



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 2021 and Activity Plan for 2022

Purpose:

To provide the Board with an overview of the headline communication activities carried out by DLUHC and DWP during 2021 and to share with the Board the 2022 Communications Activity Plan, as required by EC regulation.

Recommendation(s):

That the board:

- (i) **note the communications activities undertaken in 2021; and**
- (ii) **note the 2022 Communications Activity Plan.**

Summary:

DLUHC 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 2021. It also provides the Board with the proposed communications activity plan for 2022 (Annex A) for information / comments.

During 2021 communications were delivered through a variety of channels with messages and information shared in an effective and timely manner with target audiences ensuring the managing authorities met regulatory requirements.

This has been another challenging year for communications. Managing authorities have continued to deliver and uphold activities to deliver regulatory requirements, whilst also continuing to provide clear messages and information about our ongoing response to COVID-19. A summary of headline activities delivered is provided below in the main body of this paper.

Programme communications activities 2021

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

Throughout 2021 we have continued to use existing ERDF and ESF communication channels to inform and update partners regarding the impact of COVID-19 on project and Programme delivery. The main channels used are GOV.UK (primarily the '[ESIF COVID-19 Response](#)' and its specific ESF, ERDF and EAFRD pages; and supporting notifications of the changes when added or updated), ESIF or Programme specific Bulletins where needed, updates to guidance documents and ESF Action Notes.

In line with our communications approach in 2020, managing authority messaging includes details of easements to business processes to assist continuity of programme delivery activity during COVID-19 restrictions. This year, where appropriate, there has been some additional messaging about the ending of easements or transition to 'business as usual' arrangements that will apply to the end of the programme.

This managing authority review and update of COVID-19 easements; and the communication of these will remain in place until at least the early part of 2022, prior to what we anticipate will be a more steady state business as usual arrangement for the remainder of the Programmes.

Communications support continued to be provided for initiatives directly addressing COVID-19, such as the ERDF Welcome Back Fund (see Annual Information Activity section).

ERDF and ESF Major Annual Communications Activities

There is a formal EC requirement for each managing authority to deliver a major annual communication activity.

The ERDF Annual Information Activity was delivered in the form of a communications campaign supporting the launch of the ERDF supported Welcome Back Fund in late March. The campaign featured a Ministerial Launch, led through a video presented by our then Secretary of State Robert Jenrick, and was supported through news articles (published on GOV.UK and covered in numerous local press titles), further videos and animated tweets. The purpose shot videos were viewed thousands of times (the SoS one alone was viewed over 10,000 times) and the tweets secured 135 retweets and over 170 likes. Coupled with the high levels of take up of the press story, particularly in the local press, led to widespread positive promotion of both the Welcome Back Fund and the European Regional Development Fund.

Links to tweets – [ministerial announcement tweet](#), [High Streets taskforce](#), [launch tweet](#)
Click [here](#) to see launch article,

The ESF Programme, in line with the last 4 years, is publishing a new ESF project case study booklet, which should go live on GOV.UK by mid-December 2021. The new ESF case studies will provide a short overview of ESF programme implementation. In line with the format of the

2020 ESF booklet, the project case studies will be presented within six regional sections, to show the breadth and depth of activities and their impact locally in different parts of the country. Some will also 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 will be a short twitter campaign, and a partner bulletin. ESF stakeholders and delivery partners will also be asked to publicise the booklet 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 have been published and also houses older and current versions of the AIR, previous project case study booklets, the list of beneficiaries (updated twice a year) and branding and publicity requirements.

Overall, the pages on GOV.UK have been maintained to ensure they are fit for purpose.

In March 2020 a new section was developed to specifically house COVID-19 response information from all managing authorities. This has been 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 provided updates on the programme developments.

The ERDF and ESF List of Beneficiaries has been updated and published on the GOV.UK pages twice in 2021, in line with the requirement on this in the regulations.

From January to the end of October 2021, these pages received 137,000 page views which is in line with expectations at this stage of programme.

Social Media Activities – Twitter and YouTube

Two main social media channels - on twitter and YouTube - 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.

Updates and news have been shared through @esif1420england twitter account, which has 1,606 followers and is following 1,307. In 2021 to date, activity has mainly been concentrated in the first half of the year, and was used, for example, to support the ERDF launch of the Welcome Back Fund. The account will also be used to publicise the ESF Annual Information Activity (see item above) and a review will take place early in 2022 to consider how the account (and the 5 local ERDF twitter accounts) should be deployed/utilised in the closing stages of the programmes.

The dedicated [ERDF and ESF YouTube channel](#) remains live and available on the main YouTube platform. Containing around 130 project films (a few of which were added earlier in 2021) from both programmes and from all over the country, in October alone there were over 100 video views.

Partner Bulletins – ESIF, ERDF and ESF

Direct branded email bulletins have been used to share programme updates. The ESIF Partner Bulletin which covers all funds has been used to share 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, the ESF Project Bulletin and ESF Action Notes about specific delivery related issues are also circulated to a mailing list of ESF project/partner subscribers.

The ESIF Partner Bulletin mailing list has mainly been used this year to notify partners about COVID-19 Response updates and changes. In May 2021 a special edition of the Bulletin was issued. This informed recipients that as the main focus of the Programme is on the remaining delivery of individual funds, the regular issues of the Bulletin about the Programme overall will cease. It also set out that special ESI Fund Programme Bulletin editions will be issued to inform partners of specific areas, such as COVID-19 response ESI Fund updates to the Q&As published on GOV.UK until the Q&As close. It also added that the separate programme specific ERDF Practitioner Network Bulletin, ESF Project Bulletin and RDPE Network Newsletters will continue to be circulated when necessary to their respective stakeholders; and these will be the main way going forward that ESIF stakeholders will be updated on the different funds.

The ERDF Practitioner Bulletin has been used during the year to support messages on State Aid, Procurement, the Importance of strong audit trails and Summative Assessment/Evaluation, as well as updating ERDF partners on programme details and developments.

A number of ESF Project Bulletins have 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. They have also provided details of new or updated ESF guidance, including ESF Action Notes that have been published.

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. Case studies, intranet articles, direct emails, calls and use of the MHCLG Hub 'intranet' site were among some of the tools used. Since March 2020 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. These communications have very much continued through 2021.

For ESF staff the managing authority use an internal ESF 'iBoard', Teams and Sharepoint based '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 posted on the Teams iBoard where there is important information to communicate directly.

In September, ESF Division won the national Public Finance Award for 'Team of the Year Central Government and National Bodies'. The award recognises the finance team working in central government or for a national body that has had the most impact on organisational performance, business partners and/or client groups, and has made an outstanding contribution to building a transparent, innovative, sustainable and collaborative working environment. The award particularly recognised how the Division has worked collaboratively to adapt to the pandemic to ensure continued effective delivery of the fund. There were articles and Teams mentions featuring the ESFD award win, particularly within Finance Group, but also to wider audiences.

Formal Communications Partner Evaluation

Evaluation has played 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 continuing with the delivery of the COVID-19 response communication plans.

ERDF and ESF Communications Sub-Committee

This Sub-Committee has not met in 2021 (as reported in the GPB National Sub-Committee update papers for each of the 2021 GPB meetings). The NSC terms of reference state that NSCs should meet as regularly as needed. Given the stage we are at with the programme and the steady state nature of our communications, it has not been felt necessary to convene a meeting and whilst there are no current plans to arrange one, this will be kept under review.

Additionally, members of this sub-committee will be contacted early in 2022 regarding programme communications as part of a wider communications consultation with partners.

December 2021

Rob Martell

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