

# Building a Resilient Social Services Workforce



## About the European Social Network

The European Social Network (ESN) represents the voice of public social services as employers, managers, funders, planners, providers, and inspectors of social services in Europe. ESN inspires Social Services Leaders to Improve the Lives of People in the Community through the development and exchange of knowledge to improve policy and practice in public social services, including all support and community-based services fighting poverty, promoting social inclusion and autonomy, child protection, protection of people with disabilities, care and support for older people, homeless people, and people and families in disadvantaged socio-economic situations.

## About this Publication

This briefing was drafted within the framework of the 2023 annual work programme of the European Social Network (ESN), where the social services workforce was a cross-cutting theme across several activities. The briefing draws on desk research, the answer to a questionnaire that was completed by 34 member organisations from 19 countries, and an event that addressed ways to build a resilient social services workforce held at the European Parliament in November 2023.

## About the Questionnaire

ESN developed a questionnaire for ESN member organisations, mostly public social services at various government levels, in February 2023. The questionnaire aimed to update data from a previous questionnaire in 2016 which was the basis of the 2017 publication 'Investing in the Social Services Workforce', and focused on workforce roles and responsibilities, qualifications and skills, recruitment and retention, regulation, planning and future needs. We gathered responses from 34 member organisations in 19 countries: Austria, Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. For a detailed overview of respondents, please refer to the Annex.

## About the Event

The event took the form of a roundtable at the European Parliament. It brought together representatives from the European Parliament, the European Commission, national governments, and public social services from across Europe to discuss the evidence we had gathered through the questionnaire on challenges related to labour shortages and how developing, retaining, and attracting the right workforce are key success factors for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and related initiatives like the Care Strategy.

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## Executive Summary

This is the executive summary of the Briefing 'Building a Resilient Social Services Workforce' published as a follow-up to the European Social Network's (ESN) 2023 annual roundtable at the European Parliament. The discussion centred on the evidence gathered through a comprehensive questionnaire developed for ESN member organisations that covered social services workforce roles and responsibilities, qualifications and skills, recruitment and retention, regulation, planning and future needs.

Read the full briefing for a more comprehensive review of challenges related to labour shortages and how developing, retaining, and attracting the right workforce are key success factors for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and related initiatives like the Care Strategy.

### Social Services Workforce Roles and Responsibilities

Social workers, alongside care and support workers, were identified as pivotal professionals in delivering effective social services. Supporting them to be effective in delivering services requires ongoing training, adequate supervision, and development support. However, bureaucratic hurdles, funding constraints, and poor working conditions emerge as significant challenges hindering their ability to fulfil their roles effectively.

### Qualifications and Skills

There is a clear distinction between the qualifications required between more qualified workers and less-qualified ones. While there are a large number of formal social work education programmes within the EU, difficulties emerged in qualifications recognition across countries. On the other hand, there are few training programmes and few registration mechanisms for social care workers in Europe. Public authorities are also facing difficulties attracting young people into education, training, and the profession.

### Training in Crisis Situations

Responses to the COVID-19 crisis were generally considered effective, showcasing a growing acknowledgement of the importance of cross-sector collaboration and integrated responses in crisis management. However, there is a lack of crisis management training and response preparedness that impacts the workforce's capacity to effectively respond to emergency situations.

### Recruitment and Retention

Challenges include working conditions, career progression, an ageing workforce, and the difficulty to attract younger generations. Improved conditions, career development opportunities, and drivers to bring young people into the profession through the use of technology, flexible and innovative arrangements were emphasised as key recruitment drivers.

## Workforce Regulation

Most regulatory bodies are based within ministries rather than set up as an independent agency. Their primary focus involves ensuring workforce quality and competency standards.

## Workforce Planning and Future Needs

Reforming, investing, and strategically planning the social services workforce is crucial to extending the reach of community-based programmes and advancing a fair and equitable society.

## Managing the Social Services Workforce: Looking into the Future

As societies evolve and face new challenges, the demand for social services grows, requiring a well-managed workforce. In light of this, ESN advocates for the development of a **European Strategy on the Social Services Workforce**. This strategy should seek to foster a coordinated European approach, addressing the multifaceted issues encountered by the social services workforce across Europe with a primary emphasis on enhancing the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of social services management.

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# 1. ESN Contribution to Relevant European Policies

In Europe, increasing demand for social care, support and social services is driven, among others, by changing demographics, the cost-of-living crisis, and the social consequences of unforeseen crises such as the Covid-19 crisis and large migration caused by the war in Ukraine. This increase in demand is placing immense pressure on the social services workforce. Challenges such as understaffing, an ageing workforce, and difficulties in recruiting skilled workers persist, whilst developments like technological innovations offer significant potential for social services professionals to improve their efficiency in the way they work and empower individuals to improve the way in which they can self-manage their support needs. Yet, [at the previous European Social Services Conference \(ESSC\)](#) edition, themed 'The Role of Technology in Promoting Autonomy and Inclusion,' we learnt that approximately 30% of the social services workforce, particularly frontline workers, lacked or possessed very limited digital skills. Conversely, young workers were leaving the industry due to the absence of the expected IT tools. Thus, the critical question arises: What digital and IT skills and tools are necessary to attract and retain young workers in social services?

[Recent work](#) conducted by ESN indicates that its members anticipate a rise in demand for services, but they do not foresee an increase in the number of workers available. For all these reasons, we have had a large thematic focus on the social services workforce across all our activities and anticipate it will continue to be the case in the years to come.

At our [European Parliament roundtable on building a resilient social services workforce](#) organised in November 2023, we discussed the evidence gathered from the survey on labour shortage challenges and how developing, retaining, and attracting the right workforce in social care and social services are key success factors for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The roundtable provided a valuable platform to showcase various best practices from across Europe aimed at addressing recruitment and retention challenges among social services professionals, along with strategies for bolstering the social services workforce. Dana Bachmann, Head of the Social Protection Unit at the European Commission, highlighted key European policy initiatives like the European Care Strategy and the Social Economy Action Plan, stressing the significance of skills development and social dialogue. The EU's commitment is evident through funding support from programmes like the ESF+ and Next Generation EU. ESN's CEO Alfonso Lara Montero reiterated ESN's calls for a Social Services Workforce Strategy, emphasising regulation, education, training, and technology utilisation.





The social services workforce has been a prevalent theme across our activities, including our working groups on social services resilience and quality. Our recent briefing on [Building Resilience in Social Services by Managing Demand](#) proposed a framework to help social services manage the increasing demand in services based on five pillars: person-centred design, prevention and early intervention, partnerships, data-driven services, and a resilient workforce. A well-planned, skilled, and supported workforce is crucial for implementing a person-centred and proactive model of care and support.

[Our proposal for a series of principles that underpin a social services quality framework](#) includes the 'well-managed' services principle. This relates to how services organise and manage their workforce to ensure they have the right staff with the necessary skills, flexibility, and experience to respond effectively to people's needs.

An engaged leadership and workforce is key to the success of community-based social services, as we illustrated in our most recent publication 'Enhancing Community Care Social Services – a Force for Change'.

In our 2017 publication, [Investing in the Social Services Workforce](#), we discussed how the principle of free movement could support the recruitment of social services professionals. Yet current legislation lacks provisions for harmonising social services workforce registration, training, and development. Therefore, we suggested amending Directive 2005/36/EC, which allows EU citizens to transfer qualifications and skills between member states to include the social work profession.

ESN has expanded its focus on the social services workforce through participation in EU-funded projects, covering:

- enhancing training and development of social work professionals to be better prepared to address [crisis situations](#);
- identify and develop [current and future skills of long-term care practitioners](#), particularly through the support of technology;
- the development of a proposal for an overarching social services workforce strategy that ESN is currently preparing with workforce-focused organisations across Europe.



## 2. Key Insights from the Workforce Questionnaire

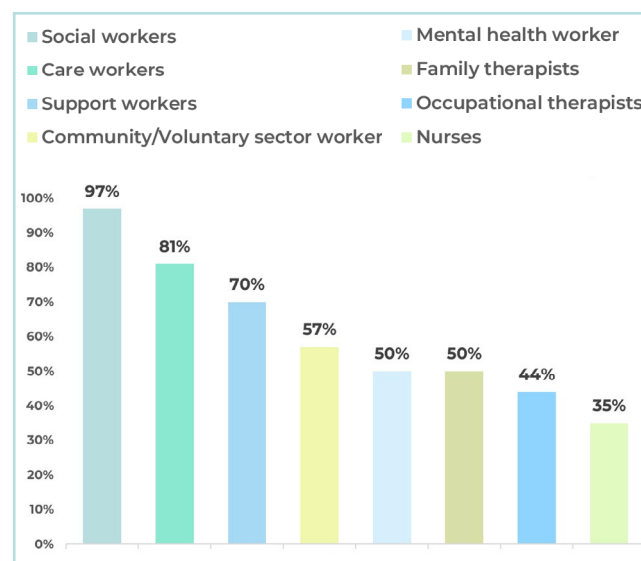
We developed and distributed a questionnaire for our member organisations, mostly public social services at various government levels, at the beginning of the year to update data from a previous questionnaire in 2016 and build up knowledge ahead of an event at the European Parliament in November 2023. The questionnaire covered roles and responsibilities, qualifications and skills, training in crisis situations, recruitment and retention, workforce regulation, workforce planning and future needs.

### 2.1 Social Services Workforce Roles and Responsibilities

This sub-section delves into the role of social and care workers, exploring the factors that enhance their performance and the challenges that may impede their ability to fulfil their duties effectively.

Nearly all respondents (98%) considered **social workers as key social services professionals**. Closely behind were care workers and support workers, as indicated in Graph 1, which also illustrates the involvement in social services of community/voluntary sector workers, mental health workers, family therapists, occupational therapists, and nurses. Several respondents pointed out the importance of considering other professional roles for the work they do in social services. For example, Marcel van Druenen from the Dutch Social Services Professionals Association (SAM) also highlighted the significance of employment services workers, debt and income support workers, youth care advisors, disability provisions advisors, and neighbourhood development workers.

Alejandro Lopez Perez from Madrid City Council emphasised the role of psychologists and social educators, whereas Loretta Greenacre from Suffolk County Council underscored the vital contribution of family carers. ESN's briefing [Putting on Quality First - Contracting for Long-Term Care](#) stressed that informal carers should be recognised as vital participants in the long-term care sector.

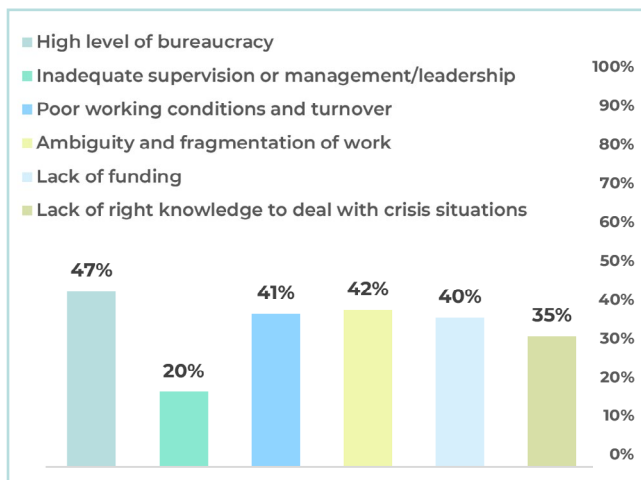


Graph 1: Professional roles in your country's social services workforce.

Asked about the drivers that enable qualified social and care workers to fulfil their roles effectively, respondents pointed out that the most important were regular and relevant in-work training, adequate support from the government in policies and guidelines, and adequate supervision and management/leadership, closely followed by adequate funding and good working conditions.

In relation to the challenges that hinder the ability of qualified social and care workers to fulfil their roles effectively, the highest-scored issue was high levels of bureaucracy, followed by a lack of funding and poor working conditions. This is in line with [previous findings](#) where we identified that professional recruitment is not the only issue and social services also have difficulty

holding onto staff. Additionally, a [2020 Eurofound](#) report revealed that across all member states, pay for social services falls below the average.



Graph 2: Challenges faced by social and care workers in fulfilling their roles.

Judith Carmona of Barcelona County Council emphasised the inadequacy of funding, underscoring the limited resources allocated to smaller municipalities.

Challenges such as the ambiguity and fragmentation of work, inadequate supervision or management/ leadership, and a lack of the right knowledge to deal with crisis situations were also highlighted as difficulties for social and care workers to work effectively in their answers to the questionnaire.

For example, Loretta Greenacre from Suffolk County Council pointed to the fact that social workers are not valued in the way that health and education professionals are.

Additionally, the emotional strain and exposure to adverse social behaviour at work emerged also as prominent challenges during our Roundtable at the European Parliament.

## 2.2. Qualifications and Skills

This sub-section offers an overview of the differences in qualification requirements, training, and education for social workers and social care workers across different European countries. Before proceeding with the analysis, it is crucial to establish a clear distinction between training, qualifications, roles, and activities of social workers and social care workers.

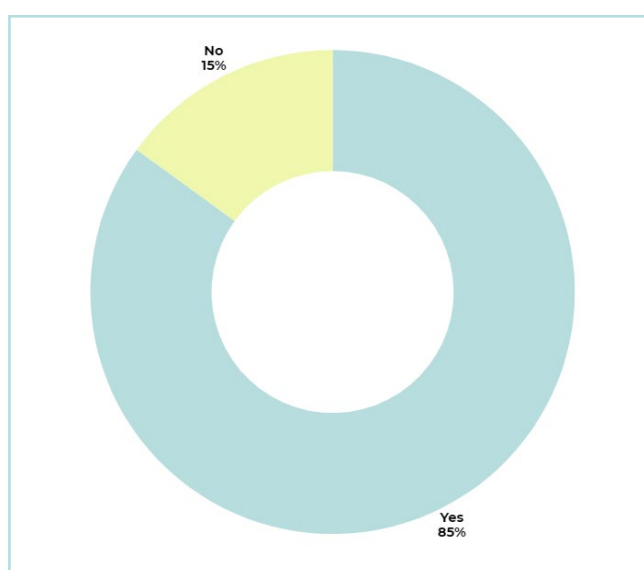
There is a clear distinction between the qualifications required for these two groups of professionals, which can be defined as follows:

- **More qualified workers**, typically social workers, who generally require accredited qualifications in areas such as social work or equivalent formal programmes.
- **Less-qualified workers**, such as social care workers, who provide personal assistance, care and support in various settings. Social care workers are defined in ESN's report on Investing in the Social Services Workforce as those who provide direct care for service users in residential, home or community-based services across European countries. They may be required to undergo vocational training, short courses, or on-the-job training.

A continuing issue in social services training and accreditation, as already outlined in ESN's 'Investing in the social services workforce' report and regularly stated as part of our work on the topic, is the lack of cross-EU accreditation and recognition of skills and qualifications for social workers. The following questions from the survey highlight the variety of social work and social care training in Europe, including various types of training, particularly whether there

is specific training on crisis management. Furthermore, new developments in training and education are explored, for instance, service user involvement.

When asked about the presence of a formally recognised social work training program in their respective countries, 85% of respondents confirmed there is one. This aligns with previous findings from a questionnaire we implemented in 2016, when nearly all respondents indicated that their countries had recognised and regulated social work training programmes.



Graph 3: Existence of a recognised social work training programme.

But the situation is different when it comes to social care workers, as 67% indicated that there is a recognised social care training programme or minimum qualification in their country. For example, in their response to the questionnaire, Helena Wiklund from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) emphasised that there is no officially recognised national training programme in social care and each facility conducts their own.

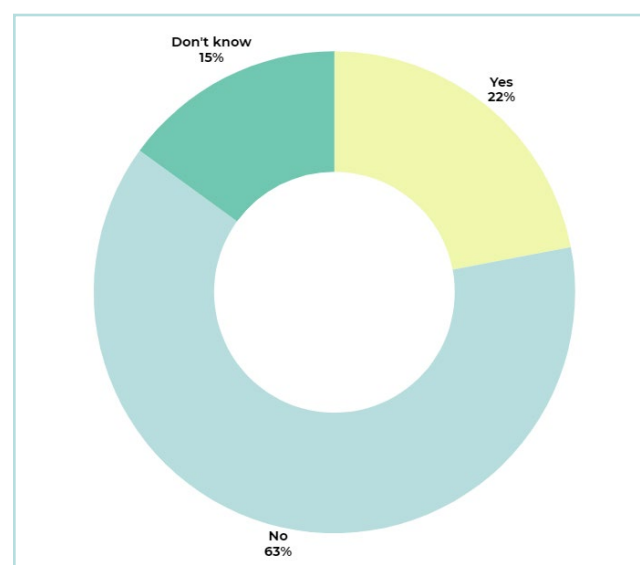
Renzo de Gabriele from Active Ageing and Community Care in Malta spoke of a 'care certificate', which is a minimal requirement to be certified to work as a social care worker. However, recruits are often required to pay for it and there is no ongoing programme of development.

A second issue is ongoing training throughout professional life. Georgios Vellis from the Municipality of Fyli specified that there is no expected training for social workers in Greece. He noted that following their university degree, individuals are required to stay up to date on their own initiative.

Asked about the **compulsory level of education** for social workers, occupational therapists, family therapists, nurses, and mental health workers, respondents replied that an undergraduate qualification or above is required.

Support workers are expected to possess fundamental skills acquired through compulsory education, while care workers usually undergo vocational training. 81% of respondents responded that **case management and communication skills/ counselling were integral components of training** in their respective countries and 78% emphasised the importance of collaborating with professionals from various fields such as health, education, police, and housing.

Finally, below 40% of respondents said that people using social services **were involved in the provision, recruitment, or assessment of social work training in a formal way**.



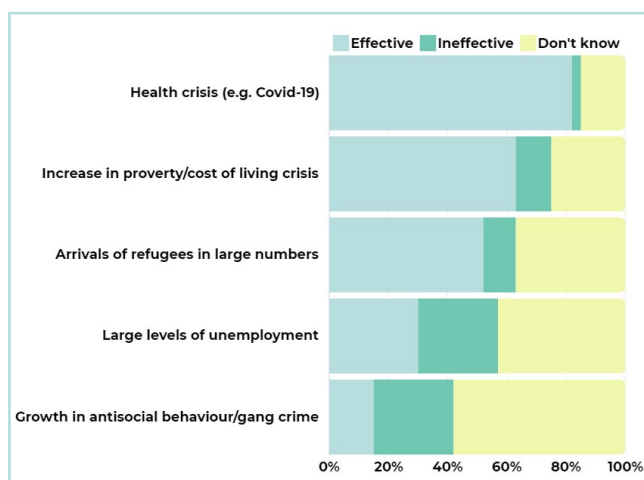
Graph 4: Involvement of service users in the provision, recruitment, or assessment of social work training.

However, Loretta Greenacre from Suffolk City Council noted they involve social services users in a Social Work Teaching Partnership through their participation in governance boards, university admission panels, shaping and delivering the curriculum, and apprenticeship recruitment.

## 2.3 Training in Crisis Situations

The questionnaire outlined five types of crises that have affected European populations in the past years: Covid-19, an increase in poverty due to the cost of living, the arrival of a large number of refugees escaping wars, an increase in unemployment, and an increase in antisocial behaviour.

We asked respondents to rank **how effectively their organisations had been responding to demands related to those crises** on a scale from 1 (very ineffectively) to 5 (very effectively).



Graph 5: Assessing your organisation's responsiveness to crisis demands.

With a score of 4.3, most respondents felt that their organisations' answer to the Covid-19 health crisis was deemed effective. This assessment may be linked to the levels of funding that were made available by governments to help services cope with the crisis caused by Covid-19. It will be interesting to observe how answers evolve in several years once the impact of the crisis has subsided.

The second-highest rank, with a score of 3.7, was the increase in poverty due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Most ESN members have been pointing out recently that the amount of people suffering from reduced income and standards of living has been rising in recent years, and the high score given to the increase in poverty is possibly a reflection of this.

Likewise, supporting people in difficult social and economic situations is at the heart of social work, which may explain why respondents feel confident in their organisation's capacity to answer effectively to these issues.

The issue which was rated most ineffectively was 'Growth in anti-social behaviour/gang crime' reflecting that respondents feel social workers do not have the skills to address anti-social behaviour in neighbours, coupled with increasing reports of beneficiaries behaving aggressively towards practitioners. Also, on the opposite end, despite an increase in natural disasters and the participation of social workers in their aftermath, crisis management is hardly part of social work training since just one respondent from Israel said that 'Natural disaster management' was included in their regular training.

We asked members **how they assessed partnerships across professional sectors**, particularly in relation to crisis situations. For 81%, work in partnership is either well or partly developed. This is encouraging as the tendency has been to work in silos. Members seem aware of the need to work in an integrated manner to respond holistically to people's social needs, particularly in crisis situations. There was also an acknowledgement in comments of different levels of partnership depending on types of services, where they are located, how willing management is to improve cross-sector collaboration, different organisational cultures and the local institutional context.

Rok Zupanc from the Association of Centres for Social Work (ACSW) emphasised their continuous efforts to work in a multidisciplinary manner and engage with other agencies. Loretta Greenacre from Suffolk City Council highlighted their robust multi-agency safeguarding partnership, bringing together social care, police, health, education, housing, and the voluntary sector.

However, Kathleen Wabrowetz from the German Association for Public and Private Welfare pointed out challenges in Germany, where the social, care, and health sectors are highly fragmented and bureaucratic. She noted that numerous regulations and sectoral divisions often act as obstacles to effective cross-cutting cooperation.

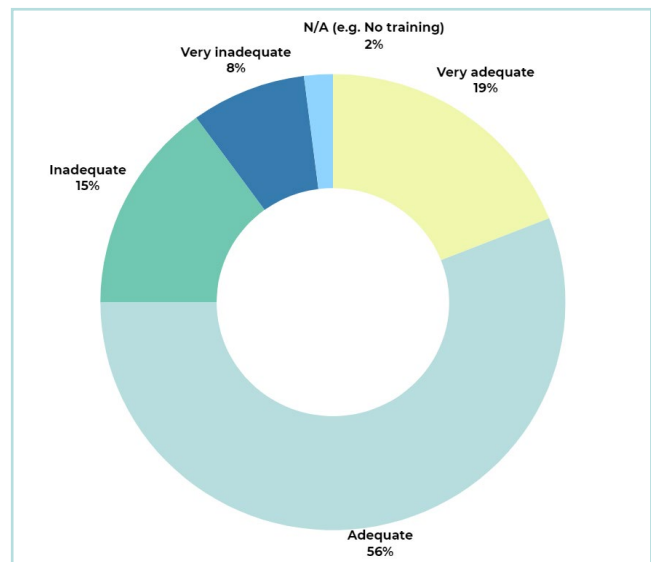
Finally, we asked respondents about the **capacity of professionals working in social services to address crisis situations**.

52% of respondents identified the absence of standardised procedures to follow as the primary challenge that social services professionals must address to enhance their capacity to respond to current crises.

Similarly, an equivalent number of responses, comprising 11, pinpointed challenges related to insufficient training and the lack of skills to deal with these specific crises.

Yet, Loretta Greenacre from Suffolk County Council underscored the rapid development of training packages to enable non-social care staff to be upskilled to support the social care workforce during COVID-19 and to enable staff to be temporarily redeployed to other roles.

All in all, the resources made available to respond to crisis situations were considered adequate or very adequate by 74% of the respondents.



Graph 6: Evaluating resources for responding to crises.

However, looking at the comments, they mostly seem to focus on the resources made available after COVID-19. Yet, Kathleen Wabrowetz from the German Association for Public and Private Welfare highlighted specific obstacles, including a lack of digital skills and equipment. She also drew attention to the initial shortage of essential medical supplies, like masks, during the early stages of the pandemic.

## 2.4 Recruitment and Retention

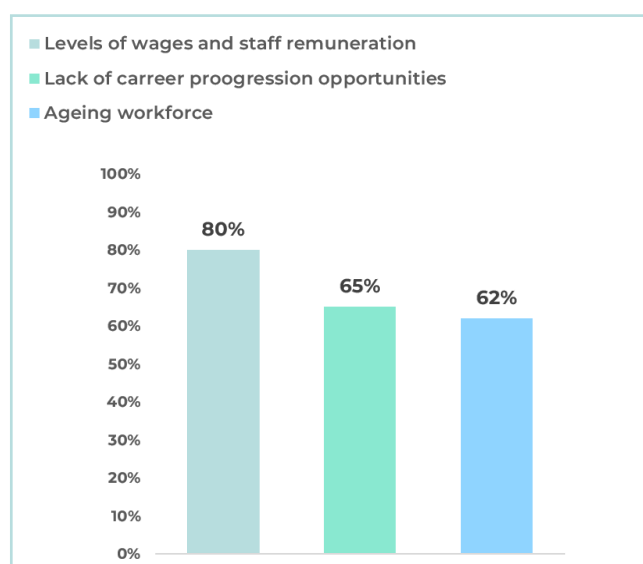
Recruiting and retaining professionals with the appropriate qualifications and skills are critical for the sector's success. However, numerous challenges often jeopardise the recruitment and retention of professionals in social services. This sub-section outlines these recruitment challenges and provides examples of innovative recruitment initiatives. Additionally, it examines factors influencing retention and describes components of successful retention strategies.

In the questionnaire, participants were asked about the **key drivers for recruiting competent and reliable social services staff**, and 52% of respondents answered strong contractual agreements (full-time,



permanent), followed by a clear team and management structure and career development opportunities. Support mechanisms, including clear guidance of supervisory and co-workers' support and further development opportunities, were also regarded as important tools in recruitment, as well as a wage law for workers' remuneration and a strong trade union reputation. This aligns with our report on '[Investing in the social services workforce](#)', which noted that representation among social care workers is typically less developed due to the diverse range of roles in this field and the absence of regulation in numerous countries which may lead to difficulties to access training and career progression.

Asked about the **key obstacles in recruiting and retaining social services staff**, the most pressing challenges centred on issues of wages and staff remuneration (80%), lack of career progression opportunities (65%) and an ageing workforce (62%).



Graph 7: Key obstacles in recruiting and retaining social services staff.

Asked specifically about the **challenges in recruiting foreign nationals or those who qualified in other countries**, 60% of respondents highlighted language proficiency as a significant obstacle.

This concern aligns with the perspective shared by Massimiliano Mascherini, Head of the Social Policies Unit at Eurofound, during ESN's European Parliament Roundtable. Mr Mascherini noted that language barriers constrain person-centred care, which prioritises individual needs and preferences by tailoring care to specific characteristics, values, and circumstances. Communication limitations due to language barriers can hinder understanding users and carers' needs, impeding the delivery of person-centred care.

The second most mentioned challenge was the recognition of foreign qualifications followed by immigration policies hindering the ability to recruit certain nationals. This sentiment was reinforced by Kathleen Wabrowetz, a speaker at ESN's Roundtable, underscoring the need for a more efficient and less burdensome recognition process.

Respondents highlighted some examples of best practice on retention strategies. Alfred Grixti from FSWS believes that it is essential to sustain professionals in the social sector. Providing a continuous system for self-development, self-care, competitive working conditions, and comprehensive support, including family-friendly measures, is crucial.

Rok Zupanc from ACSW highlighted the importance of the organisation's collective dedication to building and nurturing a strong sense of belonging within the team as well as providing ongoing opportunities for additional education and training.

Nadezda Buinickienė from Vilnius Municipality mentioned the Family Support Department of the Vilnius City Social Services Centre. This Department implements a mentorship programme for newcomers during the initial three months, prioritising open communication between managers and employees. Decision-making involves

employees in significant work processes, with a focus on continuous professional development, field training and supervision by professional mentors.

## 2.5 Workforce Regulation

Employers must understand the regulatory landscape to ensure compliance with local laws and regulations. National workforce regulators remain crucial in ensuring consistent and high standards of social services care and support. This sub-section delves into diverse practices concerning the existence of regulatory workforce bodies and their roles.

Asked about the existence of **regulatory workforce bodies**, meaning organisations responsible for setting standards in social service provision, registering or supporting the workforce, 80% of respondents confirmed this type of agency had been set up in their countries. However, digging further into the responses, we realised that this function is not often implemented by an independent agency; instead, it is still carried out mostly by ministries.

For example, Oana Parvulescu from Arad City Council Social Care Directorate highlighted that these functions were implemented by the Ministry of Labour, Family Social Protection, and Older People. Similarly, Martins Moors from Riga City Council said that the Ministry of Welfare was responsible for maintaining the Register of Social Service Providers while the municipality ensures that providers comply with specific requirements through their contracts.

Renzo de Gabriele from Active Ageing and Community Care in Malta explained the Social Care Standards Authority (SCSA) was the licencing and regulatory body for social services and social work professionals in Malta.

Arnaud Lopez from the National Association of Directors of Social Care and Health explained the 'Haute Autorité de Santé' (HAS) was France's National Authority for Health and Social Services regulation.

Asked about the **function and role of these workforce regulatory bodies**, 80% of respondents emphasised their crucial function was to ensure workforce's quality and competencies. Following closely, 64% highlighted the responsibility of these bodies in monitoring quality standards in education and training, while 60% acknowledged their role in overseeing and monitoring professional qualifications and skills development.



Graph 8: Function and role of the workforce regulatory bodies.

## 2.6 Workforce Planning and Future Needs

Having leaders and champions at all levels within the workforce is crucial for promoting ideas integral to a demand management framework, including person-centred approaches, early intervention, and empowerment. In 2023, ESN Briefing on [Managing Demand](#) underscored the critical importance of effectively and efficiently managing demand to enhance outcomes for people using social services.



This multifaceted approach enables social services to strategically plan and allocate resources, including human and financial ones, to provide tailored support that meets the actual needs of persons seeking support.

Through the questionnaire, we gathered examples of **risk management practices, including systematic planning and review.**

Marta Faba, from Barcelona City Council, explained that they conduct regular cross-cutting sessions across all services to analyse prevailing trends and identify potential risks.

Oana Parvulescu, from Arad City Council Social Care Directorate, explained they conduct periodic risk analyses, actively seeking preventive solutions for identified risks.

Nadežda Buinickienė, from Vilnius City Council, highlighted that while national legal acts regulate risk management and emergency situations, practical challenges arise in their implementation. She stressed that public administrations need emergency management plans, conduct employee training, and improve public awareness. Additionally, Ms. Buinickienė emphasised the importance of enhancing inter-institutional cooperation.



Martins Moors from Riga City Council underlined that municipalities are responsible for planning social services. With each municipality adopting its own approach, there is not just one risk management strategy. Riga, for instance, follows its own procedure for monitoring social services and analysing risks.

On the other hand, Georgios Vellis from the Municipality of Fyli in Greece noted that Greek local social services in Greece do not have a legal obligation to have in place a formal risk management strategy; instead, each municipality has its own.

Several respondents agreed that **reforming, investing, and strategically planning the social services workforce is crucial to extending the reach of community-based programmes and advancing a fair and equitable society.**

Krislin Aleksandroviene of Tartu City Council shared considerations on optimising social workers' roles to focus on casework. In Estonia, where online applications for benefits and allowances are already available, Ms. Aleksandroviene proposed exploring integrating AI into social workers' tasks to enhance efficiency. Drawing inspiration from the Unemployment Insurance Fund's success with automatic decision-making programmes, she sees potential for similar progress in social services.

ESN stresses that embracing technology and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration would further contribute to creating a dynamic and attractive environment for social service professionals.

Renzo de Gabriele, from Active Ageing and Community Care (AACC) in Malta, explained they have agreements with external agencies to source qualified social workers and social welfare professionals.

Amanda Whittaker-Brown from the Local Government Association highlighted the absence of a national workforce strategy for social care in England. Partner organisations collaborate within the sector to identify workforce priorities; for example, they are actively working with the government to prioritise continued professional development.

Asked about how the **increase in people needing support impacted social services' workforce planning**, respondents provided diverse perspectives.

Marta Faba from Barcelona City Council mentioned that, in response to growing demand, a higher ratio of social services professionals has been agreed upon with the regional government. However, she noted a shortage in mid- and long-term human resource planning.

Amanda Whittaker-Brown from the Local Government Association mentioned that workforce planning is variable across England; for instance, Loretta Greenacre from Suffolk County Council highlighted an increase in digital offers. However, insufficient funding hinders the possibility of expanding services to meet the escalating demand.

Kathleen Wabrowetz from the German Association for Public and Private Welfare also expressed concerns about the lack of staff. Numerous facilities face closure due to staff shortages, which may also lead to a lack of or a delayed response as the ratio between professionals and persons in need continues to rise.

Asked about **how the government is addressing social services and social care staff shortages**, respondents shared several initiatives.

Rok Zupanc from Slovenia's Association of Centres for Social Work reported that the

Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities is set to announce additional scholarships for social welfare programmes in the upcoming academic year. However, the focus isn't solely on bolstering social welfare initiatives but rather on governmental efforts aimed at addressing staffing shortages within social work centers and the broader social welfare sector.

Kathleen Wabrowetz from the German Association for Public and Private Welfare mentioned ongoing reforms in the training system with a focus on facilitating the entry of migrants.



Renzo de Gabriele from the Active Ageing and Community Care Agency in Malta highlighted the Health Workforce Strategy 2022-2030 issued by the Ministry of Health, aimed at supporting and empowering the healthcare workforce but did not mention a specific plan for the social services workforce.

Arnaud Lopez from the National Association of Directors of Health and Social Care noted that both national and local authorities have launched promotional campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of social care jobs.

### 3. Managing the Social Services Workforce: Looking into the Future

Social services play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable populations, including children, older people, individuals with disabilities, and those facing various social challenges. As societies evolve and face new challenges, the **demand for social services continues to grow**. As demonstrated by the results of the questionnaire we produced with ESN members, there are a series of issues with **recruitment and retention**, improving the **attractiveness** of the sector both in relation to education and professional **development, regulation** and lifelong **training**, and utilising the benefits of **technology**.

The social services workforce is key because it directly impacts the wellbeing and quality of life of individuals and communities in need with whom social services regularly work. The skills, expertise, and dedication of these professionals are essential for providing support, addressing complex issues, and working towards a more just and equitable society. This involves ensuring there are enough skilled professionals to meet the growing demand for social services effectively. Likewise, to effectively address the diverse needs of populations across Europe, the social services workforce should reflect this diversity.



Throughout 2023, we have discussed with European Commission and national government officials the importance of launching a **European Strategy on the Social Services Workforce**. While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, there are several arguments in favour of the European Commission launching a more coordinated European approach to the social services workforce considering free movement of workers, the European focus on identifying common challenges and sharing best practice, and the emphasis on social protection and social cohesion.

For all these reasons, it is important to put in place a strategy that specifically focuses on the social services workforce. This strategy should include initiatives to recruit and retain professionals from various backgrounds, ensuring the workforce is culturally competent and sensitive to the needs of different communities. One area of development is the potential to reach out to younger generations who attach particular importance to their job's purpose. Through our questionnaire, we've found out that most social services professionals still feel inspired by their mission to provide social support and ensure people's social inclusion. But we also know that younger generations, more than others, are seeking opportunities to learn new skills. This presents a fantastic opportunity for social services, which are undergoing the beginning of a technological revolution that could provide more training opportunities to younger workers, involving the use of technologies like case management software or AI, therefore maximising the **benefits of technology**.

Social services professionals require **ongoing training** and development to stay current with best practice, legal regulations, and emerging trends in the field, particularly around technology. A workforce strategy

should outline plans for continuous professional development, ensuring that workers have the necessary skills and knowledge to provide effective support. A well-structured workforce strategy aims to attract, train, and retain highly qualified individuals in the social services sector. This, in turn, helps maintain and improve the **quality** of care and support provided to those in need.

Finally, an organised and well-managed workforce is **more effective** in delivering services. A social services workforce strategy should outline methods for optimising resource allocation, caseload management, and service delivery models to ensure that services reach those who need them in a timely and efficient manner. This also includes **crises** like natural disasters, pandemics, or economic downturns, when the demand for social services may spike. A workforce strategy should include contingency plans for rapidly mobilising and deploying resources to respond to crisis situations effectively.

Enhancing personal approaches and co-creation in social services, accompanied by supportive workforce reforms is crucial for expanding the reach and accessibility of community-based social services. The development of a social services workforce strategy is also at the heart of the next [European Social Services Conference](#) (ESSC) which will take place in Antwerp, Belgium between 26-28 June 2024. There are several arguments in favour of the European Commission launching a **Social Services Workforce Strategy** in light of growing and developing the workforce to meet future demand, enhancing technology skills, and improving professionals' outreach, development and wellbeing.

## Annex

### Questionnaire Respondents

Name	Organisation
Alejandro Lopez Perez	Madrid City Council, Spain
Alfred Grixti	Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS), Malta
Amanda Whittaker-Brown	Local Government Association
Arnaud Lopez	National Association of Directors of Social Care and Health in County Councils (ANDASS), France
Benjamin Behar	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Social Services, Israel
Bruno Baron Guichard	National Centre for Local Public Administration (CNFPT), France
Carmine De Blasio	Consortium of municipalities of Area 5 Atripalda, Italy
Elmer Stanmore	Foundation Sebh, Malta
Elsebeth Nebeling	Municipality of Esbjerg – Department of Citizens, Services and Labour, Denmark
Emiliana Vicente Gonzalez	General Council of Social Work, Spain
George Pierrakos	University of West Attica – Social Administration Research Laboratory, Greece
Georgios Vellis	Municipality of Fyli, Greece
Gerard Brophy	Child and Family Agency (TUSLA), Ireland
Gloria Cerrato Tomas	Support Girona, Spain
Helena Wiklund	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, Sweden
Jiri Horecky	Association of Social Care Providers (APSSCR), Czech Republic
Judith Carmona	Barcelona County Council, Spain
Julia Pollak	Austria's National Association of Social Workers (OBDS), Austria
Katarina Lindeberg	Skane Region, Sweden
Kathleen Wabrowetz	German Association for Public and Private Welfare, Germany
Krislin Aleksandroviene	Tartu City Council, Estonia

Loretta Greenacre	Suffolk County Council, United Kingdom
Marcel Van Druenen	Association for Professionals in the Public Social Domain (SAM), The Netherlands
Maria Kristjansdottir	Association of Local Authorities, Iceland
Marta Fabà	Barcelona City Council – Institute for Social Services, Spain
Martins Moors	Riga City Council Welfare Department, Latvia
Nadežda Buinickienė	Vilnius City Municipality, Lithuania
Oana Aurelia Parvulescu	Arad City Council - Social Care Directorate, Romania
Peter Cousaert	Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VSG), Belgium
Rauf Aliyev	Agency for Sustainable and Operative Social Provision (DOST Agency), Azerbaijan
Renzo De Gabriele	Active Ageing and Community Care (AACC), Malta
Rok Zupanc	Association of Centres for Social Work (ACSW), Slovenia
Styliani Lachanioti	Municipality of Athens, Greece
Valentina Meotto	Bolzano Social Services, Italy



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