



Building and managing effective employers' organisations in the social services sector

A practical guide



Table of contents

- 3 [Introduction](#)
- 4 [Governance and Strategy](#)
- 6 [Membership and Networking](#)
- 8 [Financing of employers' organisations](#)
- 11 [Social Dialogue](#)
- 13 [Communication](#)
- 16 [Representation and Influence](#)
- 17 [Key takeaways](#)

INTRODUCTION

It is well recognised that working conditions tend to be better in sectors with strong social dialogue and collective agreements. In a field like social services, where working conditions can often be demanding, fostering such dialogue is crucial—not least because of the strong connection between job quality and the quality of services provided. Social dialogue also plays a vital role in addressing challenges such as skills gaps and staff shortages, which are common in the social services sector.

The importance of strengthening social dialogue at European and national level has also been reaffirmed by the European Commissions' European Care Strategy¹ and the 2023 Social Dialogue Initiative².

In many European countries, social dialogue remains underdeveloped, particularly at the sectoral level in social services. While trade unions may exist in these regions, they often lack counterparts on the employers' side.

This is one of the key concerns addressed by the IWorCon project. IWorCon (short for Improving Working Conditions) aims to build the capacity of employers' organisations in social services and facilitate mutual learning. To this end, project partners

participated in study visits to employers' organisations in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, France, Austria and the Czech Republic.

The study visits offered a valuable opportunity to partners to learn about social services and social dialogue in different countries and explore the functioning and management of effective employers' organisations in the sector. Partners learned about the hosting organisations' **membership and network, its financing, social dialogue practices, as well as communication, representation and influence**. The visits also included a presentation and subsequent discussion with a social services trade union representative from the sector in each country.

This Guide aims to provide practical tips and examples on how to build and manage effective employers' organisations in social services.

It serves as a summary of key learnings from the study visits. Additionally, it includes elements of a survey the Federation of European Social Employers conducted among their membership in January 2025.

For more information on IWorCon, visit the project webpage:
<https://www.socialemployers.eu/iworcon/>

¹ https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/european-care-strategy-caregivers-and-care-receivers-2022-09-07_en#navItem-relatedDocuments

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_290

GOVERNANCE AND STRATEGY

In most of the organisations involved in the IWorCon project activities, employers' organisations were typically structured as associations or similar bodies, such as employers' unions. These organisations primarily focus on representing the interests of employers within the profession, particularly in their relations with trade unions.

Employers' organisations are generally managed by a General Assembly, consisting of all members. The General Assembly appoints a Board responsible for overseeing the organisation, which includes electing a President and other key representatives, such as a Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer.

This governance structure promotes democratic functioning, based on regular elections, a clearly defined vision or mission, an updated strategy, and a work programme aligned with an agreed budget.

According to the ILO guide "*The Effective Employers' Organization*", a good vision or mission statement should comprise the following elements:

→ Purpose - One sentence that describes the end result an organisation seeks to accomplish (and for whom) e.g. "to improve the competitive environment for business".

→ Business - A description of the primary means used to accomplish the purpose e.g. "through effective advocacy with regulators and the provision of services to members".

→ Values - A listing of the values, beliefs or guiding principles shared by members of an organisation e.g. "quality outputs and value for money services".

Key objectives and strategies for achieving these goals should also be defined by a working group composed of members.

This mission and strategy help to attract potential new members and establish the ways in which the organisation and its staff should operate, negotiate, communicate, and influence policies.



Examples of missions of employers' organisations:

- *"Develop the employer function to better meet the expectations of the persons cared for and supported in our settings and services."*
- *"The Association has a social responsibility to make the organisation of care for the elderly and chronically ill future-proof. That means: reducing bureaucracy, reducing staff shortages, driving innovation in the sector and facilitating and protecting the professionalism of care professionals."*
- *"The basic aim of the Association is to help the development and improvement of the level of social services provided by its members."*
- *"The Federation's mission is to represent and contribute to the development of competitive, efficient organisations, creators of social and economic value, which favour employment and improve the level of employability of people with disabilities."*
- *"The organisation supports and strengthens its members in their production of social services of general interest that are vital to the entire population, and which therefore have to be of a high quality and (financially) accessible to everybody."*

MEMBERSHIP AND NETWORKING

Membership is crucial for an employers' organisation because it provides the foundation for its effectiveness, influence, and sustainability.

A strong and broad membership base allows the organisation to represent the interests of the social services sector more effectively to policymakers, regulators, and stakeholders and to engage in social dialogue. Through a collective voice, the organisation can advocate for policies that support the sustainability and growth of social services, such as funding, working conditions, workforce development, and labour regulations.

A large and diverse membership enables the organisation to gain a comprehensive, real-life understanding of the various challenges the sector faces. It also increases the organisation's credibility as a representative body for social services employers and strengthens its ability to negotiate collective agreements with trade unions.

Beyond their membership, employers' organisations cooperate within a broader ecosystem with partners, government entities, and other related organisations.

The network advances communication, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas, best practices, and innovations across the social services landscape.

Building a strong membership base requires a strategic approach that emphasises value, relevance, and engagement. The following points should be considered to demonstrate the benefits of becoming a member of the organisation.

1 Define and Communicate Value

→ Clearly articulate how the organisation addresses the challenges faced by social services employers, such as funding constraints, workforce and skills shortages, and regulatory compliance.

→ Start defining the values and the mission of the organisation with a first white paper, further developed over time. Facing a challenge jointly with several organisations can be a starting point.

2 Understand and Address the Sector's Challenges

→ Conduct regular dialogue and surveys or focus groups with members to understand their needs, expectations, priorities and problems.

→ Develop programmes and initiatives that directly address these issues, such as workforce development programmes, compliance support, or funding advocacy.

3 Demonstrate Impact

- Demonstrate impact by negotiating sectoral collective agreements with trade unions or by participating in the employers' delegation for cross-sectoral negotiations.
- Showcase past successes in influencing policy, securing funding, or addressing sector challenges.
- Actively involve members in advocacy initiatives to emphasise collective impact.
- Promote tangible benefits like advocacy, training, collective bargaining, legal advice, networking opportunities, and access to resources. Share success stories and testimonials from current members to illustrate the impact of membership.

4 Build Relationships and Foster Engagement

- Use personal outreach, events, and sector engagement to build trust and show commitment to members' needs.
- Create a sense of community where members feel valued and supported.

5 Provide a platform for exchange between members

- Organise events with networking breaks, workshops, and group activities, allowing members to move beyond isolation and share both the challenges they face and the successes they achieve with their colleagues.
- If the organisation is not represented in all regions, engage with members through meetings and training sessions and create opportunities for cooperation.

For example, some of the organisations visited during the project organise regular local meetings, bringing together human resources managers from the region to network, stay informed about workforce developments, and share best practices.

Networking is not only important for members, but also crucial for the organisation itself, particularly in terms of influence. The organisation can leverage its networks, as well as collaborate with other sectoral organisations, cross-sectoral bodies, and trade unions, to build coalitions for advocacy.

FINANCING OF EMPLOYERS' ORGANISATIONS

Ensuring financing for a newly established employers' organisation in social services is crucial for sustainability.

Combining diverse funding streams can ensure a steady flow of resources while minimising reliance on any single source.

Regardless of the budget size, it is essential to demonstrate the return on investment through tangible benefits such as advocacy, training, and support.

There is no single solution for financing an employers' organisation. However, to guarantee sustainable funding, it is advisable to have a diversified approach, including some, if not all, of the sources mentioned below.



A survey conducted among Social Employers members revealed **significant diversity in the budgets of employers' organisations**, ranging from just a few thousand euros to over ten million euros for the largest organisations. These budgets are primarily used to hire staff, with survey results indicating that employers' organisations employ anywhere from 3 to 82 employees.

1 Membership Fees

→ Charge members an annual fee based on a tiered structure that considers the size or financial capacity of the organisation.

→ Offer lower rates for smaller organisations, trial memberships, or promotional temporary rates. In such cases, any potential discounts should be transparent to minimise the risk of disputes.



Membership fees constitute a significant portion of employers' organisations' income. According to the Social Employers survey, 57% of respondents reported that membership fees accounted for more than 75% of their total income. The survey also revealed considerable diversity in how these fees are calculated. Some organisations base fees on a percentage of gross salaries paid to employees, others on the number of employees, and some use flat rates.

2 Grants and Government Support

→ Apply for EU grants or government grants aimed at supporting social services, workforce development, or capacity-building initiatives.

→ In some countries, the ESF+ programme can support capacity building for social partners, including areas such as staffing and skill development. However, for national-level organisations, it is important that public funding does not result in too much reliance on the government. Preserving the autonomy of social partners is essential.

→ Collaborate with government bodies on projects like improving employment standards or delivering training programmes.

→ Secure start-up grants for new organisations from foundations or public programmes promoting social sector innovation.

3 Sponsorships and Partnerships

→ Partner with businesses or service providers that align with the social services sector, such as HR software companies, training providers, or funders.

→ Co-develop funded projects with other organisations or stakeholders in the sector.

4 Revenue-Generating Services

Traditionally, employers' organisations provide legal advice, at least in relation to the collective agreements they are signatories to. However, this service has now expanded to cover other areas, such as human resources management.

→ Provide extended **advice** on HR issues, labour law, collective agreements, Occupational Safety and Health and organisational development for a fee. In such cases, services are provided by officers with in-depth expertise and knowledge of the sector, at a competitive cost compared to lawyers and external consultants. Legal advice is provided by a large majority of employers organisations.

→ Sell sector **reports, guides, toolkits**, consolidated versions of collective agreements or research tailored to social services employers.

→ Manage or have a partnership with a **training centre**, mostly address-

ing members' training needs. Offer paid **training sessions**, or workshops on workforce management, sector trends or daily management of services. **According to the Social Employers survey, 80% of the Social Employers members provide training (by far the most popular service provided).**

→ Organise fee-based **events** focused on sector-specific topics, including sponsors. These events also provide opportunities for members to network and build their own connections.

A balance must be established between services potentially included in the membership fee and paid services that go beyond the basic offerings.

The Social Employers survey revealed that 60% of the Social Employers members offer paid services to their members, which contribute, for most, to a limited extent (less than 25%) to their overall budget.

5 In-Kind Support and Cost-Sharing

→ Collaborate with other organisations to share office space, technology, or administrative support to reduce costs.

→ Engage professionals or retired experts to provide pro-bono services in areas such as advocacy, raising awareness of sectoral challenges, or delivering training.

→ Deepen cooperation with universities, research centres, or training entities to receive in-kind support for conducting sectoral studies, impact reports, or awareness-raising projects, without incurring additional costs for the organisation.



SWOT analysis of different funding streams for employers' organisations (EO):

- 1** EO Funding from Membership Fees
 → Strengths: Independence, stable and predictable funding, and incentive to stay relevant.
 → Weaknesses: Dependent on members' financial capacity, increased admin burden with low-fee members.
 → Opportunities: Growing membership base.
 → Threats: Financial limitations of members.
- 2** EO Funding from National Grants
 → Strengths: Access to large funding.
 → Weaknesses: Risk to independence, lack of funding diversification.
 → Opportunities: Stability through government support.
 → Threats: Political changes affecting funding
- 3** EO Funding from EU Projects
 → Strengths: Potential for large grants.
 → Weaknesses: Unpredictable, no project continuity, admin burden.
 → Opportunities: Collaboration and networking.
 → Threats: Disruption from inconsistent funding cycles.
- 4** EO Funding from Paying Services
 → Strengths: Revenue diversification and demand-driven services.
 → Weaknesses: Uptake of offered services also depends on members' capacity to pay for these services.
 → Opportunities: Sustainable income if demand is high.
 → Threats: Diversion from the core mission of the organisation, which is to represent the sector.

From IWorCon Study Visits

SOCIAL DIALOGUE

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), social dialogue “includes all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy”.³

Engaging in social dialogue not only addresses immediate challenges but also contributes to long-term stability, innovation, and growth in the social services sector, by:

- Advocating for policies that address the unique needs of the social services sector, such as workforce funding, labour law, and employment standards adapted to the sector.
- Ensuring regulations are practical and sustainable by voicing social partners’ perspectives during consultations.
- Negotiating terms with trade unions or worker representatives that balance fair working conditions with operational sustainability
- Advocating for increased funding for the social services sector to ensure its sustainability and growth.
- Collaborating on solutions to challenges like staff and skills shortages, through shared strategies and training initiatives.
- Demonstrating the sector’s value by highlighting its role in supporting societal well-being during social dialogue platforms.

→ Addressing emergencies or systemic challenges, like pandemics or economic downturns, through coordinated responses.

A newly founded employers’ organisation can start engaging in social dialogue by building credibility, establishing relationships, and gradually participating in platforms where labour-related discussions take place. Credibility is also conveyed through the employers’ representative’s in-depth knowledge of the sector and its challenges.

At the same time, the organisation must demonstrate its representativeness through its membership and activities. This is essential for being recognised as a social partner, in line with the national regulatory system, which can sometimes present challenges.

Key steps include:

- **Build a strong organisational identity**, by clearly articulating the organisation’s mission, priorities, and commitment to representing employers in the social services sector and thus demonstrating the representativeness of the organisation.
- **Establish relationships with key stakeholders**
 - Reach out to labour ministries, regulatory agencies, and other government bodies to introduce the organisation and seek inclusion in relevant discussions.

³ <https://www.ilo.org/resource/social-dialogue-0>

- Initiate contact with unions to foster constructive relationships based on mutual respect and shared goals and get recognition by them as a social partner.

- Collaborate with similar organisations in related sectors to learn best practices and form coalitions on overlapping issues.

→ **Gain representation on social dialogue platforms**, by becoming members in existing platforms for social dialogue, such as national economic and social committees (many Social Employers members are part of them), collective bargaining structures at cross-sectoral levels and consultative governmental bodies. Checking whether some members are already part of the existing platforms can also be a starting point for representation.

→ **Advocate for employers' participation** in decisions impacting the social services sector, highlighting the critical role they play in ensuring service quality and workforce stability.

→ **Prepare for negotiations and advocacy**, by regularly consulting with members to understand their needs and challenges, drafting position papers, recommendations, or solutions on key issues, and equipping organisational representatives with negotiation skills and knowledge to engage effectively in social dialogue.

→ Employers' representatives must also be available to dedicate time to prepare and take part in meetings.

In terms of content, the survey within the Social Employers membership shows that members negotiate collective agreements on a wide range of topics, including job classification and wages, occupational health and safety, training, and more.



"Formal social dialogue leads to progress in the social services sector. It can help establish common standards that promote economic and social stability, improving working conditions."

Participant in IWorCon study visit



"A good social dialogue needs mutual recognition and trust, a sound structure, common ground between social partners, and flexibility from the government."

Participant in IWorCon study visit



Which issues do you think should be the priority for negotiations in the social sector in your country?

- Attractiveness /Retention and recruitment
- Recognition of the importance of the sector
- Skills and training
- More funding
- Wages
- Green transition, service user's expectations impacting staff skills

From discussions during IWorCon study visit

COMMUNICATION

The ILO guide “The effective employers’ organization - Persuasive communication” identifies eight key targets for an employer’s organisation’s communication:

- Government
- International organisations
- World of politics
- Economic partners
- Public opinion
- Current staff and job applicants
- Current and future members
- Trade Unions

Identifying the targets helps define a strategy to effectively reach them.

Both external and internal communication are crucial for building credibility and trust, raising awareness, and attracting and retaining members.

Both types of communication should be based on the vision and strategic objectives of the organisation and should be put in place in the framework of a communication plan, regularly assessed and updated.

Building effective external communication

Engaging with media, policymakers, and other stakeholders ensures the sector’s concerns are addressed and understood.

→ Define clear messaging and purpose

- Clearly articulate the organisation’s mission, vision, and value proposition.
- Tailor messages to different audiences, such as employers, policymakers, and the public.
- Develop a consistent visual identity (logo, templates) and communication style.

→ Use digital tools and channels

- Establish a user-friendly website, engage stakeholders on social media, and use a broad range of marketing tools to share updates and insights effectively.
- To reach diverse audiences, the use of traditional media, such as local press, complements digital tools, especially in regions where digital platforms are not as accessible to all social groups.

→ Foster relationships with key stakeholders

- Build connections with policymakers, media, and partner organisations, including through face-to-face and on-line meetings, to amplify your reach and influence.
- Issue regular newsletters, with urgent items highlighted on the website.

→ **Showcase value through content and events**

- Share reports, success stories, and other publications, such as magazines, that highlight the organisation's expertise and contributions.
- Organise conferences, webinars, video presentations to discuss sector challenges and solutions to demonstrate the organisation's impact.

→ **Build capacity for communication**

- Hire or train staff to handle communication, or partner with external agencies for professional support (very few Social Employers members employ more than 3 communication officers).
- Allocate Resources: Ensure a budget is available for communication activities, including tools, design, and promotional efforts.

→ **Build capacity for communication**

- Hire or train staff to handle communication, or partner with external agencies for professional support (very few Social Employers members employ more than 3 communication officers).
- Allocate Resources: Ensure a budget is available for communication activities, including tools, design, and promotional efforts.

Building effective internal communication

Although members are targeted through external communication, internal communication is key to engaging them. The organisation can provide dedicated newsletters and a range of information and resources exclusively for members.

This communication can include exclusive updates, such as information on new legislation, ongoing negotiations, court cases, toolkits, guides, good practices, and databases, among others.

It can also serve as a platform for interaction between the organisation and its members, as well as for members to connect with one another. Often, this relies on an Intranet system, and access to such systems can be a strong incentive for becoming a member of the organisation.

Internal Communication Tools:

→ **Emails, calls, and meetings:** Regular communication through emails, calls, and directive meetings is widely used, with some organisations placing additional emphasis on frequent Zoom and in-person meetings. In-person meetings, like events, general assemblies can also be key for members' information and feedback.

→ **Newsletters:** Typically issued weekly or biweekly for updates and news, with urgent items highlighted on the website. In some organisations content contributions are usually organised by area of expertise.

→ **LinkedIn:** Recognised as a top social media platform for member engagement.

→ **Websites and Intranets:** Some organisations prioritise their websites, especially intranet sections, as key tools for member access to essential information, templates, guides and diverse resources. While newsletters are available, members often rely directly on the intranet for updates.

Focus: Communications Personnel and Resources Across Organisations

→ *Some organisations rely on external agencies for visual design and layout support, supplemented by in-house content creators for messaging and strategy.*

→ *In organisations with limited communication staffing, a part-time employee often manages these tasks, typically operating without a dedicated budget.*

→ *Larger organisations usually have a dedicated team overseeing various communication functions, including content creation, social media management, press relations, and event coordination.*

REPRESENTATION AND INFLUENCE

Representation and influence must be built on a deep understanding of the sector and the needs of its stakeholders, informed by the Board's insights and regular interactions with the membership.

Many social services employers' organisations hold meetings with members at the local level multiple times a year, to update them on the latest developments and gather input on relevant issues. This can also be supplemented by research and surveys within the membership.

Several partners highlighted that being a social partner, and occasionally collaborating with trade union counterparts, was a significant advantage in representation and advocacy activities.

Key aspects of **representation** include:

→ **advocating for the interests of employers** in legislative, regulatory, and policy-making forums.

→ advocating for the interests of employers in technical consultative bodies.

→ representing members in **negotiations with trade unions** regarding wages, skills, working conditions, and other employment-related issues.

→ **representing** employers in labour-related conflicts.

→ taking part in **partnerships** on behalf of members

Influence refers to the employer organisation's ability to shape policies, regulations, and public opinion in ways that benefit its members. This can happen through:

→ **engaging with lawmakers** (government, members of Parliament, local authorities, social protection schemes), to influence labour laws, business regulations, social and economic policies.

→ providing **data and research** that can help shape policy discussions and public understanding.

→ **building coalitions** with other organisations at national and European level to increase influence on key issues.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Governance and strategy

- Focus on building a solid governance structure that ensures clear roles, accountability, and effective decision-making processes.
- Define a clear mission, establishing relationships with key stakeholders, and proving representativeness through membership and active participation in social dialogue.
- Prioritise developing policies and services that address sector challenges, such as workforce development, training, and advocacy for favourable labour policies.

Membership and networking

- Build a strong, diverse membership base by offering valuable services and fostering engagement.
- Build trust through transparent com-

munication and create networking opportunities that facilitate collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

- Develop partnerships with other sectoral bodies and trade unions to enhance the organisation's influence and support its advocacy efforts.

Financing of employers' organisations

- Focus on securing sustainable funding by diversifying revenue streams, primarily through membership fees and additional services such as training.
- Set a transparent fee structure, explore public funding options where appropriate, and ensure that financial resources are efficiently allocated to support core activities.
- Enhance long-term financial stability by developing strategic partnerships and engaging in fundraising initiatives.

Social dialogue

- Build credibility and trust with both employers and trade unions to engage effectively in social dialogue.
- Participate in sectoral discussions, advocate for policies that address workforce challenges, and demonstrate representativeness through strong membership and involvement in decision-making platforms.

Communication

- Develop clear, consistent communication strategies to engage internal members and external stakeholders.
- Establish internal communication channels to keep members informed, while also creating a strong external presence to advocate for the sector's needs.
- Use digital platforms to enhance visibility, share resources, and foster collaboration with other sectoral bodies and policy-makers.

Representation and influence

- Build a strong membership base, engage in social dialogue, and participate in relevant policy discussions to influence decisions that impact the workforce.
- Strengthen partnerships with law makers, trade unions and other stakeholders.
- Provide data and research that can help shape policy discussions.