

Study supporting the evaluation of the EU Executive Agencies

European Research Executive Agency (REA)

Independent Expert Report



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Study supporting the evaluation of European Research Executive Agency (REA)

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Study supporting the evaluation of the EU Executive Agencies

European Research Executive Agency (REA)



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List of Abbreviations

ABAC – Accrual Based Accounting System
AWP – annual work programme
CA – contract agent
CBA – cost-benefit analysis
CVS – Central Validation Service
DG – Directorate-General
DG AGRI - Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
DG BUDG – Directorate-General for Budget
DG EAC - Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
DG ENV - Directorate-General for Environment
DG HR – Directorate-General for Human Resources and Security
DG RTD – Directorate-General for Research and Innovation
EA – Executive Agency
EASME – Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
ECA – European Court of Auditors
EU – European Union
EUIBAs – EU institutions bodies and agencies
FCA – Financial capacity assessment
FTE – full-time equivalent
GEP – Gender Equality Plan
HE – Horizon Europe
HR – human resources
IAS – Internal Audit Service
ICP – internal control principle
INEA – Innovation and Networks Executive Agency
KPI – key performance indicator
MFF – multiannual financial framework
MoU – Memorandum of Understanding
MSCA – Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
MSCA PF – MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships
NCP – National Contact Points
OCA – Ownership Control Assessment
PPPA – Pilot Project and Preparatory Action
PF – Postdoctoral Fellowships
PSA – Programme Support Actions
REA – European Research Executive Agency
RFCS – Research Fund for Coal and Steel
SEDIA – Single Electronic Data Interchange Area
SEWP – Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation
SFS – Specific Financial Statement
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 Executive Agency (REA) for the period 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 REA's effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence in managing the programmes delegated by its parent Directorates-General (DG).

The evaluation was conducted using a mixed-method approach designed to provide a comprehensive and balanced assessment of the Agency's operations. The methodology combined both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. 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 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, REA staff, beneficiaries, 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

REA is the largest of the six executive agencies, with a broad mandate. The Agency is focused on the domain of research activities, covering a wide range of fields and supporting both fundamental and applied research. In addition to managing well-defined Horizon Europe (HE) programme parts, it also oversees the Research Fund for Coal and Steel (RFCS) and the Agricultural Promotion Measures (AGRIP). In addition, REA is managing corporate support services for call planning and centralised participant validation covering all direct management operations of the Commission as a whole. It is also offering evaluation support to all EUIBAs implementing Horizon Europe through the research enquiry service (one stop-shop for participants and experts) and centralised contracting and paying of expert evaluators.

Effectiveness

Objectives and delivery

The evaluation shows that REA effectively delivers on the implementation of delegated programmes and activities, showing good scores across all key performance indicators. Beneficiaries, applicants and experts are generally positive about REA. The transition towards HE was challenging due to its delayed launch and the introduction of new criteria and requirements. This was well managed but resulted in significant implementation pressure. The programmes newly delegated to REA created some challenges (RFCS had no applicants for some of the calls in 2023; and AGRIP showed conflicts of interest between beneficiaries and their subcontractors).

Legal framework

REA's mandate has been very stable over the years, supported by constant operational and procedural optimisation. REA operates within the given mandate.

Internal Control

REA's internal control system is fully aligned with the Commission's common control strategy, the corporate Horizon Europe control strategy, and Internal Control Framework, with all components functioning effectively, no major deficiencies, and continuous improvements through strong RMIC oversight, and high staff awareness of internal control and anti-fraud principles.

REA demonstrates sound financial management and reliable risk control aligned with programme-specific approaches, notably through active collaboration with the CIC and DGs during the Horizon 2020–Horizon Europe transition, strengthened ex-ante checks, use of simplified cost options, and a residual error rate largely below 2%, confirming overall assurance of effectiveness.

REA proactively addresses AGRIP-related risks (conflicts of interest, subcontracting, and elevated error rate) through reinforced controls and corrective actions, while maintaining effective anti-fraud and data protection frameworks fully in line with EU standards.

Communication

REA's communication efforts have been largely successful in supporting its mission. Branding is mainly at programme level, but the visibility of the EU as the funder of the programmes it manages is enhanced. The division of responsibilities between REA and the EC is less clear, but also less relevant as stakeholders know the programmes and are satisfied with the communication by REA.

Reporting to parent DGs

Reporting to parent DGs is fully aligned with the legal and supervisory requirements set out in the applicable regulations and the four MoUs signed with its parent Directorates-General. REA's reporting system functions effectively, with parent DGs expressing satisfaction with the quality, structure, and timeliness of REA's reporting.

Efficiency

Programme management

Between 2021 and 2024, REA demonstrated growing operational efficiency across key indicators. For instance, the operational budget grew substantially, yet this trend is not followed by the number of staff. Beneficiaries and experts generally confirm that REA delivers effective and efficient work regarding various processes, including the grant agreement preparation and contract finalisation phase. REA's efficiency is supported by structured evaluation processes, a strong applicant-oriented approach, and growing digitalisation that reduces administrative workload. At the same time, efficiency is constrained by recurring peak workloads, and the temporary increase in workload linked to new funding models such as lump sums. New IT tools and the need for continuous adaptation also add pressure. Beneficiaries emphasised the importance of further simplification, harmonised rules, and improved IT usability.

Fit for purpose

REA's organisational size and staffing structure are well calibrated to its mandate and workload. The agency has a lean and delivery-focused organisational structure, with relatively few administrative staff as opposed to operational staff. In addition, REA maintained a high

occupation rate and level of staff engagement. A point of attention is the low level of confidence that the staff expresses in their professional future.

Environmental impact

REA continued its attempts to reduce its environmental impact. This includes reducing its energy consumption in REA premises, limiting travel of both experts and staff and opting for more sustainable travel. REA had a EMAS score equal to 10 out of 10 in 2024 and earned recognition for its sustainable events and processes.

Digitalisation

Overall, REA achieved a high level of digital maturity, though greater flexibility in tailoring corporate tools and expanding automation could further enhance future performance. REA is at the forefront of integrating new tools and systems and closely collaborates with CIC to continuously improve IT systems. REA also actively explores opportunities for improvements and mitigating risks related to AI. The Agency performed well in the cyber readiness assessments by DG DIGIT, although cybersecurity incidents were much more frequent in 2024 than in the years before.

Coherence

Coherence of the Programme Portfolio

The REA portfolio is largely coherent, with no systemic overlaps or gaps documented and several examples of proactive alignment (e.g., REA–EACEA collaborations, joint teams under the Feedback-to-Policy framework). Isolated overlaps/inconsistencies persist in steel-related topics (RFCS vs. Clean Steel Partnership), creating applicant confusion and fragmented follow-up. Overall, coherence issues are handled mainly via informal mechanisms (staff exchanges, ad-hoc meetings); formal monitoring is limited.

Division of Tasks between the Agency and the Parent DG

The delimitation of responsibilities between REA and parent DGs is predominantly clear and appropriate, supported by robust legal/operational instruments and active oversight; where temporary blurring occurs, mainly in policy-intensive actions (CSAs, Missions, F2P), it is addressed through MoUs, joint teams, and regular coordination.

Feedback to Policy

The Feedback to Policy (F2P) mechanism has been improved, moving towards a more strategic and structured approach. Although considered best practice, there is room for improvement in the operational mechanisms adopted to integrate emerging or evolving policy needs and to maintain the value of this exercise while, on one hand ensuring it fully meets the needs of policy makers, and on the other hand make full use of the available resources.

1. Introduction

This document presents the Final report of the study supporting the evaluation of the European Research Executive Agency (REA). This evaluation support study is 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).

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 and the state of play;
- Section 3 provides the evaluation findings;
- Section 4 presents the conclusions and the recommendations of the study.

This external evaluation assesses the operations of REA 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 the extent to which REA has achieved its operational objectives, the efficiency with which it has used resources, and the alignment of its activities with institutional goals. It also evaluates the Agency's interaction with its parent Directorates-General 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, taking into account the legal framework, the internal control framework, and its communication and reporting to parent Directorates-Generals (DGs).
- **Efficiency:** assessing whether the Agency has fulfilled its tasks efficiently (including coverage of actions taken to address environmental impact and promote digitalisation).
- **Coherence:** assessing whether there are overlaps, gaps, or inconsistencies in the management of the programme portfolio - covering both internal and external coherence; and whether there is a clear delimitation of tasks between REA and its parent DGs and information exchange on feedback to policy.

The evaluation was guided by the evaluation questions set out in the tender specifications. A retrospective cost-benefit analysis, undertaken as part of the study, examined whether the efficiency gains expected from delegating tasks to the Agency, compared to in-house management, were achieved, as projected in the 2021 ex-ante analysis and related financial statements. This evaluation is part of a broader assessment of the six executive agencies of the European Commission (EC), conducted in a coordinated manner using a common evaluation methodology.

To answer the evaluation questions, the study applied a mixed-method, theory-based approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques to assess REA. The methods included desk reviews, analysis of monitoring data, surveys of applicants, beneficiaries, and experts, a cost-benefit analysis, and interviews with REA's main stakeholders and REA Staff.

Document review and analysis of monitoring data

The document review aimed to systematically, qualitatively and quantitatively analyse documents related to REA's operations in order to address the evaluation questions. It also informed the stakeholder consultation. The evaluation team reviewed publicly available sources and, in cooperation with DG RTD and REA, accessed additional internal documents and data. Extensive documentation was provided in several batches between February and July 2025. The team also compiled a list of internal indicators relevant to the analysis, based on monitoring data. A list of reviewed documents is provided in the Annex.

Surveys

Two online surveys were undertaken for the REA evaluation, one aimed at beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants, and one at external experts involved in REA's work. The surveys were deployed on EU Survey, launched on 9 April, and remained open for one month. The beneficiary/applicant survey received 1,649 responses (1,055 from beneficiaries and 594 from unsuccessful applicants). The expert survey received 989 responses. Both surveys were thoroughly analysed to retrieve insights and findings that informed the evaluation questions. Survey insights relevant to the overarching findings are used in this report, while a separate survey analysis presents the full results in the Annex.

Interviews

The purpose of the interview programme was to provide qualitative insights into the performance and operational strengths of and challenges for REA. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken across the following stakeholder groups: EC officials (staff from parent DGs, including interviews with DG RTD, AGRI, CNECT, HOME, ENV, EAC, BUDG and EMPL), REA staff, and external stakeholders including beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants, external experts, and National Contact Points (NCPs). 56 interviews were conducted. The Annex provides details on the interviews, the distribution of stakeholders, and stakeholder categories.

Cost benefit analysis and workload assessment

The retrospective CBA analysis aims to evaluate the extent to which the 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 compared ex-ante estimates (from the SFS/ex-ante CBA) with actual data (from the AWP) on full-time equivalents (FTEs), staff costs, and commitment appropriations, assessing the performance of the Agency under the "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 the Annex.

Strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation approach

The evaluation of REA was conducted in line with the European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines. It offers reliable evidence addressing the core evaluation criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence of the Agency's operations. The findings and conclusions are based on this evidence and focus on REA's processes, management practices, and operational performance. For each evaluation criterion and question, indicators, assessment parameters, information sources, and methods were defined. This structured approach guided the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling triangulation and ensuring a balanced mix of evidence to answer the evaluation questions. Overall, the evaluation is grounded in solid evidence from quality data sources. However, challenges impacted the results:

- Although the survey ultimately received a significant number of responses for the analysis, during its initial launch, the EU Survey platform experienced an overload, causing some participants to receive error messages when filling out the survey, which may have slightly reduced the overall response rate.

- Interview response rates varied across stakeholder groups; most stakeholder groups were highly engaged, while some, like the NCPs, had low or delayed responses and therefore a limited representativeness.
- Some interviewed external stakeholders had difficulties with distilling which of their involvements was inside or outside the evaluation period. Some pointed to events that were either before or after the evaluation cut-off date. This risk was mitigated by dedicating extra time in the introduction of the interview, stressing the scope of the evaluation.
- Administrative and monitoring data enabled a sound analysis, but challenges arose due to REA operating across programmes that were overlapping in time (e.g., Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe). The evaluation team addressed these differences by clearly identifying data sources.

2. Background of the measure

The European Research Executive Agency (REA) is the largest of the six executive agencies. The Agency is focused on the domain of research activities, covering a wide range of fields and supporting both fundamental and applied research. Its structure requires coordination across different research domains and funding mechanisms, balancing scientific objectives with policy-driven research priorities. During the 2021-2024 evaluation period, REA managed the following programmes or parts of programmes of the MFF 2021-2027 (and their predecessor programmes from the previous MFF):

- H2020/Horizon Europe – Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA)
- H2020/Horizon Europe – Research Infrastructures
- H2020/Horizon Europe – Culture, creativity and inclusive society (Cluster 2)
- H2020/Horizon Europe – Civil security for society (Cluster 3)
- H2020/Horizon Europe – Food, bioeconomy, natural Resources, agriculture and environment (Cluster 6). This cluster provides a major part of the financial contribution to the EU Mission ‘A Soil Deal for Europe’.
- H2020/Horizon Europe – Widening participation, spreading excellence
- H2020/Horizon Europe – Reforming and enhancing European R&I
- Research Fund for Coal and Steel (RFCS)
- Promotion of Agri-food Products (AGRIP)

REA is managing corporate support services for call planning and centralised participant validation (Participant identification, Financial Capacity Assessment (FCA) and Ownership Control Assessment (OCA)) covering all direct management and first level of indirect management operations of the Commission as a whole. It is also offering evaluation support to all EUIBAs implementing Horizon Europe through the research enquiry service (one stop-shop for participants and experts) and centralised contracting and paying of expert evaluators.

During the evaluation period, REA operated under the supervision of seven parent Directorates-General (DGs). In support of its parent DGs, REA provided feedback to policy, reporting, and communication support. The following DGs supervised REA: DG RTD, DG EAC, DG AGRI, DG CNECT, DG HOME, DG EMPL and DG ENV.

The intervention logic of REA is provided at the end of this section. The key inputs are human resources, financial resources, IT tools and communication channels. The main outputs of REA’s performance relate to the effective and cost-efficient management of the delegated

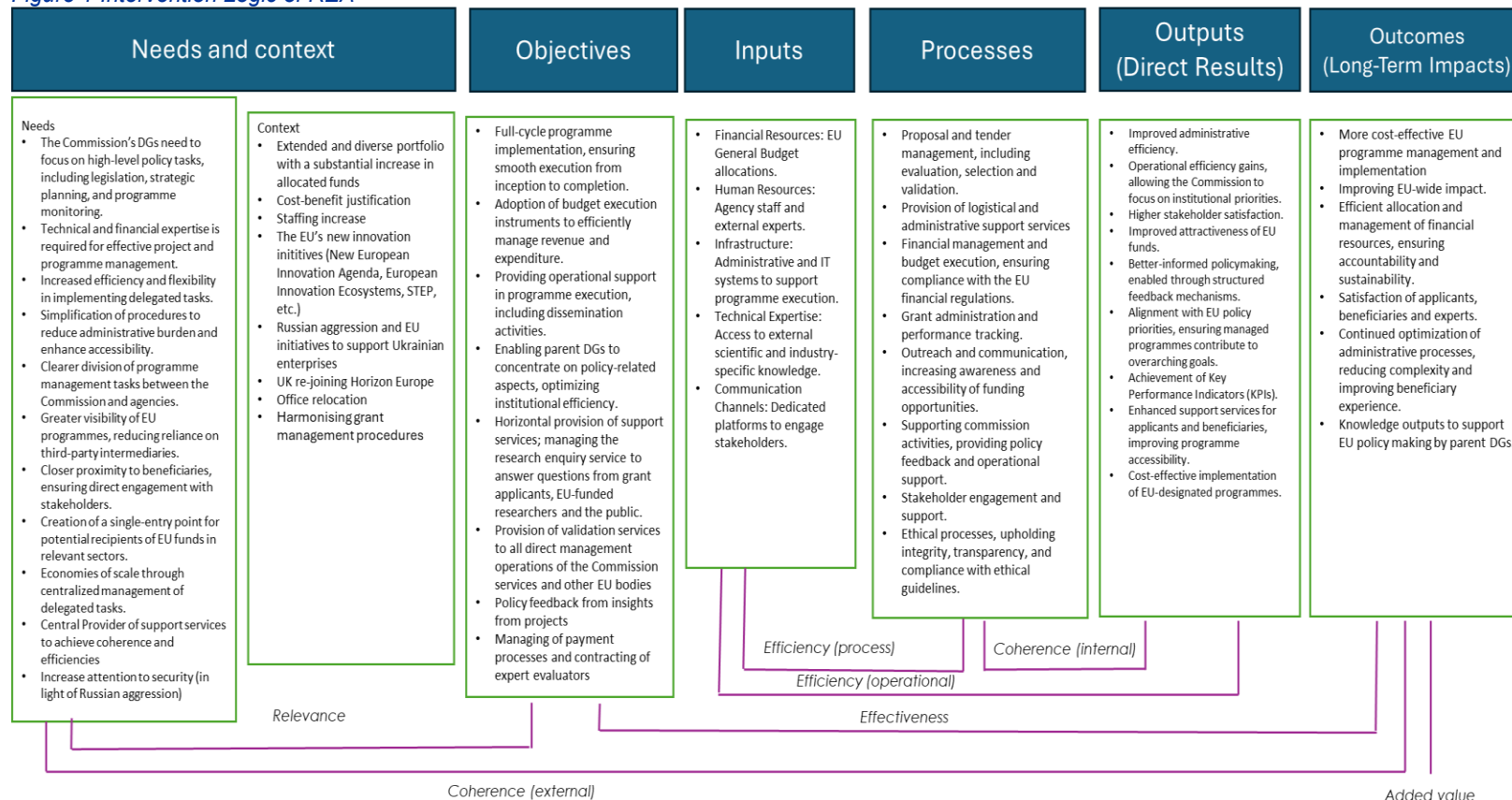
programmes – delivering on the expected volume and nature of actions. The achievement of the objectives depends on meeting key performance indicators. Feedback to policy-related outputs are also critical. Outcomes relate to the key results and impacts achieved during the evaluation period (medium- to long-term outcomes). A distinctive feature of REA's intervention logic is its role as a central provider of support services to achieve coherence and efficiencies.

To assess the implementation of EU programmes and the achievement of objectives (as per the intervention logic), key performance indicators, financial management indicators, project lifecycle metrics (e.g. number of calls, proposals, running projects), and communication reach indicators were used. Feedback to policy outputs were also considered. Satisfaction of unsuccessful applicants, beneficiaries, and experts with the Agency's performance was treated as an output and measured via surveys. Quantitative cost-benefit analysis results are also included in this evaluation.

This evaluation of REA's operations from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2024 assesses the actual costs and benefits of programme implementation by REA (executive agency scenario) compared with the alternative scenario of management by Commission departments (in-house scenario). Accordingly, the reference points for the current REA evaluation are the 2021 ex ante cost-benefit analysis and REA's specific financial statements.

The previous evaluation of REA, covering the period 2018–2021, presented generally positive findings regarding the Agency's efficiency, effectiveness, and coherence. It demonstrated actual savings exceeded expectations, being 34.6% higher than initial Specific Financial Statement (SFS) estimates and 38.8% higher than Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) estimates. The goals of REA were aligned with the broader policy goals of the parent DGs, and the Agency achieved its objectives effectively. The evaluation showed that communication between the Agency and Commission services was facilitated via well-functioning mechanisms. This allowed the Commission to focus on policy tasks. The Agency was effective and efficient in producing the intended outputs and in achieving its KPIs, which resulted in high levels of stakeholder satisfaction. Overall, there was a consensus that REA's work during the evaluation period was defined by its stability and efficiency. The Agency operated well within the legal framework, while remaining flexible in its response to changing circumstances due to COVID.

Figure 1 Intervention Logic of REA



Source: Consortium

3. State of Play

REA was first established by Commission Decision 2008/46/EC to implement parts of EU research and innovation programmes more efficiently. Its creation aimed to improve administrative execution, allowing the Commission to focus on policy and strategic oversight. REA took up operations in 2009. Its mandate was prolonged and widened in 2014, 2018 and again in early 2021. Through programme management and feedback to policy functions, REA contributes to the implementation of Commission priorities and objectives.

As from 2021, REA's responsibilities were revised and expanded, following changes set out in the 2021 implementation decision. Some programmes previously managed by REA were transferred to other agencies (e.g. the theme 'Space' was transferred to HADEA, and 'future and emerging technologies' was moved to EISMEA). In turn, REA got three more tasks:

- Management of the HE programme part (and its H2020 legacy) on Research Infrastructures, which was previously implemented by the Commission;
- Information provision and promotion measures concerning agricultural products (AGRIP), which was previously implemented by CHAFEA;
- Managing the Research Fund for Coal and Steel, which was previously implemented by the Commission.

Moreover, the scope of its call planning services (now covering all direct management grant programmes operating of the Commission) and its participant validation service was extended, covering more clients and new activities (e.g. ownership and control assessments to support the implementation of restricted calls to safeguard the EU's technological sovereignty).

In 2021, REA launched its third mandate (based on the 2021 implementation decision), introducing organisational changes to align with the Horizon Europe programme. The transition was smooth, with the portfolio redistributed across agencies and additional delegations introduced; 75% of REA's grant portfolio that year consisted of MSCA projects..

Throughout the evaluation period 2021–2024, several significant developments took place. The late adoption of the new MFF and consequent late start of Horizon Europe, together with Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the late or non-association of several countries to HE, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented peak in all activities of the Agency in 2022, which created a high load on structures and staff.

During the evaluation period, the Feedback to Policy (F2P) mechanisms were restructured to better inform and support EC policymaking.

In 2023, the programme shifted focus toward a more sustainable, inclusive, and secure future, with increased efforts to support Ukrainian organisations, scientists, and researchers. Furthermore, measures had to be implemented related to safeguarding the rule of law applied to specific Hungarian entities¹.

Between 2021 and 2023, the number of proposals evaluated remained relatively stable, averaging around 12,000 proposals per year. In 2024, there was a significant increase, with over 15,000 proposals evaluated. In parallel, the number of grants signed, and the corresponding budget amounts, evolved over the same period. In 2021, 2,081 grants were signed, with a total value of €2.4 billion. This increased to 2,371 grants in 2022, with a total value of €2.8 billion. In 2023, the number of grants slightly decreased to 2,105, while the total value amounted to €2.7 billion. In 2024, 2,244 grants were signed with a total value of €3.2 billion,

¹ REA mid-year report 2023.

showing a consistent growth in total value of the grants signed while maintaining a similar volume of signed grants.

4. Evaluation findings

This section represents a core component of the evaluation, examining the effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence of REA'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?

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: REA has achieved most of its objectives related to programme implementation.

At the start of the mandate three new programmes were assigned to REA (AGRIP, RFCCS and RI) which were successfully integrated in the portfolio.

Almost all KPIs have been achieved every year. There were some incidental timing issues that were resolved quickly (time to grant 2022; net time to pay experts 2021 and net time to validate participants 2023), as well as a too high residual multi-annual error rate identified at ex-post control (%) for RCFS in 2021. There were some more issues with the execution of AGRIP where too few projects reached their objectives in 2022, 2023, 2024, and where the residual multi-annual error rate was too high in 2024. Beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and experts all are generally satisfied with the quality of the services provided by the Agency, although 20% of respondents is of the opinion that the decision making could be more transparent, and a relevant part also thinks that the redress procedure could be improved.

The Central Validation Service within REA has increased in scope over the evaluation period. It serves the whole European Commission, executive agencies and other European bodies with the validation of legal entities and their bank accounts, with the financial capacity assessments and, in certain cases, Ownership and Control Assessments.

REA also supports operational units within REA and other Executive Agencies in the management of experts for proposal evaluations. Its role is to ensure smooth, timely, and compliant contracting and payment of experts. This process is carried out in an efficient and compliant manner, with no systemic errors, and to the satisfaction of experts and agencies.

REA is responsible for managing and implementing key parts of programmes and tasks:

- The Agency implements seven parts of Horizon Europe (HE) (MSCA, Research Infrastructures, Cluster 2, 3 and 6, Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation

(SEWP), Reforming and enhancing the European R&I system), as well as the Research Fund for Coal and Steel (RFCS) and the Agricultural Promotion Measures (AGRIP).

- In addition, the Agency also manages the respective legacy parts.
- REA was fully involved in the preparatory activities and launch of the EU Mission “A Soil Deal for Europe”.
- REA provides administrative and logistical support services to EU bodies implementing HE and other programmes, such as planning and support for publications of calls, logistical support for the evaluations, and contracting and payment of independent expert evaluators.
- Through the Central Validation Service (CVS), REA is responsible for the validation of legal entities, assessment of third-country control over participants of specific programmes (Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, European Defence Industrial Development Programme and EU Defence Fund), and the assessment of the financial capacity of applicants. The CVS case study is presented in the annex.
- Finally, through the Research Enquiry Service, REA answers questions from participants for all programmes under SEDIA and coordinates the thematic helpdesks dealing with general enquiries from citizens on EU research and innovation funding.²

REA's portfolio mainly consists of grants, with a limited number of procurement procedures (mostly as part of AGRIP). In budgetary terms, Horizon Europe accounts for more than 93% of the operational budget managed by REA, in which MSCA (29%) and Cluster 6 on Food, bioeconomy, natural resources, agriculture and environment (32%) are the largest initiatives. The number of grants managed is relatively large, which is strongly driven by MSCA (e.g. in 2021 75% of all grants managed by REA)³.

The start of the mandate in 2021 was not without its challenges⁴, primarily because three new activities were delegated to REA. The AGRIP programme, along with its managing staff, was transferred from the now dissolved CHAFEA agency in Luxembourg. The RFCS programme, including some staff previously responsible for its implementation, was moved from DG RTD. Likewise, the Research Infrastructures (RI) activities were also transferred from RTD. In addition, REA received part of the Horizon 2020 Societal Challenge 5 which was transferred from EASME. The integration of the new actions faced operational challenges and differences in working cultures and structures between Executive Agencies. Overall, the start of the mandate in 2021 was viewed as “smooth”, with REA leadership attributing this to strong preparations.

In managing the programmes and actions that have been delegated to the Agency, REA's main objectives are the full implementation of the operational budget; the timely signature of grants; reaching project objectives; a low number of upheld complaints on proposal evaluation results; and sound financial management. As shown Table 1 below and reported in the Annual Activity Reports (AAR) over the years, REA was able to deliver on all key indicators, often meeting or surpassing its targets⁵. **Budget execution (KPI 1)** remained consistently at 100% during all four years, indicating effective financial planning and implementation. REA launched calls for proposals according to agreed deadlines. In 2021, due to delays with the start of Horizon Europe, calls were launched later in the year and were less spread out, leading to higher workload peaks and bottlenecks in the grant preparation and signature processes in 2022. Similarly, **time-to-pay for expert payments (KPI 5.1)** consistently approached or reached 100% compliance with contractual deadlines, reflecting robust financial management. REA also performed well on **time-to-grant (KPI 2)**, consistently finalising grant agreements on average

² REA Annual Work Programme (AWP) 2024. Annex.

³ REA Annual Activity Report 2021.

⁴ REA mid-year report 2021.

⁵ REA Annual Activity Reports 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024.

around 30 days ahead of the target deadline. Although 2022 showed a temporary drop- with only 69% of grants signed within the target timeframe and an average of 240 days, largely due to the late launch of Horizon Europe and peak workload in MSCA due to overlapping evaluations of the two large schemes (doctoral networks and postdoctoral fellowships) — the Agency rebounded in subsequent years. By 2024, 97.5% of grants were signed on time, with the average time reduced to 211 days, well within the targets.

Project effectiveness (KPI 3.1) was consistently strong for Horizon 2020 and RFCS, with over 94% and 100% of projects respectively meeting or exceeding objectives throughout the period. AGRIP, however, underperformed relative to the 90% target, with achievement rates falling from 95% in 2021 to 75% in 2024 attributed to persistent challenges in that programme’s implementation. **Upheld complaints on evaluation results (KPI 3.2)** remained low across all years, ranging from 0.23% to 0.46%, consistently staying below the maximum threshold of 0.5%, indicating a high level of satisfaction with the quality, fairness and transparency of evaluation processes. The increase in upheld complaints for proposals to calls in the 2023 work programmes was due to a higher number of complaints for the MSCA PF call: more applicants challenged their evaluation score because it fell short of the threshold set to obtain a Seal of Excellence or to allow resubmission of the proposals to subsequent calls. No material increase in challenges to funding decisions is reported.⁶

On risks for ineligible expenditure, measured through **ex-post controls (KPI 4)**, REA largely stayed within the defined error rate thresholds. However, deviations were observed for RFCS in 2021 (3.13%, which has decreased since) and for AGRIP in 2024 (2.31%), exceeding the <2% target for non-H2020 programmes. On **KPI 5.1**, REA consistently achieved ~100% of expert **payments within contractual deadlines** across all years, fully meeting the target and confirming timely financial operations. Finally, REA consistently exceeded the target for **participant validation (KPI 5.2)** in 2021 and 2022. There was a dip in 2023, when 93% were validated on time, just below the 95% target. This was largely due to the extension in 2023 of the scope of the KPI from only legal validations to include FCAs and OCAs and the high number of FCA and OCA requests received simultaneously as from June 2023. Performance improved again in 2024, reaching 97%.

Table 1 – KPI results 2021-2024

Name	2021	2022	2023	2024
KPI 1. Rate of execution of commitment and payment appropriations (%)	100%	100%	100%	100%
KPI 2. Time to grant (days) / % signed within target⁷	208 days on average/ 95% signed within target time ⁸	240 days on average/ 69% signed within target time, ⁹	221 days on average/ 96% signed within target time, ¹⁰	211 days on average /97.5% signed within target time, ¹¹

⁶ REA Annual Activity Report 2024, p.7.

⁷ Target time to grant: Sign within 245 (for HE) and within 276 days (AGRIP/RFCS)

⁸ REA annual report 2021. Page: 7 overview of indicators.

⁹ REA annual report 2022. Page: 8 overview of indicators. This result is disproportionately affected by the MSCA PF call. As a result of the late adoption of the 2021-2022 HE Work Programme the workload in the second half of 2022 was high, resulting in this shortfall on the target. This was exclusively due to the MSCA-postdoctoral fellowships call (for which deadlines were exceeded by a few days only). Excluding that call, 92.78% of the remaining grants were signed on time, and the overall average for all HE grants was 240 days, still below the 245-day target.

¹⁰ REA annual report 2023. Page: 8 overview of indicators. This result was 0% for RFCS.

¹¹ REA annual report 2024. Page: 7 overview of indicators. This result was considered good, even if slightly below target, due to the large number of grants.

KPI 3.1 Projects reaching all or most objectives (%) ¹²	H2020 94%; 95% AGRIP, 100% RFCS	H2020 94.2%; 79% AGRIP, 100% RFCS	H2020 95.2%; 78% AGRIP, 100% RFCS	H2020 96.2%; 75% AGRIP, 100% RFCS
KPI 3.2 Number of complaints on evaluation results (partially) upheld (%) ¹³	Calls 2020 0.31%	WP 2021 0.23%	WP 2022 0.30%	WP 2023 0.46%
KPI 4. Residual multi-annual error rate identified at ex-post control (%) ¹⁴	<2% for all programmes, except for RFCS (3.13%) ¹⁵	<2% for all programmes ¹⁶	<2% for all programmes ¹⁷	H2020 is within the target range of 2-5% (2.12%). For the other programmes, the error rate is <2%, except for AGRIP (2.31%) ¹⁸
KPI 5.1. Net time to pay experts (days) ¹⁹	99% timely payments	~100% timely payments	~100% timely payments	~100% timely payments
KPI 5.2. Net time to validate participants ²⁰	99% of participants validated on time	~100% of participants validated in time	93% of participants validated in time	97% of participants validated in time

Source: REA Annual Activity Reports & Annual Work Programmes 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024

There is a broad agreement that REA continues to deliver effectively on its core responsibilities related to project management. The Agency is described as structured and attentive to administrative procedures, with positive feedback on responsiveness to recurring coordination activities and meetings. The Agency has collaborative staff and maintains operational reliability, particularly in tasks like grant preparation, monitoring, and follow-up procedures.

Other output indicators show that REA consistently demonstrated **strong operational delivery across the period**. The number of calls launched, and their total value increased steadily, reaching 54 calls worth €3.5 billion in 2024. Importantly, the share of calls' value launched compared to the total financial resources delegated to the Agency remained consistently high, ranging from 96% in 2021 to 97% in 2022–2024. REA reliably launched nearly all of its planned call value each year.

In terms of proposal volume, the Agency evaluated a growing number of proposals that were evaluated, with a notable spike in 2024 (15,384 proposals) compared to 2023 (12,130),

¹² Target of projects reaching all or most objectives (%): 90%.

¹³ Target number of complaints on evaluation results (partially) upheld: maximum 0.5%.

¹⁴ Target residual multiannual error rate: for 2021 and 2022: H2020: between 2% and 5% (specific target for MSCA: below 2%), other programmes: below 2%; for 2023 and 2024 H2020: between 2% and 5%, other programmes: below 2%.

¹⁵ REA annual report 2021. Page: 9 overview of indicators.

¹⁶ REA annual report 2022. Page: 9 overview of indicators.

¹⁷ REA annual report 2023. Page: 9 overview of indicators.

¹⁸ As explained in section 2.1.2.d of the 2024 REA AAR, the high residual error rate for AGRIP is related to a lack of transparency, equal treatment and/or best value, including undisclosed conflicts of interest, in the subcontracting of a large portion of the grant. Key actions have been taken by REA to address this issue).

¹⁹ Target net time to pay experts: 100% of payments carried out within contractual deadlines.

²⁰ Target net time to validate participants: for 2021 and 2022: 95% of participants validated within 90 days from the "raise priority" date; for 2023 and 2024: 95% of validations completed within 25 days from complete file.

highlighting REA's ability to absorb increased demand. Each proposal undergoes a rigorous evaluation process involving experts, which requires careful management and coordination. REA consistently came close to or exceeded its annual estimates for grant agreements signed. The total value of the signed grants steadily increased from 2.4 billion in 2021 to 3.2 billion in 2024.

Simplified cost models have introduced change in the implementation at REA. The most important example of such a model is lump sum funding, which involves a fixed, predetermined budget set on the basis of an estimate of the actual costs incurred. The value of public procurement remained a small share of the total budget, though it grew in 2024 to a total share of 2.45%. Procurement contract targets were significantly exceeded in 2022 and 2023.

The actual number of contracts signed is reported below in Table 2. Legal entity validations saw a sharp increase in 2022 (10,670) as a result of a delayed start of the programme and the resulting shift of validation tasks from 2021 to 2022, followed by a decline to 8,981 in 2023 and to 7,435 in 2024. Ownership and control assessments, a very labour-intensive new control activity, increased significantly from 46 in 2021 to over 1,100 in 2024 leading to high workload.

Overall, the data show a trend of steady improvement in most areas, with REA exceeding or closely approaching targets or estimates. Enhancing data availability in specific areas — such as cost models and procurement contracts for 2023-2024 — would support a more comprehensive and robust assessment of the Agency's performance in the future.

In 2023, lump sums were applied in 250 projects in line with the HE work programme, representing 541.3 million EUR, indicating a notable increase in the use of this simplified cost model. However, the overall share of projects using lump sums remained low among the stock of running projects.

Table 2 – Other indicators 2021-2024

Name	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number and total value (in EUR) of calls launched	51 calls, at a value of 3.0 billion	60 calls, at a value of 3.3 billion	42 calls, at a value of 3.4 billion	54 calls, at a value of 3.5 billion
Value of the proposals received	20.5 billion	16.1 billion	15.7 billion	23.9 billion
Value of the proposals received compared to the total financial resources delegated to the Agency (%)	683%	488%	462%	683%
Number of proposals evaluated	12,485 proposals	12,832 proposals	12,130 proposals	15,531 proposals
Number and value (in EUR) of grant agreements signed	2,081 grants, at value of 2.4 billion EUR	2,371 grants, at value of 2.8 billion EUR	2,105 grants, at value of 2.7 billion EUR	2,244 grants, at value of 3.2 billion EUR
Value of public procurement launched, compared to total budget (%)	Not reported separately from grants	AGRIP: 0.018 billion (0.6%) (HE: not reported separately from grants)	0.015 billion (0.5%)	0.017 billion (0.48%)

Number of contracts signed (procurement) ²¹	AGRIP: 18 contracts (HE: not reported)	AGRIP: 18 contracts (HE: not reported)	21 ²²	8 ²³
Estimated number of procurement contracts signed	18 contracts (100%)	23 contracts (157%)	23 contracts (161%)	38 contracts (126%)
Rate of execution of commitment and payment appropriations (%)	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number and value of projects where lump-sums were used ²⁴	57 projects (15.7 million EUR)	10 projects (31.5 million EUR)	250 projects (541.3 million EUR)	106 projects (385.1 million EUR)

Source: REA Annual Activity Reports & Work Programmes 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024 and data provided by the EC

The number of proposals evaluated by REA followed the typical cycle of framework programmes: REA received fewer proposals in the initial years and more in the final ones, but the number was seriously affected by the COVID pandemic. The number of proposals increased until 2020, then dropped temporarily (COVID period) by 25%, reaching a low in 2023 (12,130), before rising again in 2024 to a record high (15,531), just below the 2019 level. The number of grants signed was more stable: while proposal volumes vary depending on external circumstances, the number of grants signed depends on the budget allocated in the work programme adopted by the EC. The graph reflects REA's capacity to manage high volumes of evaluations and sustain grant-signing activity, even as the number of proposals fluctuated.

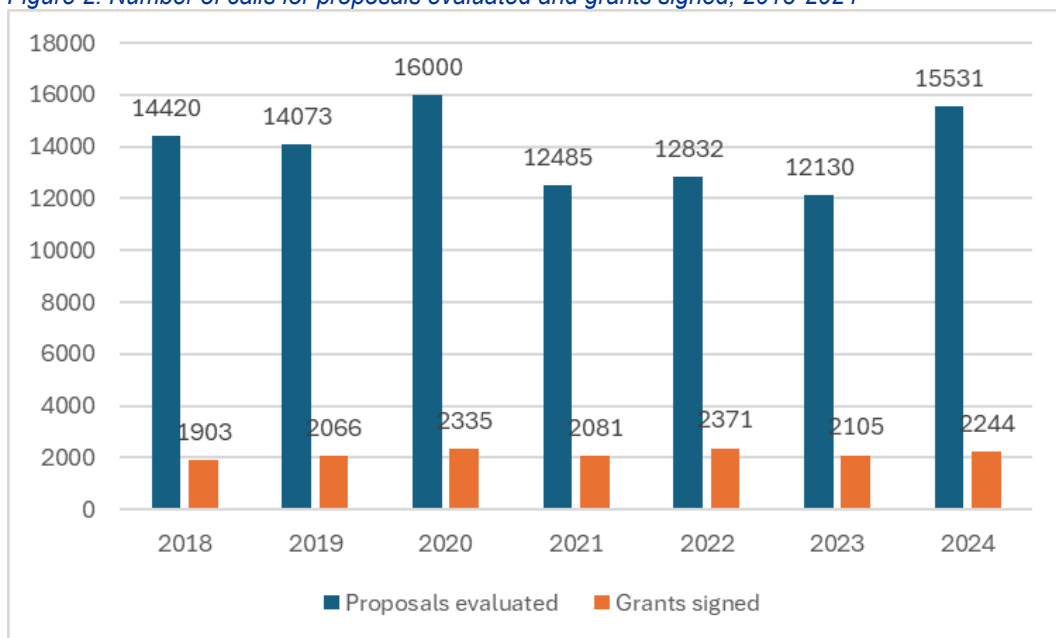
²¹ REA AAR report procurement only for AGRIP in 2021 and 2022.

²² In 2021 and 2022, the number of procurement contracts signed under AGRIP was explicitly reported. However, this information no longer appears in subsequent reports. While payment figures are available, they appear relatively high and seem to reflect broader expenditures beyond procurement alone. They have therefore not been included.

²³ REA AAR 2024.

²⁴ Data on funding mechanisms provided by the EC.

Figure 2. Number of calls for proposals evaluated and grants signed, 2018-2024



Source: Authors' elaboration based on REA Annual Activity Reports 2018 up till 2024

Table 3 outlines aspects of the different programmes implemented and managed by REA and illustrates the diversity of its portfolio with large differences between the actions and within the actions. For instance, 10,037 proposals are evaluated on average per year as part of the MSCA (1,295 per call, but with a spread between 100 in some calls and 10,000 in others), as opposed to 101 proposals evaluated for Research Infrastructures (19 per call). There are also great differences in the number of signed grants, running projects and calls between the programmes. The largest budget has been executed through the actions of Cluster 6.

Table 3 – Implementation per programme – average per year (2021-2024)

Programme	Calls	Proposals evaluated	Number of evaluated proposals per call (on average)	Grants signed	Running projects	Payments grants	Payments procurements	Budget execution (in million EUR)
MSCA	8	10,037	1,295	1,647	5,493	3,104	0	754.74
Cluster 2	5	528	117	81	285	197	0	215.93
Cluster 3	5	259	52	37	161	124	0	216.91
Cluster 6	12	1,065	93	179	684	461	0	926.60
SEWP	7	839	129	129	427	229	0	253.99
EU R&I system	3	113	45	28	159	111	0	63.62
Research Infra	5	101	19	44	206	134	0	274.86
RFCS	3	114	35	28	132	105	0	37.21
AGRIP	7	152	23	23	109	69	36	52.10
Total	53	13,208	249	2,195	7,655	4,533	36	2795.94

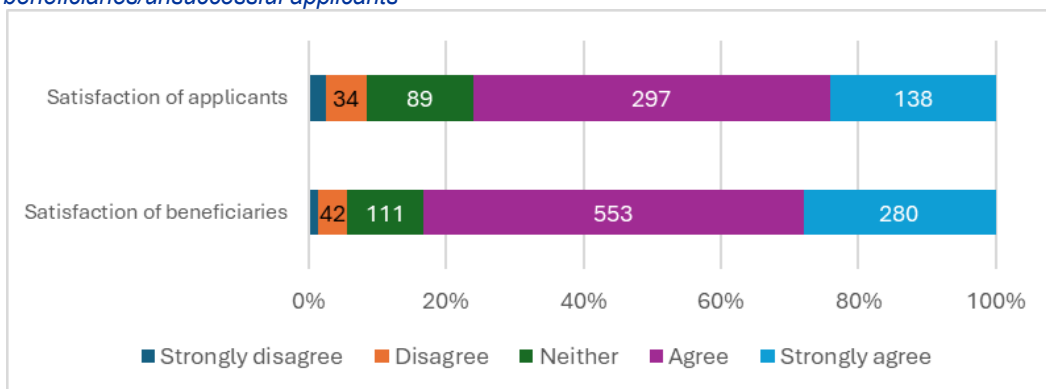
Source: REA Annual Activity Reports 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024. Outliers are presented in bold.

Satisfaction of beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and experts with the quality of the services provided by the Agency

Both the results of the surveys and the findings of the interviews suggest that unsuccessful applicants, beneficiaries and experts²⁵ are satisfied with the services of REA.

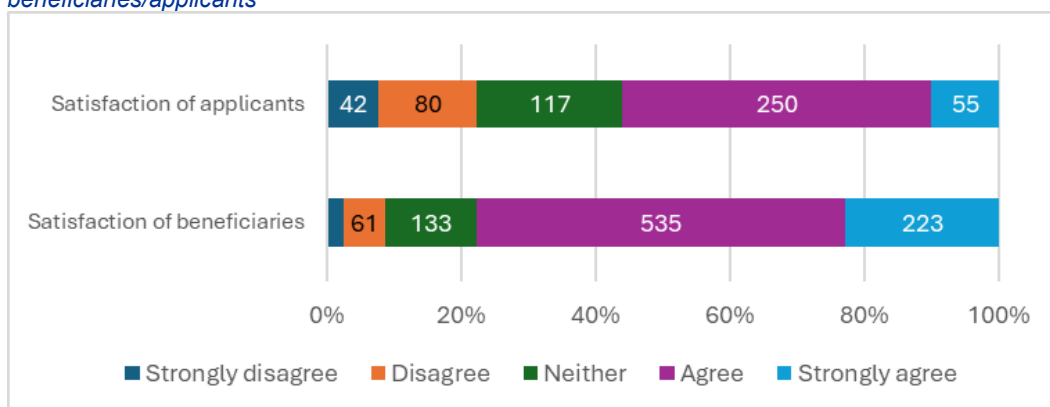
Generally, interviewees (beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants) found the **application process** clear, easy and transparent. This view is echoed by the survey respondents (especially the beneficiaries *Figure 3*), although the process was more demanding and time-consuming for less frequent applicants. No significant differences were observed among stakeholder groups (e.g. universities, private companies) in their experiences with the application processes.

Figure 3. Survey results: the application process was clear and transparent - beneficiaries/unsuccessful applicants



With respect to the transparency of the evaluation process 70% of survey respondents agreed that the evaluation process was clear and transparent. However, this satisfaction was only 57% among unsuccessful applicants. Frequent comment (n=42) was that the evaluation report provided to them lacked meaningful insights and contained inconsistencies. Interviewees judged the **evaluation process** to be generally good. Some interviewees suggested personal contact point within REA during the application process as a solution, which however, would be challenging to ensure equal treatment.

Figure 4. Survey results: the evaluation process was clear and transparent - beneficiaries/applicants

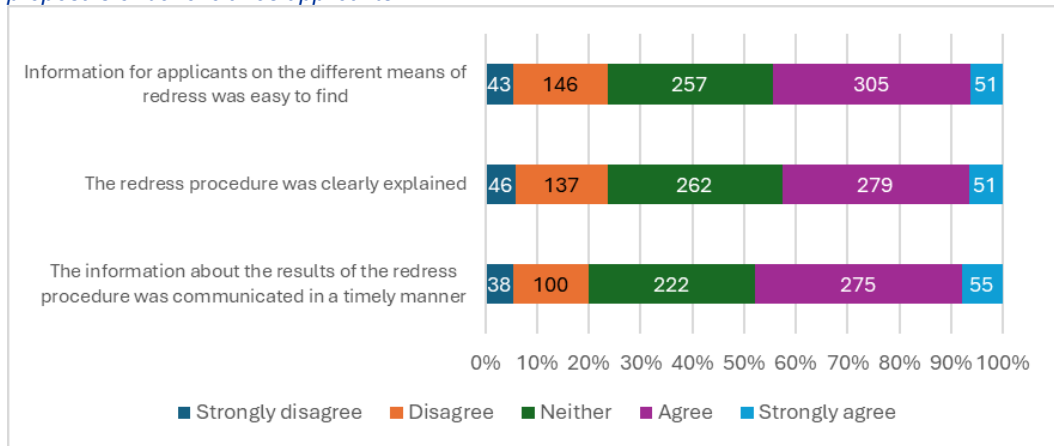


Almost one quarter of the survey respondents (both beneficiaries and applicants) made use of the means for **redress and in particular the evaluation review procedure for their**

²⁵ Perceptions of experts are reported in the paragraph 'Validation Services & Expert Management' below.

proposals, a corporate procedure where applicants can challenge their evaluation results based on procedural grounds.²⁶ Around 24% of these respondents did not find this procedure clear or easy to find. This number was higher for unsuccessful applicants, where 30% indicated not to find the redress / evaluation review procedure clear and the information easy to find on the Commission’s Funding & Tender Portal. Some interviewees also considered that their filed complaint did not receive well substantiated answer addressing their complaint.

Figure 5. Survey results: satisfaction with redress procedure and review of the evaluation of the proposals of beneficiaries/applicants

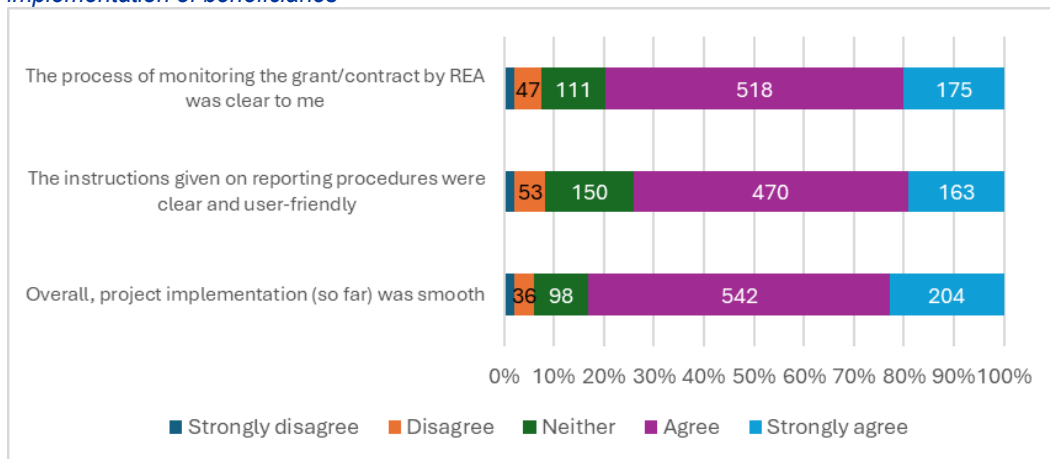


The interview findings suggest that the **project implementation** procedure is clear for beneficiaries, and the project officers are responsive and supportive. Project coordination (including administrative workload such as financial reporting and communication with partners) is estimated by beneficiaries to be around 20-30%. There are mixed opinions on whether this is proportional. Some interviewees suggest more automation of reporting (e.g. pre-filled administration reports) would help lighten the burden. In all, interviewed beneficiaries are appreciative and would apply for funding again.

Similarly, more than 70% of beneficiaries agreed or strongly agreed that the project implementation was proceeding smoothly, the reporting instructions were user-friendly and REA’s monitoring process was clear. The satisfaction level regarding the monitoring/reporting process was overall consistent across different types and sizes of organisations.

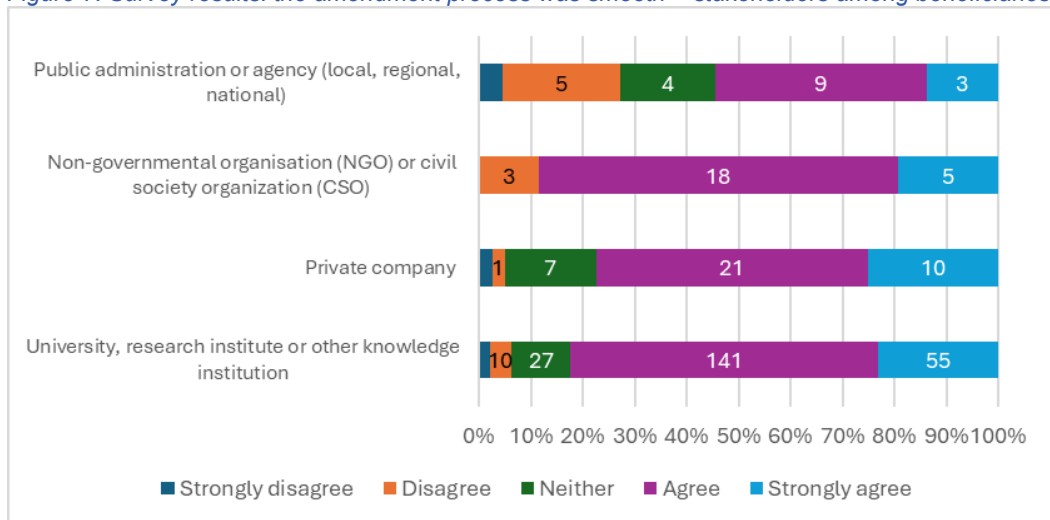
²⁶ Redress is a corporate process; REA implements the process as set out in the corporate instructions (vademeccum).

Figure 6. Survey results: satisfaction monitoring and reporting processes during the grant / contract implementation of beneficiaries



Just over half of beneficiaries (53%) reported amending their grant agreement or contract. Among them, 80% expressed satisfaction with the amendment process, citing clarity, timeliness, and staff responsiveness. Satisfaction varied by organisation type: NGOs were the most positive (88%), followed by knowledge institutions (83%) and private companies (78%). In contrast, only 54% of public administration respondents found the process smooth.

Figure 7. Survey results: the amendment process was smooth – stakeholders among beneficiaries



Programme specifics: Horizon 2020 & Horizon Europe

Many processes, and procedures from Horizon 2020 were carried over to Horizon Europe. With Horizon Europe, however, new requirements were introduced such as the Gender Equality Plans and lump sum funding²⁷. In addition, during the implementation period 2021- 2024, a number of contextual developments influenced programme’s operation (including the delayed launch of Horizon Europe), as stated in chapter 3. Furthermore, measures had to be

²⁷ REA Annual report 2022. Pages: 14-15 (Challenges due to lump sum funding and Gender Equality Plans).

implemented related to complexities to the topic structure of the European Green Deal²⁸, particularly affecting actions under Cluster 6. This presented REA with additional challenges.

During that period the work pressure for REA staff was very high²⁹, especially as processing the evaluations of proposals of Horizon Europe overlapped with the preparations of launching the next calls. This combination of factors resulted in not meeting the time-to-grant indicator in 2022.³⁰ The targets were met again in 2023.

Programme specifics: RFCS

RFCS has its own legal base (Protocol No. 37), with funding sourced from legacy assets of the European Coal and Steel Community. In 2021, updated implementing rules introduced “Big Ticket” calls focused on high technology readiness level (TRL) demonstration projects. The programme is co-managed between DG RTD (strategic ownership) and REA (implementation), with some coordinated investment from HaDEA for the Clean Steel Partnership under Cluster 4 of Horizon Europe. The desk analysis and interviews confirm that the structure and launch of calls, including grant agreement procedures and hearings with applicants, are functioning as intended. The hearing mechanism, introduced by REA in 2024, has helped improve the quality of the proposals received for the Big-Ticket calls which however continue to have received a lower than expected amount of interest. The REA Annual Activity Report 2023 noted that applicants had difficulties addressing the European Green Deal and Just Transition with regard to the impact of their proposals.³¹

As to project monitoring and feedback to policy, interviewees from the Commission indicate communication and coordination on RFCS from REA’s side could be further improved, particularly regarding timely updates on project status such as on withdrawals and suspensions. While this was sometimes perceived as a gap in technical insight, it was clarified that REA follows Horizon-standard practices by relying systematically on external experts for project monitoring—an approach that has significantly enhanced the quality of oversight for both REA and the Commission³². Moreover, challenges in providing real-time updates are also linked to resource constraints: according to REA staff, the CBA-estimated efficiency gains for the RFCS team were disproportionately high (128%) and, despite internal redeployments, the team continues to face capacity limitations that affect the frequency and depth of monitoring beyond the reporting intervals set in the grant agreements.

Programme specifics: AGRIP

The unit managing AGRIP grants oversees international communication campaigns to promote EU agri-food products, and supports the internationalisation of producers through grants, procurement and high-level missions for the Commissioner for Agriculture. Interviewees confirmed that the transition from CHAFEA to REA in 2021 was well-managed despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Transferred staff appreciated the structural integration into a larger agency, which has allowed closer collaboration with financial and legal teams within the same unit — leading, according to the staff, to more streamlined and responsive operations. Particularly due to the high-profile and reputationally sensitive nature of events outside the EU, communication with DG AGRI is frequent, involving regular meetings and daily interactions. Audit findings for AGRIP projects, particularly in schemes with high subcontracting components, have revealed areas of vulnerability in beneficiaries’ practices. In cases where a significant portion of the budget is subcontracted, the risk of non-transparent selection processes for subcontracting and potential for conflict of interest between beneficiaries and their subcontractors increases. REA, in close coordination with DG AGRI, has taken concrete steps to address these risks by intensifying communication with beneficiaries, and providing clearer

²⁸ REA mid-year report 2021.

²⁹ REA Annual Work Programme (AWP) 2022. Annex.

³⁰ 69% were signed on time. REA mid-year report 2022.

³¹ REA Annual Activity Report 2023.

³² Insights from REA staff

guidance on subcontracting rules to reinforce accountability. During the interviews, REA staff confirmed that they had drawn the attention of the European Commission to potential risks in the beneficiaries' selection process for implementing bodies (subcontractors) . However, REA staff also acknowledge that solving this is not easy as changing these elements requires modifications to the underlying legal and policy framework which involves a complex legislative process at the EU level.

Validation Services

The Central Validation Service (CVS)³³ is a unit within REA, serving the whole European Commission, executive agencies, joint undertakings and other European bodies. The scope of the CVS services has increased over time. Initially, the CVS was tasked with the validation of legal entities and their bank accounts in the Commission's relevant systems (PDM, ABAC/SUMMA) and in some cases, with the financial capacity assessments (FCAs)) of applicants in certain EU funded actions in direct management. Today, the CVS mandate has been extended to provide these services, including in certain cases Ownership and Control Assessments (OCAs), for all actions under direct and first-level transactions under indirect management implemented as part of the Single Electronic Data Interchange Area (SEDIA-). This includes fee-based services, under service-level agreements, to EU institutions bodies and agencies (EUIBAs) which are not included in the REA/CVS mandate, such as, during the evaluation period, the European Parliament. OCA was introduced as part of the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework establishing new eligibility restrictions linked to security, defence, and public order concerns.

From 2021 to 2022 the number of participants to be validated more than doubled (4,554 vs 10,670 respectively). In addition, the number of OCA conducted rose to 1,091 in 2022, compared to just 46 in 2021. Interviews confirmed that in order to address this, the CVS temporarily recruited additional interim staff. While the CVS was able to deliver the high volume of OCA, it had to do so by temporarily reducing the 4-eyes control principle (independent verification of validation decisions by two authorised persons) for more standard and thus less risky validations. This deviation from the regular process was assessed and decided in advance, is well documented, and was communicated to the EC.

Expert Management

The “MSCA & Support to Experts Department” is REA's largest Department, with over 300 staff members. Beyond its main activity in managing the MSCA actions, the Department also supports operational units within REA and other Executive Agencies in the management of experts for proposal evaluations. Its role is to ensure smooth, timely, and compliant contracting and payment of experts, which is approximately 22,000 per year under Horizon Europe. This process is carried out in an efficient and compliant manner. Independent ex post checks confirmed that no systemic errors with financial impact were detected on experts' contracts and payments for the years 2021-2024.³⁴

A key component of customer service is communication with experts by answering questions about contracting logistics, payments, and system usage. The REA expert management unit tries to anticipate peak periods (e.g., April-June, September-November for evaluations, and December for payments) by reallocating internal staff to ensure continuity and responsiveness. The Department is the system owner of the ECS tool, used to manage expert contracting. 15,000 new experts are added annually to a pool of over 300,000. The number of expert contracts signed also rose annually, reflecting growing use of expert input in call evaluations.

³³ The case study of the CVS with more detailed information is an annex to this report.

³⁴ RMIC Opinion 2021-2024.

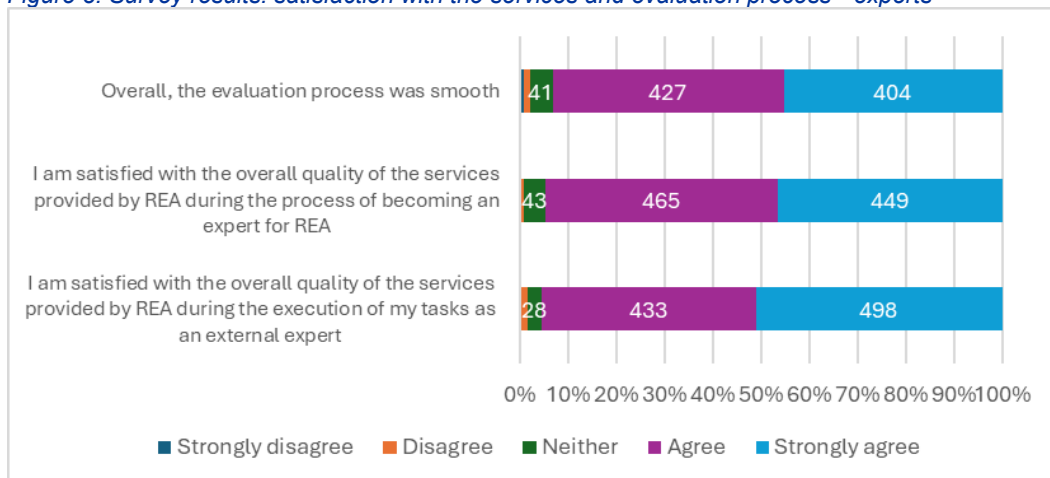
Table 4 – Performance indicators CVS and experts 2021-2024

Name	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of expert contracts signed	17,710	19,353	19,560	21,080
Evaluation sessions conducted	71	86	Not reported	80
Legal entity validation (for all EU funding programmes under SEDIA)	4,554	10,670	8,981	7,435
Ownership Control Assessment Conducted	46	1,091	782	1,137

External experts reported high satisfaction with REA in the survey as well as in interviews. As a result, all interviewees and 93% of the survey respondents would like to work as an expert for REA in the future again.

All experts interviewed experienced both the registration and contracting procedure as easy and straightforward. This is echoed by the expert survey results (over 80% consider the registration process smooth and more than 95% indicated that the contracting process was clear and timely), although the criteria used in selecting experts for proposal evaluations were clear only for 60% of the experts. Most (73%) used the online information on the EU Funding & Tenders Portal before and/or during the registration process, and experts particularly appreciated the online manual for the portal. Confidentiality rules, processing personal data and the circumstances under which to declare a Conflict of Interest are all clear for over 95% of the experts surveyed.

Figure 8. Survey results: satisfaction with the services and evaluation process - experts



The **evaluation process of proposals** was also positively reviewed by experts (over 90% were content in the survey). The work assignment for the proposal evaluations was clear for all interviewed experts (over 90% agreed) and almost all experts interviewed and surveyed found the guidance from REA responsive and concise. The shift to online evaluations has been effective in maintaining evaluation capacity during and post-COVID and interviewed experts did not see a drop in quality of the evaluation process. Of the surveyed experts, 77%, worked completely remotely.

A (relatively) smaller portion of experts is also involved as an external reviewer of projects' reports or in charge of project oversight. Compared to the proposal evaluators, they are similarly positive about the overall process, REA's guidance and clarity of their task.

Although almost all experts were happy with the timing of **payments** (based on interview and survey results), only 60% agreed in the survey that the payment matched the effort they made (primarily private sector employees and business owners are dissatisfied). The experts indicate that they are not doing this work 'for the money', but primarily to 'stay in the loop'. Still, the survey highlights some experts' perception that compensation could better reflect their contributions, mentioning (for instance) that the Commission's daily tariffs have not been updated and that the reimbursement of costs for a visit to Brussels (especially regarding the accommodation allowance which was, however, increased in 2023) was insufficient.

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

Driving factors

To bridge policy making and policy execution, good collaboration between REA as an executive agency and the parent DGs is essential. Both have a different kind of role requiring different kinds of expertise. The executive agency ensures a level of technical depth and consistency that delivers high-quality programme management, while the policy DGs focus on policy monitoring and development.

While there are concerns (which will be described as part of the hindering factors), REA and the parent DGs have a strong relationship with a well-functioning dialogue, and they actively strengthen each other. Compared to more recently formed or reshaped executive agencies, REA and the parent DGs benefit from a long history of collaboration, which provides a foundation of mutual understanding, trust, and established working routines. Over the years, this relationship has fostered smooth communication channels, informal networks, and a shared familiarity with programme objectives and operational constraints. This institutional memory enables faster coordination, more nuanced handling of complex issues, and more pragmatic solutions to emerging challenges.

REA has a strong internal organisation with clearly defined roles. This supports the delivery of its core mandate.³⁵ Agency effectiveness is not solely determined by structural design or delegation scope, but also by the quality of internal leadership and team dynamics. Interviewees indicate that REA has a strong bottom-up structure in which staff can actively deliver input on how to handle issues, which is then actively used to optimise processes in a structured and harmonised way.

REA's staff, leadership, and flexibility are often mentioned by both REA and EC interviewees as core driving factors for the Agency. The stable working environment has been praised by interviewees as a space where staff can develop and mature (for example applying lessons from previous framework programmes to the current mandate). Learning is a clear anchor point in the Agency. Many processes are monitored and reviewed, input is actively provided regarding new developments and tools, and staff learning is encouraged (see later section on human resource management). The organisation of the Agency, like having both project and financial officers in each unit, allows REA to balance its capacity. The 2023 European Commission staff satisfaction survey indicates a good overall level of engagement among REA staff.

Interview findings suggest that REA has shown flexibility in reallocating staff across units to manage shifting priorities and unexpected increases in workload, contributing to REA's effectiveness in maintaining continuity and meeting programme implementation requirements under changing circumstances. Such, be it limited, re-allocations were systematically reported to its Steering Committee to ensure transparency in support of the Commission's duties on oversight. This adaptability was particularly evident in 2022, when the Agency experienced a sharp rise in operational demands due to the delayed start of HE.

³⁵ [See Annex to Delegation Act: C_2021_952_F1_ANNEX_EN_V4_P1_1117997](#)

The REA management of experts and related procedures are also considered an important driving factor for the success of the Agency.

Hindering factors

Interviewees suggest that there may be a gradual widening of the gap between policy making and implementation, accompanied by a decrease in institutional knowledge over time. Many interviewees, both from the Agency and from the Commission, have noted that while collaboration between REA and the DGs remains a strength, the foundation of their common understanding is weakening. As REA staff face increasing pressure to deliver efficiency and achieving economies of scale, the heightened share of productive time of project officers goes to regular project management tasks including administrative procedures and compliance checks: this can reduce the time available to deepen knowledge and competencies needed to understand project developments, assess results, and translate these into policy insights. These tasks are increasingly shifting to external monitors.³⁶ Commission staff on the other hand, partly due to the departure or retirement of more experienced colleagues, are experiencing a gradual reduction in direct grant management knowledge and implementation experience from the time that actions were still managed in the DGs.

The introduction of new requirements and conditions for projects in line with the policies and priorities of the Commission and the Horizon Europe Regulation (e.g. related to economic and research security) had an impact on implementation and REA required additional capacity and /or trainings for the staff. This is especially the case when experts and applicants need guidance to understand how to properly evaluate and implement these requirements. To limit the impacts on the workload of experts and clarify the requirements to applicants, collaboration with Commission services is sought by REA. E.g. the DG RTD Gender Sector provided the guidance to applicants and ran the pilot assessment of the compliance with the Gender Equality Plan, eligibility criterion, to facilitate the future implementation of such ex-post GEP compliance checks by the different Executive Agencies. REA collaborates with the Common Implementation Centre and the Common Policy Centre to ensure that implications for programme implementation are considered early in the policy design process.³⁷

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

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: The present operation of REA is quite effective. In order to keep effectiveness at this level it is important to maintain the close relation between REA and parent DGs. Finally, technological development, such as the wider adoption of artificial intelligence, can create opportunities for further efficiency gains.

Looking ahead, it will be important to monitor how changes in staffing and expertise may affect the collaborative dynamics that have traditionally been a strength of the executive agency model. In case the relation between REA and parent DGs becomes less intensive, there is a risk that, over time, the design of calls for proposals may become less grounded in practical implementation realities, which could influence their overall effectiveness and operational feasibility. In 2022, REA voiced this concern of lack of involvement in designing “implementable” work programmes. Subsequently, instructions for work programme scribes were updated, requiring an early and continuous consultation of Agency staff throughout the preparations of the Work Programmes. In addition, increased staff exchanges between the Commission and

³⁶ These are studies contracted to research organisations and consultancies.

³⁷ REA Annual Work Programme (AWP) 2023. Annex.

the executive agencies might also be beneficial. These exchanges have the potential to strengthen mutual understanding and preserve hands-on knowledge of implementation.

Technological development, such as the wider adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), can create opportunities for further efficiency gains (e.g. application screening and conflict of interest detection), but can just as well create additional challenges for the activities of REA³⁸, for instance in evaluating (a rising number of) proposals written with AI support.

4.1.2. Legal Framework

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

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: REA's mandate has been very stable over the years, supported by constant operational and procedural optimisation. REA operates within the given mandate.

Legal framework & mandate

The Delegation Act is the legal framework that outlines the tasks the Commission delegated to REA. These tasks mainly concern the management of the programmes Horizon Europe³⁹, RFCS⁴⁰ and AGRIP⁴¹ (and predecessor programmes). This includes managing the full project lifecycle as outlined in the Work Programmes. Next to the Delegation Act, four Memoranda of Understanding (one general Memorandum of understanding for HE and three specific Memoranda, one for each programme) supplement the assignment of tasks to REA with general provisions. Each MoU establishes a tailored governance and reporting framework reflecting the operational, legal, and strategic needs of the respective programme.

Evidence from desk research and interviews with European Commission and REA staff suggest that the Agency has operated within the boundaries of its legal framework during the evaluation period.

Despite the changes to the programmes and personnel increase, overall REA's mandate has been very stable over the years, supported by ongoing constant operational and procedural optimisation. Interviewees indicate that REA operates within the given mandate. Overall interviewees are positive about REA's performance within the limits of its mandate, and they emphasise the ability of REA staff to act responsively and reliably, and to provide the necessary procedural follow-up.

REA also provides validation services and expert management services to other services. The Delegation Act defines the nature and the extent of the tasks whereas the Validation Rules are prepared by DG BUDG (in collaboration with the CVS).

³⁸ REA Annual Work Programme (AWP) 2024. Annex.

³⁹ Commission Implementing Decision C(2022) 7550 of 16 December 2022 on the Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-2024.

⁴⁰ Commission Implementing Decision C(2023) 633 final of 27 January 2023 on the financing of the Research Programme of the Research Fund for Coal and Steel (RFCS) and the adoption of the work programme of 2023.

⁴¹ Commission Implementing Decision C(2023) 7602 final of 14.11.2023 on the financing of information provision and promotion measures concerning agricultural products implemented in the internal market and in third countries and the adoption of the work programme for 2023.

According to the European Court of Auditors (ECA), REA's accounts for 2021, 2022 and 2023 are legal in regular and all material respects. This also included the revenue and payments underlying the accounts.⁴²

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?

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: REA's internal control system is fully aligned with the Commission's common control strategy, the corporate Horizon Europe control strategy, and Internal Control Framework, with all components functioning effectively, no major deficiencies, and continuous improvements through strong RMIC oversight, and high staff awareness of internal control and anti-fraud principles.

REA demonstrates sound financial management and reliable risk control aligned with programme-specific approaches, notably through active collaboration with the CIC and DGs during the Horizon 2020–Horizon Europe transition, strengthened ex-ante checks, use of simplified cost options, and a residual error rate largely below 2%, confirming overall assurance of effectiveness.

REA proactively addresses AGRIP-related risks (conflicts of interest, subcontracting, and elevated error rate) through reinforced controls and corrective actions, while maintaining effective anti-fraud and data protection frameworks fully in line with EU standards.

Based on the Commission's Internal Control Framework, the internal control systems of REA are effective. The limited number of concerns, which will be outlined in detail below, are clearly identified by the Agency and addressed. The Risk Management and Internal Control (RMIC) function provided reviews to the Director, and internal controls were reinforced by regular updates to the risk register. Across **2021–2024**, the RMIC concludes that the Agency's internal control system remains **effective**, with all Internal Control Framework components and principles present and functioning, and **no major or critical deficiencies** affecting the achievement of objectives. Year-on-year monitoring shows a mature, learning control environment that identifies issues early and follows through on fixes, tightening coverage and tracking of mandatory training, cleaning up data retention in digital filing, clarifying when to trigger the Guarantee Fund, and refining expert management and procurement practices. In **2024**, the RMIC again judged the system effective and confirmed that the deficiencies under follow-up had **no material impact** on the ICF.

A recurrent portfolio risk concerns **AGRIP**, for which REA made reputational reservations in the AARs for 2023 and 2024 due to conflict of interest and performance concerns; reinforced ex-ante checks and targeted mitigations are in place and continue to be monitored. Overall, the evidence points to a robust control environment that sustains assurance while systematically resolving specific shortcomings.

Within the Agency, efforts are made to continuously improve processes. As a result, recommendations from audits are implemented effectively.⁴³ Interviewees from the EC all agree

⁴² European Court of Auditors. Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2021, 2022 and 2023. See more here: [Audit reports, reviews and opinions | European Court of Auditors](#)

⁴³ REA Annual Work Programmes 2021-2024.

that the Agency effectively delivers on its core responsibilities, is responsive and actively supports process improvements and coordination of efforts. REA staff are generally aware of internal control principles⁴⁴, and 96% of staff members have completed a training on antifraud.⁴⁵

Financial & risk management

In its annual activity reports⁴⁶ and work programmes⁴⁷, REA outlines its activities and performance regarding financial management.—REA has made efforts to strengthen and optimise processes related to programme implementation, financial control, and error reduction across the board. Part of these efforts was aimed at the transition from Horizon 2020 to Horizon Europe, with the aim of reducing the multiannual error rate. To this end, REA collaborated actively with the Common Implementation Centre (CIC), the IAS and the relevant DGs. To support this, the Agency increased its efforts for ex-ante controls, contributed to the overall control framework for Horizon Europe and implemented adopted strategies and guidelines. Furthermore, REA piloted under Horizon 2020 and increased the use of lump sum funding under Horizon Europe as part of the transition towards more simplified cost options. REA also addressed this through capacity building and communication towards target groups of the programmes, using communication campaigns targeting error-prone beneficiaries (SMEs, newcomers, etc.), training for project officers and audit firms, as well as various harmonisation and alignment efforts to support the transition to Horizon Europe.

REA has established and maintained an anti-fraud strategy since 2013, aligned with the methodology provided by OLAF and updated every three years, most recently in December 2023. Its implementation is monitored through quarterly reporting to both REA management and the Commission, with full implementation of the latest strategy planned by 2026. In the last years, it has actively encouraged its staff to follow anti-fraud training (participation rates improved from 94% in 2021 to 99% in 2024).⁴⁸ Between 2020 and 2024, REA received 30 OLAF financial recommendations. Of these, nine have been fully implemented, four partially implemented due to differences in recoverable amounts established by the Responsible Authorising Officer (RAO), and two were not followed because no breach of law was identified. One case was waived following the exhaustion of recovery measures, while implementation of the remaining 14 recommendations is ongoing. The Head of Department responsible for Risk Management and Internal Control (RMIC) noted in all 2021-2024 consecutive annual reports that REA's anti-fraud measures are effective.⁴⁹

REA's handling of OLAF's 2024 recommendations to recover €8 million shows ongoing engagement, with €143,814 already blocked from payment or recovered and the remainder in progress. Overall, REA reports having reasonable assurance regarding the effectiveness of its anti-fraud measures. However, with 43 AGRIP grants under OLAF investigation—representing 23% of all AGRIP grants—and early findings recommending rejection of up to 90% of subcontracting costs, the risk exposure is significant. In response, REA has revised its control strategy, paused payments for grants under investigation, strengthened preventive measures, and sought legal guidance on managing conflicts of interest. Although most audits have revealed low or no errors, some identified issues in line with OLAF's findings. The residual error rate of 3.89% remains above the materiality threshold of 2%, and a reputational reservation for AGRIP is being maintained relating to the risk of conflict of interests for high-value subcontracting. As investigations continue, further measures under consideration include enhanced auditing, adjustments to the contractual framework, and clearer procurement requirements to address identified risks for future grants.

⁴⁴ In the latest staff survey (2023), 75% indicated to be well aware of these principles. Source: RMIC Report (2023).

⁴⁵ RMIC Report (2023), pp. 8.

⁴⁶ REA Annual Activity Reports 2021-2024.

⁴⁷ REA Annual Work Programmes 2021-2024.

⁴⁸ ICMC Status Report (2024).

⁴⁹ RMIC Opinion Reports 2021-2024.

In terms of indicators, the cumulative residual error rate has for the most part been below 2% across all programmes (Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, RFCS and AGRIP). The error rate was mainly above 2% for FP7, but the insignificant relevant expenditure renders the amount at risk immaterial.

Due to its multi-annual nature, the error rates can most effectively be measured in the final stages of a programme's implementation of ex-post controls. This means that the figures for more recent programmes are more heavily based on estimates. Even though the multi-annual error rate for AGRIP was in 2023 also below 2%, REA still calls for caution due to the nature of AGRIP projects. REA recognised an intrinsic risk in the design of AGRIP, as beneficiaries are selected through the evaluation process but 80-90% of the funds are spent by implementing bodies (subcontractors) selected via competitive tendering procedure, often for-profit promotion and communication companies. Coupled with relatively low competition, the involvement of these subcontractors in the implementation of projects increases the risks for conflicts of interest, and in some cases recovery of funds and project terminations are needed. To manage these risks REA undertook multiple actions. As well as developing a detailed audit strategy, adjusting the risk analysis approach and introducing bank guarantees, these included reinforcing ex-ante checks – such as additional checks at evaluation and grant preparation stages.⁵⁰ In 2024, REA has continued to perform reinforced monitoring when warranted and to process OLAF notifications under its routine remit. It also started applying a set of measures, such as grant reduction, to protect the EU's financial interests.⁵¹

To strengthen its risk management, REA meticulously registers exceptions and non-compliance events through a Deviation Register, where per deviation the risks, follow up actions, and potential impacts on REA's finances and reputation are presented.⁵² REA also regularly reports on risks and respective mitigating actions and follow-ups.⁵³ The RMIC noted in each consecutive annual report for the years 2021-2024 that REA's Internal Control Framework is effective, with "all components and principles functioning well", that REA has "assessed and monitored its risks in an adequate manner", and has implemented several actions to mitigate them.⁵⁴

According to the beneficiary survey, most respondents (64%) had not experienced monitoring or audit processes. Within the 21% that had undergone monitoring or auditing, only 6% indicated that their organisation had been audited without project monitoring and 9% with both monitoring and audit. Among those who had undergone monitoring/auditing, the majority (86%) agreed the process was smooth, timely, and supported by clear communication and transparent information requests from REA staff.

Personal Data Protection

In terms of personal data protection, REA had a control system in place aligned with Regulation (EU) 2018/1725, but several operational weaknesses were identified, including incomplete records of processing activities, a lack of updated joint controllership arrangements, and the need to formalise internal procedures for data subject requests and breach handling.⁵⁵ The Internal Audit Service (IAS) found that REA, supported by the Common Implementation Centre (CIC), has established a functioning control system to ensure compliance with EU data protection requirements, even amid organisational changes and evolving legal obligations (e.g. Schrems II ruling). The REA's internal control framework for personal data protection is generally effective and well-aligned with Regulation (EU) 2018/1725. The REA Data Protection Officer (DPO) plays an active role in coordinating with other agencies and Commission services to manage joint data processing responsibilities and the use of shared IT platforms. REA keeps

⁵⁰ Annex 3: List of Unit and Network contributions to improve REA's internal control framework (2025).

⁵¹ Annex 3: List of Unit and Network contributions to improve REA's internal control framework (2025).

⁵² REA Deviation Register.

⁵³ See for instance RMIC OP ICM report on IAS action plans_2021, and the ICF Assessment Forms.

⁵⁴ RMIC Opinion Reports 2021-2024.

⁵⁵ IAS (2023). Final Audit Report on the Protection of Personal Data (2022).

track of data breach incidents – and their severity – via through a Data Breach Register.⁵⁶ To strengthen its data protection activities, REA's Data Protection team organised targeted trainings for all staff on the subject and onboarded a Deputy Data Protection Officer in 2021.⁵⁷

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?

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: REA's communication efforts have been largely successful in supporting its mission. Branding is mainly at programme level, but the visibility of the EU as the funder of the programmes it manages is enhanced. The division of responsibilities between REA and the EC is less clear, but also less relevant as stakeholders know the programmes and are satisfied with the communication by REA.

REA's communication supports the implementation of the programmes by promoting funding opportunities, showcasing project results, and guiding beneficiaries through the application and implementation process. REA operates through the one-stop funding and tenders portal, applying corporate templates and channels for documenting call requirements. REA organises info days and cooperates with NCPs to promote and explain the calls. Moreover, REA is coordinating the Research Enquiry Service, offering this one-stop desk for all questions of applicants and beneficiaries.

All the communication efforts are systematically implemented through annual communication work plans tailored to each of the nine programmes/programme parts under REA's remit, ensuring alignment with programme objectives and audience needs. Communication of project results is complementary to the dissemination of these results among stakeholders, including in the context of feedback to policy activities.

The Agency employs a wide range of channels, including its website, newsletters, social media, info sessions, and participation in flagship EU events, to ensure broad and effective communication. Coordination with its seven parent DGs and contributions to joint communication initiatives, such as Horizon Magazine and CORDIS Result Packs, further reinforce the EU's identity as the key promoter and funder of the programmes. Coordination is facilitated through established mechanisms such as the REA Communication Network, participation in the European Commission's corporate communication and R&I family networks, and joint planning of communication initiatives.

In terms of performance, REA monitors its communication impact using key indicators such as website views, social media engagement, and the number of events.

⁵⁶ RMIC OP 2021-Data Breach Register.

⁵⁷ REA RMIC Opinion 2021.

Table 5 – Indicators for tracking the external communication activities of REA

Indicators	2021	2022	2023	2024
Average page views per month on REA's website	20,520 (target 20,000) ⁵⁸	No data	No data	69,300
Number of conferences/events where one agency representative had a speaking role and/or number of conferences jointly organised with the Agency	45	61	40	53
Number of persons reached by communication channel (LinkedIn and X)	47.7k (includes Green research X)	73.9k (includes Green research X)	111k (includes Green research X)	135.1 k
% of engagements (likes, shares, comments, downloads, event participation) relative to total number of persons reached	No data	No data	175.39%	142.71% ⁵⁹
% of REA's indicators on external communication on track to achieve the targets set in the Annual Work Programme	67%	100% (targets exceeded up to 117%)	100% (targets exceeded up to 193%)	100% (targets exceeded)
Awareness of the Agency and its EU-backed programs (% aware) ⁶⁰	74%	74%	74%	74%

Source: data provided by the EC

External communication is handled by unit D1 in REA, in collaboration with all the operational units. To help funded projects to comply with their obligation to communicate on the EU funding and disseminate their results, REA provides templates for policy briefs, encourages policy roundtables, and promotes sustainability plans tailored to different audiences, such as local authorities or businesses. These activities focus on achieving real-world outcomes and are systematically monitored during project reviews, with the involvement of external experts. REA helps projects to disseminate their findings and translate the results into meaningful contributions, increasing impact and enhancing the EU's reputation as a promoter of impactful research. This is a challenging task as results from research projects, including those with a long duration, need to be made available in time to stay relevant. Additionally, research results that are less tangible or less explicit, for instance from social sciences projects, are more difficult to apply and communicate.

REA's external communication efforts have been largely successful in supporting its mission and enhancing the visibility of the EU as the funder of the programmes it manages. Its external communication strategy states that communication activities are explicitly designed to reflect and amplify EU identity.⁶¹ EC officials reflected on this by emphasising that, in line with REA's mandate and Annual Work Programme, the branding of the communication should relate to the programmes, where REA should be recognisable as the Agency to apply to.

⁵⁸ Study supporting the evaluation of CHAFEA, EACEA, EASME, ERCEA, INEA & REA: Final Report REA (2018-2021)

⁵⁹ Indicator decreased mainly due to the increase of persons reached (see row above)

⁶⁰ These numbers are based on the survey we sent to beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants, with the scope of the time period 2021-2024.

⁶¹ European Research Executive Agency. (2024). *Information note to the REA Steering Committee: REA's external communication strategy and its implementation* (SC(2024) 2.8). Brussels.

Familiarity of stakeholders (beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and experts)

Survey results and interviews indicate that beneficiaries and applicants are generally well aware of REA's role, with consistent awareness levels across organisation types.

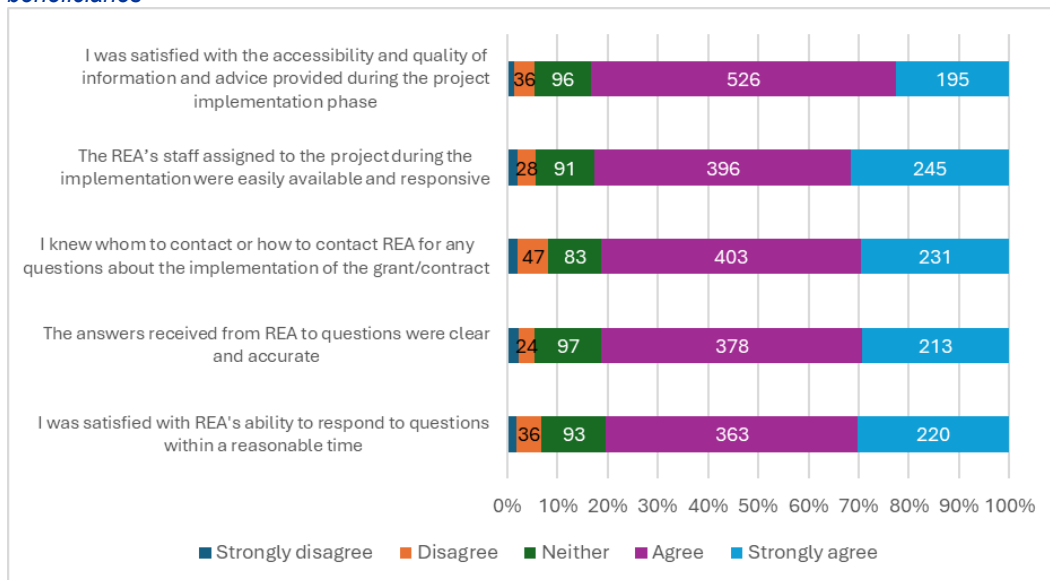
Most beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants reported being well informed about ongoing calls and funding opportunities, frequently citing newsletters, social media, webinars, and professional networks as useful information sources. National Contact Points (NCPs) praised REA's active participation in webinars and the high quality of presentations, even for complex calls.

The survey among beneficiaries and applicants however also shows that for these stakeholders the delineation of responsibilities between REA and the Commission is not clear: 41% of participants either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement "*The delineation of responsibilities and tasks between REA and the European Commission is clear to me*". This indication is echoed by multiple interviewed beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and NCPs. EC officials indicated in reflection on these findings that awareness on the specific delineation of responsibilities between REA and the Commission is not an objective. It should however not interfere with clarity about the identity of the programmes and where to apply.

Awareness of specific programmes is highest with MSCA (72%) and Research Infrastructures (50%), due to their large beneficiary base, where many recognise both the schemes and their funding opportunities. Awareness is more uneven for the other REA-managed programmes such as Reforming and enhancing the European R&I system, widening participation & spreading excellence, and the thematic Clusters (Culture, Civil Security, Food/Bioeconomy), with sizeable groups who are still unsure or unfamiliar. The lowest awareness is for Agricultural Promotion Measures and the Research Fund for Coal and Steel, where about 70% and 60% of respondents respectively are not familiar. This pattern is expected: some funds serve very specific groups, so not every potential beneficiary need, or is expected, to know them in detail. Within these groups, the awareness of the programmes is good.

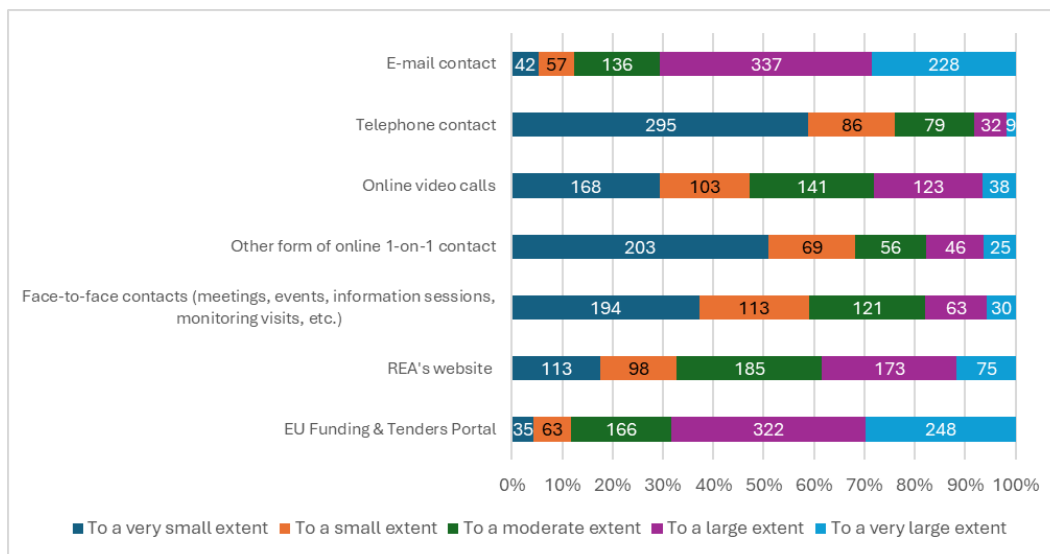
Information for applicants was largely perceived as clear and accessible. 82% agreed that information (e.g. deadlines, eligibility) was easy to find, and 78% found the guidance helpful in understanding procedures. During the application process, 76% of respondents were satisfied with the guidance provided, 59% with REA's responses to queries, and 68% knew where to seek help. Beneficiaries were generally slightly more positive than unsuccessful applicants. Most survey respondents were satisfied. During grant implementation, over 80% of beneficiaries and applicants expressed satisfaction with communication. They reported timely and helpful responses, clarity on whom to contact, and good accessibility of information. As under the grant agreement, all contacts with the authorising officer have to be channelled through the coordinator, this may be an underestimation since surveyed beneficiaries other than coordinators have also answered this question.

Figure 9 Survey results: satisfaction with the communication during the implementation phase - beneficiaries



The EU Funding & Tenders Portal and e-mails were the most commonly used as a communication channel by beneficiaries, followed by REA's website and online video calls. Direct contact methods (e.g. phone, face-to-face) were used less frequently.

Figure 10. Survey results: use of communication channels - beneficiaries



When asked about the most valued communication aspects, around 70% of beneficiaries and applicants cited clear and accessible information as important or very important. REA's responsiveness and individualised support were appreciated by about two-thirds of respondents. While staff knowledge was rated positively, it was seen as slightly less critical. The website and online tools received more neutral or negative feedback, pointing to opportunities for improvement in digital communication.

More than 90% of respondents were satisfied with the guidelines provided and with REA's responses to questions on the calls for proposals. Moreover, around 85% of respondents reported to know where to find the appropriate help and support during the application process. Some beneficiaries praised the timeliness of the process and the consistency of information provided.

However, some respondents also highlighted areas for improvement in external communication. Among the 121 comments received, several noted difficulties in communication, particularly when multiple REA officers were involved and gave inconsistent guidance. Others mentioned that the evaluation process felt overly bureaucratic⁶².

Communication with experts

According to the expert survey, 90% of respondents were aware that REA is entrusted by the European Commission to implement EU-funded programmes, and more than 80% indicated familiarity with REA's mission, its funding opportunities, and the programmes under its remit, suggesting effective outreach and promotion with this target group. However, the distinction between REA and the Commission remains less clear: around 16% of experts stated the roles are unclear, and 20% were neutral, indicating room for more targeted communication in this area. While awareness and engagement are generally high, particularly among the 30% who have worked with REA across multiple programming periods, feedback from the open-ended responses highlights some communication and procedural gaps, particularly in relation to expert registration. Experts noted challenges such as a lack of transparency in the selection of experts, and difficulty navigating the webpages for experts. Calls were also made for clearer guidance on rotation policies, changes to the rules on conflicts of interest (both defined by the Commission, not by REA) and easier document access. These comments suggest that while REA's external visibility is strong, user experience in expert onboarding and role communication could be improved. REA's physical infrastructure and logistical support were positively assessed by experts who used its Brussels facility. Although the number of respondents was smaller, reflecting that most experts worked remotely, those who did visit reported high levels of satisfaction. Over 90% were satisfied or very satisfied with REA staff assistance, IT tools and connectivity, reception services, and overall logistics and infrastructure. Additionally, around 85% expressed satisfaction with the practical information provided for accommodation and transport, suggesting that the Agency's on-site facilities and support services remain well-suited to expert needs.

⁶² It is important to note that the evaluation process is defined at corporate level and therefore not under REA's exclusive control.

4.1.5. Reporting to parent DGs

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?

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: Reporting to parent DGs is fully aligned with the legal and supervisory requirements set out in the applicable regulations and the four MoUs signed with its parent Directorates-General. REA's reporting system functions effectively, with parent DGs expressing satisfaction with the quality, structure, and timeliness of REA's reporting.

REA's reporting practices are robust and fully aligned with the legal and supervisory requirements set out in the applicable regulations and the four Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) signed with its parent Directorates-General.

REA's reporting framework is structured around standardised and comprehensive planning and reporting outputs. These include the Annual Work Programme (AWP), Annual Activity Report (AAR), mid-year reports and implementation and Call Evaluation Reports, interim updates on KPIs, ad hoc information upon request. Each year, the AARs note that reporting mechanisms fully meet the requirements of the legal framework and that parent DGs express satisfaction with both the quality and timeliness of information. The 2024 AAR specifically highlights that reporting continues to provide comprehensive visibility into REA's performance and financial management.

Oversight is reinforced by regular meetings of a dedicated Steering Committee, which serves as a formal venue for reviewing implementation progress, resource needs, and strategic planning, in line with the Framework Regulation (EC) No 58/2003. Steering Committee meetings are organised at least four times a year.

The Director of the Agency ensures that the members and observers of the Steering Committee receive in advance of each meeting or written procedure, all relevant decision-making documents and reliable control results necessary for the proper fulfilment of their mandates. Decisions are taken by simple majority of its members and in the event of a tie, the Chair would have the casting vote. In practice decisions are taken by consensus, thereby ensuring that the positions of the observers are also properly addressed by the final decisions. The audits of REA accounts and processes by the IAS and the European Court of Auditors further strengthen accountability.

Beyond a more global oversight, exercised through the REA Steering Committee, operational coordination and information provision occurs through coordination meetings at Director level by programme part (once or twice per year), and more frequent exchanges that occur at middle management level and between policy and project officers. Over time, these more frequent contacts at operational level have proven to serve well the need for policy/implementation coordination and smooth access to information.

Beyond the reporting practices outlined above, the RFCS and AGRIP programmes, managed independently of Horizon Europe, follow additional tailored approaches. The RFCS governance model is structured around a collaborative approach involving multiple layers of oversight and advisory capacities, allowing for comprehensive evaluation, strategic guidance, and program development aligned with stakeholder interests in the coal and steel industries. The model ensures that the program is subject to thorough assessment and guidance, drawing on both

internal and external expertise to achieve its objectives efficiently. The Coal and Steel Committee (COSCO), composed of Member State representatives and chaired by DG RTD, validates evaluation outcomes and monitors programme implementation. Then, the Coal Advisory Group (CAG) and the Steel Advisory Group (SAG), composed by individuals representing common stakeholder interests of the Coal and Steel sectors, provide advice on the overall development of the programme. Lastly, the Technical Groups (TGs), composed by experts from the Coal and Steel sectors appointed in their personal capacity, carry out portfolio analysis and support REA with F2P activities. The work undertaken by the AGs and TGs are shared systematically with the parent DG. REA additionally contributes to a 7-year monitoring and assessment report with input from external experts and holds annual coordination meetings with DG RTD. Strategic and technical guidance is channelled through the advisory and technical groups managed by REA in collaboration with the parent DG.

The **AGRIP MoU with DG AGRI** is very similar to the above models with regular coordination meetings at Director level and a series of joint operational processes, particularly around the grant lifecycle and procurement phases. Reporting focuses on real-time data sharing via CIFUS and Omega systems. DG AGRI's pre-approval is required for core decisions such as calls and evaluation results. This governance model enables close supervision and mutual accountability. Coordination is maintained through regular working-level exchanges rather than formal strategic forums.

REA's reporting to its parent DGs accurately reflects the Agency's operations and supports effective supervision. The use of distinct MoU allows the Agency to adapt to the different levels of strategic involvement, administrative control, and policy guidance expected by its parent DGs. Although this adds complexity, it also enables tailored oversight and supports REA's operational flexibility.

Interview findings confirm that REA's reporting system functions effectively, with parent DGs expressing satisfaction with the quality, structure, and timeliness of REA's reporting. However, some noted in the context of Horizon Europe that the high number of DGs involved can at times slow down the decision-making process.

While no significant shortcomings in the reporting process reflecting the operations of REA's activities were raised by interviewees, some stakeholders pointed to the need for enhanced collaboration and communication, particularly with regard to feedback to policy, a topic addressed in more depth in the section on feedback to policy and in the related case study included in the annexes to the cross-agency report.

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

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows:

Steering Committees meetings could be made more efficient by focusing on strategic discussions rather than operational detail.

The secondment system can be enhanced to strengthen links with the Commission.

Automated dashboards and shared digital platforms could support more efficient information exchange.

Across the 2021–2024 Annual Activity Reports, REA has consistently demonstrated its commitment to maintaining effective communication and reporting mechanisms with its parent DGs. The Annual Activity Report is based on EC corporate templates and instructions, going through a peer review at the highest level of the Commission, and closely coordinated by the R&I family. REA's reporting processes are well established, and cooperation with parent DGs

is generally characterised as constructive and timely. However, a few areas for potential improvement have been identified to further enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of these practices.

Interviewees generally considered REA's current reporting arrangements to be effective, providing parent Directorates-General with timely and comprehensive information to support supervision and decision-making. However, some suggestions were made to improve efficiency. Some interviewees noted that the large number of parent DGs involved in the Steering Committee can occasionally slow decision-making and make coordination more complex. They proposed focusing Steering Committee meetings more on strategic discussion and decision-making rather than on detailed presentations of operational data.

In this context, the **secondment of EC officials from the DGs** to posts of responsibility within the agencies plays an important role in maintaining institutional links with the parent DGs and supporting agency governance. Seconded officials are an important bridge between the Commission and REA, helping to align operational reporting with strategic objectives. However, interviews with REA staff indicate that this connection is not always perceived as fully reciprocal but rather hierarchical. In general, seconded officials expressed high satisfaction with the move to the Agency and found it an innovative and dynamic place of work. Strengthening the two-way engagement between the Agency and the Commission, through for example staff exchanges, could further enhance strategic coherence and mutual understanding in reporting relationships.

Furthermore, the increased use of digital tools has been identified as a way to improve both the timeliness and user-friendliness of reporting. Automated dashboards and shared digital platforms could support more efficient information exchange while reducing administrative burden on both sides.⁶³

⁶³ See REA AAR 2023, p. 6.

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?

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: Between 2021 and 2024, REA demonstrated growing operational efficiency across key indicators. For instance, the operational budget grew substantially, yet this trend is not followed by the number of staff. Beneficiaries and experts generally confirm that REA delivers effective and efficient work regarding various processes, including the grant agreement- and contract finalisation phase.

Efficiency of operations

Efficiency in the context of REA is reflected in its ability to handle large volumes of proposals, evaluations, and project monitoring with a high degree of professionalism and consistency. For example, between 2021 and 2024, REA consistently evaluated a high volume of proposals each year- demonstrating its capacity to manage high workloads within strict timelines.⁶⁴ The Agency employs the Commission's corporate evaluation processes to ensure that research proposals are assessed based on their merit, using standardised criteria and involving independent experts from diverse fields. Some REA units, in particular those managing high volume calls, make use of independent and experienced experts acting as "vice-chairs", who support the evaluation process and contribute to the overall quality of the evaluation, and do not evaluate the proposals themselves. Learning and improving assessment procedures from year to year are integral parts of REA's approach.

For Horizon 2020, REA managed approximately 18% of the programme's budget. Since the start of Horizon Europe in 2021, REA has managed about 24.5% of this programme's budget, which totals €93.5 billion (2021-2027).⁶⁵ In the current programming period, the number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) at REA increased, reflecting changes in its mandate and workload. In 2021, REA employed 867 FTE staff members, including new personnel integrated during the Horizon Europe transition. During that year the Agency expanded its workforce, by recruiting externally and adding new staff from other EU executive agencies and from DG RTD and DG CNECT to handle Horizon Europe and other new responsibilities such as EU Missions. In 2021, programme management for the largest action / programme, MSCA, was slightly adapted for efficiency purposes. Whereas MSCA Individual Fellowships and Postdoctoral Fellowships used to be managed by separate units (respectively A2 & A4) these are now all managed by Unit A2. This regrouping was supported by DG EAC.

The table *Table 6* below shows the operational and administrative budget for REA. REA experienced an expansion in its programme portfolio yet managed to scale up operations in a cost-conscious and efficient manner.

⁶⁴ REA annual reports 2021-2024.

⁶⁵ European Commission, Horizon Europe. Retrieved from: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en.

As expert management and Central Validation Services (CVS) are (corporate) support services that are unique to REA (not present in any other EA), the table [Table 6](#) presents staff and budgetary figures for those services separately.

Table 6 – Operational and administrative budget and staff of REA (excluding expert management and Central Validation Services)

Name	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Operational budget (M EUR) commitments	2,505.3	2,731.1	3,111.79	3,110.33	3,379.15	3,927.77
Operational budget (M EUR) payments	2,140.7	2,176.7	2,304.21	2,869.84	2,878.93	3,329.24
Administrative budget (M EUR), commitments made	56.45	58.76	65.37	71.87	77.35	85.32
Human resources at the level of the Agency (in FTE)	603	624	682	679	691	724
Operational staff; % of all staff	526 (87.2%)	552 (88.5%)	623 (91.3%)	621 (91.5%)	632 (91.5%)	662 (91.4%)
Administrative support and coordination staff; % of all staff	77 (12.8 %)	72 (11.5%)	59 (8.7%)	58 (8.5%)	59 (8.5%)	62 (8.6%)
Admin cost per €1 m operational	26,024	21,163	28,496	25,788	26,103	25,958

Source: AAR 2019-2024

Between 2021 and 2024, REA demonstrated growing operational efficiency across key indicators. While the operational budget (in payments) increased substantially—by approximately 44.5%—the number of operational staff (excluding expert management and CVS staff) rose by only 6.3%, and the administrative budget by 27.4%. This suggests that REA managed to scale up its programme responsibilities with a moderate increase in resources and is evidence of its capacity to achieve efficiency gains. Notably, administrative costs (excluding expert management- and CVS-related costs) as a share of the total budget declined from 2.8% in 2021 to 2.6% in 2024.⁶⁶ At the same time, the average administrative cost per staff member has increased, which reflects changes in staff composition, salary progression, high inflation figures during the period, and higher pricing for support on offer from EC central services through service level agreements (e.g. DIGIT, PMO, HR, BUDG, HR-DS, etc.). Taken together, the data suggest a trend toward greater cost-efficiency in REA's operations.

Table 7 – Budget and staffing expert management and central validation services

Name	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Administrative budget expert management and CVS (M EUR), commitments ⁶⁷	19.35	20.64	23.00	26.37	24.08	25.96

⁶⁶ The percentage share is calculated as: (Administrative Budget ÷ Total Budget) × 100.

⁶⁷ While this is not reported separately in the AAR, we have made this assumption by applying the same proportion of 'administrative budget, payments made' dedicated to expert management and CVS, to the commitments.

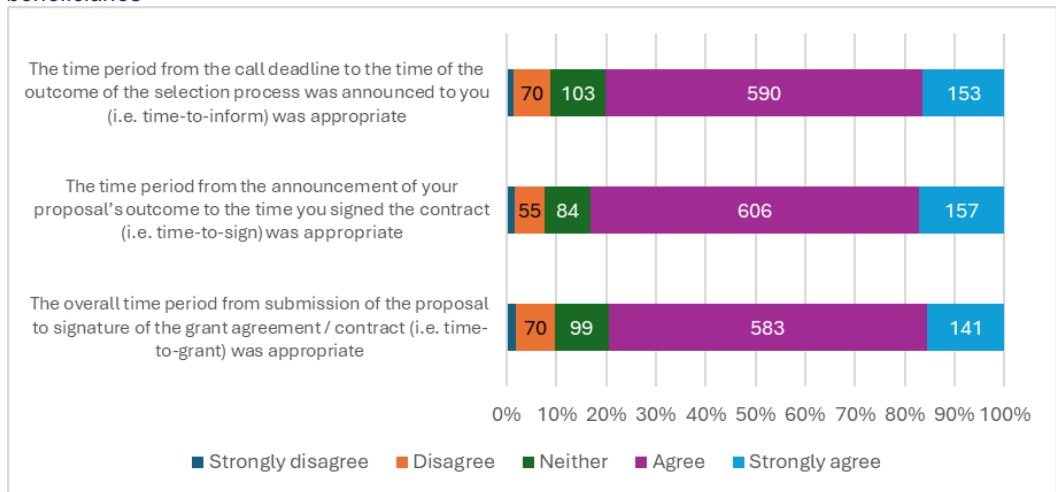
Expert management and CVS staff; % of all staff	150 (19.9%)	157 (20.1%)	186 (21,4%)	188 (21,7%)	185 (21.1%)	193 (21.0%)
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According to its internal workload monitoring, REA has experienced a steady increase in workload, with rises of 9% in 2022, 15% in 2023, and 14% in 2024 compared to the 2021 baseline.⁶⁸ This growing pressure stands in contrast to the assumptions underpinning the 2021 Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA), which forecasted a 6% efficiency gain for REA over the same period, based solely on budget-based staffing allocations. In response, REA took proactive steps to strengthen its workforce planning. In 2021, REA adapted its own internal workload assessment model based on actual project volumes rather than budget allocations to monitor and manage the evolution of the workload pressure on staff based on the number of projects being managed per FTE for each action and each operational unit.^{69,70} Since its implementation, the model has supported more accurate and flexible staff planning and has informed REA's internal resource allocations in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

In line with the signals on workload and work pressure, REA and other EAs have indicated to their parent DGs that efficiency gains 'have a limit', given that different waves of efficiency gains and simplification have already been implemented by REA since 2014.⁷¹ REA notes that the AGRIP programme continued to lead to a higher workload for the implementing unit. Furthermore, the MSCA, involve some of the highest numbers of projects and consequently, one of the highest workloads.

In addition, REA's grant management processes are perceived positively by beneficiaries, particularly with regard to the timeliness of key procedural milestones. According to the survey, 80% of respondents found the overall time-to-grant process appropriate, reflecting positively on REA's ability to deliver timely support.

Figure 11. Survey analysis: satisfaction with timeliness of REA during the grant/contract - beneficiaries



⁶⁸ REA, (2023), INFORMATION NOTE FOR REA STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING OF 12 OCTOBER 2023 - Workload assessment and staff allocation 2024.

⁶⁹ REA, (2022), INFORMATION NOTE FOR REA STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING OF 14 OCTOBER 2022 - Workload assessment and staff allocation 2023.

⁷⁰ REA, (2021), Workload assessment and staff allocation 2022.

⁷¹ See for example REA Management meeting, 09-01-2024.

Similarly, 84% were satisfied with the time-to-inform phase (from call deadline to communicating the outcome of the evaluation of proposals). The time-to-sign phase (from outcome announcement to signature of the grant agreement) received the highest satisfaction, with 83% of respondents rating it as appropriate. These high levels of satisfaction suggest that REA has effectively streamlined its operational processes to meet beneficiary expectations and ensure efficient programme delivery.

Furthermore, experts were generally positive about the time allocated to complete their tasks. However, a portion of respondents indicated that more time would have been beneficial. 16% of survey respondents involved as expert evaluator felt there was not enough time to review proposals, while 13% reported insufficient time for both final and progress reports.

Flexibility in operations

Resources for the agency is planned for a period of 7 years ahead through the MFF cycles. While this structures the delegation of tasks and supports financial planning it limits the flexibility of using resources. In some cases, as suggested by interviews, this could undermine the potential to take on new responsibilities — particularly when DGs are asked to pivot rapidly (e.g. new AI priorities or geopolitical crises affecting programme implementation, such as sanctions against Russian entities). Interviewees also indicate some tension between the DGs' political agility needs and the agencies' need for operational stability. REA requires predictable staffing and workflows to maintain performance and manage multiannual project cycles, yet DGs often must respond to short-notice political demands from Council or Parliament, creating some friction over roles and resourcing. This tension is especially visible when new work is requested but cannot be immediately absorbed into existing delegation structures or staffing envelopes. Resource constraints further impact REA's operations. The Agency is bound by a fixed staffing cap, which restricts its ability to scale its workforce to match increased programme and feedback to policy demands. This limitation was particularly evident during the launch of Horizon Europe, when the volume of proposals surged, placing significant pressure on the Agency's human resources. REA managed to address this challenge through internal adjustments and collaborative efforts.

4.2.2. Fit for Purpose

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

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: REA's organisational size and staffing structure are well calibrated to its mandate and workload. The agency has a lean and delivery-focused organisational structure, with relatively few administrative staff as opposed to operational staff. In addition, REA maintained a high occupation rate and level of staff engagement. A point of attention is the low level of confidence that the staff expresses in their professional future.

Organisation size & structure, use of available resources & adaptability

Stakeholder interviews broadly confirm that REA's organisational structure is fit for purpose, supporting effective implementation of programmes.

The ratio of staff members to the number of projects remained relatively stable, with values of 12.0 in 2021 and 11.6 in 2024. Similarly, the number of grants signed per staff member remained constant at 3.1 in 2021 and 2024 and 3.0 in 2023. Data for 2022 were excluded from this specific comparison due to disruptions linked to the delayed launch of Horizon Europe.

Table 8 – Indicators on Fit for Purpose

Indicator	2021	2022	2023	2024
# staff ⁷²	682	679	691	724
# operational staff ⁷³	623	621	632	662
# grants signed	2,081	2,371	2,105	2,244
# running projects (grants, excl. procurements)	7,452	7,819	7,711	7,686
Number of running projects per Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) operational staff member ⁷⁴	12.0	12.6	12.2	11.6

Source: AAR 2021-2024

The Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) shows that REA's organisational size and staffing structure are **well calibrated to its mandate and workload**. The agency's headcount and cost levels have remained close to projections, with only minor fluctuations, suggesting accurate workforce planning. The share of operational staff relative to administrative personnel continues to reflect a **lean and delivery-focused model**.

Furthermore, the workload assessment process, based on project volumes, duration, and project monitoring intensity, provides a rational and data-driven approach for adjusting internal structures. The capacity to redistribute staff between units offers flexibility, reducing the need for frequent reorganisations. This adaptability, coupled with high productivity levels, indicates that the agency's current size and structure are appropriate for the scale of programmes managed.

The CBA also provides evidence that REA makes **optimal use of available resources**. The agency manages higher programme volumes with stable staffing and lower costs than either the in-house or status quo scenarios. The productivity indicator (commitments per FTE) exceeding projections by 4% confirms that resources are used efficiently, with operational delivery maintained despite a constrained administrative base.

The cost distribution between operational and support functions continues to favour delivery, aligning with earlier findings that administrative expenditure has grown far more slowly than programme budgets. This balance supports both economy and efficiency, ensuring that the bulk of resources directly serve programme implementation rather than overhead. More information on the CBA can be found in section 4.4.

Human resource management

Over the 2021–2024 period, REA made sustained efforts to strengthen its human resource management in line with Commission priorities. This included adopting the Inter-Agency HR Strategy and Action Plan, hybrid working arrangements, and promoting gender balance, diversity, and inclusion. These initiatives helped reinforce the Agency's ability to respond to growing operational demands while maintaining high levels of staff engagement.

REA increased its workforce (excluding expert management and CVS staff) from 682 staff in 2021 to 724 in 2024, in line with its multiannual staffing plan and in response to expanded responsibilities, including the UK's association to Horizon Europe⁷⁵. Throughout most of the period, REA maintained a **high occupation rate**. A slight decrease to 94.4% was noted in 2024, mostly due to an additional staff allocation of 56 staff following the association of the UK, granted in late spring and for which recruitment efforts could only start around summer (after agreement

⁷² Excluding expert management and CVS staff.

⁷³ Excluding expert management and CVS staff.

⁷⁴ Excluding expert management and CVS staff.

of the REA Steering Committee) and for which many job-offers were issued with a starting date early 2025. Interviewees highlighted the competitive labour market and time to fill vacancies as areas requiring continued attention. In 2023 concerns were expressed by management about the availability of relevant profiles applying for vacancies. REA addressed these through the use of reserve lists, enhanced inter-agency collaboration, and modernised recruitment tools.

Table 9 – Staffing levels (occupation of posts)

Year	Target Occupation Rate	Actual
2021	>95%	97.9%
2022	>97.5%	98%
2023	>97.5%	Not explicitly stated
2024	>97.5%	94.4% (917 out of 971)

Source: REA Annual Activity Reports 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the development of **hybrid working arrangements and teleworking**. This has impacted the work of the Agency staff but has also largely impacted the work with external experts. **REA staff reported consistently high levels of engagement**. The 2024 Commission staff survey showed a 74% engagement score—slightly above the Commission average (73%) and below REA's 2021 result (77%). Satisfaction remained particularly high with role clarity and job content (82%), availability of resources (84%), and teamwork and collegiality (84%). A strong majority (80%) also expressed alignment with the Agency's objectives and mission. These indicators suggest that REA has sustained a motivated and committed workforce despite rising workloads and subsequent required overwork. Survey responses pointed to concerns in some areas. Notably, only **41% of staff expressed confidence in their professional future**—the lowest-scoring category. Learning and development received a modest 58% satisfaction rate, and wellbeing-related categories, including work-life balance (61%) and inclusion and fairness (63%), also scored comparatively lower. These trends reflect staff concerns about career progression, skills development, and workload pressures, particularly during peak periods resulting in overwork. In response, REA has implemented initiatives such as improved communication on internal mobility, promotion of job exchanges, and targeted wellbeing actions.

Table 10 – Staff engagement (Commission survey results)

Year	Target	Actual
2021	>69%	77%
2022	Maintain/improve	77% (EC: 72%)
2023	>72%	75% (EC: 73%)
2024	N/A	74% (EC: 73%)

Source: REA Annual Activity Reports 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024

Career progression for temporary agents within REA shows signs of internal dynamism — around 30% of TA 2f staff hold leadership roles (Deputy Head of Unit or Head of Sector). However, advancement to management positions remains blocked by regulatory constraints. Under the Commission's EA guidelines, middle and senior management posts are formally reserved for seconded Commission officials. While 66% of junior management roles are provided to TA 2f staff, the regulatory ceiling to access middle management functions continues to affect long-term prospects for TA 2f staff.

REA invested in broad **training initiatives**, including leadership development and hybrid learning formats. Knowledge exchange was supported through peer networks, job-shadowing, and staff exchanges with the Commission, though these exchanges were largely one-

directional. While appreciated by staff, such development efforts must be sustained to address concerns about professional future and learning opportunities.

Adaptability

REA demonstrates strong adaptability in managing periods of high workload and responding to emerging and unforeseen challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and the transition to Horizon Europe. The agency operates a flexible resource allocation model that allows it to redistribute staff between units and programmes as priorities evolve. Regular workload assessments and a “guided mobility” framework enable short-term redeployments without requiring structural changes, helping REA respond effectively to peaks in activity.

The agency’s response during the COVID-19 crisis exemplified its resilience: it rapidly transitioned to remote operations, maintaining the continuity of project evaluations and grant management. Similarly, REA successfully adapted to the operational implications of the UK’s reassociation to Horizon Europe which led to a rise in MSCA applications, and reallocated resources and streamlining procedures. Another example of adaptability is REA’s experience in managing the interim period between H2020 and Horizon Europe. The agency anticipated workload fluctuations and planned staffing accordingly to ensure a smooth transition between contracting periods without disrupting implementation.

In addition, the rise in the number of OCAs also required an attentive approach to planning and adaptability. While this increase was not fully foreseen in initial planning, the agency managed to integrate additional staff efficiently and maintain productivity levels. This flexibility has helped REA sustain operational continuity even in times of rapid programme alterations and regulatory change.

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

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: REA’s efficiency is supported by structured evaluation processes, a strong applicant-oriented approach, and growing digitalisation that reduces administrative workload. Collaboration with the Commission, clear procedures, and skilled staff also contribute positively. The Agency’s focus on automation and simplification, including the introduction of lump-sum funding, has enhanced operational processes and allowed staff to focus more on monitoring and results.

At the same time, efficiency is constrained by recurring peak workloads, and the temporary increase in workload linked to new funding models such as lump sums. New IT tools and the need for continuous adaptation also add pressure.

Many of the driving and hindering factors presented for the effectiveness of REA also influence the efficiency of the Agency. For instance, strong collaboration with the Commission, well-established structures in the Agency, and good leadership and staff all contribute to efficiency. The hindering factor of peak periods and work pressure requires specific mention, as overwork can distort the assessment of efficiency. Various other specific driving and hindering factors have been identified:

Factors driving the efficiency

- **Structured evaluation processes:** REA applies the Commission’s standard approach to evaluating its funding programmes. The involvement of multiple scientific panels and the use of a rigorous evaluation framework ensure that proposals are assessed fairly and consistently. This helps upholding high standards and strengthen the overall credibility of the funding process.
- **Applicant-centric focus:** The Agency prioritises the needs of applicants and beneficiaries, fostering a supportive environment. This service-oriented approach streamlines interactions

and enhances the overall experience for stakeholders, potentially leading to better outcomes and higher satisfaction.

- **Digitalisation efforts:** In terms of digitalisation, REA is implementing several initiatives to enhance operational efficiency. The Agency employs automated evaluation systems for keyword searches in support of the allocation of proposals to experts and reducing manual sorting efforts. Digital communication tools facilitate timely interactions between researchers and project coordinators, improving responsiveness. In addition, online reporting mechanisms simplify progress submissions for beneficiaries, lowering administrative burdens and improving data accuracy.

Factors hindering the efficiency

- Various factors hinder optimising efficiency. These include recurring peak workloads and temporary increase in workload linked to new funding models as well as additional requirements in the assessments of applications like research security and Gender equality programmes which require changes in procedures and resources to implement.
- The Agency has reported difficulties in re-allocating staff across programmes. Ad-hoc short term solutions are possible and have been used by REA, but the process for long term shifts of staff was seen by REA as burdensome and requiring time. However, it should be noted that under the current framework, a re-allocation of staff across programmes, both in the short and long term, is feasible – taking into account the budget constraints - and can be used more extensively if and when appropriate.
- Feedback from experts and applicants suggests that while REA's procedures function well overall, certain structural aspects could be optimised to enhance operational efficiency. Observations included the need to modernise IT platforms and streamline evaluation workflows.

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?

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: The implementation of the efficiency measures outlined in the 2021 ex-ante cost-benefit analysis has had a limited impact on the productivity of the Agency. While REA's commitment to continuous improvement is evident, given its attempts to simplify financial reporting through lump sums and enhancing feedback mechanisms, challenges remain in navigating complex IT tools and managing increased workloads without proportional staffing increases.

This EQ examines the extent to which the efficiency measures outlined in the 2021 ex-ante cost-benefit analysis (CBA) have effectively contributed to increased productivity within the Agency. The CBA aimed not only to generate efficiency gains, through larger budgets and programme groupings, but also to enhance productivity through structural and procedural improvements.

Identified improvement measures for efficiency in 2021

The findings of the analysis of efficiency conducted by the Commission in 2021 as part of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (2021 CBA) outlined several measures to improve REA's productivity and responsiveness.⁷⁶ A key focus was streamlining administrative processes, including the adoption of lump sum funding to reduce financial reporting burdens and clustering calls for proposals to optimise resource allocation. Digital transformation would

⁷⁶ EC, 2021 CBA.

play a critical role, with recommendations for advanced IT tools to automate tasks linked to checks on proposal submissions, financial checks, and remote evaluations, reducing manual efforts and improving accuracy. Optimising human and financial resources was another priority, emphasising dynamic workforce allocation during peak periods and enhanced staff training in digital tools and evaluation methods. The analysis also stressed performance monitoring through clear metrics to ensure effective resource utilisation. Enhanced stakeholder engagement was suggested, including better communication platforms, structured feedback mechanisms, and capacity-building workshops for applicants, particularly to adapt to new funding models. Collaboration with Directorates-General and other agencies was emphasised to align processes and share best practices. Improvements in monitoring, evaluation, and data analytics were highlighted to foster continuous process refinement. Finally, contingency planning and scalable IT infrastructure were identified as essential for handling unexpected challenges, ensuring resilience and operational continuity. In the next sections, we will elaborate on these issues.

Efficiency improvement measures implemented

The 2021 CBA called on the agency to seek efficiency gains, and REA has taken steps wherever possible in its remit. Further efficiency measures require changes to corporate procedures or the work programme which the Commission is responsible for. In this context, the introduction of simplified funding mechanisms, such as a wider use of lump sum funding is important. If used widely, lump sums can decrease administrative complexities and allow for better resource allocation. According to the European Court of Auditors, although lump sum funding initially required significant adjustment and negotiation efforts, this measure can improve the efficiency of grant management, allowing staff to focus more on monitoring project results rather than verifying financial claims.⁷⁷ Although simplification measures can ease the burden on beneficiaries, as confirmed during interviews, several Agency interviewees noted that they initially increased REA's internal workload. This was particularly the case during the lead-in period for the introduction of the lump-sum funding model, when additional checks on project budgets were required and evaluation procedures needed to be updated. Efficiency gains in downstream management and monitoring are expected but have not yet materialised. Such temporary workload peaks are considered normal when a new system is introduced, as staff must familiarise themselves with revised procedures and control mechanisms. As REA gains more experience with the lump-sum approach, further efficiency improvements are expected, with the balance of effort progressively shifting from front-loaded verification at proposal stage towards streamlined implementation and less intensive reporting and cost controls.

REA has implemented clustered evaluations of calls in certain programme parts (e.g. Cluster 3, MSCA, Cluster 2): organised into two cycles per year instead of multiple deadlines and evaluation sessions throughout the year. According to REA, this measure has allowed better resource allocation, improved predictability for applicants, and enhanced the Agency's capacity to manage workloads effectively.⁷⁸

Regular workload assessments and collaboration with DGs have also contributed to improved efficiency, enabling REA to effectively align its operations with shared priorities. REA has developed a workload analysis model, a complementary tool, which helps fine-tune staff allocation on an annual basis.

The Agency uses the Commission's corporate IT tools to support various stages of the programme lifecycle, from proposal submission and evaluation to project reporting and monitoring. For instance, the adoption of plagiarism detection software has enhanced the integrity of the evaluation process, while digital platforms have facilitated remote evaluations and online collaboration among experts. The benefits of the digital methods in place were particularly evident during the pandemic. Overall, REA managed to evaluate over 80% of

⁷⁷ European Court of Auditors, 2021.

⁷⁸ REA Annual Report, 2022.

proposals remotely, thereby significantly reducing logistical complexities, enabling broader participation by international experts, and reducing the environmental impact by reducing travelling of experts to the Brussels-based central evaluation facility.⁷⁹

Based on the ex-ante CBA, the Executive Agencies were supposed to benefit from a number of measures to become more efficient, such as:

- Organising more efficiently and effectively the necessary feedback to policy;
- Relying on new or improved IT tools;
- Implementing additional simplification measures made possible by the latest revision of Financial Regulation, like broader use of lump sums;
- Increasing the average grant size where possible, keeping in mind delivery of policy objectives;
- Organising calls and procurement in a less resource intensive way;
- Reassessing the reporting requirements;
- 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.

Based on the interviews conducted with stakeholders at REA, it appears that the measures outlined in the ex-ante cost-benefit analysis (CBA) of 2021 have not all been implemented to their full extent (see Table below), and this impacts on the Agency's productivity.

Table 11 – Efficiency measures and implementation by the Agency

Measure	Implementation
New or improved IT tools	Corporate IT solutions have been progressively rolled out across the Agency. While their implementation requires time and staff adaptation, they are generally performing well and contributing to more efficient processes. Continued automation is expected to further reduce workload and minimise reliance on manual tasks.
Simplification measures	The introduction of lump sums aims to simplify financial reporting and has successfully reduced the administrative burden for beneficiaries. This shift also increased the complexity and workload for the Agency in the early days of implementation. However, challenges and difficulties are decreasing as more experience is accumulated. Some interviewees highlighted that IT support for defining and reviewing lump-sum budgets by work package is not yet available. While the current workflow using excel tables is undesirable and inefficient, this already being reviewed and addressed.
Increasing the average grant size	According to interviews with REA staff this has not materialised to the extent expected. It has not been taken into account sufficiently in the preparation of work programmes.
Less resource-intensive calls and procurement	The Agency is contributing to reflections by the Commission on how to streamline calls and procurement processes, but the current structure still involves significant workload.
Reassessing reporting requirements	The Agency is actively contributing to a reassessment of reporting requirements.

Flexibility in staff allocation

REA recognizes the need for flexibility in staff allocation to address workload variations across programmes. Its workload assessment model, grounded in the 2020 resource baseline and using programme-specific drivers such as budget and project volumes, accounts for differences in complexity between programme parts. Even though REA has been sometimes able to internally re-allocate staff when needed, flexibility remains constrained, according to Agency's staff.

Source: Authors' elaboration

In conclusion, the implementation of the efficiency measures outlined in the 2021 ex-ante cost-benefit analysis has had a limited impact on the productivity of the Agency. While there have been attempts in areas such as simplifying financial reporting through lump sums and enhancing feedback mechanisms, challenges remain in navigating complex IT tools and re-allocating staff when needed. The Agency's commitment to continuous improvement is evident, yet it highlights the need for ongoing assessment and adaptation of strategies to ensure that the intended benefits of these measures are fully realised. By addressing the identified challenges and allowing for greater flexibility in operations, the Agency can enhance its overall efficiency and better meet its objectives in supporting research and innovation across Europe.

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?

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: REA continued its attempts to reduce its environmental impact. This includes reducing its energy consumption in REA premises, limiting travel for both experts and staff and opting for more sustainable travel. In addition, REA earned recognition for its sustainable events and processes.

Between 2021 and 2024, REA undertook a range of measures to reduce its environmental impact, as reflected in its Annual Activity Reports. One of the most significant changes was the continued implementation of hybrid working arrangements, which substantially decreased the Agency's environmental footprint by limiting daily commuting and reducing energy consumption in office premises. This shift, initially prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, was maintained in subsequent years, reinforcing more sustainable patterns of work.

Throughout the period, REA also consistently limited business travel, particularly air travel, by prioritising remote collaboration and restricting missions to essential needs. Next to that, REA invested in sustainable travel (so not only reduction), which is generally more expensive and therefore has budget implications. The reports for 2023 and 2024 confirmed that travel-related greenhouse gas (GHG) carbon emissions remained well below pre-pandemic levels, suggesting a structural shift in environmental awareness/behaviour. The Agency also developed tools to track travel-related emissions and incorporated sustainability criteria into mission planning. Before the pandemic, REA hosted approximately 6,000 expert evaluators on-site annually. That number has dropped to around 600 (primarily panel chairs)⁸⁰, meaning that the CO₂ emissions of experts travelling to the central evaluation facility in Brussels decreased from 25 kg per expert

⁸⁰ This is reflected in the survey results, where 77% of the external experts indicated they worked entirely remotely for REA.

day in 2019 to 7 kg per expert day in 2023. Similarly, REA staff travel has been significantly reduced, with mission planning now incorporating CO₂ emission considerations alongside logistical feasibility. For short and medium range distances, staff is encouraged to take the train rather than a flight. This has led to higher travel costs (long train rides are often more expensive than flights), but also to a significant reduction of annual CO₂ emissions per staff member (177 kg in 2023 as opposed to 320kg in 2019). REA's management notes that restricting travel even further is close to impossible, as some travel remains "an integral and indispensable part of the implementation of the programme", in particular for the AGRIP programme which includes high-level missions to other continents. A certain number of on-site visits (and therefore travel) is also required to deliver on the objective of proximity to programme participants.

In parallel, the Agency advanced its efforts to digitalise internal processes, reducing paper consumption and supporting more efficient, paperless administration. These changes were evident in the digital handling of grant applications, remote project evaluations, and the wider use of electronic signatures.

In the 2023 Annual Activity Report, REA noted that environmental considerations were increasingly being incorporated into procurement procedures, particularly for services. This included encouraging contractors to meet environmental standards and aligning with broader Commission objectives to promote sustainability in purchasing practices. While no detailed metrics were provided, the report emphasised REA's alignment with the Commission's green public procurement objectives. The 2024 Annual Activity Report continued this theme, stating that REA aimed to further integrate sustainability criteria into its procurement processes. It highlighted efforts to ensure that service providers were sensitised to environmental issues and motivated to adopt sustainable practices, particularly in facility-related contracts and ICT equipment purchasing. However, as stated in the 2023 report, and considering that procurement operations managed by REA remain limited, there was no quantified reporting of the proportion or value of green contracts, indicating that the implementation of green procurement was still evolving.

REA's activities are in line with the European Green Deal and has developed an action plan that is in line with the overall approach for the Commission's "GREENING THE COMMISSION" Communication (Directorate-General Human Resources and Security, 05/04/2022)⁸¹. The "GREENING THE COMMISSION" 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. The agency's sustainable events won awards for three consecutive years, and in 2024, contributed to revising the European Commission's guidelines for sustainable events.⁸¹ In 2021 REA initiated the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) registration process. In turn, in 2023, REA completed EMAS registration. As part of the EMAS Network's annual benchmarking, REA performed well, scoring 10/10 in 2021, 2022, and 2024, and 9/10 in 2023, consistently above the executive agency average. These results are due to factors such as participation in EMAS meetings and trainings, the presence of local volunteer groups, involvement in surveys, and the organisation of local events. For instance, in 2023, the agency 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. Moreover, REA promoted staff engagement through awareness-raising campaigns and participation in EU-wide sustainability initiatives such as EU Green Week. While these initiatives reflect a clear and sustained commitment to environmental sustainability, the Agency's environmental impact could be further minimised. Although impacting on only a small share of its operations, the integration of comprehensive environmental criteria into all procurement activities could strengthen the sustainability of external operations. There may also be scope to support more sustainable commuting practices

⁸¹ Annual reports 2021-2024

among staff, including through targeted incentives or improved facilities for cycling and public transport use.

4.2.4. Digitalisation

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

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

The key findings in relation to these evaluation questions are as follows: REA is at the forefront of integrating new tools and systems and closely collaborates with CIC to continuously improve IT systems. REA also actively explores opportunities for improvements and mitigating risks related to AI. The Agency performed well in the cyber readiness assessments by DG DIGIT, although cybersecurity incidents were much more frequent in 2024 than in the years before.

Overall, REA achieved a high level of digital maturity, though greater flexibility in tailoring corporate tools and expanding automation could further enhance future performance.

Overall efforts for digitalisation

REA uses the Commission's corporate IT systems and infrastructure and has little control over most of its IT environment. However, where there is some leeway, REA has undertaken several initiatives to digitalise its activities, such as digital workflows, virtual meeting platforms and online communication channels, showing leadership in tool development, governance, and digital practices. REA reports progress in several digitalisation areas such as (1) Digital Transformation and IT Systems, (2) IT Security and Cybersecurity Measures, (3) Data, Information, and Knowledge Management and (4) Data Protection and Privacy Compliance. Overall, strong efforts have been made in adopting and integrating corporate IT tools and, in line with audit findings, specific efforts were made regarding validation services and expert management. Next to that, the adoption of AI is an important development towards the future that REA is actively working on. The table further in this section gives an overview of digitalisation-related indicators.

Digital transformation & IT systems

REA adopted and integrated corporate tools such as eGrants, eProcurement, and eContract⁸² into its operations, while also transitioning internal systems like OMEGA (budget forecast module) into corporate environments. The Agency prepared for the rollout of SUMMA, the new Commission financial management system, which started in early 2025. The Agency also embraced Microsoft 365 and SharePoint Online, enabling teamwork, document sharing, and automated workflows. As part of this effort, REA digitised several internal processes, including expert registration and payments. The creation of a new Horizon Europe Operational Notebook (HEON) – a central repository for templates and procedures across the project lifecycle – speeds up the onboarding process for newcomers.⁸³ Overall, 96% of the corporate digital strategy principles are implemented in 2024, which surpasses its target (95%) and is a

⁸² REA Annual Work Programmes 2021-2024. Annex 2023. REA participated in the eProcurement pilot, collaborating with the JRC and DG DIGIT to onboard framework contracts and contribute to the development of an eProcurement suite for EC services. In 2024: REA continued applying eProcurement and participated in the eContract module pilot.

⁸³ List of Unit and Network contributions to improve REA's internal control framework 2024.

significant increase compared to 2021 (63%). Similarly, 95% of processes have been automated through digital solutions in 2024 (60% in 2021).⁸⁴

One of the most impactful changes came through the overhaul of expert management. The Common Implementation Centre (CIC at DG RTD), in close collaboration with REA, replaced the (outdated) EMI system with the Expert Common Service (ECS), which is now operational and integrated with both COMPASS and SUMMA as a corporate tool. This transition streamlined the expert lifecycle—from validation to contracting and payments—and allowed REA to manage 60% of all expert-related operations across executive agencies. Although an increasing number of submitted proposals to be evaluated have added workload, the team dealing with expert management was, thanks to ECS, able to shift staff across tasks (e.g., from contracting to payments) in response to seasonal peaks. The ECS platform marked a shift from top-down tool development to a more collaborative, co-designed model involving multiple agencies and governance structures. The new IT system is well received by the interviewed experts; all experienced it as easy to manage (81% experts agreed in the survey). The Agency also participated in the Commission’s eProcurement and eContract pilot programmes and supported the development of new internal control monitoring tools like Centrics. REA also streamlined beneficiary reporting through the introduction of structured templates in the SyGMA system, simplifying data collection while improving policy relevance.

Cybersecurity

In parallel, REA strengthened its cybersecurity and data protection measures by updating IT security plans, intensifying staff training⁸⁵, stimulating awareness⁸⁶ and ensuring EUDPR compliance.⁸⁷ A data governance framework was put in place, and tools like EU Login and SECUNDA were adopted to support secure access and authentication. Moreover, REA performed well in the cyber readiness assessments by DG DIGIT highlighting a high level of compliance and maturity of REA’s cybersecurity performance.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, cybersecurity incidents were much more frequent in 2024 (10) than in the years 2021-2023 (between four and five).⁸⁹

Table 12 – Indicators on Digitalisation

Indicator	2021	2022	2023	2024
Degree of implementation of the digital strategy principles by the most important IT solutions (%)	63%	73%	91%	96%
Percentage of implementation of the corporate principles for data governance for REA key data assets (%)	50%	71%	71%	71%
Proportion of processes that have been automated through digital solutions (%)	60%	73%	91%	95%
Number of cybersecurity incidents	4	4	5	10

⁸⁴ AAR Annex 11 2021-2024.

⁸⁵ Staff attendance to data protection compliance trainings rose from 55% in 2021 to 73% in 2024. Source: AAR Annex 11 2021-2024.

⁸⁶ For instance, by organising ‘Cybersecurity Roadshows’. For more information, see: List of Unit and Network contributions to improve REA’s internal control framework 2024.

⁸⁷ REA Annual Work Programmes 2021-2024.

⁸⁸ Information from REA staff.

⁸⁹ Sources: Data Breach Register, IC System Assessment and RMIC Reports.

Number of digital training programmes provided and uptake (employee participation and completion rates)	55%	70%	70%	73%
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Source: AARs, Data Breach Register, IC System Assessment, RMIC Reports, ICMC status reports

Collaboration with the Common Implementation Centre

Like the other executive agencies, REA relies on the Common Implementation Centre (CIC) for the development and maintenance of many of its operational IT tools. The CIC helps with the harmonisation of tools and procedures and REA, as the biggest agency implementing a wide range of Horizon Europe programme parts, is maintaining regular and constructive links with the CIC. The CIC, in conjunction with the relevant business process governances, has to prioritise its activities. This can delay developments relevant to REA operations and reduce its perceived agility. For example, the eGrants system used for grant management is considered reliable and user-friendly for standard processes, serving both REA and beneficiaries well. However, challenges arise when dealing with non-standard or exceptional cases. These scenarios are not always supported by the system, requiring manual intervention, which increases workload and slows down processing. REA as well as other stakeholders regularly and formally request improvements from the CIC to address these gaps which are analysed and prioritised in the relevant business process governances according to their corporate relevance i.e. in the light of the needs of other funding programmes under direct management towards the eGrants suite of tools.

4.3. Coherence

4.3.1. Coherence of the Programme Portfolio

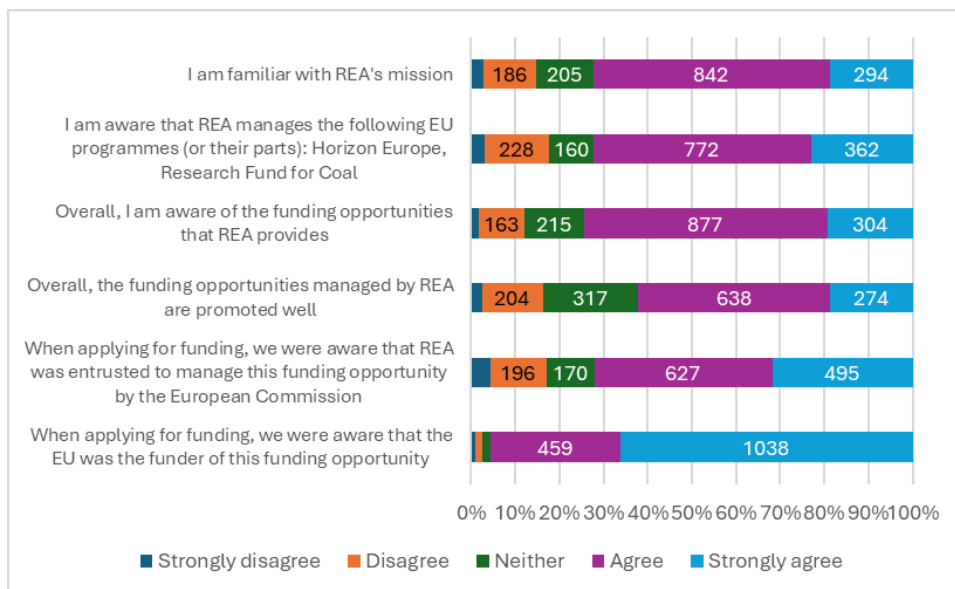
EQ16: To what extent have there been overlaps, gaps, inconsistencies, complementarities within the programme portfolio managed by the Agency and how are these addressed?

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: The REA portfolio is largely coherent, with no systemic overlaps or gaps documented and several examples of proactive alignment (e.g., REA–EACEA collaborations, joint teams under the Feedback-to-Policy framework). Isolated overlaps/inconsistencies persist in steel-related topics (RFCS vs. Clean Steel Partnership), creating applicant confusion and fragmented follow-up. Overall, coherence issues are handled mainly via informal mechanisms (staff exchanges, ad-hoc meetings); formal monitoring is limited.

REA manages a **research-focused portfolio** (in line with its name) including for agriculture an extension to promotion activities. It is a broad, multi-DG portfolio under Horizon 2020/Horizon Europe (MSCA; Research Infrastructures; Cluster 2 – Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society; Cluster 3 – Civil Security for Society; Cluster 6 – Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment; Widening Participation; and Reforming and Enhancing the European R&I system) alongside the Central Validation Service. During the current mandate the portfolio expanded smoothly to include AGRIP (transferred from CHAFEA) and RFCS, whose integration was supported by staff moving from DG RTD.

The delegated parts of the programme were governed by common rules and procedures under the respective programmes. The evidence from the stakeholder consultation suggests that the Agency’s portfolio is largely seen as consistent, without overlaps or gaps. This view is shared by both staff in the Agency and staff in the parent DGs.

Figure 12. Awareness programme delegation



Monitoring systems and available documentation provide limited insights into overlaps, gaps, inconsistencies or complementarities within the programme portfolio and how these have been identified and/or addressed. Interviewees mention that issues are usually identified through staff awareness or collaboration with other EAs and DGs rather than through formalised systems. A notable example of complementary work is the collaboration between REA and EACEA on Cultural Heritage projects in Horizon Europe Cluster 2. When overlapping projects were detected, the agencies proactively aligned their visibility strategies and co-organised events to create synergies, particularly to elevate smaller EACEA-funded initiatives. To address coherence issues, REA is increasingly engaging in inter-agency coordination, often through informal networks or in response to specific challenges. Staff exchanges, ad hoc coordination meetings, and project-level cooperation help fill gaps and avoid duplication. However, interviewees mentioned potential further improvement in cooperation for evaluation processes, programme alignment, and feedback loops between policy and implementation.

Furthermore, in 2020, in preparation for Horizon Europe, DG RTD established a Collaborative Framework for Feedback to Policy to serve as a common reference for implementing feedback to policy activities, notably with the introduction of joint teams composed of parent DGs and agencies. Overlaps and inconsistencies have not been stated in relevant documentation, nor have stakeholders been able to identify these during interviews.

Despite these measures, challenges remain. The complexity and integration of diverse objectives result in occasional inefficiencies. Overlaps and inconsistencies are visible in certain areas, such as the Research Fund for Coal and Steel (RFCS). The thematic overlap between projects implemented by REA and HaDEA (which manages steel research topics for the Clean Steel Partnerships under Cluster 4 for Horizon Europe) has at times led to fragmented project follow-up and delays in information sharing. In this example, it makes it more difficult to streamline efforts in areas related to industrial innovation. Interviewed applicants indicate that they face difficulties when understanding whether to apply for calls under the RFCS or the Clean Steel Partnership and suggest improvements in branding and communication.

4.3.2. Division of Tasks between the Agency and the Parent DGs

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

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: The delimitation of responsibilities between REA and parent DGs is predominantly clear and appropriate, supported by robust legal/operational instruments and active oversight; where temporary blurring occurs, mainly in policy-intensive actions (CSAs, Missions, F2P), it is addressed through MoUs, joint teams, and regular coordination.

Structure for the division of tasks

The division of responsibilities between REA and its parent DGs is generally well-defined and operationalised.⁹⁰ The delegation of tasks to REA is governed by the Delegation Act, which establishes the Agency's mandate, including its responsibility for managing specific programmes. Each DG is considered a "parent-DG" if they are responsible for a programme or action that REA administers.

REA handles the operational and technical aspects of programme management, including call management, financial management, and dissemination of project results. In contrast, the

⁹⁰ C_2021_952_F1_ANNEX_EN_V4_P1_1117997.PDF

parent DGs are responsible for strategic direction, policymaking, and setting the broad objectives for the programmes through the bi-annual work programmes. The lead parent, DG RTD oversees the overall monitoring and supervision of the Agency, particularly in relation to horizontal issues.⁹¹ The other parent DGs are responsible for supervising specific programmes, in particular through the involvement of their representatives sitting in the Steering Committee (SC) of the Agency.⁹² The Steering Committee, which meets at least four times a year, plays a key role in managing REA alongside its Director. The SC reviews updates on REA's programme implementation, workload, and efficiency, and provides advice on strategic documents, like the annual work programme. The Committee takes its Decisions by a simple majority of its vote by SC members. In the event of a tie, the Chair shall have the casting vote. Observers from DG HR, DG EMPL and DG ENV attend without voting rights. Nevertheless, it has been standing practice of the Committee to seek and adopt decisions by consensus among all members and observers.

In addition, REA is represented in several governance and operational bodies involved with the programming activities, both on managerial level as on operational level:

- REA takes part in the Horizon Europe Work programme group which is the working group through which the programming of the (mostly) biannual HE work programmes are coordinated.⁹³
- During the programming period, the EC is in close contact with the REA Call Planning team.
- REA is represented in the weekly RTD Directors meetings where the HE programming activities are often discussed.
- REA is represented in the HE Executive Committee where programming and implementation aspects are discussed and agreed.
- REA participates in different implementation working groups coordinated by the CIC (submission and evaluation etc...) who also discuss the implementation of specific policy decisions (2-stage calls, simplification activities).
- REA is involved at Cluster level discussions in the programming exercise (e.g. participating in thematic workshops related to Cluster 2).

As regards validation services, see the case study in the Annex document.

Functionality of the division of tasks

The division of tasks has clear roles outlined in the Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) between REA and its parent DGs, and in the more detailed vademecum of procedures which is maintained and updated by the Common Implementation Centre. For example, DG RTD oversees REA's horizontal operations, while other DGs, such as DG EAC, DG AGRI, DG CNECT, DG EMPL, DG HOME and DG ENV, monitor their specific (parts of) programmes. Each DG is also responsible for reviewing significant changes in REA's procedures and systems. There are regular interactions between REA and the parent DGs to ensure that the Agency is following the correct procedures and effectively implementing programmes. The programme-specific Memoranda of Understanding ensure that tasks like audits, reporting, and performance reviews are coordinated between REA and the respective parent DGs. Specific procedures for programme implementation, such as call management, financial management, and dissemination, are clearly defined. This is reflected through the staff opinion surveys, where in

⁹¹ Commission Decision, Article 2(2), Page 5, Document: C_2021_952_F1_COMMISSION_DECISION_EN_V5_P1_1116819.PDF

⁹² Commission Decision, Article 2(2), Page 5, Document: C_2021_952_F1_COMMISSION_DECISION_EN_V5_P1_1116819.PDF

⁹³ This group is coordinated by RTD.G.3 and aims at harmonizing the programming across the different HE programme parts.

the years 2021-2024 over 90% of REA staff indicated that roles and responsibilities between REA and the parent DGs are clearly defined.

For specific programmes, the division of tasks is also clearly defined. For example, in the case of the RFCS and AGRIP, REA is primarily responsible for call management and programme execution, while the parent DGs, namely DG RTD and DG AGRI, play roles in providing strategic oversight, policy advice, and legal interpretation.

Despite this framework, challenges in the delimitation of responsibilities have been identified by some Commission interviewees. The transition to Horizon Europe introduced new programme features, such as EU Missions, which required close collaboration between REA and the DGs. Collaboration occasionally blurred the lines of responsibility, particularly in areas where policy direction and operational implementation intersect. A practical example is the implementation of some Coordination and Support Actions where, due to their policy nature, full and sustained involvement of policy officers from the Parent DGs is required. This can in practice complicate the implementation which remains under the exclusive control of the authorising officer in the Agency. Another example, in 2022, the Agency's role in providing feedback to policymakers through the Common Framework for Feedback to Policy regarding EU Missions involved a degree of strategic input that required careful coordination to avoid overlaps and ensure clarity in roles.

Strong working relationships between REA staff and their counterparts in the Commission play a key role in enhancing coordination. Regular interaction, openness, and mutual trust foster smooth communication and enable REA to adapt its project-level support (e.g., policy briefs) to evolving policy needs. A good example is Cluster 3, where DG HOME policy officers, also acting as security area coordinators, meet monthly with REA project officers to exchange project updates, discuss events and demos, and share policy developments, including spontaneous policy recommendations. This collaboration works well. Also, while formal structures exist, such collaborative ties complement institutional arrangements and prove effective regardless of the duration of the relationship, as demonstrated also by the positive engagement between REA and newer parent DGs such as DG ENV. As regards validation services, see CVS case study (Annex 1.6).

4.3.3. Feedback to Policy

EQ18: How effective are the policy feedback 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 policy feedback activities are monitored? What are the areas for improvement, if any?

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

The key findings in relation to this evaluation question are as follows: REA's policy-feedback channels are broadly effective and valued, and the Agency does identify and communicate policy-relevant project results, but timeliness, depth, and flexibility vary across areas.

REA does provide effective feedback to policy, evidenced by sustained DG engagement and positive assessments of F2P outputs; effectiveness is strongest where coordination is routine and two-way, and weaker where policy needs shift rapidly or cut across agency silos.

Feedback to policy channels and mechanisms

REA employs several feedback channels and mechanisms to facilitate information flows between the Agency and its parent DGs on the content and results of projects. The perceived effectiveness of the feedback to policy channels, means, and methods employed by the Agency, particularly regarding communication with the DGs, is overall regarded as positive.⁹⁴ The process of ensuring an adequate information flow between the Agency and the Commission services, particularly concerning project content and result, is prominent on the agenda of the Agency and the parent DGs.⁹⁵

One of the primary feedback mechanisms is the Common Framework for Feedback to Policy (F2P),⁹⁶ introduced to systematically channel insights from funded Horizon Europe projects into policymaking. This framework involves clustering related projects, analysing their outcomes, and presenting findings in a way that informs policy development. These activities should ensure that project results are leveraged to address policy gaps and inform legislative improvements. Key elements of this include the centralised F2P structure, dedicated F2P focal points within REA's operational units, regular coordination meetings with policy officers from the DGs, and formalised feedback plans to align the available capacities in the Agency to provide value adding F2P deliverables with policy priorities. REA has made strides in identifying and informing DGs about the most relevant project results for policy. REA established a new Knowledge Network, seen as best practice, and working across all REA operational units to bring together knowledge and expertise in F2P. It has initiated an interagency F2P group that shares good practices and focuses on horizontal topics cutting across organisational boundaries. The F2P team at REA, which serves as the central hub for these activities, works closely with and coordinates the work

⁹⁴ Some interviewees and DGs are more positive than others. For example, DG AGRI and DG RTD have expressed some concerns and emphasize two-way communication to grasp and better understand the needs and possibilities on both sides - DG and agency.

⁹⁵ See for example, SC meeting 12-21 or SC Meeting 06-23.

⁹⁶ This Framework has been established by the Common Implementation Centre, Towards a "feedback to policy" framework in Horizon Europe, 2020 and Commission Decision of 15.12.2022 establishing guidelines for the establishment and operation of executive agencies financed from the EU budget and other sources.

of project officers for extracting and disseminating policy-relevant results from projects, for example by requesting policy briefs from projects, policy roundtables or a 'coordinators day'. In addition, the team has developed a systematic approach to identifying relevant data through methods like trend analysis, project evaluations, and the extraction of insights from indirect actions.

The annual F2P plan

REA works with an annual F2P plan, which is developed in collaboration with the DGs. This plan helps ensure that the Agency's deliveries are strategically aligned with the most relevant and pressing policy needs. The annual F2P planning cycle allows REA to engage with DGs proactively and co-develop a list of priorities for the year, thus ensuring that feedback is both timely and relevant. The Agency has also focused on enhancing its thematic coordination, for example, in areas like the Green Deal, digitalisation, and innovation, which are core areas of EU policy. The F2P framework put in place by REA and the annual F2P plans are overall considered positively by all parent DGs.

For example, since several years the F2P plan of REA with DG HOME in Cluster 3 (Civil Security for Society) of Horizon Europe contains the annual 'Projects to Policy Seminar', in which representatives of newly starting European security research projects inform policymakers about their activities and get informed about latest EU policy developments. Interviewees from the Commission praise this initiative as it helps to ensure alignment between ongoing research and evolving policy needs. Another platform facilitating cooperation between policymakers and EU project representatives is the Community for European Research and Innovation for Security (CERIS) managed by DG HOME. REA colleagues actively participate in CERIS, which organises every year up to 20 events on security-related topics, bringing together researchers and academia, policymakers, security practitioners, industry and civil society.

However, despite these efforts, process for identifying priorities and F2P deliverables can still be inconsistent. The challenge is often less about defining the underlying need and more about pinpointing the output best suited to meet it. DGs cannot always foresee short-term shifts in policy priorities between F2P planning cycles. In such circumstances REA must infer and adapt which feedback and products may be most useful. Additionally, while REA does extract key results from projects, interviewees suggested that there are instances when the feedback does not fully capture the depth or complexity of project outcomes, potentially leading to missed opportunities for policy development. This is especially the case for projects where high-level technical competencies are required to fully grasp the research.

Although the formal F2P processes have matured, there is still room for improvement in the operational mechanisms adopted to integrate emerging or evolving policy needs and to maintain the value of this exercise while ensuring it fully meets the needs of policymakers, particularly in responding to urgent, fast-moving policy needs (e.g., in fields like AI or cybersecurity). Some Commission interviewees noted that the annual cycle may limit flexibility, and that there could be scoped to enhance the responsiveness of feedback channels. Since the annual F2P plans are in place, parent DGs have reduced ad hoc requests to REA. Nevertheless, a minority of parent DGs observes that ad hoc requests, especially during peak periods of grant preparations and proposal evaluations, experience delay in responses. This reflects the resources constraints in REA's F2P management and poses constraints for policy DGs. EC interviewees praise REA's work on programme implementation, they highlight that this should not be seen in competition with F2P. Moreover, while the coordination structure is in place, much of the day-to-day communication on F2P relies on personal relationships, which vary per unit and across DGs.

F2P products delivered by REA: thematic reports, policy briefs, and roundtables

Thematic reports, policy briefs, portfolio analysis, and roundtables are regularly produced to make the findings from EU funded projects accessible and understandable for policymakers. Where needed, the Agency also conducts regular consultations and meetings with DGs to discuss ongoing projects and their alignment with EU priorities. The F2P products delivered by REA are overall considered positively by all parent DGs (see various discussions in the REA Steering Committee where all SC members and observers congratulated REA).

Monitoring and evaluation of effectiveness of F2P

Monitoring the effectiveness of these feedback channels is an ongoing challenge. While the Agency reports on its contributions to feedback to policy in its annual activity reports (see for example p. 13 of AAR 2022), detailed assessments of the impact and efficiency of these processes are limited. Interviews with REA staff highlight that it is difficult to measure how this feedback materialises into actionable policy changes. The F2P information is part of a wider amount of information received by policy makers that shape the policy decision, making it difficult to attribute any single policy element to a specific report. Moreover, the policy and research programming/implementation cycles do not always align, and new policy needs can emerge—sometimes ad hoc—just as projects start or are still under evaluation. As a consequence, REA faces certain limits in monitoring the effectiveness of its efforts or refine its approach to better meet DGs' needs. Areas for improvement include better documentation and evaluation of the feedback process itself.

Despite the efforts being made, some challenges remain in terms of the consistency and depth of the feedback provided. REA reports that, in some cases, DGs might not fully profit from the insights available from REA, leading to missed opportunities for feedback to policy. However, this is not a uniform issue across all DGs. Similarly, while REA is praised for taking initiative in F2P activities, this needs to be balanced with the needs and requests from the DGs, through the planning process.

Another issue is that although policy DGs articulate F2P priorities, their evidence needs typically span multiple portfolios, while current F2P mechanisms are organised at the level of individual agencies. This leads to limited F2P products in terms of scope. This is another area for improvement. Furthermore, interviewees state that feedback provided by REA is sometimes seen by DGs as too generic or outdated, particularly in fast-evolving sectors. Some stakeholders in DG RTD, for example, have noted that policy briefs prepared by projects (as a project deliverable) are sometimes misaligned with current policy agendas, particularly when they are based on data collected months earlier.⁹⁷ REA have tried to overcome this issue by regularly organising “projects to policy seminars” as well as exchanges with researchers (e.g. through workshops/roundtables) which provide direct insights from beneficiaries experience beyond data collection. Other DGs have acknowledged the relevance and usefulness of REA's contributions in shaping policy direction. Moreover, Unit RTD H5 is prompting the Joint Teams that prepare the annual F2P plans to invite other entities (e.g., Joint Undertakings and relevant DGs) whenever potential synergies are identified, an emerging practice that could be formalised and scaled.

Importance of interpersonal relationships

Evidence from interviews suggests that both the quality of interpersonal working relationships and the longevity of collaboration between REA and its parent DGs play an important role in facilitating effective F2P reporting. Established professional relationships, built over time, appear to support smoother communication and a more responsive exchange of information, even during peak periods. While the introduction of the F2P framework has helped reduce the risks associated with staff turnover—such as the loss of institutional memory—interviewees

⁹⁷ Under the grant agreement, there is no obligation for beneficiaries to report project results in real time, but only at the agreed milestones / reporting periods.

noted that F2P collaboration is most effective when supported by regular, trust-based interactions between staff. This highlights the value of maintaining continuity in staffing where possible and investing in relationship-building alongside formal reporting mechanisms.

Capacity for F2P

To support F2P activities in agencies, 3% of total FTE was allocated on average to each agency. The actual time spent on F2P in REA is not actively monitored. In order to grasp the efforts made for F2P, REA conducted an assessment in 2024 through an internal workload assessment. According to it, the Agency dedicated 4.1% of its staff-effort to F2P activities (excluding RFCS, AGRIP) in 2024.⁹⁸ This is the equivalent of 28.2 FTEs dedicated in 2024 to F2P.⁹⁹ The Agency highlighted that these investments in F2P are capacity driven, not demand driven. While this commitment underlines REA's institutional engagement in F2P, the exercise also highlighted the absence of a harmonised methodology for tracking and categorising F2P work across departments. To address this, REA has announced further data collection and resource planning improvements for 2025–2026.¹⁰⁰ Streamlining tools, integrating processes more effectively, and boosting analytical capacity (such as by further contracting, via dedicated Horizon Europe operational budget, external experts for in-depth project portfolio analysis) would help REA balance better its core administrative duties with its growing role in providing feedback to policy.

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 2021-2024.¹⁰¹

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).¹⁰²

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.

⁹⁸ European Research Executive Agency (REA). (2024). REA Feedback to Policy Effort Measurement – 2024 F2P Data Collection – Methodological note and summary findings. Internal document, Brussels.

⁹⁹ Assessment was based on a preliminary/pilot methodology that has since been corrected and thus presented numbers should not be treated as absolute.

¹⁰⁰ European Research Executive Agency (REA). (2024). REA Feedback to Policy Effort Measurement – 2024 F2P Data Collection – Methodological note and summary findings. Internal document, Brussels.

¹⁰¹ 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.

¹⁰² This approach was agreed with the Commission to ensure comparability with the initial CBA.

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 and has excluded the following programmes from the analysis:

Covered

- Agricultural Promotion Measures
- Research Fund for Coal and Steel
- Horizon Europe
 - Pillar 1: Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
 - Pillar 2, Cluster 2 & Cluster 3: Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society & Civil Security for Society
 - Pillar 2, Cluster 6: Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment
 - Part 4: Sharing Excellence"
 - Part 4: Reforming and enhancing the European R&I system"
 - Pillar 1: Research Infrastructures

Excluded

- Horizon Europe
 - Pillar 2, Cluster 1: Health
 - Pillar 2, Cluster 4: Digital, Industry and Space
 - Pillar 2, Cluster 5: Climate, Energy and Mobility
 - Pillar 2: Horizontal operational activities - Experts Evaluators
 - Pillar 2: Joint Undertakings - Experts Evaluators
 - Completion of previous programmes and activities
- Pilot projects, preparatory actions, prerogatives and other actions
 - Pilot projects & Preparatory actions
- Digital Europe Programme
 - European Cybersecurity Industrial, Technology and Research Competence Centre
- European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
 - Horizon Europe — Contribution from the ERDF

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.¹⁰³ 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 assumptions of the ex-ante CBA for the FTEs and replacing the estimated average cost assumptions with the actual average cost assumptions.

The three scenarios of the ex-ante CBA were the following¹⁰⁴:

- **In-house scenario**, which is a theoretical reinternalisation of all EU programmes in the Commission;
- **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 is unchanged compared to the situation under the previous MFF;
- **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 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. 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.

¹⁰³ In the case of REA this include activities on expert management and Central Validation Service. These account for more than 180 FTE.

¹⁰⁴ See Cost-benefit analysis for the delegation of the management of the 2021-2027 EU programmes to executive agencies (European Commission, 2021, p.3).

Table 13 - Data sources used in the retrospective CBA

Data point	Estimated	Actuals
FTEs and commitment appropriations	SFS / ex-ante CBA ¹⁰⁵	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> FTEs: Annual Work Programmes (AWPs) Commitment appropriations: Annual Activity Reports (AARs), 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
Average cost per FTE	SFS / ex-ante CBA	Final annual accounts of the EAs on Title I & II

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 14 - 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)	<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 FTE¹⁰⁶ (): <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 DG cost of coordination: Actual average costs per FTE at DG per TA and CA¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Including the Excel file on the CBA model received from DG BUDG and the Staff working document of the CBA.

¹⁰⁶ 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.

¹⁰⁷ The data was provided by the Commission.

In-house scenario

Actual average costs per FTE at DG per TA and CA **Status quo scenario**

- Actual average cost per FTE at EA
 - o For BBA (Brussel Based Agencies): same as for optimised scenario
 - o For LBA (Luxembourg Based Agencies): Same ratio as in the estimated costs was applied i.e. +23% of average cost per FTE CA of BBA CA; +17% of average cost per FTE TA of BBA TA
- Actual DG cost of coordination: Actual average costs per FTE at DG per TA and CA received from the 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), including (1) the average cost calculation for the actual average FTE costs in the optimised scenario; (2) the cost assumptions for average cost per FTE¹⁰⁸ 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 previous CBA / SFS) and actuals based on the EAs' AARs for each of the three scenarios (optimised, status quo, inhouse) and for each of the years 2021-2024.

The data is presented in a graphic format in order to visualize 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 the retrospective Cost-Benefit-Analysis

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 2021-2024.¹⁰⁹ Please note that when we compare the scenarios, the actual in-house scenario is a hypothetical model and does not reflect actual figures.

¹⁰⁸ Average staff cost 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 TA (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 DG cost at TA and CA level for overseeing EAs).

¹⁰⁹ 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.

Main findings of the cost-benefits analysis

The findings of the retrospective cost-benefit analysis justify the Commission's decision to delegate the work to REA 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 compared to the in-house scenario (183 million EUR) were 10% higher than the estimated savings (166 million EUR).

The optimised scenario consistently outperformed both the status quo and in-house scenarios in terms of efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The optimised scenario required fewer FTEs while maintaining close alignment with estimated figures, with deviations generally within a narrow range of 0% to -1%. Over the years, the gap between the optimised scenario and the other two scenarios widened slightly, further underscoring its efficiency. For instance, compared to the status quo, the optimised scenario achieved a 2% reduction in workforce needs by 2024, while the reduction was even more pronounced—approximately 7% to 8%—when compared to the in-house scenario.

In terms of cost savings, the optimised scenario also demonstrated clear advantages. While staff costs increased across all scenarios from 2021 to 2024, the optimised approach maintained the lowest cost trajectory. When compared to the status quo, the optimised scenario achieved cost savings ranging from 862,318 EUR in 2021 to 1,505,704 EUR in 2024. The savings were even more substantial when compared to the in-house scenario, with differences starting at 48.5 million EUR in 2021 and growing to 50.7 million EUR by 2024. Importantly, the actual costs in the optimised and status quo scenarios aligned closely with estimates in most years, with deviations generally within $\pm 1\%$. However, it is worth noting that in 2021, actual costs were significantly lower, with actual values approximately 13%-14% lower than estimated. This trend reversed in later years, with actual costs exceeding estimates from 2023 onwards (among other, due to higher inflation).

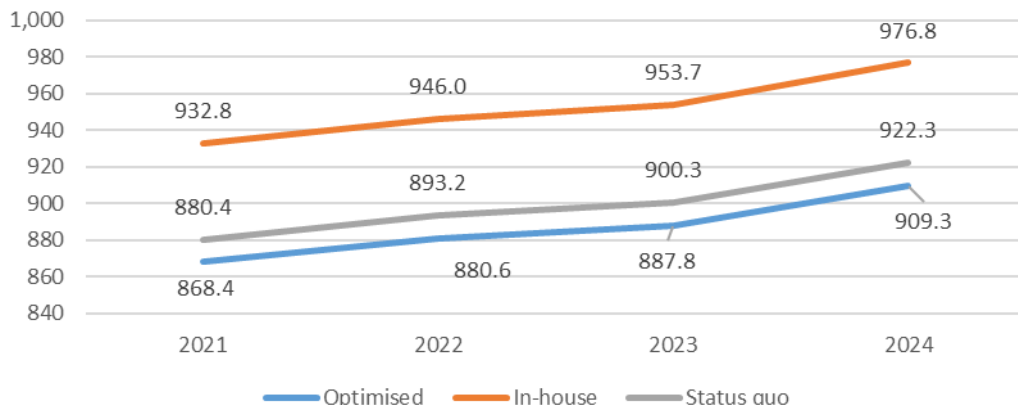
These findings highlight the optimised scenario as the most effective and sustainable approach for the Agency, balancing workforce efficiency with cost control. As presented in the retrospective CBA, the status quo and the in-house scenarios require a higher number of FTEs and are less cost effective in the examined period.

Full-time equivalents

The figure below presents the actual average FTE values across the three scenarios. By 2024, the in-house scenario showed the highest FTE value at 976.8, followed by the status quo scenario at 922.3, and the optimised scenario at 909.3. The gap between the in-house and optimised scenarios thus reached a difference of about 67.5 FTEs in 2024.

Throughout the period, all three scenarios showed a steady upward trend in FTE values. The in-house scenario consistently maintained a higher number of FTEs each year. In contrast, the optimised scenario remained the most efficient in terms of FTE use, while the status quo scenario lay in between but closer to the optimised model.

Figure 13: Actual total FTEs under the three scenarios

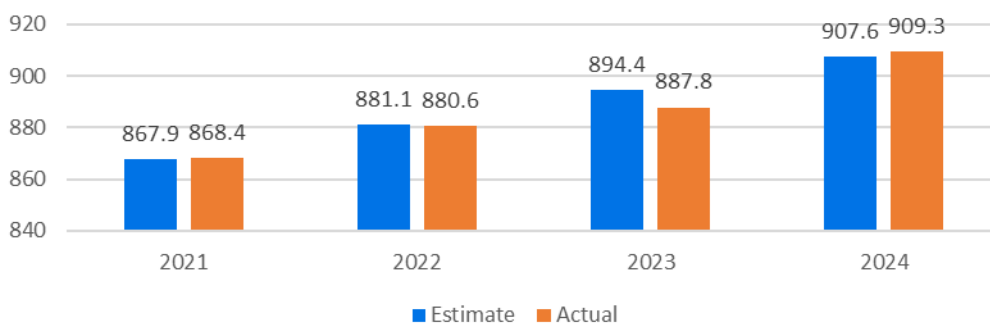


Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AWP.

The figure below illustrates the difference between estimated and actual FTE over the period 2021 to 2024. As visualised, across all years, the deviations remained consistently small. This is the outcome of the staff allocation planning for the 7 years of the MFF that set a ceiling on staff allocations.

In both 2021 and 2024, the actual number of FTEs was marginally higher than estimated, while in 2023, the actual number of FTEs was slightly below the projected value.

Figure 14: Estimated vs. actual FTEs in optimised scenario



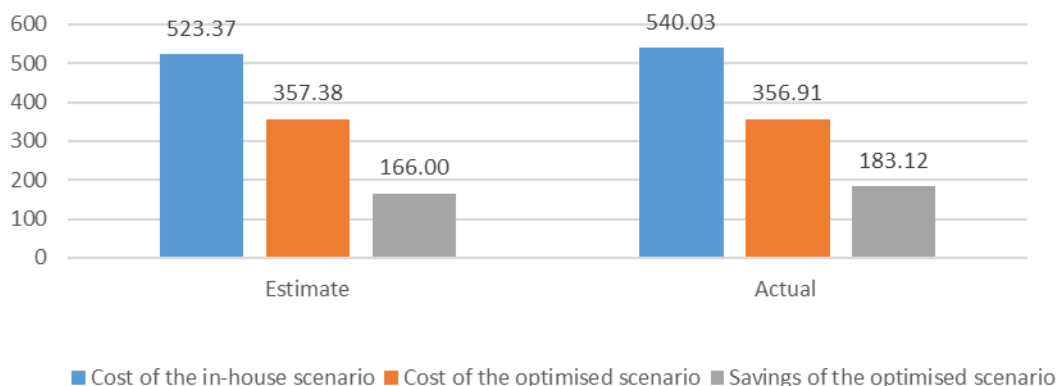
Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AWP.

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

Staff costs and savings

In addition to the number of FTEs analysed, the cost-benefit analysis also encompassed an examination of staff costs. The figure below shows both the estimated and actual costs and savings of REA. While the actual costs of the in-house scenario were larger than estimated, this was not the case for the costs of the optimised scenario. Most notably, the actual savings of the optimised scenario compared to the in-house scenario (183.12 million EUR) were **10% higher** than the estimated savings (166.00 million EUR), indicating that expectations of cost-savings have been exceeded.

Figure 15: 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 costs per FTE increased significantly over the evaluation period while Title II increased from 2021-2023 and decreased in 2024. These higher rises in staff costs results mostly from higher (than estimated) inflation and salary progressions increasing average administrative cost per staff member.

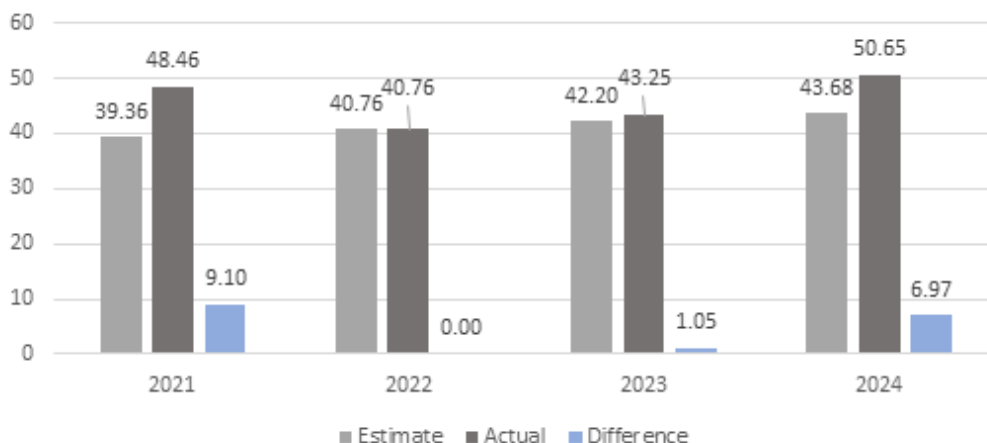
Figure 16: Estimated vs. actual costs and savings of the executive Agency scenario per year for 2021-2024, million EUR



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 while 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. This was true for all years except 2022, in which estimates mirrored actual savings. The difference was especially evident in 2021 and 2024, underlining the optimised scenario as the adequate approach for REA.

Figure 17: 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 is provided in the Annex in section 1.2.2 to 1.2.4.

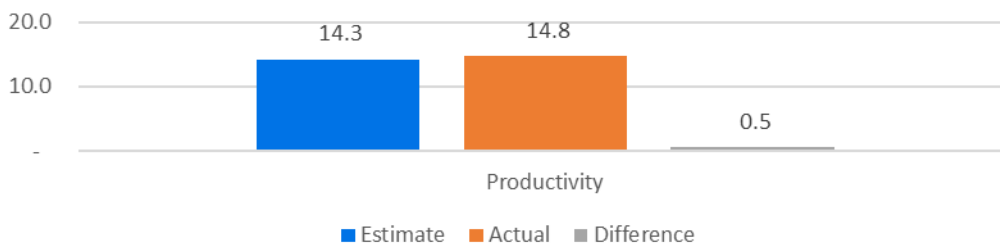
Productivity

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.

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

The actual productivity indicator exceeds the estimate (+0.5 EUR million).¹¹⁰

Figure 18: Estimated vs. actual productivity of the optimised scenario for 2021-2024 (million EUR/FTE)



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 4% higher than estimated, while the actual FTE numbers were almost identical to the estimates in 2024. As a result, the productivity indicator, measured

¹¹⁰ 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 remaining the same.

as commitment appropriations per FTE, mirrored the trends in commitment appropriations i.e. the productivity was 4% higher than estimated.

The consistent FTE levels combined with higher-than-estimated productivity value highlight that REA 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 as well as for the estimated in-house scenario vs. the hypothetical actual in-house scenario.

4.4.3. Analysis of workload assessment methodology

In response to structural challenges, REA developed a simplified workload assessment methodology in 2020 to enhance transparency and adaptability in workforce planning. The experience levels of staff are excluded from calculations, with 2021 established as the reference year. The revised methodology focuses on the number of ongoing projects per unit, aiming to maintain stable workloads despite increasing responsibilities. The methodology encompasses both operational and horizontal tasks. At the heart of the assessment is a key indicator: the number of ongoing projects. This was chosen for its simplicity and ease of measurement, facilitating straightforward distribution across units and programmes. It also allowed to bring the time perspective of project monitoring stretched over a number of years into the analysis (the ex-ante CBA methodology only considered annual commitment budget as a driver for workload). Additional qualitative and quantitative aspects refine the assessment:

- **Average Grant Size:** Average financial volume per project
- **Projects-to-FTE Ratio:** Number of projects managed per full-time equivalent
- **Project Duration:** Average length of projects in the portfolio
- **Audit and Control Workload:** Volume of audits and financial verifications
- **Effort:** Measure of effort before the projects start (evaluation and GAP)
- **Programme Budget Volume:** Total budget assigned to a specific programme

The workload assessment occurs annually, starting with an analysis of the current project portfolio, including active grant agreements and planned new projects based on the latest European Commission Work Programme (e.g., Horizon Europe).

Each unit estimates its project workload for the current and future years and calculates how this impact on the workload by FTE (based on current staff allocation) over these years. This informs management decisions on possible re-balancing of resources to maintain the rise or drop in workload by FTE over time comparable across units.

Validated staffing proposals are formalised by senior management and integrated into the Annual Work Programme (AWP), factoring in past adjustments and future vacancies.

REA's workload assessment relies on a combination of quantitative programme data and internal management information, including:

- **European Commission Work Programme:** Core reference for forecasting the evolution of the project portfolio per unit.
- **Project Portfolio Data:** Information on project timelines collected over a two-year window.
- **Staffing Tables:** Overview of current and planned FTE allocations.
- **Management Decisions:** Outcomes of regular meetings discussing staffing adjustments.

Personnel allocation within REA aligns available staffing levels with expected project portfolio developments. The assessment considers qualitative evaluations by management, with

adjustments made annually as needed. REA promotes guided flexibility rather than a purely algorithmic approach. The workload model informs management decisions, without becoming a dictate; resulting adjustments are reported to and agreed by the Steering Committee. Personnel resources can be redistributed between units to respond to peak workloads without full reorganization. Past decisions and their impacts are systematically reviewed to inform future allocations. Stakeholder involvement occurs primarily at the management level, particularly through Heads of Unit, who contribute to the assessment of the workload. While there is no formal feedback process for all staff, operational challenges reported by units are informally considered. The Director uses this information to identify pressure points and adjust staffing levels accordingly.

5. Conclusions and lessons learned

This section provides the main conclusions and lessons learned of the evaluation of Agency's operation in the period 2021-March 2024.

5.1. Conclusions

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

Effectiveness

REA effectively delivers on the implementation of delegated programmes. At the start of the mandate three new programmes were assigned to REA (AGRIP, RCFS and RI) which were successfully integrated in the portfolio. Almost all KPIs have been achieved every year. There were some incidental timing issues that were resolved quickly (time to grant in 2022; net time to pay experts in 2021 and net time to validate participants in 2023), as well as a too high residual multi-annual error rate identified at ex-post control for RCFS in 2021. There were some more issues with the execution of AGRIP where too few projects reached their objectives in 2022, 2023, 2024, and where the residual multi-annual error rate was too high in 2024. Beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and experts all are generally satisfied with the quality of the services provided by the Agency, although 20% of respondents is of the opinion that the communication on the decisions taken could be more elaborate and transparent. Some respondents also think that the redress procedure could be improved (but the sample that had experience with this is only very small).

In terms of the specific programmes, the transition towards Horizon Europe was challenging due to the delayed launch and introduction of new criteria and requirements. These challenges were overall well managed but resulted in significant implementation pressure. The programmes newly delegated to REA showed some challenges (RCFS had too few and too low-quality applications and no beneficiaries in the 2023 Big Tickets call; and AGRIP showed conflicts of interest between beneficiaries and their subcontractors), steps have since been taken to address these (e.g. on guidance and accountability). Specifically, for the AGRIP programme the scores for reaching project objectives were below target.

The Central Validation Service (CVS) within REA has increased in scope over the evaluation period. It serves the whole European Commission, executive agencies, joint undertakings and other European bodies with the validation of legal entities and their bank accounts, with the financial capacity assessments (FCAs) and, in certain cases, Ownership Control Assessments (OCAs). According to the gathered evidence, it seems that the service provided is satisfactory.

REA also supports operational units within REA and other Executive Agencies in the management of experts for proposal evaluations. Its role is to ensure smooth, timely, and compliant contracting and payment of experts. This process functions effectively, with no systemic errors, and to the satisfaction of experts and agencies.

REA's mandate has been very stable over the years, supported by ongoing operational and procedural optimisation. REA operates within the given mandate.

REA's financial and risk management is strong, with objectives consistently achieved. REA's anti-fraud measures are effective (according to the Risk Management and Internal Control annual reports). Regarding AGRIP grants, the Agency identified specific risks regarding subcontractors. In response, REA revised its control strategy, suspended payments for grants

under investigation, strengthened preventive measures, and sought legal guidance on managing conflicts of interest. This was fully reported to DG AGRI, the REA Steering Committee and the Commission. Even though steps have been taken and the multi-annual error rate for AGRIP was in 2023 also below 2%, REA still calls for caution due to the nature of AGRIP projects and the recovery/collection risks for high amounts of detected ineligible expenditure.

REA's communication efforts have been largely successful in supporting its mission and enhancing the visibility of the EU as the funder of the programmes it manages. REA implements its communication activities in close collaboration with DGs. REA is increasingly reaching and surpassing its external communication targets (e.g. social media engagements, website visits, events organised). Branding is mainly at programme level, but the visibility of the EU as the funder of the programmes it manages is enhanced. The division of responsibilities between REA and the EC is less clear, but also less relevant as stakeholders know the programmes and are satisfied with the communication by REA.

REA's reporting practices are robust and fully aligned with the legal and supervisory requirements set out in the regulations and the four Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) signed with its parent Directorates-General. REA's reporting system functions effectively, with parent DGs expressing satisfaction with the quality, structure, and timeliness of REA's reporting.

Efficiency

Between 2021 and 2024, REA demonstrated growing operational efficiency across key indicators. The operational budget grew substantially, yet this trend is not followed by the number of staff. The Agency fulfils its key performance indicators related to efficient programme implementation, and it showed resilience during the launch of Horizon Europe & disruptions linked to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Beneficiaries and experts generally confirm that REA delivers effective and efficient work regarding various processes, including the grant agreement preparation and contract finalisation phase. Based on an internal workload assessment, REA actively makes use of the (limited) available flexibility in the resource allocation. The results of the retrospective cost-benefit analysis for the period 2021 - 2024 justify the Commission's decision to delegate the work to REA 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 compared to the in-house scenario (183 million EUR) were 10% higher than the estimated savings (166 million EUR).

REA actively implemented the envisioned efficiency measures from the 2021 ex-ante cost-benefit analysis under their responsibility. While REA's commitment to continuous improvement is evident, given its attempts to simplify financial reporting through lump sums and enhancing feedback mechanisms, challenges remain in navigating complex IT tools and managing workload peaks.

REA's organisational size and staffing structure are well calibrated to its mandate and workload. The agency has a lean and delivery-focused organisational structure, with relatively few administrative staff as opposed to operational staff. In addition, REA maintained a high occupation rate and level of staff engagement. A point of attention is the low level of confidence that the staff expresses in their professional future.

The staff engagement score within REA is 74%, which is just above the EC average (73%). Satisfaction remained particularly high with role clarity and job content (82%), availability of resources (84%), and teamwork and collegiality (84%). A strong majority (80%) also expressed alignment with the Agency's objectives and mission. These indicators suggest that REA has sustained a motivated and committed workforce despite rising workloads. Survey responses pointed to concerns in some areas. Notably, only 41% of staff expressed confidence in their professional future, learning and development received a 58% satisfaction rate, and work-life balance (61%) and inclusion and fairness (63%), scored comparatively lower. Prospects for further career development for project officers and other TA 2f staff is limited as management posts are formally reserved for seconded Commission officials.

REA continued their attempts to reduce its environmental impact. This includes reducing their energy consumption in their office, limiting travel of both experts and staff and opting for more sustainable travel. In addition, REA earned recognition for its sustainable events and processes.

REA is at the forefront of integrating new tools and systems and closely collaborates with CIC to continuously improve IT systems. REA also actively explores opportunities for improvements and mitigating risks related to AI. The Agency performed well in the cyber readiness assessments by DG DIGIT, although cybersecurity incidents were much more frequent in 2024 than in the years before.

Coherence

The REA portfolio is largely coherent, with no systemic overlaps or gaps documented and several examples of proactive alignment (e.g., REA–EACEA collaborations, joint teams under the Feedback-to-Policy framework). Isolated overlaps/inconsistencies persist in steel-related topics (RFCS vs. Clean Steel Partnership), creating confusion for applicants and fragmented follow-up. Overall, coherence issues are handled mainly via informal mechanisms (staff exchanges, ad-hoc meetings); formal monitoring is limited.

The delimitation of responsibilities between REA and parent DGs is predominantly clear and appropriate, supported by robust legal/operational instruments and active oversight; where temporary blurring occurs, mainly in policy-intensive actions (CSAs, Missions, F2P), it is addressed through MoUs, joint teams, and regular coordination. Inter-personal contacts between REA staff and EC counterparts are valued and create a smooth communication and alignment. Strong working relationships between REA staff and their counterparts in the Commission play an important role in enhancing coordination.

The F2P mechanisms have been improved with the new framework setup in the new mandate, moving towards a more strategic and structured approach. REA's feedback to policy channels are broadly effective and valued, and the Agency identifies and communicates policy-relevant project results, but timeliness, depth, and flexibility vary across areas.

REA provides effective feedback to policy, evidenced by sustained DG engagement and positive assessments of F2P outputs. Effectiveness is strongest where coordination is routine and two-way, and weaker where policy needs shift rapidly or cut across agency silos.

5.2. Lessons learned

Though overall evaluation results are positive, the evaluation has identified several factors that could be further strengthened to improve the effectiveness, efficiency or coherence of the Agency. Below we provide a list of lessons learned from the evaluation period 2021-2024:

- REA is overall a mature organisation that is in the position to take initiative as many day-to-day processes are well established. We see throughout the evaluation results that REA leadership and REA staff are proactive and have a learning attitude in bringing forward initiatives, working towards improvements and flagging issues to the centralised operations of the EC. This proactive and learning attitude is of large value and should be maintained and nurtured. As typically such behaviour and culture within an organisation is a lot more difficult to create than to lose, it is advised to actively reward this behaviour, even if only through recognition.
- Retention and optimal use of talent remain a key ingredient for strong performance. While overall staff satisfaction is good, other indicators regarding 'confidence in the professional future' as well as 'learning and development' score quite low in staff surveys. It is advised to keep looking for opportunities to keep talented staff longer and/or to guide them towards other relevant positions that pose new development steps and challenges. Potential options that might be used consist in providing training opportunities and career coaching. While management positions are reserved to EC staff, alternative career paths, ensuring staff

learning and development should be identified as potential next steps in career development of staff members.

- The exchange between REA and the EC is instrumental in supporting the understanding of and synergies between policy making and implementation. Many useful methods are employed to support this (such as staff exchanges, job shadowing, seminars, combined task forces, interpersonal relationships, etc.). It is recommended to further intensify the use of these methods. When implementing activities with a strong policy component, such as the Coordination and Support Actions, it must remain clear that the final responsibility for implementation remains with the authorising officer in the Agency. Developing practical guidance on good practices for REA and EC staff collaboration across the programme cycle could help to ensure business continuity in situations of staff turnover.
- While the responsibility for shaping the future FP rests with the Commission, REA's contribution on feasibility and practical delivery of programmes is important and should be emphasised. This evaluation report highlighted the disruptive impact of delays in the launch of Horizon Europe on programme implementation. Although these were well managed by both the Commission and REA, they underline the value of open discussion on implementation feasibility. Operational experiences could provide useful input on possible simplification matters, for instance regarding the scoring practices used in independent evaluation reports by external expert evaluators. Smooth and timely implementation remains a key factor in further maximising programme performance.
- Feedback from beneficiaries and applicants suggests how the corporate redress procedure could be improved. Streamlining internal communication could further improve unambiguous answering of external questions, particularly for redress procedures.
- The implementation of AGRIP showed challenges. These are actively being addressed but need further follow up in particular with regard to risk management. The risks identified regarding subcontractors in AGRIP grants need to be further monitored and audited.
- The expert management services are well appreciated by the agencies and the experts. However, it is advisable to assess whether the fees for experts are adequate or should be increased
- The branding of the communication should primarily relate to the programmes, but REA should be recognised as the Agency to apply to for (potential) applicants. The promotion of delegated programmes could be further strengthened: even if current communication is robust, there is some potential to achieve even greater impact. On the other side, it is noteworthy to mention that an increase of visibility might lead to more proposals that would also lead to a decrease in the success rate (which for some actions is already very low).
- Simplification measures, such as the introduction of lump-sum funding, can generate notable efficiency gains in the future. Current IT structures are in the process of being improved to be better suited to handle these procedures within REA, lowering workload and reducing potential errors caused by the manual approach currently required. Further process automation at corporate level could further enhance efficiency.
- At peak moments, REA has a heavy workload. Overall, the capacity structure is quite rigid as it is based on the budget and FTEs assigned to each delegated activity. REA actively makes use of available flexibility, mostly to address the different nature of the programmes in relation to the number of assigned staff. While respecting the legal framework, allowing for more flexibility to use Agency staff across the programmes managed could allow the Agency to more actively manage its capacity towards delivering results.
- The coherence between steel research under the RFCS, managed by REA, and steel research under Cluster 4 of Horizon Europe, managed by HaDEA, both supporting the Clean Steel Partnership, could be improved by offering clearer communication to applicants on the respective scope and eligibility of each programme.

- Cross-agency feedback to policy should be enhanced. This is especially important when topics are wider than just one agency's portfolio of projects.
- We would suggest exploring ways to gather structured feedback on the usefulness of F2P outputs for parent DGs. Knowledge exchange on policy priorities/developments through seminars might strengthen the feedback loop from the EC towards REA about the use of F2P findings.

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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 Executive Agency (REA) 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 REA effectively fulfilled its mission and objectives. The delimitation of responsibilities and tasks between REA 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

