European Social Network

Crisis Management Framework for Social Services

www.esn-eu.org

ABOUT THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL NETWORK (ESN)

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, as well as people and families in disadvantaged socio-economic situations.

Table of Contents

1. ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing has been drafted in the framework of the 2025 Annual Meeting of the European Social Network's Social Services Transformation and Resilience Working Group.

The meeting brought together social services directors from across Europe to work together towards a proposal for the key components of a **Crisis Management Framework for Social Services**. Our proposal for this framework includes the following components: **Leadership and Workforce Training**, **Technology and Information Systems**, **Organisational Agility and Interagency Cooperation**, **Systematic Risk and Threat Assessment** and **Transparency and Communication**.

The content of this briefing is based on questionnaires completed by ESN Members from public social services at local, regional, and national levels in April - May 2024, desk research, and presentations and discussions during the meeting that took place in Tallinn, Estonia, in September 2025.

ESN members from the following countries completed the questionnaire: **Belgium**, **Finland**, **United Kingdom**, **Austria**, **Spain**, **France**, **Latvia**, **Greece**, **Italy**, **Croatia**, **Czechia**, **Switzerland**, **Germany**, **Slovenia**, **Israel**, and the **Netherlands**.

2. ABOUT THE TRANSFORMATION AND RESILIENCE WORKING GROUP

Working Group on
Social Services Transformation and Resilience

Tallinn, Estonia
10-11 September 2025

As part of its four-year strategy, the **European Social Network (ESN)** launched a **Transformation and Resilience Working Group**, which has ran between 2022 - 2025 to promote peer exchange on ways to ensure social services' transformation and resilience to guarantee the continuity of social services in crisis situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical need for social services to adapt to and withstand crises while continuing to support vulnerable populations. At the same time, climate change intensifies the frequency and severity of natural disasters, geopolitical instability fuels refugee crises and conflicts, whilst digital crises may disrupt essential social services putting vulnerable populations at greater risk. In this context, to ensure the resilience of social services to crises, the need for robust crisis management frameworks is more urgent than ever.

At the first Working Group meeting in 2022, participants came up with a definition of **resilience in social services** and reflected on challenges for social services to be better equipped to respond to crises (ESN, 2022).

The 2023 Working Group meeting focused on how public social services **managed increasing demand** through a proposal for a **demand management framework**. The framework consists of five pillars, one of which refers to data driven approaches enabled by technology (ESN, 2023).

Acknowledging the key importance of digital transformation to support social services resilience and continuity, the 2024 Working Group meeting focused on the **technology and data-driven pillar of the demand management framework**. Specifically, at this meeting participants addressed the status of social services' digital transformation with a focus on digital case management and AI-led tools for predictive services (ESN, 2025).

The 2025 Working Group meeting focused on the development of a **Crisis Management Framework for Social Services**.

At the meeting, four best practices on crisis management were presented.

Detailed descriptions are available in ESN Practice Library.

◆ *Samur Social - A long-standing emergency response service that supports vulnerable populations in times of crisis*, **Madrid City Council, Spain**;

◆ *Addressing Refugee Crisis, in* **Tallinn City Council, Estonia**;

◆ *Psychosocial Coordination Team in Crises*, **Service Publique Wallonie, Belgium**;

◆ *One-stop support agency for Ukrainian refugees*, **Riga City Council, Latvia**.

3. BACKGROUND: ABSENCE OF A CRISIS MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL SERVICES IN EUROPE

1. Literature Review

When looking at the literature on crisis management, specifically on crisis management tools for the public sector, authors discuss mostly five key elements that organisations should pay special attention to if they want to be prepared and resilient to address any type of crisis.

1.1 LEADERSHIP AND WORKFORCE TRAINING

Most authors agree that organisational leadership and effective leadership styles positively impact crisis management preparedness and response, and can lead to a resilient culture (Widiantoro: Shahadan, 2024) (Hazaa et al., 2021).

The literature also highlights that it is fundamental to train and coach staff to ensure effective crisis management (Widiantoro; Shahadan, 2024). If this training is carried out continuously and updated regularly, it will enable professionals and, in turn, organisations, to better cope with the challenges of crises and adapt to new situations (Mamyrbaeva et al., 2024).

1.2 USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

The integration of technology and information systems has become increasingly important in the crisis management literature. Some authors investigate how policies and actions driven by technology enhance urban resilience, crisis management, and community wellbeing (Widiantoro; Shahadan, 2024).

Moreover, the use of AI and machine learning to predict and prevent crises has increasingly been seen as having a huge potential in improving crisis management. This is especially the case in areas like education or healthcare, where AI and big data allow more efficient and accurate data collection, analysis and management (Mamyrbaeva et al., 2024). However, the literature also discusses how over-reliance on them can come with certain risks (Hazaa et al., 2021)

1.3 ORGANISATIONAL COOPERATION, FLEXIBILITY AND AGILITY

Organisational cooperation and the capacity to be flexible and act quickly have also been highlighted by authors as key elements of addressing a crisis effectively. Indeed, according to the literature, coordination between different levels of government and between private and public sectors are key to successful crisis management. Authors underscore that "only the cooperation of all stakeholders can ensure an effective response to a crisis and minimise its consequences" (Hazaa et al., 2021).

Findings also suggest that organisations that adapt quickly to changing circumstances are better prepared to manage crises (Widiantoro; Shahadan, 2024). Implementation of operational action plans or having mechanisms for rapid coordination and decision-making are examples of how organisations can prepare themselves to adapt quickly when needed (Mamyrbaeva et al., 2024).

1.4 SYSTEMATIC RISK AND THREAT ASSESSMENT

To address a crisis effectively, the literature also underscores the need to conduct a systematic risk and threat assessment to be able to identify potential problems beforehand and thus develop a strategy to address them. Regular monitoring of the systems in place becomes also essential to avoid them becoming obsolete or falling short when the time comes to put them into practice (Jiménez, 2024).

1.5 COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

In addition, authors who have investigated crisis management also focus on the role that communication and transparency play in addressing crises accurately. They highlight that ensuring transparency and regularly informing the public about public authorities measures and recommendations becomes key, as it helps building public confidence in public administration, and increases the effectiveness of crises response measures.

When it comes to which communication tools can be more useful in a crisis situation, authors highlight both traditional communication channels and social media platforms are key, but put a special emphasis on social media as a powerful tool that allows organisations to manage information dissemination and public perception at the same time (Widiantoro; Shahadan, 2024) (Mamyr-baeva et al., 2024) (Hazaa et al., 2021).

1.6 ABSENCE OF A CRISIS MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL SERVICES

Although there is an extensive literature analysing the key elements public organisations should take into consideration when addressing crises, there is not a holistic approach to crisis management. Indeed, there is not a crisis management framework available for the public sector ready to use in crises. What's more, despite all the extensive research carried out in the field, there is little to no research on the specific elements social services concretely should pay attention to if they want to become more resilient and address crises effectively. There is, indeed, no crisis management framework for social services in Europe that would serve them as a guide to follow in case of crisis.

2. The European Context: An EU Preparedness Union Strategy

At European Level, the European Commission is also starting to work on resilience and transformation. Indeed, the Commission launched in March the EU Preparedness Union Strategy to support Member States and enhance Europe's capability to prevent and respond to emerging threats. Concretely, the Strategy includes 30 key actions and a detailed Action Plan to advance the Preparedness Union's objectives, as well as developing a 'preparedness by design culture' across all EU policies.

Among these key actions, we can find:

Promoting Population Preparedness:

◆ Encourage the public to adopt practical measures, such asmaintaining essential supplies for a minimum of 72 hours in emergencies.
◆ Integrate preparedness lessons into school curricula and introduce an EU Preparedness Day.

Enhancing Crisis Response Coordination:

◆ Establish an EU Crisis Hub to improve integration among existing EU crisis structures.

Bolstering Foresight and Anticipation Capabilities:

◆ Develop a comprehensive risk and threat assessment at EU level, helping prevent crises such as natural disasters or hybrid threats.

Increasing Public-Private Cooperation:

◆ Create a public-private Preparedness Taskforce.
◆ Formulate emergency protocols with businesses to ensure rapid availability of essential materials, goods, and services, and secure critical production lines.

3. A Crisis Management Framework for Social Services

As European Social Network (ESN)'s CEO Alfonso Lara Montero highlighted in the opening session of the 2025 Working Group meeting on Transformation and Resilience:

> *Social Services play a very important role in all types of crises, not only in the immediate, but also in the long term. However, they do not have a framework that serves as a guide in times of crisis.*
>
> **Alfonso Lara Montero, CEO, European Social Network**

When we talk about social crises we are talking about events or situations that disrupt the normal social fabric of communities and increase vulnerability among individuals. Social crises take many forms and can affect communities in diverse and complex ways. These may include sudden mass displacement due to conflict or disaster, large arrivals of refugees or migrants requiring immediate support, armed conflict, cyber-attacks or increases in violence and crime in the community. Other examples are housing crises, such as waves of homelessness or large-scale evictions, and food insecurity or sudden increases in poverty affecting large populations.

Social crises may also involve the breakdown of social cohesion, tensions between groups, or the disruption of essential community services, such as schools, shelters, and community centres, which are crucial for daily support and wellbeing. Economic crises can trigger widespread unemployment, reduced household income, limited access to essential goods and services, and heightened vulnerability among families and communities, often exacerbating pre-existing social inequalities. Natural disasters, including floods, earthquakes, fires, and extreme weather events, can destroy infrastructure, displace populations, and interrupt access to critical services. Social services are often at the forefront of responding to these challenges, providing essential protection, support, and guidance to help people navigate disruption, rebuild stability, and regain autonomy.

Despite efforts made across Europe at local, regional and national levels and the research carried out in the field of crisis management, very few Member States' social services systems have in place a well-established crisis management framework.

In this context and considering the fundamental role that social services play in crisis situations, the creation of a crisis management framework for social services becomes essential. Social services have a key role in society as they work with the most vulnerable communities, hence they cannot solely rely on general public preparedness plans. For this reason, ESN's work on the creation of a crisis management framework tailored made for the specific needs of social services is a unique piece of work. Its aim is to propose a crisis management framework that ensures and guarantees the sector will be supported to face and address future crises in the short, medium, and long term; before, during, and after those crises take place.

Therefore, this year's Working Group on Social Services Resilience and Transformation focused on a proposal for a **Crisis Management Framework for Social Services** based on the following five components:
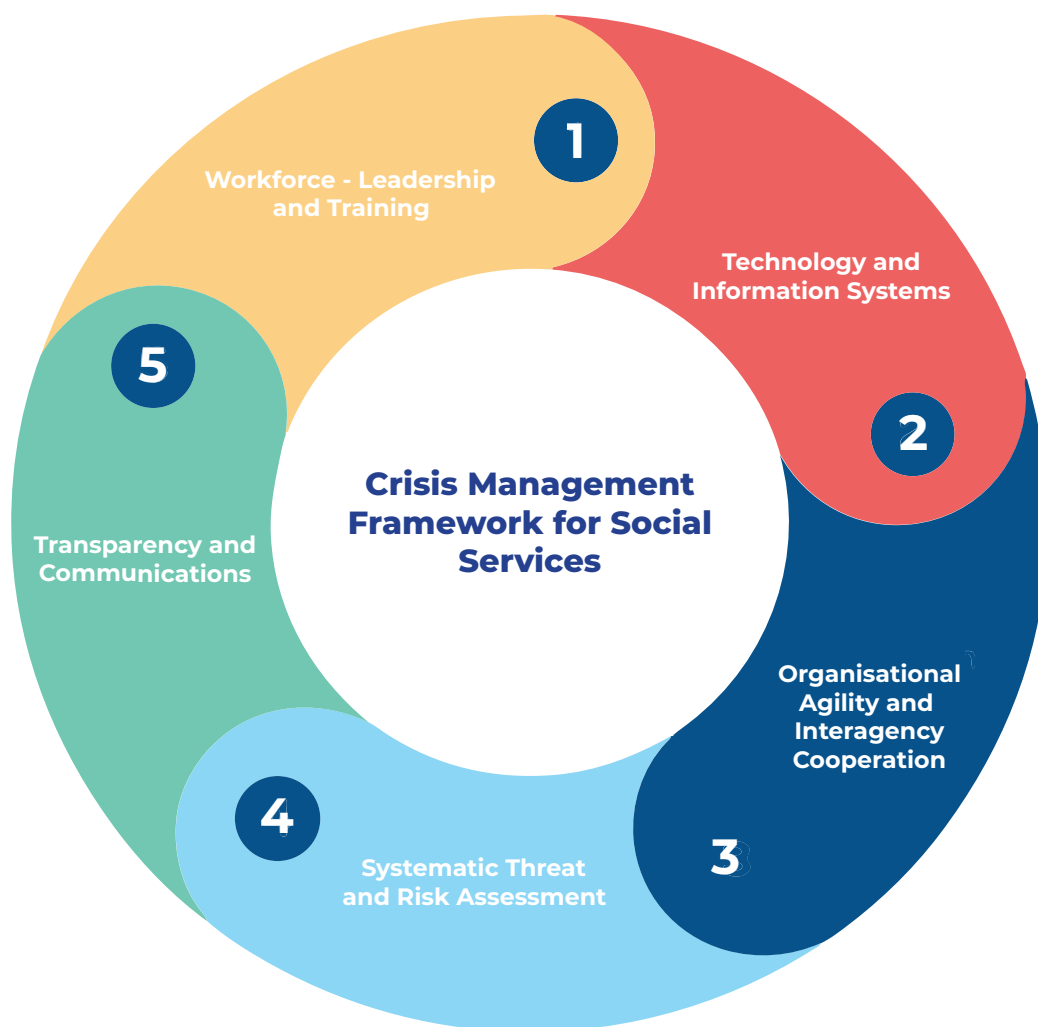
4. A CRISIS MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL SERVICES SPECIFIC NEEDS

The **Crisis Management Framework for Social Services** consists of five key components. Within each component, we explain first the background as to why each component has been selected and the context where this framework has been developed, followed by an explanation of current challenges, and then, the framework's proposals.

1. WORKFORCE - LEADERSHIP AND TRAINING

1.1 BACKGROUND

The ability of public authorities to provide a rapid, needs-based, proactive and person-centred response to be able to manage social crises effectively depends on how we support, train, and lead frontline professionals working in social services.

Experience from recent crises - social, natural, or public health ones - have shown that, following the intervention of emergency rescue teams, the first line of ongoing support is provided by humanitarian aid, and social services. After the first stage of the emergency has been covered, crisis management requires human recovery, emotional and social support, protective measures to ensure safety and prevent further harm, and the rebuilding of social support networks. This is where social services play an essential, and often decisive, role in both the emergency and long-term recovery of individuals and communities.

Indeed, it is important to distinguish the role social services play in relation to humanitarian services.

◆ **Humanitarian aid** is designed to respond quickly and efficiently in acute crisis situations - such as natural disasters, conflicts, or social emergencies. It focuses primarily on meeting immediate needs by providing essential material support: food, water, shelter, medicine, hygiene items, and other vital resources.

◆ **Social services** provide structured support, based on a complex and systemic, person-centred needs assessment. This considers not only material needs but also the social, emotional, family, health, educational, and community dimensions of people's challenges. This support goes beyond one-time intervention and includes amongst others, ensuring effective access to social rights, counselling, and mobilising community resources.

The ultimate goal is more than immediate support: it is to increase the capacity of individuals to make informed decisions nend regain autonomy. Therefore, social services play a vital role in restoring dignity and control over one's own life.

The ability of a system to respond effectively to crises lies therefore, not only in emergency infrastructure but also, in a well-trained, coordinated, supported, resilient and adaptable social services workforce. A resilient social services workforce can reduce the long-term impact of disasters on the population and play a decisive role in rebuilding communities. A resilient workforce is a well-trained, supported, and adaptable group of professionals who can respond effectively to crises, maintain quality services under pressure, learn from experience, and contribute to the recovery and wellbeing of communities.

> **It is not simply about having more staff, but having the right people, in the right roles, with the right support and leadership.**

However, across Europe, social services are facing significant challenges, from staffing shortages and an aging workforce to increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff. Yet, with a well-thought out **workforce strategy** based on training, responsiveness, strong leadership, and inclusive role distribution, social services can strengthen both their operational capacity and resilience in the face of crises and disaster impacts.

The following priorities were identified by ESN members as essential to strengthen the social services workforce:

◆ Ensuring the sustainability of the social services workforce requires increasing the visibility of social services and positioning them as a vital part of response mechanisms to crises. Social services provide essential psychosocial support, help maintain and rebuild social networks, and connect individuals to resources, thereby contributing to resilient communities, and meeting the changing needs of people and societies during crises.

◆ Training social services staff to strengthen their capacity to adapt to crises is essential, especially as the nature and frequency of crises continue to evolve. Climate change is driving more frequent and severe natural disasters, geopolitical instability is fuelling refugee crises and conflicts, public health crises and digital disruptions are threatening the continuity of essential services- placing already vulnerable populations at even greater risk.

◆ A resilient workforce thrives in responsive organisational cultures and multidisciplinary teams – where staff are listened to, involved in shaping processes and workflows, and supported in making decisions that reflect people's real needs. Professional recognition is essential to help services to adapt support strategies across a wide range of crises, including natural disasters, refugee migration, and digital disruptions.

◆ To maximise the impact and sustainability of the support provided, social services need to strategically align roles during the preparation phase: allowing skilled professionals to focus on complex responses that require emotional and social support, and strategies to restore responsiveness and decision-making autonomy. At the same time, trained support staff, volunteers and community actors need to be empowered to make meaningful contributions in clearly defined and well-supported roles that complement professional efforts.

◆ Preparing for the future means investing in professional development. Continuous professional development at all levels of the workforce is essential not only to manage complexity as it arises, but also to ensure that staff are equipped in advance to respond effectively when crises occur - rather than reacting to them. Transformational change in social services begins with leadership and organisational cultures that are values-based and dedicated to person-centred care. Supporting managers and leaders with both training and adequate resources enables systems to adapt, innovate, and empower – even under pressure.

Next, we present the six main workforce challenges that impact the ability of social services professionals to address social crises effectively.

1.2 CHALLENGES

Lack of systematic learning from crisis experiences
Managerial training and staff development are limited. While staff often have experience with different crises (earthquakes, fires, floods, pandemics), they rarely reflect on these experiences within organidations or develop them into shared lessons and materials, limiting organisational learning.

Lack of anticipation and prevention
Social services mainly react to external crises, rather than preparing for, or proactively anticipating, challenges.

Unclear responsibilities and hesitation to act due to insufficient legal frameworks and formal guidance
When responsibilities are unclear, staff and managers are often hesitant to take initiative, partly due to the lack of legal or procedural guidance, which can slow response times or reduce effectiveness.

Lack of crisis management skills among staff
Staff training generally does not include skills for crisis management, which leaves staff underprepared for emergencies.

Fear of failure
Leaders and managers are sometimes afraid of making mistakes, which further limits initiative and timely decision-making.

Lack of cooperation between governing bodies and social services

Stronger cooperation is needed between national ministries, regional or local administrations and social service providers to ensure coordinated actions and clarity of responsibilities.

1.3 PROPOSALS

Develop a crisis response toolkit for staff

Design and promote a flexible and adaptable crisis response tool to help social services to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to crises - reducing potential chaos, clarifying roles, and ensuring that essential support continues when people need it the most. Such a toolkit should provide common guidance and recommendations to reduce fragmentation, clarify institutional roles and strengthen coherence in crisis preparedness and responses across Member States.

> **Example:** Workforce crisis response toolkit specifically designed for social services teams, including clear definitions of roles, rapid deployment checklists, and communication protocols tailored to support social workers and frontline staff during crises.

Embed adaptative management practices

Introduce effective and forward-looking planning and resource allocation methods that allow services to operate with greater flexibility and impact - ensuring continuity of person-centred care both during crises and in everyday service delivery.

> **Example:** Workforce resilience planning guide for managers that provides social service managers with practical methods for scenario-based workforce planning, staff redeployment strategies, and dynamic scheduling to respond effectively during crises.

Strengthen collaboration between national, regional and local authorities as well as service providers

> **Example:** Establish closer collaboration between national, regional, local authorities, and social services providers, ensuring there is guidance, common protocols and support to empower frontline staff and managers.

Build workforce's emotional resilience through strong support systems

Establish organisation-wide systems that promote staff wellbeing - including access to professional supervision, peer support networks, and mental health services - to help professionals manage the emotional stress, secondary trauma, and long-term impact of working in crisis environments.

Example: A comprehensive staff wellbeing and resilience programme, offering guidelines for regular supervision, peer support groups, mental health resources, and strategies to manage secondary trauma and burnout.

Embed adaptative management practices

Build the skills, confidence, and adaptability of social services professionals through tailored training programmes, professional development opportunities, and digital tools - ensuring they are well-prepared to navigate complexity, changing roles, and high-stakes decision-making during crises. For example:

Example: A dedicated e-learning platform and competency framework focused on leadership and management in times of crisis, adaptive decision-making, and the provision of trauma-informed care to enhance workforce readiness and confidence.

Example: Clear instructions for staff, managers and volunteers, and organising roundtables with them to encourage joint reflection and knowledge sharing. These reflection mechanisms can capture practical experience, build trust, and encourage proactive problem solving.

Example: Ensure that professional training programmes include crisis management skills, reflection on past experiences, and inter-organisational learning. Embed agility, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving as core competencies in crisis response training. Use innovative tools that can recreate a crisis situation more realistically and thus improve resilience (e.g., virtual reality, hackathon of a crisis situation, case studies, panic rooms).

2. TECHNOLOGY AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

2.1 BACKGROUND

To ensure that social services respond quickly and effectively to crises, they must be equipped with the right tools. Technology does not replace the human support provided by professionals, it complements it, enhancing the speed and efficiency of interventions in crises.

The fragmentation of social services, the need to coordinate with education, healthcare and other systems, such as humanitarian support in times of crises, all reinforce the importance of effective collaboration. Digital technology enables real-time connection and supports optimal coordination among the various actors involved.

Digital tools also facilitate the identification of available resources and ensure quick access to relevant information for vulnerable people. When used

intelligently and inclusively, digital technology can transform social services from reactive to proactive.

Therefore, digital social services transformation is a major priority to improve the ability of social services to meet people's needs in a timely manner during crises.

At the 2024 Working Group meeting, members highlighted that digital tools can:

◆ support professionals in managing individual cases and developing personalised intervention plans.
◆ simplify interactions between service users and professionals.
◆ improve coordination between public authorities.
◆ enable the rapid collection of data on emerging risks and help predict social needs more effectively.
◆ strengthen the capacity to activate and mobilise services and resources based on real-time information.

(ESN, 2025)

Taking into account the above and that the literature highlights technology and information systems as two key essential components to address crises effectively, we include technology as one of the proposed key components for a Crisis Management Framework for Social Services.

The following three main challenges were identified in relation to the adoption of technology in crisis management:

2.2 CHALLENGES

No single registry or unified database
Depending on the situation, social workers may need specific information from beneficiaries to perform their tasks effectively. However, the lack of single registries or unified databases of social services beneficiaries between locations within countries limits access to basic personal data that may be necessary to ensure support is provided for all.

Lack of electricity during disasters or crisis
In some crises or natural disasters, like floods or fires, electricity might be cut off, something which can prevent the social services workforce to obtain the necessary data to be able to act effectively in the field.

Cybersecurity risks
With cyberattacks on the rise, social services are also facing an increasing risk of a cybersecurity breach. Being cyberattacked could mean losing access to data of people stored digitally, which in turn can result in destabilising the system and not being able to support service users effectively.

2.3 PROPOSALS

Facilitate innovation and learning
Create shared spaces for learning and exchanging good practice to develop practical digital solutions that work on the ground.

> **Example:** Establish a Digital Resilience Knowledge Hub - an online platform for sharing case studies, best practice, tools, and lessons learned, designed to foster learning and innovation between professionals.

Accelerate digital transformation for crisis preparedness
Adopt technological solutions that enable rapid, coordinated, and effective interventions when it matters most. These solutions should be developed and tested through disaster and crisis preparedness simulations.

> **Example:** Leverage existing real-life simulations that allow social services organisations to run realistic digital disaster preparedness exercises, testing communication tools, data sharing, and coordinated response protocols in a controlled environment. Focus investment on integrating digital tools into current exercises.

Ensure continuity of operations by designing digital systems with offline or low-energy functionality
By ensuring continuity through offline or low energy-based systems, social services can guarantee access to essential information of beneficiaries in any crisis where access to digital systems is limited or not available.

> **Example:** Design crisis platforms with offline capabilities and manual data-entry options for field workers.

Strengthen collaboration through the creation of a single platform to ensure communication across different sectors
Develop a platform to ensure communication across different sectors such as social services, healthcare, education, humanitarian organisations, and other relevant actors, allowing sharing of relevant data in a secure environment. This platform should be tested in crisis preparedness exercises.

The platform would include basic identification, key social services information (case status, benefits received, vulnerability indicators), health and education needs, humanitarian assistance records and crisis- related vulnerabilities. With it, all sectors could coordinate effectively, avoid duplication and respond faster during emergencies. Strong privacy controls would, however, be needed to ensure secure, efficient cross-sector collaboration.

Use data and AI to anticipate needs and act preventively

Use data intelligently to better understand emerging risks, identify needs, mobilise resources in real time and make evidence-based decisions.

> **Example:** As part of the above-mentioned unified platform, include an AI powered dashboard that would help analyse the data available in the platform to predict emerging risks and needs. This user-friendly predictive analytics dashboard, should collect and integrate real-time data from various sources - such as social services case records, health indicators, community alerts and data from previous crises - to identify early warning signs of needs. This resource within the unified digital platform would help social workers and managers allocate resources more effectively and initiate timely support measures, preventing problems from escalating further.

Ensure transparency and accountability in the use of technology

Establish clear ethical standards on data protection and transparency of digital processes.

> **Example:** Produce an ethical digital governance framework for social services that outlines best practices for data protection, privacy, informed consent, and transparent communication about how digital tools collect and use data.

Promote inclusive and human-centred digitalisation

Ensure equitable access to technology for everyone – both professionals and service users – so that digitalisation reduces, rather than deepens, inequalities. The platforms used, and their intended purposes, should be chosen through participatory processes aligned with the real needs of people, not just those of the system.

> **Example:** Create a set of recommendations to guide social services in designing platforms for crisis situations, including large-scale crises or disasters - for example, tools that list where shelters, food distribution points, or counselling services are during emergencies, ensuring that professionals can easily coordinate resources, share and update information in real time, while service users can quickly find and access the support they need.

Ensure transparency and accountability in the use of technology

Establish clear ethical standards on data protection and transparency of digital processes.

> **Example:** Launch a continuous digital skills development programme offering modular training courses, webinars, and hands-on workshops focused on the effective use of digital tools in crisis response mechanisms.

3. ORGANISATIONAL AGILITY AND INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

3.1 BACKGROUND

In a context marked by multiple and increasingly interdependent crises, social services need to be part of a wider response mechanism that may be led by them or others.The ability to respond quickly and effectively in emergencies depends first and foremost on the quality of the partnerships built before.

Clear partnerships, with well-defined and formally agreed responsibilities, are the foundation of coordinated intervention. Concrete agreements between institutions, shared protocols that establish clear responsibilities together with good personal relationships are essential. Strong collaboration between social services, health authorities, humanitarian organisations, and technology providers allows resources to be mobilised quickly when people's lives are at risk.

At the heart of effective interventions is joint planning through real-life exercises, simulations, and crisis scenarios involving all relevant actors. These processes help identify vulnerabilities and potential weaknesses, test response capacity, and build mutual trust between partners.

In **Riga (Latvia),** the One Stop Agency **created in 2022 integrated state administrations, municipal services, NGOs and volunteers under the same roof to provide an immediate and coordinated response to Ukraine refugees' needs.**

Tallinn (Estonia) created an emergency reception centre **that involved close cooperation between public administrations and civil society organisations. The experience led to the foundation of** Tallinn Migration Centre, **which now supports people from migrant backgrounds on a regular basis.**

In **Belgium, Wallonia's Public Services (SPW)** put in place the Psychosocial Recovery Support Plan **to provide a more structured and coordinated response from agencies working on psycho-social support, mobilise resources, and ensure targeted support for people affected during the 2021 floods. As a result, SPW is now developing a** Psychosocial Coordination Unit, **which will be able to activate mobile teams. Mobile teams will redirect people in need of support to the mechanisms put in place by agencies on the ground and ensure each actor involved in crises, at local, regional or national level is working in a coordinated manner to provide appropriate and targeted support.**

Yet, real and effective collaboration is built over time through constant dialogue, shared reflection forums, and intersectoral initiatives that promote a culture of shared responsibility. Therefore, leadership plays a key role since when local leaders promote spaces for cooperation, and professionals are supported to actively contribute to solutions, social services become more agile, resilient, and closer to people.

The following priorities have been identified by ESN members to support effective interagency cooperation and organisational agility:

◆ Cooperation starts with stakeholder mapping and formalising partnerships with them through agreements that ensure sustainable collaboration across departments, sectors, and levels of government.

◆ Investing in interoperable IT case management systems, co-designed with frontline professionals, to enable data sharing and improve coordinated service delivery.

◆ Empowering professionals through joint training and cross-sector dialogue to build a shared vision, essential for multi-agency collaboration.

3.2 CHALLENGES

Unclear roles and responsibilities in the field of psychosocial support
When we talk about crises management, we usually think of the police, fire services, healthcare, municipalities and social services in some areas – such as psychosocial support, but who takes the lead is not always obvious, requiring agencies to rethink their roles ad-hoc in unprecedented situations, as it was the case during COVID-19.

Long recovery phases may weaken partnerships
Long recovery phases can weaken partnerships, as actors may withdraw once the immediate pressures of the crisis subside.

High expectations and low funding
During crises, expectations tend to be placed at local level where results are best seen, but there is not always the necessary funding to ensure crises are well addressed. This results in local services not having enough capacity to address them effectively.

Lack of knowledge and information gaps
Citizens and frontline workers do not always know where to find the necessary information or help in complex systems, which can limit the effectiveness of the response even when structures are in place.

3.3 PROPOSALS

Develop a clear, flexible and applicable operational framework
The framework should be constructed in a way that can be rapidly implemented by social services and partners ensuring a coordinated, effective, and person-centred emergency response. This framework should be regularly tested through exercises and simulations. Examples of how the framework can be operationalised include the following:

Example: A clear set of rules, roles and procedures that can be quickly activated in emergency situations.

Example: Ensure all crisis resource databases are regularly updated, manually backed up, and tested annually.

Example: Define multi-level evaluation indicators that provide a comprehensive understanding of how crisis response efforts perform at different levels - from immediate operational efficiency to longer-term social outcomes. These indicators should capture not only the effectiveness of interventions but also their broader social impact, such as improved living conditions, mental well-being, and community resilience. For example, assessment can focus on:

- ◆ **Outcomes** - access to essential services (e.g. social counselling, healthcare) that are critical for each person in their specific context.
- ◆ **Inputs** - the resources mobilised to support the response, including financial, human, and material resources (e.g. funding, staff, equipment).
- ◆ **Processes** - the ways in which the response is implemented, such as the timeliness of actions, the quality of service delivery, and the effectiveness of coordination between social services and partner organisations.

Example: Organise simulation exercises to test adaptive capacity under new crisis conditions.

Example: Adopt a shared values-based framework prioritising safety, dignity, and person-centred care.

Example: Clarify leadership hierarchies and responsibilities, and contingency authority for crisis decision-making.

> **Example:** Allow for centralised coordination mechanisms during large-scale emergencies.

Strengthen durable, multisectoral partnerships

Coordination between public authorities responsible for social services, healthcare, education, and other public authorities should be formalised through agreements that include shared goals, clearly defined responsibilities and data-sharing considerations in crisis responses. These agreements should be accompanied by mechanisms that aim at maintaining partners engaged during the recovery phases.

> **Example:** Organise joint exercises for crisis preparedness and coordinated response, using centralised platforms where social workers, local health teams, and emergency response personnel (e.g. firefighters, paramedics, civil protection staff) coordinate interventions in real time.

> **Example:** Map intersections among key stakeholders (e.g.: social, health, and emergency services to clarify shared roles and strengthen coordinated planning).

Strengthen local interagency relationships and post-crisis learning to strengthen partnerships

Foster stronger communication and collaboration between local agencies involved in crisis response and recovery. This would involve creating systems for joint planning, coordination, and information-sharing during and after crises. Through post-crisis learning, future cooperation, resilience, and service delivery would also be improved during the recovery phases.

Cooperation with volunteers and external actors

Ensure that agencies coordinate effectively with volunteers, humanitarian organisations, and technology providers, integrating their support into everyday services and emergency responses.

> **Example:** Formal partnerships where public agencies have clearly defined coordination roles, and volunteers, humanitarian organisations, and technology providers have integrated responsibilities in emergency social interventions.

Enhance digital and communication competencies

Ensure that frontline professionals are confident in using digital tools and communication platforms for coordination, data collection, and service continuity during crises. Emphasise adaptability so systems can be quickly

adjusted to evolving needs and contexts. For example:

> **Example:** Provide practical, hands-on digital literacy workshops that include using mobile data systems, secure and agile communication apps, and basic troubleshooting in field conditions.

> **Example:** Create quick-reference guides and peer-support channels to ensure that staff can solve digital problems quickly and maintain flexible, responsive communication during emergencies.

4. SYSTEMATIC RISK AND THREAT ASSESSMENT

4.1 BACKGROUND

In an increasingly complex and unpredictable world, social services need structured approaches to identify, prepare for, and respond to potential risks affecting vulnerable communities. A systematic risk and threat assessment provides such a framework, guiding services to anticipate challenges and respond effectively.

Indeed, having a risk and threat assessment is key as:

◆ It enables the early identification of risks, threats, and vulnerabilities, allowing social services to take proactive measures before problems escalate.

◆ It provides essential data and insights to design targeted strategies and response actions tailored to specific risks.

◆ It helps different agencies develop a shared understanding of potential threats and priorities, ensuring coordinated and consistent responses.

◆ It strengthens the capacity of social services to protect both people and key services, resources, and networks they rely on, maintaining continuity and effectiveness even in complex or crisis situations.

The process of creating such a framework involves several key steps:

◆ **Context and Scope** – Define the boundaries of the assessment, specifying the communities served, the types of services provided, and the full range of risks to address, from social and economic changes to natural disasters, public health emergencies, or sudden flows of people.

◆ **Asset and Resource Mapping** – Identify and document critical resources, infrastructure, staff, knowledge, and services necessary to maintain effective social service delivery under regular and crisis situations.

◆ **Threat Identification** – Systematically recognise potential risks or events that could disrupt services, compromise staff or community wellbeing, or challenge the continuity of essential operations.

◆ **Vulnerability Assessment** – Evaluate weaknesses in systems, processes, staff capacity, or infrastructure that may increase their vulnerability to identified risks, including social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities.

◆ **Risk Analysis** – Determine the likelihood and potential impact of each identified risk on communities and service delivery, to prioritise response and resource allocation.

◆ **Risk Management** – Design and implement mitigation strategies that reduce, transfer, or accept risks, including adaptation protocols, contingency planning, and capacity-building measures to ensure interventions are proportionate, feasible, and effective.

◆ **Monitoring and Review** – Establish continuous monitoring mechanisms to track changes in risk levels, incorporating new information, lessons learned, and stakeholder feedback to refine strategies and maintain organisational and community resilience over time.

By systematically following this framework, social services can move from reactive crisis management to proactive risk reduction. It also encourages collaboration across sectors and public authorities ensuring coordinated and timely responses that protect both people and the essential services, resources, and networks that social services rely on.

Voices from within ESN and field professionals have highlighted clear directions for action:

◆ **Common frameworks and unified tools** – These are needed for coherent and comparable risk assessments across regions and sectors, facilitating coordinated responses.

◆ **Data analysis and information sharing** – The use of early warning indicators and integrated data flows improves the accuracy and speed of threat identification.

◆ **Multisectoral collaboration** – Social services must work hand-in-hand with health systems, emergency services, and community actors to map risks in an integrated manner.

4.2 CHALLENGES

Limited knowledge and absence of a clear methodology
There is limited knowledge and guidance available for conducting effective risk

assessments and there is no universal methodology within and among social services. This may create inconsistencies in identifying and addressing risks and threats.

Need for a change of paradigm
In some contexts, a paradigm shift is needed, moving from focusing on individuals needs to managing larger groups.

Limited resources and uncertainty in prioritising
Social services face challenges on how to allocate resources effectively in the context of limited availability.

Diversity and fragmentation of social services
Identifying and prioritising risks, including early signs, is difficult due to the diversity and fragmentation of social services, which hinders coordinated assessment and timely interventions.

4.3 PROPOSALS

Guide the identification of threats and the analysis of vulnerabilities
Provide a structured approach for services to anticipate challenges by systematically identifying risks, assess weaknesses, and prioritise risk areas. For example:

> **Example:** Use indicators related to early warning signs to support risk identification and prioritisation as well as resource allocation when assessing the impact of crises.

> **Example:** Regularly monitor crisis situations that are becoming increasingly common, such as floods, wildfires and heatwaves, and identify communities and facilities most at risk.

Recommend risk management and adaptive strategies
Offer guidance for social services to develop dynamic, learning systems that adapt to evolving risks and ensure effective crisis management.

Implement risk mitigation measures and scenario-based tests or exercises to assess social services preparedness and strengthen their response capacity.

> **Example:** Conduct simulation exercises for social, health, economic, or natural crises and disasters - such as sudden population displacements, housing crises, unemployment surges, floods, or wildfires - to test response plans and improve the actions and strategies designed to prevent or reduce the impact of these events on individuals, communities, and social services.

Example: Conduct simulation exercises for social, health, economic, or natural crises and disasters - such as sudden population displacements, housing crises, unemployment surges, floods, or wildfires - to test response plans and improve the actions and strategies designed to prevent or reduce the impact of these events on individuals, communities, and social services.

Establish a flexible and adaptable assessment framework

Provide guidance to define the scope, objectives, and boundaries of risk and threat assessments across social services. For example:

Example: Recommend standardised protocols for urban and rural services that identify potential social, economic, and environmental risks.

Example: Create a risk assessment template and provide training on its use.

Support critical asset mapping

Identify essential resources, staff, infrastructure, and services, and clarify their role in maintaining service continuity. Identify potential additional resources to support risk assessment and response. For example:

Example: Provide guidance on creating inventories of shelters, clinics, and key staff teams, highlighting which locations and personnel are critical for operations during emergencies.

Example: Define which should be the 'mandatory' or essential social services based on mapping and assessment.

Enhance Evidence-based Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Implement a structured system for collecting evidence and evaluating performance in training and simulation exercises. These exercises should replicate realistic crisis scenarios, allowing social workers to practice coordinated interventions focused on protection, guidance, emotional and social support, and ensuring access to essential services, while volunteers learn to coordinate humanitarian support at the scene of a disaster, including food and water distribution. The evaluation should analyse both the effectiveness of the actions taken and the efficiency of the coordination mechanisms, identifying lessons learned and areas for improvement to strengthen preparedness for real-world crises.

Example: Use the collected data to validate and refine risk reduction and response plans, ensuring that lessons learned are systematically integrated into future preparedness strategies and operational procedures.

Strengthen coordination platforms and multi-level interaction

Establish and maintain integrated internal and external coordination platforms, communication channels and coordination protocols, which enable real-time information sharing and decision-making among operational and local, regional, and national actors, including identifying resources to avoid duplication.

> **Example:** Develop a unified crisis response plan ensuring structured collaboration between local, regional, and national authorities. This plan should have clearly defined who is responsible for what during crises, to ensure efficient and effective responses.

5. TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNICATION

5.1 BACKGROUND

Effective social services are built on transparency and open communication. Transparency means that information about decisions, procedures, and outcomes is shared clearly and accessibly with all stakeholders – people who use services, professionals, partners, and the general public. By doing so, it is possible to build trust and accountability, which are essential for genuine collaboration, especially in crisis management and the provision of consistent social support.

In critical moments, effective communication ensures that all actors – including vulnerable people – are accurately informed, actively involved, and supported to participate in decision-making. For social services, this means making an extra effort to reach individuals who may face barriers to understanding or accessing information – such as people with intellectual disabilities, those with long-term care needs, or those in difficult socio-economic situations. Communication must therefore be adapted, using accessible formats and proactive outreach to ensure that everyone is supported effectively.

The following priorities have been identified by ESN members as essential to ensure social services transparency and communication in crises.

◆ **Communication and transparency** regarding policies, decisions, and results help build trust and support informed participation from all stakeholders.

◆ **Services should use multiple channels and formats** to reach diverse populations, including people with disabilities or with language barriers.

◆ **Involving people who use services** enhances services quality. When people are well informed and engaged, services can better understand and meet their real needs.

◆ **Solid communication within social services and with partner organisations** supports coordination and agility in crisis situations.

5.2 CHALLENGES

Lack of Transparency
In crisis situations, transparency is primarily internal, even at micro organisational level. Service users often receive limited updates, which can negatively impact their experience and understanding of social services responses.

Lack of investment in Communication
Communication is generally undervalued, with few dedicated resources allocated to ensure effective information delivery and exchange, something which can hinder the efficient flow of information during crises.

Limited resources, particularly for translation and accessible formats, can constrain inclusive communication, making it difficult to ensure that all service users receive clear and timely information during crises.

Time pressure reduces clarity and inclusiveness
Time pressure during crises reduces the clarity and inclusiveness of communication, making it more difficult to ensure that all stakeholders, particularly service users, receive accurate and timely information.

5.3 PROPOSALS

Position public authorities' communication channels as critical infrastructure for rapid, accurate and inclusive information exchange
Public authorities' formal communication channels (for example, websites, social media accounts, emergency hotlines, and SMS alert systems), community-based and interpersonal channels (for example, local and community social services points/centres, social worker of reference for that specific area) should be presented as critical infrastructure for communication during crises.

> **Example:** Create simple and effective communication channels such as WhatsApp/Telegram groups, social media communication channels, local radio, SMS alert systems, and coordination platforms for frontline workers, and provide a toolkit for their use in crisis situations.

Develop clear communication protocols and guidelines tailored to crisis situations, to ensure accurate and timely information sharing. For example:

> **Example:** Create a communication manual outlining steps and responsible actors for the rapid dissemination of information during crises, as well as daily reporting within social services.

Example: Develop clear guidelines on transparency and define what information is shared, with whom, when, why and how.

Example: Social service providers should organise transparent and clear communication with people receiving support from them, through, for example, regular update meetings, accessible language leaflets, accessible digital messages (SMS, email, or WhatsApp) and feedback channels where users can ask questions or express concerns.

Example: Raise awareness of the importance of communication before, during, and after crises by providing targeted training for:

♦ **Social workers and social services professionals** – at local and regional levels, to strengthen coordination and the delivery of essential services.

♦ **Public administration staff** – at national, regional, and local levels, to ensure alignment, timely decision-making, and effective support for social services.

Example: Each training should be tailored to the specific responsibilities and communication needs of the participants.

Promote multi-channel communication strategies
This should allow to make information accessible for all population groups in fast-paced decision-making contexts, in particular for communities in situations of vulnerability.

Example: Develop multi-channel communication strategies to present accessible summaries of decisions made, combining digital tools (such as websites, social media, and messaging apps), traditional media (radio, TV, printed notices), and direct contact methods (including meetings at the local community social services centres, and through the social worker(s) of reference for that specific area) to ensure that everyone receives consistent and understandable information.

Example: Use online platforms such as service portals, community websites, and social media pages, alongside phone calls, public posters, and translations into plain or minority languages, to reach all people who benefit from services.

Encourage participatory practices

Encourage participatory practices that actively involve service users and communities in decision-making and service design, while recognising existing practical limitations related to time or resources.

> **Example:** Organise regular meetings and surveys with people who benefit from social services to gather feedback and suggestions about how services are delivered in crises situations. This could be organised before and after a crisis, to increase resilience and learn for future crises. It would allow to understand better what went well and what can be improved, to be better prepared for future crises.

5. CRISIS MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL SERVICES

COMPONENTS	ACTIONS
1. **WORKFORCE -** **LEADERSHIP** **AND TRAINING**	☐ Develop a crisis response toolkit for staff ☐ Embed adaptative management practices ☐ Strengthen collaboration between national, regional and local authorities as well as service providers ☐ Build workforce's emotional resilience through strong support systems ☐ Strengthen professional capacity through continuous learning and innovation
2. **TECHNOLOGY AND** **INFORMATION SYSTEMS**	☐ Facilitate innovation and learning ☐ Accelerate digital transformation for crisis preparedness ☐ Ensure continuity of operations by designing digital systems with offline or low-energy functionality ☐ Strengthen collaboration through the creation of a single platform to ensure communication across different sectors ☐ Use data and AI to anticipate needs and act preventively ☐ Ensure transparency and accountability in the use of technology ☐ Promote inclusive and human-centred digitalisation ☐ Invest in the digital skills of professionals
3. **ORGANISATIONAL AGILITY AND** **INTERAGENCY COOPERATION**	☐ Develop a clear, flexible and applicable operational framework ☐ Strengthen durable, multisectoral partnerships ☐ Strengthen local interagency relationships and post-crisis learning to strengthen partnerships Cooperation with volunteers and external actors ☐ Enhance digital and communication competencies
4. **SYSTEMATIC RISK AND** **THREAT ASSESSMENT**	☐ Guide the identification of threats and the analysis of vulnerabilities ☐ Recommend risk management and adaptive strategies ☐ Establish a flexible and adaptable assessment framework ☐ Support critical asset mapping ☐ Enhance evidence-based evaluation and continuous improvement ☐ Strengthen coordination platforms and multi-level interaction
5. **TRANSPARENCY AND** **COMMUNICATION**	☐ Position public authorities' communication channels as critical infrastructure for rapid, accurate and inclusive information exchange ☐ Develop clear communication protocols and guidelines tailored to crisis situations ☐ Promote multi-channel communication strategies ☐ Encourage participatory practices

6. RESOURCES

European Commission (2025). EU Preparedness Union Strategy to prevent and react to emerging threats and crises. Available at: https://civil-protection-human-itarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/news/eu-preparedness-union-strategy-prevent-and-react-emerging-threats-and-crises-2025-03-26_en

European Social Network (2022). Resilient Social Services: Building for the Future. [online] European Social Network. Available at: https://www.esn-eu.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Transformation%20briefing_final.pdf

European Social Network (2023). Building Resilience in Social Services by Managing Demand. [online] Available at: https://www.esn-eu.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/T%26R2023%20_Building%20Resilience%20in%20Social%20Services%20by%20Managing%20Demand.pdf

European Social Network (2025). Digital Transformation for Resilient Social Services. [online] Available at: https://www.esn-eu.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/T%26R%20WG%20Report%20v4.pdf

European Social Network, (2025a). Social Services: leading crisis management across Europe. Available at: https://www.esn-eu.org/news/social-services-leading-crisis-management-across-europe

Hazaa, Y. M. H., Almaqtari, F. A., & Al-Swidi, A. (2021). Factors Influencing Crisis Management: A systematic review and synthesis for future research. Cogent Business & Management, 8(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2021.1878979

Jiménez M.M., (2024). How to manage the risk of natural disasters in companies?. Pirani. Available at: How to manage the risk of natural disasters in companies?

Mamyrbaeva Zulfiya, Ketners Karlis, Zheenalieva Aida, Sheripov Nurlan, Hudyma Oleh. (2024). Public administration effectiveness in crises and emergencies: experiences and lessons from different countries. CERIDAP. Available at: Public administration effectiveness in crises and emergencies: experiences and lessons from different countries – CERIDAP

Widiantoro, Didik & Shahadan, Md. (2024). A systematic literature review of crisis management. International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices. 7. 100-112. 10.35631/IJEMP.726008. Available at: (PDF) A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

European Social Network
Avenue des Arts 3-4-5
1210 Brussels, Belgium

www.esn-eu.org
info@esn-eu.org
+32 2 511 10 93

@ESNSocial

European Social Network

European Social Network