

Contribution of the partners of the Social Services Helpdesk project to the mid-term evaluation of ESF+ 2021-2027

[The Helpdesk project](#) reinforces the capacity of social services and managing authorities in using EU Funds, in particular the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), for quality social inclusion projects, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights. The initiative is forged through a unique and cross-European partnership spanning the full range of social services, including services for children & families in poverty, work integration, persons with disabilities, homeless persons or people in poverty and older persons, and in collaboration with public authorities, including those with responsibility for planning and delivery of social services, as well as managing authorities and intermediate bodies of EU funds.

During the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework period, the ESF+ continues to be essential for social services to face challenges such as chronic underfunding, staff shortages and transitioning to community-based and person-centred forms of services. This is even more important due to the increase in demand for social services in the current social context and a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, despite [the simplification measures](#) that have been adopted in the ongoing programming period, some obstacles remain across the EU Member States and on the ground for providers of social services, delivered by not-for-profit organisations, local authorities, or others. These obstacles have been revealed in [10 National Knowledge Gathering events](#), a [set of reports on the challenges and obstacles in accessing and using EU Funds](#), and the 'Facilitation' and 'Policy' workshops carried-out throughout the project. The project has identified 3 areas of improvement of the current ESF+ Regulation framework to facilitate access to ESF+ for social services and use it for quality social inclusion interventions:

1. Improving capacity in access to funds and in funding of quality initiatives

The Project has revealed that social services still face a significant knowledge and skills gap in accessing ESF+ and insufficiently benefit from the technical assistance budgets. Staff members of social services providers need to be further trained on: the regulation and the functioning of ESF+ in each Member State; understanding ESF+ rules and documentations; language used and the procedure of application; writing project applications and submitting projects; financing rules such as co-financing; reimbursement principle; the accountancy rules; public procurement and state aid rules; the use of simplified cost options; the administrative and financial reporting; and preparing audit controls.

On the other hand, managing authorities also lack the capacity to better define, measure, and monitor the social impact of social services projects as well as addressing social innovation.

To improve capacity of managing authorities and social services, the European Commission should ensure that Member States exploit the full potential of the ESF+ Regulation on capacity-building and the partnership principle, by making sure that it addresses social services capacity in accessing EU Funds and capacity of managing authorities to process social services initiatives. Furthermore, the future ESF+ regulation framework should be more precise on content and structure of capacity building and should especially refer to training of social services and other stakeholders in accessing, using and reporting ESF+. In particular, the regulation should foresee a network of 'National helpdesks', coordinated at cross-European level, in order to effectively deliver the training, guidance and support to organisations on-the-ground (both not for profit and public).

[The Massive Open Online Course \(MOOC\)](#) developed in the ongoing Helpdesk and the other resources available on the Helpdesk website could serve as a basis.

2. Building an enabling environment for social services to access ESF+

The use of the ESF+ is perceived as unattractive, complex, and time-consuming by social service providers, and in particular by smaller ones with limited resources and expertise allocated to the application to ESF+ calls for proposals, and the management of ESF+ funded projects. The same holds for smaller municipalities which face similar problems. It is important to note that many (not all) social services are not-for-profit organisations, typically of SME size. These smaller organisations can also be some of the more innovative providers of services too. The barriers encountered by social service providers are the bureaucratic burden (e.g. the use of simplified cost options sometimes leads to more administrative tasks, some managing authorities do not allow electronic signatures), calls that do not include smaller organisations and projects among the eligible criteria, the co-funding rules, the challenge of managing the cash flow awaiting reimbursements, state-aid and public procurement rules, the rigidity and irrelevance of indicators. Therefore, there is a need to make ESF+ accessible for social services of all sizes and legal forms, so they can fully contribute to the realisation of the EU Social Agenda.

In this regard, the [simplification measures adopted in the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy](#) should be better reflected in ESF+ operational programmes and their implementation across the European Union. Particularly, the ESF+ operational programmes addressed to social services should be tailored to the specific needs of social services; make sure that social services, and particularly smaller organisations, are among eligible participants; use programme indicators that are relevant and measurable for the specific target groups and social impact expected; use Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) when they are adapted to the needs and capacity of social services; enable the use of pre-financing; establish a predictable timetable for social service providers regarding the pre-financing of projects (to prevent problems with the cash flow due to unforeseen and non-budgeted delays, etc.); facilitate the reporting procedures.

Therefore, the [facilitation toolkit](#) developed within the Helpdesk project, intended for use by managing authorities, could be a reference point for the next ESF+ regulation framework to enhance access to ESF+ for social services. It is also not just about simplification, but part of a broader vision for creating an enabling environment for organisations to access these funds. This includes building up their capacity, providing more and better information.

The creation of national Helpdesks, complemented by a cross-European coordinating body, would help to facilitate the creation of such enabling environments.

3. Allocating Funds towards quality social interventions

The existing ESF+ & ERDF earmarking and rules for social projects do not always ensure that the funding actually reaches the most impactful initiatives. The general objectives set in the ESF+ Regulation should be followed by an effective prioritisation in Partnership Agreements and operational programmes. Projects supporting a re-design of the social service provision in line with concepts such as rights-based approaches (including reasonable accommodation), user-oriented approaches (such as co-production), community-based services (such as Housing First, home-based services), autonomy and empowerment (such as, e.g., independent living, supported employment,

supported decision making) should be clearly prioritised and backed (with earmarking or conditionalities), including in the context of “social innovation”.

Moreover, the ESF+ Regulation architecture, priorities and processes should contain practical measures that will allow the effective achievement of the European Pillar of Social Rights by ESF+. These practical measures should encompass:

1. capacity building of managing authorities around social inclusion measures,
2. bridging the silos between managing authorities and social authorities,
3. effective involvement of social services (and those who use such services) in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of the ESF+ operational programmes, including through the consultation of social partners representing these services at the European and national level,
4. the use of qualitative and harmonised indicators giving more visibility to social aspects (e.g. social inclusion, labour market integration, inclusiveness, accessibility, qualitative impact of social services, etc.),
5. integrated approaches that support projects pursuing an integrated goal; (e.g., enabling synergies between the health care sector and elderly care at home); and effective complementarity between EU funds and particularly between ERDF and ESF+.

Therefore, the Helpdesk’s Technical Guidance on Effective Interventions in Social Services (finalised by mid-February 2024), which contains a set of practical recommendations addressing the different points mentioned above, could serve for leveraging the use of ESF+ to better foster social inclusion, in line with European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Helpdesk Consortium

