



## INTERINSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION IN SOCIAL WORK CASE MANAGEMENT

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**Abstract:** *In the context of contemporary social pedagogical activity, the issue of complex relationships among specialists from various socially conditioned, educational, and judicial institutions arises. The existence of a broad range of services, units, and organizations operating in support of and for the benefit of society necessitates the establishment of a well-structured and comprehensive network for information exchange among the different segments of the system. The present article aims to examine the processes, methods, and structure of interinstitutional relationships, juxtaposing them with the views of specialists. The objective of the report is to explore interinstitutional relationships and the obstacles to achieving effective interinstitutional communication within the context of social pedagogical casework.*

**Keywords:** *interinstitutional cooperation, coordination, social work, communication, case management, casework*

### Introduction

Socio-pedagogical casework represents a fundamental part of the overall process of support and guidance in the practice of helping professionals. This aspect of social work requires the development of a holistic model of interaction that integrates various approaches and resources within the casework process, also referred to as “casework” (Механджийска 2019: 68-77). Based on the principle that the human personality is complete and strictly individual, it is understood that a coordinated approach in the interaction between different institutions is of key importance for the effectiveness of socio-pedagogical casework. “With the new reform in educational legislation in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian government guarantees that inclusion is the central principle in the process of legislative changes in education and has the potential to lead to real change for all children with disabilities. All of this is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and with the idea that all children should have access to mainstream schools and support” (Марчева-Йошовска 2025: 49).

Examining the topic through the prism of historical events that have shaped the contemporary image of socio-pedagogical practice in Bulgaria, several significant developments can be identified as having led to substantial changes over the past decades. The focus on these phenomena, the socio-economic transformations, and the overall shift in the understanding of care and support for children and individuals experiencing life difficulties have created the need to reconsider the approach that unites

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various institutional organizations and specialists within a common communication network based on transparency, cooperation, and professionalism.

The historical development of socio-pedagogical practice in Bulgaria shows how the system has evolved from single institutional care to a network of specialized structural units (social services) that provide different aspects of social support—information and counseling, advocacy and mediation, community work, therapy and rehabilitation, training for the acquisition of skills, support for acquiring labor skills, day and residential care, provision of shelter, and assistant support (Закон за социалните услуги 2019: 6). Kr. Todorova points out that “institutions for children are part of the heavy legacy in which the prevailing notion was that the state is capable of providing better care for raising and educating children than their families” (Тодорова 2021: 103). The closure of large institutions and the process of deinstitutionalization have made it possible to significantly improve the quality and individualization of the care provided. At the same time, this change has increased the complexity of interaction between institutions, requiring effective mediation, transparent communication, and coordination among various social services, schools, healthcare institutions, and non-governmental organizations.

Inter-institutional cooperation has become a key mechanism for the exchange of information, coordination, and the provision of timely and adequate support to individuals and families at risk.

The aim of this article is to examine the effectiveness of inter-institutional relations in the context of socio-pedagogical casework and to identify the main obstacles to achieving effective coordination and communication between the involved institutions and professionals.

The object of the study is inter-institutional cooperation within the system of social services in Bulgaria, examined in the context of the processes of deinstitutionalization and the implementation of the provisions of the Social Services Act.

The subject of the study includes the processes of interaction, coordination, information exchange, and distribution of professional roles among the different institutions and specialists involved in case management within socio-pedagogical practice.

### **Methodology**

The scientific value of the conducted research is justified through an interdisciplinary approach and methodology that integrate knowledge and practices from various professional fields. The topic is relevant and complementary for specialists from different areas of social work, as it not only examines experts' opinions about the existing social system but also traces their assessment of the effectiveness of inter-institutional interactions and partnerships in case management. The results of the study outline prospects for updating, optimizing, and restructuring the mediation system in order to improve coordination and the quality of the social support provided.

### **Results**

Inter-institutional cooperation in social work is viewed as a set of joint activities between different social services and institutions aimed at providing effective and comprehensive support to individuals and families at risk. In academic literature, inter-institutional cooperation is considered a key mechanism for ensuring comprehensive and timely support for clients. The definitions and conceptual frameworks of cooperation remain a subject of debate (Herlihy 2016: 117–124). The main approaches emphasize coordination, information exchange, service integration, and understanding the roles and expertise of partners. The theoretical perspective highlights that effective cooperation requires trust, clear goals and planning, as well as organizational support for interaction between different professional disciplines and institutions. These principles are valid for social work regardless of the specific national context, providing a generally applicable basis for analyzing and optimizing inter-institutional practices (Кузманова-Карталова 2013: 103-110).

At the same time, organizational and structural factors significantly influence the effectiveness of cooperation. These include processes of organizational development, employee workload, and differences in institutional goals, which may either facilitate or hinder coordination between individual units (Lanteigne & Iancu 2025: 454–474). Inter-institutional cooperation is particularly significant in work

with children and families, involving partners from the fields of education, healthcare, the Ministry of Interior system, and non-governmental organizations. Through cooperation, more comprehensive, integrated, and timely support can be ensured by combining different forms of expert knowledge and resources.

Inter-institutional cooperation brings benefits both to users of social services and to the professionals working with them. For service users, these benefits include access to specialists from various fields, better satisfaction of complex needs, improvement of overall well-being, and higher effectiveness of interventions. For professionals, cooperation provides access to diverse knowledge and expertise, support from colleagues, the opportunity to apply collective approaches when overcoming difficulties, greater professional satisfaction, better intervention outcomes, and a healthier working environment. From an organizational perspective, inter-institutional cooperation leads to more efficient use of infrastructure resources, better continuity of care, and higher quality of services provided.

Despite its numerous benefits, inter-institutional cooperation may face challenges at the individual, team, and organizational levels, which create barriers to effective joint work (Mason & Evans 2020: 664–681):

- **At the individual level**, challenges arise from the personal characteristics of team members, their perceptions of other professions, as well as their emotions and attitudes toward cooperation. Lack of flexibility, resistance to new ideas, or stubbornness may disrupt team dynamics. Insufficient confidence or hesitation in sharing ideas also hinders effective work. In addition, underestimating or overestimating the contribution of certain professions may create inequalities in status and power among team members. Negative attitudes, fear of losing control, or fear of showing vulnerability in front of others may also limit participation in collaborative work. It is important to note that specialists working with children in social services need to further develop their own social skills and emotional intelligence, which is an important prerequisite both for effective cooperation with colleagues and for objective case management with different categories of clients and service users (Златкова-Дончева 2025: 221).

- **At the team level**, the main difficulties stem from unclear roles and responsibilities of each team member, differences in professional identity, conflicts regarding approaches and goals, as well as hierarchical differences. Lack of understanding of roles may lead to duplication or omissions in task performance. Ignoring unhealthy team dynamics negatively affects the working environment and the outcomes of interventions.

- **At the organizational level**, organizational changes, rapid transformations, and newly established or temporary teams make it difficult for members to adapt to new roles and responsibilities. Organizational aspects such as leadership style, human resource management, allocation of funds, and the use of technology influence the effectiveness of cooperation. Differences in terminology, documentation, and data sharing among professionals lead to gaps in tracking the progress of service users and delays in interventions, which ultimately affect the quality of care.

The most precise definition of the effectiveness and benefits of inter-institutional relations is provided by G. Mehandzhiyska. She refines the understanding that what represents the future of social work is opening practice to flexibility and opportunities for individually different and specific approaches to support, ensuring resources for a wide range of choices of social services, enriching perspectives, and moving from a static and structured to a dynamic view of casework (Механджийска 2019: 288-289).

In support of the points presented so far, an expert assessment was conducted regarding specialists' opinions about the level of inter-institutional relations and partnership in case management. The data will be examined with regard to their informational and statistical value. The study was conducted in January 2026.

The first group of questions aims to outline the profile of specialists in the field of social work. The study involved 70 respondents practicing within the territory of Veliko Tarnovo Region. As shown in the chart, the gender distribution is uneven. A generally higher percentage of female specialists is observed in helping and/or educational professions. This phenomenon is often explained by cultural and social factors, including traditional attitudes toward gender roles, as well as the nature of professional tasks that require empathy and social sensitivity.

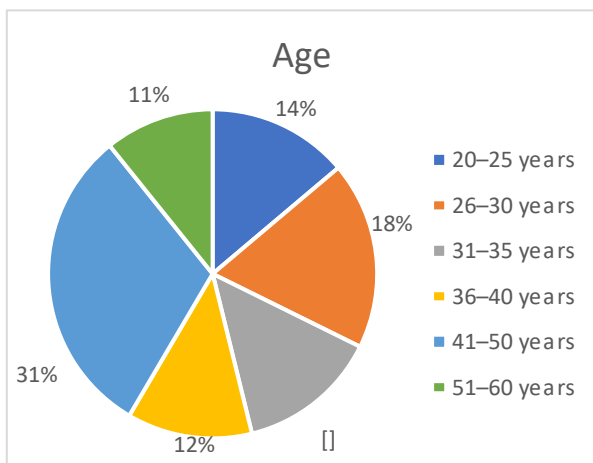


Figure 1: Gender Distribution

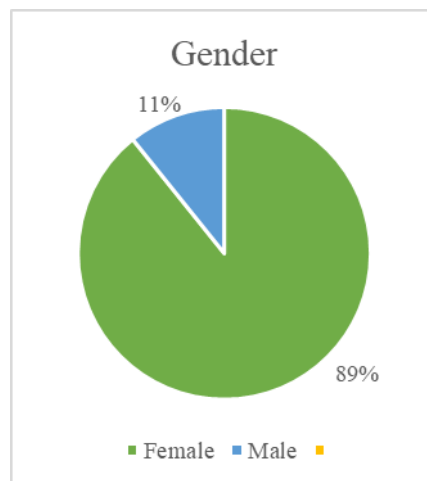


Figure 2: Age of Respondents

With regard to the age distribution of the respondents, a relative balance can be observed, indicating the participation of representatives from all age groups in the study. The largest share consists of experts aged 41–50, who represent 31% of all participants. They are followed by respondents aged 26–30, accounting for 15%. The age groups 20–25 and 31–35 are represented equally, each with a relative share of 14%. Individuals aged 36–40 make up 12%, while the smallest share is represented by experts aged 51–60, who account for 11%. Based on the presented data, it can be concluded that the expert assessment is dominated by specialists of active professional age, with a significant proportion of participants being under 35 years old.

Regarding the educational level of the experts, it is expected that the majority possess higher education, given the regulatory requirements for practicing professions in the social sector. In this context, the largest share consists of individuals holding a bachelor’s degree, representing 72% of all respondents. A relatively similar proportion is observed among experts with a master’s degree (14%) and those with secondary education (12%). The smallest share is represented by individuals with a doctoral degree, who constitute only 2% of the participants. The presented data show that a significant part of the experts has continued their professional education and have sought to further develop and update their knowledge after completing the compulsory education regulated by the legislation of the Republic of Bulgaria.

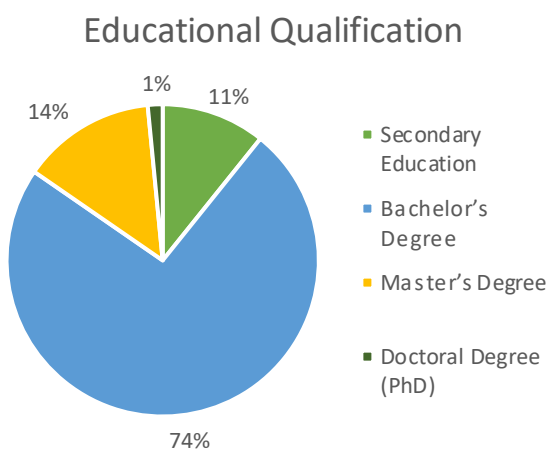


Figure 3: Experts' Educational Attainment

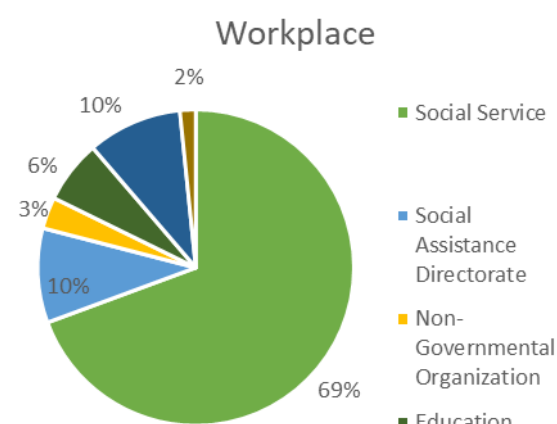


Figure 4: Experts' Place of Work

The workplace as a component of the study is of key importance in determining the reliability of the research. This is directly related to the second part of the assessment, which addresses the quality of inter-institutional relationships within the region. As shown in Fig. 4, there is a wide range of professional fields represented. The largest share consists of specialists working in social services, accounting for 70% of the total results. In the second place are experts employed in municipal units and the Social Assistance Directorate, each representing 10% of the total share. The lowest percentage is represented by experts from the educational sector, who account for only 7%.

The specialists who participated in the survey vary in their professional background. They include psychologists, social workers, experts from the Social Assistance Directorate and educational institutions, educators, therapists, and others. Their professional experience ranges from 0 to 40 years of service, indicating a broad range of specialists with a high level of professional training and experience in the field. More than 60% of the experts have over 5 years of professional experience. In other words, they possess sufficient experience and observation of the issues under study for their responses to be considered reliable.

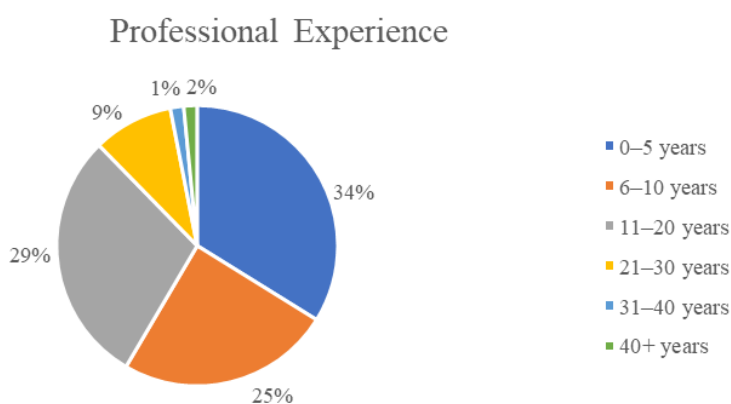


Figure 5: Experts' Professional Experience

The quality of the existing inter-institutional relationships is analyzed in the second part of the expert assessment. The first chart reflects specialists' opinions regarding their partnership with the Social Assistance Directorates and the Child Protection Department, based on criteria such as the timely and complete provision of information, professional support, and coordination in decision-making. The results indicate a predominantly positive evaluation of the partnership relations, with affirmative responses prevailing. Nevertheless, a need for improvement in the completeness of the information provided is highlighted.

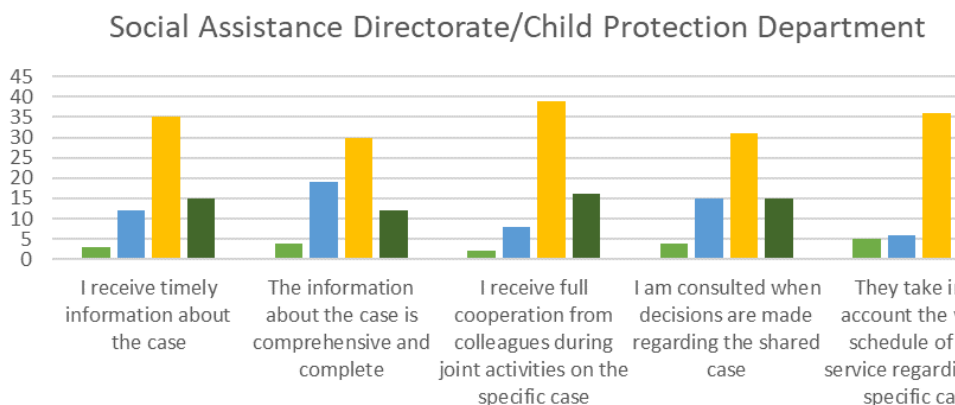


Figure 6: Collaboration with the Social Assistance Directorate and Child Protection Department

Based on the same criteria applied in the analysis of the previous institution, mediation with the municipal administration and providers of social services is also examined. The results show an almost complete absence of negative evaluations, with cooperation being assessed highly and unequivocally by the respondents.

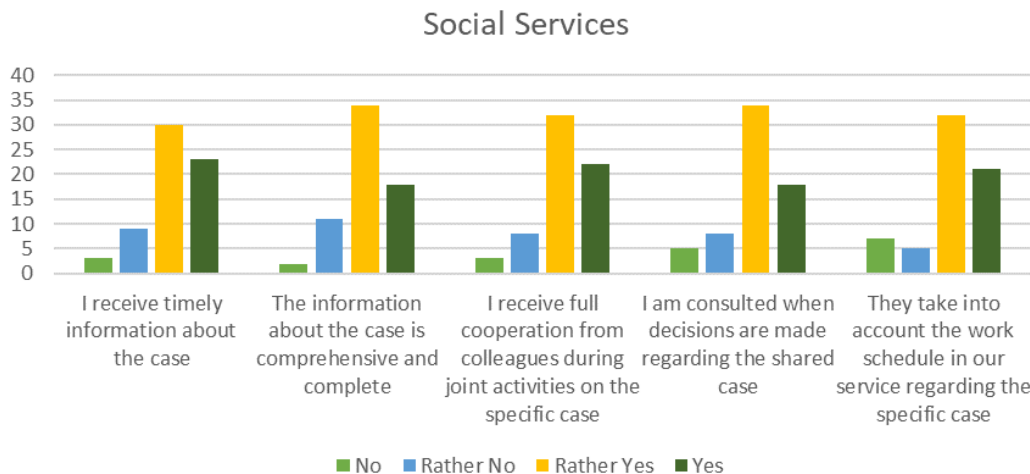


Figure 7: Relationships with Social Service Providers

Partnership with residential services and community-based services also follows the pattern observed in the previous two structures. Specialists do not believe that there are significant obstacles to establishing inter-institutional relationships, which demonstrates the competent approach taken by the professionals.

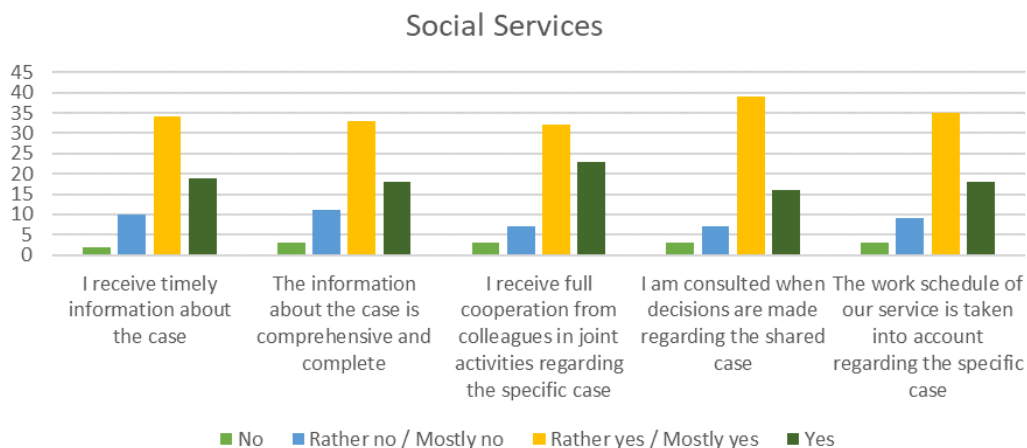


Figure 8: Relationships Between Services

The last chart highlights the most pronounced disagreements in the experts’ evaluations. It analyzes the partnership between specialists and the child’s or client’s relatives, caregivers, and parents involved in the case. Kr. Todorova emphasizes that “creating a shared understanding of the optimal way to communicate with the child on a daily basis, and of programs that support adults in this process, ensures the good mental health of future generations and their happy childhood” (Тодорова 2025: 267). The data show that a significant portion of the experts report the presence of resistance, failure to meet agreed deadlines, and difficulties in cooperation on the part of service users. The analysis does not aim to interpret these actions as deliberate but rather to outline the main challenges and areas where additional support is needed in handling future cases.

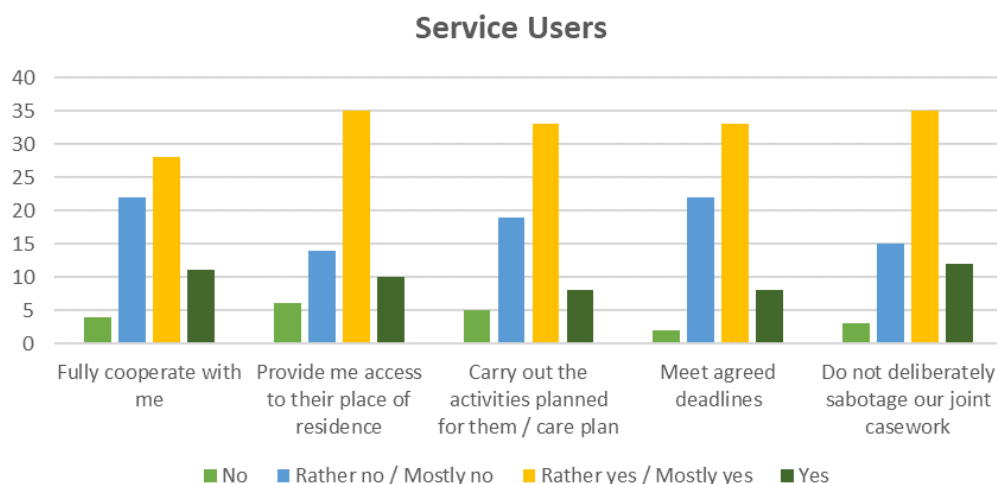


Figure 9: Partnership between Specialist and Service User

### Discussion

The expert assessment shows that inter-institutional partnership in the social sector of Veliko Tarnovo Region is at a good level and is characterized by effective coordination between institutions and service providers. Nevertheless, challenges are observed in cooperation with the families of service users, highlighting the need for additional support and increased awareness. In this regard, it is recommended to strengthen communication and the exchange of complete information between specialists and family members, as well as to organize targeted training for service users.

In the long term, these measures can contribute to more active involvement of families in the case-work process and to the sustainable enhancement of existing inter-institutional practices through regular coordination between the various structures.

### Conclusion

Inter-institutional partnership in the social sector of Veliko Tarnovo Region is at a good level and provides effective coordination between institutions and service providers. Nevertheless, it is recommended to strengthen communication and information exchange with the families of the service users, as well as to hold regular coordination meetings between the various structures to optimize socio-pedagogical casework.

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