

The National Advisory Board on
Social Welfare and Health Care Ethics ETENE

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STATEMENT ON FINAL REPORT BY A WORKING GROUP ON FUNCTIONAL CHILD WELFARE AND A PROPOSAL FOR A QUALITY RECOMMENDATION FOR CHILD WELFARE

On 20 June 2013, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health together with the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities have requested a statement on a proposal for a quality recommendation for child welfare by a working group that operated under a group appointed to examine the functionality of services for children and families and the Child Welfare Act. In addition, the Advisory Board has been requested to issue an opinion in questions pertaining to the number of staff required in child welfare. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has also requested a statement on the final report by a working group on functional child welfare.

The final report by the working group on functional child welfare puts forward several good measures that can be used to develop child welfare services. It is important to pay attention to cooperation, work practices and work methods and children belonging to special groups, such as children with an immigrant background, children with a long-term illness and children with disabilities. It is also necessary to strengthen competence, support the children of divorced parents, children taken into care and those placed outside of the home. It is good that the group has observed the entity of services from a broad perspective taking into account the various special groups. Further, it is important that special attention has been paid to the initial stage of becoming a child welfare client, open (non-residential) care and the opportunities for cooperation contained in them.

The working group on functional child welfare has endeavoured to address all of the areas outlined in the assignment. As a whole, the final report provides a good foundation for actors operating in the field of child welfare. Some of the proposals can be implemented with relatively little effort. For example, developing the competence of employees through continuing education enables the utilisation of existing expertise, thus strengthening the employees' professional capabilities to work with children, young people and their families. In order to secure the best interest of the child, it is necessary that all people working in child welfare possess the appropriate, high-quality training required. According to ETENE, it is important that in addition to this child welfare is recognised as its own area of specialisation in social work that is closely linked to practical work. This is also likely to generate greater regard for the field.

Actors in the field of child welfare have been aware of the existence of a number of problems, but have remained unable to tackle them. The task of the group has been vast and ambitious. The measures proposed to tackle the problem areas in child welfare services are good. However, the large number of proposals made has the consequence that many of them remain on a general level. It also remains unclear which of the many good suggestions would best serve to remedy central problems and, most importantly, situations where the distress of a child or young person remains unrecognised. To improve this situation, it would be necessary to produce a separate listing of the proposals that, as far as possible, would be prioritised based on their cost-effectiveness.

The group has, rightly, stressed the importance of gathering and analysing information. The Advisory Board also commends the group for the development of operating methods as concerns administrative arrangements. Separating child welfare services from other social welfare services is not a uniformly positive devel-



opment as concerns the last-mentioned objective: it is likely to highlight the separate nature of child welfare services, a way of thinking at odds with current policy. New reporting obligations that do not lead to measures should be viewed with reservation. Instead, it is recommendable to implement systematic development work by first exploring the topic and launching a pilot project in certain municipalities and, subsequently, ensuring that the results obtained in this manner are applied on the national level.

The objective of the quality recommendation produced by another working group is to guide the provision and arrangement of child- and family-specific child welfare services. The ethical principles guiding the work performed in the area of child welfare, also mentioned in the recommendation, were produced based on the ethical recommendations for the social and health care field published by ETENE in 2011. They include respect for the human dignity and the fundamental rights of the client, an understanding of the rights of the client as a central starting point for social welfare and health care services, humane and respectful interaction, the responsibility of professionals for the quality of their work and responsible decisions and operating culture. The main starting point for child welfare services is the best interest of the child, which requires good administration and the appropriate treatment of clients.

The objective of helping children and recognising their distress irrespective of their place of residence cited in the quality recommendation supports the principle of regional equality. All clients of child welfare services must be attended to so that they are heard at as an early stage as possible. The principle of early intervention is very important and supports the best interest of the child as the main starting point of child welfare services. The Advisory Board expresses as its wish that each client be assigned a specific employee who would then hold overall responsibility for that client. This must not lead to a situation where the employee feels that he or she remains unsupported in his or her work, a concern also mentioned in the quality recommendation.

An operating culture based on respect and appreciation for others, responsible management and responsible decisions promote the realisation of the wellbeing of both clients and employees. The Advisory Board finds the principles compiled in the quality recommendation good and strengthening the inclusion of children and young people. Their realisation is not possible, however, if the number of employees and the amount of time available is too small. Increasing staff resources would be necessary, which can prove difficult in a poor economic situation. For this reason, local authorities should direct the limited resources within the social welfare and health care services to helping the children and young people in the weakest position. Creating an order-of-priority listing of measures that are the most effective in promoting the wellbeing of children and young people within the measures put forward in the quality recommendation should also be considered. ETENE finds it important that resources would be directed primarily to measures to promote early intervention, to support the immediate communities of children and young people and to prevent social exclusion.

On behalf of the Advisory Board

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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

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