

ESPON 2030 Programmes

Monitoring Committee meeting

18 March 2025, 09h30-17h00

19 March 2025, 09h30 -13h00

Online (Luxembourgish time)

Final Minutes

18 March 2025, 09h30-17h00

1. Agreement on the Agenda

The MA and the chair from the Polish presidency welcomed the participants. The new members of the committee from ES, IT, LU were introduced. Following the confirmation of the quorum by the MA, the MC agreed on the Agenda without adding any additional points.

2. General Management Provisions for the ESPON 2030 Programme

1. ESPON MA Info note on management (including TA Progress Report of 2024) (ppt, questions and answers)

The MA provided an update in relation to the national contributions and confirmed that NO and BE (Wallonia) have both paid their share to 2024.

2. Update on the programme communication activities (ppt and discussion)

The MA provided an overview about the communication activities of the Programme. Since the activities are rather straightforward and repetitive over the years, it was suggested to include this information in the 'MA Info note' as from the next meeting on to reduce the number of MC documents and agenda points.

3. Liability Report 2024 (document and discussion)

The MA presented the report. No questions were raised by the MC.

4. 3rd MA Quality Check of the Single Operation (document and discussion)

The MA introduced the conclusions of the 3rd Quality Check Report. CZ shared its experience from an evaluation session in relation to one of the observations of the MA and asked if it was correct to have the technical evaluation conducted without having the administrative checks finalized. The MA confirmed that this shall not be the practice. Although it is legally not prohibited, it should happen only in exceptional, well justified cases. The reason for that is not to influence the outcome of an evaluation and to have it as impartial as possible, as well as to better use the time dedicated to technical evaluations. This means that only those tenders should be evaluated that have passed the administrative and technical capacity checks.

SI appreciated that recommendations from previous quality checks were followed-up by the MA and agreed that administrative checks shall be finalized before the technical evaluation, which is also the practice with evaluations in national contexts. SI asked whether the reasons are known for not having the administrative checks concluded on time in some cases.

The MA explained that the time schedule of tender evaluations is carefully planned by the Single Beneficiary, considering also the time needed for eventual correctable omissions. In ideal cases one round of clarification is sufficient to clear open issues. However, in few cases, additional questions might occur that require a postponement of the already scheduled technical evaluation. Due to the limited availability of some evaluators, it can be challenging to set a new date on short notice. Hence, in these exceptional cases, the technical evaluations are conducted without the final conclusions of the administrative checks. The MA asked the cooperation and the understanding of the MC members towards the Single Beneficiary, in case an already set date for a technical evaluation requires rescheduling.

SI then asked about the different options presented for substituting the legal advisor of the Single Beneficiary and the likely consequences of not finding a legal advisor. The MA explained that there are two possibilities: (i) either the EGTC finds a solution that is in line with the Operation Proposal, or (ii) it suggests another setting, which shall then be submitted for analysis by the MA and might require a reassessment of the Single Operation regarding the risks in relation to public procurement rules and operations.

To that point, PL shared its experience: in many cases, the delays are not coming from the poor time planning but more from the sometimes surprising new cases presented by the tenderers. Also, PL suggested to provide trainings to service providers, which may be the task of the ECPs.

The MA mentioned that the Single Beneficiary has elaborated a Q&A document to support the service providers and regularly review and adapt the tendering documents to make it as clear and understandable as possible.

The MA then concluded that the 3rd Quality Check was done 6 months after the second one and no serious shortcomings were detected. Therefore, unless some new issues were to occur, it was agreed to schedule the next quality check in the usual rhythm of one year, i.e. by the beginning of 2026.

5. Progress on the implementation of the Evaluation of the ESPON 2030 Programme (presentation by the external evaluators and the members of the Evaluation Steering Group, document and discussion)

The representative of the NL presented, on behalf of the members of the Evaluation Steering Committee, the work done so far and the main recommendations for the next steps of the evaluation exercise (see ppt uploaded in the follow-up folder). In particular, the implementation of the “constructive dialogue” with representatives of the MC, the MA and the EGTC on the way to improve the internal communication, which will lead to a proposal from the ESPON EGTC (under point 3.4). The result of the dialogue, moderated by the external evaluators, can also be found in the third input paper presented separately by the external evaluators.

Finally, it was proposed to the MC to focus the next steps of the evaluation on the following points, selected based on the input papers delivered so far:

- A survey and discussion about the roles and work of the ESPON Contact Points in the current programme, implemented as a self-evaluation, organised by the MA with the support of the Evaluation Steering Committee and coordinated with the external evaluators.

- A Fourth and last case study on the TAPs model and its effective implementation with a specific focus on the needs management and the scoping and targeting of the activities and the process of stakeholder involvement in needs' assessment and evidence production.

The MA indicated that it is important to focus the evaluation work on the functioning of the TAPs as this is the main novelty element of the current programme and it is important to have evaluation results on this aspect when the discussion about the next programming period will start next year.

BE supported the proposal of the evaluation steering committee and asked if any of those two elements will be already discussed at the MC in June. The MA replied that the discussion will take place at the MC November meeting as time is needed to carry out the related work.

SI asked clarification about the content of the Third input paper that was provided for the meeting as it included similar information as the ones presented by the evaluation steering committee. SI furthermore expressed interest to focus part of the work on the ECPs. The representative of the evaluation steering committee of the NL indicated that the Third input paper indeed presents the results of the work implemented on the internal communication and contains the evaluators' proposals on the different options for continuing the evaluation process.

The external evaluator, Erica Melloni, clarified that the proposal from the evaluation steering committee is aligned with the conclusion included on the Third Input paper. She further continued presenting the paper in more detailed underlying the work done so far and the related conclusions.

SI asked if the next evaluation step would also cover the implementation and the effectiveness of procurement procedures. The evaluators clarified that the overall implementation of the programme is subject to the evaluation, and the elements indicated in the presentation by the evaluation steering committee will be covered with the case studies already decided. Following that, there will be update on them until arriving at the draft and final reports. The MA also indicated that the entire process related to the TAPs is to be analyzed, from the setting up to the procurement, but that certain aspects are further scrutinized through the case studies.

The external evaluator informed that a sample of MC members will be individually contacted for interviews.

The MA concluded that the following proposals of the Evaluation Steering Committee shall be followed-up with the external evaluator as already indicated above:

- a survey and discussion about the roles and work of the ESPON Contact Points in the current programme, implemented as self-evaluation, organised by the MA with the support of the Evaluation Steering Committee and coordinated with the external evaluators;
- a fourth and last case study on the TAPs model and its effective implementation, with a specific focus on the needs management and the scoping and targeting of the activities and the process of stakeholder involvement in needs' assessment and evidence production.

6. State on setting up the audit work (information)

The MA informed about the implementation of the audit work and about the results of the system audit that was performed during autumn. No findings and no recommendations were made to the MA on the management and control system description.

7. Session with the Chair of the ESPON EGTC Assembly (information and discussion)

The Chair of the Assembly reported on the evaluation of the management of the EGTC and how previous findings were followed-up. The evaluation process involved several steps, including EGTC self-evaluation, consultations and questionnaire to the MC, MA, Assembly members, and meeting with HR at the Ministry. The evaluation focused on assessing task achievements, staff management, stakeholder relations, and public procurement processes.

Key findings included delays in starting operations, however the implementation was now already accelerating, difficulties with public procurement management, and the need for improvements in the quality of work, especially regarding the fulfillment of performance indicators. There were also challenges due to the departure of key staff members, including the assistant director and legal adviser, though the assistant director's position has been already filled. Efforts to recruit a new lawyer are ongoing, with external support is considered such as an involvement of the lawyer at the level of the Ministry and through external law firm to review documents).

The Assembly is generally satisfied with the management. An issue raised was a financial error in PR9 due to inconsistencies in the technical evaluation, which led to negative financial correction. This resulted in the review and revision of the internal documents, discussed and approved by the Assembly with a particular focus on improving internal controls and the provision of staff training. The Chair of the Assembly also indicated that her deputy will more closely follow the collaboration of the EGTC with the MA.

As no MC member asked for the floor, the MA thanked on behalf of the MC for the feedback and highlighted that in the follow-up of the recommendations it is important to take into consideration the feedback of the MA as the MA has to closely monitoring the steps proposed to avoid the any further cuts. This can be best achieved during the regular meetings between the MA and EGTC. Furthermore, it appears to the MA from an outside perspective, that a better internal communication inside the EGTC from management level to staff could support the take-up the proposed recommendations.

In conclusion, the Assembly is aware and working with the staff on these challenges with a series of proposed measures aimed at improving EGTC processes, which were to be further explained with the director of the EGTC in the following point 3.1.

8. Roundtable of MC members regarding additional MC meetings (discussion)

During the last Monitoring Committee meeting in Budapest, the necessity of organizing an additional (fourth) Monitoring Committee meeting per year was raised by the members. The MA analysed this request in the light of its financial implications to the Technical Assistance budget. The organization of an additional MC meeting online would definitely be possible, but in case the members would prefer the extra meeting to be taking place in-presence, the Technical Assistance budget being limited, it appears that it may only cover the catering related to an additional in-presence meeting. The related travel costs of the representatives would therefore have to be covered by the Member and Partner States themselves. Also, the venue shall preferably be provided by one of the Member States if organized elsewhere than in Luxembourg.

The MC members then were asked about their preferences between an online and an in-presence meeting and whether an additional meeting would at all be necessary.

CZ saw the benefits of organizing an additional MC meeting in autumn. The question on the modus of the meeting, online or in-presence, shall depend on the subject to be discussed. This intervention was supported by BE, CY, PL and RO. It was added that, considering upcoming the

discussion on the future of ESPON, the in-presence meeting could eventually be preferred if deemed necessary. FR and LU both support an additional meeting online and did not oppose it to be in-presence should the circumstances justify it.

NL would prefer in-presence meeting. BG would also prefer in-presence meetings, but due schedule and financial constraints, online meeting is considered a better option.

DE, FI, ES HU MT SE IT CH, LT support the online format.

As a conclusion, the MA suggested to organize a fourth Monitoring Committee meeting per year, that shall preferably be online. The dates of these meetings will be coordinated with the presidencies. If an important topic is to be discussed, in-person meetings might be considered. How this format would work with the discussion on the future Programme needs to be check at the time the works will start.

Sessions with the ESPON EGTC

9. Feedback and exchange on points addressed in the session without the EGTC.

See agenda point 3.1

3. Quality check and evaluation follow-up measures

1. Information by the Chair of the ESPON EGTC Assembly on remedial measures put in place after the management verification of Progress Report 9 of the Single Beneficiary (ppt and discussion)

The MA welcomed ESPON EGTC and asked for sharing more information on the measures implemented by the EGTC after the management verification of Progress Report 9.

ESPON EGTC presented the measures carried out and already communicated to the EGTC Assembly, emphasising the proactive approach taken in addressing the staff capacity challenges. Also, the newly recruited Assistant Director for Administration, Budget and Public Procurement, Mr Pierre-Emmanuel Malcotti, presented himself to the MC members.

The MA thanked for the presentation and informed that evaluating compliance, with the provisions of the Single Operation, of the solutions foreseen by the EGTC in attaining the anti-fraud measures will be done in the next step. Further, the MA added that an independent review of public procurements run by the EGTC should take into account the recommendations put forward in the quality check reports and MA assessments of the progress reports submitted by the Single Beneficiary. The resulting report should contain ex-ante assessment to prevent any potential fraudulent situations.

The MA closed this part by announcing that an exchange with the EGTC will follow on this matter, and more detailed information will be presented at the next MC meeting.

2. Measures put in place to follow up on the other aspects conclusions and recommendations of the 3rd Quality Check (ppt and discussion)

On this point, the MA debriefed the EGTC on the discussion held with the MC in the previous session, pinpointing some aspects in the organisation and timing of specific procedural stages of public procurement. This involves managing the timeframe for completion of administrative checks in case some incomplete information in the tenders (so-called correctable omissions) have been identified which triggers request for clarifications. In that regard, the MA referred to

MC members' opinion that they may be flexible in rescheduling consensus meetings to evaluate technical quality of tenders should the administrative checks require more time.

Appreciating that an updated FAQ document accompanies every call for tenders issued by the EGTC, the MA suggested considering a training session for economic operators on how to fill in the ESPD form and its annexes, in order to decrease the number of correctable omissions.

The EGTC made an overview of recent efforts to harmonise approaches to administrative checks of the received tenders towards a consistent assessment of correctable omissions and needs for clarification, and thereby to limit the number of iterations with tenderers on this issue. Despite the precise instruction and FAQ guidance, one of the common flaws by tenderers has been to leave blank the principal fields in the forms, which makes it impossible for the EGTC to conclude on selection criteria and requires corrections by the tenderers. In the EGTC view, a training would not help in that respect as it would be impossible to determine who the right audience should be. Instead, the EGTC attempts at determining the major and minor character of omissions, with the latter to be resolved upon contract award notice stage. This should allow to limit, in the majority of cases, the number of clarification request rounds to just one, and avoid postponing technical evaluation and rescheduling consensus meetings. In exceptional cases of prolonged administrative checks, the technical evaluators are approached to discuss feasibility of finding a new date for the consensus meeting.

SI thanked for the comprehensive information and the good efforts made by the EGTC to streamline the public procurement procedures. SI advised to check whether any technical solutions could be implemented to prevent the tender to be submitted prior to filling in all necessary fields in the forms.

The EGTC reminded that the programme tendering procedures in Luxembourg are operated through the national public procurement portal which is managed by a third party. This vastly limits a possibility of interfering with the system settings, as also evidenced through the so-far unsuccessful attempts to add English to the portal's interface languages. The EGTC will however explore all options as regards the modifications possible to support simplification and improvements.

In the summary, the MA underlined their appreciation of measures that the EGTC has implemented to increase consistency of administrative checks and prioritise information that is absolutely necessary to conclude that stage. The MA expressed hope that the regularly updated FAQ guidance for economic operators contributes to more complete tender documentation in the calls arranged by the EGTC.

3. Finding your way to the e-MS (ppt and discussion)

The MA provided an overview about the different information available in the e-MS. CZ suggested to indicate the titles of the activities instead of the identification numbers in the progress reports. The MA would check with the service provider about the possibility of adjusting the system, however underlined the issues with the limits of characters in certain cells.

4. Solutions for streamlining and simplifying internal communication between the EGTC, the MA and the MC – based on the ongoing evaluation of the ESPON 2030 Programme (ppt and discussion)

The EGTC presented a proposal to the MC on how to re-organise the information flows between EGTC, MC and MA, following up on the constructive dialogue session held in Luxembourg on 16 January, and a subsequent preparatory meeting held online on 20 February (see ppt).

In conclusion, the EGTC stressed that further support from the voluntary MC members would be helpful in developing the full new version of the central information document for the MC meeting in June.

The MA thanked for the presentation and backed the EGTC suggestion to continue working on this issue towards the June meeting of the MC.

SI thanked the EGTC for the rational and meaningful proposal for streamlining and simplification of internal communication. In SI view, monthly info letters are not necessary, while a list of key deliverables would be advisable to still have so that MC members could react and inform other stakeholders in their network.

HR agreed that the proposal is a huge step in the right direction and that it takes into account the MC members' recommendations made in the last months. The overall progress is very appreciated, and the additions, e.g. on risk management, are very easy to read. Further improvements could still be considered, e.g. to add more visuals in the first chapter with respective explanations (a fact sheet format) as it will be useful for reporting to the MAs at the national level. Also, in HR view, there is a good distinction between ERPs, TAs and other types of activities in the second chapter, and the annexed tables with TAPs are well acknowledged. Altogether, HR supports setting up a task force to further improve the document while keeping a balance between the information needs of the MC and administrative burden on the EGTC.

The MA recalled the ECP meeting held the past week, and the presentation of relevant projects coming to an end that could be a source for inspiration for the ECPs in designing topics for knowledge development activities.

The EGTC confirmed that such information could be included in the MC Info Note, but alerted the MC members that interim key deliverables, accessible on the e-MS, shall not be shared with external stakeholders before their verification and approval by the EGTC as the contracting authority.

CZ and COM thanked for the information and the work done.

The MA summed up this point and noted an interest of RO and DK to support the EGTC in further work.

4. Developments in Territorial Cohesion, Urban Policy and Cohesion policy including Presidency programmes relevant for the ESPON 2030 Programme presentation by PL, DK, CY Presidencies and inputs from EC (Q&A)

The Polish, Danish and Cyprus representatives presented the priorities for the presidencies and informed about the timetable of main events (ppt are uploaded in the follow-up folder).

5. Single Operation: implementation status (MC Info Note, ppt and discussion)

1. Overall progress: global performance figures, the stock of activities (MC Info Note, ppt and discussion)
2. Management risks (MC Info Note, ppt and discussion)

The EGTC presented information on the implementation progress of the Single Operation and the risks perceived in its management.

PT enquired which were the 10 already completed evidence production activities mentioned on slide 4 in the presentation.

The EGTC explained, referring to slide 6 – in which the already completed activities are put in black.

IT asked if it is possible, for a better overview, to fill in all fields on the 'Countries involved' in the tables with activities in the TAP portfolios annexed to the MC Info Note.

The EGTC noted that those activities are in a various stage of formation or implementation, and not always the geographical cases have already been identified. Further, some of the evidence production activities do not have country showcases, as e.g. in the ERP COBREN the pilot cases are arranged at the level of sea basin areas. The country involvement fields in the TAP tables will be populated regularly once the geographical cases are confirmed.

3. Targeted analyses – state of affairs after the fourth cut-off date (ppt and discussion)

The EGTC presented the state of affairs with targeted analyses after the fourth cut-off date, suggesting also a strategy for the next rounds of selecting the proposals and indicating a need to reach with information the countries that so far have had no stakeholders in targeted analyses.

NO asked if the next cut-off date could already be communicated.

The EGTC confirmed that it will be announced right after the MC meeting.

RO suggested setting the maximum number of proposals to be selected after the fifth cut-off date at 6, instead of 5.

SI agreed with RO, and argued that it would help avoid any problems with late implementation of targeted analyses before the completion of the Single Operation. Further, SI asked if any partners can still join a targeted analysis stakeholder consortium after the selection decision.

The EGTC clarified that the guidelines for stakeholders interested in submitting a proposal for targeted analyses are quite explicit in requesting that the partnership shall be set up from the onset and may not be changed. Still, there is an opportunity to join the steering committee of a targeted analysis, subject to prior consent of the lead stakeholder. The practice is that targeted analyses have many associated organisations in their steering committees who are interested in following the activity, capitalising on research findings and advocating for specific zoom-in territorial analyses to be included in the work.

COM asked if the TA MedCoopNet would be able to generate any results before June 2026.

The EGTC confirmed that the majority of outcomes, including data and statistical analyses, will be available by June 2026.

The MA wanted to know when the last cut-off date is planned, bearing in mind the timeline for implementing targeted analyses.

The EGTC replied that the last cut-off date is foreseen in early 2027, to complete the projects by end of 2028.

RO asked to consider setting the next cut-off date in connection with the MC meeting date in November 2025.

The EGTC observed that the selection decision on the submitted proposals would anyway be reported to the MC only at the following meeting (in March 2026), during which a maximum threshold for the further selection round will be agreed.

The MA wrapped the discussion and concluded that the MC agree on the maximum number of 6 targeted analyses proposals to be selected after the fifth cut-off date.

4. Stakeholder evaluation report 2024 (document, ppt and discussion)

The EGTC presented main findings from the latest stakeholder evaluation report, emphasising that the collected evidence demonstrates that the knowledge event participants without prior ESPON experience may benefit from a more accessible and actionable content in order to motivate potential use.

The MA underlined that the report contains a good substance which gives indication on what needs to be done to encourage more participants to ESPON events.

NO sought explanation on why some economic operators fail and some succeed, and if there are any territorial (country) patterns.

PT asked about availability of country-specific information on economic operators submitting tenders.

In connection to that, the MA enquired on how the success rate in calls for tenders was calculated. Also, responding to PT, the MA stated that information on unsuccessful tenderers may be publicly available.

The EGTC explained that success rate in calls for tenders was calculated as the share of all participations from one country in tendering procedures. No specific country patterns have been identified so far that could link the success probability to specific country situation as the landscape of economic operators submitting tenders shows both big and small organisations. However, it would be interesting to look at success rate of economic operators new to ESPON. Responding to the further PT question, the EGTC informed that it is possible to retrieve information on successful economic operators, incl. financial shares in service provider's consortia, owing to the latest EGTC database.

IT asked if participants data for events arranged by Italy before the ECP nomination could be added to the stock.

The EGTC confirmed, and suggested to engage bilaterally to discuss the work plan for ECP activities in Italy.

The MA underscored that all tenderers receive feedback from the EGTC on the quality of their proposals as a lesson to draw for the participation in future calls for tenders.

6. TAPs: Information on the feedback and satisfaction survey (document and discussion)

The MA reported back on the replies to the satisfaction survey launched after the MC, stressing a number of improvements after the TAP workshops sessions held in Mons. However, the present survey shows much lower response rate, just 7 answers, arguably on account of the improvement seen. The MA also noted some feedback suggestions that could be taken aboard in designing the next ESPON programme.

The EGTC pointed at a possibility to further optimise the setup of TAP workshops bearing in mind the time and capacity limitations. This may involve leaving out the administrative dimension of a TAP from presentation and discussion (as this info will already be presented in the MC Info Note), while focusing on strategic directions of further work. Further, the EGTC suggested to prepare the strategic considerations for a TAP and ideas for ESPON engagement together with voluntary MC members. In that regard, reactivating the Advisory Panels could be a good option.

The MA wrapped up this point and asked MC members to declare their interest in supporting the EGTC in that respect in written, when reacting on the draft minutes.

7. Single Operation: planned implementation actions (ppt and discussion)

1. Global plan for evidence and knowledge activities in 2025

The EGTC presented a global plan for evidence and knowledge activities in 2025, highlighting the integrative approach to initiating new activities by factoring in the budget spending dimension, in order to avoid decommitment risks. In effect, the plan details the types, the numbers and the timelines of the foreseen projects. The plan also lists a number of transnational knowledge development events planned and scheduled by the EGTC. Further, the EGTC shared views on key challenges for the effective implementation of the Single Operation, including the timely provision of on-demand territorial studies and a low absorption level of ECP grants for execution of national knowledge development activities.

The MA thanked for the presentation and underlined its vital role as a basis to consider implementation strategies and discuss activities also on the ECP side.

DK stressed the importance of finding the thematic niches and responding to stakeholder needs. From the Danish perspective, efforts were made to promote the cut-off dates for targeted analyses and, together with the ECP, to push for policy support but with no tangible effects yet. DK observed that it is relevant to open new arenas for ESPON engagement in Denmark, in relation to governance roles and jurisdictions, e.g. with regard to urban development. In that connection, DK suggested considering a support model similar to the one exercised for national contact points on urban development – with seed funding to facilitate networking, to possibly increase absorption of the ECP grants.

NO posed a practical question on the length of timeline for on-demand studies (from idea to completion).

DE thanked for the informative presentations both days. Regarding the ECPs, DE wondered whether the capacity allows to absorb this big budget, what consequences could be if not, and whether there is any way to relocate a portion of the budget to other purposes.

LT reflected that the programme produces many interesting studies, events and publications, the results of which are being spread by the Lithuanian ECP among national experts, but the time and capacity constraints with many other work tasks to be fulfilled make it difficult to be effective. LT asked if any other solutions could be possible, e.g. motivation incentives offered by the programme or more contact points in a country to be financed.

IT announced that the country's ECP was appointed in October 2024, while the Ministry had been supporting the regions with information and communication meetings before that date. As confirmed the day before, the data on participation will be uploaded on the ESPON website. IT shared some open questions that need to be resolved before signing the Partnership Agreement, e.g. in relation to organisation of some planned events in collaboration with other entities (e.g. providing venue or catering) as the programme funds are not advanced to the ECP.

FI mentioned that slim programme resources for the ECP in Finland work require subsidising the ECP salaries by the ministry, and recalled the Urbact support model for national contact points as a potentially good inspiration for the next programme.

CY supported claims by DK and LT that the resources to carry out ECP work are insufficient and asked if any additional funding from ESPON would be possible.

CZ brought to the attention the Czech model of ensuring an open account at the Ministry of Finance to advance financial support to the ECP before the expenses are reimbursed.

The MA recollected that the Urbact model, with technical assistance budget covering the cost of its contact points, was brought in discussion upon setting up the ESPON programme. However, as ESPON has less resources than Urbact, it cannot pay for communication activities

which should be provided by the ministries. Still, in comparison with the previous ESPON programme, specific activities (under knowledge development) are now being financed.

The EGTC reiterated on the points raised, emphasising the role of MC members in coordinating the work of ECPs in finding the relevant evidence produced and capitalising it in national policy contexts through events, translations and publications. Responding on the question by NO, the time span between the conception of idea for an on-demand study and the completion of the study does not exceed one year.

The MA stated that more evidence material is now becoming available, e.g. with European research projects coming to an end, which could help produce more publications and translations and these could, with less efforts, be linked with events to promote the results. In that configuration, external experts could be contracted to prepare articles etc.

RO seconded that opinion, stating that it is hard to prepare many events and publications until there are more results.

HR underscored the importance to understand the risk of not using the entire allocation; also, what can be learned from this experience and improve for the next period. While understanding capacity issues, HR brought another perspective to the scene, presenting the Croatian example of designing a realistic work plan based on the budget available. As Urbact does not reimburse travel expenses for MC members, HR stated that it could be considered for the future ESPON programme to instead use such an allocation to support the ECPs.

LT proposed to define a certain commission out of events and translations to be declared for ECP staff. Also, LT advised to consider advance payments for the Lithuanian ECP as no additional support from the ministry is thinkable. In LT view, while the LT-MC member should monitor and supervise the work of the ECP, this in practice is difficult due to other priorities.

PT informed that the Partnership Agreement should be signed by end of March. PT plans an information event with stakeholders in May 2025 to, among others, attract them to the ESPON seminar in June. PT asked if external expertise could only be used for translations and publications, or whether external experts could also support the implementation of the ESPON programme in a respective country. This could consist in a longer contract (e.g. 2 years) with a national expert to support ECPs, organise events, write articles etc., following the Urbact example.

SI reflected that the work of the Urbact contact point in the country was deemed insufficient to transfer the knowledge to the cities; therefore, a special contract was drawn up by the ministry for targeted expert support. A similar model could be, in SI view, considered to be applied in the ESPON case.

PL agreed with this, and advocated for an expertise contract dedicated to a scientific support to the ECP.

The MA thanked for the discussion and the proposals. The MA suggested to follow the EGTC recommendation to work out, under the programme rules, some feasible options to speed up the implementation of Partnership Agreements, and present them at the MC meeting in June. The future, however, will depend the budget available and the new implementation rules.

The EGTC confirmed the intent to develop – together with the MA - solutions and budget simulations for further MC guidance, and then to communicate the information to the ECP (in the upcoming ECP meeting) to help them calibrate the work plans for the second semester of 2025.

The MA closed this point by encouraging the MC members to discuss within the countries stakeholders' interest for territorial studies.

2. New evidence production activities (ppt, scoping note and decision)

a) Data Update activity

The EGTC presented the content of the proposed data update activity.

PL thanked for the presentation and stated high interest of the Polish government in this project. PL also shared opinion that it would be insightful to engage ECP in connecting the relevant national experts across the sectors.

SI confirmed that topic to be very important for the country, likewise the proposed policy questions. In that connection, SI enquired what typology will be tackled and developed through the results of analysis (e.g. whether coastal and mountainous areas will be included, as well as border regions). Further, SI would like to know if all the listed indicators are available and if any correlation could be examined between the rental housing situation and the areas lacking housing offers.

IT acknowledged country's interest for this topic and informed that minor editorial comments will be sent, regarding e.g. impact of overtourism on housing supplies, which could be considered in policy questions (fluctuations in rates, impact on specific sectors of the housing shortage and price increases, etc.).

NO recommended illustrating diversified challenges in different areas, e.g. urban and rural.

FR informed about high interest of the country in this topic, with plans for a national overview of housing issues. FR asked if feedback is awaited in any specific field within the scoping note.

RO considered this to be an excellent project and will be looking forward to its implementation. Still, it would be very interesting to also cross-check with data obtained from short rental platforms (e.g. Airbnb) as this is also influencing the housing stock a lot.

IE claimed it would be very interested in further involvement in the project. One aspect worth considering is housing affordability across different demographics - for example the difference between those under the age of 40 with higher levels of renting in contrast to those aged over 40 with higher levels of home ownership.

HR stated it would also be very interested in this project. The ministry gathered an amount of data for the purpose of preparing the first National Housing Policy Plan which is to be adopted in the coming weeks and HR would definitely be interested in extending the data and helping in implementation of this project.

COM confirmed the relevance of this topic in connection with the framework of affordable housing plan and stated its support for this activity.

The MA suggested, when setting up the maps, to cross the data on housing with income in the different regions. Also, if data per city/region are available – to compare them with commuting time. Moreover, the MA asked for clarification – if any territorial analysis will accompany the data updates.

The EGTC reassured that any type of territorial typology will be feasible to produce as the data will be granular and geolocalised, then aggregated to LAU2 level. All the indicators are available and already scraped through the ERP H4ALL project. The topical scope will be extended in correspondence to policy needs - until the ToR is drafted it will be possible to develop the specification on the scope of data to be collected.

The EGTC proposed to apply a competitive dialogue procedure for the procurement of external expertise for this activity to enable adjustments of the needs of institutions and countries to the data availability constraints.

Responding to the MA suggestion, the EGTC affirmed that it would be doable to set the housing data against income data, while inclusion of commuting time data will be investigated. The EGTC stressed that this specific activity is formatted to be an data update, following a clear stakeholders' request for new data. However, a report to be produced on a yearly basis is intended to contain a series of territorial analyses on specific policy focuses.

With the House4all project soon ending, the MA underscored the importance to continue with territorial analyses based on the newly collected data, which will be important for the mid-term review and the next programming period.

DE expressed an interest in this project proposal, and asked about a timeline to interact on its preparation.

The EGTC explained that within the framework of a competitive dialogue a two-step approach is foreseen, with publishing of a final ToR by summer 2025. The awarding of a service contract is envisaged in early 2026, at the latest.

The MA suggested adding to the description of project results that data collection will be supplemented with territorial analyses.

DK recognised the House4all results are very tangible for dissemination, also in the national policy context, and expressed strong support for the data update activity. DK suggested including the aspects of energy efficiency (quality of housing) and localisation in risk areas (flooding, storms, etc.).

PL underlined that trends and dynamics are crucial elements to be included in the project.

FR posed a question to the MA whether there is any reluctance to accept this data collection activity once the H4ALL project paved the way.

The MA stated the opposite, pinpointing that it is important to continue with data collection but not to limit it to just an acquisition and processing of data. Adding an analysis of the data collected is substantial.

FR agreed with this but advised to find a balance between strict data collection process and policy analysis.

LU reflected that further data collection is important, yet, it is equally crucial to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the data. In cross-border regions for example, integrating and analysing socioeconomic data is essential for obtaining a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the situation of households in different countries and possible negative spillovers this may entail. And so on for other cases as well.

The EGTC emphasised that the goal of the activity is not just to deliver data, although they will constitute an important contribution for the target institutions to draw up their research and development plans. Some focused territorial analyses will be provided in yearly reports. In future, in-depth territorial analyses as well as more comprehensive policy analyses could be requested through on-demand studies or a new European research project which could focus e.g. on energy efficiency issues.

The MA suggested adding in the description of yearly reports that they will contain specific (although limited) territorial analyses. Further, in a TAP plan a follow-up project could be foreseen once the first batch of new data becomes available.

The EGTC confirmed so, pointing at the upcoming discussion on TAP Perspectives for all People and Places in June 2025.

PL agreed it would be a good idea to discuss it further in June. In the meantime, the relevant bodies responsible for housing in the ESPON countries could be approached for consultation.

SI enquired if it would be possible to use data in national analyses, and asked for precisising information in the scoping note whether the yearly reports will provide a limited-scope analysis of the gathered data.

The EGTC clarified that the scoping note will specify that the yearly reports will contain some limited territorial and policy analyses. On using the data in national analyses, the EGTC cautioned that at the moment data on the Slovenian housing market are quite limited. Once resolved, it should be possible to make use of them.

FR confirmed interest but subject to checking with the national expert involved in the H4ALL project.

The MA summed up the discussion, and advised that a revised scoping note will be distributed with the draft MC meeting minutes for approval in Written Procedure. Meanwhile, the EGTC may start working on the ToR. Invitation to declare interest in supporting the EGTC in that process will be included in the draft minutes and the heading message.

b) New European research project with focus on rural regions

The EGTC shared an early notice information on the envisaged profile of this new project idea, with indicative timeline and budget to be determined later, and invited the MC members to accompany the preparatory process.

SI observed a broad scope of this project at this moment, and raised the issue that in the typology used by the Commission, Ljubljana ranks among rural regions. SI noticed the lack of references to agriculture in the description so far, essential from the perspective of efforts to preserve the agricultural land and prevent overgrowing. Also, it will be advisable to include the potential of accessibility, public services and ageing in remote rural areas. Further, SI advised to relate to the past ESPON projects on rural areas, including ESPON EDORA (ESPON 2013 programme).

PT expressed support for this proposal recalling experience from the EU Council presidency work with ESPON, and the role of the ESPON TITAN project focusing on local actors' role in developing rural areas. PT informed about the priority in the country's policies to involve rural stakeholders.

The MA asked the MC members to specify their interest for this rural areas development project.

DE and SE confirmed it to be the case. SE mentioned the relevance of this topic for the country's work on rural policies, while it would be important to identify knowledge gaps that this project could address in light of the other studies (e.g. by the OECD on harnessing the innovation potential of rural areas) and initiatives (e.g. by the Commission on smart villages).

FR confirmed interest in this topic in relation to the national policies to revitalise rural areas and the work of the observatory on diverse rural typologies

The EGTC invited the MC members to co-work on the scope of this project to thematically focus it better, based on national policy interests.

DK pointed at importance of finding some niche areas in research as an added value, so that the project is not just a sum of national discussions.

The EGTC signalled that all ideas are welcome at this stage, to then better frame the angle and the policy needs, so that the project does not overlap with the work of the other providers of territorial research.

The MA summed up that the work should continue towards developing a scoping note and asked if any countries are interested to support. The invitation to declare interest in supporting the EGTC on this project will be communicated with the draft minutes, while a fully-fledged scoping note could be presented for decision at the next MC meeting.

3. Upcoming knowledge development events (by the EGTC and the ECPs)

The EGTC presented the upcoming knowledge development events (transnational and national), and shared the latest draft programme for the ESPON Seminar in Poland. The registration will be opened in late March, and a draft programme is already available on the ESPON website.

4. ESPON Seminar in Gdansk – draft programme

The EGTC presented the upcoming knowledge development events (transnational and national), and shared the latest draft programme for the ESPON Seminar in Poland. The registration will be opened in late March, and a draft programme is already available on the ESPON website.

5. Timetable on interaction with the MC

The EGTC presented the timetable on interaction with the MC, available in the MC Info Note.

6. Involvement of MC members and ECPs in ESPON activities

The MA introduced this item by pondering on how to best ensure that the MC members are involved in the planning of Single Operation activities, and, if at this stage there are specific needs in terms of evidence production or knowledge development that they would like the EGTC to consider for the future. Particularly, if there are any requests for transnational knowledge development events.

With no reaction from the MC at this point, the EGTC recalled a procedure to raise an interest for on-demand studies and knowledge development activities foreseen in the Single Operation, which consists in sending an ad-hoc email message to initiate the planning/scoping process.

8. Update on ESPON Contact Points (ppt and discussion)

1. Nomination and contracting

2. Status of ECP work plans

3. Role of ESPON Contact Points

On this item, the EGTC referred to the status information on the work by the ESPON Contact Points presented in the context of risk management of the Single Operation.

9. Timetable MC/MA and EGTC (document and decision)

The MA has presented the timetable, which now shall be updated following the decision about organizing an additional online MC meeting in Autumn. The MA will discuss the availability of the EGTC and will update the Timetable that will be sent together with the Draft Minutes. As a pre-liminary date, the MC is suggested to mark 23 September 2025 for a one-day online MC

meeting where management provision would not be covered in order to allocate all the time for content related discussion.

The MC approved the timetable with the additional meeting scheduled for the 23 September 2025 (online)
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10. AOB

No other points were discussed.