



Risk assessment in Social Care: Community-Based Living vs. Rehabilitative/Residential Care

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Main Functions of the SCSA

- To **establish social regulatory standards, policies and guidelines** for social welfare services and to **enforce** such standards as may be necessary to ensure a **quality level** of social welfare services;
- To **establish criteria** for the granting, refusal, suspension or revocation of licenses; and
- To grant, refuse, suspend or revoke any **license**.

*Social
Regulatory
Standards*



Social Regulatory Standards

To date the authority has published Social Regulatory Standards for the Adoption of Children, Persons with Disability, Substance Abuse and other Dependencies, Children in Alternative Care, High Dependency Chronic Care Services for Older Persons and Community-based and Outreach Services. Another two sets of standards will be published next and which relate to 'Residential Services for Older Persons' and 'Residential and Community-based services in the field of Domestic Violence'.



Service Provision in Residential Care

In the Maltese Islands, service provision in residential care especially for older persons and persons with disability is quite significant. Investment in residential care services especially for older persons is ongoing.

Additionally, increased efforts are being made to increasingly invest in community living by providing accommodation that caters for smaller groups of which individuals reside together on a semi-independent or independent basis.

These forms of supported accommodation or semi-independent living serve as a tool towards enhanced autonomy and empowerment even amongst cases where a certain degree of vulnerability is still present amongst individuals.



Community Integration

Service providers in different social welfare sectors are working towards ensuring that service users are supported towards living an independent life as much as possible by being able to control what happens in their life and access opportunities related to employment, education, affordable housing and supported living. The safety and best interest of the involved individuals shall always be central to any decisions taken on this regard. Individuals shall always be encouraged to remain actively involved in activities within their community if it is safe for them to do so.

The following is an account of how service providers in different social welfare services are achieving such goal.

***Domestic
Violence***

***Children in
Alternative
Care***

***Individuals in
rehabilitative
programmes***

***Persons
with
disability***



Domestic Violence

Victims of violence usually start by availing of services in a first stage or emergency shelter as their circumstances usually result in heightened levels of trauma, risk and crisis. Once the level of risk become increasingly stabilized, these individuals are encouraged to move into a second stage shelter which is aimed towards assisting individuals to work more on themselves and their identity, recover from trauma and prepare themselves to live a healthier and fulfilling life in the community.



Children in Alternative Care

There exist semi-independent living accommodations that specifically cater for individuals over 18 who have in the earlier years resided within a residential home for children. These serve as a means for such individuals to start living an autonomous life by engaging in employment, pay their bills and ultimately search for their own home as well. Whilst professional support would always be available through competent staff, intervention is kept to a minimum and based on need so that the purpose of living without intrusion and just like any other person in the community is fulfilled.



Individuals in rehabilitative programmes

There exist a semi-residential programme which caters for individuals who have completed a rehabilitation programme following substance abuse or another dependency and which supports such individuals to integrate back into society through therapeutic groups and sessions which aim at bringing back confidence that might have otherwise been lost.



Persons with disability

Supported living and semi-independent living is gradually increasing in this sector which ensures that persons with disability who are able to take decisions and lead a rather independent/semi-independent life are able to do so within settings that allow them to carry out their daily routine comfortably but who can be supported whenever they require.





Social Regulatory Standards

In order to reinforce the purpose of community development and active living, the SCSA has developed a set of Social Regulatory Standards aiming at regulating Community based and outreach services. Such services would not be residential in nature but are classified as support services provided to individuals, families and groups in the community who might be facing life challenges, difficulties or situations that require generic and/or specialised support interventions from social care service providers.



Community-based and outreach services

Community-based and outreach services serve as a tool whereby individuals are able to access services and opportunities close to them through centres that are spread throughout different localities and from which beneficial information can be acquired on other support services that may better address their needs.

These can also be considered as effective means to ensure continuation of care or after-care when individuals move out of a residential service or a shelter for example.



Other Standards

Apart from this set of Standards which is more generic in nature, the Authority published other community-based standards that are specifically tailored for persons with substance abuse or other dependency, children in alternative care as well as day care services for persons with disability.



Quality Tools

The Authority establishes Quality Tools which complement each set of Standards that it publishes. Such quality tools aim at assessing whether the service providers are in fact complying with the published guidelines to ensure that holistic, respectful and dignified care is delivered.

Upon completing the relevant quality tools, inspectors from the SCSA draw out recommendations based upon the inspections carried out which would guide the service providers into improving their service as required.

The inspection process not only aims at improving the service to assure a positive experience for the individuals availing of the service but also to identify elements in service provision that need to be changed or modified to avoid any risks from manifesting. Such process might also contribute to risk mitigation.

The Element of Risk

Social Welfare Services are offered to individuals who might be considered as vulnerable. Depending on individual situations, a certain degree of risk would be inevitable given the susceptibility of the person due to the circumstances in which one finds himself in. Service providers who provide residential care settings as well as community supported living need to ensure that any identified risks are avoided in the first place and that there are contingency plans in place to mitigate the unlikely consequences of such risks if these develop.





Risk Assessment

Risk assessment are two-fold:

Risks related to the physical environment of the
residence

&

Risks related to the individuals availing of services

The background features a dark green circle in the center, surrounded by a pattern of grey triangles of various sizes and orientations. The triangles are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and movement, with some pointing towards the center and others pointing away from it.

Application Process

Upon application for a service to be licensed by the SCSA, the service provider shall present a risk assessment which is usually part of a thorough occupational health and safety report which would be the result of an audit which would have been done to the premises within which the service would be delivered. Aspects such as emergency exits, evacuation plans, fire safety, first aid, infection control and equipment would be addressed. This shall be performed to any service which requires a license to operate, be it a residential service or supported community living.



Terms as defined in the Standards

Risk Assessment is 'the identification of potential or actual hazards that may cause harm to individuals and that may therefore interfere with their safety, security and overall wellbeing. The service provider shall examine the probability of the identified risks to occur, who would most likely be affected if such risks manifest themselves and what measures shall be taken to reduce the likelihood that the identified risks develop or if they actually develop what shall be done to reduce adverse impacts'.

Risk Management is 'a systematic approach to the management of risk to reduce loss of life, financial loss, loss of workers' availability and to improve safety and reputation'.



Relevant Performance Indicators

The following is a list of Performance Indicators within Social Regulatory Standards that refer to the need for a risk assessment/safety planning of individuals availing of services:

- The service provider shall ensure that an evaluation of hazards and risks within the residence is carried out by competent persons.
- The evaluation of hazards and risks within the residential facility is carried out at least once every two years or whenever there is a situation that may change risk levels. Individuals are aware that daily activities and events can pose an element of risk.
- The residential facility shall be run in a way that protects individuals from any avoidable risks or harm, including physical harm and infection.

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Service User Evaluations

A risk assessment shall also be carried out for every individual availing of the service which allows the individuals to give their opinion on their perception of risk.

Individuals are fully involved in the evaluations of their own risk. Individuals are responsible for their own actions and are expected to contribute towards ensuring their own health and safety and that of others.



Other Services

With regards to shelters for persons experiencing violence, a safety plan shall be drawn for every individual availing of the service which shall also identify informal support networks that can be considered as protective factors that contribute to risk mitigation.

As far as children in alternative care are concerned, a needs assessment shall be carried out to ensure that the needs of the child are met to prevent placing the child at risk.



Service Providers

The challenges faced by service providers with regards to assessing risk might stem from the nature of service provision. Within semi-independent or supported accommodation there would be less staff intervention and so there is less control of what is happening. The service provider shall ensure to maintain the right equilibrium between ensuring individual autonomy on one hand and allowing for staff intervention on the other so that the real purpose of effective community reintegration and independent living is not stifled.



Vulnerability and Risk

Vulnerability in supported community living is assumed to be less pronounced than in residential services. With increased vulnerability comes increased risks and so within residential settings it is crucial to ensure that there is enough competent staff at any point in time who can offer the care and assistance required. This calls for more awareness of the evolving needs of the clients, adaptations to the environment and modifications to general operational functions of the service given emerging situations.




Ending notes

What is highly recommended is to ensure that the transition from a residential setting to community living is accompanied by a rigorous assessment of risk that would identify whether individuals are ready for this move to safeguard their health, safety and overall wellbeing. This would also help to prevent certain risks and problems from manifesting at a later stage.

Acknowledging and understanding risk factors within both residential care settings and community/supported living and having effective contingency planning are imperative when operating any social welfare service.

Ultimately staff competency is crucial to ensure that the staff is aware of and respects boundaries when it comes to intervening in the service users' lives so as to respect their dignity, privacy and space especially in semi-independent settings whilst still being alert and open-minded of what is going on so as to prevent any harm that can be caused to such service users. This calls for more honest, open and transparent communications with service users and the need to build more trusting relationships.





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