



On average, Zeeland Connect organises more than one event per week, such as the Annual Congress in 2024.

Image courtesy of Zeeland Connect.

Collaboration is key

Zeeland Connect ready for the next steps

Things are going well for Zeeland Connect, the independent innovation network that strengthens the Zeeland logistics sector by stimulating cooperation between government, education, and business through knowledge sharing and facilitating projects.

After a period in which much attention was given to setting up and organising the network, real momentum is now being made in achieving objectives and plans. So, it's time for a new conversation with programme manager Mariko Rouw, together with Zeeland Connect's new chair, Manon van Opdorp.

Structure

"We look back on a wonderful period for Zeeland Connect," says Mariko Rouw. "Recently, our team has moved mountains. Firstly, we have been busy further structuring our organisation. We have managed to appoint a new innovation manager for the Autonomous Transport Innovation Line, which means that every line now has its own manager. This provides clarity and focus, especially because the lines are now anchored in a new multi-year vision. The innovation manager for the Autonomous Transport Innovation Line is Jennifer Vermaas, for the Zero

Emission Logistics Innovation Line it's Rick Suurmond. Remco de Rijke is the innovation manager for Logistics Flows and Connections, and Rutger van der Male for Digitalisation and Robotics."

Expert groups

Mariko Rouw continues: "For each Innovation Line, an expert group has been formed. Representatives from our partners take part in these. New partners are also invited to participate in one or more expert groups." Manon van Opdorp adds, "These expert groups are a great form of collaboration. Our partners understand that taking part in Zeeland Connect activities is not just about giving, but that it actually brings value to businesses, too. Everyone realises that as a company, you cannot face the various challenges of our sector alone and that you need to work together. The willingness to collaborate is visible not

“ Zeeland Connect aims to make the sector smarter, more sustainable, and future-proof.”

only within the expert groups, but also between groups, partly because companies can sit on several expert groups.”

Growth

Within the innovation lines, Zeeland Connect organises various appealing and topical meetings and activities that have attracted a lot of interest and have led to significant membership growth over the past two years. “Zeeland Connect aims to make the sector smarter, more sustainable, and future-proof,” Mariko Rouw explains. “Through inspiring workshops, hands-on masterclasses, individual support for entrepreneurs, and joint innovation projects, we are working on our innovation lines. In addition, we collaborate with knowledge institutions and companies to ensure proper training for the logistics workforce of the future. With powerful networking events, projects, and campaigns, we showcase what Zeeland has to offer – and we literally bring knowledge, people, and opportunities into motion.

Growth

“All of our activities resonate in the region,” adds Manon van Opdorpe. “As a result, 85 paying parties have now joined us. It’s good to see it’s not just large companies, but also SMEs. This gives us a good and representative reflection of Zeeland’s logistics and transport-related business community. It’s also

notable that parties from outside Zeeland have found us and are eager to join, meaning we now have a network covering the whole of the south-west of the Netherlands. Currently, communication about our themes is still primarily handled by our project managers and organisation. One of our goals is to ensure that partners also publicise our projects. In this way, there is broader support. Our partners can be proud of what has been achieved. They have contributed and should certainly share this.”

Hands-on mentality

Manon van Opdorpe has taken over as chair from Ronald Wielemaker as from 1 January of this year. In the past few years he was involved with Zeeland Connect, but felt it was time to hand over the baton. “I ran into Ronald Wielemaker at the Zeeland Connect CEO dinner and we got talking,” Manon van Opdorpe elaborates. “He told me he was stepping down as chair and asked if I would consider taking over. I was surprised by his question and needed time to think. If I commit to something, I want to truly add value. So, I talked with Zeeland Connect about our mutual expectations and took up the challenge. I’ve now found my feet at Zeeland Connect. I’m pleased to see that, as a network, we’re genuinely making a difference. That suits my hands-on mentality. As mentioned, our partners don’t just participate to listen, but to achieve results together, which is great to be part of.”

Think Tank

Within the various innovation lines, Zeeland Connect initially focused mainly on technical challenges, but according to Mariko Rouw, other issues also pose threats to the logistics sector. “Our sector doesn’t only deal with technical challenges. For instance, we have a less positive image as an employer



Programme manager Mariko Rouw of Zeeland Connect and Zeeland Connect’s chair, Manon van Opdorpe.

and it's seen mainly as a man's world. We want to play our part in changing this, which is why the think tank 'Human Capital, Logistics & Innovation' has been established. Its aim is to work on a better labour market image for the sector." "I now have eighteen years of experience in the transport sector," says Manon van Oordorp. "When I started, I was one of the few women in a sector that, especially at board level, was dominated by men in grey suits. I'm pleased that, in my own way, I can contribute to diversity. It might be a coincidence, but in 2023 I was practically the only woman at our annual CEO dinner, and at the last dinner around 20% of attendees were women. Of course, it's not just about numbers. The fact is, a certain degree of diversity creates a different dynamic in an organisation. And for our sector's healthy future, we need everyone – young, old, men, women, regardless of background. We need to help dispel the image that exists about the sector by showing that, at every level, it's a fantastic one to work in."

A true action network

Zeeland Connect has gained momentum and the whole team shows great enthusiasm in working alongside partners. "Our team really make things happen," says Manon van Oordorp. "Everyone is highly motivated. My main role is to ensure that people stay focused on our objectives, as we mustn't try to do too much at once. Making choices and setting priorities is essential. As things stand, you could say we've grown from a nice networking club into a true action network. There's not just talk, but real action towards solutions, and that's something we can all be proud of." Mariko Rouw adds, "The people within our team and network are indeed the driving force. Collaboration is key, and Zeeland Connect is an excellent example of how this leads to success. We also hear from various partners that they appreciate their employees being involved with Zeeland Connect in any way. This involvement adds real value for us, for the individuals themselves, and for the participating companies." Manon van Oordorp concludes, "People used to be very focused on themselves. The current generation is more

Some activities organised by Zeeland Connect

On average Zeeland Connect organises more than one meeting or event per week.

- 'Zero Emission Truck Academy' (supporting 50 companies in 2023/2024).
- 'Zero Emission Van Academy' ('supporting 60 companies in 2024/2025).
- 'Innovation Toolbox' – toolbox to help companies to implement an innovation or any other important change (2025).
- Project 'Mussels, fries and a local beer'. Crossborder collaboration project for 100 logistic students from universities of applied sciences in Zeeland, West, and East Flanders (September – December 2025).
- DEK project: driver's license (code 95) for e-truck and renting e-truck for the promotion of electric driving (2025).
- Supporting companies with their applications for subsidies, such as for the modal shift to reduce road transport.
- CEO dinner for 70 decision makers from the transport sector (2025).
- Supply Chain Inspiration trip to Venlo with 20 companies from Zeeland (2025).
- Annual Congress (27 November) with 150 participants from the partner network.
- A variety of network meetings and workshops.

willing to seek and offer help, which is of course essential for successful cooperation. Developments in our sector are moving so fast that, as an individual company, it's almost impossible to keep up. Zeeland Connect is therefore the partnership to meet these developments successfully."

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In 2025, 70 decision makers for the transport sector joined Zeeland Connect's CEO dinner.

Image courtesy of Zeeland Connect.