

# RESPONSIVE

Horizon Europe project: Increasing the responsiveness of social services to citizen voice across Europe

## Executive Summary – Research report

### Citizen experiences of taking part in co-creation processes

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## Executive summary

This report presents the results and the analysis of a qualitative empirical study of citizens' experiences of taking part in co-creation processes in social services across six European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Poland, Portugal, and Romania). The study focuses on citizens' experiences of four different types of social services:

- Community-based disability services
- Mental health services
- Child protection services
- Services for young people at risk of social exclusion

The report is part of the Horizon Europe research and innovation project 'Increasing responsiveness to citizen voice in social services across Europe' (RESPONSIVE) that runs from 2023-2026. It presents results of Work Package 2 in the project "Citizen experiences of taking part in co-creation processes", where the objectives are to:

- Collect the views of diverse citizens about the impact of citizen input in digital and non-digital consultative and participatory structures in social services.
- Analyse participatory events and processes in social services to understand processes of voice, accountability and intersectional inequality in the range and variance in responsiveness to diverse citizen voices.
- Study citizen views on feedback loops, transparency and accountability in participatory actions and if they feel informed about the impact of their input on service development and decision-making.

The report illuminates how citizens experience and/or have experienced responsiveness within the four types of social services and their experiential knowledge of developing social services. The report is structured in four parts that present the methodology, sector-specific findings, general findings and finally the conclusion and recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

### 1. Design and methodology

This study is framed by analysis conducted in Work Package 1 of the RESPONSIVE project (Rasell et al, 2024) of the existing legal, policy and organisational frameworks in the six EU countries for incorporating the voices of citizens into the development and implementation of personal targeted social services.

In Work Package 1, the conceptual framework for the research project was developed by reviewing conceptual and empirical literature about democracy, participation and co-creation. The report presented the concept of 'responsiveness' within social service organisations, defined as *the process of learning from and reacting to the perspectives of diverse citizens who use social services. It ensures that citizen voices have an impact on social services*. The definition is used as a starting point for this report and has been further developed during Work Package 2 by adding the citizens' perspective to the definition.

This report is based on qualitative data design and a participatory practice research process involving approximately 400 users of social services in Austria, Denmark, France, Poland, Portugal, and Romania. They are all users of or have been users of social services related to one or more of the four sectors: disability, child protection, mental health and youth at risk of social exclusion. The data was collected in the period August 2023 to January 2024 and consists of qualitative individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations and workshops with service users of the four target services: Disability; Child Protection; Mental Health and Youth at Risk of Social Exclusion.

This research took a participatory approach that aimed to involve and give voice to citizens on matters of choosing research methods, collecting data and analysing data. Based on democratic principles, citizens with user experiences within the four selected social service sectors took part in 'citizen boards' to give input on the research process.

## **2. Sector-specific findings**

Analysis of citizens' experiences of participating in co-creation in consultative and participatory processes within the four social service sectors (disability services, child protection services, mental health services, and services working with youth at risk) indicates different drivers and barriers to responsiveness across sectors. These are shaped by the welfare services offered across countries, by the vulnerable positions of the different target groups, and by the individual conditions and cases of the participants. The main findings, categorised by sector, are outlined below.

### **2.1 Responsiveness in disability services**

- The support that participants with disabilities can receive is critical to their physical, financial, and health-related situations – leaving them in very vulnerable situations and at risk of social exclusion when the help they need is limited and out of reach.
- Inadequate provision of community-based services for independent living and inclusion limit the participation of persons with disabilities in democratic processes and developing social services by leaving them primarily preoccupied with their own individual case.
- Paternalistic attitudes towards citizens with disabilities and fear of losing services are counterproductive to citizen experiences of responsiveness.
- Against the significant barriers to raising voice, citizens with disabilities often find it useful to draw on support from other – parents, next of kin, friend(s), or others from their network – to achieve responsiveness.
- An open-door institutional policy facilitates responsiveness and participation.
- Citizens need more information about available social services and how they are organised.

## **2.2 Responsiveness in child protection services**

- Responsiveness was foremost related to being involved in and positively influencing the citizen's/children's case.
- Responsiveness is lacking if there is little information, if rules are too rigid and non-negotiable, and if there is less flexibility to include children's suggestions.
- There are fears of complaining when rights are violated and that acting in a negative way might influence relationships with social workers.
- There is little or no experience with responsiveness on the meso level – taking part in, for instance, Children's Councils, boards, or any kind of group meetings. If participating in councils, boards, or meetings, the citizens' focus was still connected to their individual cases.
- A few experiences of responsiveness at the macro level centred on 'advocacy' and contributing to a group, forum or discussion about improving child protection above the service level. These made citizens feel truly heard and included in decision-making.
- Responsiveness is difficult and almost coincidental in individual cases unless there is a specific structure, method, or approach.
- Structural approaches that rely on close relationships support responsiveness and inclusion.

## **2.3 Responsiveness in mental health services**

- Mental health participants' experiences with responsiveness primarily concern their own case, namely access to relevant services, medical treatment and therapy.
- Good mental health is a basic need and the most important problem to solve before citizens are able to concentrate on other things (e.g. participating in democratic processes).
- Experiences of responsiveness are linked to being listened to, recognised, and respected as human beings.
- The experience of responsiveness or lack thereof is linked to a feeling of stigmatisation based on citizens' mental health issues.
- The asymmetric relationship between staff and service users is a major barrier to responsiveness.
- There is a general fear of voicing oneself.
- There is a feeling of being labelled as a 'group' whose voices are not valid.
- The few reported experiences of participation and involvement in peer work entailed horizontal empowerment, social relationships, and affiliation with a group that understands the citizens.

## 2.4 Responsiveness in services working with youth at risk of social exclusion

- Youth at risk are affected by several challenges – the transition to adulthood, poverty, social exclusion, mental health, housing, addiction – that make it difficult to focus on responsiveness, co-creation, and participation.
- Responsiveness is related to experiences of being listened to and involved in decision-making.
- The relationship with the frontline staff is a key factor in experiencing responsiveness.
- Staff deciding and acting *with* and not *against* young people and taking their wishes and needs seriously is valued as a participatory experience.
- Trust is essential for the young participants.
- Some of the participants mentioned that they experienced a lack of responsiveness due to their (young) age and being viewed by professionals as ‘children’ without a legitimate voice.
- To establish responsiveness, youth at risk must be heard by the services, establish personal contact, and be treated with an understanding of their perspectives. Staff should ensure a sense of security and respect the right of youth to independently make decisions.

## 3. General findings of experiences of responsiveness

One of the introductory questions towards the interviewed citizens was how they understood and experienced responsiveness in the social services they were using. Across countries and sectors, it became evident that responsiveness is an unclear and for some unknown concept with many different meanings. The experiences and perspectives of citizens suggest the following definition of responsiveness in social services:

**Responsiveness in social services is the process of learning from and reacting to the *voices and actions* of citizens facing diverse social challenges. It aims for citizens’ *voices* and lived realities to have an impact on their individual situations and influence on social services.**

The general findings outline how citizens from the six countries and within the four different social services experience responsiveness. The findings are analysed both with focus on cross-country and cross-sector analysis. The analysis focuses on patterns and nuances in the experiences and identifies responsiveness on different levels - micro, meso and macro followed by identification of drivers and barriers to the experiences of responsiveness.

The main findings of the citizens’ experiences of responsiveness shows that the participants across countries and sectors are focused on:

- Gaining support to solve their individual challenges and cases. Democracy and democratic processes within social services are therefore fundamentally connected to people’s lives.
- The relationship between themselves and the social service professionals

- Being seen, listened to and acknowledged as human beings by the professionals and the organisational structures of social services (*being truly heard and taken seriously*)
- Having the possibilities to choose services, support and treatment (*making decisions in their case*)
- Dialogue with professionals who should listen to their needs, not stigmatize them and have a holistic approach towards their problems.

Findings regarding the experiences of responsiveness at meso and macro level show that:

- Activities where citizens using social services have experienced responsiveness at local and national levels are: house meetings, open door policies, open spaces for participation, boards, peer-to-peer-meetings, peer-working, in campaigns, political fora and user organisations.
- The majority of research participants have had no or very little experience with responsiveness at the meso level.
- Responsiveness from social services and voice at these levels is closely connected to participation in local or national actions, in organizations of people who use social services and in community-based NGOs.
- Research participants have few and frustrating experiences in macro-level participation where they do not see concrete changes or reactions from social services as a result of their input
- Particularly in child protection services and in some countries also youth at risk services, many citizens have never been invited to participate in anything beyond the collaboration with the case worker.

## **2.1. Drivers and barriers to responsiveness**

In the participants' narratives about their experiences of responsiveness it becomes clear that different conditions and mechanisms influence the experiences of responsiveness. These are in the following split into drivers and barriers of responsiveness.

Drivers of experiences of responsiveness:

- A close, trustful, and respectful relationship between people using social services and staff (availability, attentiveness, adaptability and accompany)
- An organizational and professional structure facilitating participating and co-creation processes with clear democratic aims (establishing structures and spaces for citizen participation, methods and approaches to facilitate democratic processes as boards, house meetings and 'open door' access to the management etc.)
- Being trained and voicing one's own situation by supportive empowerment processes at different levels – both individually both also in groups supporting peer-networks and sharing experiences building communities and affiliation

- Supporting persons as families, friends or lay representatives from organizations who can help give citizens a voice.
- Skilled professionals (having tools and knowledge about participation, trustful relationship, democratic processes)
- Resources to carry out participatory and responsive processes.

Barriers to the experience of responsiveness:

- Lack of services and support leaving the participants in vulnerable positions in risk of social exclusion not being able to fulfil basic needs and with no energy to participate in democratic processes.
- Lack of information on rights to support and democratic processes.
- Fear of potential negative consequences from social services if they voice dissatisfaction or try to interfere in the work of their case.
- Asymmetric relationships between staff and service users – where power and expert roles among professionals result in the devaluing and reducing citizens to “users” and “patients”.
- Stigmatization where the professionals and society label citizens with disabilities, mental health problems or young people, making their voices less valued and legitimate.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Responsiveness seen from the perspective of users is far from being practiced in social services. There are elements of responsiveness in individual practice of social services staff and in some institutional settings and community-based organizations, but it is experienced as random and seldom built on strong organisational cultures and structures.

Citizens' experiences of responsiveness in social services show that they are focused on:

- their individual challenges and cases – making their situation central in their understanding of responsiveness
- the relationship between themselves and the social service professionals – being seen, listened to, being acknowledged as a whole person, being truly heard and taken seriously – is the basis for having and giving a voice, being listened to and being supported.

For the majority of the citizens giving voices to experiences of responsiveness, the focus is to receive as high-quality and relevant support as possible. Citizens' individual challenges and aims are thus a pivotal and important starting point for responsiveness and participation, and the basis for democratic governance processes.