
**Department for the
Economy Northern Ireland
consultation response on
the ninth EU Framework
Programme for Research
and Innovation**

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INTRODUCTION

As the Northern Ireland Government Department with lead responsibility for research and innovation issues, the Department for the Economy is keen to reflect the views of the region's stakeholders in relation to Framework Programme 9 (FP9), through this response to the Commission's 'Public consultation on EU funds in the area of investment, research & innovation, SMEs and single market'.

Northern Ireland's draft Programme for Government and the Department for the Economy's draft Northern Ireland Industrial strategy recognise the importance of accelerating research and innovation as a means of ensuring that the region can prosper through a strong, competitive and regionally balanced economy. The priority placed on the EU's Research and Innovation funding programmes is demonstrated by the Northern Ireland Executive's target to secure at least €145m from Horizon 2020, representing a desired increase of 65 per cent from Northern Ireland's performance under the Framework 7 programme.

Northern Ireland researchers and innovators have benefited greatly from the Horizon 2020 programme. Aside from the financial benefits which help contribute to making Northern Ireland's economy into one that is knowledge-based and export-orientated, Horizon 2020, and previous Framework Programmes, have helped to raise the profile of Northern Ireland's research and innovation capabilities. The local research community has been able to collaborate with the best European researchers and, in so doing, has made a significant contribution to addressing Northern Ireland, UK, European and worldwide challenges.

Northern Ireland participants have therefore also played an important role in contributing to the UK's record as one of the key collaboration partners in Horizon 2020. The UK Government has already outlined its desire to develop a new, deep and special partnership with the EU in terms of a future framework for cooperation on science, research and innovation partnerships¹.

¹ [Collaboration on science and innovation - a future partnership](#)

Following the UK's exit from the EU, Northern Ireland will, of course, be in a unique position in the UK, given its land borders with another EU state. As the primary Northern Ireland recipients of Horizon 2020 funding, researchers at our local universities have particularly strong cross-border links with their Republic of Ireland counterparts, with a myriad of ongoing EU-funded all-island collaborations in various fields. These close linkages are illustrated by the fact that, to date, almost half of Northern Ireland's total drawdown through Horizon 2020 has come through projects involving partners from the Republic of Ireland.

This Northern Ireland paper reflects on how the strengths highlighted in the interim evaluation of Horizon 2020² can be built upon under FP9. It also takes account of the subsequent recommendations outlined in the LAB-FAB-APP report³ by the high-level Lamy Group.

This paper reflects on the important role that EU funding for research and innovation has played in Northern Ireland and highlights the view that the design and implementation of the forthcoming Framework Programme should represent "evolution not revolution" from the current Horizon 2020 programme, with excellence remaining as the main governing principle for the programme and retention of the three pillar structure. This paper also reflects the view that all aspects of FP9 should be simplified, streamlined and rationalised in order to ensure that it remains effective, in tandem with an increased budget that reflects the importance placed on research and innovation as a key EU priority.

In developing this paper the Department sought the views of a range of Northern Ireland stakeholders. Formal position papers were received from Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University and Intertrade Ireland, as well as inputs from representatives of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland (HSCNI) and Invest NI. The views of these stakeholders are reflected throughout this paper as appropriate.

² [Key findings from the Horizon 2020 interim evaluation](#)

³ [LAB – FAB – APP – Investing in the European Future we want paper](#)

VIEWS ON FP9

1. **Excellence should remain as the foundation** on which the next Framework Programme is based and on which funding is allocated, with a combination of bottom-up and top-down calls. The **three pillar structure used in Horizon 2020 should be retained** in FP9. The three pillar structure should be streamlined to ensure improved interconnectivity and complementary goals between the pillars, with each pillar driven by purpose and impact.
2. The **Marie-Sklodowska Curie Actions (MSCA)**, FET and ERC programmes are particularly valued. The exchange of experience and the ability to enhance PhD training and development provided through MSCAs has proved to be of great value to Northern Ireland participants in Horizon 2020. MSCAs should therefore continue to be a prominent element of FP9, given the important role they play in helping to facilitate cross-sectoral and inter-disciplinary mobility for researchers across Europe, by providing researchers with the opportunity to explore new pathways and develop discoveries through bottom-up research.
3. As suggested by the Lamy Group, FP9 should have an **increased focus on the purpose and impact** of research and innovation to ensure best value for investment. Impact should go beyond the purely financial and, instead, include a consideration of positive impacts on society. The adoption of a mission-orientated approach has the potential to help ensure that the wider impacts of research are better reflected.
4. A **significant overall budget increase for FP9**, from the current Horizon 2020 funding levels, during the next Multi-annual Financial Framework would help to underline the EU's commitment to the Research and Innovation agenda. Such an increase would also help to address the fall in success rates that has been witnessed from FP7 to Horizon 2020, by allowing more of those proposals judged to be excellent but which do

not receive funding (as is often the case under Horizon 2020) to be successful under FP9. The current scenario, where excellent proposals continue to be routinely unsuccessful, constitutes a serious long term risk to the programme as a whole. Potential applicants may be discouraged from applying, particularly where national funding streams are perceived as providing a greater chance of success. If success rates do not increase, it could ultimately impact the ongoing creation and maintenance of European collaborative research networks.

5. Any increase in funding should also give consideration to an associated increased weighting on regional factors as part of the allocation of funding. This would help to address the saturation effect which can occur in a particular geographic area where there is a limit to the impact increased public funding can have in increasing related innovation activity.
6. A **focus on the European added value** that can be created by countries working together, as opposed to working individually, should continue to be intrinsic to FP9. The added value of research collaboration across borders, particularly to regions such as Northern Ireland, cannot be underestimated.
7. The enhanced access to academic networks and collaborations provided by the Framework Programmes to date has undoubtedly allowed projects to be scaled up in ways that are not always possible at local or national level, and has provided access to infrastructure and resources that might not be available at a national or regional level. Better coordination and alignment of EU and national funding streams would ensure best use of resources at both levels.
8. FP9 should therefore be designed to complement funding of activities at national and regional level as a means of facilitating the collaboration of skills, expertise and

knowledge across a number of countries to allow large and complex challenges to be addressed.

9. From a broader perspective, it is worth noting that wider EU funding for Research and Innovation has helped assist regions such as Northern Ireland to build critical infrastructure for research, which in turn has helped to increase the region's ability to apply for other funding streams including Horizon 2020.

10. The **adoption of a limited number of large-scale mission-orientated challenges would be welcomed**. The missions should be designed to address global societal challenges, be based around the UN Sustainable Development goals, and have impacts across a range of activities and EU programmes rather than at individual call topic level. This will help to ensure that a critical mass is created in strategically important areas so that the greatest possible returns on investment are realised. More details and further engagement on the concept of the proposed mission-orientated approach would be welcomed.

11. **Further simplification** of the entire process around the Horizon 2020 programme, from the application stage through to reporting, would help to increase the attractiveness of the programme to potential applicants. Such a simplification would help to address the generally held perception that the administrative process surrounding application and operation of Horizon 2020 is burdensome and time consuming in comparison to other funding sources. The impact of this perception can be considered to have the potential to have a particularly strong impact in Northern Ireland, where the economy is predominantly based around small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that tend to have limited time and resources to commit to an application process that is perceived as being complex. This perception is illustrated by the results of a recent Intertrade Ireland survey of Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland researchers which found 'time and effort taken to apply' and 'success rate and competition' were the two overriding barriers associated with applying to Horizon, with over 60% of survey respondents indicating

that they felt Horizon was 'more' or 'much more' difficult to apply to in comparison to other funding programmes.

12. A simplified process would also have the potential to drive an increase in applications, in turn improving the overall quality of proposals and therefore enhancing the programme's effectiveness. It would also allow those who do apply to invest their time in submitting excellent proposals, rather than on the administrative processes.
13. An overall simplification and standardisation of the rules and terminology used across the programme would also improve accessibility. Financial reporting systems are currently complex and reporting systems are complex and repetitive; improvements should therefore be made in both of these areas to ensure that they are simpler and more flexible under FP9. Measures should also be taken to optimise the Participant Portal so that it is as user-friendly as possible. The evaluation system for FP9 should be transparent and efficient with retention of a peer group assessment based evaluation process in preference to remote assessment, particularly in respect of final decisions.
14. A more systemic and coordinated approach should be taken to EU Research and innovation with a view to **rationalising the large number of EU funding schemes** that currently exist. The Horizon 2020 programme is structured in a complex way and a rationalisation exercise should therefore be undertaken with a view to reducing and streamlining the number of instruments and programmes under FP9.
15. It is recognised that there is a European innovation gap in terms of ideas not being scaled up in sufficient numbers and / or with sufficient speed, which has the potential to negatively impact Europe's economic growth going forwards. **Using the European Innovation Council (EIC) as a vehicle**, FP9 should be designed to promote participation from industry, with a particular focus on developing the capacity of small

and medium-sized enterprises to participate, **in order to support an environment where innovative solutions can be scaled up and brought to market more quickly.**

16. Investment in innovative ideas through the EIC has the potential to facilitate increased creation and diffusion of breakthrough innovations, with more rapid scale-up. However, whilst the EIC has the potential to focus on research-driven innovation, care should be taken to ensure that it does not create a separation between research and innovation. Measures should also be taken to ensure that the EIC complements national supports, with a focus on areas where there is clear European added value in collaboration.
17. Northern Ireland has a relatively low level of innovation in comparison to other areas, as well as relatively low levels of engagement with Horizon from industry partners. An increased focus through FP9 on supporting translational research for regions with an innovation deficit would be welcomed as a means of encouraging and facilitating industry engagement in the Framework Programme. In light of the need to provide further encouragement for research and development activities to be translated into innovation, and given the strong performance of SMEs in Horizon 2020 to date, consideration might also be given to further increase the Horizon 2020 target for SMEs to avail of 20% of the total budget.
18. The **involvement of citizens should be integral to FP9**, so that they are as fully and actively involved as possible, from co-design and co-creation, through to implementation and ensuring that outputs are of clear benefit to citizens.
19. FP9 should be truly **“open to the world”**, by encouraging increased international cooperation so that those researchers who are best placed globally to address particular challenges are able to collaborate with EU partners. FP9 should therefore be designed to facilitate and encourage worldwide collaboration, with excellence remaining the overriding criteria regardless of geographical location, thus allowing truly global

association and third country participation, on the basis that the partner country has reciprocal co-funding or access to funding available.

20. Such an approach would enhance global collaboration and help to address the decrease in international participation that has been witnessed under Horizon, with consideration given to specific cooperation instruments and funding mechanisms to facilitate third country engagement.

21. As highlighted in ERRIN's FP9 Position paper of July 2017, **a stronger mandate under FP9 for regional Horizon 2020 Contact Points**, such as the Northern Ireland Contact Points (NICPs), would be welcomed. Increased authority and an extended remit for regional Contact Points to bring them more closely into line with National Contact Points would allow them to more effectively support regional applicants to access EU funding for Research and Innovation.

22. The Department trusts that this response is helpful to the Commission's considerations and that the Commission will reflect on the issues and related evidence outlined in this paper. This response has been drafted by DfE officials and seeks to set the local Northern Ireland context. It reflects the views of Northern Ireland stakeholders with an interest in European Framework Research programmes. Should the Northern Ireland Executive return, a newly appointed Minister will wish to engage on these issues.

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