



European Union

European Structural
and Investment Funds

**European Structural and Investment
Funds
2014 - 2020**

Growth Programme for England

ESI Funds Growth Programme Board

Programme Communications Activities 2020 and Activity Plan for 2021

Purpose:

To provide the Board with an overview of the headline communication activities carried out by MHCLG and DWP during 2020 and to share with the Board the 2021 Communications Activity Plan, as required by EC regulation.

Recommendation(s):

That the board:

- (i) **note the communications activities undertaken in 2020; and**
- (ii) **note the 2021 Communications Activity Plan.**

Summary:

MHCLG and DWP are required to deliver a range of communications activities to promote European Programmes and their benefits and impact across England. An overarching communications strategy was approved by the PMC in 2015 and updated in late 2016. Annual communications activity plans should be viewed by the PMC every year.

This paper summarises the key communications activities carried out by the managing authorities during 2020. It also provides the Board with the proposed communications activity plan for 2021 (Annex A) for information / comments.

Throughout 2020 communications were delivered through a variety of channels with messages and information shared effectively and timely with target audiences ensuring the managing authorities met regulatory requirements.

This has been a challenging year for communications. Since March managing authorities have had to deliver and uphold activities to deliver regulatory requirements, whilst also adapting the channels used to ensure clear messages could be shared regarding the response to COVID-19. Further details regarding this, together with a summary of headline activities delivered can be found in the main body of this paper.

Programme communications activities 2020

Programme communications are delivered, wherever possible, on shared platforms and as joint activities across ERDF and ESF. The annual communications activity plan is also a joint document, although itemised and in some cases specific to each programme.

Communications for ERDF and ESF Response to COVID-19

Since March the communication channels used for ERDF and ESF have been adapted to allow for messages to be communicated easily and quickly with partners regarding the impact of COVID-19 on project and programme delivery. This has centred around the use of GOV.UK, Partner Bulletins and Twitter. In addition, a number of new initiatives were launched by the managing authorities to help tackle the COVID-19 challenge, and communications played a key role in launch and promotion of these.

Sharing project and programme messages through communications:

Managing authorities worked together towards the end of March to put into place an easy and straight forward process for communicating with projects and partners through set and trusted channels. A new page was created on GOV.UK which primarily focussed on a Question and Answer page for each funding stream. This was updated every week based on programme developments and questions submitted from partners. To ensure everyone was aware when this page and the Q&As were updated, a notification version of our set ESIF Partner Bulletin was developed and used highlighting what had been amended or added. This was further promoted through our ESIF Twitter profile. In addition, summary letters were developed and distributed to key partner audiences, including GPB members, to provide updates on programme delivery, impact and arrangements put in place to assist projects at this time. These were also published on GOV.UK. This update process continues currently and will remain in place for the months ahead to ensure we can communicate as and when needed.

New Initiatives to address COVID-19 and communications support:

For ERDF, three new initiatives were launched focussed on reopening high streets safely, supporting visitor economy businesses and wider business support to adapt and continue to function at this time through help from Growth Hubs. For each initiative communication activities played a key role in launch plans. Externally activities included a formal ministerial-led press release published on GOV.UK, supporting promotional tweets on Twitter, partner bulletin editions to help publicise, inclusion in ministerial speeches for presentation to partners, responding to media enquiries and direct correspondence to a selection of programme partners. Internally managing authority staff received lines to take and were fully briefed through meetings on progress and launch. In addition, flexibilities were put into place for existing ERDF projects to support continued delivery. Communication channels were used to help share details on this with partners.

For ESF, several activities took place for existing projects. This included help to re-focus existing projects where that would enable the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

to be addressed, options to change payment models, adaptations to monitoring requirements to allow more electronic methods to be used, and supporting projects to deliver to businesses remotely using innovative means. Communication activities were used to share details on the changes through ESF Action Notes and the ESF COVID-19 Q&A published on GOV.UK.

We also publicised updates to the ESF Operational Programme to support measures to increase digital inclusion. This update led to the managing authority publicising separate ESF Calls that were published in London (by the GLA) and across England (by the MA), which aimed to bridge the digital gap for up to 20,000 of the most disadvantaged people enrolled on ESF funded programmes to enable participants to get online and access services to support their job search and increase their employability. These Calls were published on the GOV.UK ESIF Funding Finder. DWP Press Office circulated a Press Release to stakeholder organisations and the Calls were publicised in the ESIF Programme Bulletin.

ERDF and ESF Major Annual Communications Activity – Publishing of Case Studies

Click here to see: [ERDF Case Studies](#) and [ESF Case Studies](#)

There is a formal EC requirement for each managing authority to deliver a major annual communication activity. This has been interpreted for ERDF and ESF as annual case study booklets that contain a wide range of case studies highlighting the significant role ERDF and ESF funding plays in supporting local growth, communities and businesses. These are published on GOV.UK, promoted through a variety of channels and used during the forthcoming year to showcase the impact of the funding. This year, to meet a new DWP GOV.UK accessibility requirement for publishing new content, the ESF case studies have been published on an HTML website page, rather than as a pdf document.

Published on GOV.UK at the start of November, the ERDF booklet and ESF website page share details of a wide variety of case studies funded through ERDF and ESF. To support formal launch, a special ESIF Partner Bulletin was distributed to partners to highlight completion and signpost to GOV.UK for access. This was further supported by tweets on the ESIF Twitter account.

The ERDF booklet has key sections to showcase the delivery of ERDF supported projects and their impact based around key themes of the programme; and the ERDF response to COVID-19. This latter section is detailed through two ways: firstly through new initiatives the managing authority put in place (see COVID-19 section for details), and secondly, demonstrating how ERDF funded projects have adapted their plans and ways of delivery to ensure continuation and to assist with the current challenge. To further enhance and share details of the projects included, during the week of launch a campaign on Twitter was conducted showcasing the themes of ERDF support and impact being delivered through visuals and mini stories.

The newly published ESF case studies website page provides a short overview of ESF programme implementation, including the managing authority's and project's responses to COVID-19. The project case studies are presented within six regional sections, to show the breadth and depth of activities and their impact locally in different parts of the country. Some highlight how projects have adapted and sustained project delivery in response to COVID-19. To publicise the launch of the new page and specific projects there was a short twitter campaign, a special ESF bulletin was issued and ESF stakeholders were asked to share details across their networks.

ESIF pages on GOV.UK www.gov.uk/european-growth-funding

This is the official website portal for the programme - required by EC regulation. It is built into the existing GOV.UK website structure and contains important programme documents, guidance and governance information. It's home to the fully searchable 'funding finder' tool where project calls for the ESIF programme are published.

Overall, the pages on GOV.UK have been maintained to ensure they are fit for purpose, including updates to the regulatory list of beneficiaries.

In March a new section was developed to specifically house COVID-19 response information from all managing authorities. This was the central source for our response information and centred around the development of online Question and Answers for each fund. All other communications shared with partners signposted partners back to this section for full details. Other correspondence was also shared providing updates on the programme developments.

Towards the end of the year a review was conducted regarding the governance documents published from Growth Programme Board meetings and those held with Local ESIF Sub Committees. This was to ensure meeting documents and minutes were up to date and aligned with our transparency requirements of management of the programme.

January to end of October, has received 194,900 page views which is in line with stage of programme.

Social Media Activities – Twitter and You Tube

Two main social media channels are used to share news and developments on the programme, raise awareness of the impact of project achievements, and signposting followers to other sources of information, such as GOV.UK and bulletins.

Regular updates and news have been shared through @esif1420england twitter account. In total 234 tweets have been posted, and we have 1,604 followers and following 1,310. These figures show a positive increase in use of the channel and engagement with the online audience. In addition, 6 ERDF local twitter accounts have regularly tweeted on local projects

and news to gain wider coverage. In response to last year's external partner survey, we have increased the use of images and graphics to attract viewers attention.

For ERDF, a themed approach was taken in January, February and March, to promote the story of ERDF funding around improving business, infrastructure and innovation and technology. This included visuals shared on Twitter promoting project successes and headline figures of achievements. This approach was further adapted later in the year to promote the way ERDF projects have adapted to respond to COVID-19 and still maintain delivery.

Partner Bulletins – ESIF, ERDF and ESF

Direct branded email bulletins are an important channel used to share programme updates. The ESIF Partner Bulletin which covers all funds is currently sent to 1,000 partners, and shares latest news including government announcements, fund updates, case studies and latest programme guidance. In addition, separate fund bulletins are produced including the ERDF Practitioner Network Bulletin and ESF Project Bulletin ESF Action Notes about specific delivery related issues are also circulated to a mailing list of ESF project/partner subscribers.

The ESIF Partner Bulletin has been used during the year when needed to provide overall updates on the programme. For the majority of the year this has been turned into notification editions communicating urgent messages with partners (see COVID-19 section above). However regular editions were produced at the start of the year and October. The bulletin remains a well-used and liked tool by partners with click through and open rates above the industry norm.

The ERDF Practitioner Bulletin has also been used during the year to support messages on COVID-19. A full edition was published in October updating ERDF partners on programme details and developments.

The ESF Project Bulletin has also been published during the year. Most editions have focused on supporting the COVID-19 messaging by notifying partners of updates to the ESF Q&A COVID-19 Response published on GOV.UK.

Internal Communications Activities

Managing authorities use a broad range of internal communications activities to ensure staff are kept informed of programme developments, messages communicated externally and broader Department news.

For ERDF staff, the managing authority has used a variety of tools to keep staff updated and informed. Staff spotlights, blogs, case studies, intranet articles, direct emails, calls and use of the MHCLG Hub 'intranet' site were among some of the tools used. Since March internal communications has been more important than ever with regular lines to take for use with

partners, weekly email updates informing of developments and all staff calls allowing more discussion to take place on key areas.

For ESF staff the managing authority use an internal ESF 'iBoard' intranet that incorporates links to all internal and external documents and supporting information to support delivery of the programme. It also keeps colleagues updated on latest news and information, including on the COVID-19 response and lines to take. Newsflashes and regular Newsletters are emailed to all staff where there is important information to communicate directly. An article on the launch of the COVID-19 Response ESF Digital Call in September was published across DWP's Finance Group, which the MA is located in; and an article about the use of the digital devices supported through the national Call is planned on the main DWP intranet before the end of the year.

Formal Communications Partner Evaluation

Evaluation plays an important role in assessing and gaining feedback on the effectiveness of communication activities delivered.

An online survey was carried out late January with partners to gain views on the communication tools we have been using, the content covered and views on future activities. The results from the survey were used to further shape the communication activities undertaken through the year and highlighted the most used tools, which was particularly important when putting the COVID-19 response communication plans in place. Plans are in discussion for the next annual survey due to be carried out early 2021.

ERDF and ESF Communications Sub-Committee

The sub-committee consists of communications practitioners from a broad range of programme partner groups, chaired by MHCLG communications staff and has 11 members. Members support managing authorities in devising / delivering annual communications activity plans and offering local communication insight.

Members took part in a telekit in February which focussed mainly on plans for communications around EU exit. In September members were updated through email on the communication activities delivered by the managing authorities since March in response to COVID-19.

December 2020

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Annex A – Communications annual activity plan for 2021 (attached as separate document)