

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper focuses on the challenges and opportunities arising from the ongoing transformation of the social services in the Republic of Bulgaria. Bringing the services into an independent law and creating new structures in the social system are aimed at improving the quality of care and putting the user in an active role in the helping process. For the purpose of the study, a literature review on the current issues was conducted, publicly available data in the social assistance structure was analysed and interviews were conducted with social service providers who shared the challenges and opportunities they have identified from their practice. Several key areas are highlighted, which include legislation and staffing of the sector, etc.*

**Key words:** *Republic of Bulgaria; Social Services; Reform;*

### Introduction

The social services in the Republic of Bulgaria need to be modernized in order to correspond with the European framework legislation, and the adoption of the Social Services Act in 2020 marked the beginning of this process. This was the start of a complete reform of the social system in the country. The change in regulations requires the construction of new structures with control functions and the transformation of social services from places of provision to support activities.

The objective of this paper is to shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced by the providers of social services in the Republic of Bulgaria. The author's view coincides with the majority of researchers on the subject, that despite the slow pace, the reform is underway and the services are slowly approaching the goals set in the new regulations related to accessibility, mobility, user participation, integrated and multidisciplinary approach.

There are still serious challenges that hinder the reform and need to be addressed in order to complete the process of transforming the social services.

Some of the challenges in the field are related to: the lack of financial standards of social services; issues with the staff turnover; difficulties in the organization and procurement of documentation, etc.

### Literature Review

The history of social work has come a long way in terms of providing care for the people. The change over the centuries has been aimed at increasing the efficiency of the support. Of the recommendations for terminating the life of a newborn child with a disability; removal and provision of life outside the community; accommodation in institutions for children with severe disabilities; group homes; to family-type accommodation centres and providing care and support in the user's family environment. Each of these forms of social care services had its positives and negatives for the time it was implemented.

Service policy and practice analysts are constantly looking for newer and more efficient forms of support. Currently, over one million children and adults in the European Union live in institutions. And while in the past it was assumed that institutional care met the needs of individuals at its best, modern experience shows the exact opposite. Institutionalization is considered a bad practice in human rights regulations (Bratoeva, 2023, p. 379).

Yorgova (2022, p. 28) conducted a study in the field of social and integrated health and social care, which indicated that:

- Societies with an ageing population have increased needs for care and countries need to

adapt their legislation to be able to meet the corresponding needs. This can be achieved through the implementation of community-based long-term care; improving the organization of the provision of social services and their financing; development of social policies in the care sector;

- There is an aspiration to provide effective and efficient social services. The user participates equally in the process of assistance and the use of the services;
- An awareness of respect and dignity for the user is required to underpin the helping process. The personal preferences and views of the user are important.

Social services are a key element of the European welfare model. Based on the European values of equality and social rights, this model has undergone a number of changes as economic and political changes strongly affect the social sphere. European societies are changing not only as a result of economic crises, but also due to a number of other reasons related to technological development, demographic trends, labour market development, new forms of participation, etc. (Fresno, Meyer & Skye, 2019, p. 65).

- The main directions of changes followed in relation to the provision of social services in the Republic of Bulgaria are:
  - *Liberalization* – expansion of the opportunities for participation in the provision of social services to various legal entities, NGO organizations, private individuals, etc.;
  - *Decentralization* - the state delegates rights to a municipality, town hall, service provider. The forms of decentralization can be: administrative and financial;
  - *Deinstitutionalization* - the aim is to eliminate the institutional form of care by providing a wider range of services in the community, including prevention (Pavlova 2022, a, p 31-32).

Dimitrova & Sotirov (2020, p. 236-237) point out that long-term care envisages the construction of accessible and quality services in the community and in the home environment, which will provide an opportunity for social inclusion of people with disabilities and the elderly and at the same time have a preventive role in terms of the institutionalization of these persons.

Deinstitutionalization occupies a large share of the work on upcoming changes in response to legislative reforms. It is a figurative closure of

large institutions. The new alternative services – family-type accommodation centre; temporary accommodation centre; crisis centre; transitional housing; sheltered housing and others largely replicate the structure of larger institutions. Bratoeva (2023, p. 386) notes that regardless of the interest and preferences for services in specialized institutions, which is reported in our country, it is necessary to develop models of services in a home environment and integrated health and social services, with which to provide opportunities for people to maintain their autonomy and independent lifestyle for as long as possible. Pavlova (2018, p. 173) considers residential services as places where people receive support and help in acquiring skills for leading an independent life. The emphasis is on the relationship between the quality of the services and activities conducted within it, more specifically, the occupational therapy work as part of the user's daily life and the resulting employment and social inclusion opportunities for the users.

Bogdanova, Shishmanova, Parashkevova, & Stoyanova (2020, p. 313) highlight the prospects for strategic planning of social services. They are related to the approbation and implementation of organizational, institutional and administrative practices to counter the weaknesses identified so far, such as:

- Difficult access to social services for people at risk;
- Need for normative development of standards for identification and satisfaction of users' needs;
- Need for better coordination and communication between the institutions involved in a case;
- Insufficient funding of social services against the background of a continuous increase in the need for new services and forms of support;
- Strong centralization and concentration in public administrations of the process of providing social services to users from the communities;
- Limited outsourcing of social service provision and concentration of social activities in local authorities, i.e. in the public sector, etc.

Until 2020 in the Republic of Bulgaria, social services were provided in the Social Assistance Act (Social Assistance Act, 1998) as places for the provision of relevant support. The country

recognized the need to update the legislation on the provision of social services and in 2020 the reform of social services was started. With the adoption of the Social Services Act (Social Services Act, 2020), a period of transition and transformation has occurred, in which a number of challenges for social service providers have emerged: the face of services has been changing; standards for the quality of social services have been developed; new structures that have oversight functions in relation to the quality and standards of services have been established; a national map of social services has been adopted, etc. In the provision of services, an emphasis has been placed on building a network of complex services to increasingly support users in society and at home. The focus has changed - from providing care in institutions to providing support in the community (Pavlova, 2022, b, p. 65).

Shishmanova, Parashkevova, Lazarova & Slavova-Petkova (2021, pp. 155-156) outline the normative framework that sets the shape of the new legislation:

- At the international level: UN International Charter of Human Rights; UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; European Social Charter; Convention against Violence and Discrimination; EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Elderly Persons in Need of Long-term Care and Assistance; European Health Strategy; European Disability Strategy 2016-2020; European Charter of Family Carers (European Commission, n.d.).
- At the national level, the documents that frame regional strategies for the development of social services generally include: the National Strategy for Long-term Care; the National Strategy Vision for Deinstitutionalization of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria; the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion 2020; the National Strategy for People with Disabilities 2016-2020; the National Strategy for Demographic Development of the Population in the Republic of Bulgaria 2012-2030, etc. (Strategy documents at the national level, n.d.).

Vekova (2020, p. 511-513) defines some challenges related to the reform of the system of social services provision in the Republic of

Bulgaria:

- Challenges related to the regulatory framework - the adoption of the Social Services Act and related regulations;
- Institutional challenges - establishment of a new Agency for the Quality and Standards of Social Services in Bulgaria;
- Structural challenges related to the disproportionate distribution of social services in the country. There are settlements with very good coverage of services in relation to the needs of the local population and vice versa;
- Staffing in social services - it is necessary to be able to meet the increased need for social workers in the labour market, compared to the decreasing number of students in this field. It is also necessary to define the requirements for the professional training and competences of the future social workers in order to be able to meet the necessary requirements for the profession.

Rusanova (2022, p. 204) summarizes the following conclusions regarding the changes in the social legislation:

- The reform in the field of social services in Bulgaria follows the established concepts, but is characterised by inconsistency, significant delays and a strong linkage to funding opportunities through European programmes;
- The social services system continues to be politicised and hence there is a deficit in the professionalisation of the sector;
- The new legislation requires a series of studies in the direction of improving the quality of social services on the one hand, and on the other – the development of a sustainable model of social services in Bulgaria, taking into account the serious challenges and specific conditions in the country.

## Objectives and Methodology

The object of the present study is the social services provided in the Republic of Bulgaria. They are in the process of being reformed and the author's research interests are directed to the challenges and opportunities in the field.

The data in the publicly available registers of the provided services in the two agencies in the structure of the social assistance in the Republic of Bulgaria have been analysed: the Agency for Quality of Social Services and the Agency for Social Assistance.

The identification of challenges and opportunities could be most clearly drawn from those directly involved in the provision of social services - the managers of different social services in the area with different user profiles. With this in mind, 11 interviews were conducted with service managers in Veliko Tarnovo Region. The interviews were conducted on-site in the social services during the period 01.10.2024 - 31.10.2024. Participants:

- 4 consultative services - Community Centre, Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration and two Community Support Centres, which provide complex social services "Information and counselling", "Skills training", "Support for acquiring job skills", "Advocacy and mediation", "Therapy and rehabilitation", "Community work";
- 3 services "Day Centre for..."/"Day Care for..." - Day Centre for Children; Day Centre for Children and Youth and Day Centre for People with Disabilities, which provide complex social services "Day care", "Information and counselling", "Therapy and rehabilitation", "Skills training", and the Day Centre for People with Disabilities also provides the social service "Support for acquiring job skills"

and "Support for acquiring job skills"

Open questions were asked pointing to the challenges and opportunities they face in the period of transition and transformation of the social services managed by them.

All interviewees had the opportunity to indicate an indefinite number of challenges and opportunities, respectively, the responses were ranked by themselves around the most significant and with the greatest importance in their direct work.

Limitations: the interviews were conducted only with social service providers in the district, but the information collected reflects valid facts regarding the challenges and opportunities faced by other social service providers in Bulgaria.

The research interest implies future expansion and deepening of the scope of the study, as well as long-term follow-up of the processes related to the social service reform.

## Research Results

### Licensed social services

By the end of October 2024, a total of 1,450 licences for the provision of social services by private providers were issued by the Agency for the Quality of Social Services (Chart 1)

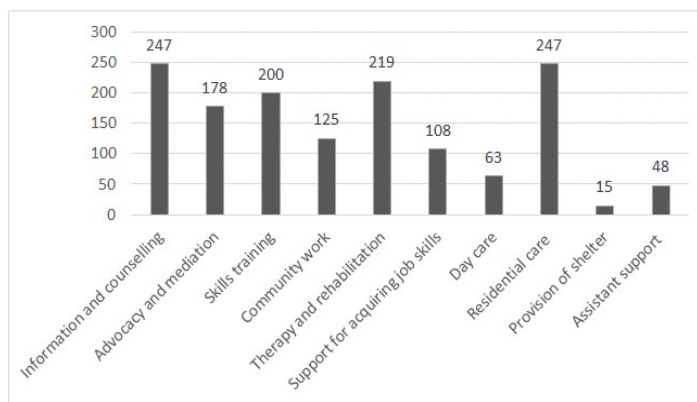


Chart 1. Licences issued to private social service providers (Source: Agency for the Quality of Social Services, n.d.)

- 4 residential services/"Residential Care" Home for Elderly People, Sheltered Housing, Centre for Family-type Accommodation for Children and Centre for Family-type Accommodation for the Elderly, which provide integrated social services "Residential care", "Information and counselling", "Therapy and rehabilitation", "Skills training"

The possible options for funding social services in the Republic of Bulgaria are:

- Social services state-delegated activity, managed by the municipalities;
- State-delegated social services assigned to private providers;
- Social services with full private funding;
- Social services funded by national

- programmes;
- Social services with mixed funding;
- Social activities carried out in municipalities or territorial structures of the SAA (Social Assistance Agency).

**Terminated licences**

The terminated licences of social services by the end of September 2024 were a total of 295 (Chart 2).

Quality of Social Services", n.d.) it becomes clear that the total number of social services provided during the year is 6957 (Chart 3).

Under the new legislation, all social services are provided in an integrated manner.

Table 1 presents the current data maintained in the registers of the Social Assistance Agency (2024, a and 2024, b) for social service providers as of the end of October 2024.

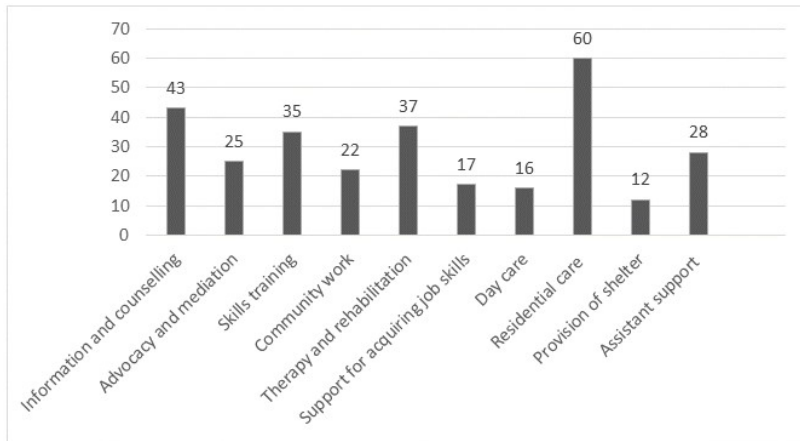


Chart 2. Terminated licences as of the end of September 2024 (Source: Agency for the Quality of Social Services, n.d.)

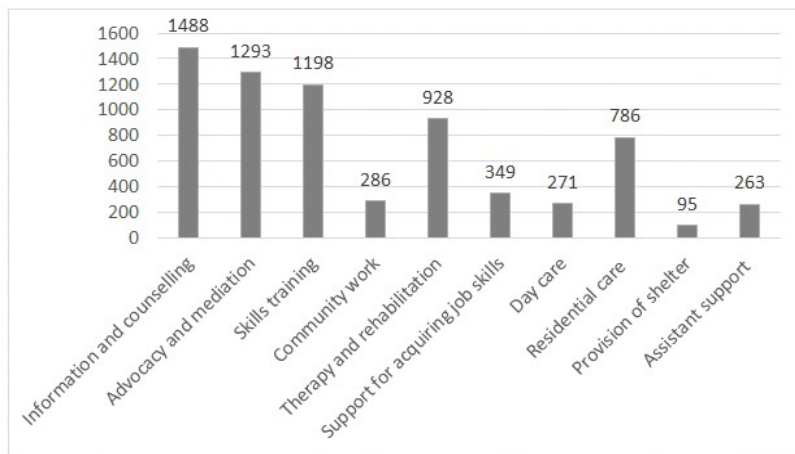


Chart 3. Social services funded by the republican budget. Source: Agency for the Quality of Social Services (Annual Analysis of the State and Efficiency of Social Services Provided in 2023, AQSS, 2024)

**Total number of social services**

The Agency for the Quality of Social Services maintains its registers entirely according to the names adopted in the new legislation (Social Services Act, 2020, Art. 15). From the Annual Analysis of the State and Efficiency of Social Services Provided in 2023 ("Agency for the

It should be noted that the services in the register of the Social Assistance Agency are marked with the names adopted under the old legislation, i.e. according to the places of provision, not according to the activities. A publicly accessible registry related to foster care is not maintained either.

Table 1. Social services funded by the republican budget, named according to the terminology adopted in the old legislation

(Source: Agency for the Quality of Social Services, 2024,a and 2024,b)

Social service	Number of services	Total capacity
Day Care Centre	285	7681
Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration	199	6616
Shelter	6	130
Family Type Accommodation Centre for ...	507	6515
Temporary Accommodation Centre	16	735
Crisis Centre	32	363
Transitional Housing	32	263
Supervised Housing	24	118
Sheltered Housing for People with ...	130	1041
Home for Adults with ...	150	9993
Home for Elderly People	82	5598
Assistant support	263	21629
Foster care	-	-
Community Support Centre	169	7755
Community Centres for Children and Families	14	901
Mother and Baby Unit	12	75
Centre for Work with Street Children	28	624

### Challenges and opportunities for social service providers according to the managers of 11 social services from Veliko Tarnovo District

To the question "What challenges do you face in relation to the transition to the new legislation and the change of the regulatory framework?" the managers pointed out:

- The majority of the interviewees (10 respondents) are united around the *lack of financial standards of social services*;
- A little more than half of the participants (7 respondents) share about *the problem of staff turnover*. Some of the managers note this is due to the heavy workload, especially with the unskilled staff attending to the more serious cases. Others share about staff turnover caused by the difficult cases they handle. The burnout effect in the helping professions is not to be underestimated. Still others single out the remuneration as a reason for the staff turnover, despite the adopted Ordinance on Employee Remuneration Standards (Ordinance on Employee Remuneration Standards, 2020);
- Again, slightly more than half of the interviewees (6 respondents) share about *difficulties in the organization and procurement of documentation in accordance*

*with the new legislation*. The quality management system has replaced the previously functioning methods for providing social services. This system is developed by each service independently and has to be in accordance with the Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services (Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services, 2022). The release of standards has been significantly delayed in time, and is considered a significant challenge by managers. There are respondents who share that they are still procuring documentation;

- Almost half of the managers (5 persons) indicate the *lack of qualified staff* as a significant problem for the service entrusted to them. Particularly pronounced is the need for nurses and rehabilitators;
- Again, nearly half of the respondents (5 individuals) cite challenges related to *long-serving employees* and, in particular, report difficulties for their employees to adapt to the new requirements despite the training and supervision provided;
- Finally, respondents (4 individuals) cite challenges due to *the lack of experience of the new employees*.

To the question "What opportunities do you consider in the period of transition to the new legislation?", the ranking of responses looks as

follows:

- The majority of the respondents (10 individuals) unite around the *complex provision of services*, which implies greater flexibility and better meeting the users' needs;
- Amongst the responses that unite more than half of the respondents (7 persons) is the *possibility of achieving a better quality of care* through the adoption of normatively regulated standards for the quality of services and monitoring by the Agency for the Quality of Social Services;
- In third place (5 respondents) is the response that *greater accessibility of services* is one of the most important opportunities provided by the Social Services Act. The promotion of services, facilitation of procedures and integrated use imply greater scope and opportunities to expand the activities and achieve better quality, both at the individual and community level;
- *Mobile provision* is ranked last (4 persons) but not least among the options mentioned. Receiving quality care in the user's home is considered the best care that can be achieved in social work. In recent months, the introduction and implementation of Telecare has been discussed (Telecare Provision Methodology, 2015) as part of the care provided at the user's home.

## Discussions and Conclusions

### Analysis of data published by both agencies

There are known discrepancies in the registers maintained in the two agencies in the structure of social assistance, both in the names and in terms of the information maintained, while in the Social Assistance Agency there is data on all services and the capacity, in the Agency for the Quality of Social Services there is data only for the licensed providers and the profile of their users.

It is difficult to draw a parallel between the registers of the two agencies, but we could point out the following:

- Disproportionality – some services are significantly more developed in terms of number and scope, at the expense of others;
- Assistant Support (Social Assistance Agency, n.d.) - albeit a new service that has existed as a state-delegated activity since December 2021 has been extensively developed and covers a significant number of users.

- Residential care services still predominate. They are also the services with the largest number of users. In particular, the "Homes for people with ..." will be phased out. This outlines the huge volume of work that lies ahead in the social sphere. A suitable environment has to be created to meet the needs of just under 10,000 users;
- Foster care is not covered by either agency as an independent social service.

### Analysis of the information received through interviews with managers of social services

On the basis of the conducted interviews with managers of social services, the following challenges have been identified: the lack of financial standards of social services; the problem of staff turnover; difficulties in the organization and procurement of documentation in accordance with the new legislation; the lack of qualified staff; difficulties for employees who have been working for a long time to adapt to the new regulatory requirements; the lack of experience of the new employees.

The opportunities that stand out are: complex service provision; the possibility of achieving better quality of care; greater accessibility of services; mobile provision. The opportunities correspond to the concept set out in the Social Services Act, which also outlines the right discourse in which the reform in the social sphere is placed.

The literature analysis and the results of the study make it possible to summarise that the process of transformation of social services, although not smooth, is happening. The new Agency for the Quality of Social Services functions; the Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services has been adopted, providing a starting point for the managers to develop a significant part of the documentation; the National Map of Social Services has been adopted. The adoption of the financial standards for social services and the deinstitutionalisation of adults is pending.

The growing need for staff in the social system emerges as a serious challenge, whether caused by staff turnover or a shortage of workforce or qualified specialists.

Deinstitutionalization is predicted to exacerbate this problem and timely countermeasures are needed.

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The author declares no conflicting interests.

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