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Brussels, 3 April 2012

RE: *Use and implementation of the Voluntary European Quality Framework for SSGIs*

Dear Dr Fransen,

Following the discussions Social Services Europe had with you on 16 March, we would like to suggest some approaches on how the European Commission could further stimulate the use and implementation of the Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services (VEQF), which was launched by the SPC in November 2010.

- ***The need for follow-up actions by the European Commission***

Although the launch of the VEQF for SSGIs was without any doubt an important milestone to come to a more common approach and to enhance quality in the social services sector, it was emphasized by different stakeholders from the very beginning that this was only a first step. Defining quality through principles and criteria needs to be complemented by measuring, evaluating and improving quality, in order to have a real impact and to make quality happen in practice. That there is need for the European Commission to act in this respect was clear and expressed several times since the VEQF was launched:

- The introduction of the SPC paper itself states that “this Framework is flexible enough to be applied in the national, regional and local context in all the EU Member States and to a variety of social services. It aims to be compatible and complementary with existing national quality approaches in the sector”.
- Recommendation N° 4 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> SSGI Forum (Brussels, 26-27 October 2010) calls for “implementing the Voluntary European Quality Framework for social services with a view to a more inclusive and more cohesive European society”
- The list of key initiatives of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion includes in its first strand the ambition to “develop the Voluntary European Quality Framework on social services at a sectoral level, including in the field of long-term care and homelessness”.
- The Annual Growth Survey 2012 requires “Member States to give priority to adequate and affordable social services to prevent the marginalisation of vulnerable groups”

- ***Possible approaches for follow-up actions***

We believe that there are two complementary approaches that the European Commission should use in parallel.

- *Call for proposals under the PROGRESS Programme*

Via a call for proposals under the PROGRESS programme and its successor programme sectoral actors at the grassroots level would be enabled to develop quality systems that assess and stimulate the implementation of the VEQF in specific social services sectors, such as homelessness services and long-term care. This bottom-up approach

would include a transnational element which would enable mutual learning throughout the process of developing, and if relevant piloting, such quality systems, as well as comparison and/or benchmarking between different EU Member States

The guidelines of the call for proposals should prioritise the development of quality systems with sector-specific indicators and instruments that are customised to those different sectors. Eventually, existing quality systems in the social services sector could be modified to accommodate the needs and specificities of different sectors, and to assess the compliance of services with the VEQF. In case sufficient financial resources are available within the call, projects could in second instance include a limited piloting of the newly developed sectoral systems.

We would like to mention in this respect that the previous PROGRESS call for proposals has turned out to be very successful, with direct and substantial contributions from sectoral stakeholders to the development of the VEQF.

- *Give exposure to Member States that have themselves launched initiatives to implement the VEQF*

Several EU Member States have already launched initiatives to implement the VEQF in their social services sectors. It concerns top-down initiatives whereby the Ministry supports or even finances social service providers to achieve compliance with the VEQF. In some cases, ESF money is used to provide financial support to those initiatives. Moreover, the Ministries in those countries also recognise existing quality system to assess and certify such compliance, and sometimes nominate organisations to organise such certification processes. Portugal, Estonia, Lithuania and Slovenia are examples of such countries, and the references to the initiatives concerned are annex to this letter.

In the light of promoting good practices, the European Commission could give some exposure to those countries/initiatives with the aim to inspire and stimulate other Member States to follow those examples. The Commission could use to this end the wide range of tools at its disposal, such as presentations at the SPC or relevant Committees, Peer Reviews, a benchmarking study, conferences/seminars etc. However, the most important tool to promote those good practices is in our view the biennial report on social services which will be launched towards the end of 2012.

Social Services Europe and its member organisations hope the European Commission will consider some of our concrete proposals, and we remain at your disposal for further discussions or clarifications.

Yours sincerely,



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Social Services Europe brings together seven Europe-wide networks of not-for-profit providers of social and health care services who each have a track record in providing value-driven services for the most vulnerable in our societies. Recognising the increasing pressures on social and health care service providers around Europe, Social Services Europe aims to ensure that the specificity of not-for-profit social and health care service providers is recognised and that economic, social and legal conditions exist for quality social and health care services. Social Services Europe represents 100,000 social and health services active across Europe promoting social inclusion and social cohesion. The sector, employing 10% of the EU workforce, has a long term commitment to vulnerable people and is constantly searching for innovative and cost effective solutions to providing services. The Network is made up of the following European organisations: SOLIDAR, Eurodiaconia, the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR), Workability Europe, European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) and the European Platform for National Non-Profit Umbrella Organizations and for National Associations of General Interest (CEDAG).