



## The Psychological Significance of the Social Services Situation on Improving Municipal Communication in Social Policy

**Jan Mandys**

University of Pardubice

E-mail: [jan.mandys@upce.cz](mailto:jan.mandys@upce.cz)

Czech Republic

**Barbora Kovářová**

University of Pardubice

E-mail: [barbora.kovarova@upce.cz](mailto:barbora.kovarova@upce.cz)

Czech Republic

**Martin Maštálka**

University of Pardubice

E-mail: [martin.mastalka@upce.cz](mailto:martin.mastalka@upce.cz)

Czech Republic

### ABSTRACT

*The paper aimed to show the psychological significance of a functional social system at the local level in the context that a functional network of social services improves the quality of life in a community. The problem was discussed using the case of an analysis of social service providers in a particular municipality. Citizen satisfaction is a key objective of public policy and the goal of every human individual is to move towards satisfaction with his or her life. An accessible social network improves the subjective perception of their problems among residents who find themselves in a difficult social situation. The task of local government is then to provide sufficient social service options to communicate with its citizens. The analysis carried out showed the limits and challenges for the future direction of the social network. This must necessarily mean improving the communication strategy of the municipality as a guarantor of social policy. At the center of this effort is the user of social services or the citizen who is a potential future user.*

**KEYWORDS: Social policy, community planning, communication, social services, quality of life**

### Introduction

Quality of life refers to the availability of options from which a person can choose to fulfill his or her life and should be viewed as a subjective assessment of one's life situation Philips (2006). Quality of life is influenced by variables (Vaďurová, Múhlpachr 2005) such as an individual's psychosomatic state, social relationships, culture, value system, one's relationship to one's goals, expectations, norms and concerns, personal beliefs, and also one's relationship to key areas of one's environment. Thus, we can conclude that it encompasses how a person perceives his or her place in life.

In psychology, quality of life is often associated with the concept of personal well-being. Personal well-being can consist of life satisfaction, morale, and happiness. It is a long-term experience rather than a current experience. Personal well-being lies within the psyche at the boundary between affected moods and personality traits (Dvořáková, Dušková, Svobodová et al., 2006).

Social services come into the public interest at the moment when a person or his or her neighbor needs them. Until then, the average person is more interested in medical services, sanitation, transport, education, etc. How social services are perceived subjectively determines their position in the community. At the same time, it should be noted that social service providers are important political actors at the local level. They are staffed by educated people who are often politically or otherwise active in the place where they live. At the same time, at a time when municipalities in the Czech Republic have a legal obligation to care for people who find themselves in a difficult social situation, municipal authorities must develop effective

communication strategies to inform the public about the possibilities of assistance.

Knowledge of the problems and the functioning of social service providers allows them to effectively deposit funds for their support. It is also possible to determine what specific services will or will not be provided in the municipality based on the needs of the citizens. In practice, this means that both citizens municipal officials, and management have a subjective perception of the state of social services. This results in a positive or negative perception among citizens. In case they do not need anything, perhaps even neutral. The political representation then discusses the opinions of citizens and then considers which segment of services is worthy of public interest.

Feeling secure and safe is a key psychological determinant of people's satisfaction. The stability of social support contributes to the leveling of inequalities caused by health, mental, or social disability. Today, there is an increasing number of people with a cumulative range of problems, many of which are multi-dimensional. This brings new challenges and forces social service providers to find new solutions.

The problem can be discussed in a selected example, which is the system of social services in Česká Třebová. This town is currently classified as one of the economically and socially threatened areas of the Pardubice Region. Česká Třebová is a medium-sized town located in the eastern part of the Pardubice Region. It is a municipality with extended jurisdiction for the municipalities of Semanín, Rybník, Přívrat, and Třebovice) and also a municipality with a municipal authority. Its advantageous location is key in terms of transport, especially railways.



Česká Třebová (City of Česká Třebová, 2002, City of Česká Třebová, 2010) is the largest railway junction of the Pardubice Region with one of the largest railway stations in the Czech Republic (CR). For road connections, the key road for Česká Třebová is the I/14 road, which shortly will connect the town to the D35 expressway connecting Liberec, Hradec Králové/Pardubice, Olomouc and Lipník nad Bečvou, or the I/43 road Brno in the southern direction and Lanškroun in the north-eastern direction. Česká Třebová is situated in the valley of the Třebovka River in the Českotřebovská vrchovina in a shallow valley of north-south orientation (ŽelPage. 2007). Its strategic location on the border of Bohemia and Moravia makes it one of the most important towns in the region. The population (Czech

Statistical Office. 2023a) density in the Českotřebov region is almost double the regional average (223.8 persons/km<sup>2</sup>) and the second highest after Pardubice. Since 2000, the population of the town has been steadily decreasing. The exception is the year 2022, when as of 31 December 2022 the town had 141 more inhabitants than at the end of the previous year. The increase is mainly due to migration (+214 inhabitants), while the natural increase remains negative (-73 inhabitants). However, only further developments will show whether this is a random fluctuation or a reversal of a long-term trend. Another positive aspect is the increase in the number of inhabitants aged 0-14 years and the mitigation of ageing in the city.

**Administrativní členění kraje**  
Administrative breakdown of the region



**Figure 1. Administrative breakdown of the Pardubický region.**

From Administrative breakdown of the Pardubický Region, by Český statistický úřad 2009 Retrieved from

<https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/23251137/administrativni.jpg/c5ecd9c-4c33-404e-b7df-4ac8642702fa?version=1.0&t=1418384284513>.

Local Agenda 21, is a strategy and set of tools to implement the principles of sustainable development at the local level. One of these principles is strategic planning involving broad participation of the private sector as well as public participation. Strategic planning combines the efficiency of the private sector, from which it has penetrated the public sector, with the principles of public participation in decision-making processes at the local level. The aim of this process, in line with most contemporary theories of regional development and public administration, is to achieve cooperation between the public sector, the private sector, and the public, and thus contribute to improving the quality of life in a place. It is a way to create new partnerships to improve the local

environment and to create a competitive position in dealing with issues that affect the quality of life of all citizens.

Since 2023, a new Community Plan for Social Services and Related Activities of Česká Třebová 2023+ has come into force. As stated in the plan, (Město Česká Třebová, 2023) in 2024 it will be evaluated or supplemented and will undergo the necessary changes. The document is based on the basic vision of the city's leadership, where the aim is to map, learn about, and make transparent the system of social services in the city of Česká Třebová. Social service providers, users and, last but not least, representatives of the town participated in the development of the plan.



## Materials and Methods

Structured questionnaires were used for data collection. The fact that the questionnaire was designed in such a way that respondents were able to complete it themselves played a key role. The aim of the research was a quantitative description of the reality (Disman, 2022) to optimize the processes in social service planning in the study area. Consequently, to create space for further reflection on reality about the input database that was created through this survey.

The questionnaire was set up so that it could be modified at any time, replacing selected questions with new ones and as a basis for regular information collection with the potential to create a coherent database.

In total, the questionnaire contained 19 questions. The data collection, as already mentioned, was carried out with the help of self-collection by respondents through the community planning network in Česká Třebová. The questions dealt with general characteristics of the providers, as well as, for example, financing of services, workload, and capacity. Some questions were tested in the context of possible further analysis (for example, question 16 - costs of service provision).

In case of any ambiguity in the answers, the organization concerned was contacted by telephone, and the question was clarified. As the number of organizations concerned was not very high, the interpretation of the data was based on whole numbers, as percentages are misleading and distorting in this case.

In this case, the base was 45 organizations. As some organizations have more than one registered social service, the whole survey was designed not by the organizations themselves, but by specific services. For this reason, a total of 52 completed questionnaires were obtained.

It was therefore a basic sociological approach to affecting reality through a questionnaire.

## Results

Česká Třebová (as well as other towns) must prepare for new challenges in social issues, not only the ageing population and the increase in the number of people with Alzheimer's disease but also the increasing number of addicts to addictive substances, especially alcohol. It is a fact that in the Pardubice Region, there is an increasing number of people who are not suitable for placement in any registered service (e.g. homeless, alcohol-dependent with a disability, and suffering from mental illness without the right to disability or old-age pension). The increasing number of people dependent on the help of others is itself a question mark in the context of the fact that the state still does not provide sufficient support for caring persons.

The public is primarily interested in other aspects of community life (education, health, transport, etc.). That is if they do not currently need help and support from social services. Therefore, it is extremely important to stress that social services are not just registered activities, but that their activities are often multidimensional, transferring to other areas and intertwining with the agenda of other organizations, importantly, the reverse

is also true. Service users then have more options to address their adverse situation.

The town of Česká Třebová is an important catchment area and it cannot be said that social service providers limit their activities only to residents of the town. The lack of proximity (and therefore accessibility) is one of the weaknesses of the social system in general.

It is important to stress that the distribution of specific services should reflect the demand of potential service seekers in the context of the challenges of the diagnosed problems. Of course, the competition known from the market environment operates with some specificities also in the social services segment. Related to this is the possible duplication or interdependence of some social services.

Česká Třebová also functions as an important center within the whole district. This means that social services have a greater reach than the cadastral boundaries of the area. Also, and this is important, the citizens of Česká Třebová use social services that are not based in the town. These are key aspects that influence the availability of social services and determine the supply and demand for services.

One of the key aspects besides the type of service provided is the target group according to the registration form.

In terms of the distribution of responsibilities, it is therefore clear that almost no person who finds themselves in a difficult life situation should be left completely unassisted.

The survey was not about identifying primary group affiliation, given that organizations provide help and support to multiple target user groups. The majority of organizations were unable to classify themselves into one group. This confirms a trend where some organizations define their activities in several groups. This is a clear advantage for the whole system. This leads to better functional interconnection and networking.

An important factor that will influence the provision of social services shortly is that although life expectancy and life expectancy are increasing, the quality of health is not improving significantly. In practice, this means that Czech society will live longer, but will not be healthy enough to be sufficiently self-sufficient. From the experience of community planning, it can be argued that at the same time, there is an increase in the number of people who have an accumulation of several handicaps. Last but not least, there is also an increasing number of people who will not have the financial means to pay for services, and at the same time, their condition and situation will require 24-hour residential care.

Some social service providers provide their services outside the city limits or to providers from other municipalities. Several organizations do not have their headquarters in Česká Třebová, but operate one of their offices here. Exactly half of them have regional competence, and 14 operate within the district. Several supra-regional organizations can also be found here. Only 4 organizations have local competence. The result is therefore mainly due to the geographical location of Česká





Třebová and is also often influenced by the founder itself, such as the Regional Charity Ústí nad Orlicí.

Regarding the operating hours, it can be noticed that, for example, care services are moving away from the traditional "from-to" working hours and are adapting much more to the needs of the users. Flexible provision of social services is thus a challenge for many organizations and a promising model for the future. Some organizations provide services outside normal working hours by individual arrangement. Weekend events or activities are also emerging.

The capacity of services is sufficient given the demand of users coming from Česká Třebová. At the same time, however, several service providers cannot assess whether the supply in their segment meets the demand. Given the fact that these include, among others, personal assistance, social rehabilitation, and care services, it is necessary to reflect at this point on what is behind the fact that these organizations cannot estimate whether they can meet the demand for the services they offer. A certain determining factor may be that these services are also used by people from the town's surroundings and the providers do not distinguish exactly where the people interested in the service come from and whether they are primarily residents of Česká Třebová.

Some organizations specialize exclusively in working with individuals (specifically, 31 organizations do not carry out group social work or related activities). A few organizations were unable to accurately determine their capacity or may not have been entirely comfortable with the proposed calculation for determining capacity. Measuring the effectiveness of social services is a constantly debated problem with no clear solution.

Another problem is sometimes the differentiation between users who reside in Česká Třebová and those from other municipalities. Some services are provided anonymously. The resulting capacities are divided into intervals for greater clarity.

The scope of the survey did not allow for a determination of how organizations subjectively assess their staffing levels. That they might be adequate can be inferred from the fact that the capacity of services about users' needs is more or less sufficient. The number of staff varies according to the service provided, with residential services with 24-hour operation being the most demanding. Several providers operate not only with core staff but also use a variety of external staff.

For further analysis, it could be suggested to investigate what positions and to what extent are performed by external staff, and the same applies to volunteers. In general, it can be stated that volunteer work is becoming increasingly important and that it represents a key support for many providers. Of course, social service users themselves are also of considerable importance. Table 23 shows that there is potential for volunteering among organizations. The question is therefore why volunteering is not used much more than indicated.

Qualification requirements for social services work are high. Pay is insufficient. At the same time, the psychological and

physical demands are considerable, and workers also have to undergo continuous training.

The financing of social services has been a debated area for many years before the Social Services Act came into force. This topic has been a constant for a long time. In this case, it can be stated that the budgets of social service providers are more or less constant without significant fluctuations. Multi-year funding is still in sight, so no particular changes can be expected in this respect, as confirmed by the data in the table below.

Although there are medium-term development plans at the regional level and community plans at the municipal level, the financing of social services is stagnant. Although all strategies clearly define priorities and measures, there is no clear public policy strategy on who and how to support financially. Thus, priorities are set in such a way that each provider receives adequate provision for its services.

Most of the funding is received from the Pardubice Region and Česká Třebová. They are also interested in Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs projects. Foundations, other municipalities where the user comes from, and of course, donations play an important role.

Any modern-minded organization should also have a financial strategy (vision) for a longer period than just a year. At the time of the survey, only 6 providers did not know from which sources they intended to obtain financial support for their activities.

As part of their responses, each organization was asked to answer how much they intended to seek funding from each potential source between 2024 and 2026. The Pardubice Region is logically the priority source of funding, and unless there is a systemic change, this will continue to be the case. There will probably also be strong interest in drawing funding from departmental sources - primarily the MLSA. Another important source is payments from users. At this point, one may wonder to what extent organizations are aware of, or can consider, the use of all possible EU structural funds.

Complementary activities can be an important source of income. It is often a rather complicated item in fundraising. Complementary activities have also been a frequently discussed topic in quality inspections when organizations can provide optional services. Although complementary activity is not a key source of fundraising, it would be interesting to subject this option to a more in-depth analysis of the possibilities across the spectrum of providers. Within the providers in Česká Třebová, the most common activities are the sale of small goods, graphic (advertising) services and hospitality. Then unspecified rental, repair, and education.

An important indicator for determining the effectiveness of social services is the cost per user. However, its determination is difficult. Some services report actual time spent, others count bed space, etc. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that each organization should have a tool to determine how much they run the service for. In the 3S projects mentioned above, it was found that, for example, the cost per user for a care service ranges from a few hundred crowns to several thousand crowns. For the



survey, a formula was used that was tested among social services in Pardubice a few years ago. For almost half of the organizations, either the formula was not a suitable guide or they were not able to objectively quantify the average monthly amount spent on providing the service. This is a crucial issue that should be addressed in the future.

A significant difference can be seen, which is primarily due to the type of care. On the other hand, it is necessary to consider whether or not municipal management should monitor this indicator or consider it explicitly important.

As in the previous case, the average monthly amount paid by the user for services was also examined. Thus, not an individual indicator, but an average for the user. here, compared to the cost per user, the variance between services is not so great. As this is an average for some services, the complexity of the service provided cannot be fully taken into account. Compared to the cost per service, reimbursement cannot be taken as a primary indicator as the prices per service are clearly defined in the implementing decree, and the margin of maneuver is clearly defined.

Funding and the effectiveness of social services cannot be separated. The commissioner of social services is responsible for the priorities in its territory. In this case, it is the needs of the people involved and the amount of money going into the social sector that are at odds. However, the supply of social services is primarily dependent on the amount of funding available in the sector.

## Discussion

Within the framework of the research, 45 organizations operating in Česká Třebová were contacted. The sample included 43 registered social services and 9 related services and activities. All of the organizations surveyed participated, which is largely unique and a signal that the organizations are cooperating at an adequate level.

An important aspect of service provision is accessibility, which is determined by the location of the service, but also means the ability of residents to find the service within a reasonable commuting distance (unless it is provided in the field). Another aspect is the capacity of the service and therefore the possibility of actually using it. Respondents mostly rate their capacity as matching the demand of potential users. 10 organizations, however, are unable to estimate this capacity about demand. However, it would be interesting in the future to analyze the reasons why they do not know, as knowledge of the local 'market' is also crucial for any provider about its operations.

The scope of the survey did not allow for a determination of how organizations subjectively assess their staffing levels. That they are probably adequate can be inferred from the fact that the capacity of the services for the needs of users is more or less sufficient. An interesting potential area of social development in Česká Třebová may include volunteering. Also because it is not used to a very high extent, the capacity of volunteering could be discussed as one of the possible topics in the framework of community planning. Based on the data collected, it is not

possible to determine whether there are not enough volunteers or whether providers are unable or uninterested in using them. These findings were beyond the scope of the research brief. It also raises the question of how the service workers themselves feel about the demands placed on them and how the public (beyond themselves) perceives their work.

The primary source of funding is mainly grant applications and projects. Income from own activities is minimal. Only a few organizations carry out complementary activities, in which case payments from users are an important source of funding. The organizations receive most of their funding from the Regional Office of the Pardubice Region, followed by ministerial departments and payments from users. The most common additional activities include the sale of small goods, graphic (advertising) services, and hospitality. There is also unspecified renting, repairs, and education. Payments from users are an important source of funding.

It can be concluded that there is a balanced network of providers of social and related services in Česká Třebová, into which the presented research provides a comprehensive insight.

All recommendations are based on the premise that the sponsor is interested in being an active local social policy maker. An important aspect is that the position of community planning coordinator must be held by an official who is respected both within the authority and by the providers. Above all, however, he or she must be a partner for regional management. The problem with the social sector in the eyes of the public is that it does not generate any profit but, on the contrary, consumes a significant proportion of the state budget (pensions, unemployment, and other benefits, including care allowances, etc.).

In the Czech Republic, there is an insufficient system of mapping accessibility using an exact method. Indicators such as waiting times for admission to a service or travel distance to a service or vice versa are monitored rather occasionally. It is also a problem that the collection of data from the public in this area encounters minimal interest and a lack of knowledge of the problem unless the citizen is a participant in a social event. The public is primarily interested in social services when they need to use them, or when someone in their family or close circle needs to use them. An interesting topic, for example for university theses, would be to analyze the numbers of people interested in the service and waiting times in the context of the nature of social services. The capacity of social services itself is closely related to this. According to the providers' statements, the capacity is sufficient for demand. The question is how the public itself assesses the availability and capacity of social services from its perspective. It is therefore necessary to set up processes for systemic monitoring of capacities within the framework of community planning. The problem lies not in the lack of an overview of capacities, but rather in the lack of a system that assesses capacities and supports the educated guesses of social workers when they are asked about these issues. Last but not least, monitoring availability and capacity is a way to set services effectively against the needs of citizens.



The county financially supports providers in its territory according to a fixed and clearly defined key. A similar system is applied by individual municipalities, which contribute to social services from their budgets. Here, it is appropriate to consider the distribution of funds not according to the key 'we will support each applicant proportionately', but the public administration should focus on specific priorities and deposit funds proportionately. This means going beyond the Community Plan, or selecting certain priorities and giving them long-term, intensive, and increased attention.

Given that it is probably not possible to expect radical improvements in the amount of money that goes into these services, it is necessary to look for methods to objectively define efficiency, performance, and quality (outside the framework of quality standards for social services). One indicator could be the cost per user. However, this indicator has not yet been clearly defined. However, if the public administration wants to allocate resources objectively and efficiently, it needs to have adequate tools to measure efficiency. Considering its size in the context of the service structure and the level of functionality of community planning, the town of Česká Třebová is an optimal model area. Each organization should have a tool to prove how much it pays for the service.

Regular monitoring and evaluation of service capacity can be considered a highly effective tool for assessing the effectiveness of the system. This is closely related to providers' statements that capacity is sufficient, with some services waiting several months to be delivered. It is therefore an attempt to move towards an optimum between demand and capacity for individual services.

Volunteering is an interesting option for those who want to be useful to their environment. The results show that in this case, the whole social service system has its reserves. However, the depth of the survey could no longer distinguish whether volunteers are not needed in some types of services, or perhaps services cannot use volunteers. The potential for volunteering is huge. If a system of recruitment and training of volunteers is in place, all stakeholders can benefit. It is, therefore, necessary to assess the potential of volunteering in the population and the capacity of organizations to use it.

Social work has long been an underfunded area. The issue of the dignity of people working in the social field is a topic that is discussed mainly in professional circles, less so in the public sphere. It is community planning that can help improve the public perception of the image of social work, at least at the regional level. In this case, we are referring to those who do not use social services. It is also appropriate to inform the public regularly in an informal but not invasive way. A massive marketing campaign for social services is not effective. On the contrary, a regular or occasional column in the Českotřebovské bulletin would be appropriate. A rather modest campaign and promotion of social service providers can have a much greater effect. A social services fair is debatable, but

presenting various products (see additional activities) at public events is desirable.

The database of local social policy is very rich. If it were possible to work with data from university theses, which providers allow to be implemented at their institutions, it would be possible to examine changes concerning the time factor. Providers themselves also complete a range of returns (e.g. as part of project applications). Rather, the data is not worked with and new, often repetitive, returns are generated. The public administration should have an overview of this service segment not only because it provides financial resources for operation, but primarily because it is responsible for its territory. Municipalities should have a set of tools and indicators that they are interested in monitoring. These tools and indicators can then assist key decision-making processes. The first step is to define what data regional management needs and whether it is necessary. It is then essential to create time series to optimize the processes. This area is a much-neglected part of social policy, as it is often based on the premise that "we all know each other, we know about ourselves and others, and we always get along".

At this point, it should also be noted that locally, the territory of Česká Třebová is also affected by social services that are provided in the territory of the town of Ústí nad Orlicí, or the provider is based here and provides services in Česká Třebová. Both towns are within good transport reach and some services have a wider overlap. A wider range of social services is positive for users in both towns. However, this results in a challenge for providers in planning and promoting their activities.

Social policy is an important segment of public policy and social services are full of professionals and passionate people. Support for this segment also pays back many times over in, among other things, increased quality of life. Nevertheless, this area is still rather marginal for the general public, alongside areas such as health, education, transport, etc. It can be argued that an important factor that will influence the functioning of social services is the aging of the population and the accumulation of disabilities in individual users. This trend is already on the rise, with social services encountering increasingly complicated cases that need to be dealt with in the context of social work. Social policy must prepare for these challenges.

This leads to the psychological aspects of the perception of the whole problem by the public as well as by the political representation and officials. It is essential to realize how social services shape the community environment. This is all the more significant given the size of the municipality that Česká Třebová is. Since the municipality is one of the other key donors besides the regional authority, it is necessary to communicate with the citizens at an appropriate level so that the public understands why the municipality invests in this segment of community life. In general, social policy is not perceived positively in the context of the fact that the expenditures to redress inequalities are huge (social benefits, pensions).





## Conclusions

The research aimed to provide insight into the situation in the social services market in Česká Třebová. The research showed that social services in Česká Třebová are in good shape and the potential for growth of the whole system is considerable. The key challenge of this segment is coping with the constant uncertainty of funding. Multi-year funding is not a topic that is currently topical, this model has not been pushed through so far. Social services are faced with a demanding administration, staff constantly needing to upgrade their qualifications, and struggling with insufficient social remuneration. Community planning can help not only the commissioner or providers themselves, but the positive results of the system will also be felt by the public, potential service users, and, of course, existing users. Social

policy must respond flexibly to changing conditions and events. Providers have to overcome obstacles in the form of prejudice and often misunderstanding. Česká Třebová is an interesting place to live and the needs of its citizens must be one of the priorities of municipal management.

Thorough knowledge of the functioning of social services is a primary attribute for serious planning of social policy in the municipality. The policy is often based on intuitive patterns of reality rather than on serious information of an exact nature. The conclusions of the presented analysis clearly show what directions the public administration should communicate with social service providers. These are challenges for improved community planning and also for better community participation of all stakeholders in the quality of life in the community.

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