

Study supporting the evaluation of the EU Executive Agencies

European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA)

Independent Expert Report



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Study supporting the evaluation of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA)

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List of Abbreviations

AAR – Annual Activity Report
AdG – Advanced Grant
AWP – Annual Work Programme
CA – Contract Agent
CBA – Cost-Benefit Analysis
CoG – Consolidator Grant
DG – Directorate-General
DG RTD – Directorate-General for Research and Innovation
EA – Executive Agency
ECA – European Court of Auditors
ERC – European Research Council
ERCEA – European Research Council Executive Agency
EU – European Union
FTE – Full-Time Equivalent
F2P – Feedback to Policy
HE – Horizon Europe
HI – Host Institution
HR – Human Resources
IAS – Internal Audit Service
ICAT – Internal Control Assessment Tool
ISG – Inter-Service Steering Group
KPI – Key Performance Indicator
MFF – multiannual financial framework
MoU – Memorandum of Understanding
PI – Principal Investigator
PoC – Proof of Concept
RMIC – Risk Management and Internal Control
SFS – Specific Financial Statement
ScC – Scientific Council
StC – Steering Committee
StG – Starting Grant
SyG – Synergy Grant
TA – Temporary Agent
TTG – Time-To-Grant
TTI – Time-To-Inform
TTP – Time-To-Pay
WP – Work Programme

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the external evaluation of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) for the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2024. The evaluation, conducted in line with the European Commission's Better Regulation guidelines and Article 25 of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003, assesses ERCEA's effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence in managing the ERC programme delegated by its parent Directorate-General (DG).

To answer the study's evaluation questions, a mixed-method evaluation approach was applied. Key elements included a systematic desk review of legislation, reports, and internal documents, as well as an analysis of monitoring data. Two large-scale online surveys were administered: one targeting beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants (principal investigators and host institutions), and another aimed at external experts involved in proposal evaluation. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including European Commission officials, ERCEA staff, ERC Scientific Council members, beneficiaries (Principal Investigators and Host Institutions), unsuccessful applicants, external experts, and National Contact Points. The study also incorporated a retrospective cost-benefit analysis comparing actual resource use and costs with ex-ante projections and alternative management scenarios.

Main study results

Effectiveness

Objectives and delivery

ERCEA has demonstrated strong performance in implementing the parts of its delegated EU programme, consistently meeting its Key Performance Indicators with few recent exceptions related to redress cases.

The Agency successfully managed a growing project portfolio, maintained low error rates, and ensured timely payments, all while maintaining satisfaction of beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and external experts. Furthermore, ERCEA's support to the ERC Scientific Council was effective and contributed adequately to the functioning of the ERC's governance model. Stakeholders highlighted the commitment, technical expertise, and engagement of the Agency's staff as a factor explaining its effectiveness.

Legal framework

The ERCEA operated within the boundaries of its legal framework during the evaluation period. One governance-related irregularity was raised by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) in 2023 annual report with regard to the decision-making rule in the Steering Committee of the agency, which has been remedied in June 2025.

Internal Control

Internal control mechanisms were robust, with no major deficiencies identified by audits. The estimated overall risk at payment was below the target (i.e. <2%) for the whole evaluation period. While the administrative expenditure error rates experienced a slight increase with the introduction of the HE programme, the rate improved from 2022 to 2023 as ERCEA staff and beneficiaries became more familiar with new reporting requirements.

Communication

ERCEA maintained a growing media outreach with events such as the Nobel Prize Dialogue proving to be very successful in gathering participation. The beneficiaries, unsuccessful

applicants, and experts consulted also showed high levels of awareness on the funding opportunities that ERCEA providers and agreed that the funding opportunities were well promoted.

Reporting to parent DGs

The Agency also complied with its communication and reporting obligations to its parent DG, while improvements could be sought to better structure the reporting. Stakeholders consulted identified that there was scope for improvement in the structure, timeliness, and strategic depth of communication and reporting to the parent DG.

Efficiency

Programme management

The ERCEA consistently met its key efficiency targets during the evaluation period, demonstrating strong performance in programme management. The Agency maintained full budget execution rates for both operational and administrative expenditures and remained within acceptable cost-efficiency thresholds. ERCEA's focused mission, cumulative experience, and well-structured procedures were viewed by stakeholders as enabling factors for its efficiency.

Fit for purpose

The analysis conducted indicates that the ERCEA's size and structure are well suited to achieving its objectives. Throughout the evaluation period, the Agency did not face staffing issues with the exception of 2021 when shortages were partly caused by hiring challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic and an increased workload. In subsequent years, the Agency succeeded in raising its occupancy rate while simultaneously reducing staff turnover.

Environmental impact

The ERCEA continued its efforts in the promotion of sustainable practices with significant reductions in their consumption and waste indicators. In addition, the ERCEA had a EMAS score equal to 10 out of 10 in 2024.

Digitalisation

The Agency has made considerable advances in the digitalisation of its operations with the support of the Commission's Common Implementation Centre to adapt corporate IT tools to their needs, while they conjointly explored further possibilities to digitalise and automate operational and administrative processes of the Agency.

Coherence

Coherence of the Programme Portfolio

As the sole implementing Agency for the ERC under Horizon Europe, the ERCEA's programme portfolio is clear and coherent, with no overlaps, gaps, or inconsistencies. The standardisation across grant types and the stability of the portfolio over the evaluation period have supported operational efficiency, flexibility, and consistent management practices

Division of Tasks between the Agency and the Parent DG

The delineation of responsibilities between ERCEA, its parent DG, and the ERC Scientific Council is clear with a robust formal framework – although some minor instances of operational ambiguity occurred.

Feedback to Policy

The feedback to policy function was significantly strengthened during the evaluation period with the introduction of a dedicated F2P sector and annual planning. Coordination of F2P processes could be further improved to better manage ad-hoc requests and tracking policy uptakes.

1. Introduction

This document presents the Draft Final report of the study supporting the evaluation of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA). This evaluation support study is being conducted under the Multiple Service Framework Contract RTD/2023/OP/0011 - Framework Contract for the Impact Assessments, Evaluations, Foresight and Strategic Analysis of Research and Innovation Policies and Programmes, Lot 3 - Studying, assessing and evaluating research and innovation programmes and policies (SARI).

In line with the requirements stated in the tender specifications, the report is organised as follows:

The remainder of this section provides an overview of the purpose and scope of the evaluation, the evaluation criteria covered, and the methodology applied.

- Section 2 provides a description of the intervention, the baseline for the evaluation.
- Section 3 describes the agency's state of play.
- Section 4 provides the evaluation findings.
- Section 5 presents the conclusions and the lessons learned of the study.

The annexes to the report include an overview of the methodology and analytical models, the approach and results of the Cost–Benefit Analysis, a synthesis report of the stakeholder consultation, the interview questionnaire and the survey questionnaire.

This external evaluation assesses the operations of ERCEA from **1 April 2021 to 31 March 2024**, in line with Article 25 of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003, which mandates a review every three years. The evaluation focuses on the Agency's effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence, following the European Commission's Better Regulation guidelines.

The study examines whether ERCEA met its operational objectives, the efficiency of its resource use, and the alignment of its activities with institutional goals. Further, the study evaluates the Agency's interaction with its parent Directorate-General, the Scientific Council (ScC) and the coherence of its programme portfolio. The following evaluation themes are covered, in line with the Commission's better regulation principles:

- **Effectiveness:** assessing whether the Agency has fulfilled its tasks effectively considering the legal framework, internal control framework, communication and reporting to its parent Directorate-General (DG).
- **Efficiency:** assessing whether the Agency has fulfilled its tasks efficiently, whether the resources are used to their best and the costs generated are strictly necessary to reach the objectives, including the potential for simplification and burden reduction (including coverage of actions taken in relation to environmental impact and digitalisation).
- **Coherence:** assessing overlaps, gaps, or inconsistencies in the management of the programme portfolio, covering both internal and external coherence; whether there is a clear delimitation of tasks between ERCEA and the parent DG and information exchange on feedback to policy.

The evaluation was guided by 19 evaluation questions defined by the tender specifications and refined during the inception phase of the study. These questions focus on the operational delivery of the programme implementation. The study did not consider results and outcomes of individual programmes, because such results are evaluated separately.

A cost-benefit analysis undertaken as part of this study further assesses whether the expected efficiency gains from delegating tasks to the agency—versus managing them in-house—have been achieved, as projected in the 2021 ex-ante analysis and related financial statements.

The evaluation is a part of a broader evaluation of the European Commission's six executive agencies.¹ The assignment covered all six agencies in a coordinated manner and followed a common evaluation methodology.

To answer the studies' evaluation questions, a mixed-methods evaluation approach was applied, using a theory-based approach, accompanied by well-defined evaluation questions and relevant indicators. This approach has integrated both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to yield a comprehensive assessment of ERCEA.

The research tools used involved a desk review and analysis of monitoring data, surveys with applicants (Principal Investigators - PIs and Host Institutions - HIs), covering both beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants, and respectively experts, and the retrospective cost-benefit analysis. For qualitative insights, a comprehensive interview programme was undertaken, involving ERCEA's main stakeholders.

Document review and analysis of monitoring data

The purpose of the document review was to conduct a systematic qualitative and quantitative analysis of materials related to ERCEA's operations. For the necessary documents, the evaluation team consulted publicly available sources and liaised with both the parent DG and ERCEA to obtain additional non-publicly available data and documents. ERCEA provided a wide range of documentation, delivered in several batches between February and June 2025. The study team also compiled a list of internal indicators relevant to the analysis based on the monitoring data. A list of reviewed documents is available in the Annex.

Surveys

Two online surveys were implemented: one aimed at beneficiaries (both Principal investigators (PIs) and Host institutions (HIs) of Principal investigators) and unsuccessful applicants (both unsuccessful applicants and their Host Institutions), and one aimed at external experts. The surveys were programmed and launched via EU survey on 8th April 2025, a second wave was launched on 2nd July 2025 due to unsatisfactory response rates and issues with the addressee lists during the first wave. The survey remained open until the 14th of July. A total of 1 344 respondents provided replies to the surveys, composed by 695 beneficiaries (including 396 PIs and 299 HIs), 649 unsuccessful applicants (including 455 PIs and 194 HIs) and 711 experts. Unsuccessful applicants participated less actively than beneficiaries. The response rate of beneficiaries/unsuccessful applicants was 9.86% and of 22.71% for experts. Survey insight pertaining to the overarching findings is used in this report, while a separate survey analysis in the Annex showcases the full results (see Annex 1.3).

Interviews

The purpose of the interview programme was to provide qualitative insights into the performance and operational challenges of ERCEA. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven key groups of stakeholders – Agency staff, European Commission staff, beneficiaries (PIs and HIs), unsuccessful applicants (PIs and HIs), external experts, members of the European Research Council Scientific Council (ERC ScC), and National Contact Points (NCPs). In total, 68 interviews have been conducted. The Annex to this report provides details on the interviews undertaken.

Cost benefit analysis and workload assessment

A retrospective cost-benefit analysis (CBA) for the period 2021-2024 was conducted by the study team. This CBA assesses to what extent the executive agencies have achieved the

¹ Evaluation of European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA), European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA), European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA), European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) and European Research Executive Agency (REA).

expected savings and productivity gains outlined in the 2021 ex-ante assessment. It examines whether delegating programme management to the executive agencies (EAs) was justified.

The CBA compares ex-ante estimates and actual figures regarding full-time equivalents (FTEs) and staff costs (incl. Title I and Title II) at the level of the EA and the Commission for contract agents (CA) and temporary agents (TA), as well as commitment appropriations (in million EUR) at programme/pillar level for the years 2021-2024. The methodology and the results of the analysis are presented in Annex.

Strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation approach

The evaluation of ERCEA was carried out in accordance with the European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines. It provides robust evidence addressing the key evaluation criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence in the Agency's operations. The conclusions are based on this evidence and focus on ERCEA's processes, management practices, and operational performance. For each evaluation question, specific indicators, assessment parameters, data sources, and methods were defined. This structured design supported the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for triangulation and ensuring a balanced evidence base.

Overall, the evaluation is underpinned by reliable data from high-quality sources. Nonetheless, a few limitations affected the process:

- While the final number of survey responses was sufficient for analysis, technical issues related to sampling strategy led to an initial lower number of responses among certain groups of stakeholders – specifically unsuccessful applicants and beneficiary PIs. To address this issue and collect sufficient number of responses, the survey programme was extended, and additional invitations were sent by the study team. The number of responses collected from beneficiary PIs increased from 45 to 396, and for unsuccessful applicants it increased from 82 to 455.
- Interview participation varied among stakeholder groups. While most groups were actively engaged, others—such as applicants—showed lower or delayed participation, limiting the breadth of input from these groups. Furthermore, not all interviewees were able to cover the full evaluation period.
- Some external interviewees found it difficult to distinguish which of their experiences fell within the evaluation period, occasionally referring to events outside the defined timeframe. This issue was mitigated through clear explanations at the start of interviews to clarify the evaluation scope.

2. Background of the measure

The Framework Regulation for executive agencies², state that the purpose of entrusting the executive agencies with programme implementation tasks is to enable the Commission to focus on its core policy activities and functions which cannot be outsourced. Moreover, delegation enables the Commission to achieve the objectives of the delegated EU programmes more effectively and efficiently. The 2021 ex ante cost-benefit analysis estimated that it was more cost-efficient to delegate certain programme tasks to the Agency than to perform them in house.³

The ex-ante cost-benefit analysis also pointed to the optimised allocation of programmes scenario, under which additional efficiency gains could be generated compared to the 2014-2020 baseline. Under this scenario, the optimised allocation of programmes should ensure a more effective implementation of EU programmes through a thematically coherent architecture of portfolios and more streamlined governance.

ERCEA, the European Research Council Executive Agency, is unique among the six executive agencies in that it manages a single, bottom-up research programme—the European Research Council (ERC). Unlike agencies that implement multiple programmes or thematic areas, ERCEA is dedicated exclusively to supporting frontier research across all scientific disciplines through highly competitive grants.

During the 2021–2024 evaluation period, ERCEA was responsible for the implementation of:

- Horizon Europe: Pillar I: the European Research Council (ERC);
- Legacy activities under Horizon 2020 Specific Programme – The Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014- 2020), Part I ‘Excellent science’: ‘Strengthening frontier research through the activities of the European Research Council’⁴;
- Legacy activities of the Specific Programme: ‘Ideas’ implementing the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-2013)⁵

ERCEA managed the full project cycle—from calls for proposals and evaluations to grant agreements and project monitoring. In addition to project cycle implementation, ERCEA supported the European Research Council Scientific Council (ERC ScC) in its strategic, monitoring, and communication functions.

ERCEA operated under the supervision of a single parent Directorate-General—DG Research and Innovation (DG RTD).

² Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173 of 12 February 2021 establishing the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, the European Health and Digital Executive Agency, the European Research Executive Agency, the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, the European Research Council Executive Agency, and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and repealing Implementing Decisions 2013/801/EU, 2013/771/EU, 2013/778/EU, 2013/779/EU, 2013/776/EU and 2013/770/EU

³ Commission staff working document, 2021, Cost-benefit analysis for the delegation of the management of the 2021-2027 EU programmes to executive agencies. C(2021) 946 final

⁴ Council Decision 2013/743/EU of 3 December 2013 establishing the specific programme implementing Horizon 2020 – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020) and repealing Decisions 2006/971/EC, 2006/972/EC, 2006/973/EC, 2006/974/EC and 2006/975/EC (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 965).

⁵ Council Decision 2006/972/EC of 19 December 2006 concerning the specific programme: ‘Ideas’ implementing the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007 to 2013) (OJ L 400, 30.12.2006, p. 243).

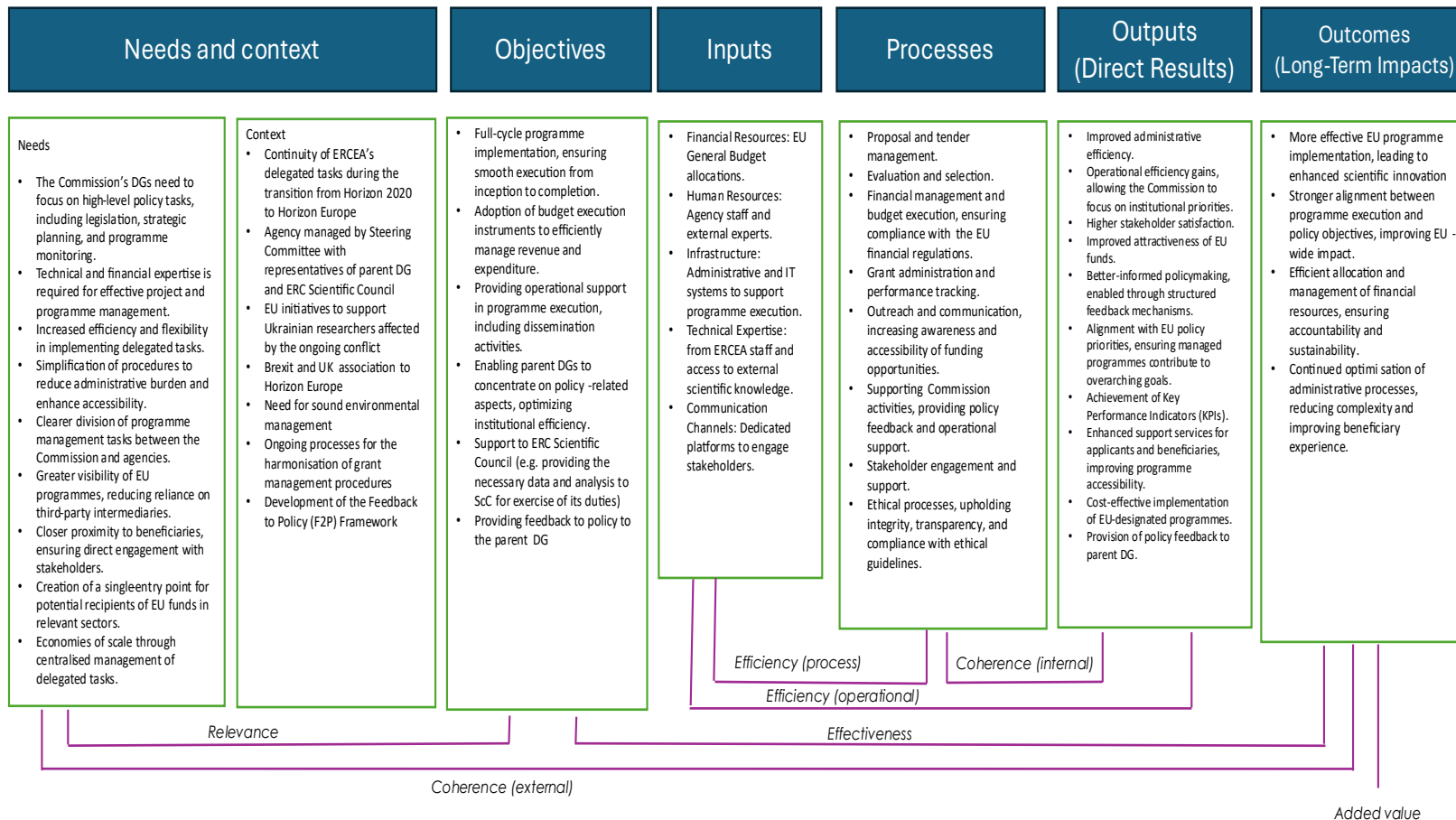
The intervention logic of ERCEA is provided below. When implementing the programmes delegated to it, ERCEA was responsible for:

- Proposal and tender management (after their approval by the Commission);
- Evaluating and selecting projects
- Signing grant agreements and contracts
- Monitoring of projects and performance tracking
- Outreach and support to applicants and their intermediaries (e.g. National contact points)
- Supporting its parent DG providing policy feedback, reporting, and communication support
- Providing support to the ERC Scientific Council, including its communication activities
- Carrying out the necessary checks and recovery procedures; and performing budget implementation tasks covering revenue and expenditure under the EU Financial Regulation.

The key inputs are human resources, financial resources, IT tools and communication channels. The main outputs of ERCEA's performance relate to the effective and cost-efficient management of the delegated programme. The achievement of these results depends on the achievement of key performance indicators. Policy feedback-related outputs are also critical. Outcomes relate to the key results and impacts achieved during the evaluation period (medium- to long-term outcomes).

To assess the implementation of ERC programme and achievement (as laid out in the intervention logic) of key performance indicators, indicators of financial management, key metrics for the proposal and project management lifecycle (e.g. number of calls, proposals managed, number of running projects, etc.), and communication reach indicators were used. Policy feedback outputs are also considered. The satisfaction of unsuccessful applicants and beneficiaries (both PIs and His) and respectively experts with the Agency's performance was considered an output and was measured via the surveys undertaken. The results of the quantitative cost-benefit analysis are also presented in this evaluation

Figure 1: Intervention logic of ERCEA



The evaluation uses several reference points to construct the baseline scenario. Regarding the cost-benefit analysis, it assesses the actual costs and benefits of programme implementation by ERCEA (executive agency scenario) compared with the alternative scenario of management by Commission departments (in-house scenario). Accordingly, the reference points for the current ERCEA evaluation are the 2021 *ex-ante* cost-benefit analysis and ERCEA's specific financial statements. The costs of the executive agency scenario are compared against the in-house scenario and the cost savings which were estimated in the ex-ante cost-benefit analysis of 2021.

The previous evaluation conducted for the period 2018-2021 found that generally the ERCEA performs effectively, efficiently, and in coherence with its legal framework, consistently meeting its objectives and KPIs with comprehensive reporting. The previous evaluation highlighted operational improvements over time, allowing for only limited further gains. In terms of effectiveness, a key factor identified in explaining the Agency's success was the high level of dedication and expertise of ERCEA employees. Additionally, ERCEA demonstrated operational efficiency through several measures adopted to simplify procedures, including the development of IT tools and the streamlining of evaluation, grant management, and monitoring processes. In terms of coherence, the previous evaluation concluded that there were a strong coherence and continuity in terms of the programmes managed, as the ERCEA was the only structure to implement the EU programme dedicated to bottom-up frontier research focused on scientific excellence. The delineation of responsibilities between the ERCEA and the parent Directorate-General was clear and appropriate and there were no overlaps, gaps or inconsistencies, in line with the legal framework.

3. State of play

The European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) was established by Commission Decision 2008/37/EC⁶ of 14 December 2007 to manage the Ideas programme in frontier research. ERCEA's creation was part of the broader development of the European Research Council (ERC), which was founded to fund frontier research, promote innovation, and support scientific excellence across Europe. Following the Delegation Act⁷ re-establishing ERCEA's mandate under Horizon Europe, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)⁸ was signed between ERCEA and DG RTD. It established the detailed rules and procedures for cooperation and set out the division of responsibilities between the Agency and its parent Directorate-General, reaffirming the operational role of ERCEA and the strategic oversight function of DG RTD.

The programme portfolio of ERCEA remained unchanged during the 2021–2024 period, reflecting the Agency's continued core mandate to implement the European Research Council's (ERC) activities in support of bottom-up frontier research across all scientific disciplines.

Since the 2021 evaluation, the ERCEA underwent several key developments in its operations and focus areas. In 2021, the ERCEA began implementing the first ERC Work Programme under the new Framework Programme – Horizon Europe (HE).⁹ This new framework strengthened the ERCEA's role in supporting pioneering research, with an ongoing focus on scientific excellence and frontier research. In 2021, both the ERC and ERCEA underwent organisational and leadership changes, with the ending and restart of the terms for both the ERC President and the ERCEA Director. The ERCEA management team under the Director's guidance, developed and adopted a strategy for 2023-2027 period. Additionally, the ERCEA developed a Feedback to Policy (F2P) Framework¹⁰, establishing a structured approach to deliver insights on the scientific impacts of ERC-funded research to the Commission to support policy making.

During the 2021-2024 time period, the total executed commitments of the operational budget increased by 48% from EUR 1 898 in 2021 to EUR 2 808 million in 2024; while the administrative commitments made increased by 21% from EUR 55.41 million in 2021 to EUR 66.8 million in 2024.¹¹ The Agency achieved full budget execution for both operational and administrative budgets throughout the evaluation period. The programme management cost ratio also remained moderate and below the 3% threshold. The total staff of the Agency, including staff financed from third country contribution, also steadily increased during the evaluation period, from 500 in 2021 to 544 in 2024. The staff engagement index also increased by 2 percentage points from 74% in 2021 to 76% in 2023. During the reference period, the ERCEA updated its organisational structure, notably with the restructuring of Department C to distribute more evenly workload during peaks. With the arrival of the new MFF and a continued increase in activities

⁶ 2008/37/EC: Commission Decision of 14 December 2007 setting up the European Research Council Executive Agency for the management of the specific Community programme Ideas in the field of frontier research in application of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008D0037>

⁷ European Commission, Commission Decision C(2021) 950 final of 12 February 2021 delegating powers to the European Research Council Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of frontier research comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union (Brussels, 12 February 2021).

⁸ Memorandum of Understanding between the European Research Council Executive Agency and the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation on Modalities and Procedures of Interaction (2022)

⁹ European Research Council Executive Agency - Annual Activity Report 2021. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/3a8fcf49-50ec-4c84-9ceb-bb4eb946c90a_en?filename=annual-activity-report-2021-ercea_en.pdf

¹⁰ European Research Council Executive Agency - Annual Activity Report 2022. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/annual-activity-report-2022-european-research-executive-agency_en

¹¹ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024.

and staff, the occupancy rate was slightly lower in 2021 compared to previous years (94.35% compared to 97.35% in 2020).¹² Over the evaluation period, it considerably improved to an almost full occupancy - 99% occupancy rate in 2024.

As reported in the Annual Activity Reports¹³, the number of proposals evaluated has shown a slight decline over the evaluation period before experiencing a historical peak of 9 597 in 2024. At the same time, the number of signed grants and running projects has been steadily increasing, with 7 168 running projects by the end of 2024 compared to 6 327 in 2021. This evidences the increasing project portfolio due to the increase of the operational budget implemented by ERCEA during the evaluation period, coupled with an increase in proposals received at the end of the evaluation period. In addition, external events also had an impact in the workload of the Agency such as administrative complexities linked to Brexit or COVID-19-related grant amendments.

¹² Data provided by the ERCEA.

¹³ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024.

4. Evaluation findings

This section represents a core component of the evaluation, examining the effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence of ERCEA's activities between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2024. The sub-sections that follow are organised according to the evaluation criteria and questions set out in the Technical Specifications. Given the interconnected nature of many of the evaluation questions, and occasional overlaps, cross-references to related questions are provided where relevant to ensure clarity and coherence in the analysis.

4.1. Effectiveness

4.1.1. Objectives

EQ1: To what extent has the Agency achieved its objectives related to programme implementation, taking into account the interests of the participants and those of the EU?

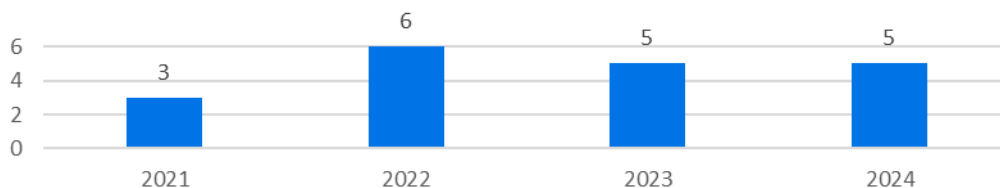
Key findings: During the evaluation period, the ERCEA met its programme implementation objectives, consistently achieving its KPIs with the exception of the percentage of redress cases in 2023. The ERCEA also managed a growing project portfolio with low error rates, and ensured timely payments, all while maintaining the satisfaction of beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants, and external experts. Furthermore, ERCEA's support to the ERC Scientific Council was effective and contributed adequately to the functioning of the ERC's governance model.

The ERCEA is responsible for all aspects of administrative implementation and execution of the European Research Council's (ERC) part of Horizon Europe Programme, the EU's framework programme for research and innovation for 2021–2027 and the legacy activities under H2020 Specific Programme and the Seventh Framework Programme. It administers the full range of ERC funding schemes (Starting (StG), Consolidator (CoG), Advanced (AdG), Synergy (SyG), and Proof of Concept (PoC) grants), as provided for in the ERC Work programme which is prepared by the ERC Scientific Council (ScC) and adopted by the European Commission.

Specifically, the Agency is responsible for managing calls for proposals, providing information and support to applicants and grantees, organising peer review evaluations, establishing and managing grant agreements, supporting the operations of the ERC Scientific Council, and communicating about the ERC. The achievement of these general objectives is assessed through the Agency's operational objectives related to programme implementation and the monitoring of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

During the 2021–2024 period, ERCEA effectively achieved its programme implementation objectives, consistently meeting performance targets. The ERCEA managed to launch all calls for proposals according to agreed deadlines. The agency generally launches five to six calls per year. However, in 2021, the ERCEA launched three calls of proposals as provided for in ERC Work Programme. This was a strategic decision to balance call calendar needs due to the adoption of the Horizon Europe Specific Programme in May 2021 as well as the additional workload that the Agency expected due to several factors stemming as consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit (further detailed below).

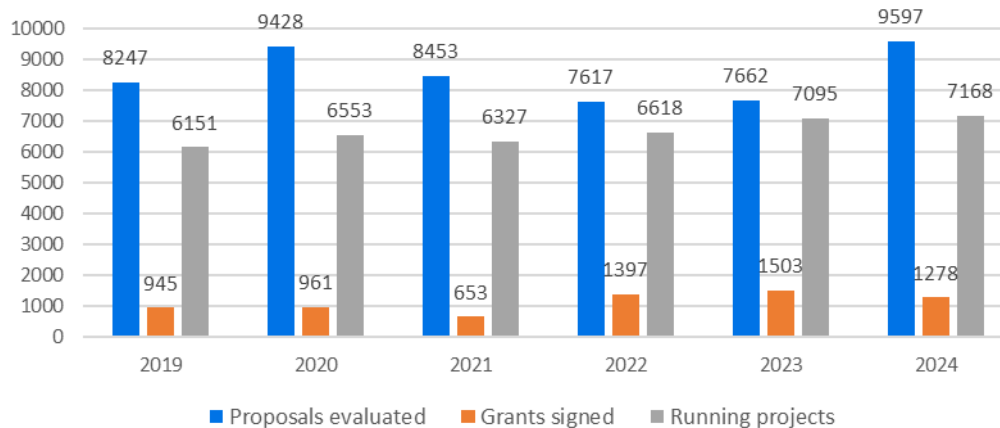
Figure 2: Number of calls for proposals launched, 2021-2024



Source: Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024.¹⁴

As reported in the Annual Activity Reports and presented in the table below, while the number of proposals evaluated has shown a slight overall decline over the evaluation period, the number of grants signed has generally increased. The trend has been reversed in the last year of the evaluation period (2024), with the number of proposals evaluated peaking at 9 597 and the number of grants signed slightly declining to 1 278. In addition, the number of running projects has steadily risen, reaching 7 168 by the end of 2024 compared to 6 327 running projects by the end of 2021. This represents an increase compared to the 6 000–6 600 ongoing projects observed at the end of each year in the previous evaluation period.¹⁵ The prolongation of projects duration, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, also contributed to the increase of running projects managed during the evaluation period.

Figure 3: Number of proposals evaluated, grant agreements signed, and running projects (2018-2024)



Source: Annual Activity Reports 2019-2024.

Despite the increasing project portfolio, the ERCEA has been mostly consistent during the reference period in the achievement of the established Key Performance indicators (KPIs) with one exception related to the redress cases for 2023, as detailed below.

¹⁴ The calls launched include the ERC grants: Starting Grant, Consolidator Grant, Advanced Grant, Synergy Grant, and Proof of Concept Grant. We have left outside of the scope of this evaluation the Public Engagement with Research Awards (PERA) calls launched in 2022 and 2024; as well as the Science Journalism Initiative. List of calls launched each year per grant type includes: 2021 – StG, CoG and AdG; 2022 – StG CoG AdG SyG PoC1 and PoC2; 2023: StG, CoG, AdG, SyG and PoC; 2024: StG, CoG, AdG, SyG, and PoC.

¹⁵ PPMI Consortium (PPMI, IDEA Consult), Study Supporting the Evaluation of CHAFAEA, EACEA, EASME, ERCEA, INEA & REA (2017/2018–2021), Final Report: ERCEA, written by IDEA Consult (2022).

As regards redress cases, all applicants receive feedback on their proposal at each step of the evaluation process. If they disagree with the assessment made by the ERCEA at the admissibility and eligibility check level or by the peer reviewers at the evaluation level, they have the possibility to submit a request for an evaluation review, so-called “redress case”. This procedure is not intended to call into question the scientific judgement made by the peer review panel. Notably, in the case of the percentage of redress cases, the results of 2022 call year (reported in the AAR 2023) reached 1.15% as average for all calls. However, the SyG rate of redress cases was 1.52%, above the 1.3% average target.¹⁶ Similarly, the results of the 2023 call year (reported in the AAR 2024), reached 1.38% as average for all calls, slightly above the target of 1.3%. When assessing the result per call, two calls were above the average target: SyG (1.52%) and AdG (2.06%).¹⁷ According to Agency staff, despite the increase in redress requests in some calls, no specific reasons or trends have been identified. It should also be noted that the rate of successful cases in re-evaluation has remained low.¹⁸ Several interviewees representing applicant HIs and beneficiary PIs noted that redress cases remain relatively infrequent, partly due to the time required to complete the process. While occasional inaccuracies or unclear comments were observed in some evaluation reports, stakeholders interviewed generally perceived the chances of a successful redress as low, which discouraged them from pursuing formal appeals.

The **Time to Grant (TTG)**¹⁹ has also remained entirely in line with its targets,²⁰ with a significant drop in the TTG for Consolidator grants from 419.3 days in 2021 to 312.4 in 2023. The survey results point out to an overall satisfaction of both Principal Investigators (PIs) and Hosting Institutions (HIs) of PIs with the TTG. Notably, 83.24% of PIs (303 out of 364) responding to the related question in the survey agreed or strongly agreed that the TTG was adequate; while 81.6% of HIs (204 out of 250) agreed or strongly agreed with the adequacy of the TTG. Interviews with beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants confirm the satisfaction with the TTG, noting the timeline to be satisfactory and reasonable given the prestige and thoroughness of the evaluation process. As noted in the Evaluation Study on Excellent Science in the European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation (Phase 2), the ERC was among the few programmes—alongside INFRA—that had improved their Time to Grant (TTG) indicator by 2023 compared to the Horizon 2020 interim phase (2014–2015), achieving TTGs that are approximately one month shorter than during that earlier period²¹.

The **Time to Pay (TTP)**²² also remained significantly below the contractual thresholds for all types of payments (i.e. pre-financing at 30 days, interim and final payments at 90 days each) as exhibited in the table below. In most of the cases across the time period of the evaluation, the payments were done in less than half of the days of the respective threshold. The TTP for experts has also been consistently below the threshold throughout the evaluation period, with an average of 10 days. In the table below we provide an overview on the percentage of

¹⁶ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2023.

¹⁷ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2024.

¹⁸ According to data provided by the Agency, the percentage of successful redress cases was 3.45% in 2021 (3 out of 87 cases), 1.09% in 2022 (1 out of 92 redress cases); 1.89% in 2023 (2 out of 106 redress cases); 1.57% in 2024 (2 out of 127 redress cases – to date).

¹⁹ Time to Grant refers to the overall time period from submission of the proposal to signature of the grant.

²⁰ It should be noted that the ERCEA has a derogation from the standard TTG of eight months that is applicable to the rest of Executive Agencies. The TTG for some of the calls for ERC grants is above this standard target. The legal reference for this derogation is Cf. art 31 of Regulation (EU) N°695/2021 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, laying down its rules for participation and dissemination, and repealing Regulations (EU) N°1290/2013 and (EU) 1921/201.

²¹ European Commission (2023), Evaluation Study on Excellent Science in the European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation – Final Report Phase 2 – Supporting the Interim Evaluation of Horizon Europe, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

²² Time to Pay refers to the overall time it takes for the Agency to execute the payment after completion of the related deliverable/milestone (ERG grantees) or the execution of the services (external experts).

payments which were done within the target days. As it can be observed, in all instances, more than 92% of payments were done in a timely manner.

Table 1: Percentage of payments done within target days

% of payments done within target days		2021	2022	2023	2024
Pre-financing payments	H2020	100%	100%		
	HE		99.92%	100%	99.3%
Interim payments	FP7	100%	100%		
	H2020	99.9%	100%	99.9%	
	HE				100%
Final payments	FP7	92.6%	92.86%	100%	
	H2020	99.3%	99.9%	99.7%	100%
	HE				100%
Expert payment		98.8%	99.07%	99.2%	99.43%

Source: ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024.

The **survey results showed an overall high level of satisfaction with the time-to-payment**. In the case of PIs, the percentage who agreed on the timelines of payments were 92.88% (248 out of 267) for the pre-financing payment, 92.54% (186 out of 201) for the interim payment, and 90.73% (137 out of 151) for the final payment. In the case of HIs of PIs, the majority of respondents agreed with the timeliness of the payments – 99.54% (218 out of 219) for pre-financing, 96.53% (167 out of 173) for interim, and 95.97% (143 out of 149) for the final payment. In the case of experts responding to the survey, 94.81% of them (657 out of 693) agreed with the appropriateness of the time it took ERCEA to process their payment requests and make the payments.

As for **budget execution**, in line with previous evaluations, the Agency has successfully achieved its targets during the evaluation period. The operational budget for payment credits of the different research programmes (i.e. FP7, H2020, and Horizon Europe) were fully attained. The Horizon Europe commitment credits for the operational budget were also fully achieved, while the ones for Horizon 2020 were either 100% attained or close to – 99.6% in 2021 and 99.94% in 2023. Compared to the initial estimates included in the Annual Work Programme

(AWP) of the Agency, the operational budget in executed payments was lower than initially planned for the years 2021 and 2023, while it was higher for 2022 and 2024.²³

Similarly, the administrative budget was close to full attainment during the reference period. In this regard, in 2021, the payment credits of the administrative budget were of 97.19% slightly short of full use, while in 2023 the commitment credits of 2022 were completed to 97.5%. According to the ERCEA staff, it is common practice that some invoices are paid early in the following year for the administrative budget, explaining the almost full attainment of the payment credits of the administrative budget. The majority of the administrative budget in payments made corresponded to Title 1 staff expenditure,²⁴ increasing from EUR 43.48 million in 2021 to EUR 57.53 million in 2024. In comparison to the initial estimates in the AWP, the payments made in 2021 were slightly below the initially planned, while the rest of the years they exceeded the initially planned amounts. Notably, in 2022 EUR 47.2 million payments were made for Title 1 compared to an initial estimate of 44.2; while for the year 2024 final title 1 expenditures amounted to EUR 57.53 million compared to planned EUR 55 million.

Furthermore, during the evaluation reference period, ERCEA's **estimated error (risk) rates** stayed well under the 2% threshold each year: 1.18% in 2021, 1.91% in 2022, and 1.80% in 2023. In 2022, for example, only EUR 30.86 million of EUR 1.72 billion spend was considered at risk (1.80%). The consistently low error rates can be attributed to ERCEA's continued implementation of a single programme under Horizon Europe and its specificities (mono-beneficiary grants, research institutes as Host Institutions having extensive experience in managing the administrative part of projects) and the corresponding expertise of agency's staff.

Below we provide a table with an overview on the ERCEA's KPIs and their level of achievement with respect to the annual targets.

Table 2: KPI performance 2021-2024

Key Performance Indicator	Indicator	Target	Results			
			2021	2022	2023	2024
KPI 1	Overall percentage of redress cases received	Less than 1.3% versus average	1.03%	1.15%	1.38%	1%*
KPI 2 – Time to grant (TTG): measured (average) from call deadline to signature of grants	Time-To-Grant from call deadline to signature of grants	100% grants signed within target days	342.3 (target 391)	387.8 (target 450)	356.9 (target 424)	342.8 (target 424)
	Starting Time grants to Consolidator grants		419.3 (target 462)	404.4 (target 441)	312.4 (target 429)	361.3 (target 487)
	Advanced grants		308.4	411.2	402.3 (target 452)	368

²³ According to AWP, payment appropriations (EUR million) – 2021: 1838; 2022: 1975; 2023: 2649; and 2024: 2198. According to AAR, executed payments (EUR million) – 2021: 1799; 2022: 2409; 2023: 2586; 2024: 2348.

²⁴ Title 1 staff expenditure accounted for at least 80% of administrative budget in payments made during the evaluation period 2021-2024.

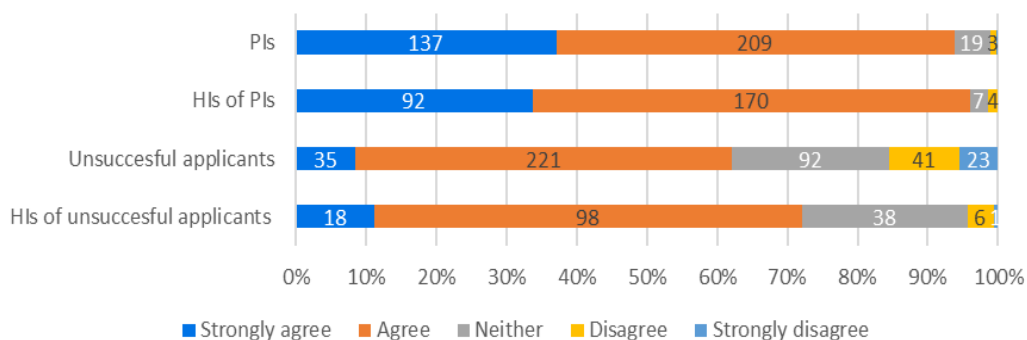
Key Performance Indicator	Indicator	Target	Results				
			2021	2022	2023	2024	
			(target 375)	(target 460)		(target 452)	
	Synergy grants		396.5	468.5	391.9	375.7	
			(target 510)	(target 510)	(target 511)	(target 502)	
	Proof of Concept grants**		207.1	186.6	157,25	173.8	
			(target 220)	(target 220)	(target 220)	(target 226)	
KPI 3 – Time to pay	Time to pay for pre-financing payments	30 days	H2020: 5	H2020: 16 HE: 5	HE: 4.8	HE: 5.4	
	Time to pay interim payments	90 days	FP7: 32 H2020: 20	H2020: 20	H2020: 20.2	H2020: 22.1 HE: 15	
	Time to pay final payments	90 days	FP7: 53 H2020: 47	H2020: 48	H2020: 48.6 HE: 30.5	H2020: 48 HE: 42.7	
	Time to pay expert payments	30 days	H2020: 10 HE: 8	HE: 10	HE: 10	HE: 9.9	
KPI 4 Budget execution	–Operational budget	HE commitment credits (L1)	100%	100%	100%	100%	
		H2020 Commitment credits – L2/L1		99.6%	100%	99.94%	100%
		FP7 payments credits		100%	N/A	N/A	N/A
		H2020 payments credits		100%	100%	100%	100%
		HE payment credits		N/A	100%	100%	100%
	Administrative budget	Commitment credits budget previous year	100%	100%	99.8%	97.5%	
	Payment credits budget current year		97.19%	99.4%	99.9%		

Key Performance Indicator	Indicator	Target	Results			
			2021	2022	2023	2024
KPI 5 Estimated risk at payment closure	– Estimated overall risk at payment /	Less than 2%	1.86%	1.91%	1.80%	1.82%
	Estimated risk at closure		1.18%	1.09%	1.00%	0.95%

Source: ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024. *Evaluation process for 2024 calls is not completed, percentage calculated is preliminary. **TTG for PoC grants calculated as the average of the calls of each specific year. N/A refers to Not applicable.

Beneficiaries (including Principal Investigators (PIs) and the Host Institutions (HIs) of PIs) and unsuccessful applicants (including applicants and HIs of unsuccessful applicants), were surveyed on their level of satisfaction with the performance of the Agency. In terms of the **overall performance of the ERCEA**, there was a high percentage of respondents who were satisfied. In the case of beneficiaries, 93.77% of PIs (346 out of 369) and 95.97% of HIs of PIs (262 out of 273) indicated to be overall satisfied with the performance of the ERCEA. The level of satisfaction diminished in the case of unsuccessful applicants with 62.14% of them (256 out of 412) and 72.05% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (116 out of 161) agreeing with the statement. Moreover, the percentage of respondents who agreed that the ERCEA asked for feedback and to know more about their experience with their services was higher for beneficiaries (78.03%, 135 out of 173 PIs, and 70.49% of HIs of PIs, 86 out of 122) compared to unsuccessful applicants (50.15% of PIs, 163 out of 325 and 50.46% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants, 55 out of 109).

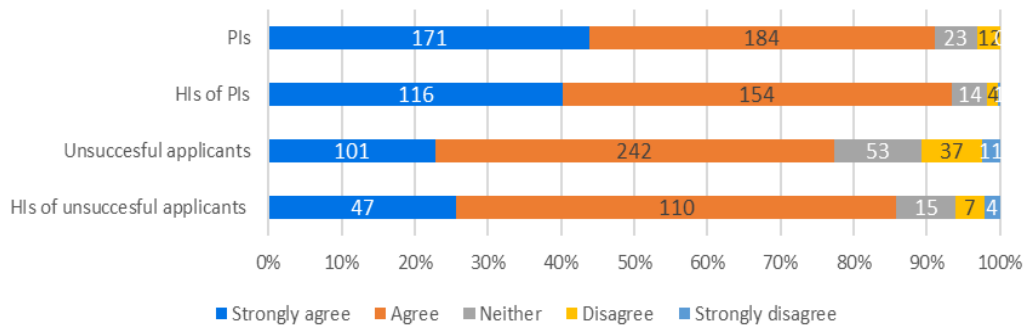
Figure 4: Satisfaction of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants with overall performance of ERCEA



Source: Beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants survey: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the overall performance of ERCEA during the grant/contract? I am satisfied with the overall quality of the programme management services provided by ERCEA during the whole application and grant / contract implementation period” and “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the overall performance of ERCEA during preparation, submission and evaluation of your rejected application? I am satisfied with the overall quality of the services provided by ERCEA during the whole application period”

With regard to the **application process**, survey respondents indicated the process to be overall clear and transparent according to survey results. The vast majority of PIs (91.03%, 355 out of 390) indicated for the application process to be clear and transparent, while 93.43% HIs of PIs (270 out of 289) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. In the case of unsuccessful applicants, the percentage of survey respondents replying to the question was lower with 77.25% (343 out of 444) of unsuccessful applicants indicating that the application process was clear and transparent and 85.79% (157 out of 183) of HIs of unsuccessful applicants. In this respect, according to an interviewed HI of an unsuccessful applicant, the submission process on the portal can be confusing for first-time users, and PIs sometimes struggle to find the “start submission” button.

Figure 5: Satisfaction of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants with application process



Source: Beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants survey: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the information provided to applicants during the application process”.

Survey respondents were also asked whether they knew where to get help when preparing the application. In the case of beneficiaries, a high percentage agreed or strongly agreed with the statement – 87.46% of HIs of PIs (244 out of 279), and 80.98% of PIs (315 out of 389). The percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement was lower in the case of unsuccessful applicants – 75.29% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (128 out of 170), and 65.30% of unsuccessful applicants (286 out of 438) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. The majority of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants were also satisfied with ERCEA’s responses to questions on the call for proposals. In the case of beneficiaries, 77.39% of PIs (178 out of 230) and 76.79% of HIs of PIs (129 out of 168) indicated to be satisfied with ERCEA’s responses. In the case of unsuccessful applicants, 55.87% of them (138 out of 247) and 65.93% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (60 out of 91) were satisfied with the responses received.

When asked whether they would consider applying for EU funding managed by ERCEA in the future, the majority of beneficiaries claimed they would (93.52% of PIs, 361 out of 386; 94.35% of HIs of PIs, 267 out of 283).²⁵ From the five PIs who said they would not apply again, three indicated that it was due to them approaching retirement; while the other two did not provide an answer. In the case of unsuccessful applicants, the percentages were lower, with 62.77% of unsuccessful applicants (263 out of 419) and 76.74% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (132 out of 172) claiming they would consider applying again. From the survey respondents mentioning they would not consider applying again, 10 out of 32 unsuccessful applicants mentioned the reason to be that the eligibility requirements for ERC grants are too high; while 16 out of 32 unsuccessful applicants indicated the success rate for applications to be too low. In the case of

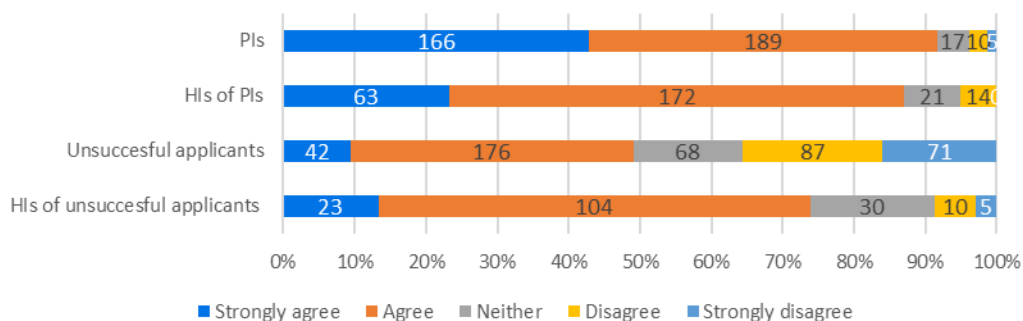
²⁵ In the case of HIs of PIs there were no respondents who said they would not apply again, while 16 said they may apply again and nine indicated they did not know. In the case of PIs, 20 said that may apply again and five did not know.

HIs of unsuccessful applicants, only two respondents indicated they would not consider applying again with only one HI of an unsuccessful applicant indicating that the reason was the low success rate. Whereas these responses may give an indication of the reasons, they cannot be considered as representative given the low response rate.

With respect to the **evaluation process**, the majority of beneficiaries agreed that the evaluation process was clear and transparent – 91.73% of PIs (355 out of 387) and 87.08% of HIs of PIs (236 out of 271). When compared with unsuccessful applicants, the percentage of applicants who agreed with the statement was considerably lower. In the case of unsuccessful applicants, slightly less than half of respondents (49.1%, 218 out of 444) agreed with the statement; while 69.4% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (127 out of 183) agreed. Beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants interviewed also mostly supported that the feedback received was clear, transparent, highly professional and to the point. Nonetheless, several PIs and unsuccessful applicants responding to the survey indicated that they considered the comments received as sometimes not sufficiently detailed. Additionally, several survey respondents noted that the timeframe for resubmitting their application after receiving the initial evaluation report was too short to adequately address the feedback. They also pointed out that the timing of the outcome notice leaves very little time for unsuccessful applicants to prepare a new application for the next call.

Furthermore, less than half of unsuccessful applicants who replied to the survey indicated that the individual reviews and panel comments helped them to improve and resubmit their proposals to ERC grants – 23.18% of unsuccessful applicants (88 out of 381) and 39.84% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (51 out of 128). The percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement was even lower in the case of the helpfulness to improve and resubmit to other EU funding – 25.58% of unsuccessful applicants (100 out of 391) and 39.52% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (49 out of 124). It should be noted, however, that the success rate for researchers who re-apply is higher than for first time applicants. According to data provided by the Agency, the success rate of first-time applicants is 9% compared to 15% for re-applicants.²⁶

Figure 6: Satisfaction of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants with evaluation process



Source: Beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants survey: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the information provided to applicants during the evaluation process”.

The **ethics review process** was also regarded as being clear and transparent by stakeholders responding to the survey. Among beneficiaries, 78.43% of PIs (200 out of 255) and 79.17% of HIs of PIs (133 out of 168) agreed with the statement. Interviews with beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants confirmed that although the ethics review process was clear and transparent, it sometimes resulted in a time-consuming process demanding for significant

²⁶ Data provided by the Agency: data from the ERC calls from 2007 until 2023 (StG, CoG, AdG and SyG). All PIs who have signed an ERC grant are considered ERC grantees. The ERC calls 2024 are excluded from the analysis because the granting process is not yet completed.

resources and sometimes delaying grant agreement signature. In the case of the **ethics monitoring process**, the majority of PIs (73.36%, 157 out of 214) also agreed or strongly agreed that the ethics monitoring process was smooth, while 78.2% of HIs of PIs (104 out of 133) agreed or strongly agreed with the statements.²⁷

The **grant agreement and contract finalisation stage** were also indicated to be clear and transparent by beneficiaries responding to the survey – 84.22% of PIs (315 out of 374) and 91.45% of HIs of PIs (246 out of 269) agreed with the statement. Beneficiaries responding to the survey also agreed that the ERCEA staff assigned to the project in the grant/contract finalisation and preparation phase were easily available and responsive. In the case of PIs, 89.13% agreed with the statement (328 out of 368), while 89.45% of HIs of PIs (229 out of 256) agreed.

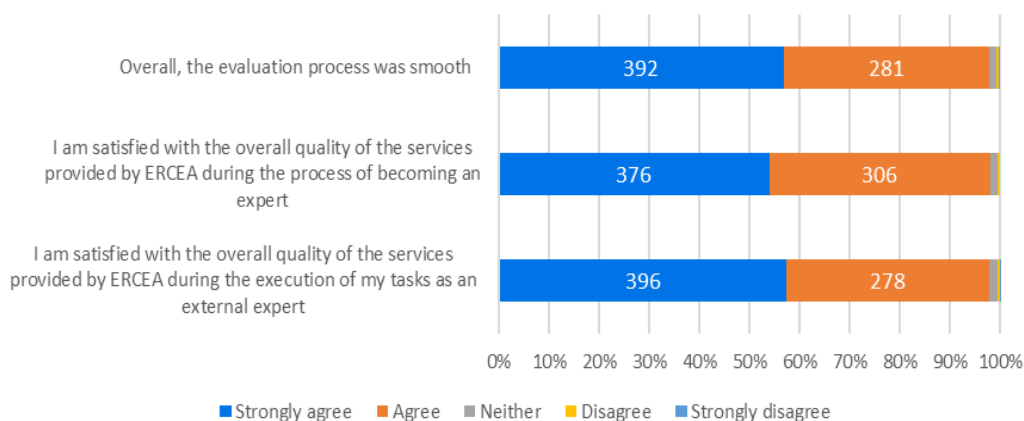
The large majority of beneficiaries responding to the survey also agreed that the **project implementation** process had been smooth - 85.96% of PIs (300 out of 349) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 94.32% of HIs of PIs did (216 out of 229). There was also a consensus on the clarity and user-friendliness of the instructions given on the reporting procedures – 70.95% of PIs (232 out of 327) and 85.07% of HIs of PIs (188 out of 221). Interviews with beneficiaries also indicate a high level of satisfaction with the project implementation among beneficiary PIs and HIs.

The level of **satisfaction of external experts** with the ERCEA was also high according to the survey results and interviews conducted. The interviewees as well as survey respondents in their answers to open questions extensively emphasised the quality of the work from the ERCEA staff emphasising that the ERCEA staff was always available and responsive to solve any issues. In fact, 97.48% of survey respondents (502 out of 515) agreed with the level of assistance and responsiveness of ERCEA staff during the panel meeting sessions in Brussels.

Almost all experts surveyed (97.68%, 673 out of 689) agreed or strongly agreed that the **evaluation process was smooth**. The vast majority of experts who replied to the survey also agreed that the reporting evaluation requirements were clear, reasonable, and proportionate – 94.15%, 660 out of 701. The only aspect of the evaluation process for which less than half of the experts (48.39%, 225 out of 465) agreed was on their satisfaction related to the effectiveness of the e-learning modules as a way of learning before attending the online briefings of experts. The high majority of experts also agreed on the easiness to use the electronic evaluation system – 75.36%, 526 out of 698 respondents.

²⁷ Please refer to the survey synopsis report in Annex for more detailed survey results on the ethics review process and the ethics monitoring process.

Figure 7: Expert satisfaction with the services provided by the ERCEA



Source: Expert survey results: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your work as an external evaluator for ERCEA” and “Please rate your overall perceptions of ERCEA in managing the involvement of experts in the following processes?”

There was a strong consensus that the time it took ERCEA to process payments was satisfactory – 95% of experts (657 out of 693) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Similarly, 91% of experts (631 out of 695) indicated that they were satisfied with the handling of their payment. With regard to the reimbursement of costs for their visits to Brussels, the majority of experts (74.3%, 399 out of 537 respondents) mentioned that the reimbursement cost was sufficient, while 70.28% (350 out of 498) agreed that they had received practical information for hotels and transport in Brussels. However, several survey respondents indicated that the reimbursement cost for accommodation was too low compared to the prices in Brussels, particularly in peak travel periods (24 respondents out of 116 who provided further comments indicated the insufficient reimbursement for accommodation). Several experts suggested in their survey responses that ERCEA could consider arrangements with Brussels hotels to secure better accommodation rates. They also highlighted the need for clearer guidelines on travel and reimbursement, particularly in cases of unexpected disruptions such as flight cancellations. In this regard, ERCEA staff noted that the Agency is working on developing clearer internal procedures for expert reimbursement, including for aspects related to handling unexpected events such as flight cancellations due to national strikes.

The experts replying to the survey also agreed that, after receiving the appointment letter to become an expert, the contracting process was smooth. The vast majority of respondents indicated that the contracting process had been clear and timely (93.6%, 648 out of 692), and that the letter used to invite the experts was clear (96.4%, 671 out of 696), as well as the related explanations (95.6%, 661 out of 691). With respect to their work as external evaluators, the majority of experts responding to the survey agreed that the evaluation process had been smooth – 97.68% of respondents, 673 out of 689. There was also a high number of respondents who indicated that the time allocated to review the proposals was adequate (80.29%, 562 out of 700 respondents), while 75.36% of respondents (526 out of 698) agreed that the electronic evaluation system was easy to use.

ERCEA’s **support to the Scientific Council (ScC)** during the evaluation period was effective and contributed adequately to the functioning of the ERC’s governance model. Interviewed stakeholders from both members of the ScC and the Agency broadly agreed that the ERCEA delivered robust operational and administrative support, allowing the ScC to concentrate on its core responsibilities related to scientific strategy, scientific monitoring, communication and dissemination. The support to the ERC ScC is reflected in the number of briefings and data

analysis, as well as presentations provided by the ERCEA. As it is exhibited in the table below, between 2022 and 2023 alone the ERCEA supported the ScC with 127 briefings and data analyses and 26 presentations. Yet, it should be noted that the preparation of such outputs decreased considerably between 2022 and 2023.

Table 3: Support to ERC Scientific Council in 2022 and 2023

	Briefings and data analyses	Presentations	Total
2022			
ERC President	67	10	77
ScC members	10	9	19
2023			
ERC President	47	5	52
ScC members	3	2	5
Total	127	26	153

Source: Data provided by the ERCEA.

EQ2: Which were the factors driving or hindering the achievement of the objectives?

Key findings: The ERCEA benefits from a singular focus on ERC grants and a single funding programme, which has enabled it to develop and internalise a high level of technical and procedural expertise across all stages of the grant lifecycle. During the evaluation period, the effectiveness of the Agency’s operations was challenged by several factors such as the administrative complexity due to Brexit; the grant amendments signed due to the COVID-19 pandemic; or the adaptation of the yearly call planning and related implementation procedures in the context of the adoption of the Horizon Europe Specific

During the reference period, the effectiveness of the ERCEA was driven by several internal strengths—such as staff motivation, expertise, and a focused mandate—as well as shaped by operational challenges, including workload peaks, administrative complexity, and limited career development opportunities.

A positive factor which was identified by multiple interviewees from the Agency and the ERC ScC as driving the efficient achievement of the ERCEA’s objectives relates to the **high levels of motivation and engagement of the ERCEA staff**. The satisfaction and engagement of ERCEA employees is reflected in the staff surveys conducted in 2021 and 2023. The staff engagement index was over 70% in both years, in 2023 it was equal to 76% - the highest among the six executive agencies.²⁸ Additionally, the bi-annual staff satisfaction survey conducted in 2023 also indicated that 83% of survey respondents expressed pride in their job, representing the highest percentage across the EAs²⁹.

²⁸ As per Annex of Annual Activity Reports, 2023 Engagement index: EACEA 71%, CINEA 75%, EISMEA 58%, HaDEA 73%, REA 74% and ERCEA 76%.

²⁹ Staff satisfaction survey 2023 - Percentage of respondents who slightly agreed or agreed with the statement “I feel pride in doing my job”: EACEA 67%; CINEA 82%, EISMEA 59%, HaDEA 80%. No data was available for REA.

Another factor driving the effectiveness of the ERCEA which was mentioned by multiple stakeholders (including those from the European Commission, Agency staff, and the ScC) relates to the **professional background and expertise of ERCEA staff**—including many with PhDs or prior research experience. Interviewees stressed that this proximity to the research community enhanced both the quality of support to grantees and the credibility of the agency in the eyes of applicants, panel members, and the Scientific Council. According to the survey results, the knowledge of ERCEA employees was an important factor for beneficiaries when dealing with the Agency – 64.69% of beneficiary PIs (264 out of 320) mentioned that it was an important factor to a very large or large extent, while 69.80% of HIs of PIs (171 out of 245) did.

Evidence from the interviews with the Agency staff, European Commission and the ScC members highlights that, unlike other executive agencies managing multiple programmes, the ERCEA benefits from **a singular focus on the ERC**, which has enabled it to develop and internalise a high level of technical and procedural expertise across all stages of the grant lifecycle. This concentrated mandate has fostered institutional specialisation, allowing the Agency to refine its processes and cultivate in-depth knowledge in areas such as application handling, peer review coordination, and complex project implementation.

Interviewees also consistently highlighted the **effectiveness of the Agency's long-established operational model**, particularly the governance system involving the ERC Scientific Council, Agency, and DG RTD. Although certain minor operational ambiguities occurred (see section 4.3.2.), this arrangement was seen as well-suited to the ERC's needs and supportive of scientific independence. Stakeholders from both the Agency and the Commission also viewed the division of tasks across units in the Agency—such as separating scientific evaluation from financial and legal responsibilities—as particularly appropriate and efficient.

In terms of the negative factors, the interviewed ERCEA staff and members of the ScC identified several factors that may have contributed to the increased workload during the evaluation period:

- **A revised 2021 call planning** in the context of the adoption of the Horizon Europe Specific Programme in May 2021, which resulted in a delayed and overlap in the launch of the Starting (StG) and Consolidator (CoG) grant calls, when compared with the regular yearly call planning, which, in turn, resulted in peaks of work during the reference period. In addition, both these calls experienced a significant increase in the amount of proposal submissions, 24.3% increase for StG and 6.7% for CoG. Thus, the ERCEA staff and panel members had to handle a very high number of proposals to a StG call. However, the regular Synergy call (SyG) and Proof of Concept (PoCG) calls were no longer foreseen in 2021 ERC Work Programme since all calls could not be included in the shorter call calendar from a planning perspective. It should also be noted that in 2021 the number of submissions received for Advanced grants (AdG) experienced a substantial decrease of 30% compared to the previous year. Hence, in 2021, while there was a workload peak due to overlapping calls, the lower number of calls launched and the reduced applications for AdG calls helped managing the overall workload throughout the year. Additionally, ERCEA staff had the possibility to recuperate overtime working hours later in the year when the workload was lower.
- **Administrative and legal complexity introduced by Brexit.** Following the United Kingdom's departure from the EU, a series of uncertainties arose regarding the eligibility and grant portability of UK-based researchers. Hence, during 2021-2022, ERCEA staff had to manage an exceptional number of cases involving UK PIs. One concrete administrative consequence was the need to manage project transfers from UK to EU-based HIs, to ensure continued eligibility. However, there was a significant low number of UK-based applicants who transferred their grant to an eligible Host Institution in the EU or an associated country during the grant preparation phase. For instance, in the case of the 2021 AdG call, out of 60 UK-based applicants only six

transferred their grant to an eligible HI³⁰. As a result, Agency staff therefore had to consult the reserve list to identify and notify the next potential eligible grant recipient.

- **Grant amendments issued as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic** – 2 138 grant amendments were signed in 2020 for H2020 grants³¹. This resulted in a total of 6 327 running projects in 2021, compared to 6 151 in 2020 and 6 077 in 2019. The number of running projects has been increasing throughout the evaluation period, reaching a peak of 7 095 by the end of 2023 (7 168 by the end of 2024).

EQ3: What could be done to render the Agency more effective in achieving its objectives?

Key findings: The Agency could keep exploring the use of advanced digital tools to support some of their operations as done in recent years in collaboration with the Commission's Common Implementation Centre. The majority of respondents supported in similar percentages both the alignment of project reporting forms to the specific requirements of bottom-up funding and as well the harmonisation of administrative requirements for projects financed under different EU programmes and actions. Thus, no conclusive trend or preference of applicants could be drawn from survey results.

The ERCEA has been overall very effective in its operations as indicated earlier in this section. The Agency has been consistent in the achievement of objectives and KPIs while maintaining high levels of satisfaction among stakeholders. The effectiveness of ERCEA operations was also reported in previous evaluations. This leaves limited scope for major structural improvements in the operations of the ERCEA.

Some of the Agency staff interviewed mentioned that they found **difficulties in finding external experts** for the evaluation panels. In this respect, during the evaluation period, the Agency introduced the use of an AI tool to support in the identification of remote referees (i.e. Prophy). According to Agency staff interviewed, many panel members mentioned that the tool had been a great support for the identification of remote referees.

In addition, during the reference period, the Agency transitioned its expert management system to a new corporate solution developed by the Common Implementation Centre (CIC) from the European Commission Services (ECS). The Agency adopted a phased approach to implement the new system, it was firstly used with a relatively small group of ethics experts before rolling out to additional teams.³² To ensure a smooth introduction of the new system, an integrated feedback cycle was set up, including a 'fastlane' with DG RTD to address urgent issues effectively. According to Agency staff interviewed, many panel members mentioned that the tool had been a great support for the identification of remote referees. The Agency could continue exploring the use of new IT tools and systems to help them overcome some operational difficulties or bottlenecks as the two examples abovementioned.

The survey conducted with beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants also aimed at collecting their views on simplifications measures that could be implemented which could lead to a better and more efficient implementation of the programmes managed by the ERCEA. One of the possibilities referred to further alignment of project reporting forms with the specific requirements and bottom-up structured of the ERC grants. In the case of beneficiary PIs, roughly half of respondents (51.64% 110 out of 213) agreed to a very large or large extent that better

³⁰ Data provided by the ERCEA.

³¹ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2021.

³² Cross-cutting case study on expert management with digital tools.

alignment would lead to a better and more efficient implementation of the ERC grants; while 70.54% of HIs of PIs (158 out of 224) agreed to a very large or large extent.

On the other hand, survey respondents also indicated whether they would like to see further harmonisation of administrative requirements for projects financed under different EU programmes and actions. In the case of beneficiaries, roughly half of respondents, 53.62% of PIs (111 out of 207) agreed to a very large or large extent with the statement, while 69.38% of HIs of PIs (179 out of 258) agreed. In the case of unsuccessful applicants, 46.97% of unsuccessful applicants (124 out of 264) and 66.67% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (112 out of 168) agreed to a very large or large extent with the statement.

4.1.2. Legal framework

EQ4: To what extent has the Agency been operating according to the legal framework?

Key findings: The ERCEA operated within the boundaries of its legal framework during the evaluation period. One governance-related irregularity was raised by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) in 2023 annual report with regard to the decision-making rule in the

Evidence from desk research and interviews with European Commission staff and members of the ScC suggests that the ERCEA has operated within the boundaries of its legal framework during the evaluation period. However, an irregularity raised in European Court of Auditors (ECA) report required follow-up:

- In its 2023 Annual Report on EU agencies³³, the ECA observed that the ERCEA Steering Committee's Rules of Procedure were not fully aligned with Article 8(6) of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003. Specifically, the Rules required any majority decision to include at least one non-Commission member—a condition not foreseen in the founding Regulation. This provision became particularly relevant during the 2023 decision on the renewal of the ERCEA's premises lease, which proceeded, despite objections raised by the Commission-appointed members. As the legality of the rules of procedure had not been contested before, the Director presumed that the Steering Committee had not taken a valid decision to oppose the renewal of the lease. The Court of Auditors mentioned that the decision to ignore this opposition ran counter to the spirit of Regulation No 58/2003, in particular Recitals 9-12 and Articles 1, 7(1), 9(3) and 13(1), (2) & (4) thereof, according to which the Commission must be able closely to circumscribe the action of each executive agency and maintain real control over the EAs' operation, and in particular their governing bodies.
- The Agency replied to Court of Auditors' observations stating that in the absence of a specific requirement in the legal framework concerning the Steering Committee's prior approval of a decision by the Agency's Director with regard to the extension of a usufruct contract, the Agency's Director complied with the applicable legal and regulatory framework by keeping the ERCEA Steering Committee duly informed.

In June 2025, the ERCEA Steering Committee adopted revised rules of procedure³⁴, fully incorporating the ECA's feedback. In such a context, ERCEA provided support by explaining the historical and legal background and proposing wording for the update of the rules of

³³ European Court of Auditors. Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2023.

³⁴ European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) Steering Committee, *Rules of Procedure*, Decision StC190625/5, adopted 25 June 2025.

procedures taking into account ERC governance. This demonstrates ERCEA's commitment not only to legal compliance but also to continuous improvement.

4.1.3. Internal Control Framework

EQ5: To what extent was the agencies' internal control framework in line with the Commission's common control strategy and the programme-specific approaches, and to what extent did the Agency act in line with internal control principles, notably sound financial and human resources management?

Key findings: The ERCEA demonstrated strong control results with the estimated overall risk at payment below the target for the whole evaluation period. The administrative expenditure error rates experienced a slight increase with the introduction of the HE programme and the new reporting requirements. The Internal Audit Services of the Commission issued a series of recommendations to the Agency which all had been timely implemented through action plans. For the 2024 recommendations, two action plans were submitted in February 2024.

During the evaluation period, ERCEA maintained an **internal control system** based on the Commission's Internal Control Framework and supported by risk management processes and audit oversight. The system was monitored quarterly through internal scorecards and annually assessed via the Internal Control Assessment Tool (ICAT), for which the participation rate was higher than 50% of staff across the evaluation period, and the overall effectiveness score was above 85%.³⁵

The Risk Management and Internal Control (RMIC) function provided quarterly reviews to the Director, and internal controls were reinforced by regular updates to the risk register. For the whole evaluation period, all mitigating measures for medium and high risks had been implemented within deadlines except for 2021. The implementation rate for 2021 was equal to 50% - one action out of two was postponed to 2022. In addition, none of the identified risks through the RMIC function were materialised.³⁶

The Agency demonstrated strong control results - the estimated overall risk at payment was below the target (i.e. <2%) for the whole evaluation period³⁷. ERCEA's share of the cumulative residual error rate for the implementation of the Framework Programme were also below the materiality threshold. The **administrative expenditure error rates** experienced a slight increase with the introduction of the HE programme and the new reporting requirements. As both ERCEA staff and beneficiaries became more familiar with the new administrative processes, the administrative expenditure error rate improved from 0.62% in 2022 to 0.55% in 2023.³⁸ As indicated in interviews with HIs of PIs and PIs benefitting from ERC grants, as well as by some Agency staff, the extensive experience of HIs in handling the administrative work related to ERC grants explains the overall low error rates for the ERCEA.

Late payments also remained low in 2021 (0.38%) and 2023 (2.5%), with the 2022 spike (15.18%). Financial error rates for staff expenditure stayed well below the 1% target throughout

³⁵ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports – 2021: 60% participation rate, 87% overall effectiveness; 2022: 61% participation rate, 88% overall effectiveness; 2023: 54% participation rate; 85% overall effectiveness; 2024: 50% participation rate, 92% overall effectiveness.

³⁶ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021, 2022, and 2023.

³⁷ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021, 2022, and 2023.

³⁸ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2023, p.27.

2020–2023, confirming a robust and reliable control environment aligned with the expectations of delegated programme management.

Table 4: Late payments and error in transactions ERCEA 2020-2023

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Error rates				
Estimated overall risk at payment for expenditures	1.86%	1.91%	1.8%	1.82%
Administrative expenditure error rates	0.09%	0.66%	0.55%	0.54%
Cumulative residual error rate for framework programme	1.22%	1.11%	1.02%	0.92%
Error in transactions related to staff expenditure (salaries) detected through ex-ante checks	0.09%	0.62%	0.55%	N/A
Late payments				
Number of late payments for the administrative budget	2	92 ³⁹	20	N/A
% of late payments for the administrative budget	0.38%	15,18%	2.5%	N/A

Source: Annual Activity Reports 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024.

The Internal Audit Service (IAS) and the European Court of Auditors raised only limited issues over the evaluation period.⁴⁰ Additionally, the 2021 European Court of Auditors' audit found that ERCEA's budgetary appropriations were insufficient by EUR 222 667 to cover its legal obligation related to the municipal tax. This shortfall was not recorded in the register of exceptions until after the European Court of Auditors' audit, which was inconsistent with internal control principles. The exception was formally recorded on 18 May 2022, and the corresponding amount was subsequently committed in the 2022 budget.⁴¹

³⁹ Out of 92 late payments, 83 were missions liquidated with delay by a stakeholder (PMO). Only 9 payments were processed with delay by the Agency.

⁴⁰ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2023.

⁴¹ ECA. Annual Report on EU agencies for the financial year 2022.

4.1.4. Communication

EQ6: To what extent did the Agency’s communication support the mission of the Agency and contribute to the visibility of the EU as promoter of the programmes entrusted to it?

Key findings: During the evaluation period, ERCEA maintained a growing media outreach: the number of social media followers grew from more than 250 000 in 2021 to over 400 000 in 2024. The session of the Nobel Prize Dialogue event proved to be very successful with 93 590 views. The beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants, and experts consulted also showed high levels of awareness on the funding opportunities that ERCEA provides; all groups of stakeholders agreed that the funding opportunities are well promoted.

During the reference period, the Agency continued the implementation of communication activities that supported its mission and contributed to strengthening the visibility of the EU as a leader in scientific excellence. Within ERCEA, the Communication Unit (Unit A.2) is responsible for implementing communication activities. The unit reports to the Agency Director, working closely with the ERC Scientific Council and coordinating with DG RTD to ensure consistency with EU visibility requirements.⁴² ERCEA, present in social media with the European Research Council social media accounts, engages in a wide range of external communication activities and operates with a relatively high degree of autonomy. Due to ERCEA’s mandate to support the ScC in communication and dissemination activities, the Agency conducts a wide range of activities to communicate with stakeholders on various topics.⁴³ For instance, it has a significant focus on press activities, building and maintaining relationships with journalists.

The communication strategy is developed to support both the ERC programme and the broader EU communication objectives in close cooperation with the Commission. The annual communication strategies outline the ERC’s target audiences, key messages, main communication objectives, and the tools and channels to be used for outreach – in the table below we provide an overview of these elements. The objectives of the ERC communication strategy have remained stable during the evaluation period, focusing on increasing the visibility of frontier research, promoting trust in science, and attracting excellent researchers to Europe.⁴⁴

Table 5: Overview of ERCEA’s communication priorities, main external communication activities, and target audiences

Communication priorities	Communication tools and channels	Main audiences
Explain/illustrate the intrinsic value of frontier research	Website	Potential applicants for ERC grants
Provide talented researchers in Europe and globally with timely and reliable information about ERC funding opportunities	Social media	ERC grantees and their research teams
	Audiovisual communication and virtual events	Wider research community, including universities and research institutions that host grantees
	Online magazine	
	Web stories	
	Email alerts	

⁴² European Research Council Executive Agency Internal Communication Strategy.

⁴³ Cross-cutting case study on communication.

⁴⁴ European Research Council External Communication Strategy 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024.

Attract the best ideas and the brightest minds Promote public understanding of science/share passion for science	Publications	Policymakers and research stakeholders
	Participation in external scientific conferences and events	Journalists and media
	Media relations support to ERC ScC	Members of the general public with an interest in science
	Responses to journalists' enquiries and reaching out proactively to the media	

Source: Study team elaboration based on ERC annual communication strategies and interviews with agency staff.

During the evaluation period, ERCEA maintained a **growing media outreach**: the number of social media followers grew from more than 250 000 in 2021 to over 400 000 in 2024.⁴⁵ The communication strategy evolved improving in storytelling, audiovisual production, and channel diversification. The addition of Instagram and WhatsApp in 2023 significantly expanded reach, with follower growth of +161% and +951% respectively in 2024.⁴⁶

As exhibited in the table below, media mentions reached approximately 23 000 in 2023 and slightly decreased in 2024 to a total of 19 100. On the other hand, the number of ERC stories has been decreasing over the evaluation period from 305 in 2021 to 151 in 2024, falling short of the target of at least 200 stories. The number of participants and views of ERC events experienced a substantial increase in 2024. This is due to the high popularity of all the session of the Nobel Prize Dialogue event which account alone for 93 590 views.⁴⁷ The event was held in a prominent Brussels venue in 2024 and co-organised with the Nobel Prize Outreach entity, focusing on the future of democracy and the role of science. The event was part of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU and featured several Nobel laureates and ERC-funded researchers.⁴⁸

Table 6: Social media and communication statistics

	Target	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of visits to website	> 1 million	908,877	940,841	909,995	970,000
Number of media mentions	> 12000	13,400	20,970	22,800	19,100
Number of new social media followers	> 40000 / >50000 (2021)	>46,564	53,340	70,698	85,099
Number of participants / views of ERC events	> 20000 / >10000 (2024)	23,700	6,071	14,358	119,869
Number of ERC stories	> 200	305	228	231	151

Source: Study team elaboration based on AARs.

The number of followers also varied per platform as presented in the figure below. The ERC accounts for YouTube and Instagram were recently created in 2023, and therefore the overall

⁴⁵ ERC Communication Impact Reports from 2021 and 2024. Aggregated followers from: X/Twitter; LinkedIn; Instagram, YouTube; and Facebook.

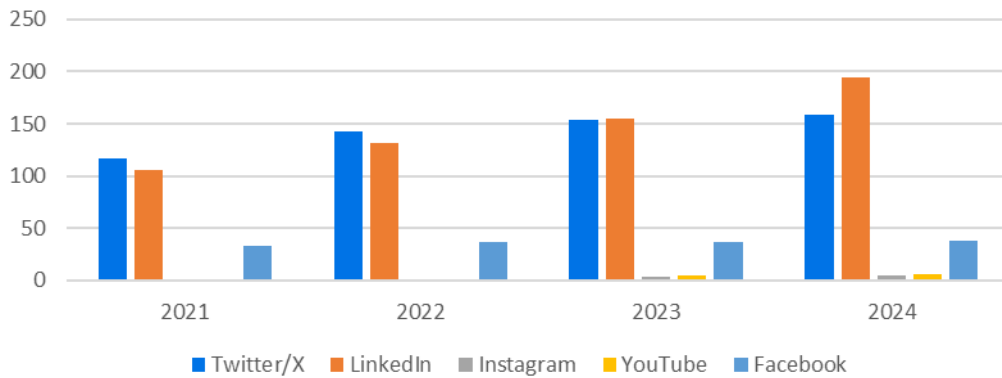
⁴⁶ ERC Communication Impact Reports 2023, 2024.

⁴⁷ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2024

⁴⁸ <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/events>

number of followers is lower. While in 2021 and 2022, the social media account with the highest number of followers was Twitter/X, in recent years LinkedIn has gained a greater number of followers.

Figure 8: Overview of number of followers per platform (in thousands)



Source: Study team elaboration based on ERC Communication Impact Reports 2021-2024.

Interviewees representing several key stakeholders (i.e. ERC ScC members, Commission officials, beneficiaries, and unsuccessful applicants) indicated ERCEA’s communication activities to be very effective in promoting ERC grants and contributing to a positive image of the EU. Survey results also provide evidence on **overall high awareness on the funding opportunities that ERCEA provides**. Survey responses collected from beneficiaries indicate that 82.52% of PIs (321 out of 389) and 93.52% of HIs (274 out of 293) agree or strongly agree that they are aware of the funding opportunities that ERCEA provides. The percentages were slightly lower for unsuccessful applicants, with 69.56% of them (313 out of 450) and 77.49% of their HIs (148 out of 191) agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Moreover, a high percentage of survey respondents agreed that the funding opportunities managed by ERCEA were well promoted – 75.45% of PIs (295 out of 391), 86.10% of HIs (254 out of 295), 57.27% of unsuccessful applicant PIs (256 out of 447), and 67.02% of HIs of unsuccessful applicants (128 out of 191). Almost all beneficiaries indicated to be aware that the EU was the funder of the ERC grants with 97% of PIs (362 out of 375), 98% of HIs of PIs (285 out of 289), 95% of unsuccessful applicants (418 out of 440) and 98% of HI of unsuccessful applicants (183 out of 187).

In the case of experts, a vast majority of them were aware of the ERC grants and the role of the EU in the funding. When being invited to the expert position, 83.7% of respondents (575 out of 687) were aware that the ERCEA was entrusted to manage the ERC grants; while 91.85% of experts (620 out of 675) were aware that the EU was the funder of the ERC grants. In addition, 87.33% of experts responding to the survey (572 out of 655) agreed or strongly agreed that overall the programmes managed by ERCEA are well promoted.

4.1.5. Reporting to parent DG

EQ7: To what extent is the Agency reporting to its parent Directorates-General reflecting the operations of its activities, and is it in line with the supervision requirements provided in the applicable legal basis and the MoU?

Key findings: The Agency has largely met its formal communication and reporting obligations; however, consultations identified scope for improvement in the structure, timeliness, and strategic depth of communication and reporting to the parent DG.

Based on an analysis of key documents as well as interviews with European Commission staff and ERCEA representatives, the evaluation finds that ERCEA's reporting practices are in line with the formal supervision requirements set out in the 2021 Delegation Act and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

ERCEA produced **Annual Activity Reports (AARs)** each year, providing a comprehensive overview of its operations, KPI achievements, internal control, and risk management. It is notable that in addition to the five common indicators, ERCEA reports on two supplementary indicators: the share of redress cases, used as a proxy for evaluation quality; and the time taken to pay experts, which contributes to the overall time-to-pay KPI.⁴⁹ **Annual Work Programmes (AWPs)** also served as key tools for operational planning and strategic communication with DG RTD, outlining yearly priorities, expected outputs, resource use, and performance targets. Together with the AARs, these documents enabled both DG RTD and the Scientific Council to monitor ERC programme implementation. The **Steering Committee**⁵⁰, composed of DG RTD and Scientific Council representatives, played a central role in the formal oversight structure, meeting four times per year to review progress, address challenges, and discuss strategic and resource matters. In addition to formal reporting, ERCEA engaged with DG RTD through **informal exchanges** and joint planning efforts, often involving data sharing and operational coordination. European Commission staff noted that these informal interactions could be further reinforced—both between ERCEA and DG RTD, and across other executive agencies—though physical distance between offices may sometimes limit the frequency of such exchanges.

While the Agency has largely fulfilled its formal communication and reporting obligations, interviews with Commission staff and supporting desk research revealed some areas in need of improvement—particularly regarding the structure of the communication and reporting conducted by the ERCEA to the parent DG, in particular on the timeliness and strategic depth of the information provided.

Notably, interviews suggested a misalignment between the parent DG and the Agency related to the timing of the ERC Work Programme submission. The ERC Work Programme is not a reporting document but represents the legal basis for ERC funding scheme which is established by the Scientific Council with the support of the Agency and is adopted by the Commission. As per the parent DG, the draft is often provided very close to the launch of the inter-service consultation posing challenges for internal coordination and for its adoption in due time before the launch of the first call foreseen in early July. It was suggested that initiating discussions at an earlier stage could support a more streamlined and collaborative review process. At the same time, the Agency considers that providing the draft in the first week of March allows sufficient time to complete the interservice consultation and adoption (i.e. four months). Nonetheless, the decision-making process of the Commission for the adoption of ERC WP is complex because it

⁴⁹ Case study on KPIs definition.

⁵⁰ As a part of its formal governance structure, the ERCEA is managed by a Director and overseen by a Steering Committee, in accordance with Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003.

is considered a sensitive policy document⁵¹ and its timing and requirements should be duly taken into account in the preparation process of the ERC Work Programme.

Since 2024, a mitigating measure has been implemented by which the ERC ScC final agreement on the WP is sought in parallel to the consultations with the parent DG rather than sequentially. The Agency emphasized that this adjustment did not fully resolve challenges posed by unexpected policy issues arising in the interservice consultations such as the Commission's new security strategy, which may take additional time to address. These developments underline the need for close and proactive cooperation between the parent DG and the ERCEA to anticipate as much as possible potential policy issues early enough, while also ensuring sufficient time for discussions and subsequent changes, when addressing the comments from interservice consultation.

Furthermore, the planned first ERC grant call (early July) is scheduled quite closely to the tentative date of adoption of the annual EU draft budget (mid-June).⁵² Since the ERC WP is dependent on the budget adoption, a one-month delay in the adoption of draft budget would make it impossible to launch the first calls of ERC grants at the indicative date. Whereas the launch of ERC grant calls is designed for operational and planning reasons, it could also be aligned with the timing of the decision-making process of the Commission and of the budgetary procedures for EU budget.

Several EC staff members interviewed also noted delays or gaps in the Agency's provision of key documents, such as the internal workload assessment conducted by an external provider, which had not been shared with the parent DG. Similarly on internal control, EC staff pointed out the need of strengthening the cooperation at different levels on the risk assessment exercise performed by the Agency to ensure a comprehensive view and alignment. These requests are in line with lead parent DG's responsibility of supervising how the Agency is managed, including on horizontal matters (e.g. internal control, human resources, IT systems). The internal control supervision is executed at all three levels of supervision – Steering Committee, management and operational.

Furthermore, some of the interviewed EC staff members noted that despite a certain positive evolution in the reporting, there may be room to enhance the strategic value of the information shared with the parent DG. While the Agency consistently provides comprehensive operational data and detailed reporting (e.g. KPIs, activity updates), several interviewees suggested that the communication could benefit from more forward-looking, analytical input that puts the information and data in a broader context.

⁵¹ Information provided by European Commission.

⁵² Insights from Commission staff.

EQ8: What could be done to make the reporting to parent Directorates-General more effective and efficient?

Key findings: According to interviews with both Agency staff and the parent DG, the reporting to the parent DG could be more effective and efficient by making it more structured, including stronger early-stage coordination, timely and proactively sharing internal assessments, operational analyses, and other relevant materials that would enable the parent DG to better anticipate challenges and ensure effective support and oversight.

Based on interviews with the parent DG, Agency staff, and supporting documentary analysis, the main areas identified for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of ERCEA's reporting relate to the **need for a more structured and standardised approach to information exchange and reporting**, including stronger early-stage coordination. Enhancing cooperation in the preparation and adoption of key deliverables—such as the ERC Work Programme—alongside the **timely and proactive sharing of internal assessments, operational analyses, and other relevant materials**, would enable the parent DG to better anticipate challenges and support effective oversight. A clearer procedural framework for reporting, combined with greater standardisation across executive agencies, could further improve responsiveness, reduce administrative burden, and strengthen the strategic value of the information provided.

In this regard, several EC officials and Agency staff highlighted the importance of strengthening timely coordination between DG RTD and ERCEA in the **preparation and adoption of the ERC Work Programme**, while taking into account the timing of the decision-making process and related budgetary procedures for EU budget.

Beyond the ERC WP, timely and proactive information sharing would be mutually beneficial, allowing the parent DG to gain a clearer understanding of the operational challenges faced by ERCEA—such as increases in workload or emerging implementation bottlenecks. In this context, reporting could be further enhanced by **establishing a more systematic and structured approach to the transmission of relevant data and documentation**. The development of a clear procedural framework—potentially including defined milestones and timelines for responding to data requests and distinguishing between different types of deliverables—could help ensure that reporting processes are both predictable and responsive to the information needs of the parent DG.

The current reporting across all executive agencies is based on KPIs and other operational metrics. However, as noted by EC staff interviewed, while reporting occurs through Steering Committee meetings, there is no standardisation across agencies regarding what is reported or how it is presented or calculated. Having a standard **dashboard monitoring the main KPIs** of agencies will provide regularly a short and comprehensive overview of operations and their evolution, which will support the discussion and decision-making in Steering Committee meetings. **Standardisation and harmonisation of the information** will facilitate both the monitoring and oversight of agencies operations and respectively the preparation of the Steering Committee meetings by reducing the workload for agencies. At the time of drafting this evaluation, the Common Implementation Centre was working on centralising data extraction for common indicators across EAs into a dashboard.

4.2. Efficiency

4.2.1. Programme management

EQ9: How efficient and flexible was the management of the delegated programmes and respectively execution of services, including the actual performance and productivity increase against the elements estimated in the ex-ante cost-benefit analysis of 2021, the actual costs (including cost of coordination and monitoring) and as compared to the alternative option of in-house scenario?

Key findings: The ERCEA demonstrated strong performance in programme management consistently meeting key efficiency targets during the evaluation period. The Agency maintained full budget execution rates for both operational and administrative expenditures and remained within acceptable cost-efficiency thresholds. ERCEA's focused mission, cumulative experience, and well-structured procedures were viewed by stakeholders as enabling factors for its efficiency.

The evidence analysed points to the ERCEA meeting key efficiency indicators during the reference period, such as maintaining a stable ratio between administrative and operational budgets, achieving the budget executions targets, and the KPIs for economy of controls. It also introduced selected simplification measures in response to unforeseen circumstances. The Agency is widely perceived by various categories of stakeholders (including the interviewed Commission, Agency staff, and members of the ERC ScC) as having extensive expertise in managing bottom-up frontier research grants and well-established internal procedures.

A notable feature of the ERC portfolio is the strong similarity across its main grant schemes (Starting, Consolidator, Advanced, and Synergy Grants), with the main differentiator being the eligibility requirements. Apart from the Proof of Concept (PoC) grants — which are smaller in scale and follow a lump sum funding model — the structure, evaluation processes, and management of the grants are otherwise almost identical. This **high degree of standardisation across grant types was consistently identified by the interviewed Agency staff, European Commission, and the members of the ScC as supporting efficiency**: staff can easily work across different grant schemes without the need for extensive retraining or adaptation, and procedures can be streamlined and harmonised across the Agency. The operational similarities reduce complexity in grant management, contribute to workload flexibility (with staff and resources being largely interchangeable between schemes), and facilitate consistent application of evaluation and grant management standards. According to several Agency staff members interviewed, even with the introduction of lump sums for Advanced Grants in 2024, the effects on the operational model were carefully managed to maintain procedural coherence and minimise disruptions.

During the reference period, the ERCEA managed a steady expansion of the operational budget, exceeding EUR 2.8 billion by 2024 as shown in the table below.⁵³

⁵³ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2024.

Table 7: Operational and administrative budget (2021-2024)

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Operational budget (million EUR), commitments ⁵⁴	1897.55	2392.34	2363.22	2807.96
Operational budget (million EUR), payments	1798.68	2408.63	2585.51	2347.76
Administrative budget (million EUR), commitments	55.41	59.14	61.85	66.80
Administrative budget (million EUR), payments	54.16	59.07	61.59	67.59
Cost effectiveness indicator - Programme management cost (%) - ratio between administrative and operational budget (executed payments)	3%	2.5%	2.4%	2.9%

Source: Study team based on AARs.

The ERCEA also achieved **100% budget execution** for both operational and administrative budgets throughout the 2021–2024 period, confirming effective absorption and delivery capacity. **Time-to-grant and time-to-pay** KPIs were consistently met, proving dependable service delivery (for more details, see section 4.1.1).

ERCEA's **administrative budget (in executed payments)** grew from EUR 54.16 million (2021) to EUR 67.59 million (2024), reflecting moderate inflation-adjusted growth amid expanding programme volumes. Its **programme management cost ratio (administrative/operational executed payments)** remained moderate, at 3% in 2021 and 2.9% in 2024, placing it below the 3% threshold often cited in CBA benchmarks. The low ratio confirms that ERCEA continued to deliver cost-effective programme management, ensuring that the implementation of a higher operational budget triggered an appropriate increase of administrative budget.

⁵⁴ In the case of the operational budget in commitments for 2022, a commitment was made for an old redress H2020 case which represented EUR 1,825 million.

4.2.2. Fit for Purpose

EQ10: To what extent is the Agency fit for purpose?

Key findings: The evidence analysed points out that the size and the structure of the organisation is appropriate to achieve its objectives. During the reference period, the Agency did not experience staffing inadequacies, except for the year 2021 for which the evidence points to staff shortages – partly due to the difficulties in the hiring process due to the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with an increase in workload. In the following years, the Agency managed to increase the occupancy rate while in parallel decreasing the turnover rate.

Evidence stemming from desk research and interviews with Agency staff, ERC ScC members, and Commission officials confirmed that **ERCEA's processes and organisational structures are well-adapted to supporting the efficient implementation of the ERC's bottom-up funding activities**. The Agency was frequently described by the different types of interviewed stakeholders as operationally efficient, with its size and setup appropriate for the scale and complexity of its single-programme mandate. According to Agency and EC staff interviewed, the ERCEA benefits from a focused mission and a stable institutional structure that collectively enhance internal clarity and efficiency.

From 2021 to 2024, the Agency steadily increased its staffing levels (i.e. posts filled) from 500 in 2021 to 544 in 2024⁵⁵, indicating moderate growth in human resources. Operational staff accounted for the majority of staff in the Agency compared to management and administrative support staff. Yet, in recent years, the percentage of operational staff over total staff decreased from 90.8% in 2021 to 87.68% in 2024.

Table 8: HR indicators (2021-2024)

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total staff	500	516	536	544
Operational staff	454	470	465	477
Management and administrative support staff	46	46	71	67

Source: ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024

The available evidence points that during the reference period, the Agency did not experience staffing inadequacies, except for the year 2021 for which the evidence points to staff shortages. Notably, in 2021 the **occupancy rate** was 94.35% against the target of 98%, resulting from a high turnover rate of 7.67% compared to 4.89% in the previous year. However, this staff shortage is partly due to the difficulties in the hiring process due to the COVID-19 pandemic in a context in which an increase in workload was registered in 2021 as previously mentioned in section 4.1.1. Additionally, the low occupancy rate was also partly due to new or expanding EAs recruiting intensively throughout 2021.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Annual Activity Reports for 2021, 2024.

⁵⁶ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2021.

Table 9: Staff occupancy rate, turnover, and changes statistics

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Occupancy rate	97.35%	94.35%	98%	98%	99%
Staff turnover rate	4.89%	7.67%	6.9%	5.19%	3.56%
Staff departures	25	40	35	29	18
New recruits	44	36	71	61	46
Staff net increase compared to the previous year	7	-15	16	9	19
Staff change compared to previous year	+1.38%	-2.91%	+3.2%	+1.74%	+3.62%

Source: data provided by ERCEA.

In the following years, the Agency managed to increase the occupancy rate while in parallel decreasing the turnover rate. Notably, the occupancy rate raised to 98% in 2022 and 2023, reaching 99% in 2024; while the **turnover rate** decreased to 5.19% in 2023 and 3.56% in 2024 (historical lowest turnover rate). The vacancy rate, as indicated by some Agency staff interviewed, could increase due to the additional resources granted to the Agency following the association of the UK to the HE programme. The fall in the turnover rate indicates that the Inter-Agency HR strategy as well as the initiatives put forward by ERCEA's HR unit to enhance staff motivation and retention may have proven effective. In particular, in January 2023 the Agency launched the pilot inter-agency staff exchange programme supporting professional growth and improve career prospects of Agency staff - to which 10 ERCEA staff applied.⁵⁷ Additionally, during 2023, 15 staff members were paired with colleagues as part of the Inter-institutional job shadowing programme.⁵⁸

Several of the Agency staff interviewed noted that many units experienced workload peaks tied to specific events such as the week where evaluation panels are conducted. To manage the common **overtime** linked to such events, any extra hours worked are recorded and employees can offset them throughout the year by working fewer hours on selected dates when the workload is lighter. In this regard, according to Agency staff interviewed, employees tend to recuperate around 90% of their total overtime hours produced within the year.⁵⁹ The Agency has also increased its flexibility regarding teleworking since the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, the ERCEA introduced a policy of closing the office for several weeks during the summer as an environmentally friendly measure.

The ERCEA also showed the capacity to rapidly adapt to periods of high workload and emerging challenges. Notably, the ERCEA has several flexibility measures in place to address workload peaks with internal staff mobility. A key measure relates to the use of floaters, staff who can

⁵⁷ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2023.

⁵⁸ The programme consists of a short-term job exchange where a staff member is paired with another staff member in another institution of their choice, over a six-month period. The main objectives of the initiative are to gain insights, create useful networks, exchange best practices, and strengthen collaboration among EU institutions and agencies.

⁵⁹ Data provided by the Agency.

share job responsibilities and work across different units as needed.⁶⁰ Another measure is that the ERCEA also resorts to the hiring of interim staff to cope with increases in workload. In addition, the ERCEA set up several projects under the Continuous Improvement (CI) programme to find efficiency gains. Following the agreement between the Commission and the UK government for the participation of UK in the HE programme⁶¹, additional resources were allocated to the ERCEA to cope with its increasing project portfolio.

A measure particularly relevant in the context of assessing the Agency's structure relates to the **restructuring of Department C at ERCEA** which was initiated in September 2020 and implemented during summer 2021. The restructuring involved moving from a call-based specialisation model, where each unit handled one type of grant call (e.g. Starting Grants, Consolidator Grants, Advanced Grants), to a functional structure where all units manage all types of grants across the full project lifecycle. The objective of the restructuring was to distribute workload more evenly across the year, reduce the intensity of peak periods, improve business continuity, and enhance operational flexibility by allowing staff to manage the full cycle of grants. ERCEA staff interviewed indicated that the restructuring has been largely successful: workload peaks have become less pronounced, business continuity has improved, and staff are now more versatile and interchangeable, reducing dependency risks. While there was some initial resistance to the change, this was gradually overcome. The reorganisation has also enabled the department to respond more effectively to additional challenges such as the introduction of lump-sum funding, Brexit-related issues, and COVID-19 related grant extensions.

With regard to **staff learning and development**, in 2021 the ERCEA developed a Learning and Development Strategy establishing the Agency's training offer from 2021-2023. The strategy has four main objectives: supporting excellence at work; nourishing staff well-being and interaction; going digital; and fostering alternative ways of learning. When developing the strategy, the ERCEA took into account the needs and views of its staff. A particular training that was offered during this period as a response to ERCEA staff demands, was on how to give and receive feedback in a constructive and respectful manner. More details on this measure are provided under EQ11.

⁶⁰ Workload assessment methodology interview and the deep dive interviews on Horizon Europe Pillar 1: Open Science: European Research Council conducted as part of Cost Benefit Analysis.

⁶¹ Council of the European Union (2023). EU-UK relations: Council gives the go-ahead to UK participation in the Horizon Europe and Copernicus Programmes. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/11/15/eu-uk-relations-council-gives-the-go-ahead-to-uk-participation-in-the-horizon-europe-and-copernicus-programmes/>

EQ11: What were the factors driving or hindering the efficiency of the Agency?

Key findings: During the evaluation period, the ERCEA implemented several simplification measures such as streamlining the ethics review process, reduction in financial reporting, or the simplification of eligibility checks.

High levels of staff engagement and motivation have been identified as contributing factors to the Agency's performance, with ERCEA reporting some of the highest engagement scores among the executive agencies. However, Agency staff sometimes noted limited career development opportunities, which could be addressed by more actively promoting internal mobility.

Harmonisation of IT systems and related processes across all EU programmes increases the overall efficiency and coherence but also brings the need for adaptations to the operational specificities of the agency and raises the challenge of interoperability of different systems. The Agency worked closely and constructively with the IT department of the Common Implementation Centre in this respect.

The evidence analysed shows that several internal factors supported ERCEA's efficiency during the reference period. First, multiple stakeholders emphasised that the Agency's focused mission on a **single programme** (ERC grants) facilitated streamlined management structures and simplified internal processes compared to multi-programme agencies. Secondly, during the evaluation reference period the ERCEA also implemented **several targeted simplification measures** improving the efficiency of its procedures:

- In 2024, the use of lump sum funding was extended to the Advanced Grants call as a pilot initiative. This change was implemented in line with the European Commission's broader strategy under Horizon Europe to simplify funding rules, improve predictability for beneficiaries, and reduce administrative burden and financial errors, particularly in relation to cost reporting and audits. According to the survey results, 71.8% of beneficiary PIs (191 out of 266) and 56.75% of HIs of PIs (143 out of 252) indicated the wider use of simplified cost options (including lump sum funding models) as a good approach to improve efficiency in ERCEA's programme management.
- Under Horizon Europe, ERCEA continued the implementation of the "keep-on-file" strategy for ethics review which was first implemented during 2020 calls. The strategy follows a trust-based approach for ethics review focusing on complex and serious ethics issues. During ethics pre-screening, proposals selected for funding are assessed, and proposals with no ethics issues or with easily manageable ethics issues are cleared at this stage. This shift led to a significant increase in the proportion of proposals receiving ethics clearance at pre-screening — between 65% and 72% for the 2021–2023 calls, compared to only 40%–45% under Horizon 2020.⁶²
- Similarly, the ERCEA streamlined its ethics review process by reducing the number of internal reviewers from three to two in the first pre-screening step. Additionally, in the subsequent assessment step, the number of external reviewers was also reduced from three to two. These changes aimed to address potential bottlenecks and address the limited availability of ethics experts.
- During the Horizon Europe reference period, ERCEA introduced targeted simplification measures to improve the efficiency and accuracy of application evaluation and grant

⁶² European Commission, Annex to the Commission Decision approving the Annual Work Programme 2024 of the European Research Council Executive Agency, C(2024) 4524 final, Brussels, 3 July 2024.

preparation processes. One notable change was the embedding of budget tables directly into the submission form, replacing the previous system where applicants uploaded separate budget files. By integrating an automated Excel-based budget tool into the submission platform, applicants are now guided through budget input in a standardised, centralised format. Agency staff interviewed confirmed that this improvement reduced errors, streamlined budget verification, and facilitated faster processing at later stages of grant preparation.

- During the evaluation period, the ERCEA also introduced simplifications to the financial reporting. As part of ERCEA’s continuous improvement efforts, the Agency streamlined its grant management process by reducing the number of interim payments from three to one and increasing the pre-financing rate from 40% to 60–65%.⁶³ This change reflects the low risk associated with the host institutions—mostly public bodies—and aims to reduce administrative burden while maintaining two scientific reporting points.
- Another key simplification involved revising the timing of eligibility checks. Under previous procedures, ERCEA conducted full eligibility checks on all submitted proposals, including detailed verifications such as proof of PhD award dates. This was resource-intensive, especially in high-volume calls. In 2023, as part of an internal continuous improvement initiative, ERCEA shifted most eligibility verifications to after the first evaluation step, when only about 30% of proposals proceed to step 2. This change substantially reduced unnecessary administrative workload during early evaluation phases while maintaining the integrity of the selection process. In particular, the analysis of the effects of this simplification in the context of eligibility checks for the 2022 StG call—comparing efficiency gains between 2022 and 2024—showed a 76% reduction in staff working hours (from 1,222 to 298 hours) and in working days (from 153 to 37) (see the table below). The implementation of this simplification required approximately 0.49 FTE, while the estimated annual savings amounted to 1.97 FTE, indicating a clear net efficiency gain.

Table 10: Cost savings from the simplification in the eligibility checks process (StG 2022 – 2024)

	Before (StG 2022)	Goal	After	Efficiency gain (StG 2024)
Steps	53	NA	53	0
No. of staff in process	68	NA	58	10 people less
Hours	1222	60%	298	76%
Working days	152.75	60%	37.25	76%

Source: Data provided by ERCEA.

With regard to **hindering factors**, one area consistently highlighted by some interviewed stakeholders (Agency staff and the ScC) and the staff satisfaction surveys concerns **career progression opportunities within the ERCEA**.⁶⁴ Whereas the staff satisfaction survey results are consistently positive, career development opportunities remain the main aspect to address. Notably, although the 2021 and 2023 staff satisfaction surveys indicate high overall engagement

⁶³ According to the Agency, the decision to reduce the number of interim payments was taken in 2021 for the Horizon Europe framework programme. The first grants with the reduced number of payments were signed in 2022, and therefore, in 2024 the reduction in the number of payments began to influence the workload of the Agency.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that, no sufficient evidence was found to identify to which extent the vacancy rate/turnover was due to concerns on career progression opportunities and subsequently impacted the agency’s activity or efficiency.

among ERCEA personnel, the staff perception on **career development** remains a relatively weak area within human resource management. In 2021, 56% of staff disagreed with the statement that they feel able to manage their career choices and determine their own career path, while 54% expressed dissatisfaction with the link between their job performance and career progression.⁶⁵ While ERCEA scored among the lowest across EAs on the questions about professional future, it was the only Agency who had increased its score between the 2021 and 2023 survey.⁶⁶ For this reason, during the evaluation period, the Agency implemented several measures to address the results of the staff satisfaction survey, in particular with regard to career development and training opportunities. The ERCEA implemented several initiatives as part of the Learning and Development Strategy 2021-2023 and the Inter-Agency HR strategy 2023-2027 as further specified below.

According to feedback from Commission and Scientific Council members, these challenges are partly linked to the Agency's institutional maturity and long-standing structure. In ERCEA staff tend to be highly specialised and internal mobility opportunities are limited, which could potentially affect on long-term motivation and professional development opportunities. It was noted that, while newer agencies may benefit from a more dynamic, start-up-like environment, longer-standing agencies could face difficulties in maintaining staff engagement over time. In this respect, Agency staff interviewed mentioned that there was limited internal mobility within the ERCEA and colleagues could find better opportunities in other agencies and/or Commission services. Moreover, the vacancy rate of the ERCEA remained low during the evaluation period, limiting inter-unit internal mobility.⁶⁷ Another issue related to internal mobility mentioned by Agency staff were related to the specific experience and knowledge required for certain positions. These insights point to the need to explore new models to support career progression of staff—e.g. through internal mobility pathways.

Career development prospects appear to be a topic that is relevant across executive agencies. The internal mobility of staff within the agencies is limited by the legal framework governing the executive agencies, which prioritises seconded officials for posts of responsibility.⁶⁸ In the case of ERCEA, less than 10% of Head of Sector positions are occupied by seconded officials.⁶⁹ The ERCEA is an outlier compared to other EAs due partly because it has fewer seconded officials (i.e. 15% compared to an average of 26% across agencies). No positions of Deputy Head of Unit are foreseen in its organisation. Hence, data shows that a significant number of temporary agents in the ERCEA have the opportunity to access pre-managerial positions (e.g. team leader, head of sector), in a higher proportion compared with the other agencies.

The Agency has followed up on the findings of the staff satisfaction surveys with several initiatives aimed to improve staff career development and learning opportunities. To address career development opportunities, in 2023 the **Inter-Agency HR strategy 2023-2027** was launched as a collaborative effort by all executive agencies.⁷⁰ Two of the three pillars of the strategy related to career development: attractiveness and staff retention; and career prospects. As part of these priorities, an Exchange Programme and an Inter-institutional job shadowing between agencies were launched.⁷¹ Furthermore, there are other opportunities for career

⁶⁵ Data provided by the Agency.

⁶⁶ Data provided by the Agency: six percentage points increase between 2021 and 2023 survey results (38%).

⁶⁷ We provide more information on vacancy rates in section 4.2.2. According to data shared by the ERCEA, number of persons moving internally to another unit were: 12 (2020), 22 (2021), 16 (2023), and 14 (2024).

⁶⁸ Council Regulation (EC) No. 58/2003 of 19 December 2002 laying down the statute for executive agencies to be entrusted with certain tasks in the management of Community programmes, Article 18: "The executive agency's staff shall consist of Community officials seconded as temporary staff members by the institutions to positions of responsibility in the executive agency, and of other temporary staff members directly recruited by the executive agency, as well as of other servants recruited by the executive agency on renewable contracts".

⁶⁹ Data provided by the European Commission.

⁷⁰ Inter-Executive Agency Human Resources Strategy 2023-2027.

⁷¹ More information on the Exchange Programme and Inter-institutional job shadowing are provided below the next evaluation question.

development that the Agency could further explore such as rotation incentives or internal career paths.⁷²

Additionally, one of the key strategic priorities of the ERCEA internal long-term strategy relates to staff motivation, including measures to empower staff, to voice staff concerns and create career opportunities. To better **manage career opportunities**, the ERCEA strategy included the aim of providing regular feedback to staff on their performance during the year. For this process to be optimal, the ERCEA established required training on how to provide advanced feedback. While the Agency reported high levels of satisfaction with the training, discussions were ongoing with potential contractors for the roll out of a tailor-made training on advanced feedback. The ERCEA also provides further training opportunities to its staff via weekly newsletters in the areas highlighted in its strategy on learning and development for 2021-2023 period. The training offered included a variety of topics such as competence model training, well-being training, team building, working in virtual teams, or on targeted digital skills. A specific example on training provided during the evaluation period relates to the Continuous Improvement programme that implemented tailored training programmes for assistants, including five areas: IT skills, communication, proactive assistant, efficiency, and confidentiality/security.

Within the legal boundaries, EC officials interviewed noted that the ERCEA could **more actively promote internal mobility**, enabling staff to develop new skills and responsibilities across units. The Agency has the potential to strengthen internal career management by systematically exploring and supporting such professional development pathways. As noted by Commission staff, internal mobility is supported by current legal provisions, with the agencies being able to implement several internal HR actions such as mobility schemes, rotation incentives, internal career paths, or prioritising internal candidates for vacancies.⁷³ As part of the Inter-Agency HR strategy,⁷⁴ a job shadowing programme was introduced by which Agency staff members were paired with colleagues in other agencies so that they could temporarily work in different roles to gain insights into other functions, built networks, and assess whether a new position might be a suitable career move. In addition, a shadowing between agencies and the Commission took place. Interviewed Commission staff viewed the job shadowing programme as a positive initiative to foster mutual understanding between Commission officials and Agency staff regarding their respective work environments.

Another potentially hindering factor highlighted by Agency staff interviewed related to the continued efforts that are needed to further **adapt the standard corporate grant-management platforms** (e.g. eGrants, Compass/SyGMA) to better support the specific operational needs of the ERC. Overall, it is evident that having a harmonised IT system and related processes across all EU programmes increases overall efficiency and coherence. The harmonisation also brought the need to sometimes adapt the corporate tools to the specificities of ERC programme implementation. As demonstrated by the below examples, this is followed up in the context of a continuous development of corporate IT tools via a close and constructive cooperation between the Agency and the Commission.

According to interviews with EC officials, the standardisation of IT tools across agencies would also allow for better allocation of IT staff. Notably, instead of each Agency relying on its own IT staff knowledgeable of their specific IT systems, centralised IT services could take care of IT operational matters across all agencies. This is particularly the case given the limited IT budget allocated to agencies as indicated by both Agency staff and EC officials interviewed. At the same time, Agency staff considers that having stable and strong IT expertise in the Agency staff can be done at a much cheaper price than the IT consultants on which central service may rely

⁷² Information provided by European Commission.

⁷³ Information provided by European Commission.

⁷⁴ European Commission. Inter-Executive Agency Human Resources Strategy 2023–2027: CINEA, EACEA, EISMEA, ERCEA, HaDEA, REA. February 2023.

on. Many Agency staff are of the opinion that the operational efficiency of ERCEA requires to have dedicated IT close to operations.

The CIC works closely with the different agencies to tailor the corporate IT tools to their specific needs, resulting in a continuous effort to improve the tools. A particular example on this collaboration relates to the activities for the optimal roll-out of SUMMA, the new centralised corporate financial system, that were carried out at the time of the evaluation. The implementation of SUMMA will involve the adaptation or discontinuation of local solutions (e.g. Bluebell, Pimpernell, speedwell), including ERCEA's own developed tools.⁷⁵ Some of these solutions (i.e. Bluebell, Speedwell, Lily) are reused by up to ten other Commission services. According to Agency staff interviewed, while the integration of some of these tools proved particularly challenging, the collaboration with the CIC IT team was constructive.

Another example mentioned on the collaboration between the Agency and the Commission services to tailor processes and tools to local needs relates to the adaptation of the lump sum financial model for ERC grants. ERCEA staff worked in close collaboration with the CIC with a systematic interaction and feedback loops on lessons learnt from other lump sum pilots. Interviewed Agency staff indicated that the collaboration with CIC was smooth and helped to adapt the IT solution (e.g. application forms, participant portal) to the specificities of ERC grants. Notably, given that ERC grants are not divided between different work packages, the reporting system was adapted accordingly – a single work package per beneficiary approach without milestones or deliverables. Otherwise, according to Agency staff interviewed, introducing a solution for multidisciplinary and multipackage would have been very time-consuming.

Based on feedback from the Commission and Agency staff, interoperability between corporate and agency-specific IT tools remains a complex issue. While the corporate IT platforms offer a standardised backbone for grant management, certain limitations remain in functionality which prompted the ERCEA to develop complementary internal tools—such as a dedicated ethics monitoring tool—to meet specific coordination and oversight needs. Agency staff interviewed also noted some **challenges related to interoperability** between systems, occasionally requiring manual data transfer that increased workload and the risk of error. The ERCEA has also been closely collaborating with the CIC IT team to develop tailor-made functionalities directly inside the eGrants platform to improve the reporting system.⁷⁶ The Agency put some of its staff at the disposal of the CIC IT department to this end. ERCEA has also been proactive in offering any new developed functionalities to other agencies when relevant. For instance, ERCEA shared an example that could benefit EISMEA. Looking ahead, a balanced approach is needed—ensuring eGrants remains a coherent, corporate platform while allowing for adaptations and the development of complementary tools where needed and in justified cases.

In addition, Agency and Commission staff acknowledged that the centralised ex-post audit model offers clear benefits, notably through harmonisation, economies of scale, and reduced audit burden for beneficiaries—now subject to a single, coherent set of audits under robust quality control. While ERCEA staff identified some operational constraints—such as limited flexibility to initiate targeted audits and occasional delays in accessing audit support—these must be weighed against the systemic gains in efficiency and the principle of auditor independence. As noted by the Commission staff, given ERCEA's very low error rate, allocating dedicated audit resources at the Agency level would be disproportionate and contrary to the founding principles of the centralised audit system model.

⁷⁵ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2023, 2024.

⁷⁶ Information provided by European Commission.

EQ12: To what extent the measures envisaged in the ex-ante cost-benefit analysis of 2021 contributed to a proven increased productivity of the Agency?

Key findings: During the evaluation period, the ERCEA implemented several measures to improve its efficiency, several of which reflected the recommendations set out in the ex-ante cost-benefit analysis of 2021, including streamlining procedures and templates, reducing its number of reports, and testing the use of new IT tools.

The 2021 ex-ante Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) outlines a series of measures recommended to achieve the indicated productivity gains. In the table below we provide a brief overview on the measures envisaged by the 2021 ex-ante CBA and how they have been implemented at the ERCEA. We provide more detailed information on the most relevant measures implemented in the accompanying text below the table.

Table 11: Efficiency measures envisaged in ex ante CBA and implementation by the ERCEA

Measure envisaged	Implementation
Organising more efficiently and effectively the necessary feedback to policy	The necessary feedback to policy was organised more efficiently and effectively with the adoption of the F2P framework and the creation of a new dedicated sector as further detailed in section 4.3.3.
Relying on new or improved IT tools	The ERCEA tested the use of new IT tools to improve its operational efficiency as further indicated in section 4.2.4. ERCEA is in the process of developing new IT tools to support workload assessments and improve data management. However, reliance on Excel for current operations indicates that full implementation is still pending.
Implementing additional simplification measures made possible by the latest revision of Financial Regulation, like broader use of lump sums	The lump sum was already used for PoC grants and was introduced in 2024 for the Advanced Grant call as a pilot. However, the broader use of lump sums is still being explored and has not yet been fully realised.
Increasing the average grant size where possible, keeping in mind delivery of policy objectives	The grant size remained unchanged during the evaluation period.
Organising calls and procurement in a less resource intensive way	As part of the CI programme, simplification of several procedures was made such as eligibility checks, ethics review, and the reduction of interim payments, as detailed under EQ 11. As of May 2024, a streamlined procedure template had been developed resulting in the following outcome - from the 92 previously existing reporting procedures: 25 had been archived, 8 simplified, 12 remained under revision, and for 27 no simplification potential had been identified.

Reassessing the reporting requirements	There has been a reassessment of reporting requirements which resulted in the reduction of the number of reports to six in 2023 and respectively five in 2024 compared to twelve previously. Furthermore, the data generated for the scorecard is reused for the Steering Committee.
Increasing the flexibility in the allocation of staff between the various programmes implemented by an Agency, allowing to better reply to the variation in the workload in the different programmes of the Agency	The Agency has implemented flexibility measures in staff allocation, enabling better responses to variations in workload across departments (e.g. floaters, interim staff). This has contributed to improved operational efficiency. The Agency also did a reorganisation of Department C to cope with expected increases in workload as detailed in EQ10.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Hence, the Agency has implemented several efficiency measures in line with the recommendations outlined in the 2021 ex-ante cost-benefit analysis. While some of these measures have shown positive results, other aspects require further development and implementation to fully realise their potential. The ERCEA is continuing the efforts to further implement the envisaged measures. For instance, the Agency is keeping the strong collaboration with the Commission on digitalisation and the introduction of new or improved IT tools. Another example relates to the flexibility in the allocation of staff. The Agency contracted an external company to help in assessing staff allocation. Outside of the evaluation period, the Agency allocated staff for 2025 based on this workload analysis.

4.2.3. Environmental Impact

EQ13: How did the Agency reduce its environmental impact during the period and to what extent could it be further minimised?

Key findings: During the evaluation period, the ERCEA continued its commitment to reduce its environmental impact by implementing measures to lower its environmental footprint. The Agency managed to cut down on electricity, gas, and water consumption although waste generation rose overall. The ERCEA also achieved an EMAS score of 10 out of 10 in 2024.

The actions implemented by ERCEA between 2021 and 2024 support several of the overarching objectives of the European Green Deal and the “Greening the Commission” initiative.⁷⁷ The Communication outlines the EU’s pathway to climate neutrality by 2030, setting a target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60% compared to 2005 levels, with remaining emissions to be offset through carbon removal. It identifies key areas of environmental performance, ranging from buildings and travel to IT and staff engagement, each accompanied by specific actions and targets designed to support this ambition.

During the evaluation period, the ERCEA actively advanced its environmental management efforts through the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) and its internal ERCEA Greening programme.⁷⁸ In 2022, key actions included the installation of filtered water fountains on all floors to reduce bottled water consumption, supporting the Cycling Contribution Scheme and the VeloMai initiative, and collaborating with the Office for Infrastructure and Logistics in Brussels (OIB) to install charging stations for electric vehicles and bicycles.⁷⁹ In 2023, the Agency also organised energy efficiency workshops, hosted Earth Day awareness events, and took part in corporate energy-saving initiatives such as the BEST summer and winter campaigns.⁸⁰ Other measures included the removal of personal printers in 2021 to encourage more sustainable printing practices, revision of mission rules to promote remote participation and sustainable travel, and continuous awareness-raising through the *pERCpectives* newsletter and internal Greening Group communications. The mission guide was further revised in 2025 to set stricter requirements, including prioritisation of trains for missions under 500 km, even at up to 40% higher cost, and to reduce the number of mission performers to a minimum.

Environmental indicators show notable improvements over the evaluation period. Between 2021 and 2023, CO₂ emissions were reduced by 57.92% from 2.44 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂eq) to 1.03 in 2023. Similarly, electricity consumption was reduced from 9.62 megawatts-hour (MWh) to 7.95 in 2023 (17.37% decrease). Nevertheless, the building retains an energy label of PEB C, and water consumption remains a challenge due to roof cooling system evaporation.⁸¹ On the other hand, the number of printed sheets as well as the total

⁷⁷ European Commission, COMMUNICATION TO THE COMMISSION, GREENING THE COMMISSION, Directorate General Human Resources and Security, 05/04/2022, Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-04/c_2022_2230_2_en_act_part1_v11.pdf. The Communication charts the course toward achieving climate neutrality within the Commission by 2030, identifying key areas for improving environmental performance. Among its targets is a 60% reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels, with remaining emissions to be offset through carbon removal measures. The commitment to reach corporate climate neutrality by 2030 is a distinct pledge made by the Commission under the Green Deal, separate from the broader EU-wide targets set for the same year.

⁷⁸ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2023.

⁷⁹ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2022.

⁸⁰ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2023.

⁸¹ Building Performance reports 2021-2023.

volume of waste generated by employees has increased over the 2021-2023 period. In the case of total waste, each staff generated 42.87% more kilograms of waste in 2023 compared to 2021.

In line with the HR Inter-Agency Strategy, the ERCEA contributed to the development of a green workplace approach, supporting inter-agency collaboration on sustainable office design and staff-driven environmental responsibility. The ERCEA Greening Group remained relatively small throughout the period, but its work was well received in the 2024 EMAS audit, which highlighted awareness-raising initiatives such as the “digital frugality” video campaign as good practice.⁸²

⁸² ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2024.

4.2.4. Digitalisation

EQ14: What did the Agency do to digitalise its activities?

Key findings: During the evaluation reference period, the ERCEA strengthened its digital systems and cybersecurity framework, while it was one of the most advanced agencies in the use of IT tools for knowledge management and analytical work. The ERCEA worked closely with the Commission's Common Implementation Centre to adapt corporate IT tools to their needs, while they conjointly explored further possibilities to digitalise and automate operational and administrative processes of the Agency.

During the evaluation period, the ERCEA adopted several measures strengthening its digital systems and cybersecurity framework.⁸³ More specifically, the Agency invested in **data security**, including multi-factor authentication on public systems, governance, risk and compliance monitoring, and staff training on information security risks.⁸⁴ During the evaluation period, ERCEA also made advances in document management through its Document Management Centre (DMC), promoting better record-keeping and preparing the introduction of electronic signatures.⁸⁵ Agency staff interviewed indicated that ERCEA also initiated archiving of legacy ERC data to meet legal retention obligations and improved expert management processes via the restricted expert profile functionality in ECS.

The ERCEA stands out as one of the agencies with the most advanced **use of IT tools for knowledge management and analytical work** to support their business intelligence (BI) practices.⁸⁶ In 2022, a BI specialist was hired while a BI community of practice was launched within the Agency, fostering the use of modern data visualisation tools such as Qlik Sense across different units.⁸⁷ With regard to analytical work, ERCEA has also several IT analytical support tools, such as Toolip for scientific monitoring and Mapping Frontier Research for classifying scientific projects.⁸⁸ The Agency also maintains databases on programme implementation, like the ERC Data Archive.

As previously mentioned, (see section 4.1.2), Agency staff raised the need of adaptation of corporate IT tools to the operational specificities of ERC programme. The agency also put some staff at the disposal of the CIC IT department to develop tailored-made functionalities which can also be beneficial for other agencies. In preparation for future corporate systems, ERCEA also began adapting local IT tools for integration with SUMMA. The shift to SUMMA was described by Agency staff as a significant shift internally, and training was provided to staff to facilitate the transition.

The ERCEA is also exploring further possibilities to digitalise and automate its operational and administrative processes. For instance, during the evaluation period, an AI-based service (i.e. the support tool for the identification of potential independent remote referees for the evaluation of proposals) was – after a piloting phase - introduced as a mainstream tool to support the evaluation process.⁸⁹ Similarly, the Scientific Management department has introduced several IT tools to help them streamline processes. For instance, the use of the Toolip tool helps streamline project monitoring reports. The tool allows Scientific Officers to generate PDF reports

⁸³ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2021-2024.

⁸⁴ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2022.

⁸⁵ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2021 annex.

⁸⁶ Cross-cutting case study on IT integration.

⁸⁷ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2022.

⁸⁸ Cross-cutting case study on IT integration.

⁸⁹ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2021.

though a web-based user interface that can be then uploaded to the corporate workflow solution Compass. The use of this tool guarantees that information is presented in a structured manner, saves the scientific officers time in drafting reports, and less knowledge is lost in the process. The Scientific Management department has also leveraged on the Data Analysis group to improve the efficiency of their operations using machine learning algorithms.⁹⁰

Across agencies, a re-engineered IT tool was put into production by the CIC for expert management to assist agencies in managing the profiles and contracts of external experts for individual procedures.⁹¹ The new tool (ECS) has a more user-friendly interface compared to the old system, including a simplification of the new model contract.⁹² Agency staff interviewed indicated that the integration with the e-experts platform was a major benefit, facilitating easier access to expert profiles and contracts. While agency staff encountered minor bugs, the CIC IT team provided prompt resolutions to address any technical issues.

With regard to AI applications, during the evaluation period, the ERCEA has initiated an Agency-internal working group on the topic including the collection and internal assessment of use cases.⁹³ Several agencies are also collaborating among them in the exchange of AI applications and knowledge, enabling to share more efficient solutions and harmonised approaches to IT.⁹⁴ The ERCEA is also actively sharing with other agencies any solutions co-developed with the CIC IT department which can be useful for other agencies. For instance, in an IT Steering Committee meeting, ERCEA IT unit members of staff shared an example of a tailored-made IT solution developed within the eGrants platform which could be also beneficial for EISMEA in the framework of its EIC Accelerator actions.⁹⁵

EQ15: To what extent could more have been done to make the Agency more digitally efficient?

Key findings: The Agency recently hired an AI expert to join the IT unit to explore the use of new IT tools to automate or streamline operational processes. The findings are expected to be shared in the context of the recently established AI CIC-EA coordination group, in line with established practice of the Agency to collaborate with the Commission's IT unit of the Common Implementation Centre to tailor corporate IT tools to the ERC calls' and grants' specific needs when duly justified.

While the Agency introduced new IT tools to automate or streamline some operational processes, the systematic use of AI remains limited to some innovation pilots. ERCEA staff interviewed noted that the Agency had initiated reflections on AI integration which translated into the hiring of an AI expert colleague to join the IT unit of the Agency in April 2025 to an AI-dedicated position.⁹⁶ This new incorporation is likely to help the Agency explore further possibilities to use AI tools to improve internal processes.

The close collaboration between the IT unit of the Agency and of the CIC is essential to enable better functionalities. Improving corporate IT tools and adapting them to the specific needs of individual agencies involves a continuous effort of collaboration. In many cases, areas for tailoring of IT tools are discovered in the finalisation phase of programmes, and not in line with

⁹⁰ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2021.

⁹¹ Cross-cutting case study on new IT tool on expert management.

⁹² Insights collected from REA and ERCEA staff participating in focus group to draft the case study on expert management tool.

⁹³ Cross-cutting case study on IT integration.

⁹⁴ Cross-cutting case study on IT integration.

⁹⁵ Information provided by European Commission.

⁹⁶ Information provided by European Commission.

the yearly IT programme cycle.⁹⁷ The CIC IT department responds to such requests, although differences in programme cycle can represent a constraint in the ability of adapting systems to meet agencies' needs. In the particular case of the eGrants platforms, as indicated by Commission staff, it is important to find the balance between adapting eGrants to the specific needs of the Agency while ensuring coherence of the platform to serve the majority of the programmes.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Information provided by European Commission.

⁹⁸ Information provided by European Commission.

4.3. Coherence

4.3.1. Coherence of the Programme Portfolio

EQ16: To what extent have there been overlaps, gaps, inconsistencies, complementarities within the programme portfolio managed by the Agency and how are these addressed?

Key findings: As the sole implementing Agency for the ERC under Horizon Europe, the ERCEA's programme portfolio is clear, coherent, and free of overlaps, gaps or inconsistencies. The high degree of standardisation across grant types and the stability of the portfolio over the evaluation period have supported operational efficiency, flexibility, and consistent management practices.

With regard to overlaps, gaps, or inconsistencies in the tasks delegated to the Agency, ERCEA has a single parent Directorate-General (DG RTD) and is responsible solely for the implementation of ERC grants. The implementation of the ERC component of Horizon Europe has not been delegated to any other executive Agency. Consequently, **no overlaps, gaps, or inconsistencies are identified in the programme portfolio.**

The **programme portfolio of ERCEA has remained largely stable over the period 2021–2024**, continuing the Agency's core mandate of implementing the European Research Council's (ERC) activities in support of bottom-up frontier research across all scientific domains. The Agency continues to manage all types of the European Research Council (ERC) grants, including Starting Grants, Synergy Grants, Consolidator Grants, Advanced Grants, and Proof of Concept Grants. No new grant type for researchers was introduced. Notably, the Synergy and Proof of Concept calls were temporarily absent in the 2021 Work Programme due to the transition from Horizon 2020, but they resumed thereafter⁹⁹. A few new initiatives were launched on the margins of the main schemes – for example, a Science Journalism Initiative¹⁰⁰ in 2023 (a special grant to help journalists spend time at research institutions) and a Public Engagement with Research Award¹⁰¹ introduced in 2020 to recognise outreach by ERC grantees. These initiatives, however, did not alter the ERC's fundamental scientific scope or its principal funding portfolio.

No overlaps, gaps, or inconsistencies within the ERC grants portfolio were reported by interviewed stakeholders, Commission officials or Court of Auditors reports. Furthermore, stakeholders from the Agency and the European Commission confirmed that managing only one programme, albeit with several types of grants, creates **significant clarity, operational coherence, and efficiency**. The different grant types are well-defined in terms of objectives and target groups, as outlined in the programme guidelines and calls, and these distinctions are clearly communicated both internally and externally.

⁹⁹ ERC Work Programme 2021; ERC Work Programme 2022.

¹⁰⁰ <https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/science-journalism-initiative>

¹⁰¹ <https://erc.europa.eu/manage-your-project/public-engagement-research-award>

4.3.2. Division of Tasks between the Agency and the parent DG

EQ17: To what extent is there a clear and appropriate delimitation of responsibilities and tasks between the Agency and the parent Directorates-General?

Key findings: Overall, there is a clear delimitation of tasks and responsibilities between HaDEA and its parent DGs. Roles are indeed well defined and operationalised via the Delegation Act and general/programme-specific MoUs.

At the same time, coordination between the Parent DGs and HaDEA in planning/events could be further improved.

Evidence from desk research, interviews with parent DG, ScC and Agency staff, and the external stakeholder survey shows that while the **delimitation of tasks and responsibilities between ERCEA and its parent DG (DG RTD) is clear, appropriate, and fit for purpose, there are certain areas for improvement and streamlining**. During the period April 2021–March 2024, the Agency’s mandate was renewed for Horizon Europe via formal Commission decisions, consolidating its tasks under updated terms. At the same time, the division of responsibilities between ERCEA and DG RTD was further clarified: the Commission reaffirmed its role as supervisor and guarantor of ERC’s independent scientific mission, while empowering ERCEA with operational autonomy to manage projects. However, interviews with Agency and European Commission staff, as well as members of the Scientific Council, suggest that despite the robustness of the formal framework, different opinions or operational ambiguity occasionally emerge —particularly in the practical implementation of responsibilities at the intersection of scientific strategy, its implementation, and the corresponding supervision and accountability.

A Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/1732 of 12 February 2021¹⁰² re-established the ERCEA, effective 1 April 2021, replacing the previous Agency set up under Horizon 2020. This decision confirmed ERCEA’s mandate to implement ERC funding activities under Horizon Europe. A new Instrument of Delegation (**Commission Decision C(2021) 950, 12 Feb 2021**¹⁰³) was adopted, delegating to ERCEA the management of ERC grants for 2021–2027, as well as legacy projects from Horizon 2020 and FP7¹⁰⁴. Under this framework, the Commission retains overarching oversight responsibilities, acting as the guarantor of the ERC’s autonomy and integrity, and ensuring that funded actions are implemented in line with the Scientific Council’s scientific strategy. According to Article 2 of the Commission Implementing Decision of 12 February 2021, DG RTD is responsible for monitoring and supervising the

¹⁰² European Commission, Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173 of 12 February 2021 establishing the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, the European Health and Digital Executive Agency, the European Research Executive Agency, the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, the European Research Council Executive Agency, and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and repealing Implementing Decisions 2013/801/EU, 2013/771/EU, 2013/778/EU, 2013/779/EU, 2013/776/EU and 2013/770/EU [2021] OJ L50/9.

¹⁰³ European Commission, Commission Decision C(2021) 950 final of 12 February 2021 delegating powers to the European Research Council Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of frontier research comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union (Brussels, 12 February 2021).

¹⁰⁴ European Commission, Annexes 1 to 5 to Commission Decision C(2021) 950 final of 12 February 2021 delegating powers to the European Research Council Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of frontier research comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union (Brussels, 12 February 2021).

Agency's work at the operational level for the programme under its remit, as well as managing the relationship between the Commission and the Agency.

A significant development was the conclusion of a **new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU¹⁰⁵)** between DG RTD and ERCEA, signed on 28 October 2022, replacing the 2014 arrangement. The MoU detailed the day-to-day modalities of cooperation, introduced structured coordination mechanisms, and reaffirmed that strategic decisions remain with DG RTD and the ERC governance bodies, while ERCEA focuses on operational delivery. It also emphasised the principle of loyal cooperation in the interests of the Union to manage unforeseen issues for which there are no pre-set rules.

Interviews with ERCEA staff, Scientific Council members, and Commission representatives indicates that the division of tasks and **responsibilities between ERCEA and its parent Directorate-General (DG RTD) is regarded as appropriate and fit for purpose**. Interviewees consistently highlighted that the formal boundary between scientific strategy—defined by the Scientific Council—and operational execution—managed by the Agency—is clearly articulated, along with the Commission's role in oversight and monitoring. This arrangement was seen as functional and supportive of the ERCEAs core objectives. The division of responsibilities between ERCEA and DG RTD, as set out in the legal framework, including Commission Decision C(2021)950 and Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173, has been respected.

Findings from the external stakeholder survey indicate that **a moderate share of ERC beneficiary host institutions (HIs) and principal investigators (PIs) report a clear understanding of the delineation of responsibilities between the European Commission, the ERCEA, and the Scientific Council**. Specifically, 35.64% of beneficiary PIs (139 out of 390) and 56.61% of HIs of PIs (167 out of 295) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the respective responsibilities and tasks are clear to them. The remainder either disagreed or expressed no clear opinion. Similarly, 55% of surveyed external experts (383 out of 696) indicated that the delineation of roles among the three entities is clear. However, levels of clarity were lower among unsuccessful applicants. Among these respondents, 25.61% of PIs (115 out of 449) and 40.63% of HIs of PIs (78 out of 192) agreed or strongly agreed that the division of responsibilities was clear.

Despite the robustness of the formal framework and the major roles and responsibilities being respected, some operational ambiguities occurred during the reference period. These were not major in nature and stem from differing interpretations of the practical implementation of responsibilities, rather than from substantive gaps in the formal delineation of tasks. Multiple interviewed stakeholders from the European Commission, Agency staff, and the ScC acknowledged that the unique governance model of ERCEA – that involves the interaction between the ScC and DG RTD – is characterised by the need to take into account at the same time the specificities of ERC and the corporate policies of the Commission. The adoption process of the ERC Annual Work Programme has occasionally highlighted differing interpretations regarding the delineation of scientific, administrative, and policy responsibilities, particularly during the final stages of approval. In line with the Horizon Europe Specific Programme and Commission Delegation Decision C(2021)950, the Scientific Council is responsible for establishing the Work Programme from a scientific perspective, while the European Commission holds formal responsibility for its adoption.

Although the adoption process has fully complied with the legal provisions and consultation requirements, some challenges have arisen in cases where the Commission proposed adjustments based on broader EU policy or legal considerations—particularly with regard to eligibility restrictions for applicants from certain third countries and in areas involving sensitive technologies. While several interviewed members of the Scientific Council and Agency staff

¹⁰⁵ Memorandum of Understanding between the European Research Council Executive Agency and the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation on Modalities and Procedures of Interaction (2022).

expressed concerns that such proposals could risk perceptions of interference with the ERC's bottom-up, excellence-driven approach, representatives of the parent Directorate-General emphasised the importance of ensuring alignment with legitimate EU security and strategic autonomy objectives. Consultations with all stakeholder groups confirmed that the Commission engaged with the Scientific Council on these matters, and that the dialogue between both parties was generally constructive and an agreement was reached, albeit at times limited by tight timeframes. Regular communication between DG RTD, the ERCEA, and the Scientific Council is essential for addressing similar matters and ensuring shared understanding and strategic alignment. The Steering Committee serves as one of the key mechanisms supporting effective cooperation among the actors involved in the ERCEA's governance. These meetings are held regularly and include in-depth discussions on operational matters. In addition to these formal interactions, trilateral discussions between the ERCEA, the Scientific Council, and DG RTD also take place when needed to resolve specific matters.

Nonetheless, some interviewed European Commission staff members indicated that **more structured and consistent communication—particularly between the Commission and the Scientific Council**—could help further strengthen mutual understanding and coordination. A continuous flow of information among the key actors, including the Agency, was also seen by some as beneficial in enhancing responsiveness and promoting alignment.

4.3.3. Feedback to Policy

EQ18: How effective are the Feedback to Policy channels, means and methods and to what extent do they ensure an adequate information flow between the Agency and the Commission services, notably on the content of the projects and their results? To what extent did the Agency identify and inform parent Directorates-General on the projects with the most relevant results for policy? To what extent the Feedback to Policy activities are monitored? What are the areas for improvement, if any?

Key findings: ERCEA's Feedback to Policy (F2P) function was significantly strengthened during the evaluation period. The establishment of a dedicated F2P sector and the introduction of annual planning contributed to a more systematic and structured approach. The Agency's focus on a single programme and one parent DG has helped streamline the exchange of information, while multiple channels have been established to facilitate F2P-related communication. Although the Agency has maintained a degree of flexibility to address evolving needs, staff interviewed expressed concerns about workload pressures.

Between 2021 and 2024, ERCEA significantly strengthened its Feedback to Policy (F2P) function, transforming a previously ad-hoc practice into a more systematic and coordinated activity following the Commission's formal delegation¹⁰⁶ and building on an initiation project run through the Agency's Continuous Improvement Programme.

Within this context **ERCEA undertook an extensive review** of its internal processes and structures to organise this activity in a more systemic and coordinated manner.¹⁰⁷ As result, ERCEA **created a new dedicated sector** (2021), adopted the **ERCEA F2P Framework** building on the F2P Collaborative Framework proposed by the EC for Horizon Europe and adapted to the bottom-up nature of the ERC programme (2022), and designed and implemented **F2P annual plans** as from year 2023.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Commission Implementing Decision 2021/173/EU of 12 February 2021 (Single Establishment Act).

¹⁰⁷ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2020.

¹⁰⁸ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024.

Even though little time has passed since the adoption of these measures for the effects to be fully visible, evidence collected shows that **channels and means developed by the Agency to implement F2P activities are overall effective** and allowed an adequate flow of information and knowledge on programme implementation between the Agency and the parent DG.

Given that ERCEA manages a single programme and reports to one parent DG, **the exchange of information appears to be inherently more streamlined** compared to multi-programmes agencies. At the same time, **ERCEA has also established multiple channels for F2P-related information** allowing different needs arising throughout the policy cycle to be addressed. More specifically, ERCEA provided policy-relevant analyses and inputs to the parent DG through both formalised processes and unstructured exchanges. With the adoption of the ERCEA F2P Framework, it was aimed to anticipate policy needs and formalise them in annual F2P plans. This planning exercise enabled the Agency to systematically gather inputs from the parent DG on the main policy priorities of the year and better understand their information needs. It also facilitated internal discussions with the ERC ScC and the ERCEA units involved in F2P about the most relevant scientific developments.¹⁰⁹ F2P activities and progress in the achievement of the plans are then regularly discussed during Steering Committee meetings and management meetings. ERCEA is also part of the HE F2P Group¹¹⁰ and the Commission's Strategic Foresight Network, and contributes on-demand to the HE joint teams where policy DGs and agencies work together on F2P activities linked to the different HE clusters.¹¹¹ These networks represent an additional opportunity for the Agency to exchange with the parent DG (and other interested Commission services) and subsequently align internal F2P activities to the emerging needs. All these formal channels run in parallel with informal exchanges where the parent DG directly liaises with ERCEA's F2P sector and/or with specific scientific units depending on the topics at stake to address more contingent needs.

If the planning exercise brought a certain level of formalisation to F2P activities, **the Agency managed to keep a certain degree of flexibility to address evolving needs**. F2P plans in ERCEA remained flexible and have been adjusted throughout the years to adapt to the changing policy landscape and to scientific developments. In addition, F2P plans integrated from the outset some room to address ad-hoc requests from ERC ScC, parent DG and other Commission's services. The Agency progressively adopted processes to deal with these requests, and the internal organisation of work allowed some flexibility to cope with all of them. However, while acknowledging the need to keep the plans flexible and open to ad-hoc requests, some representatives from the Agency staff pointed at room for an improved internal coordination to streamline these requests and better anticipate the related workload.¹¹² While some of these requests are unpredictable and link to the distinctive bottom-up nature of ERC-funded research that can potentially inform most of the EU policy priorities, others are more foreseeable as they are tied to the support to official events or visits.

ERCEA F2P activities were reinforced by the Agency's continuous support to the ERC ScC. As indicated in the Delegation Act, this support includes various analysis needed for preparing the ERC scientific strategy, as well as monitoring and evaluating the quality of the ERC's operations and its achievements. Hence, the Agency built its F2P activities on existing work for ERC ScC and valorised/streamlined available data and information/initiatives - e.g. Mapping Frontier

¹⁰⁹ The identification of thematic areas to consider in the annual plans, is done through wide internal consultations, derive from an assessment of EU policy needs and is guided by scientific developments that can be relevant for policy makers and other stakeholders.

¹¹⁰ In the HE F2P Group representatives from each agency and parent DGs discuss the implementation of the common approach, act as a community of practice by exchanging experiences and best practices, help identifying synergies between actions and anticipate policy needs.

¹¹¹ Due to its bottom-up and non-thematic nature, ERCEA may potentially contribute to all clusters/joint teams. Interviews with the representatives from the Agency's staff clarified that it has been agreed that ERCEA does not formally take part to any joint team but provides input on demand where needed and according to the principle of proportionality.

¹¹² Interview (three representatives from Agency staff).

Research,¹¹³ the ex-post peer review-based assessment of completed ERC projects, science stories, ERC scientific conferences, factsheets – including in the context of the Knowledge Management Steering Committee.¹¹⁴

Interviewees from both the Agency staff and the parent DG stressed the **overall satisfaction with the F2P mechanisms put in place**. More specifically, Agency staff¹¹⁵ highlighted the benefits of the new organisational structure as an enabler for horizontal internal coordination and increased relevance of policy feedback and agree in considering F2P as a valuable opportunity for the Agency to make the research it funds visible and to collaborate with other services. At the same time, representatives from the ERC ScC¹¹⁶ and the parent DG¹¹⁷ expressed their satisfaction with the F2P outputs produced by the Agency. The analysis showed that outputs have been delivered according to the plans and, since 2023, the Agency recorded an increase in the F2P requests received¹¹⁸ which, to some extent, may reflect the growing appreciation for the analysis provided. Although the depth and scientific quality of outputs produced are overall valued, insights from interviews with DG RTD suggest that there might be room to enhance their utility for policymakers by incorporating a more strategic outlook and forward-thinking approach to more directly inform decision-making processes¹¹⁹.

ERCEA produced a variety of F2P outputs¹²⁰ —including portfolio analyses, reports, and events—**primarily focused on characterising the portfolio of ERC-funded projects**. For ERCEA this type of characterisation and mapping against policy priorities appears to be more complex than for other agencies due to the bottom-up nature of the ERC funded research and the absence of pre-defined topics or policy objectives. However, the Agency is working to strengthen this aspect by leveraging on both specific tools and ad-hoc organisational arrangements.

As for the **tools**, the use of the distinctive in-house classification system of Mapping Frontier Research¹²¹ designed by the ERC ScC, alongside new text-mining tools, enabled an efficient identification and analysis of projects aligned with emerging policy needs. In addition, the use of the ERC Dashboard¹²² and the ERC Research Information System (ERIS)¹²³ further supported the exploration and analysis of ERC funded projects and evaluated proposals by internal staff, policy officers and the general public. Similarly to other agencies, ERCEA is also testing the use of AI tools to investigate potential efficiency gains and representatives from the Agency staff see this as one of the main areas for further development.¹²⁴

Besides specific tools, **internal organisational arrangements** adopted for implementing F2P activities also enabled the characterisation and analysis of projects. First the newly created sector, located in the Scientific Department, works closely with scientific officers and staff involved in data analysis, project follow-up, and research ethics and collaborates with a cross-

¹¹³ One of the main tools for in-house portfolio analysis that enables ERCEA to systematically analyse and report on the research it funds across Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programmes, using a taxonomy developed with the ERC ScC.

¹¹⁴ ERCEA, 2022. Framework for feedback to policy in the European Research Council Executive Agency.

¹¹⁵ Interview (three representatives from the Agency staff).

¹¹⁶ Interview (one representative from ERC ScC members)

¹¹⁷ Interview (two representative from parent DG)

¹¹⁸ The Agency reported to have received around 37 ad-hoc requests in 2023 and 41 in 2024 (Source: written input from the Agency and interview with three representatives from the Agency staff).

¹¹⁹ F2P case study.

¹²⁰ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024.

¹²¹ <https://erc.europa.eu/about-erc/thematic-working-groups/working-group-mapping-frontier-research>

¹²² The ERC Dashboard is a user-friendly interface for funded projects and evaluated proposal with various filter options (e.g. by funding scheme, country, year, panel, and more).

¹²³ ERIS is an IT system and application for data exploration, search, analysis, visualization, portfolio analysis and reporting for ERC funding activities, projects and their outputs. ERCEA re-designed this system in 2023 to offer new visualizations and enhanced search and portfolio tools.

¹²⁴ Interview (three representatives from Agency staff).

agency F2P network to ensure broad input and engagement.¹²⁵ This network is composed of representatives from all scientific units (and other units as suitable) who meet regularly and support in the identification and analysis of relevant projects across different thematic areas. Collaborative work is further enabled by the existence of a dedicated page for F2P on the intranet and an F2P collaborative site with information on F2P activities, plans and tools.¹²⁶ Acknowledging the importance of knowledge management as a key enabler to effective F2P, the Agency also revised in 2023 the mandate of its Knowledge Management Steering Committee¹²⁷ to improve the way the Agency exploits all available information and scientific knowledge to capture impacts and outputs. Within this context, the Agency launched a pilot study to explore how concretely existing processes and tools linked to scientific knowledge management can complement each other and support internal synergies.

The F2P sector regularly monitors the progress and the results of F2P activities compared to the initial plans through internal tracking tools¹²⁸ and reports to ERCEA management and the ERC ScC in periodic meetings, and to the StC through the Interim and the Annual Activity Reports.

According to the view of Agency staff interviewed,¹²⁹ if the resources allocated to F2P do not increase in the future, the Agency's future capacity to perform F2P activities may be at risk. Notably, the increasing trend in the number of requests (and outputs produced) together with the growing complexity of the issues at stake may risk to negatively affect the capacity to perform F2P and to keep the current balance between planned requests, anticipatory initiatives and ad-hoc requests. However, the Agency is currently not using 3% of its staff for F2P work¹³⁰ (as estimated in the ex-ante CBA at the beginning of the MFF).¹³¹ As explained by the Agency,¹³² if resources working on F2P are fewer than initially estimated, those working on evaluation tasks were more than initially planned.

Given that the Agency is not using all resources initially envisaged to F2P and with plans in place to further increase these resources until the end of the Framework Programme¹³³, there is still flexibility to handle a possible rise in requests thus making F2P resources not a priority issue for the Agency in the short term. Staff¹³⁴ have also identified opportunities to improve efficiency by strengthening project data screening and enhancing collaboration with other agencies, particularly when dealing with similar types of requests. These measures can help optimize resource use and free up capacity for F2P activities.

However, it will be necessary to continuously assess the adequacy of F2P resources to the number and type of requests received to ensure the delivery of high quality and timely analysis. The continuous monitoring performed by the F2P sector will be essential to support future informed decision-making processes.

¹²⁵ ERCEA, 2022. Framework for feedback to policy in the European Research Council Executive Agency.

¹²⁶ Written input from the Agency.

¹²⁷ ERCEA 2023. Knowledge Management Steering Committee (KMSC): New mandate.

¹²⁸ Interview (three representatives from Agency staff).

¹²⁹ Interview (three representatives from Agency staff).

¹³⁰ In 2024 around 2.25% of ERCEA staff was involved in F2P activities including the F2P team working in the dedicated sector (9.33 FTEs) and the time equivalent of 4.25 resources from the Scientific Department and unit A2 who contributed to F2P with part of their working time on a project basis.

¹³¹ European Commission, Cost-benefit analysis for the delegation of the management of the 2021-2027 EU programmes to executive agencies, SWD(2021)20 final.

¹³² Written input from the Agency.

¹³³ Written input from the Agency.

¹³⁴ Interview (three representatives from Agency staff).

EQ19: To what extent did the Agency provide effective Feedback to Policy to the policy-making Directorates-General?

Key findings: There is evidence that F2P outputs have directly supported EU decision making processes. However, information on how Commission services use the feedback provided by ERCEA is often limited and unstructured.

Owing to the broad and bottom-up nature of ERC-funded research, which spans all disciplines, **ERCEA is de facto contributing to the main EU policy priorities**¹³⁵ and several portfolio analyses¹³⁶ and reports have shown the potential for contribution of the ERC-funded research to EU policy goals. However, for the same reason, ERCEA cannot predefine its contributions to each Commission objective or set related targets, adding complexity to the implementation and evaluation of F2P activities and requiring strong cross-domain collaboration.

There is evidence that F2P outputs have directly supported EU decision making processes. Reports and outputs developed as part of the F2P activities provided inputs to scientific opinions (e.g. scientific opinion of the EC's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors "Towards sustainable food consumption", scientific opinion of the EC Scientific Advice Mechanism team on AI), have been used as a basis for high level events (e.g. high-level event organised jointly by the ERC and the European Parliament's STOA on "Science-driven solutions for sustainable food", ERC annual conferences), and were cited in official statements (e.g. Statement on defending democracy in Europe by the European Group on Ethics in Science).¹³⁷

However, **information on how Commission services use the feedback provided by ERCEA is often limited and unstructured.** Feedback from DGs on F2P is among the key procedural steps suggested in the guidelines for the operation of the agencies.¹³⁸ Also the overarching framework designed for HE¹³⁹ describes F2P as a circular and collaborative process building on a close collaboration between policy DGs and implementing bodies. Interviews with ERCEA staff¹⁴⁰ stressed the importance of this element to enable continuous improvements and fully assess the effectiveness of F2P activities and reported limited knowledge on how Commission services used the feedback provided by ERCEA. While acknowledging the challenges in measuring how F2P outputs materialise into actionable policy decisions which often combine a broad amount of information, it was also mentioned in the interviews that more systematic and structured feedback is welcomed by Agency staff to improve service relevance.

A more proactive approach by the Agency in systemically engaging with the parent DG to gather feedback on the usefulness of various F2P outputs and to better understand specific needs could help address these concerns and support a more effective assessment of current F2P efforts¹⁴¹. For example, some agencies—such as REA, EACEA, and HaDEA—have recently initiated ad-hoc surveys to collect structured feedback from their parent DGs on the effectiveness of the support provided¹⁴².

Agency staff noted that **a close collaboration with Commission officials** also helped align analyses with Commission needs and boosted staff commitment by making the link between

¹³⁵ ERCEA Annual Activity Report 2023.

¹³⁶ For instance: the factsheets mapping of H2020 ERC-funded projects, 2023 Mapping ERC Frontier Research – Sustainable food production and consumption, the 2023 Mapping ERC Frontier Research – Biodiversity.

¹³⁷ ERCEA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024.

¹³⁸ Commission Decision of 15.12.2022 establishing guidelines for the establishment and operation of executive agencies financed from the EU budget and other sources.

¹³⁹ Common Implementation Centre, Towards a "Feedback to policy" framework in Horizon Europe, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Interview (three representatives from Agency staff).

¹⁴¹ Based on feedback from parent DG.

¹⁴² F2P case study.

their work and its use more visible. They also saw value in having seconded Commission officials at ERCEA to strengthen connections and mutual understanding, a practice which has been particularly productive for the sector through the staff exchange programme.¹⁴³

Part of the value in the Agency's F2P activities also lies in its **distinctive use of thematic foresight** to complement a more standard reactive approach to F2P and undertake anticipatory initiatives linked to key scientific and policy developments (such as AI or democracy). This aspect is appreciated by the parent DG.

The broad scope of ERC-funded research has also brought ERCEA to cooperate with other agencies to provide **cross-programme F2P**. This is facilitated via the F2P plans and coordination meetings, which helps identifying shared areas of interest. In addition, the close cooperation between agencies contributes to provide added value to policy DGs by integrating the analysis of projects contributing to similar policy objectives but implemented under different programmes, and there is a growing interest from both the Agency and the parent DG¹⁴⁴ in fostering cross-programme synergies to enhance the value of policy feedback. This inter-agency cooperation is useful especially when the request aims to gather policy feedback across different programmes or parts of it. In this context ERCEA suggested greater integration and/or central steering as the agency lacks the strategic overview of the entire programmes or policy areas needed to properly coordinate responses.

¹⁴³ Interview (three representatives from Agency staff),

¹⁴⁴ Interview (three representatives from Agency staff and one representative from parent DG).

4.4. Retrospective Cost Benefit Analysis

4.4.1. Introduction and methodology

Objective and scope

The objective of the retrospective cost-benefit analysis (CBA) was to determine to what extent the executive agencies have achieved the expected savings and productivity gains outlined in the 2021 ex-ante assessment. It examines whether delegating programme management to the executive agencies (EAs) was justified.

The CBA compared ex-ante estimates and actuals regarding full-time equivalents (FTEs) and staff costs (incl. Title I, staff expenditure and Title II, expenditure for building and infrastructure) at the levels of EA and Directorate Generals (DG) for contract agents (CA) and temporary agents (TA), as well as commitment appropriations (in million EUR) at programme/pillar level for the years 2021-2024.¹⁴⁵

The CBA only includes those programmes / pillars which were delegated to the EAs in the current Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) through the respective Specific Financial Statement (SFS).¹⁴⁶

This ensures the comparability of the initial CBA and commitments in the SFS with the actuals estimated for the different scenarios.

It is also important to note that the CBA does not cover third country contributions.

Why does it not cover third country contributions?

The 2021 ex-ante CBA specifically focuses on and is limited to the analysis of programmes implementing actions primarily tied to EU policies. Therefore, it covers programmes financed from EU budget (including Next Generation EU (NGEU)).

Third-country contributions are, therefore, not considered in the retrospective CBA as they (1) pertain to different funding frameworks and governance structures; and (2) would jeopardise the comparability with the ex-ante estimates and the actuals (i.e. C1 credits with EU budget and non-C1 credits against NGEU).

Thus, the CBA covers the following programme: Horizon Europe – Pillar I Excellent Science: European Research Council.

It is, therefore, important to mention that the comparison of the estimated and actual productivity (i.e. the ratio of commitment appropriations in million Euro per full-time equivalent of staff (FTE)) does not include legacy and additional programmes that were managed by EAs with available FTEs. Therefore, the analysis below does not represent the entirety of EAs' actual workload and productivity.

Approach and methodology

The CBA analyses the actual programme implementation by the EA ("optimised scenario") in comparison to an in-house scenario and the status quo scenario, by using the same

¹⁴⁵ Please note that the evaluation assesses the operations of the Agency in 2021 from 1 April to 31 December, i.e. 9 months, in line with the tender specification. In the CBA, 2021 was a full year with 12 months.

¹⁴⁶ This approach was agreed with the Commission to ensure comparability with the initial CBA.

assumptions of the ex-ante CBA for the FTEs and replacing the estimated average costs assumptions with the actual average cost assumptions.

The three scenarios of the ex-ante CBA were the following¹⁴⁷:

- **In-house scenario**, which is a theoretical re-internalisation in the Commission of the implementation of all EU programmes;
- **Status quo scenario**, in which the delegated budgets change in line with the new financial framework but the allocation of (sub)programmes in the agencies remains unchanged, namely as it was under the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework;
- **Optimised allocation of programmes scenario**, which is based on the initial orientations provided by the Communication of 29 April 2020 and a further adaptation due to recent political developments.

The average staff costs at EA level were calculated based on the Title I (staff expenditure) and Title II, which include expenditure for building and infrastructure.

Cost equation for the average staff costs at agencies:

$$\text{Average staff costs by category} = \text{average staff expenditure (Title I) by category (CA/TA)} + \text{average other costs (Title II) per FTE}$$

The costs related to Title III, the costs related to management of programmes are not included in the calculations, as these are the same between the different scenarios considered and would not help to identify the most efficient scenario. As in the ex-ante CBA, staff financed from third party contributions was not included in the analysis.

Data and assumptions

The assumptions follow the original CBA assumptions. It was not feasible in the context of this evaluation to consider real 'in-house' data for the few programmes still being implemented by the Commission and extrapolate to a whole in-house scenario while ensuring full comparability with the agencies' scenario in terms of overheads.

Several data sources were used to conduct the CBA which are highlighted in the following table.

Table 12: Data sources used in the retrospective CBA

Data point	Estimated	Actuals
FTEs and commitment appropriations	SFS / ex-ante CBA ¹⁴⁸	FTEs: Annual Work Programmes (AWPs) ¹⁴⁹ Commitment appropriations: Annual Activity Reports, Inputs concerning actual commitment appropriations received from EAs directly for programmes / pillars not reported <i>en detail</i> in the AARs.
	C1 credits	EU Budget
	Non-C1 credits	Next Generation EU Budget (NGEU)

¹⁴⁷ See Cost-benefit analysis for the delegation of the management of the 2021-2027 EU programmes to executive agencies (European Commission, 2021, p.3).

¹⁴⁸ Including the Excel file on the CBA model received from DG BUDG and the Staff working document of the CBA.

¹⁴⁹ The data concerning FTEs includes the number of Seconded National Experts (SNEs) was included in the numbers for the Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs). This data is available in the AWPs.

Data point	Estimated	Actuals
Average cost per FTE	SFS / ex-ante CBA	Final annual accounts of the EAs on Title I & II (based on commitment appropriations)

Source: Authors elaboration.

The following table summarises the main assumptions made in the retrospective CBA in order to perform the comparison between actual and estimated numbers and between the three scenarios.

The assumptions for the staffing mix and the number of staff shown in the table below are the same as in the 2021 ex-ante CBA.

Table 13: Main assumptions of the retrospective CBA

Context	Assumption
Staffing mix (same assumption as in ex ante CBA)	<p>DGs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Temporary Agents (TA)/ Establishment plan posts: 70% - Contract agents (CA)/ External personnel: 30% <p>EAs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - TA: 25% - CA: 75%
Number of staff (same assumption as in ex ante CBA in terms of staff allocation in the three scenario)	<p>Optimised scenario</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actual total FTE DG: 2.4% of actual total FTE EA <p>In-house scenario</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actual total FTE DG: +10 % of actual total FTE EA in optimal scenario <p>Status quo scenario</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actual total FTE DG: 2.4% of actual total FTE EA - Actual total FTE EA: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o For split programmes: +5% of actual total FTE EA in optimised scenario o For all other programmes: Same as actual total FTE EA in optimised scenario
Average staff costs (other assumption as in ex ante CBA)	<p>Optimised scenario</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actual average cost per FTE at EA = Average Title I per FTE + Average Title II per FTE¹⁵⁰ : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Average cost per FTE (Title I) = Title I / FTE TA and FTE CA o Average cost per FTE (Title II) = Title II / Total FTE - Actual cost of coordination at DG: Actual average costs per FTE at DG per TA and CA¹⁵¹ <p>In-house scenario</p> <p>Actual average costs per FTE at DG per TA and CA</p> <p>Status quo scenario</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actual average cost per FTE at EA <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o For BBA (Brussel Based Agencies): same as for optimised scenario - Actual cost of coordination at DG: Actual average costs per FTE at DG per TA and CA¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Note that the numbers for Title I and Title II are based on the financial accounts – initial adopted budget. See also the Table below for the exact numbers.

¹⁵¹ Data provided by European Commission.

¹⁵² Data provided by European Commission.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

A more detailed description of the underlying assumptions for the CBA is provided in the Annex (section 1.2.1, table 6), including (1) the average cost calculation for the actual average FTE costs in the optimised scenario; (2) the cost assumptions for average cost per FTE¹⁵³ by scenario.

Structure of this CBA chapter

The following section comprises the core data analysed as part of this CBA:

- Full-time equivalents;
- Staff costs and savings; and
- Productivity.

In relation to each of these aspects, we present estimated data (from the ex-ante CBA / Specific Financial Statement) and actuals based on the EAs' AARs for each of the three scenarios (optimised, status quo, in house) and for each of the years 2021-2024.

The data is presented in a graphic format in order to visualise the overall results of the CBA as the bottom line for the EA as a whole. More granular data at the level of the programmes and pillars is provided in the Annex (see section 1.2.2-1.2.4).

The sections afterwards elaborate on the EA's workload assessment methodology.

4.4.2. Key findings from retrospective CBA

This subsection presents the main findings of the retrospective CBA which was carried out to examine efficiency in comparison to initial expectations and alternative scenarios. Methodologically, it compares the assumptions of the ex-ante CBA with the developments during the period 2021-2024.¹⁵⁴ Please note that when we compare the scenarios, the actual in-house scenario is a hypothetical model and does not reflect actual figures.

Main findings of the cost-benefit analysis

The findings of the retrospective cost-benefit analysis demonstrates that the Commission's decision to outsource the implementation of ERC programme to ERCEA was justified as the expected savings of the optimised scenario (EA scenario) have been exceeded compared to the in-house scenario. More specifically, the actual savings of the optimised scenario (EUR 102.38 million) compared to the in-house scenario were 5% higher than the estimated savings (EUR 97.84 million) for 2021-2024 period. The yearly savings range from EUR 28.30 million in 2021 to EUR 25.15 million in 2024.

While the differences in full-time equivalent (FTE) requirements between the optimised and status quo scenarios were negligible¹⁵⁵, the optimised scenario required 38.4 to 39.7 fewer FTEs

¹⁵³ Average staff cost in the Commission for: DG TA (Directorate General Temporary agents), DG CA (Directorate General Contract agents), FTE EA CA (Full-Time Equivalents at Executive Agencies Contract Agents), FTE EA CA (Full-Time Equivalents at Executive Agencies Temporary Agents), BBA CA (Brussel Based Agencies Contract Agents), BBA TA (Brussel Based Agencies Temporary Agents); DG cost of coordination (sum of total cost at TA and CA level for overseeing EAs in parent DG).

¹⁵⁴ The retrospective CBA analysis aims to evaluate the extent to which Executive Agency has realised the anticipated savings and productivity gains outlined in the ex-ante CBA for the period 2021-2024. To conduct this analysis, the study compares ex-ante estimates with actual data on full-time equivalents (FTEs), staff costs, and commitment appropriations, assessing the performance of the EA ("optimised scenario") against both the in-house and the status quo scenario. The detailed description of the methodology and the assumptions can be found in Annex 1.2.

¹⁵⁵ The CBA conducted followed the assumption of the 2021 ex-ante CBA on the stability in the portfolios of the EACEA and the ERCEA (page 40, European Commission (2021) Cost-benefit analysis for the delegation of

annually compared to the in-house scenario. Across all scenarios, with minimal deviations of 0.1 FTE or less, deviations between estimated and actual data points became more pronounced in later years, particularly in 2023 and 2024.

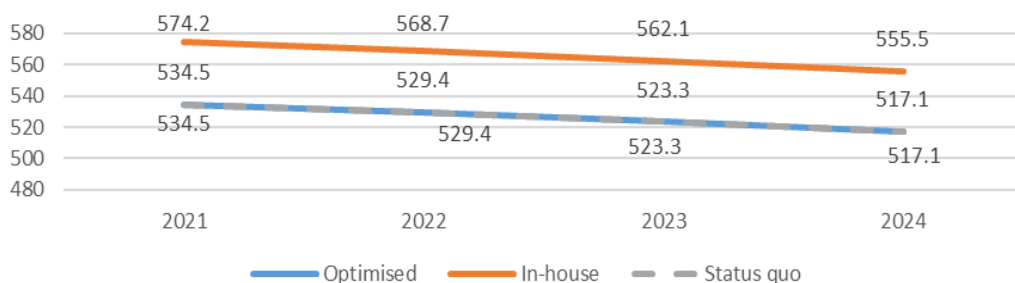
In terms of costs, the optimised scenario has also outperformed the alternatives, particularly when compared to the in-house approach. The actual costs of the in-house scenario exceeded those of the cost of the optimised scenario by EUR 102.38 million. As the actual costs of the both the in-house and the optimised were higher than estimated, the difference between the two scenarios was also larger than originally estimated. This translates to higher savings of the actual optimised scenario compared to the estimate by EUR 4.53 million (5%). Productivity trends further reinforced the advantages of the optimised scenario, with actual productivity exceeding the estimate by 27%. The consistent FTE levels combined with higher-than-estimated productivity highlight that ERCEA has successfully optimised its operations, achieving higher financial outputs without increasing staffing.

Full-time equivalents

The **CBA conducted as part of the current evaluation** examined the number of FTEs of ERCEA across three scenarios over the period from 2021 to 2024. It should be noted that the actual figures on FTE for the CBA were retrieved from the planned staff figures indicated in the Annual Work Programmes (AWPs) of the agencies, excepting the staff financed from third country contribution. The staff figures provided in the overall analysis of the evaluation (i.e. in chapter 4.1-4.3) were retrieved from the AARs and correspond to the actual staff in place (FTEs), including staff financed from third countries contributions. Hence, when reading the analysis carried out, the reader should take into account the differences between the planned FTEs (from AWP financed from EU budget and used in the CBA) and the staff in place, (from AARs, regardless of funding source, not used in the retrospective CBA).

The figure below provides the CBA calculations on the total number of FTEs under each scenario for the evaluation period, which include staff both in the agency and the DG supervising. While the three scenarios show a downward trend on FTEs required, there was also a constant wide gap between the in-house scenario and the optimised and status quo scenario of approximately 40 FTEs over the evaluation period.

Figure 9: Actual total FTEs under the three scenarios



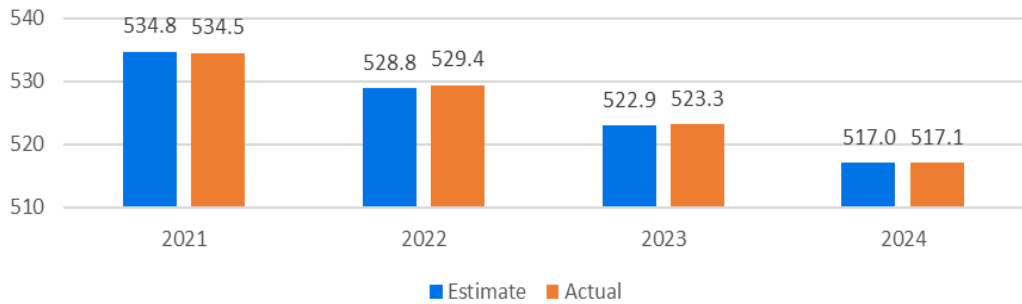
Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AWP.

Focusing on the optimised scenario in more detail, Figure 10 visualises the differences between estimated and actual number of FTEs in this scenario over the evaluation period, which were

the management of the 2021-2027 EU programmes to executive agencies). Under the optimised scenario for CINEA, HaDEA, EISMEA, and REA this scenario envisaged a 5% increase in FTEs compared to the status quo scenario. In the case of EACEA and ERCEA, due to programme stability no increase in FTEs was envisaged between both scenarios.

minimal across all years with only small deviations. The actual number of FTEs were slightly higher than estimates in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Figure 10: Estimated vs. actual FTEs in optimised scenario



Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AWP.

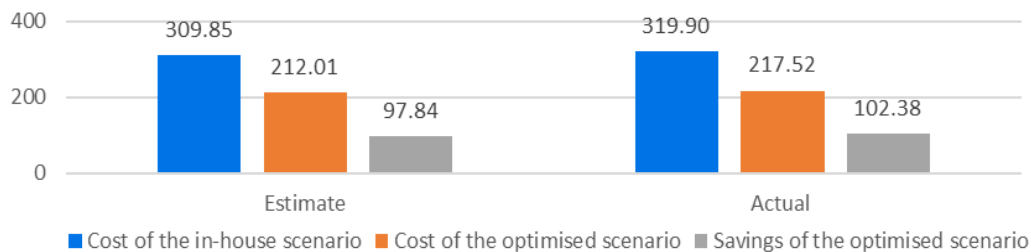
Further data and analysis are provided in the Annex in section 1.2.2 to 1.2.4.

Staff costs and savings

As exhibited in the figure below, the analysis shows that over the period 2021-2024, the total actual costs of the optimised scenario were considerably lower than for the in-house scenario. The average staff costs, derived from Title I and Title II (“habillage”), were calculated in alignment with the ex-ante Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA), encompassing not only staff expenditure but also costs related to building and IT infrastructure (see also Annex section 1.2.1).

Whereas the costs of the in-house scenario exceeded those of the cost of the optimised scenario, the actual costs for the optimised scenario were higher than estimated (by 4.53 million EUR). Most notably, the actual savings of the optimised scenario compared to the in-house scenario (102.38 million EUR) were **5% higher** than the estimated savings (97.84 million EUR), indicating that expectations of cost-savings have been exceeded.

Figure 11: Estimated and actual costs and savings of the executive Agency scenario in 2021-2024, million EUR



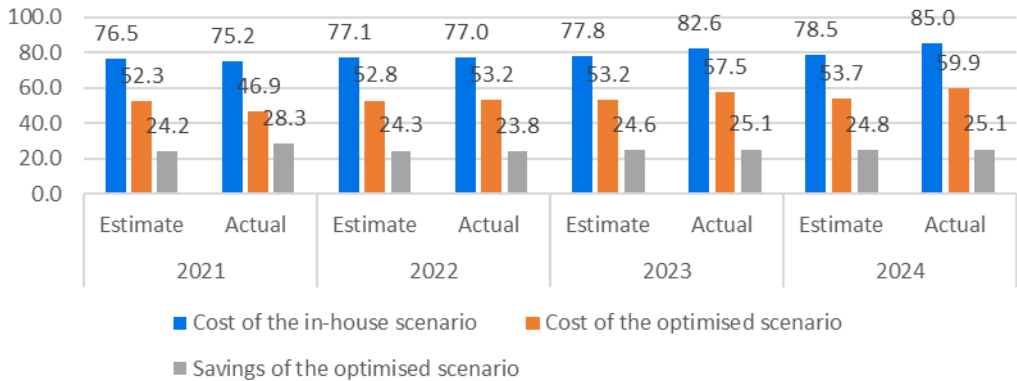
Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AWP.

The analysis of annual actual vs. estimated costs and savings from 2021 to 2024 reveals a clear distinction between the in-house and optimised scenarios, underscoring the efficiency of the latter.

The increase of actual costs of both the in-house and the optimised scenario over the evaluation period is rooted in the increase in actual average staff costs in later years, 2023 and 2024. The analysis of the cost drivers indicated that the increase in average costs is driven more by Title I

than Title II (i.e. rather staff expenditure than expenditure for building and infrastructure): As presented in Table 6 in the Annex 1.2.1, Title I per FTE increased und Title II decreased across the evaluation period, which reflects that average administrative cost per staff member has increased, due to salary progression and the high inflation figures during the period.

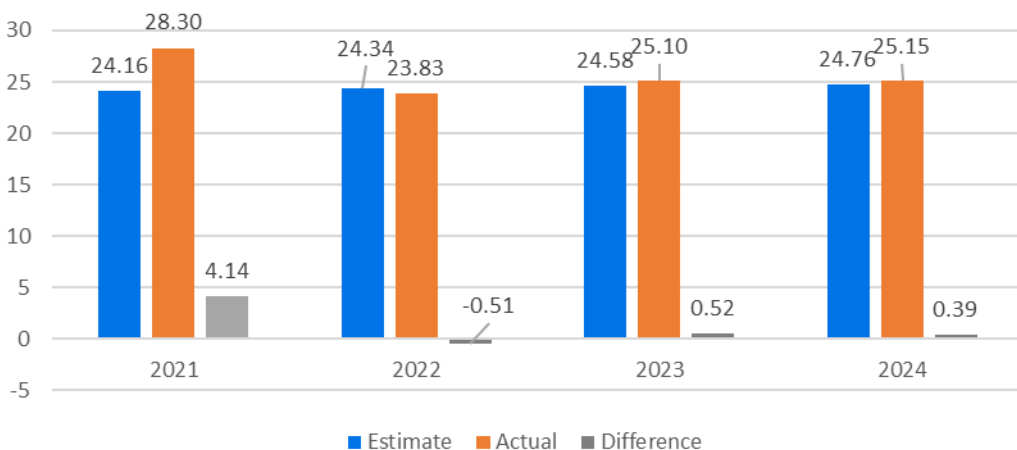
Figure 12: Estimated vs. actual costs and savings of the executive Agency scenario per year for 2021-2024, million EUR



Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AWP.

Examining the annual savings of the optimised vs. the in-house scenario (i.e. looking only at the grey bars from the figure above but now comparing estimated and actual savings), as shown in the figure below, indicates that the optimised scenario, in comparison to the in-house scenario, delivered higher-than-estimated savings. While the largest deviation between estimate and actual savings was evident in 2021 (4.14 million EUR), there were slight negative savings of 0.51 million EUR in 2022. The deviation between estimate and actual savings may be a result of the low occupancy and high turnover rate experienced in 2021 due partly to the difficulties in the hiring process due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 13: Estimated vs. actual savings of the optimised vs. the in-house scenario for 2021-2024, million EUR



Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AWP.

Further data and analysis are provided in the Annex in section 1.2.2 to 1.2.4.

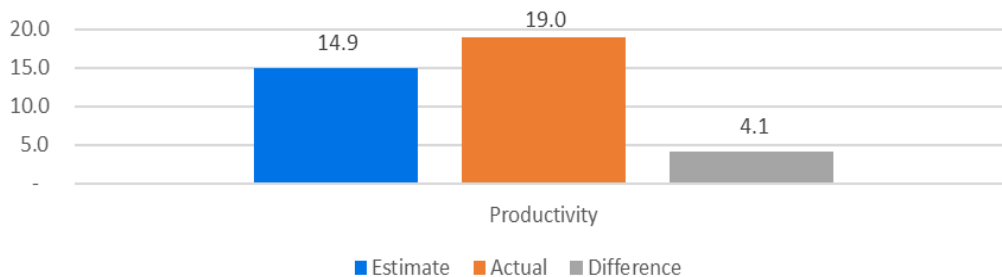
Productivity

The productivity of the EA is calculated by dividing the commitment appropriations (in million Euro) by the number of FTE managing them. This means that the higher the budget managed per FTE, the more productive the EA overall is.

$$\text{Productivity} = \text{Commitment appropriations (in million EUR)} / \text{FTEs}$$

The actual productivity indicator exceeds the estimate (+4.1 million Euro/FTE).¹⁵⁶

Figure 14: Estimated vs. actual productivity of the optimised scenario for 2021-2024



Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AAR.

As can be seen in the Table 10 in the Annex 1.2.2, the actual commitment appropriations in the evaluation period (2021-2024) were 27% higher than estimated, while the actual FTE numbers were almost identical to the estimates in 2024. As a result, the productivity indicator, measured as commitment appropriations per FTE, mirrored the trends in commitment appropriations.

The consistent FTE levels combined with higher-than-estimated productivity value highlight that ERCEA has successfully optimised its operations, achieving higher financial outputs without increasing staffing.

The Annex, section 1.2.2 presents the analysis of the productivity indicator in the estimated **optimised** scenario and the actual optimised scenario.

4.4.3. Analysis of workload assessment

ERCEA's operational structure is designed to support its mandate effectively, with a clear focus on managing the Horizon Europe programme. The Agency has established a systematic approach to workload assessment, which has undergone significant changes in recent years. The introduction in 2024 of a new, centralised workload methodology developed in collaboration with an external provider has improved the consistency and accuracy of staffing needs assessments across departments. This methodology allows for better forecasting of workloads and more effective allocation of resources, leading to increased operational efficiency.

During 2021, the Agency dealt with an expected extra workload due to the factors listed in the effectiveness section (see section 4.1.1). Notably, the Agency staff noted that they had continued evaluating proposals submitted by Switzerland and UK-based applicants, representing approximately 15% of the total evaluated proposals, while the Agency was not yet reinforced with additional staff.

¹⁵⁶ In agreement with the Commission, no productivity indicators are provided on an annual basis as this would improperly reflect the nature of programme management. For some programmes, the workload was frontloaded by the EA, whereas for others the workload was delayed. However, in both cases over the entire evaluation period, the productivity would be remain the same.

Prior to 2024, the workload methodology was inconsistent across departments with each department calculating staffing needs differently.¹⁵⁷ The ERCEA therefore commissioned an external provider to develop a new centralised methodology to help inform and support the workload analysis and planning activities in the Agency.

The result was a methodology as well as a report which provided a comprehensive overview of the current and projected staffing needs at the levels of each unit in the Agency based on the 2024 estimated workload indicators.

The new workload methodology involves forecasting expected workloads and calculating the necessary Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) based on 71 identified activities. Each activity is assigned a specific workload indicator, such as the number of panels, proposals, requests, and processed payments.

Employees participated in a survey to identify their primary activities and the time spent on each, selecting up to ten activities. This data informs a structured, annual workload assessment methodology consisting of three calculation steps:

1. **Average Profile Calculation:** Time allocations from the survey are converted into full-time equivalent (FTE) values, creating detailed profiles for each unit.
2. **Workload Evolution Analysis:** Changes in workload per activity and unit are assessed using the defined indicators.
3. **FTE Adjustment Calculation:** Percentage changes from the previous step are applied to the average profiles to determine expected FTE increases or decreases, aggregated at the department and agency level.

Results are compiled in a custom Excel dashboard, supporting annual staffing allocations and strategic discussions with management. An ex-post analysis is conducted yearly to compare projected workloads with actual workloads, aiding continuous improvement.

The workload methodology has evolved significantly moving from a decentralised and inconsistent approach to a centralised, transparent system in 2024. Data sources include staff surveys, HR statistics, workload indicators, job descriptions, management interviews, and benchmarking with other agencies.

Results on workload as of 2025 showed a 3% decrease in reported workload and an 89% overtime recuperation rate, enhancing work-life balance.

The workload assessment methodology was used to decide on the staff allocation for the year 2025, indicating where reinforcement of the teams needed to happen. Staffing allocation aligns with the annual workload assessment, treating operational and support functions equally, although operational units typically receive the majority of positions. However, the reliance on Excel for workload assessments and the absence of dedicated tools for tracking workload data limit transparency and efficiency.

The workload associated with managing the Horizon Europe programme is substantial. The main workload drivers for ERCEA can be categorised into several key factors that significantly influence the volume and complexity of tasks undertaken by the Agency. These drivers include:

- **Volume of applications:** Annually, ERCEA receives between 9,000 to 10,000 proposals, but can only fund around 1,000. This creates a substantial workload for staff involved in the evaluation and selection processes, necessitating rigorous assessments and follow-ups.
- **Administrative requirements related to actual cost payment structure:** The administrative demands associated with the chosen payment structure, primarily based on actual costs for most of calls except Advanced Grants (from 2024) and Proof of

¹⁵⁷ Workload assessment methodology interview and the deep dive interviews on Horizon Europe Pillar 1: Open Science: European Research Council conducted as part of Cost Benefit Analysis.

Concept, require thorough documentation and reporting even if it was simplified by the agency. This can be time-consuming and is part of the workload of staff involved in grant management and financial oversight.

- **New strategic initiatives and external factors:** ERCEA is also influenced by strategic initiatives and external factors, such as changes in EU policies, COVID-19 pandemic or Brexit, which can introduce additional responsibilities and workload.

The following table briefly highlights the merits and disadvantages of the workload assessment methodology applied.

Payment structure within Horizon Europe

The primary payment structure utilised within Horizon Europe is an actual cost-based model. This approach requires beneficiaries to submit detailed invoices and financial statements, which ERCEA meticulously analyse before disbursing funds. While this method is labour intensive, it allows for precise financial oversight, particularly for complex research projects that necessitate careful monitoring of expenditures.

Based on the decision by the Scientific Council via the ERC Work Programme, the lump-sum funding model was introduced for certain initiatives (PoC grants, 2024 Adv grant call) for which the ERCEA will simplify administrative processes.

According to the Commission, the implementation of lump sum for 2024 Adv grant call was smooth and well received by applicants so far.

The evaluation of lump sum implementation would fall under the next evaluation period, which would show its impact on workload.

Table 14: Merits and disadvantages of the workload assessment methodology applied

Merits	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Method provides a comprehensive overview of the current and projected staffing needs at the levels of each unit in the Agency • Has significantly improved the consistency and accuracy of staffing needs assessments according to the Agency itself • Comprehensive method based on 71 identified activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliance on Excel for workload assessments • Lack of systematic tracking of time spent on activities

Source: Authors elaboration.

5. Conclusions and lessons learned

The triangulation of the evidence collected indicates that during the period 2021-2024 the ERCEA continued to deliver substantial value to the European Commission and its stakeholders. Evaluated against the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence, the ERCEA has achieved its operational objectives while maintaining high standards of performance, with the retrospective CBA confirming higher aggregated actual savings of the optimised scenario compared to the in-house scenario.

Conclusions

Effectiveness

The ERCEA has overall performed effectively in delivering the parts of its delegated EU programme. Across the 2021-2024, the ERCEA consistently demonstrated high operational and financial performance. The Agency consistently met its KPIs with one recent exception related to redress cases for 2023 calls where the average was 1.38% exceeding the 1.3% threshold. Operational effectiveness was also showcased by the full call implementation, evaluation and grant finalisation within target timelines.

The agency successfully managed a growing project portfolio, maintained low error rates, and ensured timely payments, all while maintaining the satisfaction of beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and external experts. Survey results show high satisfaction among beneficiaries (94% of PIs, and 96% HIs of PIs), unsuccessful applicants (62% of them, and 72% of their HIs), and external experts (98%).

The ERCEA's singular focus on the ERC also fostered deep institutional specialisation and procedural excellence across the grant lifecycle. However, several challenges also affected the Agency's operations, such as workload peaks resulted from the overlap of calls (StG and CoG) in 2021, as well as administrative complexities linked to Brexit, COVID-19-related grant amendments, and increase of applications.

The Agency demonstrated strong compliance with its legal framework, while a governance-related irregularity was identified by the European Court of Auditors during the evaluation period. This concerned misalignment between the Steering Committee's Rules of Procedure and Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003, particularly the decision-making provision. In response, the Steering Committee rule were revised in June 2025, fully addressing the ECA's concerns.

The ERCEA has also established a robust internal control framework; and has consistently addressed audit recommendations excepting one related to communication with stakeholders via the tool PPGMS. The latter is partly implemented by uploading systematically the first and last email of contact with the PI in PPGMS to keep a communication record.

The ERCEA maintained a growing media outreach, with a significant increase in the number of followers across their social media channels. During the evaluation period, the Agency also organised successful events which attracted high levels of participation. Beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants also showed overall high awareness levels on the funding opportunities that ERCEA provides.

The Agency fulfilled its formal reporting requirements as defined in legal frameworks and Memoranda of Understanding by providing Annual Activity Reports, Annual Work Programmes, and providing information in Steering Committee meetings. Despite full compliance with formal reporting requirements, the evaluation identified areas for improvement in the timeliness, strategic depth, and structure of communication with the parent DG. Challenges related to the ERC Work Programme submission timeline suggest the need for streamlined and more structured approach to information exchange.

Efficiency

The ERCEA has demonstrated a strong performance in programme management, meeting key efficiency targets over the 2021-2024 period. The Agency maintained full budget execution rates for both operational and administrative expenditures and remained within acceptable cost-efficiency thresholds, including a stable programme management cost ratio consistently below the 3% benchmark.

ERCEA's focused mission, cumulative experience, and well-structured procedures were viewed by stakeholders as enabling factors for its efficiency. The 2021 restructuring of Department C was noted as a successful measure to improve workflow balance, business continuity, and staff versatility.

High levels of staff engagement and motivation have been identified as contributing factors to the Agency's performance, with ERCEA reporting some of the highest engagement scores among the executive agencies. This was complemented by the in-house technical expertise and knowledge developed over the years. Additionally, limited career development opportunities—common across executive agencies—emerged as an area of improvement. In this respect, it would be beneficial continuing efforts to enhance staff mobility, particularly by implementing and expanding the Inter-Agency HR Strategy 2023-2027 in collaboration with the other agencies and exploring additional internal mobility mechanisms within the existing legal framework to enhance career opportunities for its staff.

During the reference period, ERCEA implemented a range of targeted simplification measures—such as preparations for the introduction of lump sum in Advanced Grant call 2024, streamlining ethics reviews, embedding budget tools, reducing interim payments, and shifting eligibility checks to later stages—which collectively enhanced procedural efficiency, reduced administrative burden, and generated measurable resource savings.

The retrospective cost-benefit analysis confirms that the Executive Agency model has delivered substantial efficiency gains, with actual savings in the optimised scenario compared to the in-house scenario being 5% higher than the estimated savings. Productivity trends further reinforced the advantages of the optimised scenario, with actual productivity¹⁵⁸, calculated as budget managed per FTE, exceeding its estimate by 4.1 million Euro/FTE in the examined period (2021-2024).

The ERCEA's structure and internal resources were broadly fit for purpose, with a steadily increase in staffing levels during the evaluation period. Despite a high turnover rate in 2021 due to several factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Agency managed to considerably decrease it to a historical lowest turnover rate in 2024. Additionally, in 2024 the Agency contracted an external provider to develop a centralised methodology for workload assessment. According to Agency staff, the new model improved the consistency and accuracy of staffing needs across departments.

During the evaluation period, the ERCEA continued its efforts in promotion more sustainable practices, introducing several measures to reduce its environmental impact. The Agency managed to considerably reduce electricity, gas, water, and waste consumption, although waste generation increased over the period. Notably, CO₂ emissions were reduced by 58% during the evaluation period from 2.44 in 2021 to 1.03 in 2023. In addition, the ERCEA had a EMAS score equal to 10 out of 10 in 2024.

The Agency adopted several measures to strengthen its digital systems and cybersecurity framework. The ERCEA also stands out as one of the agencies with the most advanced use of IT tools for knowledge management and analytical work to support Business Intelligence practices. The ERCEA is closely collaborating with the IT department of the Common Implementation Centre to adapt corporate tools to ERC-specific needs. The ERCEA is also

¹⁵⁸ Figure 14

exploring further possibilities to digitalise its operational and administrative processes. In 2025, an AI expert was hired to join the IT unit.

Coherence

The ERCEA's programme portfolio is clear, coherent, and free of overlaps, gaps, or inconsistencies. As the sole implementing agency for the ERC under Horizon Europe, there are no overlaps or inconsistencies in the division of tasks with other agencies. The high degree of standardisation across grant types and the stability of the portfolio over the evaluation period have supported operational efficiency, flexibility, and consistent management practices.

The clear delineation of responsibilities between ERCEA, DG RTD, and the ERC Scientific Council has supported a balanced governance structure. While the formal framework is robust, some operational ambiguities occurred at the intersection between scientific strategy, its implementation and supervision and accountability, notably in the approval of the ERC Work Programme and the management of premises.

ERCEA's Feedback to Policy function was significantly strengthened during the evaluation period. The introduction of a dedicated F2P sector and annual planning contributed to a more systematic approach. Early outputs have informed EU-level initiatives, although further improvement is possible in coordinating and managing ad-hoc requests, and tracking policy uptake (e.g. through a pro-active approach of the Agency in systemically engaging with the parent DG to gather feedback on F2P outputs, to improve the overall process).

Retrospective Cost-Benefit Analysis

The retrospective cost-benefit analysis confirms that the executive agency model has delivered substantial efficiency gains, the actual savings of the optimised scenario compared to the in-house scenario (EUR 102.38 million) were 5% higher than the estimated savings (EUR 97.84 million). The differences in full-time equivalents (FTE) requirements between the optimized and status quo scenarios were minimal, the optimised scenario required 39.4 to 39.7 fewer FTEs annually compared to the in-house scenario.

Lessons learned

The below list of lessons learned was identified from the evaluation of the Agency's operation in 2021-2024 period:

- The organisation of high-profile public events proved to be very successful. Continuing the efforts in the organisation of such events could help to showcase how ERC supports frontier research. In doing so, the growing media outreach of the European Research Council's social media channels could be further leveraged to promote EU values.
- A framework to enhance the exchange with parent DG could be beneficial for strengthening the strategic depth of information provided and anticipating matters of interest. In particular, the transmission of relevant data and documentation for the adoption of the ERC Work Programme could be integrated into a clear procedural framework. It is worth considering developing a more systematic and structured approach (e.g. clearly defined deadlines, differentiated types of deliverables) to ensure that the process is both predictable and responsive to the parent DG's information needs, as well as aligned with the timelines of the relevant decision-making and EU budgetary processes.
- The ERCEA provides data on key performance indicators to the parent DG mainly through the Steering Committee meetings and the Annual Activity Reports. To ensure that the parent DG has a continuous access to a well-defined but limited set of indicators to monitor the Agency's operations and identify any potential deviations or issues, efforts could be continued in the development of a dashboard providing access

to key indicators. This would contribute both to consistently informing parent DGs on Agency's performance and ease the reporting burden from the ERCEA, particularly ahead of the StC meetings.

- It could be beneficial to strengthen and streamline both formal and informal communication channels between the Commission, the ERC Scientific Council, and the Agency to help ensure that all parties remain aligned, while respecting their respective roles and responsibilities as defined in the legal framework.
- During the evaluation period, there were several instances of good collaboration between the Agency and the IT department of the Common Implementation Centre to explore possibilities to tailor corporate IT tools, when duly justified. It could be beneficial to continue such close collaboration, as well as to seek cooperation with the IT units of other agencies, in order to strengthen the sharing of IT best practices (e.g. in knowledge management and business intelligence) and to explore the use of AI-supported tools to enhance digital efficiency.
- Considering the foreseen increase of F2P activities and the workload concerns raised during interviews, it would be useful to monitor the actual evolution of F2P activities, assess the related workload and explore opportunities to further streamline ERCEA's Feedback to Policy (F2P) processes to enhance efficiency, by: (i) strengthening project data screening through a more formalised structure for collecting and reporting inputs to the F2P programme; and (ii) enhancing DGs and inter-agency cooperation on F2P-related information requests by promoting exchange of practices, improving coordination on similar demands, and identifying potential for shared analytical approaches, particularly in view of increasing complexity and volume of requests.
- Although ERCEA gets feedback on F2P activities from parent DG in the Steering committee meeting, it could be beneficial to explore ways to systematically engage with parent DG at operational level to gather structured feedback on the usefulness of F2P outputs and better understand evolving needs— possibly building on recent initiatives by other EU executive agencies that have introduced ad-hoc surveys and feedback mechanisms for this purpose.

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According to Article 25 of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003 laying down the statute for executive agencies, an external evaluation on the operation of each agency must be carried out every three years. This Report presents the findings of the external evaluation of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) during 2021-2024, which assessed the operation of the Agency and its performance results (in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and coherence). A comprehensive methodology was deployed during the evaluation, consisting of extensive desk research, various stakeholder consultation activities, and a cost-benefit analysis.

During the period of evaluation ERCEA effectively fulfilled its mission and objectives. The delimitation of responsibilities and tasks between ERCEA and DG RTD is clear and appropriate, and the current model and delegation of tasks ensure effective management of the programme and the highest quality services to the stakeholders. The Agency was both effective and efficient in terms of producing the intended outputs and achieving its KPIs, which resulted in high stakeholder satisfaction. Furthermore, the delegation enabled the Commission to better focus on its primary policy-making tasks and enables cost savings.

Studies and reports

