

Malta 2007

ACCESS: Cottonera Community Resource Centre

Short Report



On behalf of
European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

The Peer Review was held in Qormi, Malta, on 12-13 June 2007 and hosted by the Maltese Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity. In addition to the host country, seven peer countries took part: Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Also participating were stakeholder representatives from Eurochild and the European Social Network, together with representatives of the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

AÇCESS is a centre serving the community in Malta's Cottonera area and neighbouring Kalkara. The area is one of the most densely populated in Europe, and has more than its share of social problems. Its inhabitants include a high proportion of unemployed people, early school leavers and households living on social benefits. Grouping a range of different agencies under one roof, AÇCESS is a "one-stop shop" for social services.

- The mission is "to be a catalyst for sustainable community development and long-term social change through a genuinely collaborative, participatory, holistic and empowering approach which improves the quality of life for all residents in Cottonera and Kalkara".
- It aims "to enable the development and well-being of the Cottonera and Kalkara communities by: listening to people and assessing their needs and issues; being supportive, inclusive and valuing all service users, volunteers and staff regardless of age, race, religious belief, gender, ability or sexual orientation; working in partnership with others and seeking to build alliances of benefit to the community; delivering quality in all that is done to achieve the best within available resources; striving to remove barriers to participation through ensuring accessibility to services and working with community groups to build their skills, knowledge and capacity, so they can act to address their community needs and issues; planning and evaluating practice and enabling staff to work effectively with the community and addressing the particular needs of children, listening to them and enabling them to have a voice."

AÇCESS works under the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, and it has a Board of Directors composed of representatives of the agencies and organisations involved. Its main components are:

- Appoġġ, which runs both the Cottonera Community Services and the Smartkids family and childcare centre, mainly catering for children under 3 years of age;
- the Housing Authority;
- the Day Centre for Persons with a Disability;
- the Department of Social Security, whose regional office is in the AÇCESS building; and
- the Employment and Training Corporation, which runs a job centre inside AÇCESS. Also recently incorporated into AÇCESS is a Computer Technology Learning Centre subsidised by the Ministry for Information Technology.

There is close cooperation with the Foundation for Educational Services and the Cottonera College, which includes all the government-run schools in the area. Cottonera Community Services provides social work support on mental health issues, difficulties associated with ageing, emotional and behavioural difficulties in childhood and adolescence, housing issues, children at risk, and childcare and parenting. It has conducted a wide range of community development projects over the past few years. AÇCESS is celebrating its fifth anniversary in 2007.

The peer reviewers heard presentations of ACCESS and visited the centre. They were particularly *impressed by*:

- The shared vision and stated objectives of ACCESS;
- The advantages of grouping different services together inside one building with a fairly open lay-out. As different services are on offer, nobody is stigmatised whereas the juxtaposition of the childcare and job centres, for example, has obvious benefits for parents seeking employment;
- The efforts made to consult and involve the clients; especially the strong involvement of parents in Smartkids was praised;
- The high rate of self-referrals to social services. This suggests that ACCESS succeeded in securing the trust of its clients.
- The decision to extend the ACCESS approach to at least one other area of Malta.

The peer reviewers also made *a number of suggestions*:

- The establishment of ACCESS was not preceded by a scientific analysis of the needs of the area. As it is functioning at present, it gives more the impression of decentralisation of services but not as one which was specifically designed for the area and of its specific needs. A systematic, regularly updated analysis of the problems of the area could be very useful. On this basis one could consider developing further the preventative work at ACCESS.
- Services can be integrated to a different extent (continuum from fragmentation to full merger or from informal to formal integration). In the case of ACCESS the advantages of further integration could be explored (e.g. a more integrated budget, protocols between services as a way of passing on experience to newcomers, appointing one key person to coordinate services to meet a specific user's needs).
- Having more formal arrangements for involving stakeholders (e.g. client satisfaction questionnaires, involving users in the management board) could be examined.
- It could be useful to integrate a number of additional services into the centre, e.g. services for children older than 3 and health services (particularly health visitors).
- Although self-reference is in itself a positive outcome, the lack of formal monitoring and evaluation of the project was discussed during the meeting. It was acknowledged that the first full-scale evaluation of ACCESS is planned by the end of 2007.

Monitoring and evaluation. On this issue the Peer Review greatly benefited from presentations by two co-sources countries: Hungary and the United Kingdom. Both countries - be it to a quite different extent - have Sure Start programmes in place aimed at supporting children and families by improving services in deprived areas. These programmes were examined at the Sure Start Peer Review in the UK in May 2006. One year later, both countries presented evaluation results.

The national evaluation of Sure Start in the UK consists of five components: implementation

evaluation, impact evaluation, local community context analysis, cost-benefit analysis and support for local evaluations. From the presentation it became clear that a comprehensive scientific evaluation can produce evidence that is very useful for guiding policy.

The Hungarian evaluation also produced interesting results although it was found that early investment in and planning of data collection is necessary if one is aiming for a thorough comparative evaluation of local programmes. The desirability of performance benchmarking was also discussed. A number of countries gave details of their systems.

The possibilities of transferring ACCESS or key components of it. The Peer Review first noted that:

- Most participants emphasised the major differences between the participating countries, as regards culture, size, population density, the school starting age and the structural models of how State services are delivered.
- The EU Member States involved are also at different stages of economic development, of service provision and cooperation whereas the integration between services has progressed more in some countries than in others.
- Notwithstanding the differences, all the peer countries are facing similar challenges which need to be tackled. These include growing numbers of lone parents, both inward and outward migration and the training of professionals, particularly social workers.
- It was agreed that a carbon copy transfer would not work, even within Malta. Different areas face different challenges, such as high concentrations of older people or of migrants. The principle established by ACCESS could however be adapted to different situations. The priorities of a particular area need to be identified.

On the issue of **integrated services** it was stressed that

- Local needs must be thoroughly assessed and identified before a community resource centre is established. On this basis, an action plan should be drawn up, including timescales and specifying who will deliver the key services. The importance of providing holistic services for parents and their children was stressed.
- Innovative programmes must be developed to meet the needs of the community, and especially of vulnerable groups. The communities themselves have therefore to be empowered. Training and stakeholder involvement are particularly important here.
- The “key worker” approach is one successful model where one worker co-ordinates with other services or agencies to best meet a customer’s needs as a type of advocacy service on behalf of the customer. ACCESS could obviously facilitate this approach.
- Service delivery needs to be high-quality and well-paid. Many EU Members States struggle to solve the problems of lack of staff capacity both in numbers and in adequate training.

Quality childcare is another key objective for all participants. Some countries are a long way ahead on this, while others are striving to reach that goal.

- The Smartkids service within AÇCESS provides a very good model of a multidimensional approach to child well-being. The addition and integration of healthcare in a truly integrated service could make that model complete.
- Quality guidelines for childcare have to be established and licensing systems must be in place. Most importantly, inspections and monitoring must be carried out to ensure that quality levels are reached.
- Teenagers should not be forgotten, in particular those who need help with the transition from school to work. The focus should be on the best interests of the child.
- The investment in pre-school facilities does also have a long-term economic pay-off. More funds need to go into childcare in most EU Member States, notably in disadvantaged areas.

A major lesson to be learnt from AÇCESS is that it goes beyond service provision and aims to give tailor-made solutions for the **specific needs of the community**.

- The community level is the best one at which to tackle the specific needs of service users.
- Quality standards also need to be set, and their implementation must be monitored. Planning needs to specify who does what, as well as the budgets required. EU structural funds are now committed to supporting work on social inclusion.
- The AÇCESS approach reflects a priority that is also found in the EU social inclusion work, namely breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty.
- Provision has to be made for tackling two issues of growing concern within EU Member States – financial exclusion and over-indebtedness. Employment is the best route out of poverty but poverty is not just financial. The need for adult socialisation and social inclusion is just as great.
- By adding some elements such as healthcare, care after school for children of school age, support for young and long-term care for the elderly, AÇCESS could serve as a model of a holistic approach.

Last but not least, **points drawn by Malta from the Peer Review** include to:

- Build services for children over the age of 3 into the AÇCESS cooperation structure,
- Work more towards having a child/family centre, and
- Possibly bringing in the health services, as advocated by a number of the peer reviewers.