

Growing in a Time of Brexit

The European Social Network (ESN), the leading social services network in Europe with over 135 member organizations in 33 countries, has faced many challenges in the past few years – the first one being a UK-based organization benefitting from European funds, which, in a time of Brexit, led the association to relocate in Brussels. Alfonso Lara Montero, Chief Executive, explains to Boardroom it was actually not the only issue ESN had to deal with.

Interview Rémi Dève

There have been a few challenges for ESN to overcome in recent years...

Most member organizations of ESN are social services departments in public authorities, which were significantly impacted by the financial crisis. They saw their budgets reduced and the need to do more with less, having to address more and greater social needs with fewer staff. This impacted the membership of our Network.

However, despite these challenges, ESN is now stronger than it was back in 2011 when public authorities were having to deal with the social consequences of the economic crisis. Since then, our membership has grown in terms of numbers by 50%, themes and countries covered, with a significant expansion in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond the EU.

Is social care going to be one of the world's most critical challenges, as the world grows older?

Against a backdrop of ageing societies and the associated increase in long-term conditions such as dementia, long-term care is growing in importance in all European countries. Socio-demographic changes, including family formation patterns, the geographical location of family members and changes in employment are challenging the sustainability of informal unpaid care and increasing demands on formal care services. Any such increase is likely to require an almost equal demand for a higher number of social services employees,

while there are growing expectations of more responsive and higher-quality, tailored social services.

Throughout our work we have documented significant recruitment challenges in the sector which impact social services across Europe. The social services and care sectors eagerly await policy reforms that address the implementation of specific recruitment strategies, the provision of support and development opportunities, and ensuring adequate remuneration. Without a sustainable and valued workforce, public authorities cannot ensure consistently safe and high-quality care to elderly and vulnerable people across Europe.

In which areas do you think there is room for growth for ESN in future years?

Public authorities have a unique role when it comes to the management of social services, including planning, financing and quality improvement. ESN as the only network of public authorities in the sector is exceptionally placed to support social services managers in their journey to improve social services. With decentralization, there is significant room for growth within local authorities as ESN provides them a professional forum for discussing and addressing issues related to the planning and financing of child protection, support for families in difficult socio-economic conditions, disability and adult long-term care services.



When it comes to delivery, at ESN we see significant potential to work with social services providers who can now be part of our Network, too. Since then, we have had many requests from providers to join our Network. Their views give an understanding of the issues faced by front-line staff at the point of delivery.

An issue that permeates all of this is quality and when it comes to social services, quality inspectorates have a key role in relation to ensuring that people using social services are safeguarded and protected. As the field of quality improvement develops further, we see at ESN another area of growth in terms of new challenges and themes to be addressed within our activities.

Finally the use of technology for the transformation of social services has been growing, hence we see an opportunity in partnering with IT, technology and data solutions providers to create the space for conversations around how technology can improve the delivery of social services while ensuring that the rights of the most vulnerable are respected.

We understand you relocated your headquarters from Brighton to Brussels recently. Why the move? Obviously Brexit played a role in that...

ESN has had a strategic partnership with the European Commission for the past 14 years. Due to the UK referendum result to leave the EU, the Board of ESN made a decision to relocate the Secretariat elsewhere, so that our EU funding would not be jeopardized by the decision made by the UK. While there were other options on the table, it was felt that ESN should be close to the European institutions, hence the Board decided to relocate to Brussels.

ESN had been established in the UK since it was founded in 1999 and relocation meant that most staff did not wish to leave the UK. It was a difficult process to ensure that an association was

established in Belgium while the UK charity and company was wrapped up. Nonetheless, efforts have paid off and ESN is now an established and fully operational association in Brussels.

How do you see Brussels as an association hub? In what ways does it make sense for you to be headquartered there?

The strongest point for associations to establish themselves in Brussels is that there are many of them in the same situation, hence it is always possible to find peer support. However, the environment is extremely competitive, and costs are quite high in comparison to other cities in Europe. The legal system is also a bit complicated with a myriad of benefits to offset some of the costs, but this is not easy to navigate through, though those benefits do exist, which is a good thing.

On the positive side, Brussels being an association hub, many public authorities have representations there which can make it easier for ESN to reach out to them. The same goes for international institutions and private sector organizations with whom ESN can work for mutually beneficial partnerships.

On a personal level, I did Solvay Brussels School's Executive Master in International Association Management. The programme is specifically targeted at association professionals expected to take on wider responsibilities, grow within their respective organization or to lead and ensure sustainable growth of their associations, and I found it both well structured and designed.

This piece is part of the exclusive partnership between Boardroom and the Global Association Hubs Partnership (GAHP), which comes as an innovative response to the increasing decentralisation of international associations, as they look to develop their activities globally.
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