

## **REPORT ON SURVEY FOR USE OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR THIRD SECTOR SUPPORT SERVICE (ESF AND ERDF)**

### **Decision required**

JPMC is invited to:

- a) agree that on the basis of a survey of Third Sector bodies not to use Technical Assistance (TA) to provide a support service for the third sector and community organisations;
- b) consider the provision of TA to provide an information service on funding opportunities via ERDF and ESF interventions for an initial period of two years.

### **Background**

1. The current approach to the ESF and ERDF programmes across Member States reflects the European Commission (EC) focus on results and impact of cohesion policy: financial absorption is no longer the dominant feature. In response to this shift, Managing Authorities across the EU have equipped themselves to demonstrate results and impact through rigorous evaluation of the programmes which require available and robust data, improved data management and technical capability.
2. In Scotland, the difference between current and previous programmes was developed through extensive consultation before programme initiation in 2014. The ESF and ERDF programmes 2014-20 also reflect lessons learned from the suspension of three of four of the previous programmes 2007-13 in 2015. At a practical level these are seen in:
  - the National Rules
  - refreshed guidance and procedures
  - a new Management Information System (EUMIS)
  - a new Management and Control System (MCS)
3. The structure of the ERDF and ESF programmes 2014-20 means past uses of technical assistance including supporting intermediate bodies and open calls for evaluations, are no longer relevant. However, there have been a number of suggestions that smaller third sector and community-based organisations in particular may find the new structure difficult to navigate and see their own potential role in the programmes. To test this, the November 2016 JPMC requested the Managing Authority survey the third sector and community organisations to find out about any unmet demand for support in accessing ESF and ERDF.

## Survey Design & Findings

1. The Managing Authority developed the survey with the aim of keeping it short, relevant and easy to understand. The questions were tested with policy colleagues from the SG Third Sector Unit. The online survey comprised of three questions and ran from 10-24 February 2017. The questionnaire was distributed to 17 national representative organisations, who were invited to pass it on to others.
2. The survey was also sent all Lead Partners involved in the programmes for awareness, again with the invitation to pass it on to third sector organisations they worked with to deliver projects funded by ESF and/or ERDF.
3. The Managing Authority also issued an online survey to Lead Partners (from 17 February – 3 March 2017) for the purpose of collecting data for the early review of the programmes; this survey included a question on third sector access to the current ESF and ERDF programmes.
4. 18 responses were received, with three being anonymous; the full list is shown in **Annex A**. The majority of responses came from onward referrals rather than in direct response to the invitation.

Q1. Have you been able to participate in the ESF and/or ERDF programmes through Lead Partners?

- 16 of 18 respondents applied for ESF. 2 did not try
- 14 applied successfully for ESF, 2 respondents were not successful
- 2 of 14 respondents who gained ESF also applied for ERDF, without success

Q2. If you were not able to participate, please tell us about the main difficulties you experienced?

- the main difficulty for those who were unsuccessful was timescales in which to apply, they were too short
- further to this the national rules and eligibility criteria were highlighted as barriers - vague, disproportionate, confusing and intrusive were used as descriptors
- match funding was also reported as an issue

Q3. If you have overcome difficulties, please tell us how you did this?

- responses to this question included those who were successful and unsuccessful with applications for funding
- solutions to overcome difficulties included reliance and close working with Lead Partners
- encouraging Lead Partner organisation to make connections between its services/departments
- absorbing costs associated with the administrative burden required to participate
- previous experience of ESF projects
- withdrawing from process altogether

1. One respondent, who chose to remain anonymous, highlighted that there was a “lack of mentoring advice”. This respondent had been unsuccessful in accessing EU funds. Similarly, one respondent raised additional questions for the Managing Authority around the costs lead partners incur or retain associated with governance and overheads. These are being responded to separately.
2. The issues highlighted in this survey are consistent with responses to the separate early review survey question posed to Lead Partners about third sector access to the programmes.

3. In this separate survey, the lack of match funding for the third sector was the issue reported most frequently by Lead Partner respondents, followed by the national rules and eligibility requirements. Audit and compliance issues were also reported as challenging for the third sector alongside the administrative burden associated with EU funding. Some Lead partners indicated that some of these issues have been particularly acute for those organisations or groups who are new to ESF or ERDF programmes.

## Conclusions

1. The survey findings highlight known issues associated with Structural Funds programmes which both the EC and Managing Authority are responding to through simplification of regulations and flexibility where possible. This includes updated participant guidance in response to stakeholder feedback and providing training to accompany refreshed guidance, procedures and systems (EUMIS).
2. Apart from one respondent, there was very little to suggest that a third sector support service would make a material difference to third sector participation in structural funds programmes, the majority of respondents are involved. Lead Partners also expressed concern that such a support service could affect consistency in advice. Solutions are more likely to be found through:
  - greater pace of implementation of the programmes, Brexit has prompted this, an early review of the programmes is underway
  - increased availability of match funding, this is not exclusive to the third sector and can be seen more widely across the public sector
  - increased intervention rates in areas where the third sector is most active
  - collaborative working with Lead Partners, Managing Authority, Audit Authority and Delivery Agents to ensure a continued and shared understanding of EU funded programme requirements
  - further simplification of regulations by the EC
3. However, it is acknowledged that the new Programme design makes it more complex for the third sector to easily detect opportunities as they arise from application calls, schemes and procurement. Technical Assistance could be offered to collate this information from the lead partners and have it accessible via one site and provide simple contact details and links to further information on these interventions.
4. The MA will scope out and procure such a service which would cover both ERDF and ESF and operate for 2 years.

## **Annex A**

List of Survey respondents who provided a name. Three further respondents declined to be identified

1. Changeworks
2. ENABLE Scotland
3. Right Track Scotland Ltd
4. Action for Children
5. Bridges Programmes
6. Apex Scotland
7. Fife Volunteer
8. Barnardos
9. BLES Training
10. South West Aberdeenshire CAB
11. Aberdeen Foyer
12. Wheatley Group
13. Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation (SCVO)
14. Rathbone Training
15. Dundee Social Enterprise Network