

Co-Creating Future Social Services

European Social Services Conference 2024

REPORT

26-28 June 2024
Antwerp, Belgium



The European Social Services Conference 2024

[The European Social Services Conference \(ESSC\)](#) is the annual flagship event of the [European Social Network](#) (ESN) and is the largest forum for public social policy and practice in Europe. The 32nd ESSC, hosted by the City of Antwerp in Belgium, welcomed almost 700 delegates to share insights and discuss advancements in personalisation and co-creation in social services.

An event to remember - take a moment to reflect on the **highlights of the 2024 edition!**



About the European Social Network

The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. It brings together the organisations that plan, deliver, finance, manage, research, and regulate local public social services, including health, social welfare, employment, education and housing. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice by exchanging knowledge and expertise.

ESN's mission is to inspire social services leaders to improve the lives of people in the community. The ESSC supports this mission by offering a platform for social services leaders from Europe and beyond to share insights and inspire each other with innovative ideas and solutions. Attendees of the ESSC leave with valuable new connections, perspectives, and knowledge.

An Unforgettable Edition

The 2024 conference was the biggest yet, bringing together 694 leaders in social services from 34 different countries.

694 Delegates

34 Countries

23 Partners

215 Organisations

47 Sessions

145 Presenters

23 Keynote Speakers

62,106 Website
Views

20 Exhibitors

34,692 X
Impressions

32,132 LinkedIn
Impressions

The ESSC 2024

The conference was hosted by the City of Antwerp, with the support of the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG), the Flemish Department for Care and 20 industry partners. It was held within the framework of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The 2024 conference theme, '**Co-creating Future Social Services**' focused discussions and presentations on how public authorities, service providers and people using services can together better design, deliver and evaluate social services.

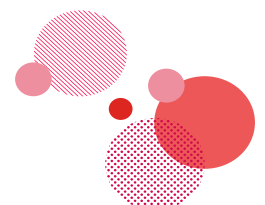
Programme

The 3-day conference programme focused on three thematic strands:

- **Local Social Inclusion**
- **Managing the Future Workforce**
- **Digital Social Inclusion**

The action-packed programme consisted of:

- **5 plenary sessions**
- **4 Thematic Panel Discussions**
- **23 interactive workshop & case study sessions**
- **12 innovation zone presentations**
- **2 project forums with 7 elevator pitch presentations**
- **1 practice fair with 15 projects**
- **1 Ted Talk**
- **3 Study Visits to Social Projects in the City of Antwerp**



During the plenary sessions **23 keynote speakers** from around the world shared their expertise and knowledge on co-creating social services.

The conference technical programme was shaped through a Call for Contributions process where organisations were invited to submit a proposal to be included in the programme. Ninety-four applications from twenty-six countries were received, resulting in a diverse range of local, regional and national perspectives being represented across the programme. There were **145 presenters** from **twenty-five countries** that presented at this year's conference.



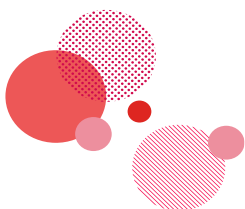
ACCESSIBILITY

Language support

The conference plenary sessions were interpreted into 6 languages:

- **English**
- **Dutch**
- **French**
- **German**
- **Italian**
- **Spanish**

All sessions in the technical programme were interpreted into English, giving presenters the freedom to present in their native language. A velotypist provided **live subtitling** during the main plenary sessions. These services gave presenters and delegates from across Europe the opportunity to attend and engage with the topic, encouraging a greater diversity in geographical representation at the conference.



Inclusion and Access

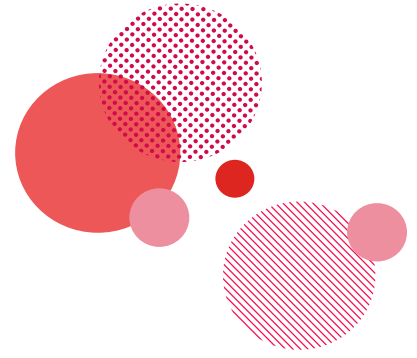
ESN supports the attendance of persons with experience of care to the ESSC through a bursary programme, which provides free entrance and covers travel costs and accommodation for eligible persons. In 2024, ESN supported the attendance to the ESSC of 6 people with experience of care and their carers where necessary.

The programme is developed to ensure that there is representation of persons with experience of care in sessions throughout the conference. In the 2024 edition there were three presenters with experience of care. ESN will continue to increase this level of representation in future editions.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The conference sessions highlighted the importance of co-creation in social services. Read more of the key learnings below.



Empowerment and Inclusion

Co-creation empowers people using social services by involving them directly in the decision-making process. This fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that their voices are heard, promoting inclusion and reducing potential power imbalances.

Innovation and Creativity

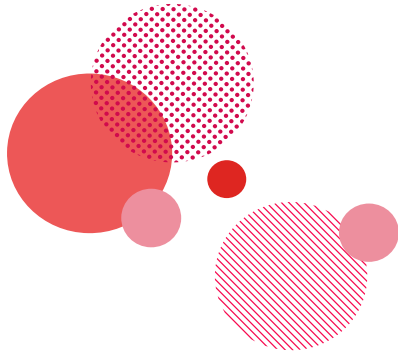
Collaborative efforts bring diverse perspectives and expertise together, fostering innovation and creative problem-solving. This can lead to new approaches and solutions that might not emerge in traditional top-down service design.

Responsive and Adaptive Services

Co-creating services with the professionals and people using social services allows those services to be more responsive to changing needs and circumstances. Continuous feedback from the professionals and people using services ensures that services are relevant, and they can adapt and evolve over time.

Policy and System Change

Co-creation can influence broader policy and systemic changes. The insights that we gained at the conference from multiple collaborative efforts across Europe and beyond can inform the policy decisions that will lead to improvements in the overall social services system.



CONFERENCE THEMATIC LEARNINGS

Further dissecting the conference three thematic strands, find out more below about the conference main learnings.

Local Social Inclusion

In order for effective social inclusion to become a reality, social services leaders and professionals at different levels should be ready to **share decision making power** with the people and communities using their services. Organising this transition of power at services planning, provision and assessment, may need **investment in time and resources** at the start, but it will **pay back in better outcomes** for those who need support and those who co-provide it.



Managing the Future Workforce

We can overcome existing challenges by rethinking our approach to workforce dynamics, **embracing kindness and professional curiosity, and prioritising compassionate leadership**. As these values are integrated into public policy and organisational practice, we move towards a future where social services professionals are valued, supported, and empowered to make a meaningful impact.

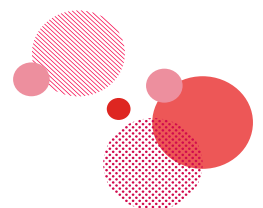


Digital Development

Ethical co-creation and deployment of technological innovations can ultimately hold great potential for optimising service provision and enhancing the quality of life of those using social services. Meaningful engagement of the latter at all stages is vital to ensuring that **digital solutions are user-centred, empowering, and responsive** to the unique needs and priorities of underserved communities. Only in this way can digital innovation contribute to a fair and inclusive society.

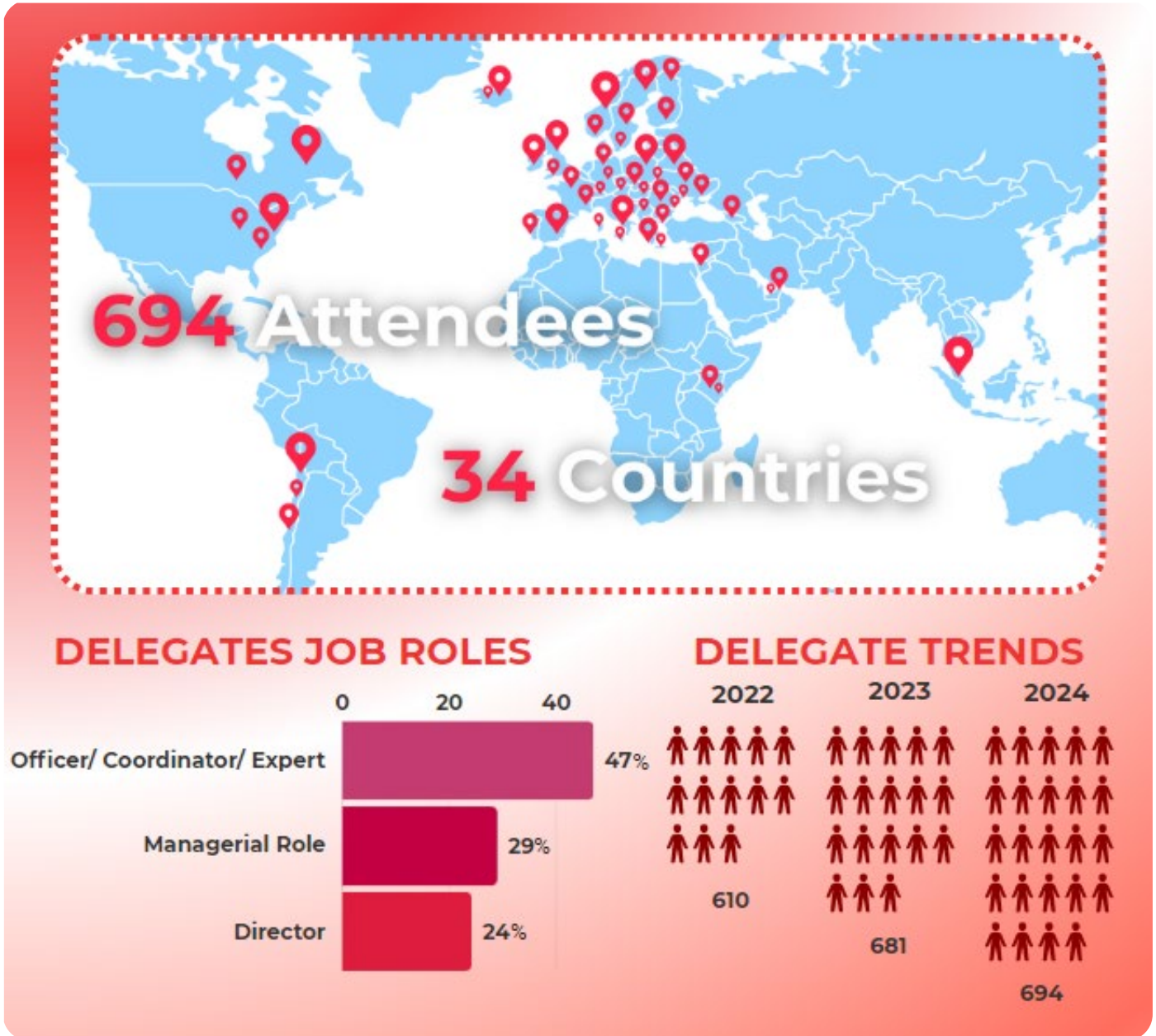
Co-creation in EU Policy

The 2024 ESSC served as a nexus between European, National, Regional and Local policy and practice. Key figures present included Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion at DG EMPL who observed: **“There must be a culture of understanding from the perspective of people using services.”** Her sentiments were echoed by her colleagues from the European Commission in sessions throughout the conference, including Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, who remarked, **“The COVID-19 crisis underscored the vital role of social services and welfare state. We must innovate, ensure opportunities for all, address poverty, and recognize the essential nature of quality care.”**



WHO JOINED US AT THE ESSC 2024?

Have a look through the type of delegates and organisations who joined us at the 2024 conference edition.

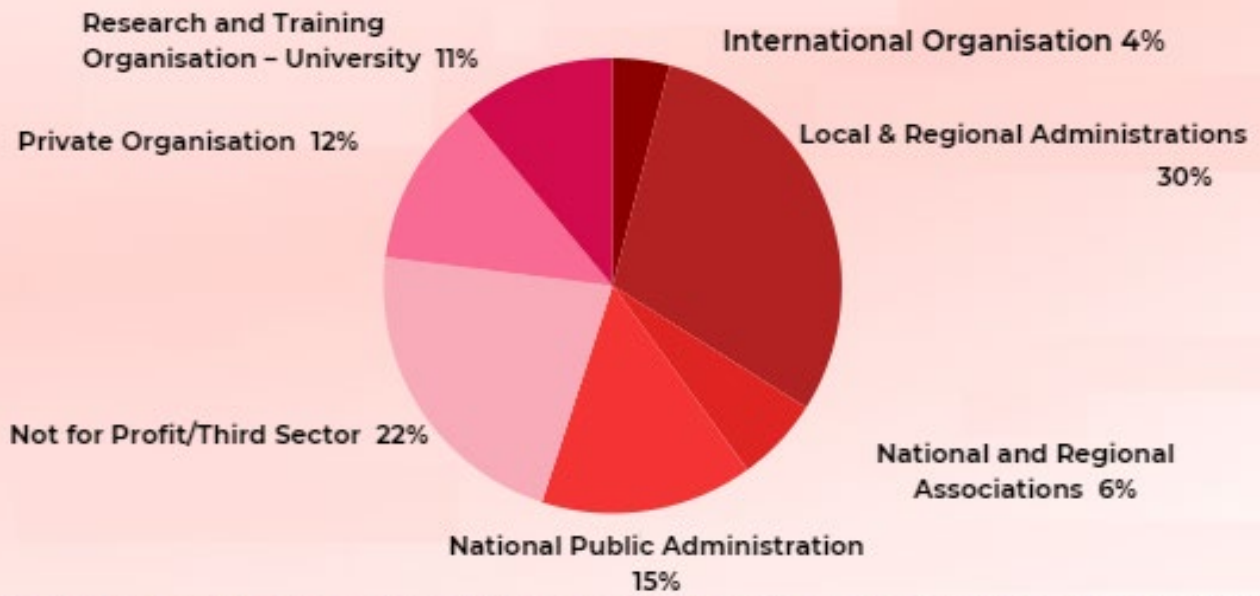


ESSC 2024 brought together a truly diverse range of participants, with delegates from **5 different continents** in attendance. Whilst most of the delegates came from across Europe, there were participants that came from as far away as **Canada, Singapore, and Chile**. The countries with the highest representation of delegates were **Belgium, Iceland and Spain**.

Over the last 3 years, the number of delegates attending the ESSC has gradually increased, from 610 in 2022 to 694 in 2024, the largest number of delegates in attendance in the 32 years of the conference.

Most delegates (53%) were in decision-making roles. The remaining delegates held various senior professional roles in social services.

TYPES OF ORGANISATIONS



Most of the organisations (45%) represented were public administrations, with the highest proportion of these organisations being local public administrations (21%).



ESSC 2024 Partners

ESN has developed mutually beneficial long-term cooperation with different kinds of organisations to pursue excellence and innovation in social services.

Partner organise thematic discussions and interactive sessions, showcase products and solutions.

Delegates had the opportunity to learn about the latest developments and innovations in social services through the Innovation Zone, Exhibition Area and through sessions hosted by Partners. Sessions hosted by Partners also included testimonials from representatives of Public Authorities implementing their solutions.

20 organisations including global and national consultancies, IT companies, NGOs and research centres, brought knowledge, insights, innovations and new technologies.

ESN partners collaborate with ESN to:

LEARN

- about the latest social policy and practice trends at European and national levels.
- about the needs of vulnerable populations
- about the use of innovative and technological solutions and products

MEET

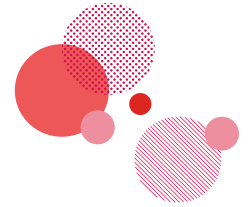
- with public authority representatives from more than 34 countries
- with peers from other companies
- with all types of agencies involved in the planning and delivery of social services

SHOWCASE

- products and solutions to decision makers and senior officials
- projects and initiatives to expand them into other contexts.



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LOOKING AHEAD TO THE ESSC 2025

The 33rd European Social Services Conference, **'Where Care Meets Tech,'** will take place in Aarhus, Denmark, from **22 to 25 June 2025**. It will bring together leaders in social services to discuss **enhancing personalisation** and **utilising technology** to ensure efficiency, compassion, customisation, transparency and accessibility are at the core of **social services transformation**. The 2025 ESSC will be hosted by the City of Aarhus and supported by the Regional Government of Central Denmark and the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, Housing and Senior Citizens, in the framework of Denmark's EU Presidency.



European Social Services Conference

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