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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Application of Decision 573/2014/EU on enhanced cooperation between Public Employment Services (PES)

1. Introduction

Public Employment Services (PES) are at the forefront of responding to the challenge of unemployment and exclusion across Europe. Pursuant to Decision No 573/2014/EU[1] ('the Decision'), the European Parliament and the Council set up the European Network of Public Employment Services ('the Network') in May 2014 as a platform for closer cooperation between these organisations. This report is a review of the Decision's application. In accordance with Article 10 of the Decision, the report will assess to what extent the Network has helped to achieve the objectives of the Decision[2] and whether it has fulfilled its tasks so far. It will also examine how the Network has developed and implemented Benchlearning – the process of connecting performance comparisons with mutual learning.[3]

Section 2 of the report examines each of the Network's objectives and looks at activities that it has undertaken.[4] Section 3 reviews the implementation of the Benchlearning initiative, describing the methodology, the results so far and ongoing developments. Section 4 concludes the report, drawing some lessons from the first two and a half years of implementation of the Decision.

About the European Network of Public Employment Services

The Network was established in May 2014 following the Decision to improve cooperation between PES in Europe. The Network includes PES from all EU Member States, Norway and Iceland, as well as the European Commission.

European-level collaboration between PES began before the Decision was adopted. In 1997, the Commission set up an informal advisory group of heads of PES. The aim was to promote cooperation, exchange and mutual learning between the group's member organisations and to receive specialist feedback on employment policy initiatives. Building on this, the Commission made a proposal to formalise PES cooperation. It wanted to provide a platform to compare PES performance at European level, identify good practice and foster mutual learning so that the PES could improve their services. It also wanted to give the PES more opportunities to help develop innovative, evidence-based policies in line with the Europe 2020 objectives.

[1] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.159.01.0032.01.ENG
[2] As set out in Article 3.
[3] With specific reference to point 1(a) in Article 4. This calls on the Network to develop and implement Union-wide, evidence based benchlearning among PES to compare, with appropriate methodology, the performance of their activities in the following areas: contributing to reducing unemployment for all age groups, the duration of unemployment and inactivity; filling vacancies; customer satisfaction with PES services.
[4] For ongoing and future activities please consult the 2017 work programme: http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=17001&langId=en

Governance of the Network

The Network has a robust governance structure.

Network Board

The Network has a governing Board whose members are heads of PES from each EU Member State, Norway and Iceland, as well as the Commission. The Employment Committee (EMCO)[5] has observer status. The Board meets twice a year in the Member State which holds the EU Presidency. It sets the strategic direction of the Network, debates labour market developments and monitors the work programme's implementation.

Advisors for European PES Affairs (AFEPAs)

Each Board member appoints an Advisor for European PES Affairs (AFEPA) to help run the Network. The advisors meet twice a year before Board meetings to review Network activities and agree draft positions. The EMCO secretariat is invited to attend these meetings to support collaboration between the Network and the EMCO.

Network Secretariat

The Network Board is assisted by a Secretariat provided by the Commission (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion). The Secretariat, in cooperation with the chair and vice-chairs, prepares the Board meetings and helps implement the annual work programme. It also organises and chairs the meetings of the AFEPAs.

The Network's activities[6]

The PES Benchlearning system is at the core of the Network's activities. It aims to improve PES performance in addressing European labour market challenges. Benchlearning links indicator-based benchmarking with mutual learning. Good practices are identified and findings are used for mutual learning activities to increase the quality of service delivery to job-seekers and employers. Assessment is both qualitative and quantitative and leads to recommendations on improving each PES.

The Network also helps its members to implement priority actions, such as the Youth Guarantee, and to address PES-related country-specific recommendations. This is done through mutual learning and individualised technical assistance. Finally, the Network provides decision-makers at national and European levels with expert advice on designing, developing and assessing employment policies.

[5] http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=115

[6] Annual reports on the Network activities are available for 2015 and 2016: http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1100&langId=en

2. Assessing fulfilment of Article 3 objectives

This section examines each of the objectives under Article 3 of the Decision. It looks at activities that the Network has undertaken. Where thematically appropriate, some Article 3 objectives have been linked together (objective a with objective g and objective d with objective e).

Article 3 of the Decision: Objectives

The aim of this Decision is to encourage cooperation between Member States through the Network in the field of employment, within the areas of PES responsibility, in order to contribute to 'Europe 2020' and to the implementation of relevant Union policies, thereby supporting:

(a) the most vulnerable social groups with high unemployment rates, especially older workers and young persons not in employment, education or training ('NEETs');

(b) decent and sustainable work;

(c) the better functioning of the labour markets in the EU;

(d) the identification of skills shortages and the provision of information on their extent and location, as well as the better matching of the skills of job-seekers with the needs of employers;

(e) the better integration of labour markets;

(f) increased voluntary geographical and occupational mobility on a fair basis to meet specific labour market needs;

(g) the integration of persons excluded from the labour market as part of the combat against social exclusion;

(h) the evaluation and assessment of active labour market initiatives and their effective and efficient implementation.

2.1 Supporting vulnerable social groups and integrating persons excluded from the labour market (objective a and objective g)

The Network helps to ensure that labour markets are working well in Europe. Central to this is implementing policies that help those furthest away from the labour market find work, especially young people and the long-term unemployed, a key priority for European Employment policy. In addition, the Network has addressed the integration of refugees and of persons with disabilities into the labour market.

Youth unemployment

The Network has been actively contributing to EU measures to tackle youth unemployment by supporting the implementation of the Youth Guarantee[7]. The Youth Guarantee aims to ensure that all young people under 25 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education. In many countries, PES act as the main entry point for the Youth Guarantee, working also with a range of delivery partners.

The Youth Guarantee Recommendation calls upon the PES Network to continue monitoring and reporting regularly on developments concerning the design, implementation and results of Youth Guarantee schemes. The Decision calls on the Network to promote and share best practice on integration of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs). The Network is therefore monitoring PES implementation of the Youth Guarantee – published in annual reports on the subject[8] — and has undertaken several other mutual learning and analytical activities. For example, the Network's *Catalogue of PES Practices for the Outreach to NEETs*[9] includes examples from 17 PES on the different ways that such services were delivered across Europe. The Network's *Catalogue of Measures for Implementation of the Youth Guarantee*[10] lists PES measures to improve their Youth Guarantee service offer. Furthermore, in 2016 a toolkit[11] was developed to provide concrete guidance for PES on outreach to NEETs.

The Commission's 2016 report on the *Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative Three Years On*[12] considered that most PES had better targeted their services and offered more to young people. The report also mentions some remaining challenges for the PES, such as ensuring they have the capacity to perform the large range of tasks required, and stepping up their structured cooperation with employers.

Long-term unemployment

The February 2016 Council Recommendation on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market[13] mandated EMCO to monitor implementation, with the Network contributing to this process.

Example: Network Conference on integrating the long-term unemployed

On 2 June 2016, the Network held a conference bringing together representatives from the PES, the third sector, private employment services and other partners to discuss implementation of the Recommendation on the long-term unemployed.

The conference focused on providing single points of contact through inter-agency coordination, designing and implementating job integration agreements and creating effective job integration partnerships.

The conference discussions gave PES and other stakeholders an opportunity to exchange experiences and share expertise. These forums enable PES to improve performance and

[7] http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079
[8] http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16966&langId=en
[9] http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=13728&langId=en
[10] http://ec.europa.eu/social/contentAdmin/BlobServlet?docId=13199&langId=en
[11] http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16571&langId=en
[12] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1477901398883&uri=CELEX:52016DC0646
[13] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016H0220%2801%29

deepen cooperation with partner organisations to address critical issues.

The Network designed and adopted quality standards which set out minimum, intermediate and advanced expectations for the delivery of a facility for a single customer contact point and job integration agreements. The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council[14] (EPSCO) has endorsed these quality standards. The Network also conducted research to identify good practices in PES on early intervention with and activation of the unemployed.

From the start the Network has been involved in developing the Recommendation on the long-term unemployed, and submitted a Network response to the consultation on its introduction.

Refugees

Many PES in Europe are having to offer services to a growing number of refugees and, in some cases, asylum-seekers. Although the situation in the Member States varies widely, there are many common challenges and significant possibilities to learn from innovative approaches across Europe. The Network Board has been discussing the refugee situation and Member State practices.

In June 2016, the Network adopted its key considerations on the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers into the labour market[15]. It identified four issues as being of particular importance for integrating refugees and asylum-seekers: language, skills and qualifications, partnerships and institutions, and employers. In 2017 it is organising a mutual learning event to investigate PES practices in these areas.

Persons with disabilities

Integrating persons with disabilities into the labour market is an area the Network has been focusing on. It was also the priority of the Dutch Presidency of the EU in the first half of 2016. The June 2016 Network Board meeting in Amsterdam was an opportunity to take a look at the innovative and advanced approach of the Netherlands. In 2016, the Network also published an analytical paper on disability and labour market integration[16] which reviewed recent policy initiatives and looked at the main trends for helping persons with disabilities find work. The paper drew on examples from Member States where there have been major reforms in the support given to persons with disabilities.

2.2 Decent and sustainable work (objective b)

The Network has worked to ensure that initiatives to create decent and sustainable work are effective by contributing to the consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights, publishing the Labour Markets Dynamics Report, and organising a thematic review workshop

[14] http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/configurations/epsco/
[15] http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16068&langId=en
[16] http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16601&langId=en

on sustainable integration into the labour market. In addition to specific events on this topic, many of the Network's mutual learning events have touched on it indirectly.

European Pillar of Social Rights

The Commission Recommendation and proposal for an Inter-Institutional Proclamation for a European Pillar of Social Rights[17] puts more focus on employment and social aspects and make the European social model fit for the challenges of the 21st century. The Pillar sets out a general right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects, including the right to receive support for job search, training and re-qualification. For the unemployed, the Pillar sets out as well the right to personalised, continuous and consistent support. For the long-term unemployed, the Pillar foresees a right to an in-depth individual assessment at the latest at 18 months of unemployment. On the side of unemployment benefits, the unemployed have the right to adequate activation support from PES to (re)integrate in the labour market and adequate unemployment benefits of reasonable duration, in line with their contributions and national eligibility rules.

In December 2016 the Network Board submitted a contribution to the Commission's consultation. It identified technological changes and shifts in the socioeconomic context as having the most transformative impact. The specific policy fields identified included skills education and lifelong learning, secure professional transitions, active employment support, integrated social benefits and services, unemployment benefits, minimum income, and sickness benefits. In the light of this, the Network is also revising its PES 2020 vision[18] to better reflect the emerging trends and PES preparedness to adapt and help customers cope with these changes.

Labour Market Dynamics Report

The 2016 EU Labour Market Dynamics Report[19] identifies trends affecting the EU labour market during the crisis. It then analyses the use of PES by job-seekers and how PES assisted job-finders during the period 2007-2014. It provides insight into the many ways in which PES can use the analysis of transition data to make the services they provide more effective. It also looks at the relative contribution of PES to how labour markets operate in various Member States.

Thematic review workshop on sustainable integration into the labour market

A mutual learning event on sustainable integration into the labour market was held in November 2016. It led to a group of PES wanting to learn more about the innovations in the Norwegian PES. In a follow-up visit to the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) in January 2017, these PES were able to learn about how the NAV has improved its digital services. This has led to a more efficient use of resources, both in terms of the amount of time counsellors spend with job-seekers and in terms of physical meeting space, so that staff can concentrate on supporting job-seekers who have more complex needs. Such an approach is also enabling the PES to work better with employers to match job-seekers effectively. Employer relations units in each PES help develop stronger links. The NAV also explained how it sets up mentoring once job-seekers are placed, and supports the return of health-impaired individuals to work.

[17] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights_en
[18] http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=9690&langId=en
[19] http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16334&langId=en

2.3 Better functioning of labour markets (objective c)

Cooperation between a range of stakeholders to help people enter and remain in the labour market is crucial to ensure successful outcomes for job-seekers, employees and employers across Europe. To this end, the Network has been involved in several initiatives to promote greater collaboration, including the Partnerships between Employment Services (PARES) initiative and a Stakeholder Conference on Partnerships. The Network has also organised events such as change management seminars, review workshops on IT and workshops on profiling, as well as providing specific technical assistance to help PES improve their capacity to match of job-seekers to vacancies, for example. Cooperation with the European Network of Employment Services (EURES), re-established under Regulation (EU) 2016/589[20], has also been crucial given EURES' remit to improve the functioning, cohesion and integration of labour markets in the EU, including at cross-border level.

Partnerships between Employment Services

The PARES initiative[21] ran between September 2011 and March 2016 to improve cooperation between public, private and non-profit providers of employment services and to determine areas where they could deliver complementary services. The initiative consisted of three strands of work: strategic dialogue forums to share and develop good practices, calls for proposals and a shared database to bring useful material together.

There have been a number of strategic dialogues on topics ranging from effective e-services to delivering coordinated services. At the final PARES strategic dialogue event in February 2016, representatives from PES and municipalities in 12 countries came together to share experiences of and insights into contracting out services. Delegates shared their views on and experiences of working with external providers, using remuneration models for outsourced services, and designing and evaluating tenders.

Stakeholder Conference on Partnerships

The Network held a Stakeholder Conference in 2015 on strengthening the labour market through greater cooperation between partners. The event brought together representatives of the PES, the ministries concerned, the European Parliament, the European Commission, private employment services, social partners and NGOs. The participants explored a number of areas including partnerships with private employment services, the Network's contribution to the European Semester, the role of social partners in PES reform, the delivery of the Youth Guarantee, the 'conductor' role of PES between labour market actors, and the managing of career transitions. The event was instrumental in raising the profile and value of the Network among its stakeholders.

Co-operation between PES and Private Employment Services (PrES)

In December 2016, the Network Board endorsed principles outlining a strategy and vision to cooperate with PrES at European level. They highlighted the need for PES to create partnerships to continue to be relevant given the cross-cutting nature of the current and future labour markets. They also pointed out that PES would need to offer a diverse range of

[20] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2016.107.01.0001.01.ENG
[21] http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=991

services. As there was a constant pressure to do more with fewer resources, they would be unable to achieve this alone. Partnerships offered a way of continuing to offer high quality services to customers. The PES Board has agreed to engage in discussions on this matter at future meetings and to invite stakeholders to meetings.

2.4 Better matching and integration of labour markets (objective d and objective e)

Identifying skills shortages and better matching of job-seekers with jobs are one of the Network's objectives. Employers play a central role in prospering economy in general, and in the effective integration of job-seekers into the labour market. The European PES promote productivity and employability through an appropriate supply of relevant knowledge, skills and competences.

To support this, the Network has been engaged in a range of initiatives to exchange information between PES on skills shortages and learn from innovative practices. These include producing an annual bottleneck vacancies study and running a European Employers Day to encourage closer collaboration between PES and employers.

Bottleneck vacancies studies

Two studies[22] were conducted in 2015 and 2016 to collect data on shortage occupations across the Network. The studies developed and applied a model for data collection and exchange on bottleneck occupations in Europe, with the participation of 26 PES.

The second study, based on 2016 data, also included a comparison of administrative data from the employment services and data from the Labour Force Survey. The studies paint a picture of occupations in shortage and surplus both at national and at EU level. They also discuss whether the shortages are genuinely based on skill deficits or on unstable conditions of employment, and ways to improve skills matching.

European Employers Day

To encourage the cooperation between PES and employers, the Network organised the first European Employers Day in April 2016[23] in all EU Member States, Iceland and Norway. In light of the initiative's success, the Network Board agreed to hold another European Employers Day in the Autumn of 2017.

Example: Activities of the European Employers Day 2016

At European level, the European Employers Day was marked by a high-level press conference in Brussels. At national level, the PES organised intensive employer contacts, job fairs, thematic events and various communication actions. As a result of the European Employers Day, 30 000 vacancies were collected by PES through their contact with more than 220 000 employers. 70 000 job-seekers and 20 000 PES employees were involved. Furthermore, PES were able to share experiences with other PES on interacting with

[22] http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16007&langId=en and http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=17666&langId=en

[23] http://www.employersday.eu/

employers and on making a success of this event.

2.5 Mobility (objective f)

To address the issue of supporting the increased voluntary geographical and occupational mobility of workers, the Network Board agreed to propose closer coordination with EURES. The Network will also consider how it can support the new European Solidarity Corps initiative as part of an approach to assist individual PES with meeting the mobility needs of both employers and job-seekers, especially young people.

Co-operation with EURES and governance structure

Established in 1993, the European Employment Services Network (EURES) is a cooperation designed to facilitate the free movement of workers between the 28 countries of the EU plus Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

EURES aims to make labour markets more transparent at EU level by exchanging data on job vacancies and job-seeker profiles. It also seeks to improve access to support services for job-seekers and employers interested in making the free movement of workers easier. Given the PES' mandate, the role of EURES is crucial and to date PES are the most important member organisations. The member organisations share labour market information and work together daily to match and place workers in jobs in other countries across the EU. The new legal basis laid down in 2016 reinforces the obligations to share information and cooperate across Member States on areas such as apprenticeships. It also defines a minimum set of support services that PES have to provide. In the light of these new obligations, important synergies can be expected by both networks working together quite closely on activities resulting from their mandates and affecting the everyday management of PES.

Consequently, at its December 2016 meeting, the Network Board agreed to promote closer cooperation between the PES Network and EURES at European level. A representative from the EURES European Coordination Group would be invited to attend AFEPA meetings to provide relevant updates, and vice versa. It was also agreed that the PES Secretariat and the EURES European Coordination Office would work closely together to prepare for their respective meetings.

Fair mobility working group

The Network Board established a working group on fair mobility to focus on the operational aspects of PES cooperation to support mobility. The working group drafted a reflection paper which was considered by the AFEPA and by the Board in December 2015. However, there is currently no common Network position on fair mobility.

European Solidarity Corps

The European Solidarity Corps launched in December 2016 aims to provide young people across Europe with the opportunity to volunteer or engage in a professional experience, in the form of a job or a traineeship for instance, in the solidarity sector in their own Member States, or in another Member State. PES contributed to the design of the initiative as part of the targeted stakeholder consultations that took place, given their experience of matching young job-seekers with jobs, including across borders. They will be one of the key players that will

help deliver the occupational dimension of the initiative and some PES are already involved in facilitating first occupational placements under the first phase of the European Solidarity Corps.

2.6 Evaluation and assessment of active labour market initiatives (objective g)

The evaluation of Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) is especially important for PES. It can help them to decide whether to pursue specific approaches following initial piloting, and which practices from other Member States may be successfully transferred.

Analytical reports

The Network produces a number of analytical reports and studies which examine and assess ALMPs and their implementation. In 2016 for example, it published an analytical paper on issues emerging from combining active and passive measures for the long-term unemployed. Further reports include studies on integrating ex-offenders into the labour market, coaching and supporting older workers. These papers are available on the Network's knowledge centre website[24]. This enables members and practitioners to learn about initiatives across the EU and assess their impact.

PES contribution to EMCO multilateral surveillance reviews

The Network also contributed to EMCO multilateral surveillance reviews on ALMPs, the Youth Guarantee and long-term unemployment. For example, the December 2015 review of the Youth Guarantee/youth employment recognised the importance of PES in delivering the Youth Guarantee and confirmed the need for ongoing efforts to improve PES capacity and efficiency.

3. Benchlearning

Benchlearning — a systematic combination of indicator-based benchmarking with mutual learning — is an innovative method that the PES have pioneered in the Network.[25] It aims to support each PES in improving its performance through comparisons and institutional learning from peers. It enables PES to utilise qualitative internal and external assessment of various performance enablers (drivers) to support benchmarking. The results can be used for mutual learning activities. As defined by Article 4 of the Decision, Benchlearning is central to the Network's activities.

The five pillars of Benchlearning

1. Quantitative assessment creating transparency on the PES performance through the collection, validation and analysis of PES data;
2. Qualitative assessment of PES performance against performance enablers through

[24] http://ec.europa.eu/social/PESknowledgecentre

[25] PES Benchlearning is inspired by the excellence model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), a holistic tool for assessing the effectiveness of organisations. For the particular purpose of Benchlearning within the European PES, a tailor-made application of the related Common Assessment Framework approach was developed.

self-assessment followed by a peer/Commission/external expert assessment on the basis of a site visit;

3. Systematic identification of good practices which are collated online, such as in the PES Knowledge Centre;
4. A mutual learning programme which builds on the results of and supports the increase in PES performance by focusing on identified strengths and weaknesses;
5. PES follow-up of the Benchlearning assessment in defining and driving their action plans for improvement.

Benchlearning assessment process and site visits

In order to achieve an integrated link between benchmarking and mutual learning activities, a structured and systematic analysis of PES performance was conducted during the first two years of the Benchlearning project. It focused on the seven performance areas identified in the Decision[26], broken down further into 29 performance enablers. For the analysis, performance data were used in combination with an ongoing process of PES self-, peer and expert review. Each PES conducted a structured reflection on its performance in relation to the performance enablers. Following this self-assessment, a group of peer, Commission and external experts visited the PES, at both central and local levels, to undertake an external assessment.

By the end of July 2016, PES in all Member States, Iceland and Norway had been visited, bringing to an end the first cycle of PES visits. The outcomes of the site visits are collated in a report providing each PES with a set of specific recommendations, to help PES steer their national action plans for improvement. As follow-up, reports on change are submitted by PES one year after the visit.

Benchmarking

In order to achieve evidence-based learning, transparency of PES performance was created through a collection of comprehensive data on PES results and performance enablers.

The combined quantitative and qualitative analyses provide initial empirical evidence that overall more mature organisations exhibit better performance overall. On performance comparisons, it should be highlighted that in each performance area several PES were assessed as mature or well-developed during the first cycle of PES visits. There is, therefore, more than one opportunity to study good examples from peer PES to support organisational development.

A collection of potentially transferable practices identified during the assessments are shared within the Network for learning purposes.

Mutual learning

Mutual learning activities aim to strengthen the performance and modernisation of PES by building on the results of data analysis and PES Benchlearning assessments. These activities

[26] 1. Strategic performance management; 2. Design of operational processes such as effective channelling and profiling of job-seekers and tailored use of active labour market instruments; 3. Sustainable activation and management of transitions; 4. Relations to employers; 5. Evidence-based design and implementation of PES services; 6. Effective management of partnerships with stakeholders; 7. Allocation of PES resources.

take several forms, such as peer exchanges, thematic reviews, conferences, analytical papers and toolkits (see activities in Section 2 above). They also include support for the implementation of country-specific recommendations[27].

The results of the first Benchlearning cycle have been used to develop and steer the Network's mutual learning programme, as reflected in its 2017 work programme. A broad range of topics have been selected from the Benchlearning exercise, enabling staff participation at different levels within PES.

Second cycle of Benchlearning

In 2017, the Network has begun the second cycle of PES visits. It follows on seamlessly from the first cycle and builds on its achievements by supporting PES activities and initiatives for improvement and modernisation. Each PES will be re-assessed, with an emphasis on change.

The Benchlearning model has been slightly adapted, but the main design of the process remains. Additionally, it focuses on the changes the PES have planned to make and their progress in making these changes since their first assessment. This is to help each PES individually to implement improvement measures. After the second visit, PES will again receive a feedback report with a detailed assessment focusing on the areas of change PES are currently dealing with and practical suggestions for further improvements to maintain continuous progress and learning.

The Network has fully embraced Benchlearning, with all members committed to engaging in the second cycle of PES visits. Feedback from a satisfaction questionnaire shows that PES appreciated the high level of competence of the team of external assessors. The Benchlearning initiative is seen as a unique opportunity for the PES to strengthen inter-departmental and inter-sectoral cooperation and learning.

The Benchlearning project provides PES with an opportunity to get feedback from trusted partners in an environment of mutual support, collegial advice and trustful cooperation. This results in internal and external support. Internal, in that the members of the Network can all benefit from the mutual learning activities, and external in that it provides PES decision makers with evidence they can use to justify changes and improvements.

The support of the Network's members to continue with the initiative and their readiness to volunteer as assessors for the site visits demonstrate the value that PES derive from it, and the success of the first cycle of Benchlearning.

Examples of reform initiatives resulting from the Benchlearning initiative[28]

Malta: the Maltese PES has initiated a number of reforms. These include establishing an employers' relations unit to reach out to employers, revising their standard operating procedures and transforming the interactions between PES advisors and clients to ensure a more personalised approach.

Lithuania: the Lithuanian PES has created a new quality management and control division and is introducing process-orientated structural changes in all 10 of their regional offices.

[27] https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/european-semester/european-semester-timeline/eu-country-specific-recommendations_en

[28] Further examples can be found in the European Network of Public Employment Services, Annual Report July 2015-December 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=17000&langId=en

They also have a programme of activities which includes a formal quality assessment, staff development and improvements to their IT infrastructure.

Ireland: The Irish PES undertook an extensive evaluation programme, initiated a large-scale annual Jobseeker Customer Satisfaction Survey, created a recognition programme to reward significant contributions by staff and increased the frequency of contact with job-seekers, particularly vulnerable groups.

4. Outlook

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the Decision has been fully implemented and that the Network's activities fulfil the objectives set out in the Decision. From the early years of the implementation there are also some preliminary lessons that can be drawn which might be of use to other European initiatives. These are outlined below.

Stronger PES cooperation at European level

The legal establishment of the Network has provided a platform to successfully develop and strengthen the previous informal network of Heads of PES. The formalised structure, defined objectives and the regularity and dynamic structure of Board meetings have created an impetus for closer collaboration between Member States and national PES. The busy work programme and active involvement of all members in the mutual learning activities, working groups and Benchlearning are proof of this.

There is a strong culture of mutual support and collaboration within the Network, and this is leading to innovations in PES supporting one another. Peer-to-peer support also helps addressing PES-related country-specific recommendations issued by the Council in the context of the European Semester. Increasingly PES are also using the Network to receive assistance or advice from other members on certain policy areas outside of the work programme.

Successful start of the Benchlearning initiative

The innovative Benchlearning initiative has been implemented successfully, driven and shaped by the Network's members. The willingness of all Member States to also participate in the second cycle of PES visits indicates the value they see in Benchlearning with its mutual support and learning opportunities, as well as personalised recommendations for improvement for individual PES. Reports from PES follow up on the Benchlearning activities indicate performance improvements. The exercise has identified a range of inspiring practices from Member States and areas where PES can focus their development, therefore providing evidence based rigor to the Network's work programme.

Need for increased visibility

PES are stronger when they speak with one voice. The recent collaboration to provide a single PES contribution to the consultation on the Social Pillar demonstrated that the challenges and changing landscapes faced by individual PES are shared. It also showed that there is not only

scope for them to work together to tackle these challenges, but also scope to raise their profile for decision makers by providing a united stance. As evidenced by the wide range of information in the PES knowledge centre on the organisation of PES in Europe and the services they offer, the Network has been prolific in its output. Many of these resources have a wider benefit for researchers and decision makers. Greater visibility of the Network and its output would ensure these resources are used effectively. The Board's agreement to allow Benchlearning data to be published would also strengthen the business case for reform.

5. Conclusion

The Decision has been successfully implemented to date. As shown in this report, there is strong evidence that the Network is focusing on all areas set out in the Decision. In its formalised structure, the Network has proved that it is an effective vehicle for supporting national PES in the individual challenges they face. At the same time, it promotes cooperation to tackle common issues together to further the aims of the Europe 2020 strategy.

The Benchlearning project in particular has shown itself to be a positive innovation, in that national institutions can have external references, receive constructive feedback from expert practitioners and engage in tailor-made learning activities with peers. As the cycles of Benchlearning develop, PES will be able to continually improve their organisation and the services they provide to the public. Benchlearning has the potential to be applicable to a wide range of policy areas and initiatives across the EU in the pursuit of excellence.

Building on its successes and remaining relevant to its members, the Network is making encouraging progress. The willingness of its members to collaborate, share good practice and participate in learning events demonstrates their shared desire to constantly improve and ultimately provide a better and more effective service for all people across Europe. The Network has been focusing its activities on the eight objectives outlined in the Decision. However, this has not prevented it from responding to emerging challenges such as the refugee crisis.

In accordance with the Decision, the Network is to run until 31 December 2020. This report gives an interim review of its activities to date. Another report will be published before the Decision expires. Looking ahead, the 2017 work programme has a full schedule of activities to further the objectives and needs of PES. Such activities will continue throughout the Network's existence.