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Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

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Agenda Item 12. Preparations for programming period 2021- 2027 ESF+

In May 2018, the European Commission published its proposals on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027. As part of this process, the Commission also published drafts of the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) and the ESF+ Regulation which will provide the legislative framework for the next round of ESF. The proposals will see the ESF merged with the Youth Employment Initiative, the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived, the Employment and Social Innovation Programme and the EU Health Programme to become ESF+. Ireland's indicative ESF+ allocation is €514 million (in 2018 prices).

The ESF+ will be the main financial instrument to strengthen Europe's social dimension, putting the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights into practice. Article 4 of the draft ESF+ regulation details 11 specific objectives for ESF+, broadly spanning the areas of employment, education and social inclusion. The draft regulation also proposes three main 'thematic concentration' requirements, namely that:

- Member States shall allocate 'an appropriate amount' of ESF+ resources to challenges identified in the European Commission's country-specific recommendations;
- Member States shall allocate at least 25% of their ESF+ resources toward social inclusion, including at least 2% toward addressing material deprivation;
- Member States who have a rate of young people not in employment, education or training above the EU average, shall allocate at least 10% of their ESF+ resources toward youth employment measures.

MFF Position

At its June 2019 meeting, the European Council welcomed the work done under the Romanian Presidency and took note of the various elements of the MFF package. It called on Finland's Presidency to pursue the work and to develop the Negotiating Box. On that basis the European Council will hold an exchange of views in October 2019, aiming for an agreement before the end of the year.

Progress on ESF and CPR Regulations

Negotiations on the regulations are ongoing since September 2018, with the European Council and European Parliament formulating their position on various aspects of the proposals as follows:

The Council adopted a partial mandate on

- Article 4(1) : specific objectives on 15.02.2019
- Remaining elements of the ESF+ Regulation (apart from the bracketed text which is linked to the MFF discussions, ie the budget; the thematic concentrations and co-financed rates).

The European Parliament adopted proposed amendments on 16.01.2019 (mandate for negotiations with the Council) –Adopted at first reading in April 2019.

On the CPR, the Council has adopted partial mandates on various elements of the draft regulation as follows:

- Strategic approach and programming (block 1) -19.12.2018
- Management and control (block 5) -19.12.2018
- Enabling conditions and performance framework (block 2) -15.02.2019
- Monitoring, evaluation, communication and visibility (block 3) –3.04.2019
- Financial support from the Funds (block 4) -3.04.2019
- Financial management (block 6) –17.04.2019
- Definitions and general provisions (block 7) –29.05.2019
- Horizontal enabling conditions –Annex III (block 2) –5.06.2019

The European Parliament adopted amendments at first reading on 4.04.2019 and the position has been reconfirmed by the new EP following the elections. Trilogues on the CPR resumed in September with the new European Parliament, while no Trilogues on the ESF+ have taken place to date.

The Finish Presidency is seeking to advance the negotiations with Parliament as much as possible, concentrating on elements most important for programming (CPR blocks 1, 2 and 5 as well as the specific objectives of the fund-specific regulations).

Planning for Next Round

The Commission held an initial launch of planning for the next programme “Cohesion Policy Investment 2021-27” in Dublin on 20th March 2019.

On May 17th a meeting was held with a broad range of public sector stakeholders, both those responsible for current programme implementation and experts in areas related to the horizontal principles. This meeting acted as an initial high level forum establishing the baseline for the programme planning process. In addition to information sharing on the implementation of the current programmes, this full day event provided a welcome opportunity to discuss and agree with sponsor departments the parameters, priorities and views on the following:

- Existing programme structures; stakeholders and objectives.
- Identified strategies and synergies
- Next steps/timeline for progression

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (MS authority) sent the programming plan and timelines to the Commission on 1st July, 2019.

Following on from this, informal consultations between Government Departments/bodies/agencies have been held to gather information and to identify key considerations.

A Needs Analysis will be conducted to provide the evidence base which will underpin the development of a Partnership Agreement covering the CPR funds and Operational Programmes for the ESF+ and ERDF. This is intended to ensure that programming will reflect the socio-economic context and be fully aligned with relevant EU guidance and existing national policies. The ESF Managing Authority, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and other key partners, issued a Request for Tenders for a Needs Analysis on 23rd September 2019. The closing date for receipt of tenders is 23rd October and it is expected that the Analysis will be completed in Q1 2020.

A Strategic Programme Development Steering Group comprised of key stakeholders will be established to oversee the process and ensure a coherent approach to programming across the funds. The Communications Strategy for the Programmes will be developed alongside the Programmes.

The programming process will also consist of a number of formal consultations with relevant partners and the public, ensuring that programming is informed by a wide range of viewpoints and in line with the partnership principle.

It is expected that the programme will be finalised in the latter half of 2020 for approval by the European Commission.