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Evaluation of the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA)

Accompanying the document

REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL AND THE COURT OF AUDITORS

**Evaluation of the Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency, the
Educational, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, the Executive Agency for
Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, the European Research Council Executive
Agency, the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency and the Research Executive
Agency**

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Glossary

<i>Term or acronym</i>	<i>Meaning or definition</i>
Agencies	Executive agencies
CBA	Cost-benefit analysis
CEF	Connecting Europe Facility
CHAFEA	Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency
CINEA	Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency
EACEA	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency
EASME	Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
EEA	European Economic Area
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
ERCEA	European Research Council Executive Agency
EU	European Union
H2020	Horizon 2020, the 8 th EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020)
IDEA	Inspire, Debate, Engage and Accelerate Action
INEA	Innovation and Networks Executive Agency
IT	Information Technology
PPMI	Public Policy and Management Institute
REA	Research Executive Agency
SFS	Specific financial statement
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
TRIMIS	Transport Research and Innovation Monitoring and Information System

1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose and scope of the evaluation/fitness check

In accordance with Article 25 of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003 laying down the statute for executive agencies (the Framework Regulation)¹, the Commission carries out an evaluation of the operation of each executive agency every 3 years, including a cost-benefit analysis. It submits the respective report to the agency's Steering Committee, to the European Parliament, to the Council and to the Court of Auditors.

This staff working document reports on the triennial evaluation of the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA or 'the Agency'). The evaluation was carried out in the context of the evaluation of the six executive agencies² for the period of INEA's mandate under the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework, which still needed to be evaluated, i.e. from 1 January 2017 to 31 March 2021. This is the period just before the establishment of the new agencies for the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework, including INEA's successor, the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA), on 1 April 2021.

In line with Article 12 of the Establishment Decision on new agencies³, the evaluation covered all six agencies in a coordinated manner and followed a common evaluation methodology. It focused on the operation of the agencies and their performance during the evaluation period by providing answers to specific evaluation questions on effectiveness, efficiency and coherence, including a retrospective cost-benefit analysis.

The purpose of evaluating the operation of INEA was to assess its implementation of the parts of the EU funding programmes that have been entrusted to it: Connecting Europe Facility – transport, energy and telecommunications (including the Wifi4EU subprogramme on the promotion of internet connectivity in local communities as of May 2018); Horizon 2020 – 'Smart, green and integrated transport' and 'Secure, clean and efficient energy'; as well as the Innovation Fund as of June 2020.

INEA operated between 1 January 2014 and 31 March 2021 and was governed by the following Commission legal bases: (i) the Establishment Decision⁴, which established the Agency and set out its mandate; (ii) the Delegation Decision⁵, which specified the tasks to be

¹ Council Regulation 58/2003 of 19 December 2003 laying down the statute for executive agencies to be entrusted with certain tasks in the management of Community programmes (OJ L 11 of 16 January 2003, p. 1).

² Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency (CHAFEA), Executive Agency for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (EASME), Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA), Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Research Executive Agency (REA) and European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA).

³ Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173 of 12 February 2021 establishing the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, the European Health and Digital Executive Agency, the European Research Executive Agency, the European Innovation Council and Executive Agency for SMEs, the European Research Council Executive Agency, and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and repealing Implementing Decisions 2013/801/EU, 2013/771/EU, 2013/778/EU, 2013/779/EU, 2013/776/EU and 2013/770/EU (OJ L 50, 15.2.2021, p. 9).

⁴ Commission Implementing Decision 2013/801/EU of 23 December 2013 establishing the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency and repealing Decision 2007/60/EC as amended by Decision 2008/593/EC.

⁵ Commission Decision C(2013) 9235 of 23 December 2013 delegating powers to the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of transport, energy and telecommunications infrastructure and in the field of transport and energy research and innovation comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union.

carried out by, and the powers delegated to the Agency in order to perform its mandate; and (iii) the Decision establishing the Agency's Steering Committee ⁶.

In line with the Commission's Better Regulation principles ⁷, the evaluation applies several standard evaluation criteria. It assesses whether the Agency has fulfilled its tasks in an effective and efficient way, whether there are overlaps/gaps/inconsistencies in the Agency's management of the programme portfolio, and whether there is a clear delineation of tasks between INEA and the parent Directorates-General or other executive agencies (coherence) ⁸.

The evaluation also assesses whether the Agency's functioning has yielded the expected positive results as estimated in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis for delegating tasks to the executive agency ⁹ and identifies potential areas of improvement. To this end, the estimations of the 2013 cost-benefit analysis have been tested to provide evidence on the validity of the assumptions in the *ex ante* scenario by considering the actual costs and benefits of programme implementation by the Agency in a structured way. The aspects to be covered by the cost-benefit analysis are specified in Article 3(1) of the Framework Regulation ¹⁰ and in the guidelines on establishing and operating executive agencies ¹¹.

The evaluation does not cover the achievements of the EU funding programmes managed by INEA, which are themselves subject to mid-term and *ex post* evaluations. The evaluation of INEA nevertheless provides useful input for the programmes' evaluations given that the Agency's performance affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the programmes it manages.

The evaluation examines the efficient use of resources and the effective achievement of the tasks entrusted to the Agency. It looks in particular at whether (i) the alignment of more coherent programme portfolios with the Agency's core competences and its brand identity delivered the estimated qualitative benefits; (ii) the assembly of the management of different EU programmes delivered the estimated synergies, simplification and economies of scale; and (iii) the pooling of instruments guaranteed consistent service delivery and whether there is scope for simplification and further efficiency gains.

The evaluation is based on a study carried out by an external contractor ¹².

⁶ Commission Decision C(2014)520 of 6 February 2014 appointing the members and observers of the Steering Committee of the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency, as last amended by Commission Decision C(2020) 4848 final of 22.7.2020.

⁷ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on 'Better Regulation: joining forces to make better laws', COM(2021)219 final of 29.4.2021, and Commission Staff Working Document on 'Better Regulation Guidelines', SWD(2021)305 final of 3.11.2021.

⁸ The assessment of the evaluation criterion 'EU added-value', i.e. why the EU should act, is not perceived to be a relevant criterion for the evaluation of the executive agencies as they carry out tasks which the Commission has transferred to them. The EU added-value of the programmes that the agencies manage is assessed in the context of the delegated programmes' evaluations. The previous needs which INEA was meant to address and whether they are still pertinent at present (relevance) are illustrated in the context of this evaluation.

⁹ Cost-benefit analysis for the delegation of certain tasks regarding the implementation of Union Programmes 2014-2020 to the executive agencies – Final report for the Commission of 19 August 2013.

¹⁰ The cost-benefit analysis should include the following factors: identification of the tasks justifying outsourcing, cost-benefit analysis including the costs of coordination and checks, the impact on human resources, possible savings within the general budgetary framework of the European Union, efficiency and flexibility in the implementation of outsourced tasks, simplification of the procedures used, proximity of outsourced activities to final beneficiaries, visibility of the EU as promoter of the EU programme concerned and the need to maintain an adequate level of know-how inside the Commission.

¹¹ Appendix II of the Guidelines for the establishment and operation of executive agencies financed from the Union budget (C(2014) 9109 from 2 December 2014).

¹² Study supporting the evaluation of Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency (CHAFEA), Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME), European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA), Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA) & Research Executive Agency (REA) (2017/2018-2021), Final Report: Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA), 14.03.2023, PPMI and Inspire, Debate, Engage

2. WHAT WAS THE EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE INTERVENTION?

2.1 Description of the intervention and its objectives

As outlined in the Framework Regulation and in INEA's Establishment Decision, the outsourcing of certain management tasks to the Agency in the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework intended to:

- Allow the Commission to focus on its institutional tasks, i.e. tasks assigned to the institutions by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union that require discretionary powers in translating political choices into action. Such institutional tasks should not be outsourced.
- Enable the Commission to achieve the objectives of the delegated EU programmes more effectively. According to the 2013 cost-benefit analysis, the delegation of certain programme tasks to the Agency was estimated to be more cost-efficient than an in-house scenario. The Establishment Decision stated that the alignment of more coherent programme portfolios with the Agency's core competences and its brand identity would bring qualitative benefits. In addition, it estimated that assembling the management of different EU programmes would bring synergies, simplification and economies of scale.

The original objective of the intervention involved entrusting the Agency with the implementation of several EU programmes. Originally, the Agency was entrusted with the implementation of parts of:

- the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)¹³: transport, energy and telecommunications; and
- Horizon 2020¹⁴: transport and energy research (Part III Societal challenges of the Specific Programme).

It was also responsible for the management of the trans-European transport network (TEN-T)¹⁵ and Marco Polo¹⁶ legacy programmes under the 2007-2013 multiannual financial framework (until their last projects closed in 2018 and 2020 respectively).

As of May 2018, the Agency's mandate was extended to include implementation of the new Wifi4EU initiative as part of CEF Telecom¹⁷. As of June 2020, it was further extended to

and Accelerate Action (IDEA): [Study supporting the evaluation of CHAFAEA, EACEA, EASME, ERCEA, INEA & REA \(2017/2018-2021\) - Publications Office of the EU \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹³ Regulation (EU) No 1316/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Connecting Europe Facility (OJ L 348, 20.12.2013, p. 129).

¹⁴ Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing Horizon 2020 — the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014- 2020) (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 104); and Council Decision 2013/743/EU of 3 December 2013 establishing the specific programme implementing Horizon 2020 — the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020) (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 965).

¹⁵ Regulation (EC) No 680/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2007 laying down general rules for the granting of Community financial aid in the field of the trans-European transport and energy networks (OJ L 162, 22.6.2007, p. 1).

¹⁶ Regulation (EC) No 1692/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 October 2006 establishing the second 'Marco Polo' programme for the granting of Community financial assistance to improve the environmental performance of the freight transport system (Marco Polo II) (OJ L 328, 24.11.2006, p. 1).

¹⁷ Commission Decision C(2018) 1281 final of 27.2.2018 and C(2018) 6366 final of 4.10.2018 on amending Decision C(2013)9235 delegating powers to the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency, as regards promotion of internet connectivity in local communities.

include implementation of the Innovation Fund¹⁸ managed by the Directorate-General for Climate Action¹⁹.

By the end of the evaluation period, the Agency was working under the supervision of five parent Directorates-General:

- Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (lead parent Directorate-General);
- Directorate-General for Energy;
- Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology;
- Directorate-General for Research and Innovation; and
- Directorate-General for Climate Action.

In implementing the programmes delegated to it, INEA was responsible for monitoring the projects, making the necessary checks and recovery procedures, and performing budget implementation tasks covering revenue and expenditure within the meaning of the EU Financial Regulation²⁰, and in particular:

- managing the operations and procedures leading to the adoption of Commission award decisions and to the conclusion of grant agreements and managing the ensuing decisions and agreements;
- providing support in programme implementation;
- performing all the operations required to launch contests and award prizes in accordance with the EU Financial Regulation;
- concluding public procurement procedures and managing the ensuing contracts, including the operations required to launch and conclude such procedures.

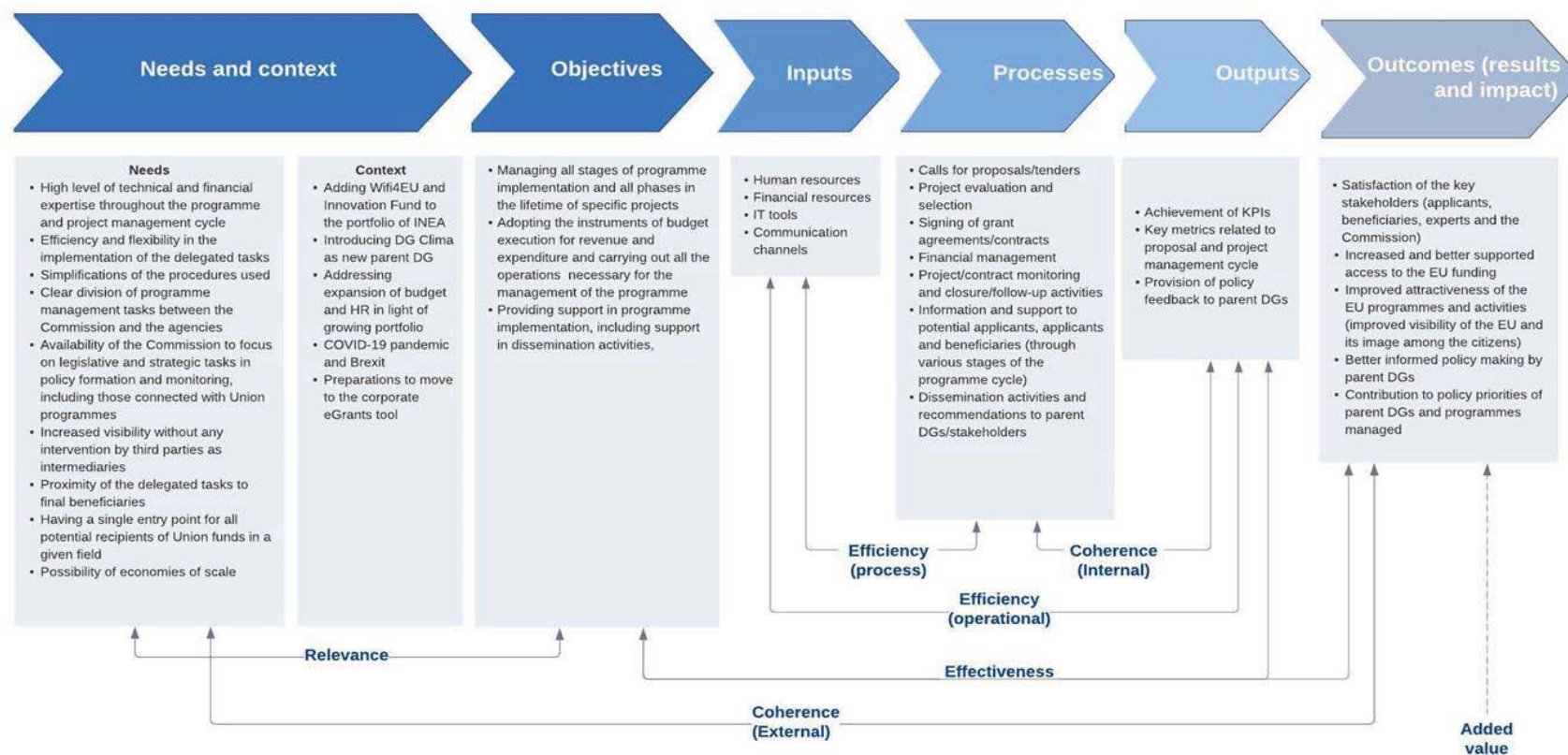
The intervention logic (Figure 1 below) closely follows the provisions and logic provided in the key documents defining the objectives, tasks and activities of the Agency.

¹⁸ Directive 2003/87/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 October 2003 establishing a scheme for greenhouse gas emission allowance trading within the Community and amending Council Directive 96/61/EC (OJ L 275, 25.10.2003, p. 32).

¹⁹ Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2020/669 of 18 May 2020 amending Implementing Decision 2013/801/EU as regards entrusting the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency with the implementation of the Innovation Fund (OJ L 156, 19.5.2020, p. 20).

²⁰ Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, amending Regulations (EU) No 1296/2013, (EU) No 1301/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1304/2013, (EU) No 1309/2013, (EU) No 1316/2013, (EU) No 223/2014, (EU) No 283/2014, and Decision No 541/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012 (OJ L 193, 30.7.2018, p.1).

Figure 1: INEA's intervention logic



Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

2.2 Point(s) of comparison

The current evaluation of INEA operations for the period January 2017-March 2021 assesses the actual costs and benefits of programme implementation by INEA (executive agency scenario) when compared with the alternative scenario of management by the Commission (in-house scenario).

Accordingly, the reference points for this INEA evaluation are the 2013 *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis and INEA's specific financial statement ²¹.

The analysis of INEA's performance during the reference period assesses the progress achieved since the previous evaluation, which covered the Agency's operations from 2014 to 2016.

The 2013 cost-benefit analysis estimation was that the savings from the delegation of tasks to INEA over the period 2017-2020 would be EUR 38.3 million compared to the in-house scenario. The specific financial statement estimated efficiency gains of EUR 42.4 million over the same period.

The specific financial statement estimated that the total number of full-time equivalents required to manage the programmes delegated to INEA in 2020 – the peak programming year in terms of workload – was 318 (adjusted from 337 in the cost-benefit analysis). The total initial operational budget entrusted to INEA in 2020-2024 was estimated at EUR 36.9 billion in commitment appropriations and EUR 23.5 billion in payment appropriations. Considerable efficiency gains were expected compared to the in-house scenario, along with non-quantifiable benefits such as improved quality of programme management and service delivery, improved visibility of the EU programmes and proximity to beneficiaries.

3. HOW HAS THE SITUATION EVOLVED OVER THE EVALUATION PERIOD?

Current state of play

INEA was set up on 23 December 2013 and started operating as an autonomous legal entity on 1 January 2014.

As stipulated in the INEA Delegation Decision, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on 1 October 2014. It defined the modalities and procedures of interaction and set out a clear delimitation of responsibilities between INEA and its parent Directorates-General ²². This evaluation assesses whether the distribution of roles has been complied with for the 2017-

²¹ INEA's Specific Financial Statement was updated in March 2018 in view of the delegation of the Wifi4EU programme under CEF Telecom to INEA, and in April 2020 in view of the delegation of the Innovation Fund to INEA. These amendments had an impact on the administrative resources allocated to both the Agency and the Commission, and were therefore considered in the retrospective CBA.

²² Memorandum of Understanding between the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport, the Directorate-General for Energy, the Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology, the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, and the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA) of 1 October 2014, subsequently amended. The Memorandum of Understanding consists of four documents: Part I – General Provisions, Part IIa – Connecting Europe Facility, Part IIb – Horizon 2020, and Annex – Administrative and logistical support services provided by the Research Executive Agency. The General Provisions and Horizon 2020 parts of the Memorandum of Understanding were updated in December 2015 to take into account the lessons learned about programme implementation as well as administrative developments within the Commission. The CEF part was updated in July 2018 notably also to take into account the delegation of the Wifi4EU programme under CEF Telecom to INEA on 1 May 2018. The General Provisions were again updated in June 2020 to incorporate the Directorate-General for Climate Action as parent Directorate-General following the delegation of the Innovation Fund to INEA, and a new Part IIc concerning the specific provisions for the implementation of this fund was signed between INEA and the Directorate-General for Climate Action on that occasion.

March 2021 period, as well as the effects of the intervention on the coherence and efficiency of INEA's action.

As mentioned above, the total operational budget estimated in the specific financial statement for INEA for the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework was EUR 36.9 billion in commitment appropriations, of which EUR 30.1 billion for CEF and EUR 6.8 billion for Horizon 2020. However, the actual budget managed by the Agency in this period (without the Innovation Fund) was somewhat lower: EUR 34.6 billion, of which EUR 29 billion for CEF and EUR 5.6 billion for Horizon 2020, i.e. 94% of the originally estimated budget. This mainly related to funds from the delegated programmes being transferred to the European Fund for Strategic Investments (8.4% of CEF funds and 3.5% of Horizon 2020 funds for Energy and Transport), as well as operational budget changes resulting from the multiannual financial framework review and the annual budget review exercises. Nevertheless, this means that INEA handled the largest budget of all the executive agencies in the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework.

When considering only the period 2017-2020, the operational budget actually managed by INEA was approximately EUR 23.3 billion in commitments (EUR 4.9 billion in 2017, EUR 5.1 billion in 2018, EUR 6.4 billion in 2019 and EUR 6.9 billion in 2020) and EUR 12.5 billion in payments (EUR 2.5 billion in 2017, EUR 2.8 billion in 2018, EUR 3.2 billion in 2019 and EUR 4 billion in 2020).

The Agency's administrative budget evolved from EUR 24.3 million in 2017 (including EEA/EFTA and non-EU contributions) to EUR 30.9 million in 2020. Due to changes in the operational budget, the number of authorised staff at INEA was adjusted correspondingly. Its staff numbers increased from 254 in 2017 to 313 in 2020, down from the specific financial statement estimation of 272 and 337 respectively.

The total budget per head in terms of commitments increased from EUR 16 million in 2013 to EUR 22.1 million in 2020, an increase of 38%. This was despite the programme portfolio managed by the Agency during the 2014-2020 period being significantly more complex. The increasing volume of INEA's operational budget during this period outpaced the increase in the number of Agency staff.

The number of proposals that INEA received and evaluated in 2014-2020 totalled 8 069 ²³, i.e. significantly lower than the cost-benefit analysis estimate of 9 207. It was significantly higher than the cost-benefit analysis estimates for CEF Telecom, and lower for CEF Energy. The number of projects managed per head decreased slightly from 8.82 in 2018 to 8.42 in 2020, well below the average of the executive agencies. This was due mainly to the complexity of sizeable CEF infrastructure projects. The number of proposals evaluated per head increased from 6.41 in 2018 to 7.11 in 2020.

The number of projects managed by INEA, which constitutes the main workload driver for the Agency, increased from 1 583 in 2017 to 1 859 in 2020. The actual number of running projects in 2017-2020 constituted on average 91% of the cost-benefit analysis estimate, reaching 94% in 2020 (1 859 compared to the estimated 1 980). However, there were very significant variations between the estimated and actual number of projects across the programmes managed by INEA. For CEF Telecom, the number of running projects was

²³ Excluding Wifi4EU and the Innovation Fund.

substantially higher than in the cost-benefit analysis estimates, which related to the higher-than-estimated operational budget of the programme and much lower average project size (as a result of the Wifi4EU initiative). At the same time, the actual numbers of grant agreements concluded and projects managed were much lower for CEF Energy, which related primarily to its higher average grant size and the lower-than-anticipated number of projects, especially studies. Programme management costs (defined as the ratio between the administrative and operational budget in payments) decreased from 0.9% in 2016 to 0.45% in 2020.

INEA introduced several organisational and procedural changes to increase the efficiency of programme implementation, in particular in the evaluation period:

- further simplification and improvement of information management tools and grant management procedures, notably on the use of the QlikSense project portfolio tool; the transition from the TEN-Tec portal to e-Grants for CEF submission and evaluation of proposals; and the preparation and signature of grant agreements and reporting;
- the adoption of simplified Horizon 2020 business processes, such as the introduction of a single set of rules, the electronic signing of grant agreements, the Participant Portal as a one-stop shop for interactions with participants, the single reimbursement rate, and a flat rate for indirect costs;
- the adoption of a multiannual human resources strategy in April 2017 with specific measures related to staff engagement, training, internal communication, career development opportunities, well-being and work-life balance, aimed at improving human resources management and increasing the effectiveness of the Agency's operations; followed by a staff retention plan in September 2018 to increase staff satisfaction levels and help reduce staff turnover and vacancy rates;
- the development of a methodology for workload analysis in 2017, based on the 2013 cost-benefit analysis and specific financial statement, to better assess the number of available staff against the current and forthcoming workload and, as a result, better allocate resources.

Moreover, the European Court of Auditors carried out a performance audit of INEA's management of the delegated EU funding programmes in 2018/2019. The audit focused on the 2014-2020 programming period and examined whether INEA, together with the Commission, (i) fulfilled the tasks delegated to it and achieved the expected benefits of programme delegation; and (ii) followed robust procedures for managing the CEF.

In its 2019 report ²⁴, the European Court of Auditors inferred that INEA was a well-organised Agency and that it was implementing the programmes delegated to it, in particular the CEF, efficiently. However, the Court made a number of recommendations (14 in total) to improve CEF implementation and the overall operational performance of the Agency, covering the following areas:

- 1) improve the potential for synergies between the CEF and Horizon 2020 programmes, and between CEF sectors;
- 2) strengthen the framework for INEA's management of the delegated programmes;
- 3) ensure greater harmonisation and transparency of project selection procedures;
- 4) set better conditions for timely implementation of the CEF;

²⁴ European Court of Auditors Special Report N° 19/2019; 'INEA: benefits delivered but CEF shortcomings to be addressed', 7 November 2019.

- 5) redesign the performance framework to better monitor project results.

The Commission and INEA addressed the European Court of Auditors' recommendations by establishing the new executive agency – CINEA – in 2021 and also adopting the new CEF and Horizon Europe regulations in 2021, followed by the adoption of work programmes and launch of calls for proposals. CINEA's increased use of corporate management tools such as e-Grants was also instrumental in meeting certain European Court of Auditors' recommendations on call evaluations and project monitoring.

Despite this, the Court considered that a couple of its recommendations on the Agency's key performance indicators and the CEF performance framework had not been fully implemented²⁵. The Commission and INEA have held constructive discussions with the Court on this in order to implement such recommendations to the extent possible, while taking into consideration the difficulties inherent to the accurate results-oriented measurement of performance of both the Agency and complex infrastructure funding programmes such as CEF.

4. EVALUATION FINDINGS (ANALYTICAL PART)

4.1 To what extent was the intervention successful and why?

Effectiveness

For the purpose of this evaluation, effectiveness relates to how successful the Agency has been in achieving or progressing towards its objectives.

The evaluation inferred that during the period January 2017- March 2021, INEA operated according to the legal framework that established it. INEA's activities, as set out in its annual work programmes and reported in the annual activity reports, corresponded to the tasks set out in the Commission's Establishment and Delegation Decisions.

As provided in the Delegation Decision, the modalities and procedures of interaction between the Agency and its parent Directorates-General are set out in the Memorandum of Understanding of 1 October 2014, as amended subsequently. The Memorandum of Understanding provides for a supervision strategy to avoid gaps or duplication of efforts resulting from crossover between the policymaking, monitoring and supervision tasks of the parent Directorates-General and the execution tasks of the Agency. These provisions have generally worked well, and all parent Directorates-General and INEA appreciate the effectiveness of mutual cooperation.

In the evaluation period, INEA continuously improved its operations and achieved a high level of overall effectiveness. The Agency was flexible and effective in addressing the key challenges during the evaluation period, in particular:

²⁵ Rec 2b) 'The Commission and INEA should make use of more results-oriented goals and indicators'; Rec 5a) 'Based on experience and lessons learned from TEN-T and CEF projects, INEA and the Commission should define a performance framework that breaks down the objectives of the CEF programme into clear and measurable indicators, covering all CEF sectors, and expected project results'; and Rec 5b) 'INEA should specify these indicators in call objectives, consider them in the evaluation of project proposals, monitor them through grant agreements and report on them on a regular basis to the Commission'.

- the phasing-out and closure of its two legacy programmes TEN-T and Marco Polo;
- the efficient monitoring of the CEF Transport project portfolio and implementation of the ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ budget principle, which resulted in the launch of ‘Reflow’ calls for proposals in 2019 and 2020;
- the efficient integration of the new Wifi4EU subprogramme under CEF Telecom in May 2018 and the successful management of the programme afterwards (until its transfer to the new European Health and Digital Executive Agency on 1 April 2021);
- the efficient integration of the new Innovation Fund programme in June 2020 and successful management of the programme with a significantly higher budget than originally envisaged, based on the EU emissions trading system;
- the effective continuation of operations during COVID-19 due to sound organisation, efficient internal procedures and resilient and dedicated staff.

During the preparatory phase for the integration of the Wifi4EU and Innovation Fund initiatives in particular, the Agency was required to use its existing resources to handle a significantly higher workload. Furthermore, with the delegation of the Innovation Fund, the Directorate-General for Climate Action became the Agency’s fifth supervisory Directorate-General, which also required operational adjustments.

INEA has developed strong internal control standards, including on the management of financial and human resources. The Agency established an overarching control strategy with a large number of control and reporting mechanisms. These allow it to closely monitor progress against objectives. It also allows it to prevent and mitigate potential risks to its operations in a timely and effective way. INEA in particular established a coherent anti-fraud strategy, which it pursues effectively. This is reflected in positive assessments by the European Court of Auditors and the Commission’s Internal Audit Service.

In 2017-2020, INEA achieved its targets to a large extent in terms of key performance indicators. On time-to-inform²⁶, it achieved this target (100%) for all programmes. It managed to inform all participants in a timely manner, even though the volume of applications grew during the evaluation period.

On time-to-grant²⁷, the Agency was largely successful in meeting deadlines for the preparation and signing of grant agreements under both Horizon 2020 and CEF programmes. On Horizon 2020, the Agency was consistent and reliable in meeting the deadlines (100% in 2017-2019, and 99% in 2020). For CEF, the 100% target was not reached, in particular in 2017 (94%), mostly for reasons outside the Agency’s remit, such as the organisation of official grant agreement signature ceremonies beyond the time-to-grant period (for communication purposes). For CEF calls between 2018 and 2020, Wifi4EU had a much lower average grant preparation time than the CEF average. In fact, the preparation and management of Wifi4EU vouchers was significantly simpler than the other CEF calls’ grant agreements and required less time.

²⁶ Time-to-inform: the maximum time from a call being closed to informing applicants of the outcome of the evaluation of their application was set at 6 months (184 days) for CEF (and legacy programmes), and 5 months (153 days) for Horizon 2020.

²⁷ Time-to-grant: the time the Agency required to sign grant agreements with successful applicants or to notify them of the grant decision was set at 9 months (276 days) for CEF (and legacy programmes), and 8 months (245 days) for Horizon 2020.

INEA's performance on time-to-pay²⁸ was consistently high, with 100% for Horizon 2020 across the evaluation period, 99% for CEF between 2017 and 2019, and 100% in 2020. This represents a consistent upward trend since 2014 (90%). Sub-targets included the timely payment of experts, pre-financing, further pre-financing as well as interim and final payments. The Agency reached its goal of paying external experts on time in more than 98% of cases. More importantly, the Agency performed well on interim and final payments, executing almost all payments in under 3 months.

In accordance with its annual work programmes, the Agency was required to meet deadlines for pre-financing and further pre-financing in all cases. INEA's outputs approximated these standards each year for the former (with a minimum of 97.93% share of grant payments made on time in 2019 and a maximum of 99.56% in 2018) and met the target for the latter in 2017, though not in the remaining years (but still with a minimum of 98.01% in 2019). In 2020, even though the number of all three types of payment requests peaked, the Agency still achieved good performance (above 99% for all), with the average number of days for payments under the set targets²⁹.

For interim and final payments in particular, INEA reduced its average payment time significantly over the evaluation period, from 64 to 56 days. In 2019, however, INEA fell slightly below the target for the timely delivery of pre-financing of external experts under the Horizon 2020 programme.

INEA achieved full execution of its operational budget in 2017-2020 both in commitment and payment appropriations. For CEF Transport in particular, as mentioned above, during the evaluation period INEA and the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport implemented the 'use-it-or-lose it' principle. INEA launched a comprehensive mid-term review of the project portfolio in 2018, based on the projects' annual action status reports, to assess the performance of ongoing projects. This led to amendments to certain projects' grant agreements, including a reduction in (unused) grant amounts resulting mostly from implementation delays. This allowed such funds to be reinjected into new calls for proposals ('reflow calls') in 2019 and 2020.

With regard to the legality and regularity of transactions, in most years INEA was successful in maintaining a sufficiently low residual multiannual error rate in terms of the operational budget³⁰, especially for CEF Energy and CEF Transport, which were frequently below 1%. For CEF Telecom, however, residual error rates exceeded the pre-set targets in 2 consecutive years. These higher error rates were due to the high participation of non-governmental organisations and small and medium-sized enterprises, a high percentage of personnel costs among the costs declared, and the limited use of certificates on financial statements. The expected acceptable error rate for the Horizon 2020 programme was estimated to be between 2% and 5%, taking into account the cost of controls as well as issues with personnel costs. INEA therefore remained within the target range for the programme in 2017-2020.

²⁸ Time-to-pay: the time between receipt of a request for payment and its execution was set at 30 days for pre-financing, 60 days for further pre-financing, and 90 days for interim/final payments.

²⁹ The targets for payments were defined as meeting the deadline for the payment in 98% of cases, which was mostly achieved.

³⁰ The multiannual residual error rate is equal to the extrapolated level of error remaining after corrections/recoveries undertaken by the Commission/the Agency following audits.

Summary of INEA's key performance indicators over 2017-2020 ³¹

Key performance indicators	Target	2017		2018		2019		2020	
		CEF	Horizon 2020	CEF	Horizon 2020	CEF	Horizon 2020	CEF	Horizon 2020
(1) Rate of execution of commitment appropriations	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(2) Rate of execution of payment appropriations	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(3) Time to grant (percentage of grants signed on time)	98%	94%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	99%
(4) Net time to pay (pre-financing) (days)	30	11.43	8.75	12.13	7.55	12.4	7.15	13.4	7.25
(5) Error rate of payments at <i>ex post</i> control	<2% (<i><2% to 5% for H2020</i>)	Est. 1-2%	2.24%	0.71%	2.45%	2.33%	2.67%	2.5%	2.45%

Source: INEA annual activity reports 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Despite the tight timing of call launch and evaluation and selection processes, INEA adapted well to peak periods of very high workload. Such heavy workload was especially felt in the 2018/2020 period when the Wifi4EU and Innovation Fund calls were being prepared, the Agency was still recruiting supplementary staff, in addition to other regular calls under CEF (especially several CEF Transport calls, including blending and SESAR Air Traffic Management calls) and Horizon 2020. Regular coordination meetings between the parent Directorates-General and INEA resulted in more efficient planning and coordination of the calls. Towards the end of the evaluation period, the Agency decentralised the call evaluation coordination function from the Programme Support unit (R1) to the operational units to streamline the call evaluation and selection processes.

While providing recommendations for addressing minor shortcomings, the reports of the independent observers accompanying the evaluations, for both CEF and Horizon 2020, were consistently complementary to INEA's work on the transparency and efficiency of the evaluation process. On Horizon 2020, the very small share of evaluation review/redress cases filed and (fully or partially) upheld compared to the number of proposals evaluated supports the general trust in the evaluation process. The redress rate decreased from 3.28% in 2017 to 2.97% in 2020 for Horizon 2020 Energy, and from 2.4% in 2017 to 1.7% in 2020 for Horizon 2020 Transport.

As a follow-up to the 2019 European Court of Auditors' performance audit, the Agency introduced a new key performance indicator in its annual work programme on the rate of review/redress cases. This provided an indication of the quality of the evaluation and selection process organised by INEA jointly with the parent Directorates-General.

The survey of INEA's applicants and beneficiaries indicates satisfaction in their dealings with the Agency. In general, beneficiaries (92%) and experts (96%) were satisfied with the overall quality of programme management by INEA. Among unsuccessful applicants, satisfaction only reached 60%. Out of all applicants, a very high number would apply again for funding

³¹ Given their gradual phasing out and for the sake of succinctness, the legacy programmes TEN-T and Marco Polo are not mentioned here.

following their experience with INEA – 99% of successful applicants and 89% of unsuccessful applicants. Similarly, 99% of experts replied that they would be willing to work with the Agency in future.

However, the survey showed that the Agency could still improve the call evaluation process by providing clearer feedback to applicants. Specifically, the evaluation process was considered fair and transparent by 85% of beneficiaries surveyed, compared to 45% of unsuccessful applicants. Among the latter, 51% believed that they did not receive useful and practical feedback on their applications. The survey also noted that CEF applicants were slightly more dissatisfied with the overall quality of services during the application process compared to Horizon 2020 applicants surveyed.

Most programme participants appreciated INEA's flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic: 96% of beneficiaries, 94% of unsuccessful applicants and 96% of external experts believed that the Agency maintained the quality of its services.

As a follow-up to the 2019 European Court of Auditors' performance audit, the Agency also introduced a new results-oriented key performance indicator concerning the launch of a targeted stakeholder satisfaction survey every 2 years (starting in 2022). This allows the Agency to receive first-hand feedback on the quality of its operational activities.

INEA was successful in ensuring proximity to stakeholders and the visibility of the EU as a promoter of the programmes delegated to it. In terms of proximity to stakeholders, INEA acted as a direct contact point for programme applicants and beneficiaries. INEA's communication with beneficiaries came in the form of personal, regular contact, monitoring visits and through multiple knowledge-sharing events (thematic workshops, panel discussions, webinars for Horizon 2020 participants, and 'projects of common interest' days, among others). For CEF Transport, a long-established Advisory Group, which aims to ensure regular contact with programme stakeholders and obtain advice on programme implementation issues, continued its valuable work.

Separation of policymaking and implementation benefits the beneficiaries insofar as they obtain specialised advice and service. During the evaluation period, INEA made sustained efforts to boost awareness of new funding opportunities for project promoters (under CEF and Horizon 2020, and later under the Innovation Fund) and consolidate service-oriented communication. It also supported parent Directorates-General, giving visibility to the delegated programmes by promoting success stories.

The Agency performed its communication functions in a satisfactory manner, as recognised by programme participants. During the evaluation period, the Agency's communication strategy developed further. INEA's activities for maintaining close communication with beneficiaries and external experts were effective, and participants found that the Agency was accessible throughout the project cycle. A proportion of unsuccessful applicants, however, felt they lacked opportunities for communication during the application process.

As a follow-up to the 2019 European Court of Auditors' performance audit, the Agency introduced yet another new results-oriented key performance indicator concerning communication outreach. This is intended to measure the visibility of the delegated programmes through the registered total potential reach via all communication channels. In 2020, the Agency achieved 93% of the planned communication target, which indicates high

performance despite difficulties connected with the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. the cancellation of events).

On the EU's visibility as a promoter of the programmes entrusted to INEA, the evaluation suggests that there is awareness among stakeholders that the Agency is acting under powers delegated by the Commission. The Agency's contributions to increased visibility of the programmes included info days, project management workshops, proactive use of social media tools and high-quality graphic and communication materials, in particular on its website. The many channels of communication used by the Agency resulted in greater visibility of the programmes.

Efficiency

This section considers the relationship between the resources used by the Agency and its output. It also includes an analysis of the administrative and regulatory burden and looks at aspects of simplification.

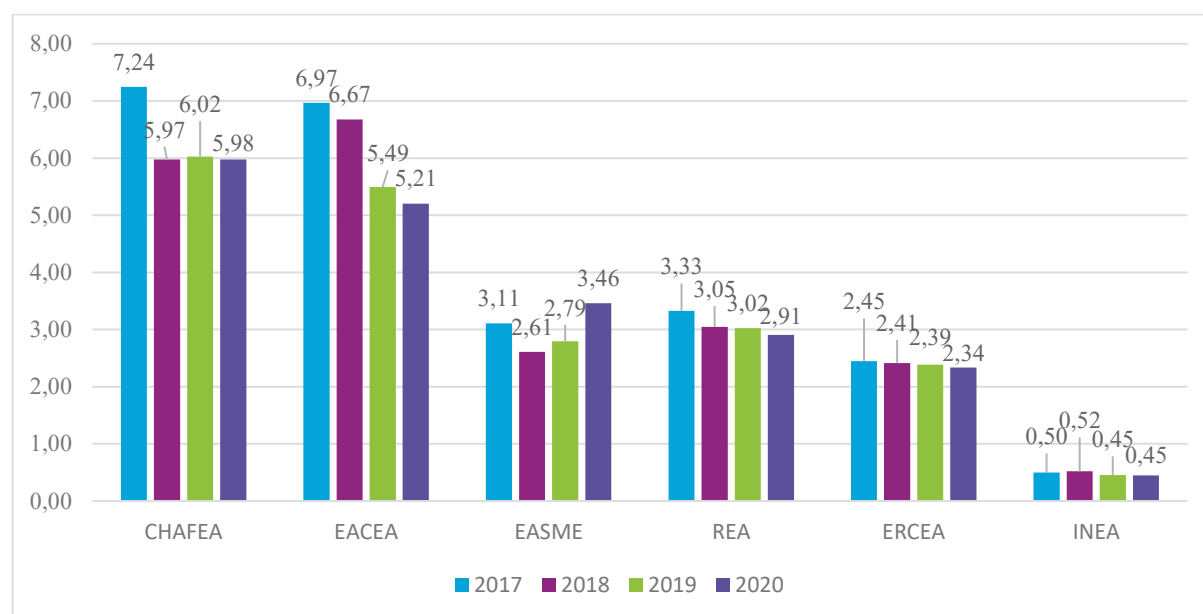
In 2017-2020, INEA proved to be an efficient and cost-effective body for the management of the delegated programmes. As mentioned in Section 3, INEA's administrative budget (including EEA/EFTA and non-EU contributions) increased from EUR 24.3 million in 2017 to EUR 30.9 million in 2020. Its programme management costs (the ratio between the administrative and operational budget) decreased from 0.50% in 2017 to 0.45% in 2020 based on commitment appropriations, and from 0.97% in 2017 to 0.75% in 2020 based on payment appropriations, which are the lowest of all agencies (see Figures 2 and 3 below). The budget managed per head (in commitment appropriations) increased from EUR 16 million in 2013 to EUR 22 million in 2020, and the budget per operational head (full-time equivalent) (in commitment appropriations)³² also increased from EUR 28.4 million in 2018 to EUR 31.3 million in 2020, which are the highest of all agencies.

The number of admissible and eligible proposals evaluated by INEA in 2017-2020 was 4 935. The total number of running projects increased from 1 583 in 2017 to 1 859 in 2020. During the evaluation period, INEA's actual workload was higher than estimated in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis due to factors beyond the Agency's control that influenced its workload, such as the average grant size, number of proposals and grants, and the reinjection of budget into new reflow calls. The number of running projects per operational head decreased from 8.82 in 2018 to 8.42 in 2020.

A detailed analysis of INEA's cost efficiency and the results of the cost-benefit analysis is presented in Section 4.2.

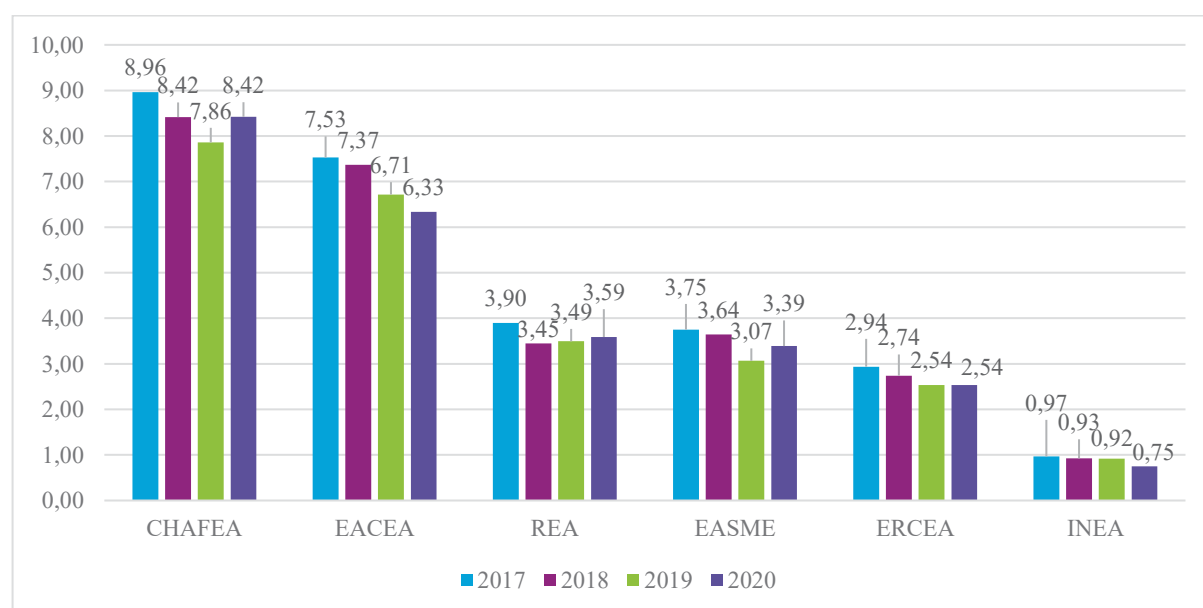
³² The budget per operational head is a more accurate indicator for measuring the efficiency of operational staff directly involved in the management of the operational budget. However, data for this indicator are only available for 2018-2020.

Figure 2: Programme management costs (ratio between the administrative and operational budgets in terms of commitments) across the agencies, 2017-2020



Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency, based on the annual activity reports of the agencies.

Figure 3: Programme management costs (ratio between the administrative and operational budgets in terms of payments) across the agencies, 2017-2020



Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency, based on the annual activity reports of the agencies.

INEA budget, staff and workload indicators, 2017-2020 (in € million, number or %)

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Operational budget, commitments	4898	5113	6355	6910
Operational budget, payments	2460	2840	3177	3997
Administrative budget, commitments	24.30	26.54	28.83	30.91
Administrative budget, payments	23.74	26.30	29.10	30.10
Actual number of staff (at the end of the year)	254	287	299	313
Programme management costs* (commitments)	0.50	0.52	0.45	0.45
Programme management costs (payments)	0.97	0.93	0.92	0.75
Budget per operational head (commitments)	NA	28.42	31.6	31.32
Proposals received	1124	1154	1087	1570
Total running projects	1583	1587	1766	1859
Running projects per operational head	NA	8.82	8.78	8.42

* Defined as the ratio between the administrative and operational budget.

On human resources management, as mentioned in Section 3, the Agency adopted a comprehensive multiannual human resources strategy in April 2017. This included specific measures relating to staff engagement, training, internal communication, career development opportunities, well-being and work-life balance. The aim was to improve human resources management and increase the effectiveness of the Agency's operations.

The human resources strategy was followed by the adoption of a staff retention action plan in September 2018 – identified as a key action – to increase staff motivation and reduce annual turnover rates. In fact, INEA had to cope with increasing staff turnover rates in the first years of operation (which reached 11.8% in 2016, the target level being 3%). The staff retention policy addressed this issue successfully, with initiatives such as encouraging internal staff mobility, announcing vacant positions internally and organising job shadowing and mentoring. As a result, INEA was more effective during the evaluation period in retaining staff and filling vacancies, with the turnover rate dropping to 7% in 2020. The vacancy rate also dropped significantly, from 10% in 2016 to 7% in 2017, and to 6% in 2020.

To optimise the allocation of human resources across its delegated programmes, INEA developed a methodology to calculate its operational workload and staffing needs. This was approved by the Steering Committee in February 2018 and has been kept up to date. The methodology is based on three main workload drivers: proposals to be evaluated, grant agreements to be signed, and ongoing projects to be managed. While Commission budgetary rules did not allow Agency staff to be moved between programmes, the workload assessment methodology proved useful in reallocating staff resources more efficiently within programme sectors, in agreement with the parent Directorates-General.

In the 2018 Commission Staff Satisfaction Survey, INEA registered the second highest response rate across the Commission (80%). The survey revealed an increase in INEA's staff engagement index for the third consecutive time, from 61% in 2014 to 68% in 2016, and to 70% in 2018. This is slightly above the average of the other executive agencies (67.5%) and of the Commission (69%). The staff engagement index is a composite indicator³³ that helps

³³ The staff engagement index is composed of the following seven individual questions:

measure how connected staff are to the Agency and how committed they are to helping it achieve its goals. With an improvement of 9% from 2014, it clearly shows that INEA has made good progress in this area.

Overall job satisfaction also increased to 75%, although it is still slightly lower than the Commission average (77%). However, the results of the survey also show points for attention: decreasing staff satisfaction with workload levels, work recognition and performance management as well as lower satisfaction rates with the Agency's middle management. There is also concern about the limited opportunities for mobility and career development, which is an issue common to all agencies.

The results of the survey were presented to and discussed with INEA staff in each department, with an action plan then drawn up and adopted, including a list of 10 actions. INEA staff recognised that the Agency placed a great deal of emphasis on the staff survey, and tried to address the challenges and shortcomings highlighted by them.

In late 2019, the Agency ran an internal mobility exercise in which all staff members were invited to express their interest in potential internal mobility and identify concrete opportunities. Interviews were conducted with all colleagues who expressed an interest. Based on the outcomes of these (around 15% of staff), the remaining vacancies were published externally. Meetings were also held with the trade unions and the Common Staff Committee as part of the social dialogue in order to harmonise and align policies on internal mobility and career progression between the agencies.

INEA launched various other initiatives as a follow-up to the staff survey and in response to other concerns:

- It developed a preventive framework based on the Commission's health and well-being strategy 2017-2020. The framework is structured around three key areas of well-being: physical, mental and social.
- A training plan was drawn up for 2020 (as in previous years), the purpose of which was to identify the Agency's learning needs for 2020. This provided a structured overview of the different courses the Agency planned to offer its staff.
- In 2020, the Agency also increased its efforts to implement the Commission's Gender Equality Strategy, with the aim of achieving a target of 50% of management positions being filled by women by 2024. As women occupied just 20% of the Agency's management positions by the end of 2020, both INEA and its parent Directorates-General noted this as a priority for recruitment.

In 2018, the Agency also worked harder on reducing its vacancy rate, with the ultimate goal of keeping it below 3%, despite challenges resulting from the new Selection Tool recruitment system for contract agents launched in March 2017 and the suspension of EPSO testing for several months due to COVID-19. To speed up recruitment, the Agency revised

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- I have the appropriate and timely information to do my work well;
 - My colleagues are committed to doing quality work;
 - I have a clear understanding of what is expected from me at work;
 - I have recently received recognition or praise for good work;
 - I feel that my opinion is valued;
 - My manager seems to care about me as a person;
 - My line manager helps me to identify my training and development needs.

its selection and recruitment procedures and adopted simplification measures. It also set up a dedicated onboarding programme to integrate new staff members. It included career development and learning opportunities, a mandatory mentor for each newcomer and other activities and events. These were evaluated positively by newcomers. The vacancy rate in 2020 and for some time afterwards was nevertheless affected by the lengthy process of recruiting new staff for the Innovation Fund.

The evolution of key indicators for staff satisfaction after 2018 has been encouraging. In the staff satisfaction survey launched in 2021³⁴, the staff engagement index increased to 72%, and 59% of staff believed that the Agency cared about their well-being, compared with 47% at the Commission. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021, INEA did its best to ensure the well-being of its staff and keep staff engagement high through IT procurement, remote project management (including remote evaluation), pulse surveys and multiple adjustments to its internal procedures.

Overall, the size and structure of INEA and the level of resources in each of its departments were appropriate to its mandate and delegated tasks during the evaluation period. Until 2020, INEA had a lean organisational governance structure, with three operational departments structured around the various programmes (Department C responsible for CEF; Department H responsible for Horizon 2020 and, since June 2020, also for the Innovation Fund), assisted by Department R responsible for programme support and resources. The CEF programme department was organised according to thematic areas (energy, transport, telecommunications), as was the Horizon 2020 department (energy, transport).

INEA's organisational structure was reviewed and effectively aligned to cope with policy changes such as the evolution of its mandate, notably the creation of a dedicated unit for CEF Telecom linked to the delegation of the Wi-Fi4EU programme to INEA and the integration of the Innovation Fund into the Horizon 2020 Energy unit linked to the delegation of this programme to the Agency.

The Agency's internal control mechanisms were also reorganised during the evaluation period to introduce greater decentralisation. At the beginning of the evaluation period, the Director of the Agency was responsible for most of its decision-making and for communication with the European Court of Auditors and the Internal Audit Service. By the end of the evaluation period, these tasks had become more spread across the Agency, in particular communication with the auditing services was shifted to the Head of Department R.

During the evaluation period, the Agency underwent an operational decentralisation process. Several decision-making procedures were simplified and delegated to lower-level staff, which made the Agency more agile. INEA also optimised its use of IT tools and their harmonisation among different programmes. It introduced the QlikSense portal, which provides a comprehensive overview of the portfolio of programmes and projects it manages. This portal includes a publicly accessible dashboard to communicate real-time information in an easy, transparent, flexible and user-friendly manner.

A comprehensive e-Manual of Procedures comprising various easily accessible sections was also made available to INEA staff on its intranet website. Moreover, like the other agencies,

³⁴ Staff Survey was launched in November 2021, thus falling outside the reference period of the current evaluation.

INEA extended the use of the corporate e-Grants tool, previously used only for the management of Horizon 2020 programmes, to all its delegated programmes. While this transition took place outside the evaluation period, the transition process from the TENtec system (developed in-house for CEF projects) to the e-Grants system was thoroughly prepared from 2018.

INEA also developed IT solutions that benefit applicants and beneficiaries, including a complementary module to allow geographical data to be submitted during the submission phase (with e-Grants), the simplification and improvement of the Business Object environment for e-submission and evaluation processes, as well as the switch from the TENtec tool to the e-Grants tool for the CEF programme. Examples of improved information sharing include the sharing of more extensive and more specific guidelines for applications and the development of a tailored financial spreadsheet template for the CEF programme to help applicants and evaluators better substantiate the financial aspects of project applications.

Coherence

Coherence looks at any overlaps and complementarities within the programme portfolio managed by the Agency or delimitation of responsibilities between the Agency and its parent Directorates-General.

In the evaluation period, INEA demonstrated flexibility in implementing a diverse programme portfolio and being answerable to four different parent Directorates-General (five as of June 2020). The evaluation did not find any evidence of overlaps, duplications, gaps or inconsistencies within the INEA programme portfolio. The Memorandum of Understanding as last amended in June 2020 provides for a clear delimitation of responsibilities and tasks between INEA and its parent Directorates-General.

Since INEA was established around the concept of network industries and related research and innovation, there was strong coherence between the CEF and Horizon 2020 programmes delegated to the Agency, particularly the energy and transport sectors.

However, the evaluation inferred that the management of Horizon 2020 Energy, shared between INEA and the Executive Agency for SMEs (EASME), could have been streamlined by entrusting the entire programme cluster to a single agency. This was corroborated by the European Court of Auditors in its 2019 audit report³⁵. This more coherent approach was implemented under 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework when the successor of INEA – CINEA – became responsible for the entire Horizon Europe energy topics.

Coherence in the programmes managed by INEA also helped to exploit synergies to the extent possible. On synergies at programme level, these have been effective. For example, with regard to CEF, common implementation by INEA with the same business processes, three-sector (transport, energy and telecoms) coordination, the common CEF coordination committee of Member States and common work programmes for CEF financial instruments generated economies of scale and simplification. However, the CEF 1 (2014-2020) legal basis was not sufficiently flexible to allow funding of large-scale infrastructure projects that combine two or three sectors.

³⁵ The European Court of Auditors noted that while the two agencies coordinated calls for proposals, each administered its part of the programme separately, which meant administrative costs on both sides and limited potential for synergies.

With regard to synergies between Horizon 2020 and CEF, despite some intrinsic difficulties linked with the legal bases of both programmes, different business processes and distinct types of support projects (research vs deployment and/or infrastructure building), INEA and the parent Directorates-General endeavoured to take initiatives in this field. INEA launched a reflection exercise on the transport sector, which led to a report being presented to the Steering Committee in 2017. Several actions were taken at project level, including technical meetings with the parent Directorates-General, collaboration on the Transport Research and Innovation Monitoring and Information System (TRIMIS), and the creation of a synergies webpage on the INEA website. As a result of this exercise, Horizon 2020 projects had a greater presence at the TEN-T Days organised by the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (as of the 2017 edition). In addition, there was a higher degree of coordination between Horizon 2020 and CEF work programmes. Several proposals that applied for CEF Transport funding have referred to results from Horizon 2020 projects.

INEA also conducted a technology mapping exercise in 2019 to assess whether technologies being developed in Horizon 2020 could be used in CEF, which it submitted to its parent Directorates-General. However, in the case of CEF Energy, the mapping revealed that, at the time, the technologies developed under Horizon 2020 would be of limited use to CEF Energy actions. The Steering Committee therefore noted a 'lack of bridges between the two funding programmes' and advised that a basis needs to be explored as to which players should be better connected to improve synergies.

Also, one of the reasons why the Commission decided to delegate the Innovation Fund to INEA in 2020 was because of the potential synergies between CEF, Horizon 2020 and this new fund aimed at boosting innovation in low-carbon technologies. The *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis carried out before such delegation estimated that entrusting the Agency with the implementation of the Innovation Fund would result in cost savings of about EUR 30.5 million over the 2020-2030 period compared to the in-house management cost. It would also increase efficiency and flexibility, provide for significant synergies between the Innovation Fund and other EU programmes managed by the Agency, and increase proximity to the beneficiaries as well as visibility of EU funding.

The evaluation concluded that INEA would gain from a closer alignment of procedures, as appropriate, between the infrastructure programme (CEF) and the research programmes (Horizon 2020), as well as the newly delegated Innovation Fund, in terms of call launching, submission of proposals, the evaluation and selection process and grant awarding for the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework. Work was developed successfully in this respect in the context of the Commission's corporate e-Grants process, including the model grant agreement.

INEA enjoys a very good working relationship with parent Directorates-General. They were generally satisfied with the levels of formal and informal communication taking place in a regular and structured manner. The fact that some of the Agency's personnel, mainly at management level, were either seconded from one of the parent Directorates-General (in 2020, 21 out of 313 staff) or had previously worked for them was an important asset in this respect.

INEA provided enough information to its parent Directorates-General to enable them to maintain sufficient know-how in relation to the delegated programmes. Despite the inherent difficulties linked with reporting on programme implementation (grant funding) of a variety

of delegated programmes and subprogrammes, INEA has been proactive and constructive in providing feedback to policy to the parent Directorates-General. This is the case in particular on lessons learned from the evaluation and selection process, project management and from project funding, which are fed into the preparation of subsequent work programmes and evaluation processes. However, in the evaluation period there was no framework in place to ensure that feedback to policy was coordinated and planned in an appropriate manner, or to ensure that requests from parent Directorates-General were prioritised and based on the competences and knowledge within the Agency. Important steps have since been taken under 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework – for instance, through feedback from individual programmes feeding into the policy framework/plans and the adoption of a strategy on improving synergies through cross-programme feedback to policy in 2021. This is being addressed and improved constantly through close cooperation between the parent Directorates-General and the Agency.

4.2 Cost-benefit analysis

The retrospective cost–benefit analysis for January 2017 to March 2021 was carried out based on the results of the 2013 *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis, the assumptions laid down in the specific financial statement and the actual costs of INEA.

As mentioned in Section 2 above, given that the Commission decided to extend INEA’s mandate with additional programmes (the new WiFi4EU initiative under CEF Telecom and the Innovation Fund were delegated in 2018 and 2020 respectively), INEA’s specific financial statement was updated twice on those occasions. These amendments had an impact on the administrative resources allocated to both the Agency and the Commission, and were therefore considered in the retrospective cost-benefit analysis.

The 2013 *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis estimated that the delegation of programme implementation to INEA would result in savings of around EUR 54 million over the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework compared to management by the Commission (in-house scenario).

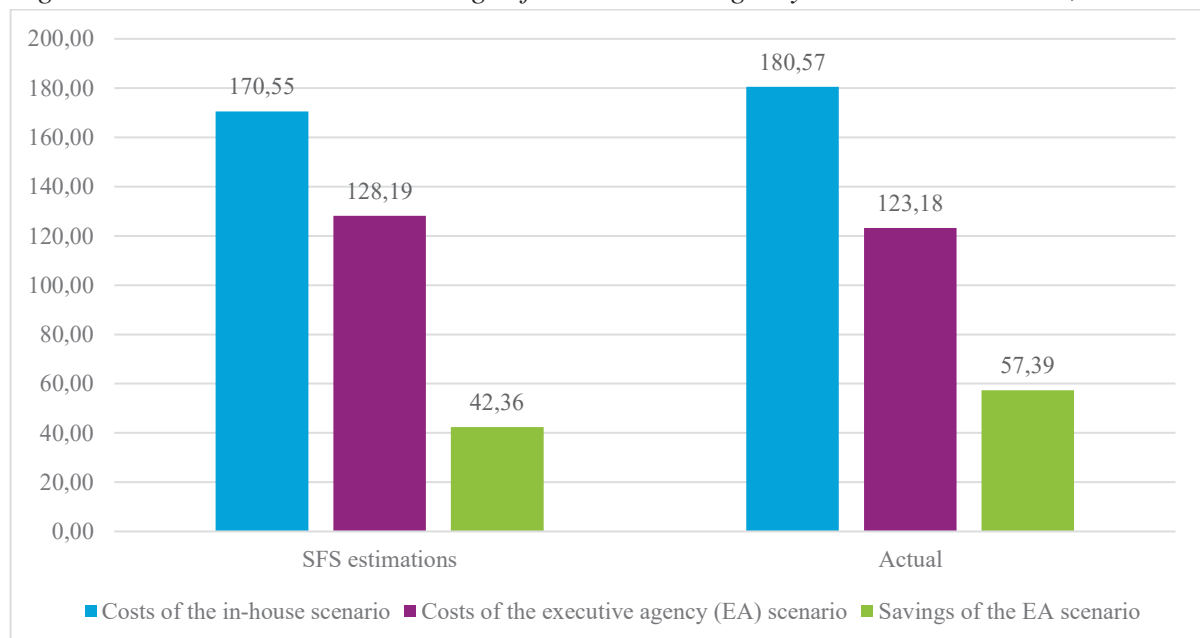
The retrospective cost-benefit analysis showed that the overall actual costs of the executive agency scenario amounted to EUR 123.2 million in 2017-2020. To evaluate the extent to which the actual costs corresponded to the initial specific financial statement estimates, the same assumptions that led to the specific financial statement estimates were followed. The specific financial statement estimates (EUR 128.2 million for 2017-2020) were based on the EU contribution, but INEA’s administrative budget also included contributions from the EEA/EFTA and third countries (EUR 1.3 million in 2017-2020) to manage its additional operational budget. As a result, the actual costs of the executive agency scenario were EUR 121.9 million based on the EU contribution alone, which means that savings amounted to EUR 6.3 million and accounted for 4.9% of the specific financial statement estimates.

Significant cost savings were made in Title II ‘Infrastructure and administrative expenditure’ and Title III ‘Programme Support Expenditure’ of INEA’s administrative budget. As envisaged in the previous evaluation (2014-2016), Title I expenditure, i.e. ‘Staff-related expenditure’, was higher than estimated in the specific financial statement, which related to higher average staff costs (due to salary indexation, promotions and/or increasing staff seniority).

The costs of the executive agency scenario were much lower than the estimated costs of the in-house scenario. During the 2017-2020 period, the actual cost savings deriving from a cost difference between the executive agency scenario and the in-house scenario amounted to EUR 57.4 million (or 31.8% of the estimated costs under the in-house scenario).

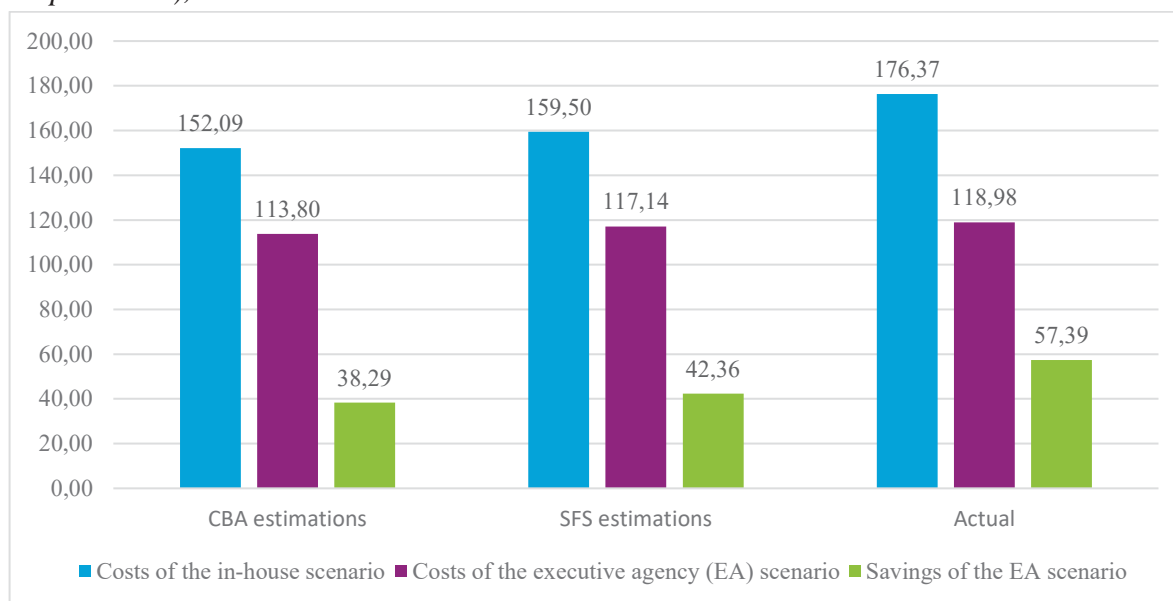
When comparing the savings initially estimated in the specific financial statement and cost-benefit analysis with the actual savings from the delegation of tasks to INEA, it was found that the actual savings during the 2017-2020 period were 35.5% higher than the 2013 specific financial statement estimates (EUR 57.4 million, compared with EUR 42.4 million), and 49.9% higher than the 2013 cost-benefit analysis estimates (EUR 57.4 million, compared with EUR 38.3 million) (Figures 4 and 5). As forecasted in the *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis and the specific financial statement, the savings in the executive agency scenario resulted primarily from a higher share of lower-cost external staff (contract agents) employed within the Agency, and a lower overall number of staff.

Figure 4: Estimated costs and savings of the executive agency scenario 2017-2020, EUR million



Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

Figure 5: Estimated costs and savings of the executive agency scenario 2017-2020 (Title I and Title II expenditure), EUR million



Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

The workload analysis in the retrospective cost-benefit analysis revealed that the actual operational budget in terms of executed commitment appropriations for the 2014-2020 period was 6% lower than the specific financial statement estimates (EUR 34.6 billion instead of EUR 36.9 billion in terms of commitment appropriations). This mainly related to funds from programmes delegated to INEA being transferred to the European Fund for Strategic Investments. Many other parameters of the delegated programmes deviated significantly from the 2013 cost-benefit analysis assumptions (e.g. the higher-than-estimated operational budget of the CEF Telecom programme and the much lower average grant size due in particular to Wifi4EU; the lower-than-anticipated number of study projects under CEF Energy; the return of unused funds from CEF Transport projects that fed into additional ‘reflow calls’ in 2019 and 2020, as well as operational budget changes resulting from the multiannual financial framework review exercise and the annual budget review exercise). However, such deviations were beyond INEA’s control. As a result, the number of authorised staff in INEA was reduced to 254 in 2017 and 313 in 2020, down from the specific financial statement estimate of 272 and 337 respectively.

Experience from the implementation of the programmes also shows that productivity indicators could differ within the same programme (e.g. the administration of lump-sum actions in CEF Telecom was less work-intensive than the administration of real-cost actions; the administration of CEF Energy and CEF Transport studies was less work-intensive than works, etc.). Evidence gained during this evaluation shows that INEA monitored the actual workload and the main factors that contributed to it and then redeployed staff resources (subject to the flexibility provided for in the corresponding legal acts ³⁶).

The evaluation reveals that INEA managed to achieve the productivity level initially estimated in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis. The budget per head ratio in INEA increased from EUR 16.0 million in 2013 to EUR 22.1 million in 2020 ³⁷ – an increase of 38% – despite the

³⁶ Administrative resources could be redistributed within the same programme, but not across the programmes.

³⁷ In commitment appropriations.

programme portfolio managed by the Agency during the 2014-2020 period being significantly more complex.

5. WHAT ARE THE CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED?

5.1 Conclusions

The external study supporting the evaluation of INEA operations from January 2017 to March 2021 confirmed that INEA achieved effective management of the delegated programmes while operating according to the legal framework governing it. The portfolio of tasks delegated to INEA was diverse but provided for synergy opportunities. Due to the Agency's focus on transport and energy, there was room for further delegating tasks connected to green innovations. This occurred by expanding the portfolio to the Innovation Fund – adding the Directorate-General for Climate Action as parent Directorate-General.

INEA adopted several measures for simplifying the management of the programmes, including operational optimisation, streamlining and harmonisation of funding rules and procedures across different programmes and programme strands. However, based on interviews, there was still room for improvement in terms of agile decision-making within the Agency.

Coherence of the thematic areas of programmes increased the possibility of synergies. Various initiatives were noted within the CEF programme and between CEF and Horizon 2020, such as technical meetings with parent Directorates-General, a 'synergies' section on the INEA webpage, and a higher degree of coordination between Horizon 2020 and CEF work programmes.

INEA operated according to the legal framework and responded flexibly to key changes (e.g. integration of Wifi4EU and Innovation Fund programmes, COVID-19, and preparation for the transition to the successor agency). It also adapted to the significant increase in its responsibilities and workload. It successfully implemented delegated programmes and performed well on most of the intended outputs and key performance indicators. Overall, it improved programme management. It maintained strong procedures to ensure the legality and regularity of budget expenditure.

The Agency carried out its communication functions in a satisfactory manner, as recognised by programme participants. INEA's activities for maintaining close communication with beneficiaries and external experts were effective, and participants found that the Agency was accessible throughout the project cycle. However, a proportion of unsuccessful applicants felt they lacked opportunities for communication during the application process. CEF applicants more often showed dissatisfaction with the overall quality of services compared to Horizon 2020 applicants.

INEA's key stakeholders were satisfied overall with the Agency's performance. Representatives of parent Directorates-General believed that INEA was operating in a professional and efficient manner.

INEA's performance on measures of efficiency (e.g. time-to-pay, time-to-grant and time-to-inform) was high. The operational budget was fully executed in all years (100%) in terms of

commitment appropriations. The cost-effectiveness of INEA's management and control arrangements was the best among all agencies.

During the evaluation period, INEA managed to successfully launch and complete almost all calls for proposals envisaged in the work programmes. A significant majority of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants agreed that the requirements for the application process were reasonable and proportionate. The beneficiaries of INEA were generally positive about cooperation with the Agency during the project implementation phase. External experts evaluated their work experience with INEA positively.

INEA was efficient in terms of human resources management, keeping the ratio between its administrative and operational budgets low and stable (around 1%). While good use of IT tools and the continuous search for and implementation of simplifications helped achieve efficiency gains, the available data also pointed to a certain lack of flexibility in various procedures.

The 2018 staff satisfaction survey revealed very reasonable levels of INEA staff engagement (70%) and well-being (63%). The Agency actively addressed shortcomings in its 2017-2020 multiannual human resources strategy and dedicated action plan, including through its staff retention policy. The turnover and vacancy rates in particular have been significantly reduced.

The legal framework and the Memorandum of Understanding set out clear provisions on the delimitation of responsibilities between INEA and its parent Directorates-General. These were also clarified by supporting guidance documents. Further room for improvement remained in the delineation of tasks involving feedback to policy, based on the clear expectations of the parent Directorates-General and the Agency's capacity to fulfil them. The awareness about the delineation of responsibilities and tasks between INEA and its parent Directorates-General was rather high among the beneficiaries and external experts.

The costs of the executive agency scenario were much lower than the estimated costs of the in-house scenario. In 2017-2020, the actual cost savings deriving from a difference in costs between the executive agency scenario and the in-house scenario amounted to EUR 57.4 million (or 31.8% of the estimated costs under the in-house scenario). The cost-benefit analysis carried out for this evaluation reveals that INEA managed to achieve the level of productivity initially estimated in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis.

5.2 Lessons learned

In light of the above, the external study supporting the evaluation identified areas where further improvements are recommended from both the Commission and INEA, aimed at further streamlining the efficient management of the delegated programmes:

- (1) The Commission should continue to optimise the delegation of programmes and tasks between the agencies by (i) ensuring that the thematic areas linked to the European Green Deal are mostly managed by INEA's successor agency (CINEA) alone; (ii) further exploring the good practice of bringing Green Deal-related programmes under the sole management of INEA's successor agency (CINEA); and (iii) ensuring that the future delegation of programmes among agencies is organised in a similar way.

- (2) The Agency should increase the quality of information provided to CEF applicants during the application and selection phase to ensure high levels of transparency and trust. In particular, it should increase: (i) the information for applicants as predefined in the FAQ system embedded in the e-Grants portal; and (ii) improve the clarity of the answers given and the quality of information provided during info days.
- (3) The Agency should continue to explore potential simplifications at different stages of programme management and daily operations, as well as ways to streamline and simplify the decision-making process in day-to-day operations: (i) further explore potential simplifications of various procedures and processes, focusing on how to optimise them in light of the constant expansion of INEA's size and responsibilities; (ii) continue exploring the delegation of decision-making powers to lower-level management (for example, heads of sector) with regard to day-to-day operations to ensure a leaner decision-making process in various situations and in light of various challenges.
- (4) The Agency and the Commission should continue to explore potential solutions to better align the Agency's workload with its resources: (i) further explore opportunities to improve the recruitment process and suitable additional tools to better target potential candidates; (ii) further consider potential ways to improve workload planning practices in order to ensure that various tasks and requests, including potential unforeseen requests relating to feedback to policy, are taken into account at the planning stage; (iii) avoid supporting projects that are too small or organising small calls – these have disproportionate impacts on workload (within the limits of the resources provided for by the cost-benefit analysis); (iv) explore potential ways to further improve communication between the Commission and the Agency, ensuring that the Commission is aware of the digital platforms to which it has direct access and can retrieve necessary data, and that it has the necessary tools and channels to communicate its needs in a timely manner.
- (5) The Agency and the Commission should continue to improve the existing framework for the Agency's provision of feedback to policy to its parent Directorates-General by developing a more structured and streamlined process. Important steps have already been taken in this regard by CINEA – for instance, through feedback from individual programmes into the policy framework/plans and the adoption of a strategy on improving synergies through cross-programme feedback on policy in 2021: (i) further delineate the Agency's responsibilities with regard to providing feedback to policy, taking into account the specific needs of each programme/Directorate-General resources available through feedback to policy plans; (ii) ensure two-way communication between the Commission and INEA to create lean processes for feedback to policy that are suitable for both bodies; (iii) empower and encourage Commission staff to obtain project-related information and data via the digital platforms to which they have access.

It should nevertheless be noted that in the transition phase from INEA to its successor agency - CINEA – (which started operating on 1 April 2021) and beyond, the Agency has constantly improved its operations. CINEA is now responsible for the Green Deal thematic areas, notably in the area of environment, maritime, fisheries and aquaculture, and Just Transition, including Horizon Europe energy topics. It has also improved call procedures for all delegated programmes to the satisfaction of the parent Directorates-General and stakeholders, notably call texts, info days, guidance to the applicants, help desk, FAQs and guidance to experts. All such procedures have been harmonised in view of the widespread use of the corporate e-Grants system. The Agency has also simplified internal procedures, notably in the run-up to

the integration of programmes and staff from EASME, and constantly reviews and allocates staff resources in view of evolving workload. It is also continuously exploring possibilities for synergies and improving feedback to policy in close coordination with the parent Directorates-General.

ANNEX I: PROCEDURAL INFORMATION

The evaluation of INEA's operations had a clearly defined scope:

- The reference period of the evaluation ran from 1 January 2017 to 31 March 2021.
- The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the performance of INEA, as per the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency and coherence.
- The scope of the evaluation covered the implementation of programmes managed by INEA in the reference period: Connecting Europe Facility (CEF Transport, CEF Energy and CEF Telecom, including WiFi4EU), Horizon 2020 Energy and Transport, and – since 2020 – the Innovation Fund.
- The evaluation did not focus on the operational achievements of the delegated programmes, as these are the subject of separate evaluations.
- The current generation of agencies established under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework was outside the scope of this evaluation.

The evaluation INEA was part of the evaluation of all the six agencies, which was made in a coordinated manner based on a supporting study carried out by an external contractor. The preparations for the evaluation started in 2022, when an interservice group was set up by all lead parent Directorates-General and the concerned central services (Directorate-General for Budget and the Secretariat-General). The group meetings (i.e. 6) were chaired by the Common Implementation Centre, set up within the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, who also ensured the secretariat. The evaluation of each agency was led by the respective lead parent Directorate-General (PLAN/2022/1912). The Commission also launched a 'call for evidence' on 10 March 2023 on its 'Have your say' portal. The call was open for feedback on agencies activities until 7 April 2023.

The methodology used for the evaluation was consistent across the agencies in accordance with the criteria provided in the Commission's Better Regulation guidelines. The assessment of the evaluation criteria 'EU added value', i.e. why the EU should act, was not considered relevant as each agency carries out tasks which the Commission transferred to it. The EU added value of the programmes that each agency manages is assessed in the context of the programme evaluations.

Evidence was taken from sources such as the Commission databases, annual reporting exercises, adopted decisions. The supporting study was prepared using a mixed-methods approach at the levels of methodologies and methods and worked on a qualitative methodological approach (based on documentary review and desk research, interviews, answers to open-ended survey questions and qualitative cost-benefit analysis) combined with a quantitative methodological approach (based on administrative and monitoring data, surveys and quantitative cost-benefit analysis), as detailed in Annex II.

Knowledge from the present evaluation will inform internal decision-making in INEA's successor agency, namely the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA), as well as its parent Directorates-General (Directorates-General) with regard to possible improvements to the implementation of legacy programmes and the next generation of programmes by the Commission.

Furthermore, the results of the present evaluation will be useful for accountability purposes. The final evaluation reports regarding the performance of the six agencies will allow the Commission to report the results of the retrospective cost-benefit analysis to the budgetary authority, while informing various European Union (EU) institutions on the value of cost savings achieved as a result of the executive agency scenario compared with the costs of in-house management by the

Commission, as well as identifying potential areas for improvement. The results of this evaluation will be communicated to the Steering Committees of the six current agencies, to the European Parliament, to the Council, and to the European Court of Auditors.

ANNEX II: METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL MODELS USED

Short description of methodology

As mentioned in Section 1 above, the evaluation was supported by a study carried out by an external contractor. The study covered the evaluation of the six executive agencies (INEA, EACEA, EASME, ERCEA, CHAFEA and REA) in the period between 2017/2018 and March 2021 in a coordinated manner, based on the same methodology. The study was structured around a series of evaluation questions outlined in Annex to the study report.

The evaluation methods providing for the collection of qualitative and quantitative information and evidence included:

- Documentary review and desk research concerning all relevant documentation relating to INEA: its legal bases; the memorandum of understanding between the parent Directorates-General and INEA; annual work programmes; annual activity reports; European Court of Auditors (ECA) and Internal Audit Service (IAS) audit reports; previous evaluations and cost-benefit analysis studies; financial documents; action plans; staff satisfaction and staff mobility reports; minutes of the steering committee, management, and coordination meetings; the evaluation relied also on the results of the 2018 staff satisfaction survey;
- Interview programme: a total of 35 interviews were held with 41 interviewees representing the main stakeholders, in three stages:
 - The scoping phase consisted of exploratory and scoping interviews with officials in the lead parent Directorate-General and in the Agency who worked in a position that required them to have a strategic outlook and be familiar with the overall key developments that took place during the evaluation period (1 interviewee in Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport and 2 interviewees in INEA);
 - The main phase consisted of semi-structured interviews, based on survey questionnaires tailored to each target group to ensure that all evaluation questions and all aspects of the organisational model were covered (35 interviewees - staff of INEA and its parent Directorates-General; unsuccessful and successful applicants (beneficiaries); and external experts contracted to assist in the evaluation of proposals under the delegated programmes' calls (CEF, Horizon 2020 and Innovation Fund);
 - The follow-up phase consisted of in-depth interviews to contextualise and deepen the understanding of the data emerging during the previous stages of the interview programme and the data collection process overall (3 interviewees in Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport and INEA).
- Survey programme: two surveys were carried out as part of the evaluation:
 - Survey A targeted the unsuccessful and successful applicants (beneficiaries) and external experts contracted by INEA. The total number of persons targeted was 3 154, of which 342 responded (response rate of 10.9%);
 - Survey B targeted external experts. The total number of persons targeted was 1 708, of which 523 responded (response rate of 30.6%).
- A retrospective Cost–Benefit Analysis, including an analysis of the workload and of the cost-effectiveness of the delegation of programme implementation of the agency, comparing the actual indicators with the estimates in the *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis and Specific Financial Statement of 2013.

In addition, building on the results of the desk research and the interview / survey programme, and to shed light on the success stories and lessons learned as a result of key developments during the evaluation period, an in-depth analysis of INEA's performance in two areas was carried out: (1) its retention policy introduced to address high levels of staff turnover, and (2) its regular workload analysis, to address high workload and improve planning. Analysis of these cases has provided evidence of benefit to the implementation of any future reorganisations as well as insights into possible synergies across the agencies.

Limitations and robustness of findings

The external contractors consulted a representative sample of Commission and INEA staff and stakeholders (both applicants of rejected proposals and beneficiaries) and external experts in the course of the evaluation. Compared to the overall population, as expected, unsuccessful applicants participated less actively in the survey than programme beneficiaries; both categories of applicants participated less actively than external experts.

No sampling bias was observed as the profile of the respondents to the surveys was very similar to the overall population, guaranteeing statistical representativeness. The non-response bias (not all characteristics of the group that did not reply had been captured in full) was mitigated through triangulation with the results of follow-up interviews. The triangulation approach, using multi-level and multi-stakeholder dimension in the data collection, ensured the robustness and reliability of the data and information used to draw up conclusions in the supporting study.

With regard to the survey, it should be noted that the successor agency – CINEA – launched a stakeholder satisfaction survey of its own in 2022 (covering also applicants and beneficiaries of calls for proposals launched by INEA prior to March 2021). It was therefore decided not to target recipients of that survey (for the calls for proposals before March 2021) given that many questions overlapped, which might lead to survey fatigue among the applicants.

The target group for the survey was thus smaller than originally foreseen. As the evaluation team had access to the results of CINEA's survey of 2022, these were also integrated into the analysis for this evaluation. The limitation has thus been sufficiently mitigated, and the perspectives of applicants excluded in the present evaluation survey have still been reflected in the findings.

A mix of parent Directorates-General and INEA managers and policy / project officers were interviewed extensively. Some answers to evaluation questions, notably in the 'Coherence' section, rely largely on interview and desk research data. Some views from Commission and Agency staff gathered from the interviews and mentioned in the study illustrate personal experience, and they may not be representative of overall relations between the Commission and the Agency.

ANNEX III: EVALUATION MATRIX AND ANSWERS TO THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS (BY CRITERION)

The core task of the evaluation was to respond to evaluation questions relating to the effectiveness, efficiency and coherence of INEA as defined by the Better Regulation guidelines. Evidence-based answers, including points of comparison and sources, can be found in Section 4 of the evaluation study carried out by an external contractor³⁸.

³⁸ [Study supporting the evaluation of CHAFEA, EACEA, EASME, ERCEA, INEA & REA \(2017/2018-2021\) - Publications Office of the EU \(europa.eu\)](#)

ANNEX IV: OVERVIEW OF BENEFITS AND COSTS

The benefits and costs are detailed in the cost-benefit analysis outlined in Section 4.2 above and Annex V below.

ANNEX V: COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

A retrospective cost-benefit analysis was performed to assess whether the estimates (of savings) and conclusions of the 2013 *ex-ante* cost-benefit analysis and specific financial statement are still valid when compared with the actual situation, and what the overall savings are.

The following approach was adopted:

- To use data on INEA's actual performance (actual execution of the administrative budget, actual staffing, etc.) for the executive agency scenario.
- In order to ensure the comparability and validity of results, to follow the assumptions laid down in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis and specific financial statement, and provide estimates of the comparable 'actual' in-house scenario (the comparator), which would best reflect the actual situation.
- Based on these estimates, to assess whether the conclusions of the *ex-ante* cost-benefit analysis and specific financial statement are still valid when compared to the actual situation, and what the overall savings are.

To deconstruct the 'actual' in-house scenario (the 'comparator'), estimates were based on the following cost-benefit analysis/specific financial statement assumptions:

- The number and composition of staff at the Commission under an in-house scenario corresponds to specific financial statement estimations³⁹. Additional contract agents were added to the estimated number of Commission staff for 2017-2020 (five contract agents), to reflect additional authorised staff at INEA financed from the contributions of EEA/EFTA and participation of candidate countries and/or third countries, to manage additional operational budget not covered in the cost-benefit analysis/specific financial statement resource calculations.
- Commission staff costs and overheads correspond to the average costs set by Directorate-General for Budget for the estimates of human resources and overheads in legislative financial statements for the respective year.
- Programme support expenditure (Title III) remains the same under both the in-house scenario and the executive agency scenario.

The table below presents the results of our analysis of the estimated actual costs of the in-house scenario, and the actual costs of the executive agency scenario.

The table below presents the results of the analysis of the estimated actual costs of the in-house scenario and the actual costs of the executive agency scenario.

³⁹ Additional resources allocated under specific financial statement amendments are also considered.

Estimated actual costs of the in-house (Commission) scenario and actual costs of the executive agency scenario, thousand EUR

	2017		2018		2019		2020		Total 2017- 2020
	No.	Cost	No.	Cost	No.	Cost	No.	Cost	
<i>In-house scenario</i>									
<i>Commission</i>									
Title I. Staff-related expenditure	333.7	31,331	345.8	33,753	357.7	36,130	388.3	40,530	141,744
<i>Establishment plan posts</i>	230.1	26,462	238.6	28,393	246.9	30,369	273.9	34,238	119,461
<i>Contract agents</i>	103.6	4,869	107.2	5,360	110.8	5,762	114.4	6,292	22,283
Title II. Infrastructure and administrative expenditure		7,675		8,299		8,943		9,708	34,624
Title III. Programme support expenditure		1,137		1,159		1,076		831	4,203
TOTAL COST	333.7	40,143	345.8	43,212	357.7	46,149	388.3	51,068	180,571
<i>Executive agency scenario</i>									
<i>INEA</i>									
Title I. Staff related expenditure	254	18,981	287	21,154	299	23,853	313	25,770	89,758
<i>Establishment plan posts</i>	65	7,609	67	8,229	70	8,693	77	9,511	34,042
<i>Contract agents</i>	189	9,844	220	11,384	229	13,572	236	14,559	49,359
<i>Interim supportive agents and trainees</i>		403		287		272		264	1,226
<i>Professional development and recruitment costs</i>		1,125		1,254		1,316		1,436	5,131
Title II. Infrastructure and administrative expenditure		4,183		4,230		3,909		4,311	16,633
Title III. Programme support expenditure		1,137		1,159		1,076		831	4,203

	2017		2018		2019		2020		Total 2017- 2020
	No.	Cost	No.	Cost	No.	Cost	No.	Cost	
Total INEA cost:		24,301		26,543		28,838		30,912	110,594
<i>Commission</i>									0
Title I. Staff-related expenditure	23.4	2,215	23.6	2,325	23.6	2,406	29.6	3,210	10,156
<i>Establishment plan posts</i>	<i>16.4</i>	<i>1,886</i>	<i>16.6</i>	<i>1,975</i>	<i>16.6</i>	<i>2,042</i>	<i>22.6</i>	<i>2,825</i>	8,728
<i>Contract agents</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>329</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>350</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>364</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>385</i>	1,428
Title II. Infrastructure and administrative expenditure		538		566		590		740	2,435
Total Commission cost:		2,753		2,892		2,996		3,950	12,591
TOTAL COST	277.4	27,054	310.6	29,435	322.6	31,834	342.6	34,862	123,185
ESTIMATED SAVINGS	56.3	13,089	35.2	13,777	35.1	14,315	45.7	16,206	57,386

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

The analysis led to the conclusion that:

- The overall actual costs of the executive agency scenario⁴⁰ amounted to EUR 123.2 million during the period 2017-2020. To evaluate the extent to which the actual costs corresponded to the initial specific financial statement estimates, it is important to follow the same assumptions that led such specific financial statement estimates. The specific financial statement estimates (EUR 128.2 million during the period 2017-2020) were based on the EU contribution, but INEA's administrative budget also included contributions from the EEA/EFTA and third countries (EUR 1.3 million during 2017-2020) to manage its additional operational budget. Consequently, based on the EU contribution alone, the actual costs of the executive agency scenario constituted EUR 121.9 million, which means that savings amounted to EUR 6.3 million and accounted for 4.9% of the specific financial statement estimates. Significant cost savings occurred in Title II, 'Infrastructure and administrative expenditure' and Title III 'Programme Support Expenditure' of INEA's administrative budget. Title I, 'Staff-related expenditure' was higher than estimated in the specific financial statement, which related to higher average staff costs.
- The costs of the executive agency scenario were much lower than the estimated costs of the in-house scenario. During the period 2017-2020, the actual cost savings deriving from a cost difference between the executive agency scenario and the in-house scenario amounted to EUR 57.4 million (or 31.8% of the estimated costs under the in-house scenario).
- Comparing the savings initially estimated in the specific financial statement and cost-benefit analysis with the actual savings from the delegation of tasks to INEA, it was found that the actual savings during the 2017-2020 period were 35.5% higher than the initial specific

⁴⁰ Including the cost of coordination and monitoring by the Commission, and the costs covered from non-EU contributions.

financial statement estimates (EUR 57.4 million, compared with EUR 42.4 million), and 49.9% higher than the initial cost-benefit analysis estimates (EUR 57.4 million, compared with EUR 38.3 million). As forecasted in the specific financial statement and the *ex-ante* cost-benefit analysis, the savings in the executive agency scenario resulted primarily from a higher share of lower-cost external personnel (contract agents) employed within the Agency, and a lower overall number of staff⁴¹.

⁴¹ The number of staff in the executive agency scenario was reduced; however, the in-house scenario was not modified in the specific financial statement.

ANNEX VI. STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION – SYNOPSIS REPORT

This Annex summarises the stakeholder consultation that was carried out as part of the evaluation, based on the Commission’s Better Regulation guidelines.

1. Outline of the consultation strategy

The consultation strategy was designed and carried out as follows:



Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency, based on the Commission’s Better Regulation guidelines.

Considering the scope of the Agency’s activities, the consultation included various categories of stakeholders, in particular Commission officials from the parent Directorates-General, Agency staff, beneficiaries of and unsuccessful applicants to the programmes managed by INEA, as well as external experts contracted by the Agency.

Two surveys, an extensive interview programme and the triangulation of various data sources were carried out.

CONSULTATION ACTIVITY		TARGET GROUPS	DATE
Surveys	Survey A	Beneficiaries of and unsuccessful applicants to the programmes managed by INEA	29 November– 9 December 2022
	Survey B	External experts contracted by INEA	29 November – 9 December 2022
Interview programme		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commission officials from parent Directorates-General - Director of INEA - Heads of department and heads of unit - Members of the INEA Steering Committee - Beneficiaries of and unsuccessful applicants to the programmes managed by INEA - External experts contracted by INEA 	9 August 2022 – 24 January 2023

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

These different types of stakeholder consultation activities complemented each other. The survey of and interviews with unsuccessful applicants, beneficiaries and external experts informed questions on the Agency’s effectiveness and efficiency. Interviews with the Commission and INEA officials

not only provided information on these questions, but also allowed coherence-related evaluation questions to be covered.

Consultation activity and evaluation criteria covered

	Effectiveness	Efficiency	Coherence
Interviews with the Commission	✓	✓	✓
Interviews with INEA	✓	✓	✓
Interviews with unsuccessful applicants, beneficiaries and experts	✓	✓	
Survey of INEA's beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants	✓	✓	
Survey of external experts contracted by INEA	✓	✓	

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

2. Key results of consultation activities

2.1 Summarised results of the survey

Two surveys were carried out: Survey A for applicants (beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants) and Survey B for external experts. The questions in both surveys aimed to ensure comparability across groups of respondents, as well as complementarity with the other evaluation methods used, including interviews. The surveys ran for around 2 weeks.

Overall, fewer beneficiaries and applicants were reached than experts (see table below). Experts also showed a higher response rate, with 30.6% of those contacted filling out the survey (523 out of 1 708). This compares with an average response rate of 11.5% among beneficiaries and applicants (165 out of 1 180 beneficiaries contacted, and 177 out of 1 908 unsuccessful applicants contacted). Among the respondents to Survey A, a greater number of the unsuccessful applicants were involved in Horizon 2020 calls (139 out of 177) compared with CEF calls (38 out of 177). Among the beneficiaries, slightly more were connected to CEF programmes (98 out of 165). Commission and INEA staff did not take part in the surveys, only in the interview programme.

Main statistics on the implementation of the surveys

Target group	Full launch of the survey (majority of all invitations sent on this date)	Survey closure date	Population targeted/no. of invitations sent out	No. of responses received	Response rate*	No. of responses included in the analysis after cleaning
Beneficiaries	29 November 2022	9 December 2022	1 199	Partial*: 0 Complete: 165 Total: 165	Total: 13.8% Only including complete: 13.8%	165
Unsuccessful applicants	29 November 2022	9 December 2022	1 955	Partial*: 0 Complete: 177 Total: 177	Total: 9.1% Only including complete: 9.1%	177
Experts	29 November 2022	9 December 2022	1 708	Partial*: 29 Complete: 494 Total: 523	Total: 30.6% Only including complete: 28.9%	523

Note: Response rate was calculated using the formula: Response rate = $\frac{\text{No. of responses received}}{\text{No. of invitations sent out}} \times 100\%$

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

The survey data fed into all of the evaluation questions, in particular those aspects in which the opinions of respondents are of prime importance. A summary of the findings from the survey data, grouped by the evaluation criteria, is presented below.

Effectiveness

In general, beneficiaries and experts were satisfied with the overall quality of programme management by INEA – 96% of experts (468 out of 486); 92% of beneficiaries (142 out of 155). Among unsuccessful applicants, satisfaction only reached 60% (89 out of 148). Out of all applicants, a very high number would apply again for funding following their experience with INEA – 99% among successful applicants (154 out of 156); 89% among unsuccessful applicants (151 out of 169). Similarly, 99% of experts (487 out of 491) replied that they would be willing to work with the Agency in future.

The effectiveness of the Agency's evaluation and selection process for applications was assessed differently by the groups surveyed. Unsuccessful applicants expressed dissatisfaction with the selection process and the feedback given. Only 45% of unsuccessful applicants (77 out of 171) agreed that the evaluation was fair, and 43% (72 out of 167) had objections to the outcome. Few among the unsuccessful applicants believed they had received useful and practical feedback (34%; 57 out of 170), and few believed they had received clear information as to why their application was rejected (38%; 65 out of 171). This was in contrast to the perceptions of successful applicants, who mostly viewed the evaluation and selection process positively: 85% (123 out of 144) believed that the process was fair and transparent, while 86% (119 out of 139) considered the feedback given to be useful and practical. More than half of the experts surveyed also agreed that the selection process was transparent (63%; 185 out of 294).

The survey results supported the effectiveness of INEA's communication activities. Most applicants believed they knew where to send questions when preparing and submitting the application – during preparation, 79% of successful applicants (101 out of 128) and 57% of unsuccessful applicants (81% out of 143); during submission, 79% successful applicants (102 out of 129) and 63% unsuccessful applicants (92 out of 145). Most participants also held a positive view of the info days organised for proposals: 87% of successful applicants (89 out of 102) and 75% of unsuccessful applicants (82 out of 110) considered them important sources of information. Among the external experts, 98% (469 out of 480) also agreed INEA staff were responsive.

Beneficiaries were satisfied with the Agency's availability and accessibility during different stages of the project implementation cycle – 95% (134 out of 141) during grant preparation; 90% (131 out of 144) during project implementation; and 96% (94 out of 98) in the event of grant or project amendments. Most beneficiaries (86%; 101 out of 117) found the kick-off meeting useful, while 89% (127 out of 142) believed that the answers they received from INEA were clear and accurate.

A high percentage of all programme participants believed that the funding opportunities provided by INEA were well promoted – specifically, 78% of experts (387 out of 496), 77% of successful applicants (121 out of 157) and 61% of unsuccessful applicants (95 out of 157) agreed that programmes managed by INEA are well promoted.

Efficiency

Most survey respondents were satisfied with the efficiency of the application process. To most applicants, the information given was clear and helpful – 87% of successful applicants (129 out of 149), and 85% of unsuccessful applicants (146 out of 172). The information was also easy to find for 86% of successful applicants (137 out of 160) and 87% of unsuccessful applicants (150 out of 173). Fewer applicants (but still a high number) believed that the requirements for application were reasonable – 79% of successful applicants (120 out of 152), and 69% of unsuccessful applicants (119 out of 172). Both groups shared an appreciation for the user-friendliness of the e-form for applications – 84% of successful applicants (114 out of 136) and 78% of unsuccessful applicants

(131 out of 169) agreed that it was user-friendly). Similar appreciation was expressed for the user-friendliness of the programme guides – 79% of successful applicants (103 out of 131) and 71% of unsuccessful applicants (119 out of 168). In terms of the overall administrative work required from applicants, out of the 69 companies that answered, most required one or two full-time employees per month for the whole application process (22 answered one; 17 answered two; the rest of the answers varied widely). Although it is not possible to find out how much time applicants spend on their applications based on the surveys, it appears that they took between 8 months and a year based on the interviews. Most interviewees confirmed that at least one employee had to dedicate their entire working time to administrative tasks throughout that period.

Among unsuccessful applicants, 48% (51 out of 106) were not satisfied with the time it took for INEA to respond to their queries during the application process. Meanwhile, 80% of successful applicants (85 out of 106) reported being satisfied. Similar differences existed between the groups with regard to satisfaction with the application feedback mentioned above.

In relation to INEA's work with external experts, survey respondents found the process of becoming an expert efficient. 76% (228 out of 299) believed that information on how to become an expert was easy to find, while 96% (483 out of 502) believed that the contract was easy to access and sign. The communication tools and the frequency of communication were also satisfactory for 91% of experts (416 out of 458), including the web tool for Legal Entities / Bank Accounts validation, which was easy to use according to 83% of experts (337 out of 405). 94% (442 out of 472) believed that the electronic evaluation system was also easy to access, while 93% (439 out of 471) believed it was easy to use.

Beneficiaries also had a positive view of efficiency in relation to project implementation. They found the time-to-grant appropriate – 81% (125 out of 154) agreed this was within a reasonable time. Slightly fewer – 78% (127 out of 153) – agreed that the time-to-inform was appropriate. Overall, 89% (137 out of 154) found the granting process clear and transparent, with 87% (85 out of 98) also being satisfied with the time it took the Agency to process grant amendments.

The Agency's monitoring requirements and auditing processes were generally viewed positively by beneficiaries. 89% (135 out of 152) believed that the monitoring requirements were clear and user-friendly, while 86% (124 out of 145) believed they were useful for project implementation. In general, 93% (140 out of 150) said that requests from INEA were clear overall.

Not many respondents were audited, but among these, 82% (37 out of 45) believed that the time it took INEA to conduct an audit was appropriate, and 85% (41 out of 48) believed that the scope of the information requested (for monitoring/audit) was reasonable. Overall, 85% (40 out of 47) judged the auditing process to be smooth.

Overall, payment processes were likewise well appreciated: 92% (127 out of 138) of beneficiaries believed the process was smooth. External experts appreciated the timeliness of the process: 97% (251 out of 259) were satisfied with the timeliness of reimbursement, while 93% (455 out of 489) were satisfied with the timeliness of payments. However, some experts believed that their remuneration was not enough for their work. Correspondingly, only 68% (338 out of 491) agreed that the payment received matched their efforts.

Lastly, most programme participants appreciated INEA's flexibility during the pandemic: 96% of beneficiaries (129 out of 134), 94% of unsuccessful applicants (80 out of 85) and 96% of external experts (393 out of 409) believed that the Agency maintained the quality of its services.

Coherence

Most programme participants were aware of the involvement of the Commission, but the delineation of responsibilities between the Commission and INEA was not clear to some participants. 83% of experts (123 out of 509), 88% of beneficiaries (140 out of 160) and slightly fewer unsuccessful applicants (60%; 101 out of 169) knew that the Agency was entrusted to

manage the programme by the Commission. However, fewer people believed that the delineation of responsibilities between the two bodies was clear. Among external experts, 73% (365 out of 500) considered the division of responsibilities between the Commission and INEA to be clear, compared with 69% of beneficiaries (109 out of 159) and only 44% of unsuccessful applicants (73 out of 165).

2.2. Summarised results of the interview programme

The interview programme encompassed a scoping phase, a main phase and follow-up interviews with the representatives of the Commission and the Agency, as well as with beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and external experts contracted by the Agency. The programme was designed to embrace a wide variety of views, including those coming from the Commission and Agency as well as those of other stakeholders.

The interviews were conducted in line with a standardised questionnaire, including questions on the evaluation criteria and adjusted to the experience of individual stakeholders. Each interview was recorded, and interview notes and/or transcripts were prepared on the basis of the recording. As envisaged, a total of 24 interviews with 26 interviewees were conducted:

- 7 interviews (9 interviewees) with representatives of parent Directorates-General;
- 12 interviews (13 interviewees) with representatives of INEA and its successor agencies;
- 9 interviews (11 interviewees) with unsuccessful applicants or beneficiaries and service providers of programmes managed by INEA;
- 1 interview (1 interviewee) with an external expert who worked on project evaluations;
- 1 interview (1 interviewee) with INEA staff, conducted for the purposes of follow-up and validation;
- 1 interview (1 interviewee) with a representative of a parent Directorate-General, conducted for the purposes of follow-up and validation.

The interview data fed into responses to the relevant evaluation questions, in particular aspects of those questions to which the opinions of the interviewees are of prime importance. All evidence from the interviews was incorporated into the evaluation's final report. A summary of the findings from the interview data is presented below.

Effectiveness

Based on the interviews with INEA and the Commission, the Agency followed the legal framework and did not overstep its boundaries. It was also flexible in incorporating new programmes and adapting to changing circumstances.

Overall, key stakeholders were very satisfied with INEA's work and effectiveness. Staff also believed they had established good relationships with beneficiaries and applicants and that overall, key stakeholders were satisfied. Both INEA's employees and the Commission agreed that INEA is reliable.

Staff said that the evaluation process was of high quality, and stressed that there were few redress cases. However, more than one interviewee highlighted the need for greater transparency in the evaluation process, e.g. more information on the outcomes of the selection process could be made publicly available. In connection with this, the external expert who was interviewed believed that applications were not fully transparent.

Overall, all programme participants held a very positive view of the Agency's communication activities. A few applicants requested more input from the Agency during implementation (i.e. monthly check-ins, sending alerts for deliverables, site visits). One beneficiary also suggested project management meetings, with the Agency and the beneficiary organisation present. Many applicants highlighted info days as being especially useful and a crucial source of information. Some applicants, however, found the application process burdensome and also suggested training,

webinars or other training/learning materials for new applicants to make the process more accessible.

According to interviews, the Agency's role in relation to feedback to policy was not standardised. However, most parties shared the view that INEA delivered effective inputs. Many interviewees stressed the importance of informal communication for delivering feedback. Although the majority of them held positive views, the outcome of interviews points to a mismatch between the Commission and INEA with regard to expectations for the delivery of this function. One official from the Commission believed that Agency employees should not be *too close to* policy areas, whereas INEA employees believed that requests from the Commission were not always sufficiently clear.

Employees believed that the Agency's work on external communications was effective. For example, they mentioned its good practice in flagging success stories. The interview programme suggested that external communication was usually organised together with units in the parent Directorates-General. Interviews also indicated that communication is very resource-intensive, and one Commission official suggested that the Agency's resources could be increased to make it more effective in this regard. Importantly, applicants and the external expert appreciated INEA's work on external communication. All beneficiaries believed that sufficient opportunities were given to share project results and that it is not solely INEA's responsibility to encourage communication. Two applicants said that greater visibility might be needed.

Efficiency

Overall, most of the representatives of INEA and parent Directorates-General, as well as successful and unsuccessful applicants interviewed, said that the Agency was efficient at managing applications and communication with beneficiaries, and that it was more efficient than an in-house scenario would have been.

Most INEA employees were satisfied with the organisational structure of the Agency, and believed that it contributed to its efficiency. Most agreed that decentralisation, standardisation and communication between units increased efficiency and contributed to smooth operations. Two employees said that having the coordination of evaluation not located within individual operational units was not efficient, but this situation was later changed when CINEA was set up. One employee also advised that financial engineering positions could be fully relocated into individual operational units, but another employee disagreed. Another employee did not support energy efficiency areas being split between EASME and INEA, and believed that overall, having six parent Directorates-General introduced inefficiencies into management. Lastly, multiple employees expressed that they might not have enough resources to allow efficient feedback to policy.

INEA staff mostly held a slightly negative perception of workload management, but a positive view of human resource management practices at the Agency, especially in relation to practices that address the challenges related to high workload. It was mentioned that workload analysis was helpful in allocating resources and to gain an overview for managing human resources. Employees saw career development exercises, introduced by INEA during the evaluation period, as an improvement. As they explained, this was because the previous lack of prospects for some staff members had a negative effect on staff retention. Interviewees also said that the Agency followed up on the results of the staff satisfaction survey.

The IT tools used by the Agency were mostly appreciated, although some interviewees said it took them some time to get used to them. Most employees believed that with further sub-delegation and harmonisation between programmes, the Agency could increase its efficiency. They also expressed the view that involving staff in thought exercises to improve efficiency and overall communication between departments was beneficial to INEA.

Interviewed applicants found the application process time-consuming but clear overall. Multiple applicants mentioned that with experience, the process became easier. They generally shared a

positive view of the materials provided and the user-friendliness of the tools, although one person expressed criticism of the applicant portal. Many applicants said that attaching formal documents from national ministries (Member State signatures) takes a lot of time and makes the application process stressful. Others thought that having two-stage applications would reduce wasted resources, because proposals would not be submitted by organisations who have a similar background.

INEA staff believed that application evaluation was of good quality and efficient. Most applicants (both successful and unsuccessful) shared this view: they mostly found the feedback to be timely and clear. Only one interviewee expressed dissatisfaction with the feedback, as they believed it was not clear and was therefore not useful. Another interviewee was dissatisfied with its timeliness, as they believed it took INEA a long time to make a decision. The external expert interviewed believed that the deadlines for experts were short and the workload was too much for evaluations – INEA was not flexible in this regard.

INEA staff and programme participants who were interviewed were also satisfied with INEA's efficiency and did not have ideas on how to create further efficiency gains. Staff and participants both stressed that the Agency reacted quickly to the pandemic and switched to virtual evaluations. According to employees, contact with beneficiaries remained good. Beneficiaries generally believed that project implementation was smooth and that INEA was accessible and responsive during this time. Many among them noticed simplifications and greater flexibility in processes during the evaluation process. Contracting and monitoring requirements were also viewed positively, although one beneficiary believed that the amount of work required to audit their organisation was too high and not efficient.

Coherence

Both INEA staff and Commission officials found the division of tasks and responsibilities to be clear, and all interviewees believed that the Agency acted appropriately. Similarly, with the exception of one of the programme participants interviewed, the distinction between the Agency and the Commission was clear.

The results of the interview programme suggest that some INEA employees regarded some of the tasks requested by the Agency to be outside their mandate. One employee said that the memorandum of understanding is too broad and the Commission can delegate anything to the Agency. Another employee expressed the criticism that too much input is required from INEA into work programmes. One employee said that it should not be necessary for INEA to instruct applicants with regard to applications, while another believed that popularising project results is not the job of the Agency but of beneficiaries. At the same time, several Commission officials criticised INEA's reluctance to carry out certain tasks.

Most of the Commission officials interviewed believed that INEA freed the Commission to work on policy-related tasks. Many among them appreciated INEA's ad hoc and flexible contributions to policymaking, although a few interviewees believed they were not always able to gain sufficient information about programme outcomes and lessons learned. On the positive side, multiple interviewees from the Commission mentioned that they enjoyed good informal relations with Agency staff, which helped in obtaining know-how from projects. Most INEA employees and Commission officials also believed that the reporting processes set up were sufficient to achieve a good level of understanding within the Commission with regard to programme outcomes.

2.3. Comparison of the results of consultation activities

The table below presents the key results per consultation activity, organised by evaluation criteria as well as by the level of consistency, complementarity and contradiction of results across consultation activities. Overall, as summarised in the table, there was high convergence in the results of different consultation activities.

Key findings of the consultation activities

Evaluation criterion	Survey	Interview programme	Consistency of results across consultation activities	Complementarity of results across consultation activities	Contradiction of results across consultation activities
Effectiveness	<p>In general, beneficiaries and experts were satisfied with the overall quality of programme management by INEA.</p> <p>The effectiveness of evaluation and selection processes was assessed differently by the groups surveyed. Unsuccessful applicants expressed dissatisfaction with the selection process and the feedback given, while successful applicants were more positive.</p> <p>The effectiveness of INEA's communication activities was supported by the survey. Beneficiaries were satisfied with the Agency's availability and accessibility during different stages of the project implementation cycle. High percentages of all programme participants believed that the funding opportunities provided by INEA were well promoted.</p>	<p>The Agency followed the legal framework and did not overstep its boundaries. Overall, key stakeholders were very satisfied with INEA's work and effectiveness.</p> <p>Staff said that the evaluation process was of high quality and stressed that there were few redress cases. However, more than one interviewee highlighted the need for greater transparency in the evaluation process, e.g. more information about the outcomes of the selection process could be made publicly available.</p> <p>Overall, all programme participants held very positive views of the Agency's communication activities.</p>	High	High	Low
Efficiency	<p>Beneficiaries held a positive view of efficiency in relation to project implementation, including reporting requirements, payments and auditing. Most programme participants appreciated INEA's flexibility during the pandemic. Most survey participants were satisfied with the efficiency of the application process. For most, the information given was clear, helpful and easy to find.</p> <p>Almost half of unsuccessful applicants were not</p>	<p>Overall, most interviewees among INEA representatives, representatives of parent Directorates-General and successful and unsuccessful applicants believed that the Agency was efficient at managing applications and communication with beneficiaries, and that it was more efficient than an in-house scenario would have been.</p> <p>Most INEA employees were satisfied with</p>	High	High	Low

	<p>satisfied with the time it took for INEA to respond to their queries during their applications. Whereas most of the successful applicants were satisfied.</p>	<p>the organisational structure of the Agency and believed that it contributed to its efficiency.</p> <p>INEA staff mostly held slightly negative perceptions of workload management, but had a positive view of human resource management practices at the Agency, especially with regard to practices that address challenges related to high workload.</p> <p>The applicants interviewed found the application process time-consuming but clear overall; multiple applicants mentioned that the process became easier with experience.</p> <p>INEA staff believed that the evaluation of applications was of good quality and efficient. Most applicants (both unsuccessful and successful) shared this view: they generally found the feedback provided to be timely and clear.</p>			
Coherence	<p>Most programme participants were aware of the Commission's involvement, but the delineation of responsibilities between the Commission and INEA was not clear for some participants.</p>	<p>Both INEA staff and Commission officials found the division of tasks and responsibilities clear, and all interviewees believed that the Agency acted appropriately.</p> <p>Most of the Commission officials interviewed believed that INEA allowed the Commission to concentrate on policy-related tasks.</p>	High	High	Low

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency