

Implementing the Community Lisbon programme: social services of general interest in the European Union

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn by Joel Hasse FERREIRA (PES, PT) in response to the Commission communication on implementing the Community Lisbon programme as regards social services of general interest (SSGIs) in the EU. The report stressed that SSGIs were "an appropriate means" of strengthening the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy, attaining the objectives of the social agenda and addressing challenges such as globalisation, industrial change, technological progress, demographic change, migration and changing social and employment patterns. However, although it welcomed the Commission initiative, the committee pointed out that the communication lacked sufficient clarification about the classification and definition of SSGIs and "defers any decision on the legal framework which should apply to them". MEPs accepted only "on a provisional and indicative basis" the organisational criteria which, according to the communication, are the distinguishing features of SSGIs and urged the Commission to find definitive conclusions through the consultation process it has pledged to conduct with the Member States and the SSGIs providers and users.

The report was opposed to an approach to SSGIs which sets up a "false opposition" between rules on competition, public aid and the market on the one hand, and concepts of public service, general interest and social cohesion on the other. MEPs nevertheless stressed that, in the case of SSGIs, the rules on competition, public aid and the internal market must be compatible with public service requirements and not the other way round.

The committee called on the Commission and Member States to protect and promote the patterns of employment frequently found in the SSGI sector, including female employment, flexible working hours, part-time working and use of the voluntary sector, while taking care not to encourage fraud and job insecurity or to cause any deterioration in employment conditions of workers. It also wanted the Commission, Member States and SSGI service providers to develop vocational training initiatives to help staff deal with the stress, working hours (shift and night work) and dangerous or demanding nature associated with certain activities in this sector.

Among its other recommendations, the report called for the establishment of public-private partnerships to provide SSGIs, while taking care to promote the general interest and ensure the provision of efficient and high-quality services. Lastly, it called for a forum to be convened, under the auspices of the European Parliament, to bring together European social organisations and representatives of the Council and the Commission to guide the way the SSGI process is handled.