Planning EU funds in the area of cohesion
ESN briefing

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The European Social Network (ESN) brings together people who plan, finance, research, manage, regulate and deliver local public social services, including health, social welfare, employment, education and housing. The network consists of national associations of social services directors, departments of social welfare of government, regions, counties and municipalities, funding and regulatory agencies, universities and research and development organisations.

This briefing has been drafted in response to the consultation launched by the European Commission on EU funds in the area of cohesion which closed on 8 March 2018. ESN members from France, Spain, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Greece and Denmark answered the questionnaire provided by the Commission. Their answers are the basis for this briefing, which reflects on some of the obstacles and positive aspects of EU funds available in the area of cohesion through the lenses of local public social services. Our members indicated that they primarily have experience using the following EU funds: the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived.

ESN members consider it highly important to use EU funds in the area of cohesion to promote social inclusion and combat poverty. In this sense, it is particularly important to make good use of available funds to protect and support vulnerable people such as people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, people in need of long-term care and migrants. Linked to this, the deinstitutionalisation of care and the development of community care services should continue to be promoted by future EU funds. In addition, ESN members also consider that the reduction of unemployment, the promotion of quality jobs and support for labour mobility should be a priority to be addressed by future funding programmes under the policy area of cohesion. These issues should be addressed through a life-cycle approach, recognising the need to provide support from childhood to old age.

ESN members identify the following as the main obstacles which prevent the current funding programmes from successfully achieving their objectives: complex procedures leading to high administrative burden and delays, heavy audit and control requirements, and the difficulty of combining EU action with other public interventions. Most ESN members found the daily management of regulations challenging because of their complexity, which makes EU funding hard to grasp by citizens and beneficiaries. In addition, members of ESN have pointed out that the complexity of EU funding processes sometimes result in losing sight of the end goal, such as supporting vulnerable people. In relation to this, members have highlighted that the fear of non-compliance with EU rules has created uncertainty, with worries that funding could be scrapped at audit stages.

According to ESN members, the alignment of rules between EU funds and having fewer, clearer and shorter guidelines are the two main steps that the European Commission should take to further simplify and reduce the administrative burden for beneficiaries under current and future programmes and funds in the area of cohesion. To meet this objective, ESN members also point out the need to establish more effective stakeholders’ involvement in the programming, implementation and evaluation.