

An evaluation of European Social Fund information and publicity

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Background

The European Commission (EC) is committed to improving the transparency of Structural Fund programmes at European and Member State levels in 2007-13. The programme's Managing Authority, European Social Fund Division (ESFD), drew up a Communication Plan for the Operational Programme aimed at providing the strategic direction critical to maintaining a consistent and coherent approach across regions and ensuring that not just European Social Fund (ESF)-funded projects get publicised, but the ESF investment as well.

Insite Research and Consulting was commissioned in 2009 to conduct a small-scale qualitative evaluation of ESF information and publicity measures.

The overall aim of the evaluation was to assess progress towards achieving the objectives set out in the Communication Plan, including the visibility and awareness of the Operational Programme and the role played by the EC during the first half of the Convergence, Competitiveness and Employment Programme 2007-2013. Evidence from the study will inform the production of information and publicity materials, as well as events and activities, for the remainder of the programme.

Methods

The research consisted of three elements: an assessment was made of a sample of printed/published materials sourced from all parties delivering the programme; information was collated from the formal monitoring data which forms part of the required reporting within

the programme by both central and regional Managing Authorities and Co-financing Organisations (CFOs); and a total of 18 face-to-face interviews with stakeholders were undertaken in four study areas across England during October-November 2009.

Key findings

Understanding requirements

A basic level of understanding of the requirements of the Communication Plan, in terms of a contractual requirement to use the ESF logo and branding (EU flags, supporting statements and images), was found among all organisations involved. A greater appreciation existed among Managing Authorities and CFOs, that it was equally as important to publicise the wider benefits and opportunities which ESF funding brings.

Several measures were established to aid the implementation of the requirements. At national level a Publicity Strategy Group was established to assist ESFD with the strategic management and delivery of the Communication Plan. At regional level CFOs produced Communication Plans, the structure and content of which varied both between individual CFOs and regions. Some CFOs used the process of developing a Communication Plan to consider what could be provided above and beyond the statutory requirements, including considering different audiences, and these plans, therefore, contained more detail.

Implementation measures

In some regions close working links between individual CFOs led to the production of

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regional plans. In addition, a number of regions have accessed technical assistance (TA) to fund Public Relations (PR) agencies and/or organisations to coordinate activity across the region.

There was evidence from the regions that staff with marketing backgrounds were able to look at the implementation of the requirements in a more strategic way than others, and had additional expertise for effectively managing and encouraging activity that went beyond basic compliance.

Monitoring roles

Each delivery organisation has different responsibilities for monitoring how requirements are complied with. The stakeholder interviews highlighted a key difference between CFOs in terms of whether they saw their role in monitoring as auditor or facilitator. The former tended to consider reviews as a means of reinforcing regulatory aspects of publicity and quality assurance. Whilst not technically incorrect, this may place limitations on how effectively the message about ESF investment is communicated. On the other hand, those who viewed their role primarily as facilitators saw themselves more as conduits for information and support.

Information and publicity activity

A range of materials had been produced and activities undertaken which had been effective at raising awareness of ESF investment. Materials and activities differed widely in terms of objective and target audience.

Printed materials

Printed materials at Managing Authority and CFO level included booklets, good practice guides and newsletters with the key messages and branding clearly evident. At provider level, printed material generally took the form of leaflets or flyers. These were tailored to provide potential participants and referral agencies with

information about projects. Although effective at informing target audiences about projects, there were some issues with the effectiveness of such printed material in raising awareness of ESF investment in a meaningful way. The ESF logo often lacked prominence by being one of many crowded together. Also, the key messages about ESF investment were frequently absent.

Case studies

Case studies were given high prominence throughout the programme due to their suitability in targeting a range of audiences, adaptability to use across most media and the role they play in bringing the ESF story to life. The 'PR Toolkit' for providers, detailing how to construct a case study, represents good practice in this area. However, some stakeholders expressed concerns over the process of gaining project participants' consent and felt there might be a danger of an 'overload' of case studies in the media.

Web-based materials

The web was increasingly being used as a means of communicating with a variety of audiences both formally through websites and informally through social networking sites. It was widely acknowledged that further guidance on the use of new technologies was needed.

Events

A wide range of events had taken place across the programme with the driving force being the publicity priorities of 2008 and 2009. The key strengths of major events were the additional levels of publicity activity generated and the number of different audiences which could be targeted simultaneously.

Media engagement

Engagement with the media was principally through press releases. The assessment of materials showed that there was a wide range of publications in which ESF news appeared.

Radio and television were less frequently used but some providers had found innovative ways of securing airtime.

Integration of cross-cutting themes

The integration of the cross-cutting themes (gender equality and equal opportunities and sustainable development) into publicity and information measures had been difficult to implement at provider level. Partly, this was due to inconsistencies in understanding at CFO level about what the themes meant in practice, although good practice guides have been produced by ESFD.

Overall progress and ways forward

Overall, progress has been good in terms of meeting the publicity and information objectives, although progress specifically against the quantitative indicators in the Communication Plan (which are assessed annually by ESFD) has been more variable.

Suggested improvements

The evaluation process suggested areas where improvements could be made to strengthen the second half of the programme and facilitate progress against the set of indicators in the Communication Plan:

- There is a need to refine indicators of progress to facilitate ongoing evaluation of progress made. For example, rather than use the number of overall hits on the ESF website as an indicator of activities being publicised to the general public, more qualitative indicators could productively be used.
- Evaluations should be undertaken after each key event or publicity priority and the results disseminated through the Publicity Network.
- A continuous dialogue needs to be established between CFOs and all providers (both prime and sub-contractors) to pass back information and good practice from the overall programme. This requires monitoring for effectiveness.

- Guidance on the use of new media needs to be established by the Managing Authority in collaboration with those already using it.
- Clarification around the transfer of materials across regions from TA-funded projects needs to be made.
- Awareness of cross-cutting themes needs to be developed, based on a consistent understanding of what they mean.

Conclusion

At the halfway point in the 2007-2013 ESF programme, good progress has been made in meeting publicity and information objectives. Strong strategic frameworks, shaped by the Communication Plan, have been put in place.

The key messages around ESF investment making a real difference run through many materials and activities, but there are audiences for whom achievements are not yet being systematically linked to ESF investment.

Awareness of the requirements around publicity is high amongst CFOs. Provider awareness is also high in terms of the use of the logo and the need for case studies and good news stories.

A range of materials has been produced and activities undertaken which have been effective at reaching their target audience and raising awareness of ESF investment. The adoption of more non-traditional forms of communication, such as social networking, is recognised as vital in maintaining the reach of the ESF message and needs to be supported across all organisations.

The majority of indicators have been met. Those where it is difficult to judge success using current surveys may need more targeted effort, and there remains a need for a shift in perception as to what constitutes successful programme publicity.

The Publicity Network Group is seen as a particularly valuable tool for the transfer of good practice, and is supported in this by the

re-focused ESF-Works which is successfully raising the programme's visibility among policy-makers and stakeholders.

Extra resources and focus are required to establish and maintain a dialogue with all providers. Cascading the ESF story down to sub-contractors will further consolidate the brand and give greater consistency in approach. Proactive support from CFOs rather than a purely auditing approach is likely to reap benefits. The continued transfer of good practice needs to be encouraged and supported.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 737 2. Research Report 646. March 2010).

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