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The inclusion of social services as an urban policy from the perspective of experts

Rubén Calero del Valle
Universidad de Huelva
Octavio Vázquez Aguado
Universidad de Huelva
Teresa González Gómez
Universidad de Huelva

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Abstract: To date, there has been no academic or scientific discussion on the link between social services and urban policy. This research aims to explore the possibility of incorporating social services into urban policy. It presents the results of a consultation carried out with experts in both areas of public policy, using a Delphi method focused on their assessments across five dimensions: shared features, contributions, common elements, joint integration and overall assessment. The two main aims are to ascertain the experts' views on the possibility of incorporating social services into urban policy and to compile proposals that would facilitate this approach. The results reflect widespread expert acceptance of the proposal for integration. The impact would be positive and reciprocal between both public policies; particularly, social services would contribute to the formulation of a more participatory, inclusive and environmentally friendly urban management model. Furthermore, proximity to citizens emerges as a common feature of the two policies. A total of twenty proposals were identified, with the highest proportion relating to the inclusive approach and to the area of governance, citizen participation and community development. In short, these proposals do not imply a significant financial burden for local authorities; rather, they require the political will to actively listen to the public and to focus on the social dimension.
Keywords: social services; urban policy; urban management; social innovation; inclusion.

Sumario: 1. Introduction. 1.1. Urban policy: the role of local authorities in the management of urban and rural contexts. 1.2. Social services in urban management and the contribution of community social work in cities. 2. Purpose and methodology. 3. Results. 4. Discussion. 5. Conclusions. References.

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1. Introduction

Social services have historically suffered from a subordinate position compared to other public policies within the welfare state. Their organisation is characterised by greater territorial fragmentation (Fantova, 2019) and by economic, regulatory and ideological devaluation (Garrido Juncal, 2020). This fragmentation and the devolution of social welfare responsibilities to the autonomous communities, with local authorities managing these responsibilities, result in chronic financial shortfalls, a diversity of technical approaches, a lack of clearly defined responsibilities, and the complex system of central institutions with a local presence (Casado, 2010; Aguilar, 2010).

Furthermore, another factor that highlights the fragility of the social services system can be seen in the way social issues are addressed in each social context and at each point in history; issues such as the complexity of social problems arising from exclusion, rising demand, evictions, workers facing poor working conditions, excessive bureaucratisation of services and the curtailment of social rights and budgets through legislative changes, migration, violence, not to mention the varying regional impacts and coverage rates (Hernández-Echegaray, 2019).

The structural fragility of the social services system has been frequently highlighted. Aguilar Hendrickson (2013) also criticises the system's dependence on demand and its institutional fragmentation. Fantova (2019),

meanwhile, emphasises the need for coordinated and preventive interventions. Furthermore, the perspective of Kazepov et al. (2022), which focuses on multilevel governance and local well-being, encourages the possibility of reinterpreting social services as an essential social and urban policy, particularly when they are linked to strategies of community outreach and participation in rural contexts characterised by a scarcity and dispersion of resources.

This structural fragility of the predominantly welfare-based social services model highlights the need for reflective processes to improve its standing as a social public policy. Its local and community-based nature makes it the welfare state policy that is closest to the public. This proximity, as a political criterion, has enabled the structuring of essential social welfare systems. In Spain, this coincided with the consolidation of democracy; systems such as education, healthcare and social services, organised around the resources of each sector of activity (Fantova & Casado, 2017) and rooted in the neighbourhood or municipality, spaces that are close to and vital for citizens.

The local and community-based nature of social services develops in parallel with other community-based policies, which are considered within the framework of urban management. Can social services be considered as another urban policy within the framework of urban management? Can this consideration or integration contribute to the consolidation of social services as public policy? This paper presents the results of an empirical study on the possibility of including social services as another urban policy on city agendas. Using the Delphi method, experts in social services and urban policy were consulted on their views regarding the inclusion of social services as an urban policy across five key dimensions: shared characteristics, contributions, common elements, joint incorporation and overall assessment, using a previously validated questionnaire.

To this end, this research has been based on two main objectives. Firstly, to understand the views of experts in urban policy and social services regarding the inclusion of social services as an urban policy. And secondly, to compile a series of proposals that will pave the way for social services to be included as an urban policy. The aim is not to dilute or weaken the status of social services as a social policy, but quite the opposite: to strengthen their role and prominence within cities. To this end, the study begins with an examination of the concept of urban policy and the role of local councils in its management, drawing on urban management and the management of rural contexts, and offers a contextualisation of social services within urban management and the contribution of Community Social Work in cities.

1.1. Urban policy: the role of local authorities in the management of urban and rural contexts

Since the 1990s, urban management has been associated with a restrictive, economistic and individualistic approach centred on land use, and has been criticised for its inefficiency and institutional rigidity at local level. In recent decades, the approach has broadened to incorporate new urban issues (Jordán et al., 2003).

More recently, European urban policy has seen a gradual consolidation of a shared urban heritage through the evolution of the concept of sustainable development and the development of the European Urban Agenda. Specifically, sustainable development can be defined as a comprehensive process that ensures the interaction between nature and society, through the transformation of global and local paradigms—such as inequality, poverty, overpopulation, resource scarcity and biodiversity—in such a way that, within a nation, it fosters environmental, social and economic balance (Damián Tibacuy et al., 2022). The role of local government has been revitalised to understand citizens' needs and provide the best response from a multidimensional perspective (social, economic, political and cultural). However, it may still be premature to comment on the prominence given to more social and sustainable criteria in local urban agendas and local territorial strategies.

Urban policy also faces a number of challenges relating to its terminology and urban management models (Blanco & Subirats, 2012), which could be grouped under the neoliberal urban management model of the 'Smart City' and the participatory or community-based model. Another factor influencing the polysemy of the notion of urban policy is rooted in the closely linked concepts of the city, urban space, public policy and urban management, or urban governance (Calero-Del Valle et al., 2023). To achieve objectives as public policies, urban policies must integrate multiple fields—not only spatial planning, but also the labour market, housing, environmental sustainability, mobility and safety, as well as culture, a sense of community and history, and, of course, social inclusion policies, where social services play a leading role.

Just as with these urban policy challenges, we cannot overlook the structural challenges facing social services, as highlighted by various authors (Casado, 2010; Aguilar, 2010; Aguilar Hendrickson, 2013; Fantova, 2019; Hernández-Echegaray, 2019; Garrido Juncal, 2020). Furthermore, the model for professional intervention in community-based social services has not, to date, achieved the necessary level of practical implementation (Aguilar, 2013; Rodríguez and Marbán, 2017; Montagud, 2018).

These challenges are exacerbated in rural areas, where interventions take place under specific local conditions such as greater dispersion, mobility barriers, reduced availability of specialist resources, and a closer link between geographical isolation and social vulnerability. Consequently, social services perform not only care functions but also play a central role in addressing territorial inequalities and fostering community cohesion; therefore, they must be positioned as a strategic element of territorial governance rather than as a peripheral extension of urban-centric policies (Zamora et al., 1995; Sanz Tolosana & Oliva Serrano, 2020).

The literature on social services and care in rural areas also highlights the need for flexible, mobile and cross-sectoral models, suited to low population density and the importance of informal networks. In this vein,

the rural agenda should be integrated into strategies for social cohesion and sustainable territorial development, strengthening coordination between local government, health, education, community services and the voluntary sector. In this regard, Gil Rodríguez's systematic review (2024) highlights the desirability of reducing rural dispersion and incorporating the territorial variable into professional assessments. From this perspective, it is argued that the work of social work is crucial for the future of the rural world.

From the perspective of community social work, rural areas provide a particularly fertile ground for collective action, neighbourhood organisation and the strengthening of social capital, although they also carry risks of paternalism, institutional dependency and the fragmentation of resources. Consequently, the coordination between social services, community work and the rural agenda enables a shift from an intervention focused on deficits to one geared towards the empowerment, participation and sustainability of communities, enhancing endogenous resources and social capital (López Carlassare & Palma García, 2026). Consequently, viewing social services as a territorial policy (both urban and rural) strengthens their legitimacy as public policy and broadens their role in shaping well-being.

1.2. Social services in urban management and the contribution of community social work in cities

In academic literature, it is common to encounter approaches that view social services as social policies closely associated with the urban context. Indeed, certain studies use the term 'urban social services', generally without a rigorous or systematic conceptual framework, and based on a broad and poorly problematised approach. (Vaid, 1976; Huxley et al., 1987; Arriagada Luco & Órdenes Órdenes, 2011; Moreno Jiménez, 2015; Mugumbate & Nyoni, 2016; HatiBoğlu Kisat & Odabaş, 2023). Consequently, historically this has not translated into a clear contribution by social services to the sustainability of cities, largely due to the structural weaknesses of social services and urban policies.

Although social services were initially established in urban contexts to mitigate the social impacts of industrialisation, their original formulation did not respond to an urban policy logic, but rather to a sectoral protective intervention in the face of the social effects of the early industrial revolution (Vázquez-Aguado, 2009). Today, the main challenge is not that social services should dilute their autonomy as a social policy, but rather to articulate synergies and strategic convergences that facilitate their integration into urban and, by extension, territorial agendas, thereby strengthening their institutional recognition.

A key pillar of this integration is community social work, which has historically been linked to Lefebvre's (2013) 'right to the city' and is aimed at promoting more equitable and inclusive environments. Based on these premises, social services cease to operate solely as welfare mechanisms and are reconfigured as active agents of territorial agendas, capable of highlighting vulnerability and incorporating citizens' situated knowledge into the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies (Jaraíz Arroyo, 2012; Pastor Seller, 2014; Morán Neches & Rodríguez Suárez, 2021; Espadas-Alcázar & Amezcua Aguilar, 2024).

Furthermore, the rural agenda broadens the analysis by situating intervention in depopulated areas or those at risk of depopulation, where dispersion and scarcity of resources coexist with a strategic role in guaranteeing rights, social cohesion and community sustainability. Taken together, the coordination between social services, Community Social Work and urban-rural agendas makes it possible to overcome the urban-centric bias and understand social intervention as a territorial component of equity, sustainability and social justice (López Carlassare & Palma García, 2026).

With the consolidation of local social services, community-based approaches have lost their central role, and social work has increasingly focused on the administration of benefits and services. This reorientation has created a twofold vulnerability: it has restricted interventions designed as processes of inclusion and normalisation and, at the same time, has reduced the capacity of these services to generate community social capital (Jaraíz & Zugasti, 2021). Despite their nature as local public services providing close-to-home care, particularly relevant for vulnerable groups, their role in urban management is not limited to their contribution in Urban Regeneration and Rehabilitation Areas, where it is proposed to incorporate specific actions and indicators (Agost-Felip et al., 2018). In a broader sense, social services operate as a public policy aimed at promoting citizenship, participation and rights, including Lefebvre's right to the city.

Without focusing on the regulatory framework of social services and their respective regional laws, it is important in this study to identify the position of social services within urban agendas. To understand the role of social services in urban management, we must specifically refer to the 1985 Law on the Foundations of Local Government, which explicitly identifies social services as falling outside the scope of urban management. Urban management is presented as a combination of public services linked to land use, grouped under the term 'urban planning' rather than the concept of urban management. In the case of social services, they form part of this group of public services.

According to Ornés (2014), the aim of urban policies is to overcome the obstacles to sustainable development across the six dimensions present in cities: social, economic, ecological, political, cultural and ethical. It should be noted, however, that social services are not currently considered part of urban policy, despite the fact that urban agendas have become more complex. In the social dimension, only health and education are considered; in the economic dimension, they should be present, albeit indirectly; and in the political dimension, bridges could be built between local government and citizens. There remains a need to better articulate and understand the complexity of urban policies due to the diversity of issues they may encompass (Salamaña, 2012), and also to identify where social services can contribute and strengthen their role as an element of the social dimension of cities.

Their roles will vary depending on which urban management models are implemented in the city; there is a continuum between these models. In more economically driven urban management models, which are reduced to urban planning policies, social services face a greater number of obstacles or social problems in cities.

Furthermore, public service companies, technology firms and businesses from any sector seek business opportunities and economic profitability within this model, overlooking equality, social cohesion, genuine citizen participation, redistributive justice, or greater quality of life and happiness in cities (Salamaña, 2012). According to Montaner (2012), social sustainability is a major challenge to be met, one that enables the promotion of sustainable architecture, addresses environmental challenges, fosters participatory urban planning, and creates spaces where diversity and equality are recognised; under this premise, it is a key objective for the management of social services. To this end, it is necessary to deconstruct current neoliberal processes, with the aim of generating an alternative form of urban planning based on bottom-up principles, self-organisation, and values of social justice. The role of social services within this model of urban management is evident and necessary for improving citizens' quality of life.

Examining the role of social services in relation to the right to the city, through the lens of community social work and social sustainability, presents a major challenge. This is due to the gap between these two concepts in current urban agendas, the need for a fundamental rethinking of urban planning and urban management, which are characterised by a neoliberal approach, and the undervaluing of social services as a component of territorial urban policy.

2. Purpose and methodology

The aim of this article is, firstly, to examine and analyse experts' views on the inclusion of social services as an urban policy, assessing the positive and negative aspects of this new conceptualisation and approach. Secondly, it seeks to identify proposals that will pave the way for the inclusion of social services as an urban policy. The interest in incorporating social services into urban management as yet another urban policy stems from the desire to enhance the prominence of social services on urban agendas and from the urgent need for these public services to receive the recognition they deserve for the social functions they perform in cities, without straying from their conception as social policy or losing their prominence as such.

To explore the possibility of incorporating social services as a further urban policy, this study employs a qualitative methodology using the modified or 'non-iterative' Delphi method (Charro, 2017). The aim is to ascertain the views of experts in urban policy and social services regarding the inclusion of social services as an urban policy.

The Delphi method has been one of the most widely used methods in social research over recent decades (Cabero & Infante, 2014). This method allows information to be gathered from experts in specific subject areas, thereby achieving a reliable consensus (Reguant-Álvarez & Torrado-Fonseca, 2016; Ramírez Chávez & Ramírez Torres, 2024) that provides experts' perceptions regarding a series of in-depth questions organised around a questionnaire (Cabero & Infante, 2014). To apply this method, first the experts were consulted to validate the questionnaire itself; and second, the consensus was compiled following seven phases (Ramírez Chávez & Ramírez Torres, 2024): 1) Define the problem, 2) Determine the knowledge required of the participating experts, 3) Select the participants, 4) Prepare the questionnaire, 5) Distribute the questionnaire, 6) Analyse the responses, and 7) Establish the consensus.

If consensus is not reached, feedback is provided to the experts and the process is repeated until consensus is achieved. As the authors Ramírez Chávez & Ramírez Torres (2024, p.5) state, "in the event of divergence between the experts' responses, the next questionnaire is prepared with the points of divergence (second round) and this is sent back to the specialists to reach a consensus". In the case of this research, as can be seen, a classic Delphi method was not followed; it was not necessary to repeat the data collection process, as the first round yielded an 80% acceptance threshold for the proposal to include social services as urban policy.

The sample was selected on the basis of suitability in relation to their fields of research, comprising 10 experts in social services and urban policy. The profile is diverse, representing a heterogeneous mix of people of different genders, with institutional/university or external backgrounds, and all holding a PhD. Specifically, three come from Social Work (three male and three female PhD holders considered experts in social services) and four from Sociology (three male and one female PhD holders, considered experts in urban policy).

As regards institutional background, the majority are affiliated with universities, with the exception of one person from outside the university who regularly collaborates with the Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea as an independent consultant. Of the remainder, two work at the University of Jaén, four at Pablo Olavide University, one at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, another at the University of Cádiz, and another at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. All are members of the tenured teaching staff and/or are full professors with extensive experience.

The tool used was a questionnaire designed in line with the stated objectives. As this research is heuristic and innovative in nature, and as no existing instruments were available that were suited to the aims of this study, the questionnaire was developed from scratch. Furthermore, the questionnaire was reviewed in full by the three authors of this research and validated with the ten experts in the sample prior to their responses being recorded. To collect the information, they were provided with a conceptual framework outlining three key concepts used in this research (urban management, urban policy and social services). This conceptualisation stems from a commitment to a model of urban management distinct from the neoliberal approach, due

to its limitations and the problems it generates. Regarding the structure of the questionnaire[1], a biographical section was included to provide a brief overview of the respondents' CVs, alongside five sections focusing on topics related to urban policy and social services.

The first four sections were assessed using a Likert-type scale, with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), whilst section 5 featured a series of open-ended questions to allow respondents to explain or justify their answers and/or provide any additional information they deemed relevant. Finally, in the last section, the experts were able to provide an open-ended assessment to make proposals and rank them in order of importance regarding the suitability and potential of including social services as an urban policy. All these results have been organised and compiled manually with the aid of spreadsheet software.

3. Results

Below are the most notable findings from the expert consultation, drawn from five of the six sections that make up the questionnaire. To view the detailed data for each item, please refer to the four open-access tables available in the Arias Montano Institutional Repository of the University of Huelva[2].

Purpose and proximity as common characteristics of urban policy and social services

Table 1 shows the average scores for the items in the section entitled 'Characteristics of urban policy in relation to social services' (Section 1). The two items with the highest ratings are: "proximity to citizens is necessary in both urban policy and social services", in first place with an average of 4.80, and in second place "the purpose of urban policy and social services is to meet the needs of citizens".

Specifically regarding the highest scores, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that proximity to citizens is a common characteristic of both urban policy and social services. In the second case, eight out of the ten experts expressed this view regarding the common aim of meeting citizens' needs through both urban policy and social services. Conversely, among the items with the lowest ratings, the funding role of regional public administrations for social services, as well as for urban policies, stands out first.

With an average rating of 2.5, this can be interpreted in terms of the different approaches to managing the funding of social services, which are financed by regional authorities and administered at local level in areas with a population of 20,000 or more, whilst urban policies are managed by local authorities. The second item with a low average rating (2.60) was the social and inclusive orientation of urban policy and social services, highlighting the limitations of both policies in meeting the needs for inclusion in cities.

A collaborative culture and the promotion of research initiatives as contributions to social services

The findings for Section 2 (Table 2), which focuses on the contribution of urban policy to social services, include seven statements regarding potential contributions, all of which are characterised by relatively high average scores. Specifically, the lowest score—regarding how urban policies can help address the limitations of social services management—has an average of 3.20. This is followed by other statements at varying distances; however, the most notable is the average of 4.10 corresponding to the promotion of research initiatives as contributions to social services, a statement which has an 80% consensus regarding the highest levels of 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. In the case of the second highest rating (3.80), consensus stands at 70% regarding the promotion of a collaborative culture conducive to the generation of shared values in social services. Consequently, it is clear that the highest ratings relate to the dimension of innovation and research.

On the other hand, addressing shortcomings in the management of social services by incorporating them into urban policy and achieving greater budgetary stability are the statements that received the lowest scores, with a weighting of 3.20 and 3.30 respectively. Although both are the lowest-rated items, they both show a 50% consensus among those who 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. In conclusion, the lowest scores relate to the economic dimension of social services.

The inclusive approach and the socio-cultural and educational dimensions as common elements between urban policy and social services

With regard to the shared components between urban policy and social services (section 3), the experts identify certain elements of urban policy that are also present in social services. The nine statements set out in Table 3 show the degree of agreement or disagreement.

Nine items corresponding to the dimensions of urban action are identified. In this section, there is greater consensus in the scores awarded; all items receive the same rating at least twice and have an intermediate rating exceeding a score of three on the scale, meaning they are genuinely positive ratings. Specifically, two items stand out with the same score of 4.10. The item on socio-cultural activities, education, leisure and culture is the one with the highest proportion of consensus regarding the levels of 'agree' and 'strongly agree', having been rated by 80% of respondents. In the case of the item on the inclusive approach, the consensus stood at 70%.

In contrast, the three items with the lowest scores all received the same weighting (3.10): energy and sustainability, infrastructure and public space, and mobility and transport. These items show a 40% consensus on response rates below three points.

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1 You can find detailed information about the questionnaire in open access within the University of Huelva's Arias Montano Institutional Repository: https://hdl.handle.net/10272/28199

2 To view detailed data for each item, please click on the following link: https://hdl.handle.net/10272/28199

It is clear that the results of this section reveal a degree of inclusion and segregation regarding specific elements shared by social services and urban policy. Nevertheless, there is broad acceptance of the common elements identified between social services and urban policy. This implies setting common objectives and joining forces on specific issues affecting cities, as a united front between social services and urban policy.

The broad consensus on the integrated approach to social services and urban policy

In the case of the joint integration of urban policy and social services, nine statements were formulated for section 4 (see Table 4). Overall, the statements received a high rating, as indicated by the percentage of consensus based on the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses. On the one hand, the contribution to mobility and public transport has the lowest score (3.80), although 70% rated it at over 4.00 points. On the other hand, the contribution to infrastructure and public transport ranks as the second lowest (3.90); nevertheless, 70% also rated it positively at over 4.00.

The highest scores were given to the contribution of the inclusive approach, the second highest-rated item across the five blocks (4.40); and the contribution of governance and citizen participation, the third highest-rated item (4.30). Looking closely at the consensus on both items, 80% of the experts agree or strongly agree, and only 20% are neutral.

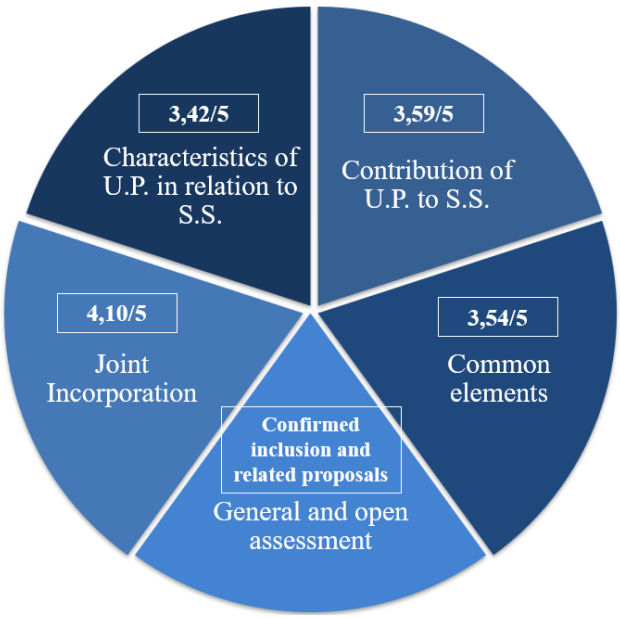
It is clear that it seems easier to argue that social services should be part of urban policy. Rather than arguing the opposite—that urban policy should incorporate social services—given the weaker evidence supporting the latter view.

Furthermore, if we examine the consensus on the inclusion of social services in urban agendas, clear results can be identified. 80% of experts consider inclusion to be necessary; in contrast, only 20% believe it is not necessary. These results reflect the broad consensus that exists for our proposed approach.

Delving deeper into the reasons for the non-inclusion, the two respondents put forward two very different reasons. One argument is that social services are already incorporated from our analytical perspective, which would support the item. The other argument is an exercise in reflection, focused primarily on two issues: a higher-level territorial policy in localities that promotes their social, economic and cultural development, and the transformation of second-generation human rights into social policy with a territorial character. In this regard, despite disagreeing on the inclusion of social services (though considering it possible), they offer a series of alternative proposals: social services as a territorial service, 'preserving the identity of social services' and 'formulating territorial social policies'.

Furthermore, by way of summary and to illustrate the five sections comprising the expert survey, a representation of the five dimensions is provided, along with their respective main findings (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Proposed approaches to incorporating social services into urban policy



Source: compiled by the authors.

The experts' proposals for the inclusion of social services as an urban policy

With regard to the proposals made by the experts, a total of 20 were identified, distributed as follows: those who submitted the minimum of three (40%), those who did not meet the minimum requirement (20%), those who submitted one additional proposal (10%) and one person who did not submit any proposals (10%). The proposals could be grouped into six thematic groups or areas.

The largest proportion of proposals relate to the inclusive approach, with six contributions. In terms of their level of specificity, these are: 1) focusing urban development on promoting equal opportunities; 2) orienting

urban management towards universal accessibility regardless of the level (social, cultural, commercial, etc.); 3) directing it towards analysing social housing policy; and 4) managing urban planning based on the concept of 'social superblocks' (Rueda Palenzuela, 2017) developed in Barcelona. Two more generic proposals are also put forward: 1) to take into account the needs of all citizens (including vulnerable groups) in urban policy, and 2) to involve social services in urban policy due to their proximity to the population's needs, in order to gain first-hand knowledge of many unknown and unmet demands (particularly in line with the findings of our research).

The thematic area of governance, citizen participation and community development is the second most popular, comprising five proposals focused on: 1) implementing local open governance networks; 2) involving service users and social services professionals in citizen forums on urban policy; 3) supporting, leading and revitalising the aforementioned participatory spaces through social services; 4) shaping community actions through the coordination of urban policies; and, along similar lines, 5) fostering community development through the reclaiming of public spaces by citizens. Within this theme, all proposals address the need to integrate the 'philosophy' of social services into urban policy.

The thematic group on design and integrated development and the sustainability group (social, environmental and economic) are the next to be discussed; both contain three proposals. The proposals from the first group are: 1) to implement tools for social and local development and integrated planning; 2) to integrate all collective activities carried out by social services into the public agenda of local actions, as well as to integrate these actions into those (there is also a commitment to integrating the 'philosophy' of social services); and 3) to specify planning instruments and formats designed or chosen in each location (reference is made to the proximity of social services). In contrast, the three proposals from the sustainability group are: 1) aimed at environmental recycling in neighbourhoods within Areas in Need of Social Transformation with citizen involvement; 2) participation in smart neighbourhood projects from a social perspective (energy communities); and 3) designing tools that take into account variables susceptible to social, environmental and economic intervention.

Finally, the two remaining groups with the lowest proportion of proposals: the mobility and transport group (two proposals) and the socio-cultural and educational group (one proposal). In the case of the first group, one proposal is the "15-minute city", characterised by the proximity of public services located within a 15-minute walk or cycle, and another proposal is to adapt public transport for people with disabilities. In the case of the other group, there is only one proposal to strengthen educational and cultural programmes in order to combat exclusion in marginalised neighbourhoods.

4. Discussion

This research has sought to explore the strengthening of the role of social services in cities, by identifying a common framework between social services and urban policies, as well as a series of characteristics and elements shared by both fields. The possibility of including social services as another urban policy on urban agendas also stems from the urgent need for their recognition. These public social policies can (and should) be recognised for the social functions they perform in cities, without overlooking their prominence in rural settings (Zamora et al., 1995; Sanz Tolosana & Oliva Serrano, 2020; Gil Rodríguez, 2024).

To date, there is no real link between social services and urban agendas. Rather, certain case studies have been presented that are closely linked in isolation and as a public service without being highlighted (Calero-Del Valle et al., 2023). Despite this, the literature review highlights the significant work and prominence of social services in cities in mitigating the social impacts that have been mounting since the origins of the Industrial Revolution (Vázquez-Aguado, 2009; Williams, 2019). This leading role is recognised even outside Spain by the pioneers of social work, whose professional practice marked a turning point for the profession and for social services themselves at an international level.

Urban social work must be able to move beyond the profession's isolation and its role as a 'knowledge provider' or 'problem-solver', with the aim of highlighting its proactive nature and thereby strengthening its role in sustainability and development (Williams, 2019). On the one hand, these premises have been identified by experts in the inclusive approach as one of the areas of greatest consensus, with some proposals focusing on the urgent need to meet the needs of all citizens (not just vulnerable groups) in urban policy, as well as integrating social services into urban policy due to their proximity to the needs of the population. On the other hand, these findings continue to highlight the shortcomings in the level of practical implementation required for the professional intervention model of community-based social services (Aguilar, 2013; Rodríguez & Marbán, 2017; Montagud, 2018). Therefore, from our perspective, there is an urgent need to strengthen these social public policies through their genuine integration at the local level. This view is also shared by 80% of the experts consulted, who consider inclusion to be a necessary component of urban policy.

Similarly, proximity to the public is a key characteristic of both disciplines (4.80/5), a point particularly emphasised in the field of social services by various authors (Aguilar, 2013; Fantova & Casado, 2017; Rodríguez & Marbán, 2017; Montagud, 2018). In the quest to establish a common framework between the two disciplines, another element has been highlighted: collaboration and research initiatives. There is broad acceptance of a collaborative culture (70%) and a high rating (3.80/5), as well as support for research initiatives as contributions to social services (4.10/5), with 80% consensus. Research initiatives such as the one proposed in this study could contribute to improving the social services system and its prominence at the local level. Various authors have highlighted the importance of this role (Zamora et al., 1995; Sanz Tolosana & Oliva Serrano, 2020; Gil Rodríguez, 2024).

The inclusive approach and the socio-cultural focus are common elements between social services and urban policy; in this regard, a consensus of 70% and 80% respectively has been observed. This represents another 'bridge', another common link between the two fields, which suggests the possibility of a shared working framework. In fact, these approaches or thematic axes are closely linked to the principles of community social work (Pastor Seller, 2014; Morán Neches & Rodríguez Suárez, 2021); through the guarantee of rights, social cohesion and community sustainability via social intervention as a territorial component of equity, sustainability and social justice (López Carlassare & Palma García, 2026).

5. Conclusions

This empirical study put forward an innovative proposal to identify theoretical and practical links in the relationship between social services as a public policy and urban policies. Through its fieldwork, it encouraged experts to engage in an ontological reflection on the concepts of social services and urban policies. Its methodological approach of expert analysis sought to identify arguments for association or symbiotic relationships and to contribute to their improvement and development in comparison with other local public policies. The conclusions lead us to various arguments or assumptions with which to conclude this study. To date, there has been no prior academic or scientific discussion on the link between social services and urban policies, or on the proposal to include them as urban policies. Added to this challenge are the various challenges of urban policies, the structural barriers of the social services model, and urban-centric policies.

However, this reflective inquiry has revealed a high level of support for the integration of this pairing. Furthermore, such integration would have a positive impact on social services, as well as, conversely, on urban policies, as demonstrated in the proposals put forward—such as the involvement of vulnerable groups in environmental, urban planning and urban mobility policies. In short, the findings were fruitful mainly because 80% believe that inclusion is necessary. These are quite high figures and indicate a broad consensus on the proposal for integration. In fact, the remaining 20%, although they disagree, consider inclusion possible and generally do not raise any objections.

There is clear evidence of the enormous contribution that social services would make to reshaping the urban management model towards a more participatory, inclusive and environmentally friendly model. This could mark the beginning of the promotion of a collaborative culture that fosters the creation of shared values between social services and other urban policies, through the proximity to citizens' needs that characterises social services and the development of social innovations.

A key common feature highlighted is the proximity to citizens as a characteristic shared by social services and urban policy, as well as the purpose of both policies, which underpin the appropriateness of conceiving social services as urban policy. Meeting demands and needs is more feasible when there is a facilitating element at the local level; in particular, the proximity of social services makes this possible through local knowledge.

This work of ontological reflection, which has a heuristic purpose in that it proposes a novel conceptual approach to social services, has not been easy; this study acknowledges that respondents have found it difficult to recognise the contributions of urban policy to social services. However, the broad consensus regarding the common elements raised in the consultation provides a framework for establishing an appropriate structure for social services within the urban agenda and its theoretical justification. This is without overlooking certain shared elements, such as focusing on two dimensions or thematic groups: an inclusive approach and socio-cultural activities, education, leisure and culture (although the latter encompasses the fewest proposals).

As regards the proposals put forward by the experts, these have been compiled with the aim of broadening the scope of social services to include them within urban policy. In the consultation, the 20 proposals identified have been grouped into the four thematic areas mentioned: an inclusive approach; governance, citizen participation and community development; sustainability; and socio-cultural and educational aspects. Among these proposals, those in the inclusive approach group stand out as they account for the largest proportion (N=6), whilst the governance, citizen participation and community development group ranks second in terms of the number of proposals.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the 20 proposals do not entail a significant financial burden for local authorities; rather, they require the political will to actively listen to citizens and direct these proposals towards the social dimension. Consequently, this is reflected in a series of territorial strategies and plans demonstrating a strong social commitment, with a particular emphasis on more structural interventions.

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