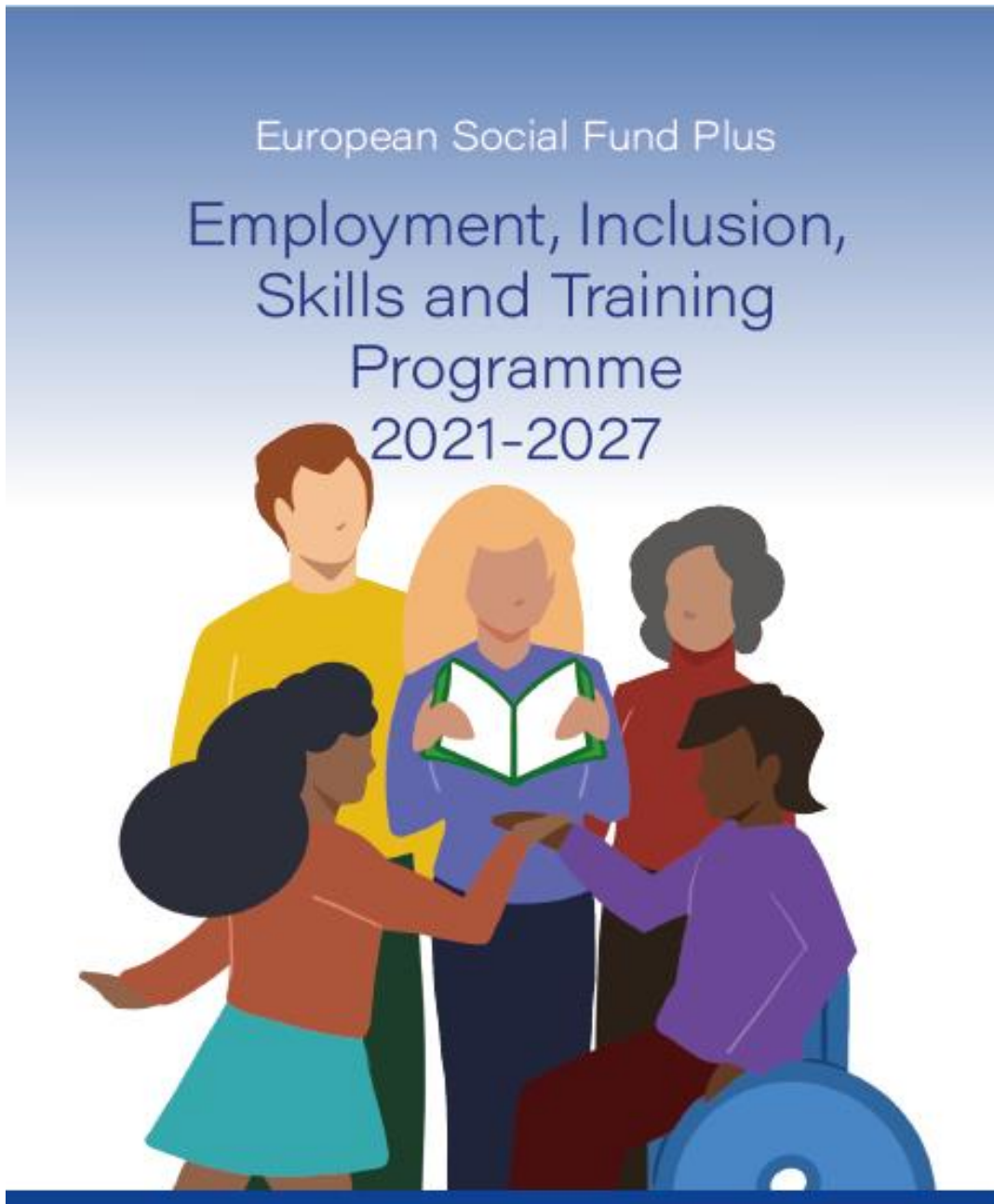


Evaluation Plan



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Arna chomhchistiú ag
an Aontas Eorpach

Co-funded by the
European Union

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Abbreviations

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
CPR	<u>EU Common Provisions Regulation 2021/1060</u>
DRCD	Department of Rural and Community Development
DSP	Department of Social Protection
EaSI	Employment and Social Integration Fund
EC	European Commission
EIST	Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training Programme
EMFAF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
EU	European Union
HEA	Higher Education Authority
IB	Intermediate Body
IEFAS	Ireland's European Funds Administration System
IHREC	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
JTF	Just Transition Fund
MA	Managing Authority
MC	Monitoring Committee

Introduction

This evaluation plan for the ESF+ EIST Programme 2021-2027 has been prepared by the MA and submitted to the MC for approval.

The purpose of programme evaluations, as set out in the CPR, is “to improve the quality of the design and implementation of programmes.” The CPR (Article 44) requires managing authorities to carry out evaluations of the programmes related to one or more of the following criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and Union added value. Evaluations may also cover other relevant criteria, such as inclusiveness, non-discrimination and visibility, and may cover more than one programme. In addition, the CPR requires that an evaluation for each programme to assess its impact be carried out by 30 June 2029. The CPR (Article 44) also requires MAs to draw up an evaluation plan and submit it to the MC within one year of the programme’s approval.

In addition, the CPR (Article 44) requires that evaluations be entrusted to internal or external experts who are functionally independent and be published on the EU funds website, www.eufunds.ie.

The CPR (Article 45) requires the EC to carry out:

- a mid-term evaluation to examine the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and Union added value of each fund by the end of 2024.
- a retrospective evaluation to examine the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and Union added value by 31 December 2031. The EC’s evaluation will focus in particular on the social, economic and territorial impact of the fund in relation to its policy objectives.

This evaluation plan provides an overall framework for the evaluation of EIST 2021-2027, taking account of the regulatory requirements and available guidance, including the EC’s Guidance Document on Evaluation Plans¹. The main objectives of the evaluation plan are to:

- Design a feasible evaluation framework,
- Ensure that resources for funding and managing the evaluations are appropriate and proportionate (in terms of budget/resources),
- Enable informed programme management and policy decisions on the basis of evaluation findings, and
- Ensure that evaluations provide inputs for the monitoring committee and for annual performance reviews².

Accordingly, this evaluation plan sets out the proposed approach to evaluations of the programme, including their subject, rationale, methods, timing and estimated budget.

The progress made in carrying out evaluations, syntheses of evaluations and the follow-up given to findings will be examined by the MC. This evaluation oversight will be complemented by the monitoring reports provided to the MC on programme activities, which will address the progress in programme implementation and in achieving the milestones and targets and any issues that affect the performance of the programme and the measures taken to address those issues. Similarly, all evaluations will be submitted to the EC and the annual performance reviews will include updates on the implementation of the evaluation plan.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/evaluation/performance2127/performance2127_swd.pdf

² CPR (Article 41) requires that review meetings be organised once a year between the Commission and each Member State to examine the performance of each programme.

All evaluation reports commissioned by the MA will be published on the EU funds website, www.eufunds.ie and their findings will be brought to the attention of relevant stakeholders so that they can contribute to the policy making process.

Overview of the EIST Programme 2021 - 2027

The EIST Programme, is Ireland's ESF+ programme for the 2021 to 2027 period. It was formally approved by the EC in October 2022 and approved by the Government of Ireland in November 2022. The programme involves a total investment of over €1.08 billion; €508 million from the EU and €573 million from the Government of Ireland. The programme has two different rates of co-financing. As 'more developed' regions, the Southern and the Eastern & Midlands regions will receive 40% in EU co-financing, while as a 'transition' region the North-Western region will receive 60% in EU co-financing.

EIST contains five priorities, which were developed in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, EU and national policy, and a stakeholder consultation process.

- **Priority 1 Employment:** Support labour market training and activation measures for all job seekers with a particular focus on younger workers, the long-term unemployed and those underrepresented in the labour market, including people with a disability.
- **Priority 2 Skills and Lifelong Learning:** Support increased access to inclusive education and training at all levels including through the enhanced provision of adult education and targeted support for learners from disadvantaged groups. Promote lifelong learning through support for upskilling and reskilling programmes in key sectors of the economy.
- **Priority 3 Social Inclusion:** Provide targeted support for individuals at higher risk of social exclusion, to facilitate their active participation in society and improve employability. Support actions designed to further the personal and social development of those at risk of poverty or social exclusion, in particular young people and children.
- **Priority 4 Social Innovation:** Support social innovation and social experimentation measures including the development and testing of new ideas, approaches and policies designed to address this challenge. It will also support the scaling up of approaches tested on a smaller scale or in a different context. The overall aim is to develop new approaches to the challenges faced by disadvantaged groups and to develop the social innovation ecosystem in Ireland
- **Priority 5 Assistance to the Most Deprived:** help people take their first steps out of poverty by addressing their most basic needs i.e. food and basic materials for personal use.

Role of the MA

In relation to evaluations, the MA is responsible for:

- Preparing the evaluation plan for approval by the MC,
- Ensuring that evaluations are undertaken in accordance with the evaluation plan and regulatory requirements,
- Ensuring the existence of an administrative framework for the implementation of the evaluation plan, with appropriate skills and competences available,
- Ensuring that the monitoring data on financial and participant indicators, required for monitoring and evaluation, is collected and available,
- Providing resources for evaluation purposes from technical assistance,
- Preparing terms of reference³ in order to obtain the necessary expertise to undertake the required evaluations,
- Monitoring and promoting the quality of evaluation activities,
- Submitting evaluation reports to the MC and the EC,
- Monitoring the follow-up to recommendations from evaluation reports in consultation with relevant IBs and Beneficiaries and submitting evaluation responses to the monitoring committee for consideration,
- Effecting any required modifications to the programme that emerge from the evaluation process, and
- Publishing the evaluation plan, evaluations undertaken and disseminating learning to all key actors.

In line with the regulatory requirement that evaluations be carried out by experts who are functionally independent of the MA, all evaluations will be commissioned from external experts by competitive tender, in compliance with national and EU guidelines and directives on public procurement. In Ireland, the Office of Government Procurement puts in place framework agreements for evaluations across the public sector. The frameworks result in panels of pre-qualified evaluation firms. The pre-qualified firms can compete for requests for tenders issued by public administrations.

Evaluations will be overseen by the MA and will be financed from the budget for technical assistance of the programme.

The MA will bring forward any programme amendment proposals in line with evaluation recommendations to the MC.

Evaluation Quality

The quality of an evaluation depends largely on the quality of its initial terms of reference, which will be defined within each request for tenders. The terms of reference define the objectives of an evaluation, the role and responsibilities of the evaluator and the evaluation client, the duration of the contract and the resources allocated to the project.

The evaluation activities included in this evaluation plan will be carried out in accordance with best practice and will observe the following key standards:

- Responsibility for the co-ordination of evaluation activities will be assigned to the ESF+ Evaluation Officer,
- All relevant stakeholders will be meaningfully involved in evaluation activities,
- Evaluations will be planned and conducted in a transparent manner,

³ The terms of reference will be defined in each request for tenders.

- Evaluations will be carried out in a timely manner to enable the findings and recommendations to feed into decisions on the design and modification of activities,
- A steering group will be set up for each evaluation to advise on the terms of reference and to assess the quality of the completed work,
- The principle of avoidance of conflicts of interest will be respected, and
- Independent evaluators will be commissioned to undertake evaluations.

Evaluators will be expected to draw appropriate conclusions in relation to each of the analytical tasks set out in the terms of reference and the quality of evaluation reports will be judged on the basis of:

- Openness of the evaluation process,
- Adequacy of the evaluation design,
- Reliability of the data used,
- Results supported by evidence and rigorous analysis,
- Appropriateness of the analysis and credibility of the findings,
- Clarity of presentation of conclusions, and
- Utility of the recommendations.

Evaluation Resources

Sufficient financial resources have been provided within technical assistance to facilitate the programme of evaluations. The MA will ensure that the resources necessary for carrying out evaluations, organising the production and gathering of the necessary data and use of the various types of information available from the 2021-2027 IEFAS IT System will be provided.

Within the MA, an Evaluations Officer has been appointed with primary responsibility for leading the implementation of this evaluation plan. This Officer, and other staff of the MA as appropriate, will undertake relevant training to ensure that the MA's evaluation activities are appropriate and effective.

The MA will also continue to liaise closely with the EC, other Member States and other relevant bodies, including through active attendance at meetings of the EC's ESF+ Evaluation Partnership and of Community of Practice on Counterfactual Impact Evaluation of ESF+ Interventions (CoP-CIE-ESF), to ensure best practice is shared and adopted. The MA will continue to avail of the EC's methodological support on counterfactual impact evaluations, as appropriate. The MA will also seek to leverage the expertise of colleagues across the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science who have expertise in policy evaluation and statistics, to inform the design and implementation of the evaluation activities described in this plan.

It is the intention of the MA to establish a steering group for each evaluation set out in this plan to advise on the terms of reference, to assist in the oversight of the evaluation and to assess the quality of the completed work. The steering groups will be chaired by the MA and stakeholders relevant to each evaluation will be invited to be represented on the groups. The steering groups will also consult other stakeholders as appropriate in relation to any specific issues.

Monitoring and Data Collection

Monitoring of EIST 2021-2027 will be undertaken through a series of common non-financial indicators, which are set out in the [ESF+ Regulation](#) (2021/1057). The MA has prepared separate detailed guidance on the ESF+ non-financial data monitoring requirements.

All IBs and Beneficiaries are required to collect data at operation level to meet the requirements regarding data on individual participants, where applicable.

All data for EIST 2021-2027 will be reported on the IEFAS IT System. The specification for the system ensures the system will be capable of storing the data required by the regulations.

These datasets will be critical because they will provide both the fundamental basis for monitoring the progress of the programme and the basic data required for evaluations. Where relevant, they can also potentially be used to link to other datasets to obtain further information on the outcomes of the programme.

The MA will work with IBs and Beneficiaries to ensure the reliability and consistency of the data. This will involve providing training to IBs and Beneficiaries on the operation of the IEFAS system. The MA will also provide relevant guidance documents to IBs and Beneficiaries.

Verifications undertaken by the MA and audits undertaken by the ESF+ Audit Authority will check the evidence supporting the indicators.

The Administrative Agreement⁴ with each IB includes a general requirement that all IBs co-operate with programme evaluations, as appropriate. The same requirement is included in the Service Level Agreements with Beneficiaries, where relevant.

Planned Evaluations

The CPR (Article 44) requires MAs to carry out evaluations of the programmes related to one or more of the following criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and Union added value. Evaluations may also cover other relevant criteria, such as inclusiveness, non-discrimination and visibility, and may cover more than one programme. While there is a wide range of potential interpretations for these criteria depending on the context, they intend to address the following considerations:

- **Effectiveness:** effectiveness analysis considers how successful EU co-funded action has been in achieving or progressing towards its objectives.
- **Efficiency:** efficiency considers the resources used by an intervention for the given changes generated by the intervention.
- **Relevance:** relevance looks at the relationship between the needs and problems at the time of introducing the intervention and during its implementation.
- **Coherence:** The evaluation of coherence involves looking at how well (or not) different interventions, EU/international policies or national/regional/local policy elements work together.

⁴ Outlines the basis on which the ESF+ Managing Authority will support approved actions under EIST 2021-2027. The primary purpose of the Administrative Agreement is to set out the arrangements for the performance of delegated functions by Intermediate Bodies.

- **EU added value:** EU added value looks for changes that are due to the EU co-funded intervention, over and above what could reasonably have been expected from national actions by the Member States.

In addition, the CPR requires that an evaluation for each programme to assess its impact be carried out by 30 June 2029. Impact evaluations aim to disentangle the effects of the intervention from the contribution of other factors. An impact evaluation analyses not only whether the intervention has an effect but why and how the intervention works (theory-based impact evaluations) or how much of the effect was due to the intervention and for whom (counterfactual impact evaluations).

The table below outlines the evaluations to be carried out by the MA throughout the period (until 30 June 2029). Of course, new evaluation needs may emerge during that time and, for that reason, the list below should be regularly reviewed by the MC to examine where evaluation efforts should be most concentrated. The MA may also conduct *ad hoc* evaluations as required during the period.

While the table below refers only to those evaluations for which the MA is directly responsible, the MA will also seek to support the evaluation activities of IBs and Beneficiaries where those activities are, in the view of the MA, particularly relevant to the efficient and effective implementation of the programme.

Relevant bodies are requested to inform the MA of relevant research activities and to invite the MA to be part of the individual evaluation steering groups set up for these evaluations.

Theme	Subject	Rationale	Methods	Timeline (start date)	Estimated budget
Communication and Visibility	Level of public awareness of EU funds	To evaluate the impact of communication activities	Mixed methods to be proposed by evaluator as part of public procurement tendering process and to include from the following: data analysis, surveys, etc.	2024	€30,000
Social inclusion	Evaluation of the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and Union added value of EIST 2021-27 Priority 3	EIST Priority 3 actions account for 48% of EIST financial allocations and 30% of target participants	Mixed methods to be proposed by evaluator as part of public procurement tendering process and to include from the following: data analysis, interviews, surveys, literature review, focus groups, case studies etc.	2025	€150,000

Skills and Lifelong Learning	Evaluation of the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and Union added value of EIST 2021-27 Priority 2	EIST Priority 2 actions account for 26% of EIST financial allocations and 40% of target participants	Mixed methods to be proposed by evaluator as part of public procurement tendering process and to include from the following: data analysis, interviews, surveys, literature review, focus groups, case studies etc.	2026	€150,000
EIST Programme	Evaluation of the impact of selected actions across the EIST programme	In an impact evaluation of a programme, not all interventions can be subjected to a similar degree of rigorous impact evaluation methods. Criteria for deciding to which actions to focus on will include: strategic/policy salience of the actions; actions that may be rolled out and replicated in future; financial allocation of action; actions that are new or for which little evaluation evidence already exists.	Mixed methods to be proposed by evaluator as part of public procurement tendering process and to include from the following: theory based impact evaluation and counter-factual impact evaluation	2027	€200,000
Communication and Visibility	Level of public awareness of EU funds	To evaluate the impact of communication activities	Mixed methods to be proposed by evaluator as part of public procurement tendering process and to include from the following: data analysis, surveys, etc.	2028	€30,000

Evaluation of Horizontal Principles

IHREC worked jointly with the MAs of the ESF+, ERDF, JTF, EMFAF and AMIF funds to agree guidance for IBs and Beneficiary Bodies, if appropriate, on their compliance with the enabling conditions and horizontal principles. The guidance aims to provide practical support to advance equality and human rights in the planning, implementing, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of funded initiatives, in compliance with the relevant EU regulations. The guidance is available at <http://eufunds.ie/regulations-guidance>

A reporting template has been agreed between IHREC and the MAs for use in conjunction with guidance. Annual reporting by each Intermediary Body or Beneficiary, as appropriate, will start in early 2024. These reports will be reviewed by IHREC as part of their monitoring role and IHREC will prepare an annual report for consideration by the monitoring committee on compliance with the enabling conditions and horizontal principles.

Other Evaluations

The MA will ensure that all relevant evaluation work, which is carried out outside the specific scope of this plan, is brought to the attention of relevant stakeholders. The MA will also seek to liaise with the bodies carrying out these complementary evaluations, in order both to provide assistance and to ensure that such evaluations can positively affect the implementation of the EIST programme.

In this regard, the MA is aware of the following evaluations which are of particular relevance to the EIST programme:

Priority	Scheme	Body	Notes	Timeframe
1	Youth Diversion Projects		A review of the structure, conduct and impacts of the YDPs and to consider issues relating to the governance, processes, outputs, and short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes	Published 2023
2	SICAP	DRCD/ Pobal	A review of SICAP 2018 -2023 and consultation for the new programme design	Q4 2023
3	SICAP	DRCD/ Pobal	Pobal Learning Brief: Exploring how existing resources are leveraged within SICAP	Q4 2023
4	EaSI Digital Activation of Lone Parents	DSP	An external review of the digital activation of lone parents currently operating in Ireland, Finland and Greece	Q4 2024
5	Adult Literacy for Life (ALL)	SOLAS	An independent mid-term review of progress will be commissioned by the	Q4 2026

	10 year Strategy		ALL Programme Office five years into delivery	
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Communication of Evaluations

As noted earlier, evaluations and their follow-up will be examined by the MC, which may make observations to the MA regarding evaluation of the overall programme.

Final evaluation reports will also be sent to the EC via upload to the SFC2021. This will allow the EC to provide examples of methodological approaches used in different fields to the evaluation community, to analyse the evidence produced and as far as possible build a repository of evidence for policy-making.

The MA will consult with the relevant IBs and Beneficiaries, where relevant, as to how they propose to address the findings and recommendations arising from evaluations. The MA will then submit a response paper to the MC for approval, addressing the recommendations. The MC will exercise its discretion whether to implement the response as proposed or to vary it.

In addition, and as noted above, the MA will bring to the attention of the monitoring committee any other relevant evaluation work which is completed during the programming period.

A key part of the evaluation plan is to ensure that findings are disseminated as widely as possible, in the interests of transparency and to promote the emergent learning. One of the main purposes of carrying out an evaluation is to improve the way things are done and the MA will ensure that all stakeholders, decision makers and organisations working on ESF co-financed activities are aware of the evaluation work. Press releases/information sessions/launches will be organised to communicate the results of individual evaluations, where appropriate. The MA will also publish all relevant evaluation reports on the EU funds website, www.eufunds.ie.

Co-ordination and Collaboration with other EU Funds

The ESF+ MA will continue to work closely with the MAs of other EU funds in Ireland to explore the potential for co-ordination and collaboration on evaluation.