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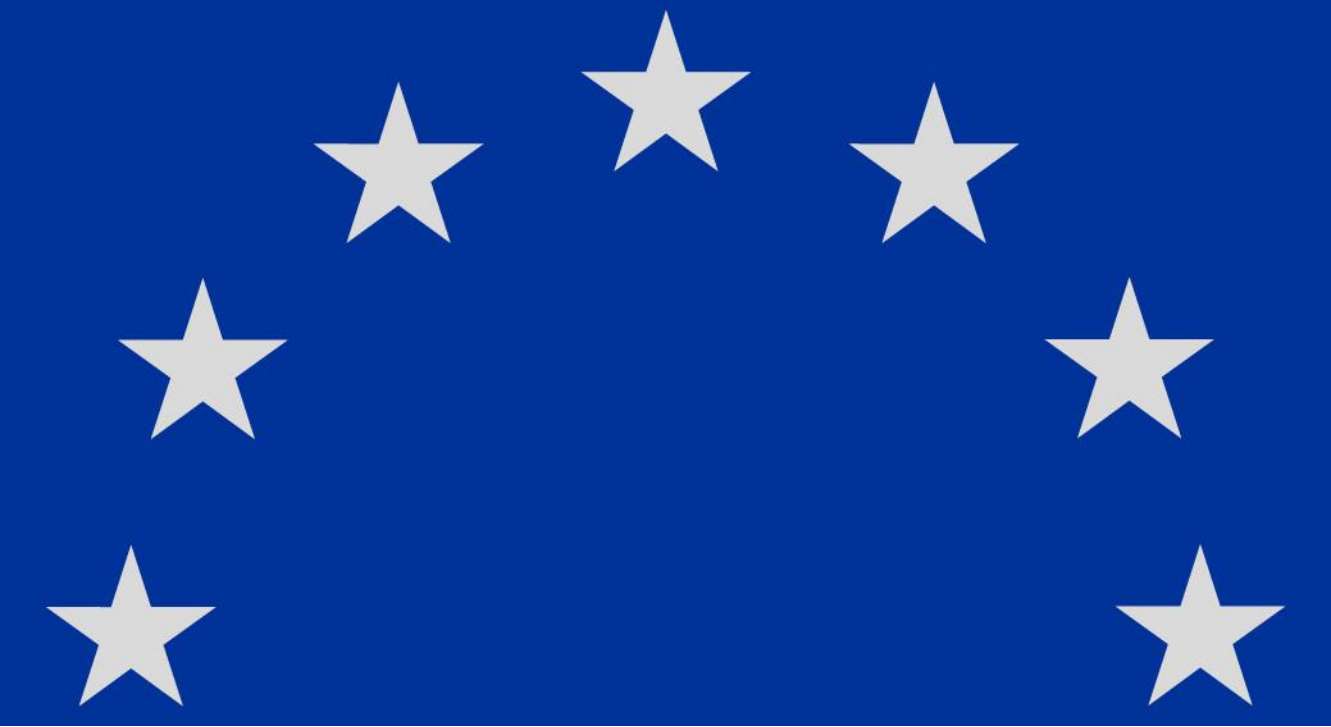
Research and Innovation

Study supporting the evaluation of the EU Executive Agencies

European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA)

Independent Expert Report



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Study supporting the evaluation of European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA)

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EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Study supporting the evaluation of the EU Executive Agencies

European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA)

2026 Directorate-General for Research and Innovation EN

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List of Abbreviations

AAR – Annual Activity Report
ACPC – Advisory Committee on Procurement and Contracts
AI – Artificial intelligence
AWP – Annual Work Programme
CA – Contract Agent
CEF – Connecting Europe Facility
CBA – Cost-Benefit analysis
CHAFEA – Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency
CINEA – European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency
DG – Directorate-General
DG BUDG – Directorate-General for Budget
DG DEFIS – Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space
DG CNECT – Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology
DG GROW – Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs
DG RTD – Directorate-General for Research and Innovation
DG SANTE – Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety
DIN - Data Intelligence Network
EA – Executive Agency
EASME – Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
ECA – European Court of Auditors
EISMEA – European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency
EMAS – Eco-Management and Audit Scheme
ESR – Evaluation Summary Report
EU – European Union
F2P – Feedback to Policy
FTE – Full-Time Equivalent
HaDEA - European Health and Digital Executive Agency
HERA – European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority
HR – Human resources
IAS – Internal Audit Service
ICMC – Internal Control Monitoring Criteria
ISG – Inter-Service Steering Group
INEA – Innovation and Networks Executive Agency
KPI – Key performance indicators
MFF – Multiannual Financial Framework
MoU – Memorandum of Understanding
NGEU – Next Generation EU
REA – European Research Executive Agency
SFS – Specific Financial Statement
SMP – Single Market Programme
StC – Steering Committee
TA – Temporary agent
TTG – Time-to-Grant
TTI – Time-to-Inform
TTP – Time-to-Pay
WLA – Workload assessment
WP – Work Programme

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the independent evaluation of the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) for the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2024. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with Article 25 of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003 and the European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines. It assesses HaDEA's performance in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence across the management of five EU programmes delegated by six parent Directorates-General (DGs).

The evaluation was conducted using a mixed-method, theory-based approach to ensure a robust and balanced assessment of HaDEA's performance. The methodology integrated quantitative and qualitative techniques, including a systematic review of legal and operational documents, monitoring data analysis, and a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis. Two large-scale online surveys targeted beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants, and external experts. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were held with Commission officials, HaDEA staff, applicants, experts, and National Contact Points (NCP). The study also incorporated a retrospective cost-benefit analysis comparing actual resource use and costs with ex-ante projections and alternative management scenarios.

Main study results

Effectiveness

Objectives and delivery

HaDEA has demonstrated strong effectiveness in managing its diverse portfolio, including the EU4Health, Horizon Europe (clusters 1 and 4), Single Market Programme – SMP (food chain), Digital Europe Programme (DEP), and Connecting Europe Facility (CEF-Digital) programmes. The Agency ensured high levels of budget implementation, smooth delivery of calls for proposals, and consistently strong performance in KPIs such as time-to-grant and time-to-pay. Beneficiaries and experts expressed high satisfaction with HaDEA's management and support.

Legal framework

HaDEA operated fully within the boundaries of its legal framework, with no evidence of activities beyond its mandate or legal non-compliance during the evaluation period. The Agency effectively carried out delegated while adhering to financial regulations.

Internal Control

Since 2021, HaDEA has implemented the Commission's internal control framework, combining top-down leadership with bottom-up engagement. Continuous improvement was driven by regular self-assessments, risk reviews, and awareness activities, achieving full compliance with all 17 principles by 2024. Annual risk assessments, an internal control network, and a revised strategy in 2023 strengthened oversight and risk mitigation, while process and system improvements reduced late payments after the first year.

Communication

As a new agency, HaDEA prioritised creating an outreach strategy and promoting delegated programs, especially new and less-known ones. Initial outreach was hampered by temporary initial external challenges, but targeted country missions, info days, and participation in major events improved awareness and increased the stakeholder's network of the Agency. HaDEA strengthened its outreach through a structured communication strategy, annual action plans, and multiple channels.

Reporting to parent DGs

HaDEA's reporting largely complies with the 2021 Delegation Act and MoUs, supported by tailored governance per programme, regular multilevel contacts, and Steering Committee meetings that provide timely, structured updates for parent DG oversight. Since 2021, the reporting framework has improved significantly, delivering reliable KPI data and aligning with Commission standards. However, parent DGs expect more qualitative insights, forward-looking analysis, and reflections on risks and implementation challenges to enhance strategic value.

Efficiency

Programme management

HaDEA demonstrated strong performance in programme management consistently meeting key efficiency targets during the evaluation period. The Agency maintained full budget execution rates for both operational and administrative expenditures and remained within acceptable cost-efficiency thresholds. The introduction of simplified funding mechanisms, such as unit contributions and lump sum grants, streamlined programme management and reduced administrative burden, though uptake varied across programmes.

Fit for purpose

Evidence indicates that HaDEA's size and structure are appropriate for achieving its objectives. Since its establishment in 2021, the Agency prioritised recruitment to meet occupancy targets, though challenges remain in attracting and retaining specialised profiles. Operational efficiency improved through clear procedures, motivated staff, bottom-up initiatives, and measures aligned with the 2021 ex-ante cost-benefit analysis, such as enhanced Feedback to Policy processes, new IT tools, and greater flexibility in staff allocation. Despite recruitment difficulties, uncertainty over UK participation, and pandemic-related project extensions, HaDEA adapted quickly to maintain programme continuity and share best practices.

Environmental impact

HaDEA achieved EMAS certification in 2023, exceeded corporate CO_2 reduction targets for business travel ahead of schedule, and promoted sustainable commuting, energy-saving initiatives, and digital sustainability campaigns, demonstrating strong commitment to environmental performance and staff engagement.

Digitalisation

HaDEA made significant progress in modernising its IT environment, introducing new digital tools, automating processes, and enhancing user experience. Key initiatives included the rollout of eGrants across programmes, development of simplification tools like the lump-sum calculator, and improvements in collaboration platforms. These efforts, combined with shared IT solutions and infrastructure, strengthened operational efficiency and supported the Agency's strategic digital objectives.

Coherence

Coherence of the Programme Portfolio

HaDEA's five delegated programmes during the evaluation period are largely seen as complementary, targeting distinct policy goals and beneficiary groups, with no major overlaps or gaps identified by the evidence gathered.

Division of Tasks between the Agency and the Parent DG

Overall, there is a clear delimitation of tasks and responsibilities between HaDEA and its parent DGs. Roles are indeed well defined and operationalised via the Delegation Act and general/programme-specific MoUs. However, some minor instances of operational ambiguity occurred.

Feedback to Policy

During the evaluation period, the mechanism was further strengthened through formalisation and initiatives such as the October 2023 workshop with parent DGs, which reviewed progress and improved coordination. HaDEA is widely regarded as responsive and systematic and Since 2022, HaDEA has consistently met or exceeded its planned F2P implementation targets, as reflected in Annual Activity Reports. However, evidence suggests scope for more strategic and structured feedback, particularly in identifying policy-relevant results and addressing ad hoc demands. F2P output has contributed to EU policy-making in areas including health initiatives, digital innovation and aerospace and defence strategies. To enhance impact, HaDEA plans to survey parent DGs, promote cross-programme synergies and organise portfolio-wide workshops to better align outputs with policy priorities.

1. Introduction

This document presents the final report of the study supporting the evaluation of the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA). This evaluation support study is being conducted under the Multiple Service Framework Contract RTD/2023/OP/0011 - Framework Contract for the Impact Assessments, Evaluations, Foresight and Strategic Analysis of Research and Innovation Policies and Programmes, Lot 3 - Studying, assessing and evaluating research and innovation programmes and policies (SARI). The study covers the period from April 2021 to March 2024.

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

- The reminder 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 and the baseline for the evaluation.
- Section 3 provides an overview of HaDEA's evolution during the evaluation period
- Section 4 provides the evaluation findings
- Section 5 presents the conclusions and the recommendations of the study.

This external evaluation assesses the operations of HaDEA 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 annexes to the report include an overview of the methodology and analytical models, the approach and results of the Cost–Benefit Analysis, a synthesis report of the stakeholder consultation, the interview questionnaire and the survey questionnaire.

The study examines whether HaDEA met its operational objectives, the efficiency of its resource use, 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. Specifically, 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, delivering the intended results (the following sub criterion will guide the effectiveness' assessment: objectives, legal framework, internal control framework and reporting to parent DGs).
- **Efficiency**: assessing whether the Agency has fulfilled its tasks efficiently, evaluating whether the benefits justify the costs and whether the same results could have been achieved at lower cost or with fewer resources the following sub criterion will guide the efficiency's assessment: programme management, fit for purpose, environmental impact and digitalisation)
- **Coherence**: examines how well the Agency works together with other EU actions and policies. It considers internal and external coherence assessing if there are overlaps, gaps or inconsistencies in its management of the programme portfolio; whether there is a clear delimitation of tasks between HaDEA and the parent Directorates-General and information flows on Feedback to Policy.

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

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

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

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

The research tools used involved notably a desk review and analysis of monitoring data, surveys with applicants, beneficiaries and experts and the cost-benefit analysis. For qualitative insights, a comprehensive interview programme was undertaken, involving HaDEA's main stakeholders and an ex-post cost-benefit analysis.

Document review and analysis of monitoring data

The purpose of the document review was to conduct a systematic qualitative and quantitative analysis of materials related to HaDEA's operations. For the necessary documents, the evaluation team consulted publicly available sources and liaised with both DG RTD and HaDEA to obtain additional non-publicly available data and documents. HaDEA provided a wide range of documentation, delivered in several batches between February and June 2025.

In addition, the project team compiled a list of internal indicators relevant for the analysis. This list was shared with HaDEA, who subsequently provided further data.

A comprehensive list of the documents reviewed for this evaluation is provided in the Annex.

Surveys

Two online surveys were undertaken for the HaDEA evaluation, one aimed at beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants, and one at external experts who support the work of HaDEA in the evaluation of proposals and the monitoring of projects. Questionnaires were developed during the inception phase in exchange with DG RTD. The surveys were deployed on EU Survey and launched on the 8 April 2025 and closed on 2 May 2025.

The selection of contacts followed a stratified sampling approach, ensuring that also beneficiaries and applicants to smaller programmes are sufficiently represented in the survey sample. A total of 2311 respondents provided replies to the surveys, composed by:

- 992 beneficiaries, out of 6.146 uploaded contacts, with a response rate of 16%
- 515 unsuccessful applicants, out of 15.141 uploaded contacts, with a response rate of 3%.
- 804 external experts, out of 1.989 uploaded contacts, with a response rate of 40%

Overall, the two surveys achieved a 95% confidence level, which means the results can be considered statistically representative. Further insights from the surveys that inform the main findings are integrated into this report, while a separate analysis in the Annex presents the complete survey results.

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

Interviews

The purpose of the interview programme was to provide qualitative insights into the performance and operational challenges of HaDEA. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken across the following stakeholder groups: European Commission officials (DG SANTE, DG CNECT, DG RTD, DG DEFIS, DG GROW and HERA), HaDEA staff and external stakeholders (beneficiaries, applicants, external experts and National Contact Points). 51 interviews have been conducted. The Annex provides details on the interviews, the distribution of stakeholders, and the corresponding stakeholder categories.

Cost benefit analysis and workload assessment

A retrospective cost-benefit analysis (CBA) for the period 2021-2024 was conducted by the study team. This CBA assesses to what extent the Executive Agencies have achieved the expected savings and productivity gains outlined in the 2021 ex-ante assessment. It examines whether delegating programme management to the Executive Agencies (EAs) was justified.

The CBA compares ex-ante estimates and actuals regarding full-time equivalents (FTEs) and staff costs (incl. Title I and Title II) at the levels of EAs 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. The methodology and the results of the analysis are presented in Annex.

Regarding the workload assessment, the CBA team conducted an interview with HaDEA stakeholders in order to grasp the workload assessment methodology used at the Agency, identify the main workload drivers and any challenges in terms of staff allocation.

Strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation approach

The evaluation of HaDEA was conducted in line with the European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines. It offers reliable evidence addressing three of the five cores evaluation criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence of the Agency's operations. The findings and conclusions are strictly based on this evaluation evidence and focus on HaDEA's business 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 of HaDEA is grounded in solid evidence, derived from a combination of quality data sources, including document analysis, desk research, cost–benefit analysis, and input from stakeholder consultations. However, some challenges were encountered during the evaluation, which imposed certain limitations on its results.

- First, the survey response rates, varied considerably between respondents. The beneficiary response rate stood at 16%, whereas the response rate was low for unsuccessful applicants, reaching only 3%. Overall, the experts were the most likely to respond (41%). These numbers are in any case still sufficient in absolute numbers to perform analyses per target group. Moreover, to improve the response rate, up to two reminder messages were sent to respondents who had not participated yet, spread out during the fielding period, and Helpdesk services were provided to anyone facing difficulties or who had questions about the ongoing surveys.
- Second, the evaluation included exploratory and in-depth interviews to understand HaDEA's governance, operations, and performance. Though interviews proved highly valuable, not all interviewees were able to cover the full evaluation period. Further challenges arise from the evaluation cut-off date, with some interviewees also covering more recent events and developments.

- Third, administrative and monitoring data collected allowed the study team to perform sound analyses of HaDEA's performance. At times, moreover, variation in numbers between the different data sources (Annual Activity Reports, data provided by HaDEA and data provided by the European Commission) was noted. The evaluation team addressed this by clearly identifying data sources.
- Finally, the evaluation does not assess the outcomes of the individual programmes delegated to the Agency, nor does it address questions other than those identified in the evaluation. This, at times, represented a challenge, accepting the widespread interest in programme performance, and other topics.

2. Background of the measure

The Framework Regulation for executive agencies[2] states that the purpose of entrusting the Executive Agencies with programme implementation tasks is to enable the Commission to focus on its core policy activities and functions which cannot be outsourced. It also enables the Commission to achieve the objectives of the delegated EU programmes more effectively. The 2021 cost-benefit analysis indicated that it was more cost-efficient to delegate certain programme tasks to the Agency than to perform them in-house.[3]

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

HaDEA is the newest EU Executive Agency, established by the Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173 of 12 February 2021, to manage programmes in health, digital innovation, food safety, and industry. HaDEA operates at the intersection of public health, technological development, and regulatory enforcement, ensuring that EU-funded projects contribute to stronger health systems, digital transformation, and food security. It is responsible for implementing significant parts of the following programmes:

- **EU4Health**: which is the EU's largest health programme, designed to improve health systems, boost disease prevention, and enhance crisis preparedness and response across Member States.
- **Horizon Europe Cluster 1 & 4**: which contains the health research, digital, industry and space challenges of the Horizon Europe programme and supports research and innovation projects in health, digital technologies, industry, and space to drive scientific progress and industrial leadership.
- **Single Market Programme (food chain)**: which aims to maintain high standards of food safety and quality, supporting businesses and protecting consumers within the EU single market
- **Connecting Europe Facility programme – Digital**: which supports the deployment of high-speed connectivity and secure digital infrastructure to ensure seamless cross-border digital services
- **Digital Europe Programme**: that focuses on building strategic digital capacities in areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and advanced digital skills to strengthen Europe's digital sovereignty.

These programmes are delegated by six parent Directorates-General:

- DG SANTE – Directorate General for Health and Food Safety (Lead Parent DG)
- DG RTD – Directorate General for Research and Innovation

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

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

- DG CNECT – Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology
- DG GROW – Directorate General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs
- DG DEFIS – Directorate General for Defence Industry and Space
- HERA – Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority

This wide and diverse parentage reflects HaDEA's cross-cutting mandate and requires close coordination with multiple Commission services.

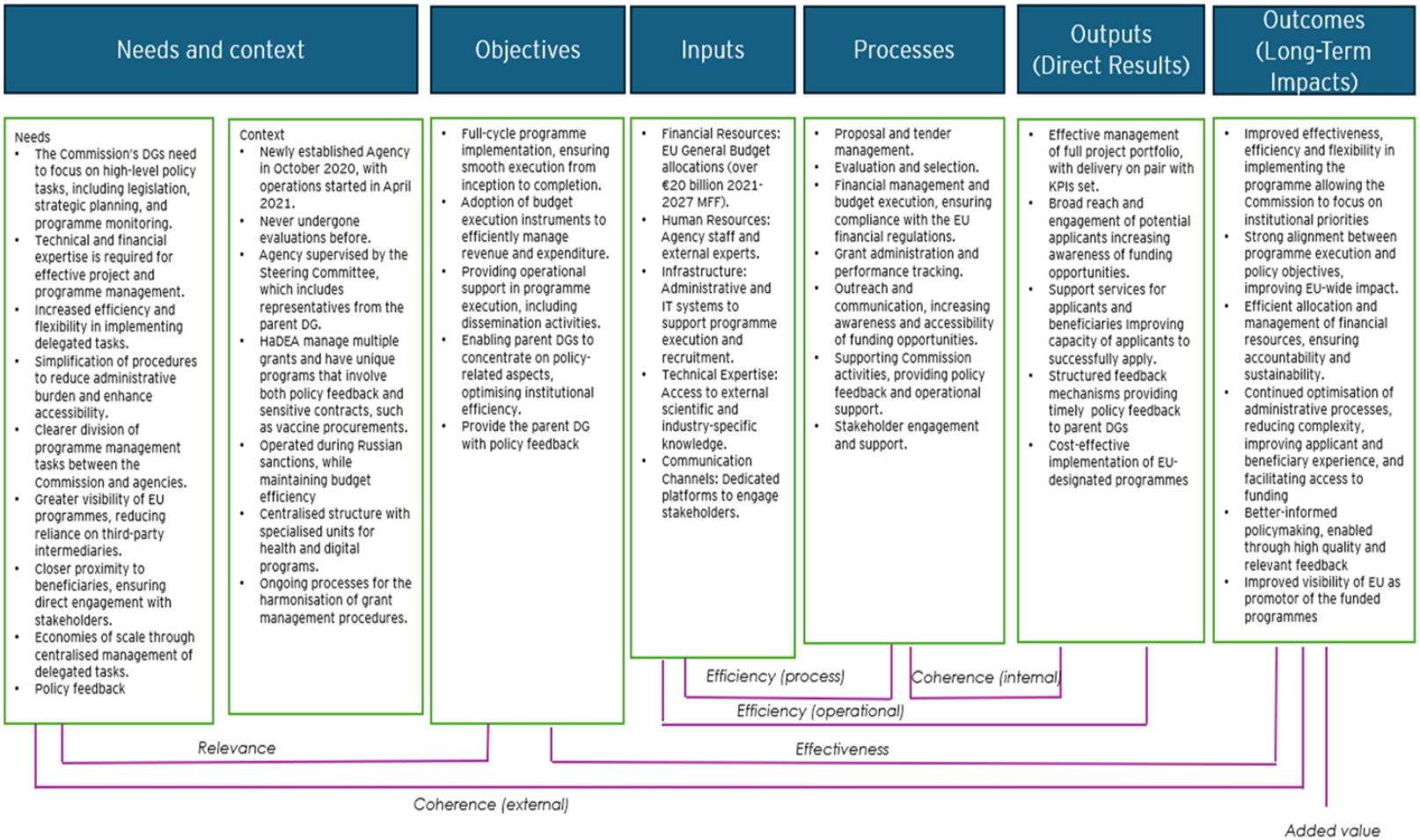
The intervention logic of HaDEA is provided below. When implementing the programmes delegated to it, HaDEA was responsible for:

- Calls for Proposals and calls for tenders' management, evaluating call for proposals and call for tenders and propose a ranking list of proposals for the selection by the European Commission.
- Signing grant agreements and contracts
- Monitoring of projects and performance tracking
- Outreach and support to applicants and their intermediaries (National Contact Points, National Agencies, and programme Desks)
- Supporting parent DGs by providing Feedback to Policy, reporting, and communication support
- Carrying out the necessary checks and recovery procedures; and performing budget implementation tasks covering revenue and expenditure under the EU Financial Regulation.

The intervention logic underpinning HaDEA's work links the Union budget and human resources it receives (inputs) to operational processes such as grant management, procurement, communication, and monitoring (activities). These lead to outputs including awarded grants and contracts, funded projects, and stakeholder engagement actions. The outputs are intended to contribute to wider programme objectives such as stronger public health systems, increased uptake of digital technologies, enhanced food safety and industrial resilience and access to Space. In the long term, HaDEA's work contributes to broader EU strategic goals including the Digital Decade, the European Health Union, and Europe's industrial strategy.

To evaluate HaDEA's implementation of EU programmes and the achievement of the Agency's objectives, as defined in the intervention logic, a range of indicators were used. These included key performance indicators, financial management metrics, and core statistics across the proposal and project management lifecycle (e.g. number of calls, proposals evaluated, ongoing projects). Communication outreach indicators were also considered. Additionally, the evaluation incorporated Feedback to Policy outputs. Stakeholder satisfaction, covering unsuccessful applicants, beneficiaries, and experts, was treated as an output and assessed through dedicated surveys. The evaluation also presents the findings of the quantitative cost-benefit analysis.

Figure 1: Intervention logic of HaDEA



3. State of play

Established under Commission Implementing Decision 2021/173, the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) has experienced a substantial evolution in both structure and scope, with its mandate quickly expanded to cover multiple strategic areas. As stipulated in the HaDEA Delegation Act, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between HaDEA and the parent DGs. It established the detailed rules and procedures for interaction and set out delimitation of responsibilities between HaDEA and its parent DGs

HaDEA was officially created on 16 February 2021 and commenced operations on 1 April 2021. In its inaugural year, the Agency faced a dual challenge: establishing its internal processes, procedures, and resources from the ground up to become an efficient and effective Executive Agency, while simultaneously delivering on legacy programmes inherited from other Executive Agencies and Directorates-General, and launching newly delegated programmes from the European Commission.

Before its establishment, the "legacy programmes" (funded under the 2014-2020 multi-annual financial framework) were managed by other Executive Agencies and/or Commission Directorates General. To ensure a seamless transition, teams from the soon-to-be HaDEA and the DGs and agencies previously managing the programmes collaborated closely. They exchanged information on the implementation status of each programme and prepared for the technical "transfer of files" from the 'giving' entity to HaDEA[4].

Table 1: Overview of the entities previously managing legacy programmes now managed by HaDEA[5]

2014-2020 programmes now managed by HaDEA	"Giving" entity
Third Health Programme	CHAFEA
Horizon 2020: Part III: Societal Challenge 1: Health, demographic change and well-being	European Commission
Horizon 2020: Part II: specific objective 'Leadership in enabling and industrial technologies (LEIT)' - ICT, NMBP, Space	EASME, REA, European Commission
Horizon 2020: Part III: Societal challenge 5: Climate action, Environment, resource efficiency and raw materials	EASME, European Commission
FP7: The theme 'space' of the specific programme cooperation of the Seventh Framework Programme	REA
Common financial framework in the area of food and food safety including Better Training for Safer Food	CHAFEA

[4] HaDEA, Mid-Year Report, 2021
[5] Ibid., p. 6.

2014-2020 programmes now managed by HaDEA	"Giving" entity
Connecting Europe Facility: Telecom	INEA, European Commission

Source: HaDEA Mid-year Report, 2021

Recruitment was a top priority from the outset. HaDEA's workforce grew by nearly 19% within its first nine months, increasing from 273 to 324 staff members in 2021, and reaching 488 staff members by 2024. The Agency adopted a participatory approach to shaping its corporate culture, defining its mission, vision, and values to unify a diverse staff around shared goals. To ensure sound financial management, HaDEA implemented appropriate financial circuits and adopted an anti-fraud strategy. A comprehensive internal control framework was also established to guarantee the legality and regularity of operations, aligning with the Commission's performance framework.

From the beginning, HaDEA contributed to key priorities of the first von der Leyen Commission, notably the development of a European Health Union and the implementation of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, as well as the EU's digital and industrial transformation. The Agency demonstrated agility in responding to emerging Commission priorities. For example, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Commission amended the 2022 EU4Health work programme to include a dedicated open call for action grants supporting the mental health of displaced Ukrainians. HaDEA published this unplanned call just one week after the amendment's adoption.

Simultaneously, the Agency encountered its first challenges in grant management. Uncertainty surrounding the participation of UK organisations complicated the grant agreement preparation phase for several programmes. Until January 2024 UK was not associated to Horizon Europe, requiring changes of project coordinators (in case of a British coordinator) or sometimes the inclusion of new beneficiaries from other countries to meet eligibility criteria. These adjustments significantly delayed the finalisation of some grant agreements and impacted related key performance indicators (KPIs).

Internally, HaDEA strengthened its organisational capacity through investments in digitalisation, internal control systems, and staff training. The Agency also prioritised communication, successfully launching internal and external social media channels to enhance visibility for both HaDEA and the respective delegated programmes to effectively reach its constituency. Environmental sustainability initiatives were introduced as well, including paperless workflows, energy optimisation in buildings, and preparations for compliance with the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS).

During the evaluation period, the Agency underwent a change in leadership. The new Director of HaDEA was officially appointed on 16 January 2022 and took up functions on 16 February 2022. In accordance with the Commission Decision on the establishment of Executive Agencies, this role had previously been held by an interim Director acting on behalf of the Commission during the transitional phase of setting up the Agency.[6]

[6] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2022, p.3.

4. Evaluation findings

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

4.1. Effectiveness

4.1.1. Objectives

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

Key findings: During the evaluation period, HaDEA met its programme implementation objectives, consistently achieving its KPIs with the exception on the percentage of Time to Grant in 2021 and 2022. HaDEA managed to navigate through the initial set up challenges, establishing and maintaining general satisfaction among beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants, and external experts.

During the evaluation period, HaDEA's objectives and activities remained aligned with the strategic plans of its parent Directorates-General (DGs). This alignment is evidenced by Annual Work Programmes that mirror DG programme and policy objectives, as well as by Mid-Year and Annual Activity Reports that document activities against the strategic goals set out in the regulations of the delegated instruments and in the MoUs with the parent DGs. At the beginning of the period, a substantial share of HaDEA's work still concerned the predecessor programmes whose management had been transferred from other Commission services (DGs, REA, EASME, INEA, CHAFEA)[7]. The Agency continued to oversee project implementation for ongoing grants under these legacy programmes.

[7] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p.4.

Table 2 Overview of programmes delegated to HaDEA

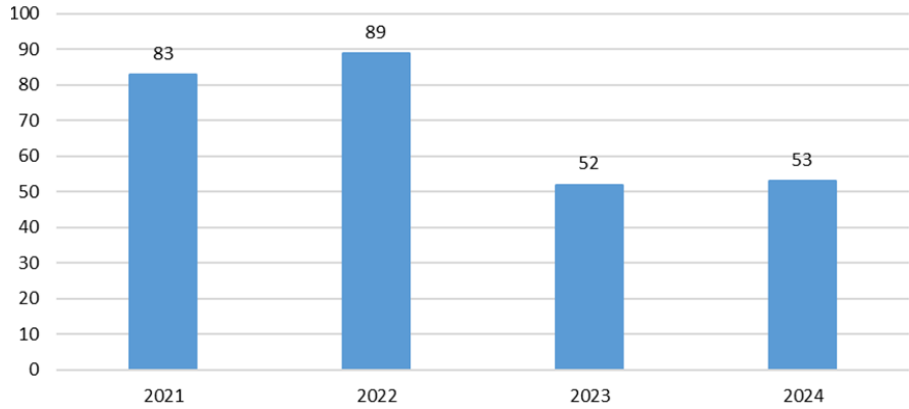
Parent DGs	Programme delegated
DG SANTE	DG SANTE delegated the implementation of the Food Strand (SMP Food Chain Strand) of the Single Market Programme (SMP) Regulation and its legacy. Such legacy concerns the actions whose implementation started before the 1/4/2021 under the legal framework of Regulation (EU) 652/2014, and that are not yet finalised to HaDEA.
DG CNECT	DG CNECT delegated the implementation of Connecting Europe Facility (CEF-Digital) and its legacy programme CEF Telecom, including WiFi4EU to HaDEA. DG CNECT also delegated the implementation of the Digital Europe Programme and its legacy programme CEF Telecom DSI part to HaDEA.
DG SANTE, HERA	DG SANTE and HERA delegated the EU4Health Programme (2021-2027) and its legacy Third Health programme to HaDEA.
DG SANTE, DG RTD, DG CNECT, HERA	DG SANTE, DG RTD, DG CNECT, and HERA delegated the implementation of Horizon Europe (Pillar II, Cluster 1): Health to HaDEA.
DG RTD, DG GROW, DG CNECT, DG DEFIS	DG GROW, DG RTD, DG CNECT and DG DEFIS delegated the implementation of Horizon Europe (Pillar II, Cluster 4): Digital, Industry & Space to HaDEA.

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on MoU and AARs 2021 – 2024

Figure 2 shows the number of calls for proposals launched during the evaluation period. 2021 represented quite a challenging year that coincided with the beginning of the Agency's operational activities, when also the transfer of the (legacy) project portfolios from other Executive Agencies and DGs to HaDEA occurred. A significant part of the year has been dedicated to the handover/transition and management of legacy programmes, and in the preparation for the new programmes, the organisation of training sessions, the introduction and testing of new tools, and the recruitment of experts. HaDEA launched 83 calls for proposals from the 2021-2027 programmes in 2021, including 47 under EU4Health, 22 under Horizon Europe Cluster 1 – Health, 14 under Horizon Europe Cluster 4 (respectively 3 under Digital, 5 under Industry and 2 under Space), and 4 under the SMP Food[8]. The number of calls for proposals reached its peak in 2022 up to 89, and with a significant decline in 2023 with 52. The figure slightly increased to 53 in 2024. Moreover, as further elaborated in Figure 4 below, the Agency had to manage also a rising number of procurement calls.

[8] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, Annex.

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



Source: AARs, 2021-2024

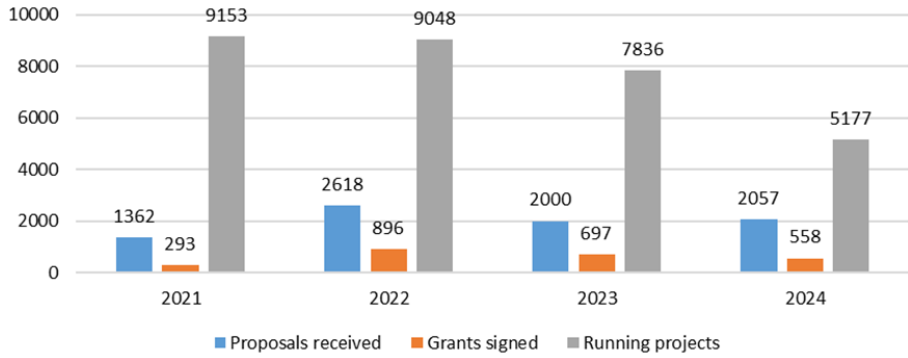
An analysis of the implementation data from this period reveals notable trends that reflect the Agency's evolving operational environment as shown in Figure 3. The number of proposals received annually shows a strong and sustained level of interest, rising from 1362 in 2021 to a peak of 2618 in 2022. Although there was a decline to 2000 in 2023, a slight increase to 2057 in 2024 suggests a stabilisation after the exceptional demand observed in 2022.

The number of grants signed mirrors shifts in funding capacity and programme focus. After a start with 293 grants signed in 2021, which was the Agency's establishment year, the figure surged to 896 in 2022, reflecting a year of intensive funding activity. This was followed by a decline to 697 in 2023 and 558 in 2024, indicating a more selective or strategically targeted funding approach in subsequent years. Against this background, as displayed in section 4.2.2, the number of staff gradually increased, reaching its peak in 2024.

The number of running grants remained relatively steady between 2021 and 2022, with 9153 and 9048 ongoing grants respectively. However, 2023 marked a decrease to 7836 active grants, before falling to 5177 in 2024. These comparatively high numbers of running grants reflect mostly the implementation of the grants under the legacy activities.

Between 2021 and 2024, the programme portfolio of HaDEA fluctuated moderately in financial terms. The operational budget in executed commitments increased from 2.9 billion euros in 2021 to 3.4 billion in 2022 before stabilising at a slightly lower level of 3.1 billion in 2023. Whereas, in 2024 the operational budget amounted to 2.6 billion – before factoring in external assigned revenue.

Figure 3: Number of proposals received, grant agreements signed and running grants (2021-2024)



Source: AARs, 2021-2024 and data shared by the European Commission for all delegated programmes to HaDEA

HaDEA has demonstrated positive operational performance over the period, for example, by consistently meeting or exceeding its annual indicative targets for evaluation sessions for grants. In 2022, HaDEA launched 91 evaluation sessions against a target of 57 to 64, and in 2024, it launched 52 sessions compared to a target of 36 to 41, confirming a positive trend in evaluation delivery.

Additionally, the use of simplified cost models—particularly lump sums—has shown significant variation across programmes managed by HaDEA. Since 2022, these models were used primarily in Horizon Cluster 4 and SMP Food, although for SMP Food Veterinary programmes, lump sums were used for the first time already in 2021, the table below Table 3 shows the increasing

Table 3: Performance indicators and outputs on grants management 2021-2024

Output	Indicators	Year	Target/planned	Result
Number of evaluation sessions	Number of evaluations sessions launched	2021	16 – 24	23[9]
		2022	57 – 64	91[10]
		2023	45	45
		2024	36 – 41	52
		2021	/	32

[9] Including 7 BTSF Evaluation sessions implemented from 2020 Legacy activities

[10] The value is a cumulative number of all the programmes managed by HaDEA. However, in specific terms, as almost half of this figure belongs to EU4Health programme, the increase in the numbers of published calls, evaluation sessions and signed grant agreements is due to several factors. These include the April 2022 amendments of the 2021 and 2022 EU4Health AWPs, which both led to the creation of new grant actions. Additionally, the NGO Operating Grants call from the 2023 EU4Health AWP was already launched in 2022, due to the earlier adoption of the 2023 EU4Health AWP. Furthermore, HaDEA relaunched one call for proposals, as requested by DG SANTE, due to a lack of successful proposals following the first call

Output	Indicators	Year	Target/planned	Result
Number of grants where simplified cost models – lump sums were used		2022		57
		2023		155
		2024		142

Source: HaDEA AARs and annexes 2021-2024 and data provided by the European Commission

Procurement Management

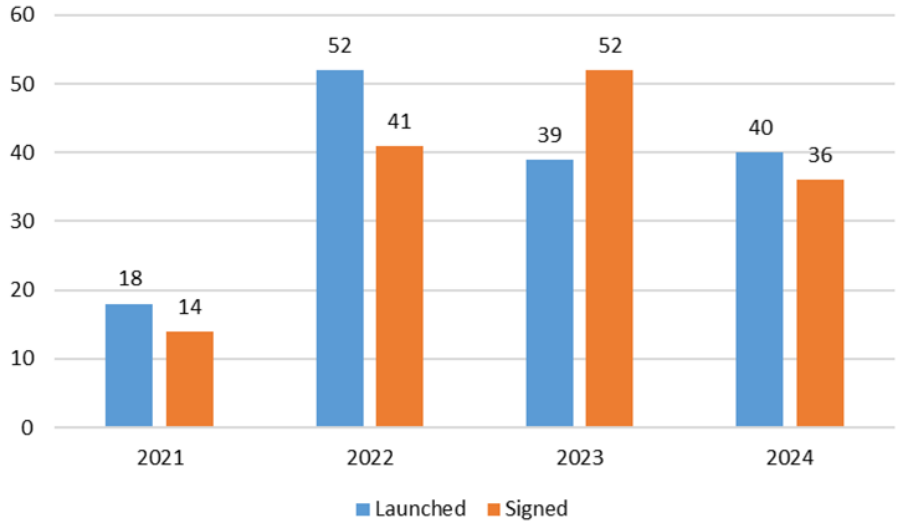
Procurement activities include the launch of new calls for tenders, the use of framework contracts by HaDEA or other institutions, and low-value contracts. To ensure compliance with EU financial rules, HaDEA established the Advisory Committee on Procurement and Contracts (ACPC) in 2021[11]. The ACPC plays a key role in promoting sound procurement practices and mitigating financial and reputational risks by reviewing procedures for conformity.

A dedicated procurement team supports these activities, particularly under the EU4Health programme. They provide legal and procedural guidance in line with DG BUDG standards and work closely with operational and financial units throughout the procurement lifecycle, from planning and evaluation to award, monitoring, and supervision.[12]

In 2022, HaDEA launched 41 procurement procedures, representing 2% of the Agency's total budget expenditure. In 2023, the Agency launched 33 procedures under the EU4Health programme, with an indicative budget of €320 million, resulting in 45 contracts and 72 ongoing actions, including legacy actions from the Third Health Programme[13]. This accounted for 6% of the Agency's expenditure[14]. In 2024, HaDEA launched 40 procurement procedures and signed 36 contracts, with each call receiving an average of four offers. Procurement in 2024 represented 8% of the Agency's total budget expenditure[15].

[11] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p.14.
[12] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, Annex, 2022, p.81.
[13] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2023, p.11-12.
[14] Ibid. p.28.
[15] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2024, p.23.

Figure 4: Number of procurement calls launched and contracts signed, 2021-2024[16]



Source: HaDEA AARs and annexes 2021-2024 and data provided by the European Commission

Key performance indicators (KPIs)

During the evaluation period, HaDEA used five Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), namely:

- KPI 1 (Time-to-Grant)[17]
- KPI 2 (Time-to-Pay)[18]
- KPI 3 (Budget Execution)
- KPI 4 (Estimated Risk at Closure)
- KPI 5 (Quality of service – client satisfaction)

During the evaluation period, on KPI 1 (Time-to-Grant), the share of grant agreements signed on time, varied from 93% in 2021[19], to 92% in 2022[20] reaching the peak of 99% in 2023, before settling in at 98% in 2024.[21] At the same time, the KPI 2 (Time-to-Pay) increased from 99% in 2021 to 100% in 2024. Regarding this indicator, HaDEA has consistently met the predefined targets. When it comes to the KPI 3 (Budget execution), HaDEA in 2021 implemented 100% of its operational budget in commitments and payments; this trend continued throughout the

[16] As per Annual Activity Report, 2023, pp. 11-12: the reason for higher number of procurement contracts signed in 2023 compared to the ones launched could depend on the fact that HaDEA launched 33 procurement procedures, stemming from both the 2022 and 2023 work programmes. The Agency published half of the procedures under the 2023 work programme. Most of the remaining ones were launched by mid-2024, concern either specific contracts under framework contracts currently published but not signed at that time, or stemming from policy needs requiring a later timeline.

[17] Time to Grant refers to the overall time period from submission of the proposal to signature of the grant.

[18] Time to Pay refers to the overall the overall time it takes for the Agency to execute the payment after completion of the related deliverable.

[19] As per Annual Activity Report 2021, "The discrepancy with HaDEA's target of 98%, is mainly explained through the late signature of 12 grants under Horizon 2020 (one to four days over the time to grant), due to the transfer of files between HaDEA and EASME, who previously managed this part of the programme"

[20] As per Annual Activity Report 2022, "The discrepancy with HaDEA's target of 98% can be explained by the uncertainty about the participation of UK organisations, which led to last-minute changes in the consortia, and by the lengthy and complex ownership and control assessment required for the signature of projects of some programmes."

[21] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2024

evaluation period. When interpreting budget execution figures—specifically executed commitments—it is important to consider that these results are partially influenced by the practice whereby lead parent DGs absorb unused and expiring commitments. This arrangement allows Executive Agencies to maintain high performance indicators, as non-implemented global commitments are not reflected in their reporting. However, it shifts the responsibility to the lead parent DGs, who must then reallocate or manage these funds to prevent budgetary losses.

Moreover, HaDEA managed to keep KPI 4 (Estimated risk at closure) minimal and below the target of 2%. The estimated risk was 1.68% in 2021, 1.74% in 2022, and 1.58% in 2023, with the peak of 1.94% in 2024. In 2021, data for KPI 5 (client satisfaction) were unavailable due to the delayed adoption of several work programmes. This was further impacted by HaDEA's recent establishment, as the Agency only reached full operational capacity later in the year. Consequently, the launch of calls was postponed, and key public events—such as the Info Days—were either deferred to 2022 or directly organised by the European Commission. Additional context is provided under the evaluation question "*Which were the factors driving or hindering the achievement of the objectives?*". This prevents us from establishing a reliable baseline for this indicator. After this first year though, HaDEA's performance in terms of client satisfaction has shown consistent improvement. In 2022, 88% of participants in HaDEA's external events reported being satisfied. Although there was a slight dip to 86% in 2023, the Agency successfully reached its 90% target in 2024.

Table 4: KPIs performance 2021-2024

KPI	Indicator	Target	Results			
			2021	2022	2023	2024
KPI 1 – Time to grant	The number of grant agreements signed within the target time period, divided by the number of grant agreements signed overall	98% within 9 months	93%	92%	99%	98%
KPI 2 – Time to pay	The percentage of payments which were made on time	98% of payments made on time for the operational budget	99%	100%	100%	100%
KPI 3 – Budget execution	Percentage of budget execution (commitments and payments – operational budget)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
KPI 4 – Estimated risk at closure	Risk at closure	<2% of relevant expenditure	1.68%	1.74%	1.58%	1.94%

KPI 5 – Client satisfaction	Satisfaction of participants in HaDEA's external events	90%	NA	88%	86%	90%

Source: AARs and annexes, 2021-2024

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

To enhance client-orientation, in 2023 HaDEA initiated its first satisfaction survey targeting over 4,000 external clients, including unsuccessful applicants and beneficiaries. This survey was the Agency's initial baseline for assessing the satisfaction level of external clients. The analysis of these results also contributed to the development of an action plan to improve HaDEA's services[22].

The findings revealed an overall satisfaction rate of 84% among beneficiaries and 49% among unsuccessful applicants[23]. Programme-specific results for beneficiaries are globally aligned with the overall figures, with the exception of SMP Food's beneficiaries where the satisfaction level stands at 60%. The lower satisfaction can be partially explained by the SMP Food's adoption of eGrants in 2021, before the survey was conducted in 2023. The onboarding of this programme on eGrants introduced a substantial difference in the participation's modalities (paper vs electronic), particularly for the sampled grants with consequent technical difficulties to adapt the tool to the beneficiary grants that were funded by the programme[24].

As part of the current evaluation, two surveys targeting respectively external experts, and beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants were launched, and the results were in line with the high satisfaction levels reported by HaDEA in their own 2023 survey.

The figures below show the results of the quantitative online surveys conducted by the evaluation team. Figure 5 shows a very high overall satisfaction of beneficiaries with HaDEA's performance. A combined 87% "agree" or "strongly agree" indicates that they are satisfied with the overall quality of the management services provided by the Agency. The perception among unsuccessful applicants is less positive. When asked about their satisfaction with the service quality during the preparation, submission, and evaluation of their rejected application, a combined 74 % of all respondents (including beneficiaries reflecting on past unsuccessful attempts) expressed satisfaction. However, the regression analysis shows that those whose current status is an unsuccessful applicant are significantly more likely to be dissatisfied and as shown in the figure below just 54% of applicants "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement that they are satisfied with the overall quality of the management services provided by HaDEA. Among the principal reasons cited by applicants for their dissatisfaction were the complexity and administrative burden inherent in the application and reporting procedures.

Furthermore, during the interviews conducted with beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants, it emerged that beneficiaries generally perceived the services provided by HaDEA positively. Interviewees generally appreciated the clarity of the application procedures, the timely evaluation of proposals – which was recurrently considered as reasonable, and the overall responsiveness of project officers during both the application and implementation stages were appreciated.

[22] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2023, p. 10.
[23] HaDEA Client Satisfaction Survey 2023 Report
[24] Ibid., p.7.

Figure 5: Satisfaction of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants with HaDEA's grant management[25]

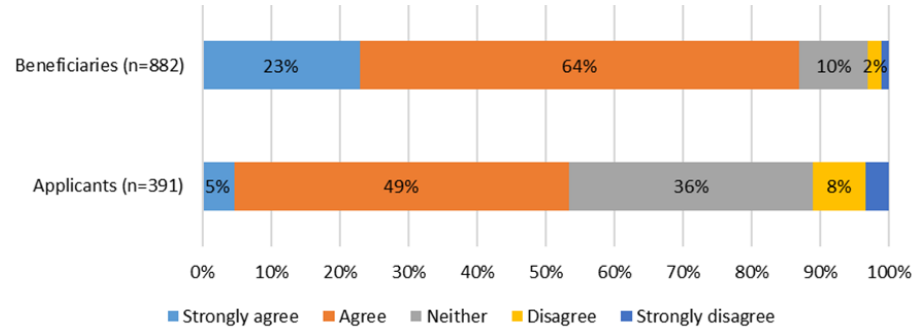
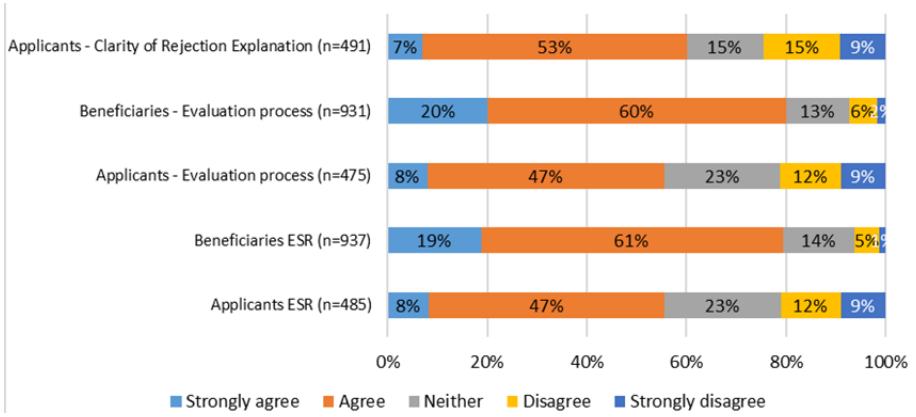


Figure 6 shows that a significant majority of beneficiaries (over 80%) "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement that their application's Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) was useful. Similarly, 80% of this cohort "agree" or "strongly agree" that the overall evaluation process was clear and transparent. The Evaluation Summary Report ESR, which assesses the quality of their proposal, is seen as a useful document. Naturally, a positive result can lead to a perception that the system is fair, clear, and functional. Compared to beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants reported more negative experiences with the evaluation and feedback process. While 60% agreed the rejection explanation was clear, 35% were neutral or disagreed. Only 56% found the ESR helpful for improving future proposals. Similarly, just 55% found the overall evaluation process clear and transparent.

[25] Beneficiaries: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the overall performance of HaDEA during the grant/contract?: I am satisfied with the overall quality of the programme management services provided by HaDEA during the whole application and grant / contract implementation period.
Applicants: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the overall performance of HaDEA during preparation, submission and evaluation of your rejected application?: I am satisfied with the overall quality of the services provided by HaDEA during the whole application period.

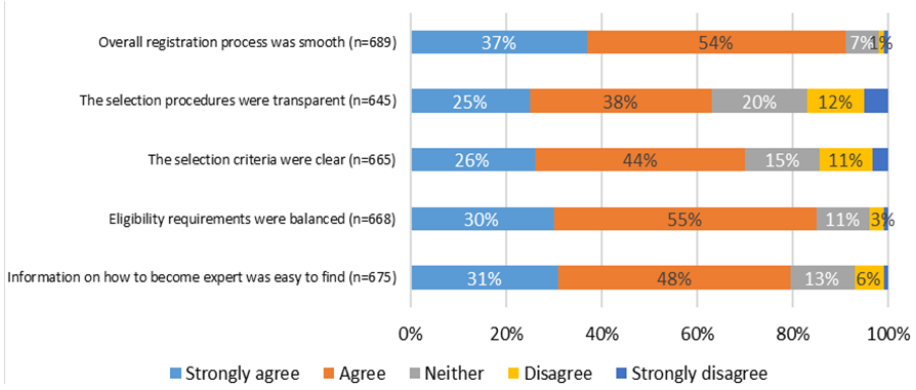
Figure 6: Satisfaction of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants with the Evaluation Summary Report[26] and with the evaluation process[27]



The results show an overall positive picture about the selection process to become an expert, with 70% of external experts seeing this process as clear, and with 63% of them agreeing with the statement, that the selection is transparent. For this last question, it is worth stressing that the neutral responses amounted to 20% whereas the combined proportion of disagreeing, and strongly disagreeing responses rises to 17%.

The following Figure 7 demonstrates that experts clearly see the registration process positively but the next step, the selection process less positively.

Figure 7: Satisfaction of external experts with the registration process as an external expert for HaDEA[28]



[26] Beneficiaries: As a beneficiary, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the evaluation of your application?: Our application's evaluation summary report contained useful and practical information.
Applicants: As an unsuccessful applicant, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the evaluation of your application?: Our application's evaluation summary report contained useful and practical information.

[27] Beneficiaries: As a beneficiary, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the evaluation of your application?: Overall, the evaluation process was clear and transparent.
Applicants: As an unsuccessful applicant, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the evaluation of your application?: Overall, the evaluation process was clear and transparent.

[28] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your registration process as an external expert for HaDEA?

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

Key findings: During the evaluation period, the effectiveness of the Agency's operations was challenged by several internal and external factors such as the administrative complexity due to Brexit; the grant amendments signed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the late adoption of certain programmes; or the intensive recruitment strategy. Despite these challenges, HaDEA's success was driven by highly motivated and skilled staff, strong engagement (73% in 2023), and constructive collaboration with parent DGs, enabling operational effectiveness under pressure.

From the perspective of both HaDEA staff and its parent DGs, the Agency is widely regarded as effective in achieving its operational programme objectives and expected outputs. Despite the natural challenges faced during its initial setup phase, HaDEA successfully navigated through this period—thanks largely to its committed and experienced staff, and Commission officials, who were identified as key actors in the Agency's swift and timely establishment and the start of operation.

This positive factor was also highlighted by multiple interviewees from both the Agency and the parent DGs as a driver of HaDEA's achievement of its objectives, particularly due to the high levels of motivation and engagement among its staff. The satisfaction and engagement of HaDEA employees is also reflected in the staff surveys conducted in 2021 and 2023. The staff engagement index exceeded 70% in both years, reaching 73% in 2023[29]. Additionally, in 2023, 80% of survey respondents expressed very positive attitude towards their job[30].

The dedication, motivation, and competence of HaDEA's staff were consistently highlighted by stakeholders, including those from the parent DGs, as crucial to the Agency's overall effectiveness as well as its capacity to operate under pressure or by coping with tight timelines. A particularly positive aspect was the strong and constructive working relationship between the Agency and its parent DGs, which was seen as a major factor contributing to HaDEA's effectiveness. Interviewees generally assessed the collaboration channels between HaDEA and the parent DGs at all levels as highly positive.

HaDEA's management capabilities and ability to operate under tight deadlines have been widely recognised as key enablers of its performance. This has been particularly evident in the Agency's swift and tailored responses to external crises, as well as its contributions to the European Commission's policy priorities. A notable example occurred, as described above, with the unplanned launch of call just one week after the adoption of the amended work programme, supporting the mental health of Ukrainian displaced people. A further example can be found with the special CORONA-01 call, launched in April 2021, a few days after the Agency officially started operations, which included the evaluation of 57 proposals within a very short timeline. One last example of the Agency's agility was its rapid response to the Mpox outbreak. In June 2022, HaDEA signed a supply contract for the purchase of over 330,000 vaccine doses for donation to EU Member States. The entire procurement procedure has been completed within three weeks[31].

On top of the "human factor", several structural and contextual factors, along with internal processes, were identified as contributors to HaDEA's effectiveness during the reference period. Notably, the adoption of the eGrants system for managed programmes under the 2021-2027

[29] Staff Survey 2023 - Dashboard overview. 2023 Engagement index: EACEA 71%, CINEA 75%, EISMEA 58%. HaDEA 73%, ERCEA 76% and REA 75%.

[30] Staff satisfaction survey 2023 - Percentage of respondents who slightly agreed or agreed with the statement "I feel pride in doing my job": EACEA 67%; CINEA 82%, EISMEA 59%, HaDEA 80% and REA 79%.

[31] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2022, p.4.

mandate significantly enhanced operations by streamlining procedures, reducing unnecessary variation, and enforcing the use of standardised model grant agreements and contracts. Since 2021, the Agency has invested in defining clear processes and tools and successfully recruited and trained competent staff within only a few months. In parallel, it developed at corporate level with the parent DGs, specific procedures and a new grant agreement model. Considerable time and resources were dedicated to introducing the (still missing) programmes in the eGrants system, enabling a high degree of automation in grant management[32].

This was particularly evident in the SMP Food programme: the efforts made in 2022 by HaDEA staff to adopt the corporate IT tool paid off, as all grants in 2023 were signed within the deadline. Additionally, by the end of 2023, a service-level agreement was signed between HaDEA and DG RTD for the development of a specific IT module to calculate and submit lump sums. This module was set to be used for the veterinary and phytosanitary programmes in 2024 for the programmes starting in 2025.

The progressive adoption of lump sums in grant agreements under different programmes was widely acknowledged as a factor enhancing programme delivery. Evidence from beneficiary surveys and interviews indicates that lump sums contribute positively to both the effectiveness and efficiency of project execution. Beneficiaries consistently reported that lump sum funding has simplified and accelerated financial management, significantly reducing administrative burdens. This shift towards lump sum agreements has introduced new operational demands for Agency staff, though. While this funding model offers more flexibility and has been positively received by beneficiaries, it also requires a significant change in internal processes. The shift to lump sum funding changes the nature of responsibilities in grant evaluation, operational monitoring, and result verification. While some traditional financial management tasks may diminish, new requirements emerge, particularly the need for precise assessment of proposed budgets in relation to the planned work. Importantly, this evaluation is carried out by scientific and technical experts in the relevant fields, not by purely financial specialists. The key expertise now lies in judging the appropriateness and relevance of budgeting within the context of the proposed activities. This transition may initially require additional effort and adaptation, as experts who previously had a more peripheral role in budget considerations will now play a central part in ensuring accountability and alignment between resources and objectives.

Although project monitoring will involve no scrutiny of detailed costs, most lump sum calls are still in early stages, and the full impact of these changes has yet to be realised. Looking ahead, if lump sum grants become more widespread, the operational differences will likely be more pronounced, particularly for financial colleagues whose roles will evolve significantly.

While HaDEA demonstrated strong operational performance, desk research and interviews also revealed several internal and external challenges that affected its activities and delivery during the evaluation period. Some of these issues were temporary and largely stemmed from the Agency's status as a newly established entity.

In its early phase, HaDEA faced a dual set of challenges. Internally, the Agency was still consolidating its organisational structure, formalising procedures, and completing staff recruitment well into the summer of 2021, which constrained its operational capacity. Externally, delays in the adoption of the legal basis and some work programmes, postponed the launch of call for proposals in spring 2021 or later. Consequently, key processes such as evaluation, award decisions, and contract signing were postponed until the final quarter of the year, leading to tighter deadlines (N+1-rule) and greater strain on the workforce. Specifically, the late adoption of the 2021 work programme concerned:

[32] Ibid., p.19.

- EU4Health adopted on 24 June 2021[33] following the adoption of the EU4Health Regulation[34] on 26 March 2021;
- Horizon Europe Cluster 1 adopted on 10 May 2022[35];
- Horizon Europe Cluster 4 adopted on 10 May 2022[36];
- Single Market Programme (SMP) food adopted on 06 May 2021[37];

At the same time, following the delayed adoption of the 2021 work programme of SMP: food, HaDEA and its parent DG, DG SANTE opted for bi-annual grant agreements covering both 2021 and 2022 for (i) veterinary programmes, (ii) phytosanitary programmes, and (iii) European Reference Laboratories and European Reference Centres (EURLs/EURCs). This approach helped ease the workload pressure, as three additional calls and one preparatory action linked to the 2021 work programme were launched and completed in 2022. Furthermore, the Agency launched three calls under the 2022 work programme and two calls under the 2023 work programme. The resulting grant agreements were signed in 2023[38].

- Digital Europe Programme adopted on 10 November 2021[39];
- CEF Digital adopted on 16 December 2021[40].

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic further complicated operations, leading to numerous requests for project extensions across the various programmes managed by the Agency. This introduced greater unpredictability in budget forecasting and planning as well as increased workload since this was not taken into account in the calculation of resources in 2021 when the Agency was established.

[33] European Commission, COMMISSION IMPLEMENTING DECISION of 24.6.2021 on the financing of the Programme for the Union's action in the field of health ('EU4Health Programme') and the adoption of the work programme for 2021 (C(2021) 4793 final) 25.7.2022 amending Implementing Decision C(2021) 4793 final of 24 June 2021 and Implementing Decision C(2022) 317 final of 14 January 2022 on the financing of the Programme for the Union's action in the field of health ('EU4Health Programme') and the adoption of the work programmes for 2021 and 2022 respectively, 25 July 2022.

[34] REGULATION (EU) 2021/522 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 March 2021 establishing a Programme for the Union's action in the field of health ('EU4Health Programme') for the period 2021-2027, and repealing Regulation (EU) No 282/2014

[35] European Commission. Commission Implementing Decision C(2022)2975 of 10 May 2022 on the financing of Horizon Europe – Health and the adoption of the work programme for 2021-2022

[36] European Commission, COMMISSION IMPLEMENTING DECISION of 10.5.2022 amending Commission Implementing Decision C(2021)1940 on the adoption of the work programme for 2021-2022 within the framework of the Specific Programme implementing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and on its financing as regards the 2022 budget.

[37] European Commission, COMMISSION IMPLEMENTING DECISION C(2021) 3046 of 06.05.2021 on the financing of the Programme for single market, competitiveness of enterprises, including small and medium-sized enterprises, and European statistics and the adoption of the work programme for 2021-2024.

[38] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2022, p. 19.

[39] European Commission, Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Digital Europe Programme and the adoption of the multiannual work programme for 2021 – 2022, 10 November 2021.

[40] European Commission, Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Connecting Europe Facility – Digital sector and the adoption of the multiannual work programme for 2021-2025, 16 December 2021.

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

Key findings: While HaDEA reduced its vacancy rate, a faster recruitment process could be beneficial to address critical gaps. Interim solutions offered short-term relief but did not entirely resolve structural issues. Overlapping calls and evaluations, particularly at year-end, created heavy workloads that pose risk to staff well-being and operational efficiency. Strengthening internal coordination, especially between programme units and cross-cutting functions like policy feedback, communication, and reporting could significantly improve effectiveness.

While HaDEA has demonstrated positive performance in delivering on the objectives of its delegated programmes, the Agency has also faced transitional challenges. These were partly linked to the initial establishment of its operations and the implementation of relevant procedures, as well as to external factors beyond its control. Nonetheless, evidence gathered during the evaluation highlights several areas where targeted actions could enhance the Agency's overall effectiveness.

For instance, recruitment and staffing emerged as major challenges. During HaDEA's first year, which coincided with an intense hiring phase, the Agency began operations with 273 staff members, aiming to reach 381 by the end of 2021. By 31 December, it onboarded 324 staff, with 17 more joining in early 2022, achieving 90% of its staffing target. Additionally, the team initially assigned to Horizon Europe Cluster 4 proved insufficient to manage the increased delegated budget. To address this, stakeholders agreed to frontload eight positions to Department B, enabling the Agency to better handle the additional workload[41]. Although progress was made in reducing the vacancy rate during the evaluation period, interviews with Agency staff and representatives from parent DGs underscored the need for a more streamlined and faster recruitment process. To mitigate short-term staffing gaps—such as during peak periods or to cover long-term sick leave, HaDEA has relied on interim solutions, including interim staff. While helpful in the short term, these measures did not fully resolve the underlying structural challenges.

Overall, the allocation of staff within the Agency remains a salient factor in enhancing operational effectiveness. Although the current legal framework permits both short- and long-term reallocation of personnel across delegated programmes, adopting a more holistic approach would be advantageous. This would involve a thorough analysis of the underlying factors that hinder efficiency and the identification of potential mitigating actions to be proposed for discussion and decision-making by the Steering Committee. Maintaining a lower vacancy rate, coupled with close monitoring of workload distribution, will be instrumental in ensuring that staffing levels remain adequate to support the Agency's operations effectively.

Furthermore, overlapping calls and evaluations, especially towards the end of the calendar year, place considerable strain on reporting and grant agreement preparations. This results in a substantial workload that poses risks to staff's well-being and increases operational vulnerabilities. Interviews with Agency staff also pointed to the need for improved internal horizontal coordination, particularly between programme units and cross-cutting functions such as Feedback to Policy, communication, and reporting. Strengthening these internal linkages could significantly enhance the Agency's effectiveness across its programmes.

[41] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p.47.

4.1.2. Legal Framework

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

Key findings: HaDEA operated fully within the boundaries of its legal framework, with no evidence of activities beyond its mandate or legal non-compliance during the evaluation period. The Agency effectively carried out delegated while adhering to financial regulations.

Several documents contribute to defining the legal framework of the Agency. For instance, in terms of delegation's act and respective amendments the following outlines the specific tasks and responsibilities assigned to HaDEA:

- Decision C(2021)948 delegating powers to the European Health and Digital Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of EU4Health, Single Market, Research and Innovation, Digital Europe, Connecting Europe Facility - Digital, comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union.[42]
- Commission Decision C(2021)9343 of 14.12.2021 amending Decision C(2021) 948 delegating powers to the European Health and Digital Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of EU4Health, Single Market, Research and Innovation, Digital Europe, Connecting Europe Facility - Digital, comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union.[43]
- A further annex linked to the above-mentioned Commission decision provides supplementary information and details that support the main decision regarding the delegation of powers related to the implementation of the various delegated programmes.[44]

Moreover, the appointment of the members and observers of HaDEA's Steering Committee together with the rules of procedures of this is constituted in the following documents:

- Commission Decision of 24.3.2021 amending Decision C(2021) 1051 appointing the members and observers of the Steering Committee of the European Health and Digital Executive Agency.[45] Moreover, this was further amended during the evaluation period by Commission Decision of 15.2.2023 C(2023) 1200.

[42] European Commission. Commission Decision of 14 December 2021 amending Decision C(2021) 948 delegating powers to the European Health and Digital Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of EU4Health, Single Market, Research and Innovation, Digital Europe, Connecting Europe Facility – Digital. Brussels: European Commission, 2021.
[43] Ibid.
[44] European Commission. Annexes to the Commission Decision on delegating powers to the European Health and Digital Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of EU4Health, Single Market, Research and Innovation, Digital Europe, Connecting Europe Facility – Digital. Brussels: European Commission, 2021.
[45] European Commission. Commission Decision of 14 December 2021 amending Decision C(2021) 1051 appointing the members and observers of the Steering Committee of the European Health and Digital Executive Agency. Brussels: European Commission, 2021

- Rules of procedure of the European Health and Digital Executive Agency Steering Committee SC01(2021)01.[46]

The Commission Decision outlined below establishes the Executive Agencies responsible for implementing Union programmes within the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). It defines their specific tasks, portfolios, and general operational rules, while also creating the legal framework for the transition between the agencies and the relationship between the Commission and these agencies.

- Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173 of 12 February 2021 establishing the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, the European Health and Digital Executive Agency, the European Research Executive Agency, the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, the European Research Council Executive Agency, and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and repealing Implementing Decisions 2013/801/EU, 2013/771/EU, 2013/778/EU, 2013/779/EU, 2013/776/EU and 2013/770/EU.[47]

According to the Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173 a transitional period48 was established during which the Commission managed HaDEA. The transitional period ended on 16 February 2022, when HaDEA gained the operational capacity to implement its own budget.[49]

The operation of the Agency is also governed by several MoU which describe the interaction between the Agency and parent DGs, as well as detailing the delegation modalities of specific programmes and by the Annual Work Programmes of the Agency. No major changes to the legal framework happened during the evaluation period. The only notable exception was the addition of HERA as a parent DG, which was established through Commission Decision C(2021)9343 in 2021.

To assess to what extent HaDEA has operated in accordance with its legal framework, the activities of the Agency-as set out in the Work Programme and Annual Activity Report-during the evaluation period, were compared to HaDEA's mandate. As indicated above, the Annexes to the Commission Decision (2021)948 establish the delegated programmes, or parts of programmes, as well as the specific delegated tasks. Accordingly, HaDEA is responsible for managing some or all the phases of programme implementation and stages in the life cycle of projects for the delegated programmes. This includes, inter alia, awarding grants and managing the ensuing agreements, monitoring projects and performing the necessary ex-ante and ex-post controls. Moreover, the Agency prepares the publication of calls, contracts external expert evaluators and observers, evaluates the proposals with the help of said external experts, prepares and adopts decisions on awards and rejections. Regarding project implementation, the Agency monitors the implementation of the grant agreements, organises the selection of the experts assisting in monitoring, assess reports and other deliverables, as well as the overall implementation of the contractual obligations of the consortium. It also checks financial compliance, manages payments and recovery procedures. As regards audits, HaDEA is

[46] European Health and Digital Executive Agency. Decision of the Steering Committee of the European Health and Digital Executive Agency on internal rules concerning restrictions of certain rights of data subjects in relation to the processing of personal data in the framework of activities carried out by the Agency. Official Journal of the European Union L 379, October 26, 2021, p. 57. ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/proc_rules/2021/1026/oj.

[47] European Commission. Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173 of 12 February 2021 establishing the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, the European Health and Digital Executive Agency, the European Research Executive Agency, the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, the European Research Council Executive Agency, and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and repealing Implementing Decisions 2013/801/EU, 2013/771/EU, 2013/778/EU, 2013/779/EU, 2013/776/EU and 2013/770/EU (C/2021/953). Official Journal of the European Union L 50, February 12, 2021, p. 9–24.

[48] Ibid., Article 22

[49] European Court of Auditors, *Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2021*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, **https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2865/46794**

responsible for following up and implementing audit findings for the delegated parts of the programmes (for the Digital Europe Programme, this responsibility entails the whole programme, including the non-delegated parts). HaDEA is also tasked with performing communication about the projects and dissemination of project results in line with the strategy and agreement of the parent DGs.

Based on our research, no evidence of activities beyond the Agency's remit were found. Furthermore, no discrepancies were identified between HaDEA's mandate and the activities carried out.

The Agency's adherence to the legal framework was also examined based on the number of non-compliance events recorded in legal assessments. The Agency has not faced any legal cases during the evaluation period. In 2022, the ECA observed that Article 22 of Commission Implementing Decision 2021/173 entrusted the Director-General of DG SANTE with the authority to act as HaDEA's interim Director until HaDEA gained the operational capacity to implement its own budget. However, the ECA noted that, on 19 February 2021, the Director-General of DG SANTE delegated that authority to another DG SANTE official, appointing him as the interim Director of HaDEA. While Article 26 of HaDEA's Financial Regulation allows budgetary powers to be delegated, the ECA objected that this did not include the whole authority of the interim Director as it would void Article 22 of its substance and meaning.[50] The matter was considered a one-off event, it did not call into question the ECA's overall opinion on the legality and regularity of the Agency's transactions, and it was closed in the subsequent year as HaDEA gained its full operational capacity and appointed a permanent Director.[51]

Overall, the stakeholders interviewed confirmed that the Agency is fully operating in accordance with the legal framework. Interviewees also emphasised that HaDEA is committed to adhering to financial regulations and documenting any deviations with clear explanations and alternative solutions, including maintaining exception requests and non-compliance reports within its internal control files.

[50] ECA. *Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2021*, 2022, https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=62271

[51] ECA. *Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2022*, 2023, https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/SAR-AGENCIES-2022

4.1.3. Internal Control Framework

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

Key findings: Since 2021, HaDEA has applied the Commission's internal control framework, combining top-down leadership and bottom-up engagement. Regular self-assessments, risk reviews, and awareness activities have ensured continuous improvement, with all 17 principles fully functioning by 2024. Annual risk assessments, an internal control network, and a revised control strategy in 2023 strengthened oversight and risk mitigation. Improvements in processes and systems also contributed to a robust control environment, reflected in declining late payments after the first year. HaDEA's HR management is robust, with no legal disputes and strong staff engagement (73%) and satisfaction (80%).

The Agency played a leading role in inter-agency HR harmonisation, joint recruitment, and the adoption of a common multiannual HR Strategy in 2023, attempting to improve talent acquisition across Executive Agencies.

Since its establishment in 2021, HaDEA operates under the same internal control framework as the European Commission. It was adopted by analogy in March 2021. Based on international good practices, HaDEA's framework is composed of five components broken down into 17 guiding principles.[52] The Agency has a dedicated internal control team within Department C. This team is a part of the unit that is separated from the operational finance unit, helping to ensure its independence.[53] Following the methodology of the Commission, the unit conducts annual risk assessments, mid-term reviews, and yearly reviews of its Internal Control Monitoring Criteria (ICMC) based on various sources. Desk research, supported by interviews, indicates that the Agency's internal control framework is well-established and functions smoothly, as illustrated in this section.

The Agency has adopted a bottom-up and a top-down approach to build an internal control culture. An internal control survey is run annually where both staff and managers provide feedback on the effectiveness of the system. Furthermore, HaDEA has set up an internal control network - '*ICnet*' - identifying contacts within all units that support the internal control team.[54] Awareness-raising activities regularly also form part of this effort. The top-down approach relates to how senior management sets the tone for the importance of Internal Control, including expected standards of conduct. Overall, this ensures that the Agency remains updated on the state of the internal controls.

During the evaluation period, the Agency's annual self-assessment of the effectiveness of its internal control framework has consistently shown positive outcomes. In 2022, the assessment showed that 13 out of the 17 principles were present and functioning well. Minor deficiencies[55] were detected in regard to 'Control Activities' and 'Monitoring.' These issues were subjected to

[52] See further: European Commission. *Communication to the Commission from Commissioner Oettinger. Revision of the Internal Control Framework.* 2017, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/f163e193-bf9b-4823-bd4b-dceb8739f46e_en?filename=revision-internal-control-framework-c-2017-2373_2017_en.pdf

[53] As stated in the interviews.

[54] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report 2021, 2022.

[55] Minor deficiency is defined as a minor impact on the presence and/or functioning of the principle. The principle is in place and functions well, only minor improvements are needed according to HaDEA, Report on the 2022 Internal Control Assessment Results and Actions to Take in 2023, 2023, Not publicly available.

an Action Plan setting out remedial measures that were implemented the following year. In 2024, the internal control framework self-assessment found that all five components and 17 principles were present and functioning well without any issues to report. These continuous improvements as shown in the self-assessment underline that the internal control framework is present and well-performing. Moreover, interviewees highlighted that the Agency has not received any criticism or recommendations from the Steering Committee on internal controls.

Interviewees also highlighted that HaDEA has not registered any cases of maladministration. They noted an Ombudsman case and several Article 22 complaints under Regulation 58/2003 pertaining to complaints on proposal rejection, but in the end none of the complaints were upheld. The European Ombudsman, however, provided a recommendation to HaDEA in regard to improvements in its communications and procedures relating to the particular case.[56]

As regard to risk assessment, the Commission's framework requires the Agency to conduct an annual risk assessment as an integral part of the internal control framework. The first annual risk assessment exercise was conducted in May 2021, with risks reviewed and reported to the members of the Steering Committee on a bi-annual basis in line with guidance provided by central services. The risk assessment follows a bottom-up approach in its initial phase, where the entire Agency is invited to identify potential risks.[57] Subsequently, all levels of management evaluate these risks, leading to a consolidation process guided by the internal control team. The identified risks are then recorded in the Agency's risk register, highlighting high and very high risks at the Agency level.

In 2023, HaDEA also revised its control strategy to establish a more integrated and balanced framework for internal controls. The updated strategy combines both manual and automated measures, as well as preventive and detective controls, to ensure comprehensive oversight. It sets out a clear, overarching approach aimed at strengthening the internal control environment and enhancing the Agency's ability to manage risks effectively[58].

Late payments have been kept above target throughout the evaluation period, as reported in Section 4.1.1 confirming a robust and reliable control environment aligned with the expectations of delegated programme management. In addition to meeting such targets, even the number of late payments also remained low during the evaluation period, besides 2021 which was primarily affected by the delay in migration of the IT tool managing legacy WiFi4EU payments from INEA to HaDEA.

Table 5: Late payment and errors in transactions HaDEA 2021 - 2024

Indicator name	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of late payments for the administrative budget	8	4	3	1
% of late payments for the administrative budget	3.86%	0.71%	0.29%	0.12%
Number of late payments for the operational budget	608	50	16	34
% of late payments for the operational budget	13.20%	1.04%	0.48%	0.79%

Source: HaDEA AARs and annexes 2021 – 2024

[56] European Ombudsman, *Decision on how the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) followed-up on the findings of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) following an investigation into an entity that participated in EU-funded projects under the Horizon 2020 programme (case 130/2024/FA)*, 03 April 2024, https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/decision/en/198583

[57] As stated in interviews.

[58] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2023, p.30.

Audit results

As regard sound financial management, various audits have been performed by the Internal Audit Service (IAS) and the European Court of Auditors (ECA) during the evaluation period. Overall, none of the audits have resulted in any critical or very important recommendations being addressed to HaDEA. Moreover, the ECA has audited the Agency yearly and found the accounts of the Agency presented fairly, and the revenue and payments underlying the accounts were legal and regular for 2021,[59] 2022,[60] 2023[61],[62]

In 2021, the IAS did not launch any audits as HaDEA started its operations in the same year. Thus, as no audit work covering internal controls was performed in HaDEA in that year, the IAS stated that there was no element to report nor contribution to provide for the 2021 annual activity report. The ECA audit in 2021 also did not result in any recommendations. However, an observation was made on budgetary management. HaDEA took note of the observation and replied within the stipulated six months period.[63] Similarly, in 2022 the ECA closed, among others, several transactions related to the Agency's administrative budget in 2022 and found weaknesses in four out of six audited low-value procurement procedures (below €15 000). The observation raised by the ECA auditor concerned four low value contracts related to the implementation of communication activities. In response to this, HaDEA agreed with the observation and highlighted that as of September 2022 the dedicated IT tool PPMT (Prescribed Procurement Management Tool), which streamlines further the procurement processes was applied[64]. In addition, following the ECA audit of 2023 and 2024 accounts, this observation has been withdrawn by the ECA.

In June 2023, the ECA issued a Special Report on *"The EU's industrial policy on batteries"*, involving several DGs and Executive Agencies. HaDEA was audited through a sample of four grants managed under Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe. The audit report did not include findings or recommendations addressed to HaDEA in particular. In 2021-2023, IAS performed several audits on programmes implemented by HaDEA.

HaDEA's internal audits have also shown that the internal control framework is robust. In 2023, the Agency's auditors performed 26 audits on the programmes under its audit responsibility, which includes all programmes except for the Horizon Europe programme. However, at programme level, some differences emerged. In particular, in a few smaller programmes, the residual error rate was slightly above the target of 2% in some years of the evaluation period. Evidence from the AARs indicating that at the end of 2021, the residual error rate of Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) Telecom – Digital Service Infrastructure (DSI) segment was 3.84%, exceeding the materiality threshold of 2%. The error rate was already very high before the programme was transferred to HaDEA, prompting the Agency to take action to reduce the cumulative error rate. These measures are yielding positive results. However, due to the high error rate prior to the transfer, it will be challenging for HaDEA to bring the cumulative error rate (considering all years of the programme) below 2%. Nevertheless, there has been a decreasing trend before HaDEA took over the programme, with the error rate dropping from 5.26% in 2019 to 4.73% in 2020, and finally to 3.84% in 2021. Following the administrative transfer of programmes between the Executive Agencies, this segment did not meet the cumulative criteria to fall below the '*de-minimis rule'*, as HaDEA had a smaller portfolio in 2021 than its predecessor in 2020. HaDEA issued therefore a reservation for this segment, even though the impact is well

[59] ECA. *Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2021*, 2022, https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=62271

[60] ECA. *Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2022*, 2023, https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/SAR-AGENCIES-2022

[61] ECA. *Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2023*, 2024, https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?ref=SAR-AGENCIES-2023

[62] The 2024 Annual report of the ECA is not yet available.

[63] Annual report on EU agencies for the financial year 2022 (OJ C, C/2023/594, 27.10.2023, ELI: **http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/594/oj**)

[64] Ibid.

below the established exposure limits. The Agency considered this as a “one-off” event, in view of the combined effects of the low financial exposure (EUR 2.38 M EUR), the phasing out of this segment and the improvements already made, resulting in a decreasing error rate[65],[66].

To enhance error prevention, detection, and correction early in the project lifecycle, HaDEA implemented effective remedial actions, resulting in a reduction of the error rate. In 2022, the residual error rate decreased to 3.28%, still above the 2% materiality threshold. However, management has reasonable assurance that adequate controls are in place, risks are being monitored and mitigated, and necessary improvements are underway. The identified weaknesses were not deemed significant in terms of reputational risk or financial loss. The programme's budget implementation share fell to 0.62% of the Agency's total payments, with a financial exposure of EUR 1.57 million. Consequently, since both cumulative conditions for the ‘*de-minimis rule’* were satisfied, the Agency decided to lift the reservation.[67]

Table 6: CEF Telecom programme DSI - Error rates evolution (2018 - 2023)[68]

CEF Telecom programme - DSI	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Detected error rate	1.24%	5.37%	4.95%	4.11%	3.91%	2.82%
Residual error rate	1.10%	5.26%	4.73%	3.84%	3.28%	2.46%
Reservation	No	No	No	Yes	No	No

Source: HaDEA AAR, 2023

Table 6 shows the detected and residual error rates trend of the CEF Telecom programme – DSI between 2018 and 2023. The remedial actions enforced by the Agency since 2021, had led in the last years to a positive trend, reflected in the continuous decrease of the error rate.

HR practices

As regards to sound Human Resources (HR) management, the Agency has engaged in extensive recruitment efforts. Despite these recruitment efforts there have been no legal cases regarding project lines or staff selection under Article 90 of the Staff Regulation[69], indicating that rules and procedures function effectively. The Internal Control assessment has found that HR practices are in place to ensure the effective functioning of internal controls.[70] Component 1 of the Commission’s Internal Control Framework relates to the Control Environment, which involves satisfaction with the workplace and with professional relationships[71]. The ICMC that relates to staff engagement showed very high engagement with a rate of 73%. Moreover, the Agency’s staff survey showed that HaDEA staff had a very high employment satisfaction rate of 80%.[72] As regards external auditing, the ECA did not issue any recommendations or observations on human resources during the evaluation period.

Overall, in line of the above findings, consulted stakeholders within the Agency declared that the internal control system has remained “solid” over the past few years, with no meaningful challenges reported. At the same time, the assessments provided by the IAS and the ECA pointed out neither any critical nor very important recommendations to HaDEA during the evaluation period, as per the Annual Activity Reports.

[65] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p.10
[66] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021 Annex, pp.115 – 119.
[67] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2022 AAR, p.40.
[68] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2023 Annex, p.76.
[69] Regulation No 31 (EEC), 11 (EAEC), laying down the Staff Regulations of Officials and the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/1962/31(1)/2014-05-01/eng
[70] Ibid. p.77.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

4.1.4. Communication

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

Key findings As a new agency, HaDEA prioritised creating an outreach strategy and promoting delegated programs, especially new and less-known ones. Initial outreach was hampered by temporary initial external challenges, but targeted country missions, info days, and participation in major events improved awareness and increased the stakeholder's network of the Agency. HaDEA strengthened its outreach through a structured communication strategy, annual action plans, and multiple channels. While social media presence expanded significantly, evidence shows this could be further enhanced and exploited. Surveys show that direct channels—especially email and the EU Funding & Tenders Portal—remain the most effective for beneficiaries.

The main priority of the Agency is to raise awareness of delegated programmes, however, as a new Agency, HaDEA's external communication strategy also focused on developing a distinct Agency identity and increasing its visibility.[73] Stakeholders indicated some challenges from the onset to connect with constituencies and inform them of the Agency's role and services due to its new status. While well-recognised programmes, such as Horizon Europe, already had a defined identity, low application rates were noted for new programmes such as the Digital Europe Programme.

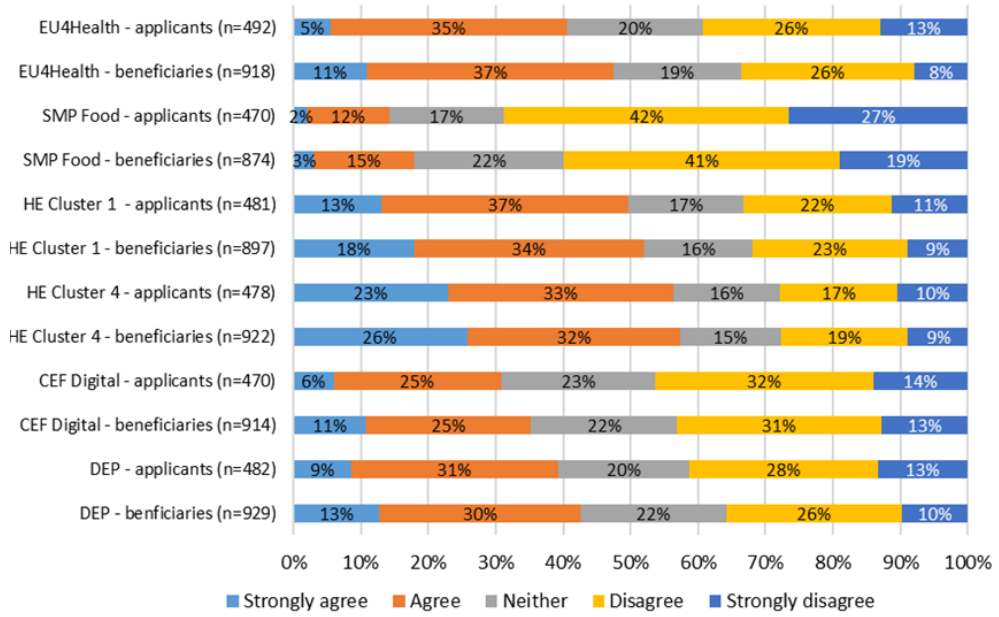
Where applicable, the Agency relied on existing channels from Parent DGs, including national contact points, to increase awareness. Initially, challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing travel restrictions prevented the Agency from meeting external stakeholders in person and organising in-person events. However, once restrictions were lifted, country missions in collaboration with the parent DGs were launched to promote programmes. Member States with a low participation rate were a particular focus of these missions and aimed to explain HaDEA's role, programmes, application processes, and funding opportunities. Meetings with national contact points were also used to increase the visibility of the Agency and provide the national points with guidance on communication strategies and synergies. In 2023, five successful country visits (Romania, Israel, Luxemburg, Bulgaria, and Italy) were undertaken. Stakeholders noted that communication efforts have paid off and the Agency now receives a higher volume of quality proposals.

The survey showed that beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants were still mostly familiar with the Horizon Europe Clusters managed by the Agency (Figure 8). Particularly low awareness was noted for the Single Market Programme – Food Strand with respectively 18% of beneficiaries and 14% of applicants declaring of being familiar with it.[74] Overall, less than half of respondents were familiar with most programmes in the Agency's portfolio, except for Horizon Europe clusters. This pattern highlights how already existing and established programmes enjoy strong recognition, while new ones face considerable outreach challenges.

[73] See case study on communication

[74] Within the SMP food programme, the primary beneficiaries are the competent authorities of Member States. The current survey corroborates this, as most responses were submitted by national competent authorities. External beneficiaries, on the other hand, have only a minor role in food-related actions, generally restricted to a handful of annual procurements.

Figure 8: Awareness of Programmes respectively among applicants[75] and beneficiaries[76]



As a new Agency, HaDEA's external communication strategies are still developing.[77] The Agency has a dedicated communication function within Department C managing interactions with communication teams of parent DGs, internal communication and public outreach. This unit was quickly established at the start of HaDEA and has helped in promoting the Agency and maintaining clear communication channels. A rolling Action Plan for external and internal communications is drafted each year and approved by the management. Performance indicators for both internal and external communication are set out annually in the Work Programme, followed by the results in the Annual Activity Report.

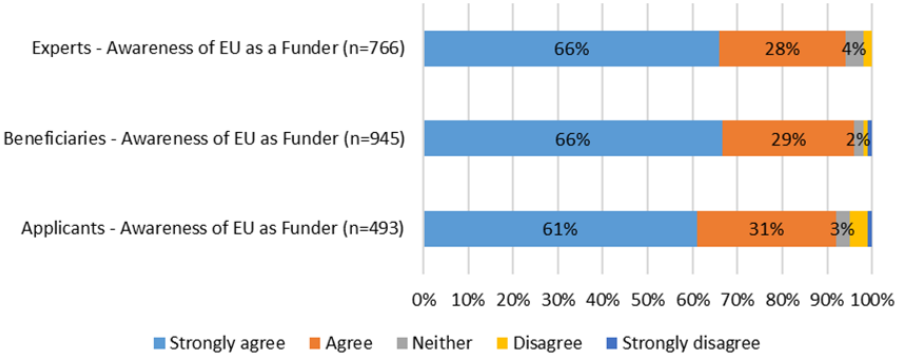
Social media have been used as one of the primary channels of outreach and include Twitter/X and LinkedIn accounts. Built from scratch, HaDEA's social media presence has steadily gained traction over the evaluation period. The Annual Activity Reports indicate substantial growth in both followers and interactions. For instance, the Agency's number of LinkedIn followers grew from 3,503 followers in 2021 to 32,065 followers in 2024.[78] However, performance data indicate that engagement rates on both LinkedIn and Twitter/X have dropped. LinkedIn organic engagement rates on posts about calls for proposals fell to 0.29% in 2024 from the baseline 1.85% in 2021. A possible explanation for this is that the follower-base as a whole, especially considering its constant growth, is not interested in all posts. As regards to Twitter/X, organic impressions dropped to 380 in 2024 below the target of 680. This could be due to the changes in the platform's algorithm and as such, the platform is no longer the focus of the Agency's social media outreach. However, the HaDEA website is becoming increasingly visited with unique visitors growing from 67,563 in 2021 to 270,000 in 2024. The survey results showed, however, that social media is not an important introductory channel to HaDEA and its funding opportunities for stakeholders. 0.80% of respondents first heard about the opportunities from "HaDEA's website" and about 0.33% cited the "social media of HaDEA". This suggests that

[75] Ibid.
[76] Looking more closely at the programmes managed by HaDEA and the funding opportunities provided, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I am familiar with (Programme's name) and funding opportunities it provides.
[77] See case study on communication
[78] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024.

social media and the HaDEA website are channels used to maintain and build further engagement with stakeholders already familiar with HaDEA rather than as initial sources of contact. In this vein, qualitative feedback in the Expert survey suggested more proactive communication efforts directed to experts such as a LinkedIn community to foster a greater sense of engagement and to keep experts informed of opportunities.[79]

Another tool regularly used by the Agency to engage with stakeholders are info days. Stakeholders emphasised that the most effective communication activities involve participation in prominent fairs and conferences, rather than hosting numerous standalone events, especially considering budget constraints. According to the interviewees, in order to enhance visibility for the Agency's programmes, the opportunity to conduct workshops within these larger events is often sought, an approach that has produced positive outcomes. Visible links to the Commission are important to communicate to external stakeholders HaDEA's role within the broader institutional framework. In the survey, 95% of beneficiaries and 92% of unsuccessful applicants were aware that the EU was the ultimate funding source of the Agency's managed programmes. Also, a vast majority of experts were also aware that the EU is the ultimate funder of HaDEA's funding opportunities (94% agree or strongly agree).[80]

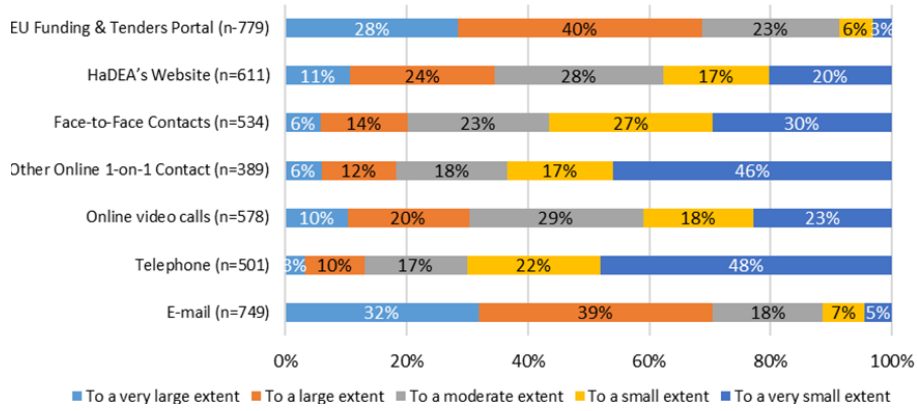
Figure 9: Beneficiaries, applicants and external experts' awareness of HaDEA and EC[81]



As regard direct communication with beneficiaries, there is a clear preference for direct, interactive communication over static, one-way channels. In the survey, email was overwhelmingly stated as the most effective communication tool with telephone rated the least effective. Furthermore, the EU Funding & Tenders Portal was also considered a key channel, with 68% of beneficiaries finding it helpful to a "large" or "very large" extent.

[79] See further Survey on HaDEA – Annex
[80] See further Survey on HaDEA – Annex
[81] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your familiarity with HaDEA and awareness of various aspects of HaDEA's operations? When applying for funding, we were aware that the EU was the founder of this funding opportunity.

Figure 10: Effectiveness of communication channels according to beneficiaries[82]



Overall, HaDEA has invested considerable efforts in building a communication strategy to further the Agency's mission and build its identity. External stakeholders interviewed emphasised that the Agency's comprehensive focus on communication was instrumental in achieving increased visibility.

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?

Key findings: HaDEA's reporting largely complies with the 2021 Delegation Act and MoUs, with tailored governance per programme, regular multilevel contacts, and Steering Committee meetings providing timely, structured updates that enable parent DGs to discharge oversight.

Based on documents and interviews with European Commission staff and HaDEA representatives, the evaluation finds that HaDEA's reporting to its parent DGs has largely complied with the supervisory framework established by the 2021 Delegation Act and the accompanying MoUs. The content and frequency of updates are generally aligned with the MoUs' provisions, ensuring that parent DGs receive timely, structured information necessary to discharge their oversight responsibilities. Substantively, the Agency provides regular updates on programme implementation, legal and financial risks, staffing, internal control findings, and alignment with EU policy priorities.

Each MoU sets out a tailored governance and reporting arrangement reflecting the operational, legal, and strategic needs of the programme concerned. In line with these arrangements, HaDEA maintains regular, multilevel contact with its parent DGs and other Agencies through Steering Committee meetings, participation in DG management meetings where appropriate, programme specific discussions, and working level exchanges. Ahead of each Steering Committee session, the Chairperson and the Agency's Director meet to discuss key matters, with support from the DGs' services.

[82] To what extent did HaDEA use the following communication channels to provide you with relevant and helpful information when you needed it?

HaDEA has put in place structured mechanisms to keep parent DGs informed on programme operations, strategic developments, and risk-related matters. The Steering Committee—meeting at least four times per year—serves as the central forum for reviewing and approving reports, dashboards, audit updates, and strategic briefings, with preparatory meetings and informal contacts used to resolve issues in advance. For horizontal functions—such as budget execution, internal control, human resources, data protection, and access to documents—support is coordinated by the lead parent DG in collaboration with other DGs and central services. Reporting products include the Annual Activity Report, Implementation and Call Evaluation Reports, mid-year activity updates, KPI tracking, quarterly briefings by the Director, and ad hoc contributions upon request.

Overall, these deliverables are timely, comprehensive, and tailored to each parent DG's expectations, meeting the supervisory requirements in HaDEA's founding act and the MoUs. While the use of distinct MoUs introduces some complexity, it also provides operational flexibility and allows reporting to be calibrated to differing levels of strategic involvement and oversight, enabling more targeted supervision.

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

Key findings: HaDEA's reporting framework has improved significantly since 2021, delivering reliable KPI data and aligning with Commission standards, yet Parent DGs expect reports to include more qualitative insights, forward-looking analysis, and reflections on risks and implementation challenges to enhance strategic value.

While reporting is data rich and comprehensive, interviewees saw room for more forward looking, analytical content (qualitative insights, project narratives, results analysis), plus more consistent coordination between HaDEA's communication unit and parent DGs to improve structure and timeliness.

Since its establishment in 2021, HaDEA has taken significant steps to enhance the quality, consistency, and effectiveness of its reporting activities. Overall, performance reporting is assessed positively. However, as noted—particularly in relation to Feedback to Policy in section 4.3.3, parent DGs have expressed a need for more qualitative insights into the nature of projects and, where possible, their outcomes. In addition, there is a clear expectation that reports should go beyond descriptive updates to provide forward-looking analysis, identify emerging risks, and reflect on implementation challenges and opportunities.

At the same time, interviews with parent DGs indicate that HaDEA's reporting has improved markedly in recent years, providing a solid foundation for performance monitoring and governance. The current reporting framework delivers detailed and reliable data on KPIs and other indicators. These improvements reflect a broader effort within the Agency to align with Commission-wide standards and reduce internal inconsistencies. Coordination meetings, bilateral exchanges, and Steering Committee sessions are considered effective channels for ensuring regular supervision and oversight.

Notwithstanding this positive assessment, interviews with Commission staff and supporting desk research identified areas for improvement, particularly regarding the structure, timeliness, and strategic depth of the information provided to parent DGs. Moreover, some interviewees with parent DGs also suggested that reporting. Though strong on quantitative data and comprehensive operational detail, would benefit from more forward looking, analytical input that situates data in a broader policy and implementation context. Overall, reporting could be enhanced through qualitative insights, project level narratives, and results analysis, with outputs more specifically tailored to their needs. These observations align with the broader discussion on Feedback to Policy and communication gaps addressed later in the report.

4.2. Efficiency

4.2.1. Programme Management

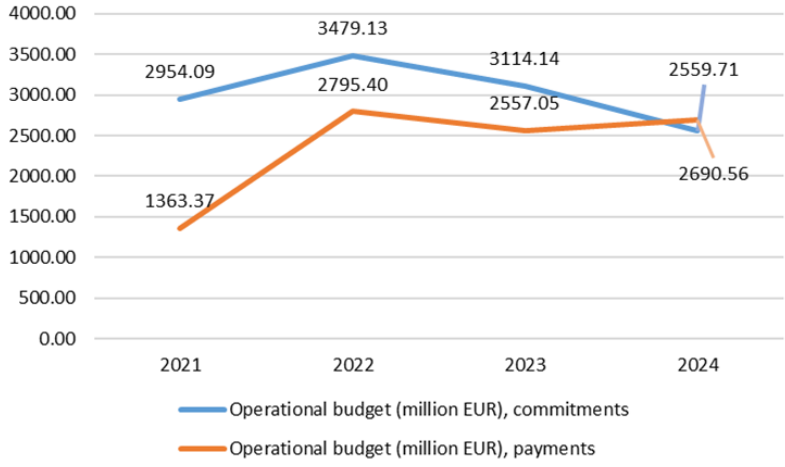
EQ9: How efficient and flexible was the management of the delegated programmes and respectively execution of services, including the actual performance and productivity increase against the elements estimated in the ex-ante cost-benefit analysis of 2021, the actual costs (including cost of coordination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

Key findings: HaDEA demonstrated strong performance in programme management consistently meeting key efficiency targets during the evaluation period. The Agency maintained full budget execution rates for both operational and administrative expenditure and remained within acceptable cost-efficiency thresholds. The introduction of simplified funding mechanisms, such as unit contributions and lump sum grants, streamlined programme management and reduced administrative burden, though uptake varied across programmes.

The evidence reviewed indicates that HaDEA consistently met key efficiency benchmarks during the reference period, including maintaining a balanced ratio between administrative and operational budgets, achieving budget execution targets, and fulfilling key performance indicators related to the economy of controls.

Figure 11 presents HaDEA's operational budget overview from 2021 to 2024, showing both commitments and payments in million euros. In 2021, HaDEA committed €2.95 billion but paid only €1.36 billion, reflecting its initial phase after becoming operational in April 2021. In 2022, both figures rose sharply, with commitments reaching €3.48 billion and payments €2.80 billion, indicating full-scale implementation of the delegated programmes. In 2023, commitments dropped to €3.11 billion and payments to €2.56 billion, suggesting a shift toward consolidation. By 2024, commitments further declined to €2.56 billion, while payments slightly increased to €2.69 billion, showing improved budget execution and alignment between planned and actual expenditures.

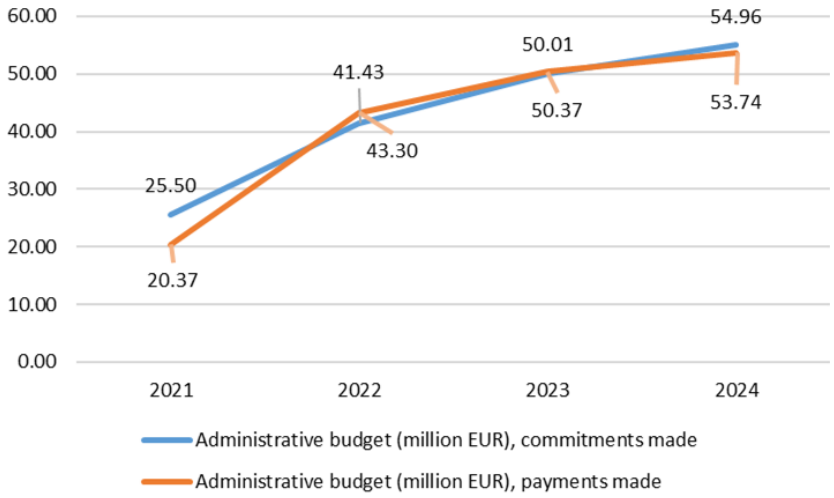
Figure 11: Operational budget overview, 2021-2024



Source: HaDEA AARs, 2021-2024

Figure 12 displays HaDEA's administrative budget evolution from 2021 to 2024, showing both commitments and payments in millions of euros. In 2021, administrative commitments stood at €25.50 million, while payments reached €20.37 million, reflecting the agency's early operational phase. In 2022, both figures increased significantly, with commitments at €41.43 million and payments slightly higher at €43.30 million, indicating a rapid scale-up in administrative capacity to support the growing portfolio of EU programmes. This upward trend continued in 2023, with commitments to 50.01 million and payments to 50.37 million. By 2024, commitments reached €54.96 million and payments €53.74 million, marking a steady consolidation of HaDEA's administrative operations.

Figure 12: Administrative budget overview, 2021-2024



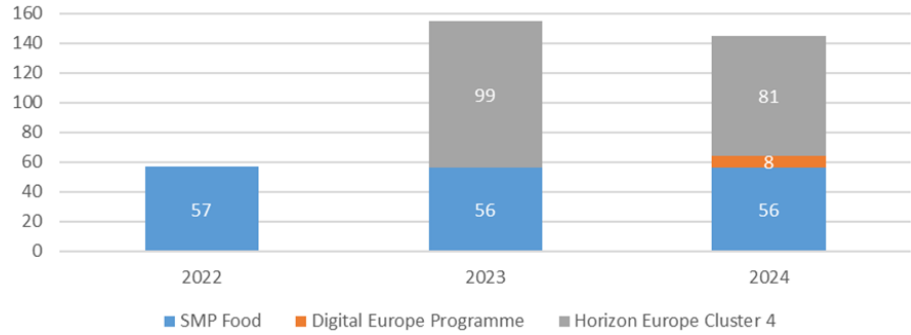
Source: HaDEA AARs, 2021-2024

Overall, HaDEA's programme management cost ratio (administrative/operational executed payments) remained low, between 0.9% in 2021 and a peak of 2% in 2024, placing it below the 3% threshold often cited in CBA benchmarks. This indicates strong cost containment and supports the view that the Agency's financial oversight systems are both effective and economical.

Use of simplified funding mechanisms

As mentioned in Section 4.1.1, during the evaluation period, HaDEA implemented measures to simplify the programme management in individual programmes such as simplified funding mechanisms in programme calls. The use of unit contributions and lump sum grant is a relevant element in enhancing the efficiency of programme management. During the evaluation period, the use of simplified cost options varied considerably by programme, as decided by the parent DGs responsible for programming. Figure 13 further displays the number of signed grants implemented using lump sums per programmes where applicable.

Figure 13: Use of lump sums in programmes 2021-2024



Source: Authors' elaboration, based on data provided by the European Commission

4.2.2. Fit for Purpose

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

Key findings: The evidence gathered indicates that HaDEA's size and structure are appropriate for achieving its objectives. Following its establishment in 2021, an intensive recruitment strategy was launched and prioritised, enabling the Agency to meet – or come close to its occupancy rate targets. Initial evidence of turnover was recorded as of 2023; however, a major constraint remains the challenge of recruiting and retaining specialised profiles.

In terms of staffing, HaDEA began operations with 273 employees, aiming to reach 381 by the end of 2021. This required recruiting over 100 colleagues within nine months. By 31 December 2021, the Agency had grown to 324 staff, with a further 17 newcomers scheduled to join in early 2022, meeting its internal target of 90% of the planned workforce. During its first months, HaDEA faced challenges in aligning posts across grades and in resourcing Horizon Europe Cluster 4, which received additional budgetary allocations. To address this, eight positions were frontloaded to Department B, ensuring sufficient capacity to manage the increased workload. The number of frontloaded posts amounted to 8 full-time equivalents (FTEs) for 2021, 8 FTEs for 2022, and 4 FTEs for 2023.

By May 2021, HaDEA had established internal policies for selection processes and a recruitment plan prioritising urgent posts and critical profiles. Recruitment remained a key focus in 2022, a milestone year for the Agency. HaDEA not only expanded its workforce but also coordinated the development of a common multiannual Inter-Executive Agency HR Strategy aligned with the Commission's HR Strategy.[83] Initiatives were launched to foster a strong organisational culture and maintain staff motivation.

Overall, the Agency is structured to support programme implementation efficiently. Its organisational set-up balances central service units, clustered in Department C, and programme implementation units in Departments A and B. The Agency's size, with 458 employees at the end of 2024, represents significant growth compared to its establishment in 2021, demonstrating

[83] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2022, p.42.

its commitment to rapid recruitment and consistently achieving the planned filling rate set out in the AWP.

At the same time, the Agency also faced a rising turnover rate, reaching 10% (up from 7.6% in 2023). This was largely due to staff becoming eligible for internal mobility or successfully passing competitions to join the European Commission,[84] further intensifying recruitment pressure. Both Agency and parent DGs interviews underscored the difficulty in recruiting and keeping specialised or technical profiles essential for implementing grants that support complex topics. To bridge this gap, HaDEA launched targeted training programmes for generalist staff, though this needed time to yield results.

Table 7: Staff overviw 2021-2024

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Staff in place year end	324	411	443	458
Operational staff	267	340	373	388
Horizonal (management & support)	57	71	70	71
Share horizontal (management & support)	17.5%	17.2%	15.8%	15.4%
Occupancy rate	85%	98%	97%	93,9%
Ratio n. of projects/staff[85]	34.28	26.61	20.51	12.41

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on data found in AARs annexes 2021 – 2024

Beyond programme coordination, HaDEA has actively engaged in regular exchanges with other Executive Agencies to address cross-cutting issues such as human resources. A key milestone in 2021 was the harmonisation of job titles across all Executive Agencies, aimed at facilitating inter-Agency mobility by ensuring consistency in roles and responsibilities. In parallel, a common methodology was adopted to assess and flag sensitive functions, in line with the DG BUDG policy on sensitive posts.[86]

To promote fairness and transparency in career progression, the six Executive Agencies jointly developed a standardised approach for calculating reclassification quotas. This methodology, which came into effect on 1 January 2022, is based on objective and transparent criteria and has enabled HaDEA to avoid developing its own internal policy, thereby streamlining administrative processes.[87]

In the area of talent acquisition, HaDEA participated in joint selection procedures with CINEA and EISMEA and continued to use reserve lists from other agencies to fill specific profiles. This collaborative approach reduced the need for new recruitment campaigns and accelerated the hiring process[88]. Professional development was another area of joint effort. All Executive Agencies supported staff growth through interinstitutional initiatives such as the Inter-Agency Women Talent Programme and the Inter-Agency Job Shadowing Exercise, which promote career development and cross-Agency learning.

Lastly, HaDEA took the ownership of leading two cross-agencies' initiatives: In May 2022, all six EAs agreed to develop a common multiannual HR Strategy, with HaDEA leading the initiative. The Strategy and related action plan were adopted in February 2023; these align with the Commission's HR Strategy while addressing the specific needs of the EA. Whereas in 2023, HaDEA led the first joint selection procedure in which all six EAs participated. This selection

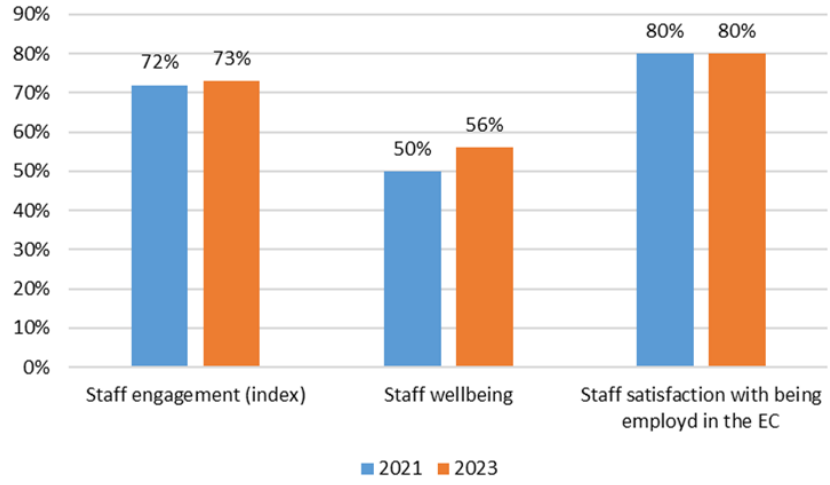
[84] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2024, p.40.
[85] Projects – in this case – include both grants and procurement projects/operational staff
[86] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p. 52.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

provided a vast reserve list (out of more than 1.000 applications) of more than 130 Project Officers (CA FGIII) that will be used by all EAs in the coming years.

Staff perception

In the evaluation period, the Agency has had a high level of staff engagement, as evidenced by its staff engagement index which exceeds the European Commission's average. The staff engagement index increased from 72% in 2021 to 73% in 2023, while staff wellbeing saw a more notable increase from 50% to 56%. Staff satisfaction with being employed in the EC remained consistently high at 80% across both years. These trends suggest a generally positive trajectory in employee sentiment, with wellbeing showing the most significant progress. The following figure shows the staff engagement index based on DG HR's regular Commission staff or pulse surveys.

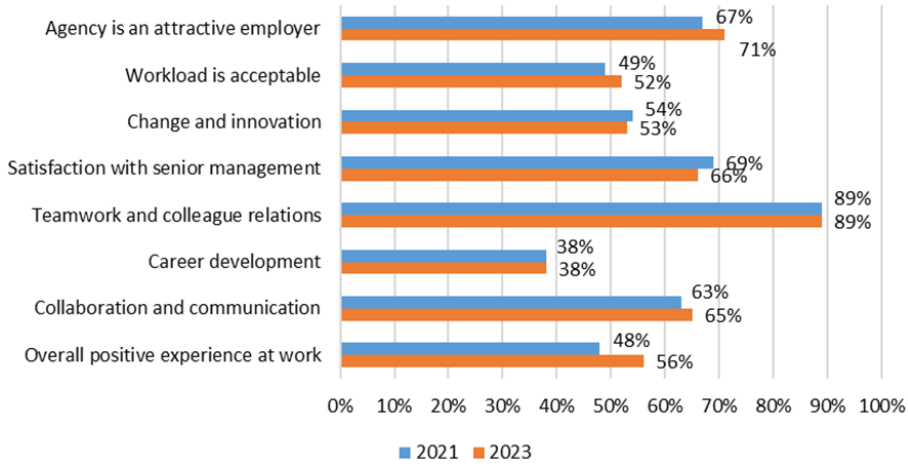
Figure 14: Staff engagement index and job satisfaction



Source: EC staff satisfaction survey 2021, 2023

Furthermore, positive developments emerged in certain areas like the attractiveness of the Agency as an employer, 71% in 2023 compared to 67% in 2021 and the acceptable perception of workload, at 52% in 2023 up from 49% in 2021. The overall positive experience at work saw the most evident improvement up to 56% in 2023 compared to 48% in 2021, showing how the Agency worked actively on the development of its HR strategy, putting in place follow-up action plans for staff surveys with the objective of improving staff management and efficiency.

Figure 15: Comparison of staff survey results, 2021 – 2023



Source: EC staff satisfaction survey 2021, 2023

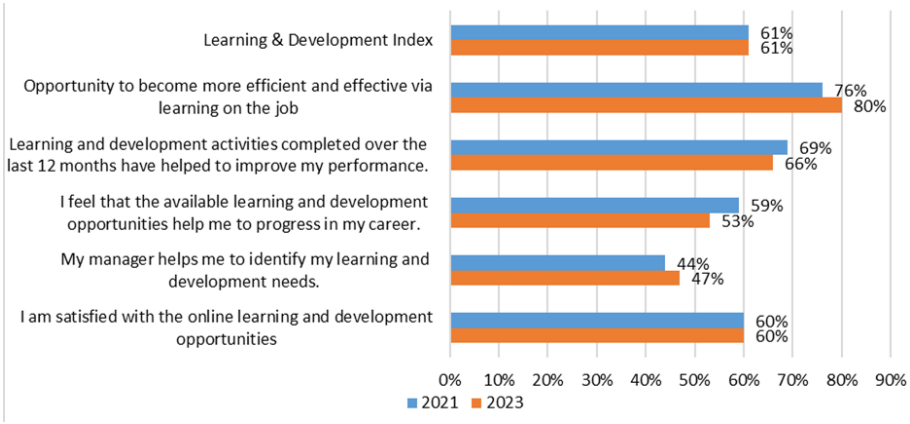
HaDEA has established processes to actively follow up on staff satisfaction survey results. In response to the 2021 satisfaction survey, an action plan was developed, and several concrete actions were implemented by the Agency in the area of professional future, work-life balance, change & innovation and HaDEA's managerial excellence plan.[89] Within the Agency, the election of the staff committee took place in October 2021, following approval from DG HR. Until then, a temporary committee composed of colleagues from other Executive Agencies ensured proper staff representation. After a successful campaign, HaDEA's permanent staff committee was established in December 2021.[90]

Learning & development and teleworking

Overall, staff satisfaction with learning and development remained stable at 61% in both 2021 and 2023. In particular, the perception of opportunities to become more efficient and effective through on-the-job learning increased significantly, from 76% in 2021 to 80% in 2023, reflecting the Agency's efforts to leverage simplification measures to boost efficiency. At the same time, room for improvement in the availability of learning and development opportunities that support career progression emerged, as it declined from 59% in 2021 to 53% in 2023. Professional career prospects within the Agency remain a concern for staff. Career progression is limited, as Contract Agents cannot be appointed to management positions beyond Head of Sector and do not have access to the European Commission's internal competitions. The Agency has introduced measures to address these issues, including mobility schemes and training offers to support professional development. Nevertheless, as reflected in the staff satisfaction survey, these initiatives are still not sufficiently encouraged, with only 36% of respondents in 2023 agreeing with this statement, compared to 37% in 2021.

[89] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2022, p.43.
[90] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p.48

Figure 16: Learning and development staff satisfaction



Source: EC staff satisfaction survey 2021, 2023

At the beginning of 2022, all HaDEA staff were based in COV2. In line with the corporate policy on "*New Ways of Working*", the Agency gradually transitioned to a dynamic office space layout, reducing office space and increasing teleworking. A dedicated task force was established to oversee the implementation of this new policy.[91] Satisfaction with flexible working arrangements, as reflected in the staff satisfaction survey, is high, 92% in 2023 compared to 82% in 2021.

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

Key findings: During the evaluation period, HaDEA strengthened its operational efficiency through clear procedures, motivated staff, and bottom-up initiatives to further streamline operations and sharing of best practices.

Recruitment difficulties, uncertainty over UK participation, and pandemic-related project extensions created significant operational strain. Despite these challenges, the Agency adapted quickly to maintain programme continuity.

Overall, evidence gathered shows that the Agency well-positioned itself to operate efficiently. During the evaluation period, it has pursued a continuous improvement approach, introducing measures aimed at further reducing administrative burden and enhancing efficiency in call management. Findings from desk research and interviews with internal and external stakeholders highlight the organisational structure and the clear definition of procedures as key drivers of efficiency during the evaluation period. Staff experience also emerged as a significant positive factor, particularly during the Agency's set-up phase, when establishing core systems and procedures was critical. Across units, staff were consistently praised for their motivation and professionalism, and staff management was viewed positively.

Notable internal measures to strengthen efficiency include the 2022 launch of the "*HaDEAns for Efficiency*" initiative, which invited staff to propose process improvements and efficiency gains through a structured, bottom-up approach. A key outcome in 2023 was the "*HaDEA Work Etiquette*", a set of golden rules designed to streamline email and meeting practices, subsequently endorsed by management and circulated to all staff. In parallel, HaDEA established two dedicated professional communities, the *Network of Project Officers* and the

[91] Ibid., p.44.

Network of Call Coordinators, which operate across the programme lifecycle to support streamlined operations and strengthen decision-making.

At the same time, recruitment processes are widely perceived as constraints. Internal stakeholders highlighted recurring challenges in attracting candidates with specific skill sets, and the recruitment procedures, lengthy and reliant on services provided by DG HR were viewed as an impediment. The common reserve list introduced among Executive Agencies during the reference period, an exercise coordinated by HaDEA, which led to the first-ever inter-Executive Agency selection procedure, was regarded as an improvement and yielded a substantial reserve list; however, it has not fully resolved the underlying recruitment challenges.

The Agency faced also further external and internal challenges during the evaluation period which at times hindered its efficiency. For instance, the uncertainty surrounding the participation of UK organisations complicated the grant agreement preparation phase for several programmes from 2022 onwards.[92] The temporary exclusion of UK organisations from Horizon Europe funding led to delays and rework of grant agreements, leaving €26.6 million unused budget later redirected to reserve list proposals.

Furthermore, as elaborated in section 4.1.1 between 2021 and 2022, numerous grant agreements required amendments to extend project durations, ensuring that original objectives could still be met. For example, in 2021, 48% of the amendments signed for health research grants included an extension. These extensions also had implications for budget implementation.[93] Similarly, Horizon Europe Cluster 4: Space experienced delays: 48 grants requested extensions in 2021, an unusually high proportion out of the 70 amendments signed that year[94]. While these delays were driven by external factors beyond the Agency's control, they resulted in a substantial increase in workload, requiring the Agency to adapt quickly and manage complex amendment processes to ensure programme continuity.

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

Key findings: During the evaluation period, HaDEA implemented several measures to improve its efficiency, several of which reflected the recommendations set out in the ex-ante cost-benefit analysis of 2021, including organising more efficiently and effectively the necessary Feedback to Policy, relying on new or improved IT tools, and increasing the flexibility in the allocation of staff between the various programmes implemented by the Agency.

This evaluation question examines the extent to which the efficiency measures outlined in the 2021 ex-ante CBA have effectively contributed to increased productivity within the Agency. Section 4.4 presents the methodological explanations and assumptions underlying the retrospective CBA. Lastly, section 1.2 of the annex provides a more detailed overview of how the actual average costs in the optimised scenario were calculated, including the split between Title I and Title II.

The CBA aimed not only to generate scale effects, through larger budgets and programme groupings, but also to enhance productivity through structural and procedural improvements.

[92] As per AAR 2022 and its annex: the programmes affected by such a circumstance were respectively: Horizon Europe Cluster 1 Health, specifically for one case under the call HORIZON-HLTH-2021-DISEASE-04 and for one case under the call HORIZON-HLTH-2021-ENVHLTH02; as well as Horizon Europe Cluster 4 Space, specifically one grant case under the call HORIZON-CL4-2021-RESILIENCE01.
[93] Ibid, p.17.
[94] Ibid, p.20.

Executive agencies and parent DGs must adopt measures that strengthen productivity gains by ensuring that implementation methods and legal frameworks support this objective. To achieve this a number of measures to become more efficient by[95]:

- 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 evidence collected, it appears that the measures outlined in the ex-ante CBA of 2021 have had varying degrees of materialisation and impact on the Agency's productivity:

Table 8: Efficiency measures envisaged in ex ante CBA and implementation by HaDEA

Measure	Implementation
Efficient feedback to policy	As shown in Table 10 the Agency managed as of 2022 to meet or exceed the respective planned target of F2P's implementation. This reflects HaDEA's ability to promptly adapt to the newly agreed framework and consistently deliver timely input to its parent DGs.
New or improved IT tools	The improvement and evolutive maintenance of dedicated IT platforms have supported application processing and monitoring. However, initial challenges with IT tools have impacted overall productivity, necessitating ongoing improvements. The Agency also uses e-Grants to manage applications, but there are corporate restrictions on using AI tools, which could limit further efficiency gains. At the same time, it was noted that this feature extends beyond HaDEA's remit.
Simplification measures	The use of lump sum payments—such as in the WiFi4EU initiative, SMP Food and Horizon Europe Cluster 4—illustrates a successful simplification measure. This approach has significantly reduced administrative burdens and enabled a stronger focus on outcomes, thereby enhancing overall productivity. In addition, the Agency has implemented several internal simplification actions presented previously. During interviews, stakeholders frequently highlighted the positive impact of the sub-group exercises, which facilitated the sharing and collection of the best internal practices to boost operational efficiency.

[95] European Commission. Commission Staff Working Document: Cost-Benefit Analysis for the Delegation of the Management of the 2021–2027 EU Programmes to Executive Agencies. Accompanying the Document Communication to the Commission: Delegation of the Management of the 2021–2027 EU Programmes to Executive Agencies. SWD(2021) 20 final. Brussels, February 12, 2021, p.49.

Increasing average grant size	HaDEA has managed an expanding portfolio of complex delegated programmes, including the delivery of five legacy programmes during peak years such as 2021 and 2022. During the evaluation period, average grant sizes have varied across programmes; nevertheless, the Agency continues to manage a number of smaller grants.
Less resource-intensive calls and procurement	Efforts have been made to streamline calls and procurement processes, but challenges remain in fully realising resource efficiencies. The Annual Work Programme's frequency and structure for some programmes also complicates resource management and planning, suggesting a need for regulatory changes to improve efficiency.
Reassessing reporting requirements	Although current reporting practices are perceived as creating an administrative burden for the Agency and beneficiaries, the Agency is proactively contributing to a review aimed at streamlining these requirements.
Flexibility in staff allocation	The Agency adopted flexible staff allocation measures, allowing it to adapt more effectively to workload fluctuations across departments, including the use of interim personnel. These actions have enhanced operational efficiency and further streamlined internal workflows.

Source: Authors' elaboration

While some measures, such as simplification through lump sums and increased flexibility in staff allocation, have shown positive results, others require further development and implementation to fully realise their potential. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of these measures will be essential for HaDEA to enhance its productivity and effectively meet its objectives. Evidence gathered from internal stakeholders emphasised the importance of ongoing collaboration and feedback mechanisms to ensure that the Agency can respond effectively to evolving challenges and opportunities.

Furthermore, the Agency implemented a higher budget than initially foreseen in both the CBA and financial statements, with regards to Horizon Europe Cluster 1 & 4, and Digital Europe Programme. Over the years 2021 and 2022, the Agency has committed 10% more in appropriations than planned, with increases for Horizon Europe reaching 13% to 15%. While the increased budget and workload for Cluster 4 were managed, as mentioned above, through frontloading, similar increases for Cluster 1 in 2021 and 2022 were not addressed at the staffing level. Despite these constraints, the Agency took, within the limited possibilities it had, measures to tackle the shortage of resources, e.g. through limited internal redeployment of staff. Most programmes in HaDEA's portfolio have exceeded their budget execution targets over the past two years, demonstrating strong uptake and effective implementation. The only exception is CEF-Digital, where budget underconsumption occurred due to the delayed adoption of its work programme in December 2021. This delay pushed the launch of the first calls to 2022, reducing the time available for commitments within the initial period and resulting in lower-than-expected spending.

4.2.3. Environmental impact

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

Key findings: HaDEA actively supported the European Green Deal and the Commission's "Greening the Commission" objectives by implementing paperless workflows, hybrid meeting tools, and green procurement practices from 2021 onward. It achieved EMAS certification in 2023, exceeded corporate CO_2 reduction targets for business travel ahead of schedule, and promoted sustainable commuting, energy-saving initiatives, and digital sustainability campaigns, demonstrating strong commitment to environmental performance and staff engagement.

The actions implemented by HaDEA between 2021 and 2024 support several of the overarching objectives of the European Green Deal and the Commission's "GREENING THE COMMISSION" Communication (Directorate-General Human Resources and Security, 05/04/2022).[96] 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. It identifies key areas of environmental performance, ranging from buildings and travel to IT and staff engagement, each accompanied by specific actions and targets designed to support this ambition.[97]

Shortly after its foundation, in 2021, HaDEA implemented several of the initiatives promoted by the Commission, including paperless workflows to reduce paper use, videoconferencing equipment for hybrid meetings, sustainable meeting guidelines, green procurement awareness, bike commuting allowances, and teleworking rules.[98]

In 2022, HaDEA successfully underwent an external EMAS verification audit with highly positive results. That same year, the Agency established a volunteer-based "*greening group*", supported by senior management, DG HR, and OIB, to develop an environmental action plan and coordinate joint initiatives with other Executive Agencies. Among the first actions were the Green Week at Covent Garden in November and the launch of the "*Digital Frugality*" campaign in December, aimed at reducing digital waste. HaDEA also implemented the "New Ways of

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

[97] The GREENING THE COMMISSION Communication identifies seven key areas of environmental performance to be monitored and improved in support of the EU's climate neutrality objective by 2030. These include: (1) *Buildings and working space* – improving energy efficiency and reducing consumption; (2) *Business travel* – minimising emissions through videoconferencing and sustainable transport; (3) *Commuting* – promoting low-carbon commuting options such as public transport and cycling; (4) *Commission vehicles* – increasing the use of electric or hybrid vehicles; (5) *IT operations and assets* – optimising digital infrastructure to reduce energy use; (6) *Procurement and waste management* – implementing sustainable purchasing practices and reducing waste; (7) *Staff participation and engagement* – fostering environmentally responsible behaviours through training and awareness initiatives.

[98] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p.51.

Working" policy, reducing the number of workstations to 80% of staff capacity, which contributed to lowering its carbon footprint.[99]

In addition, the Agency joined the BEST energy-saving initiative, powering down the Covent Garden building twice during the year. Responding to the European Commission's call to reduce emissions from business travel, HaDEA updated its internal mission guidelines to align with greener practices. Staff engagement was strong, with nearly 8% of colleagues participating in *Velomai*, an interinstitutional cycling challenge, earning HaDEA ninth place among all DGs and Executive Agencies.[100]

Building on this foundation, 2023 marked a year of tangible results. HaDEA exceeded its 2024 corporate target of reducing business travel emissions by 50% (compared to 2019) ahead of schedule, thanks to awareness sessions and the introduction of a practical checklist for planning and approving missions. The Agency continued to promote sustainable commuting by offering financial incentives for public transport and cycling. The Agency also reinforced its commitment to digital sustainability through the "*Digital Frugality*" campaign and actively contributed to the joint Executive Agencies' Green Week on waste reduction.[101] A major milestone was reached in June 2023, when HaDEA received its official EMAS certification.[102]

In 2024, HaDEA consolidated its achievements and expanded its initiatives. The Agency applied sustainable meeting guidelines, encouraged green commuting, and participated in energy-saving actions whenever possible. Furthermore, corporate CO_2 reduction targets for business travel were surpassed, and a new greening initiative to further promote sustainable travel habits among staff was launched. HaDEA also played an active role in the Executive Agencies' Green Week and introduced the first Summer Challenge, encouraging colleagues to adopt eco-friendly practices during their holidays.[103]

4.2.4. Digitalisation

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

Key findings: During the evaluation period, HaDEA put in place a formal digital strategy (IT steering/management boards), onboarded corporate tools, and aligned fully with DG DIGIT requirements. Data governance matured via updated inventories, a new EU data catalogue asset, the Data Intelligence Network, and a documents/archives plan. Key indicators in digital solutions and strengthening internal data governance improved significantly.

HaDEA made significant progress in modernising its IT environment, introducing new digital tools, automating processes, and enhancing user experience. Key initiatives included the rollout of eGrants across programmes, development of simplification tools like the lump-sum calculator, and improvements in collaboration platforms. These efforts, combined with shared IT solutions and infrastructure, strengthened operational efficiency and supported the Agency's strategic digital objectives.

In the evaluation period, the Agency has undertaken a number of efforts to increase its level of digitalisation and alignment with the Commission's corporate IT principles and rules, including in terms of security and data protection. In 2021, the Agency launched its digital strategy by

[99] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2022, p.46.
[100] Ibid., p.47.
[101] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2023, p.48.
[102] Ibid., p.49.
[103] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2024, p.43.

inventorying IT systems and projects and establishing governance procedures. This included forming an IT steering group and an IT management board, which met on a yearly basis to review and approve IT investment plans, assess progress made, identify synergies and validate new initiatives.[104]

Furthermore, HaDEA formally initiated the onboarding process to the eGrants IT toolset of both the CEF-Digital and SMP-food strand programmes. All programmes managed by the Agency were expected to use the corporate IT tools by 2023,[105] yet already in 2022 eGrants was successfully onboarded for the SMP Food programme. Despite being the onboarding of such an IT tool technically challenging and requiring efforts both from HaDEA staff and the beneficiaries, most of which were using this IT tool for the first time, this effort allowed to launch seven calls through this IT tool in 2022.[106]

Since 2022, all programmes and new projects have fully complied with DG DIGIT's technology, security, and governance requirements, leading stakeholders to perceive a high level of digitalisation within the Agency. The Agency also progressed in corporate data governance by updating its data inventory and identifying a new asset for the EU data catalogue. It launched the first of three awareness actions to promote data sharing and quality and established the Data Intelligence Network (DIN) in October 2023. An action plan for document and archives management was drafted, supported by training and coaching sessions to build staff skills.[107].

The Agency has also developed and benefitted from digital tools that support its overall analytical capabilities and the Feedback to Policy functions of the Agency. This includes the use of software tools such as Qlik Sense, database provided for WiFi4EU jointly used after an agreement with CINEA. Moreover, in the first half of 2024, HaDEA made good progress on the implementation of strategic objectives defined by the European Commission Digital strategy[108], advancing its key IT projects. For example, it delivered a lump sum calculator for the SMP Food programme, enhanced the WiFi4EU Dashboard and developed a mobile application for the WiFi4EU initiative, displaying the 93000 public hotspots across Europe via a dynamic map. In addition, the Agency also developed an automatic lump sum calculator tool for the SMP programme, with the support of DG RTD. This tool, embedded in eGrants, was positively welcomed by the Member States as a major simplification of the funding process.[109] Finally, HaDEA also collaborated with EISMEA on the development and maintenance of several internal IT tools. While both agencies retained their local IT infrastructure, they shared server facilities and maintenance responsibilities, resulting in cost savings and improved resource use.[110]

The Agency upgraded its digital tools, completed SharePoint migration by April, and launched the new HaDEA DG hub, which replaced the intranet, on 1 May 2024. Although the migration from the accounting system ABAC to SUMMA was postponed to January 2025, the preparations progressed since 2023 for the operational budget and since 2024 for the administrative budget with cleaning of data, starting User Acceptance Testing as well as training of users.[111]

Table 9 presents a snapshot of HaDEA's progress between 2021 and 2024 in implementing digital solutions and strengthening internal data governance. While structured around specific indicators, the data also reflects broader organisational trends and priorities.

The most consistent progress is seen in the implementation of digital strategy principles[112] across HaDEA's key IT systems. Starting with 50% of degree of implementation of the digital

[104] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p.49.
[105] Ibid., p.49
[106] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2022, p.19
[107] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2023, p.47.
[108] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2024, p.40.
[109] Ibid., p.42.
[110] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2021, p.52.
[111] Ibid., p.40.
[112] As per Annex AAR 2021, p. 124, for this indicator it is made reference only to the large IT system managed by HaDEA, the BTSF Academy.

strategy principles by the most important IT solutions in 2021, the Agency met its targets in the first two years and exceeded them in 2023 and 2024, reaching 82% and 91% respectively. This upward trajectory suggests a sustained commitment to digital transformation and a growing maturity in the use of innovative IT tools. In comparison, the implementation of corporate data governance principles shows a more modest and uneven pattern. Although the Agency achieved 20% in 2021, progress slowed in 2022, with only 30% achieved against a planned 50%. However, as of 2023 the Agency managed to catch up with the delay reaching 100% in 2024 implementation of the corporate principles for data governance for its key data assets. Concerning the third indicator, while no data is available for 2021, likely due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, figures are provided for subsequent years. In 2022, 22% of staff participated in such activities, with a notable increase to 81.8% in 2023 and a further rise to 100% in 2024. This upward trend suggests a growing emphasis on data protection awareness within the Agency, reflecting efforts to strengthen compliance culture and staff engagement.

Table 9: HaDEA's digital transformation and information management KPIs 2021-2024

Output	Indicators	Year	Target/planned	Result
HaDEA is using innovative, trusted digital solutions for better information management and administrative processes to become a truly digitally transformed, user-focused and data-driven Agency	Degree of implementation of the digital strategy principles by the most important IT solutions	2021	50%	50%
		2022	68%	68%
		2023	77%	82%
		2024	90%	91%
	Percentage of implementation of the corporate principles for data governance for HaDEA's key data assets	2021	0%	20%
		2022	50%	30%
		2023	N/A	50%
		2024	80%	100%
	Percentage of staff attending awareness raising activities on data protection compliance	2021	N/A	N/A
		2022	22%	22%
		2023	80%	81.8%
		2024	100%	100%

Source: AARs annexes 2021-2024

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

Key findings: HaDEA has made substantial progress in digitalisation. While these efforts are generally well received, some staff seek more structured training, and beneficiaries still face challenges with registration and contracting. Adaptation to new systems has improved over time, and the Agency is exploring further efficiency gains through automation and AI, where applicable and possible.

While HaDEA has made notable and significant progress in digitalising its activities, some evidence suggests that additional measures could further enhance the Agency's digital efficiency.

Interviews with the Agency and parent DGs indicated notable improvements in the Commission's corporate IT tools, which are generally effective despite their complexity. While perceptions vary across programmes, the overall view is positive. Some Agency's staff, however, called for more structured and ongoing training on corporate tools.

Further evidence gathered from external stakeholders underscores that certain challenges persist. Some beneficiaries that were interviewed reported that legal entity registration, especially designating a legal representative with an electronic signature, remains cumbersome. In this regard, several external users – beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants – found the IT systems complex and time-consuming, citing unintuitive interfaces, scattered chat threads, and a burdensome validation and contracting process. These concerns were echoed in survey responses, as presented in the annex.

Despite not being under the control of the Agency, interviews with external stakeholders frequently described the original Funding & Tenders Portal as outdated and difficult to use, specifically for participants in smaller and new onboarded Programmes. It recently underwent a comprehensive revamp with the decisive support of its internal and external users to adapt it to the latest and highest user standards providing more clarity and readability, moving progressively away from the PDF-based system.

Lastly, to further enhance the Agency's efficiency, several Agency's staff have highlighted the potential to enhance internal processes through automation and the use of AI tools. For instance, the recruitment process, which involves handling a high number of CVs and applications, could benefit significantly from automation to ease existing bottlenecks. Although the Agency has expressed a willingness to adopt AI tools to improve efficiency in HR processes, such as managing large volumes of applications following open calls, current guidelines from DG HR and central services prohibit Executive Agencies from using AI in any HR-related processes involving personal data. Nonetheless, the interest and awareness within the Agency suggest that, should the policy framework evolve, there is readiness to explore and adopt such tools to improve internal efficiency.

4.3. Coherence

4.3.1. Coherence of the Programme Portfolio

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

Key findings: HaDEA's five delegated programmes during the evaluation period are largely seen as complementary, targeting distinct policy goals and beneficiary groups, with no major overlaps or gaps identified by the evidence gathered.

In terms of external stakeholders, HaDEA's programme portfolio is widely viewed as coherent and complementary, with no major overlaps, while awareness of its role is high among experts (90%) and beneficiaries (72%) but significantly lower among unsuccessful applicants (52%).

As already discussed in Section 3, HaDEA has a broad portfolio with (parts of) five programmes delegated to the Agency (EU4Health, Horizon Europe Cluster 1 & 4, SMP food, CEF – Digital, Digital Europe Programme). For these, the Agency is responsible for the entire grant management cycle of EU programmes with a thematic focus in the domains of health, food safety, digital technologies and networks, industrial capacities and space. The agency contributes to the achievement of the general and specific objectives of its six parent DGs, by implementing tasks, such as the launch and conclusion of grant and procurement procedures, the adoption of award decisions, project monitoring, financial control and accounting, the contribution to programme evaluation and various support tasks.

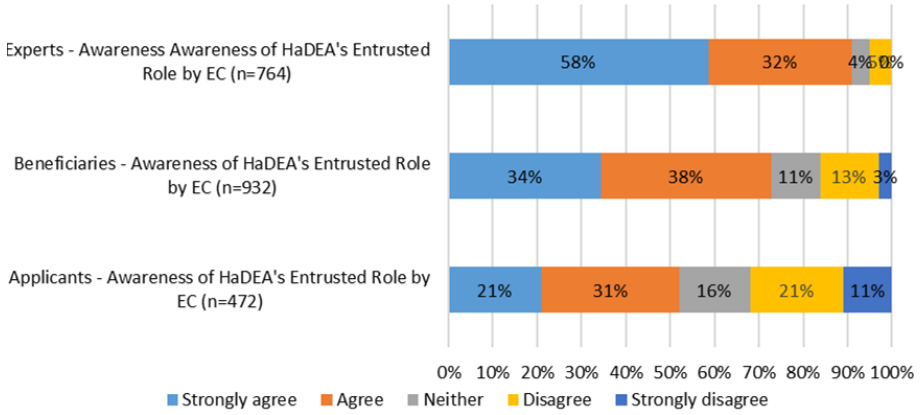
HaDEA's delegated programmes target distinct stakeholder communities and support different types of actions. Horizon Europe – Cluster 1 and Cluster 4 – primarily funds collaborative research and innovation, engaging universities, research organisations, hospitals, industry and SMEs. EU4Health and the Single Market Programme – Food focus on policy implementation, capacity building and operational procurement, working mainly with national competent authorities, EU reference laboratories, NGOs and specialised agencies. The Digital Europe Programme is deployment-oriented, investing in strategic digital capacities (e.g., HPC, AI, cybersecurity, data spaces and advanced digital skills) and their uptake by public administrations and businesses. CEF-Digital complements these efforts by financing cross-border connectivity infrastructure (e.g., high-speed/backbone networks) that enables secure digital services. Together, these instruments span the continuum from research to large-scale deployment in health and digital domains, each with programme-specific objectives, KPIs and beneficiary groups.

The Agency carried out progressively during the evaluation period a significant number of public procurement actions delegated to it by parent DGs during the evaluation period, again mostly under the EU4Health programme. Some public procurement was also carried out under SMP food and Digital Europe Programme.

The evidence from the stakeholder consultation suggests that the Agency's portfolio is largely seen as consistent without overlaps, gaps, between the Agency's programmes or with programmes from other Executive Agencies. This view is shared by both staff in the Agency and staff in the parent DGs. The programmes of HaDEA are seen as complementary, having different policy goals, targeting different beneficiary groups, or providing different grant and procurement formats.

When it comes to external stakeholders, the evidence collected for the evaluation shows that there is general awareness of HaDEA's profile and programme portfolio. In addition, as the survey results below show, there is a general awareness of HaDEA's role in the implementation of the delegated programme. While a large majority of experts (90%) and beneficiaries (72%) reported being aware of HaDEA's role as entrusted by the European Commission, awareness among applicants was significantly lower, with only 52% indicating familiarity with this role.

Figure 17: Awareness programme delegation[113]



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?

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

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

The division of responsibilities between HaDEA and its lead and parent DGs is generally well-defined and operationalised[114]. The delegation of tasks to HaDEA is governed by the Delegation Act and in the MoUs, which lays down the Agency's mandate, including its delegated tasks and provides the framework for their implementation and for the relations between the Commission and the Agency. Each parent DG is considered responsible for ensuring monitoring and supervision of the work of the Agency at operational level for the programme they are

[113] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your familiarity with HaDEA and awareness of various aspects of HaDEA's operations? When applying for funding, we were aware that HaDEA was entrusted to manage this funding opportunity by the European Commission.

[114] C(2021)948, COMMISSION DECISION delegating powers to the European Health and Digital Executive Agency with a view to the performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of EU4Health, Single Market, Research and Innovation, Digital Europe, Connecting Europe Facility – Digital, comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union

responsible for. Whereas, the lead parent DG has an established leading role to supervise the non-programme specific issues in the Agency, especially in relation to horizontal issues[115].

The Steering Committee, which meets at least four times a year, plays a key role in managing HaDEA alongside its Director. It is composed of five members (representatives of DG SANTE, DG CNECT, DG RTD, DG GROW and DG DEFIS) and two observers (representatives from HERA and Sec Gen). The Steering Committee reviews updates on HaDEA's programme implementation, workload, and efficiency, and adopts annually strategic documents like the annual work programme, administrative budget, annual accounts and Annual Activity Report.

Before the Steering Committee meetings, the parent DGs and the Agency organise preparatory meetings at operational level. These meetings can be complemented by ad hoc and informal contacts between the parent DGs whenever there is a need to discuss particular topics in greater detail before the Steering Committee meetings[116].

The Agency maintains regular communication with its parent DGs regarding programme implementation. In December 2021, HaDEA and its parent DGs signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that outlined the general provisions and modalities of interaction. This document is based on Article 7 of the Delegation Act of HaDEA and specifies the procedures for interaction between the Agency and DG SANTE, DG CNECT, DG RTD, DG GROW, DG DEFIS, and HERA[117].

The general MoU between HaDEA and its parent DGs is complemented by programme-specific MoUs for each of the five delegated programmes. These agreements, which came into effect in early 2022, clearly define the division of responsibilities and modalities of interaction.

To ensure effective programme implementation and procedural compliance, HaDEA maintains regular interactions with its parent DGs. The MoUs facilitate coordination on key operational tasks such as audits, reporting, evaluations—both internal and external—and performance reviews. Evidence from interviews with HaDEA and parent DG representatives, as well as supporting documentation, reflects a positive assessment of the current communication channels and protocols. Since the Agency's establishment, communication has notably improved, particularly at the operational level, where alignment on deadlines and the implementation of new measures or evaluation methodologies is consistently maintained.

Despite these strengths, some challenges remain. Stakeholders noted that while certain parent DGs consistently involve HaDEA in planning and events, others show inconsistency in communication, especially regarding invitations and coordination of activities, leading to uneven collaboration. Although roles and responsibilities are defined, the Agency's involvement in planning and coordination could be strengthened. Enhancing HaDEA's participation would foster better alignment, reduce confusion among stakeholders, and ensure more balanced and transparent engagement across all programmes.

For external stakeholders instead there appeared to be less clarity regarding the division of roles between the Agency and the European Commission. Only 29% of the unsuccessful applicants and 46% of beneficiaries agreed or strongly agreed that the delineation of responsibilities between HaDEA and the European Commission is clear to them, with 50% of applicants disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement. Among external experts, clarity was higher, with 69% responding positively, yet still leaving over one-third neutral or dissatisfied. Across all groups, a significant proportion reported uncertainty (18%-21%) or disagreement (15-

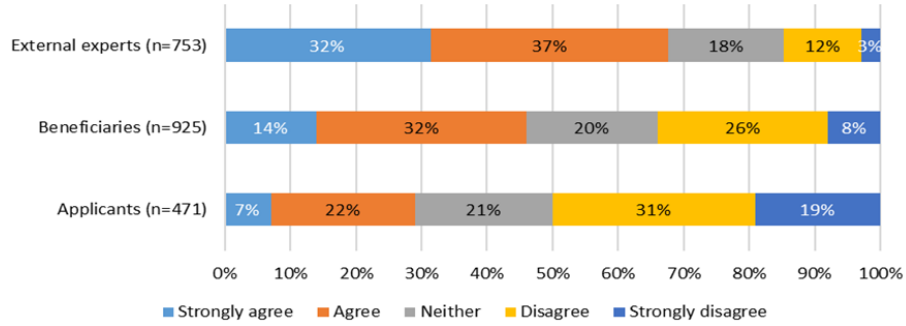
[115] Ibid. Article 2(2), p. 5.

[116] MoU between HaDEA and THE DG FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY, THE DG FOR COMMUNICATION NETWORKS, CONTENT AND TECHNOLOGY, THE DG FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION, THE DG FOR INTERNAL MARKET, INDUSTRY, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SMES, THE DG FOR DEFENCE INDUSTRY AND SPACEAND THE DG EUROPEAN HEALTH EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE AUTHORITY GENERAL PROVISIONS

[117] C_2021_948_Alnnex_delegation_act_2021_2027.pdf

50%), suggesting that the complexity of institutional roles is not always effectively communicated to end users.

Figure 18: External stakeholders' perception of role clarity between HaDEA and the European Commission[118]



4.3.3. Feedback to Policy

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

Key findings: HaDEA established the Feedback-to-Policy (F2P) framework in 2021 to provide structured, policy-relevant feedback across all its programmes. The framework supports strategic planning, knowledge sharing, policy monitoring, and legislative adaptation through data analysis, reports, and stakeholder engagement. Since 2022, HaDEA has consistently met or exceeded planned F2P implementation targets across most programmes, as shown in Annual Activity Reports.

During the evaluation period, the Feedback to Policy mechanism was notably strengthened. At the same time, evidence gathered suggest there could be room for more strategic and structured feedback processes, particularly in identifying and highlighting policy-relevant results and responding effectively to ad-hoc demands.

Despite this, HaDEA is widely regarded as responsive, diligent, and increasingly systematic in its approach to Feedback to Policy. The formalisation of the F2P process and the October 2023 workshop with parent DGs, where progress was reviewed and coordination strengthened, are notable achievements in this process.

Since its establishment in 2021, HaDEA has prioritised the development of a Feedback-to-Policy (F2P) framework aimed at supporting policy activities in the most effective and efficient way. Designed in close collaboration with its parent DGs, the framework sets out key principles for delivering policy-relevant feedback across all programmes managed by the Agency.

[118] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your familiarity with HaDEA and awareness of various aspects of HaDEA's operations?: The delineation of responsibilities and tasks between HaDEA and the European Commission is clear to me.

Formally adopted by all parent DGs in November 2021[119], the F2P framework includes annual plans that foresee among other things, the organisation of internal workshops between the Commission and HaDEA, as well as events with external stakeholders, project portfolio analysis. It facilitates data and trend analysis on applications, evaluations, and grant outcomes, while also incorporating a flexible mechanism for ad-hoc requests, ensuring timely and targeted input to support EU policy-making.

As part of Horizon Europe, DG RTD developed a comprehensive F2P framework through a collaborative process involving Executive Agencies. HaDEA applies this framework to the parts of Horizon Europe (Clusters 1 and 4) and Horizon 2020 delegated to it. To avoid duplication and build on this good practice, HaDEA has adopted the core principles of the Horizon Europe framework as the foundation for an Agency-wide F2P approach, extending it to non-Horizon programmes as well[120].

As per MoUs, HaDEA provides F2P in various forms—such as data, analyses, and assessments—in line with the agreed content, format, schedule, and revision procedures. These outputs adhere to commonly established templates and structured data fields (for example, project reporting, feedback and assessments from policy officers or expert monitors, and inputs on policy measures). This standardised approach is intended to maximise synergies and improve efficiency in the collection, processing, and analysis of information across all relevant policy areas.

According to this framework, Feedback to Policy is a process that involves close collaboration to identify and report relevant knowledge from project management to policymakers, including various Commission Directorates-General. This input supports the design, monitoring, review, and adjustment of existing policies and programs, as well as the implementation of new initiatives and communication actions in a timely manner. Overall, there are four main categories of policy needs:

- Strategic Planning and Programme Development: Supporting the design of framework and specific programmes, work programmes, calls for proposals, joint programming initiatives, and strategic or annual management plans.
- Knowledge Sharing and Communication: Contributing to policy briefs, reports, and events; providing information relevant to Commission strategies; and responding to queries from EU institutions (e.g. input to parent DGs for the preparation of briefings for Commissioners and replies to MEP questions).
- Policy Monitoring and Evaluation: Delivering monitoring flashes, reports, strategic analyses, and input for Annual Activity Reports and programme evaluations.
- Legislation and Regulation: Supporting the implementation, evaluation, and adaptation of legislation, including contributions to Commission decisions and initiatives.[121]

At the same time, HaDEA supports its parent DGs with policy-relevant inputs/feedback by providing:

- Analysis and support: such as project portfolio validation analysis; gap analysis; valorisation exercise; contribution to programme drafting and linked activities; task force activities; feedback from beneficiaries; tenders and evaluation.
- Report and communication: with inputs like channelling feedback from the experts on the design of individual calls, project portfolio reports at a clustered level; individual project implementation reports; success stories at project and portfolio level,

[119] HaDEA, Feedback to Policy Framework between HaDEA and its parent DGs, November 2021
[120] Ibid., p.2.
[121] Ibid., pp.3-4.

programme implementation reports; programme implementation feedback; contribution to parent DGs' communication activities.

- Meetings and events: individual project meetings; regular cluster meetings; project to policy meetings; workshop/stakeholder events; policy related thematic events organised by European Institutions; R&I Days; WP Info Days and coordinators days, NCP training sessions.[122]

In line with the Steering Committee's endorsement of the framework at the end of 2021 annual Feedback to Policy plans were prepared and implemented for each delegated programme and programme strand in 2022. Throughout 2023, HaDEA continued to work closely with its parent DGs, sharing insights gained from project management to inform policy development. A notable example of this collaboration was the October 2023 workshop, where HaDEA and DG representatives reviewed progress in implementing the F2P framework and discussed opportunities for further improvement[123].

HaDEA reports on F2P activities in its Annual Activity Report, detailing main outputs and strategic developments. Additionally, it uses specific indicators and internal tracking tools to monitor F2P requests and priorities, complemented by regular exchanges with parent DGs and Steering Committee-level oversight. Table 10 further shows how the Agency managed as of 2022 to meet or exceed the respective planned target of F2P's implementation. This reflects HaDEA's ability to promptly adapt to the newly agreed framework and consistently deliver and implement timely inputs to its parent DGs. From a resource perspective, the Agency has not provided detailed estimates, making it difficult to assess the allocation for F2P activities at this stage. The 3% figure referenced in the CBA served as an indicative assumption to inform the overall resource allocation, reflecting a reduction in anticipated productivity gains by the end of the current mandate. Resource management for F2P within HaDEA is determined internally, taking into account available expertise, the need to deliver on all core responsibilities—including evaluations and grant agreement preparations—and the policy feedback requirements expressed by parent DGs. While the current allocation enables coordination, briefings, and basic reporting, several stakeholders, including parent DGs and Agency staff, have observed that this level of resourcing may not fully support more advanced tasks or the capacity to respond to additional ad-hoc requests.

Table 10: Feedback to Policy implementation rate per programme 2022-2024[124]

Output	Year	Target/planned	Implementation rate
Feedback to Policy – EU4Health	2022	70%	97%
	2023	90%	100%
	2024	90%	100%
Feedback to Policy – Horizon Europe Cluster 1: Health	2022	70%	70%
	2023	90%	90%
	2024	90%	90%
	2022	70%	85%

[122] Ibid., p.4
[123] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2023, p.10
[124] HaDEA's framework for policy feedback was agreed upon by the Agency's Steering Committee on 6 December 2021. The policy feedback plan for each programme was subsequently agreed with the parent DG(s) by 15 March 2022. As a result, data for 2021 were not available, since the policy feedback process had not yet been established.

Feedback to Policy – Horizon Europe Cluster 4: Digital	2023	90%	100%
	2024	90%	100%
Feedback to Policy – Horizon Europe Cluster 4: Industry	2022	70%	92%
	2023	90%	97%
	2024	90%	97%
Feedback to Policy – Horizon Europe Cluster 4: Space	2022	70%	90%
	2023	90%	97%
	2024	90%	100%
Feedback to Policy – Single Market Programme: Food	2022	70%	100%
	2023	90%	100%
	2024	90%	100%
Feedback to Policy – Digital Europe Programme	2022	70%	70%
	2023	90%	100%
	2024	90%	89%
Feedback to Policy – Connecting Europe Facility: Digital	2022	70%	100%
	2023	90%	100%
	2024	90%	89%
Feedback to Policy – WiFi4EU	2022	70%	80%
	2023	90%	100%
	2024	90%	100%

Source: AARs annexes 2021-2024

Yet, despite these achievements and progress in terms of implementation rate, evidence gathered, including interviews with both Agency and parent DGs indicate that the Agency made progress and has established a solid framework, but there are still areas that could be enhanced to ensure that the feedback is more impactful and aligned with policy needs.

As outlined in the F2P framework, anticipating and planning are essential for effective Feedback to Policy. To support this, HaDEA and its parent DGs engage in regular, informal exchanges to identify emerging policy needs, align on programme implementation, and maintain a continuous flow of information on progress and challenges. These interactions inform the jointly developed annual feedback-to-policy plans.

In line with the MoUs, feedback requests to the Agency should be planned and anticipated as much as possible. However, given the dynamic political environment, ad-hoc requests may occasionally be necessary. In such cases, and when justified, the Agency will respond to the best of its ability. While flexibility remains important to address evolving priorities, ad-hoc requests, despite being unavoidable and at times difficult to plan, should be limited to avoid placing undue strain on resources[125]. However, as emerged from the collected evidence, despite the Agency report in a timely manner, its actions could benefit from greater proactiveness in anticipating or mitigating policy needs, especially with new raising priorities in response to evolving political developments.

[125] HaDEA, Feedback to Policy Framework between HaDEA and its parent DGs, November 2021, p.5.

An additional area identified for improvement concerns the depth and quality of feedback. Although its volume has grown, several DG representatives observed that, in certain instances, such as briefs or reports, the Agency's contributions remained predominantly descriptive rather than analytical. This limited their strategic value, as the focus tended to centre on quantitative indicators, such as project counts and funding levels, rather than providing substantive insights.

While HaDEA has made significant strides in structuring its Feedback to Policy activities, several systemic constraints continue to limit its ability to scale and deepen this function. The legal and procedural frameworks under which the Agency operates—particularly the Delegation Act—define a fixed scope of action. Any expansion to address new policy areas requires formal amendments, which can delay responsiveness to emerging themes, crises, or political priorities.

Despite these challenges, HaDEA is widely regarded as responsive, diligent, and increasingly systematic in its approach to Feedback to Policy. The formalisation of the F2P process and the October 2023 workshop with parent DGs—where progress was reviewed and coordination strengthened—are notable achievements in this process.

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

Key findings: There are evidence that HaDEA's F2P outputs have supported EU policy-making through contributions to health initiatives, digital innovation workshops, and strategic agendas in aerospace and defence. The Agency is now seeking to strengthen impact by surveying parent DGs, promoting cross-programme synergies, and organising portfolio-wide workshops to better align outputs with policy priorities.

Overall, there is evidence that HaDEA's F2P outputs directly supported EU decision making processes and served to complement or assist the diverse parent DGs' policy needs, through different actions.

For example, within the EU4Health F2P activities, HaDEA beyond programme delivery, contributed to policy initiatives such as the Council recommendation on vaccine preventable cancers and the Commission communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health. In the digital field, over 2023, HaDEA completed among the other things two high profile workshops, on "*Factories of the Future and MadeinEurope: challenges and opportunities*" and on "*the transformative power of Virtual Worlds and Web 4.0*".[126] Within Horizon Europe Cluster 4: Space, HaDEA's provided analytical support across annual coordination cycles with aerospace and defence stakeholders and helped shape strategic research and innovation agendas for forthcoming work programmes. It also curated the Agency's presence at EU Space Week, leading a panel on European no dependence and featuring project results on Big Data and Artificial Intelligence.

HaDEA has planned targeted ad hoc surveys to parent DGs to assess the effectiveness and usefulness of its support, with the aim of strengthening feedback loops and informing future deliverables. Moreover, although F2P activities largely remain anchored at the individual programme level, HaDEA is actively fostering synergies across the programmes it manages. There is growing evidence of cross programme F2P outputs within its portfolio, and HaDEA has convened synergy workshops to address policy needs in a more integrated, portfolio wide manner. These efforts seek to align outputs more closely with DG priorities and enhance the strategic value of F2P.[127]

[126] HaDEA, Annual Activity Report, 2023, pp.16-17.
[127] For further details, see F2P case study.

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.[128]

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). [129]

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

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

Why does it not cover third country contributions?

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

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

Thus, the CBA covers the following programmes:

- EU4Health
- Single Market Programme
  - Food Chain Programme: Health for humans, animals and plants (BTSF)
  - Food Chain Programme: Health for humans, animals and plants (eradication and reference laboratories)
- Horizon Europe
  - Pillar 2, Cluster 1: Health
  - Pillar 2, Cluster 4: Digital, Industry and Space

[128] 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.
[129] This approach was agreed with the Commission to ensure comparability with the initial CBA.

- Connecting Europe Facility: Digital
- Digital Europe Programme: Advanced digital skills (SO 4) and Deployment, best use and interoperability (SO 5)

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

Approach and methodology

The retrospective 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 costs assumptions with the actual average cost assumptions.

The three scenarios of the ex-ante CBA were the following[130]:

- **In-house scenario**, which is a theoretical re-internalisation 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 current situation;
- **Optimised allocation of programmes scenario**, which is based on the initial orientations provided by the Communication of 29 April 2020 and a further adaptation due to recent political developments.

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

Cost equation for the average staff costs at agencies:

Average staff costs by category = average staff expenditure (Title I) by category (CA/TA) + 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.

[130] 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 11: Data sources used in the retrospective CBA

Data point	Estimated	Actuals
FTEs and commitment appropriations	SFS / ex-ante CBA[131]	1. FTEs: Annual Work Programmes (AWPs) 2. Commitment appropriations: Annual Activity Reports (AARs), Inputs concerning actual commitment appropriations received from EAs directly for programmes / pillars not reported *en detail* in the AARs.
	C1 credits	EU Budget
	Non-C1 credits	Next Generation EU Budget (NGEU)
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 to make 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 12: Main assumptions of the retrospective CBA

Context	Assumption
Staffing mix (same assumption as in ex ante CBA)	**DGs** • Temporary Agents (TA)/ Establishment plan posts: 70% • Contract agents (CA)/ External personnel: 30% **EAs** • TA: 25% • CA: 75%
Number of staff (same assumption as in ex ante CBA)	**Optimised scenario** • Actual total FTE DG: 2.4% of actual total FTE EA **In-house scenario** • Actual total FTE DG: +10 % of actual total FTE EA in optimal scenario **Status quo scenario** • Actual total FTE DG: 2.4% of actual total FTE EA • Actual total FTE EA: - For split programmes: +5% of actual total FTE EA in optimised scenario

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

	- For all other programmes: Same as actual total FTE EA in optimised scenario
Average staff costs (other assumption as in ex ante CBA)	**Optimised scenario** • Actual average cost per FTE at EA = Average Title I per FTE + Average Title II per FTE[132] (): - Average cost per FTE (Title I) = Title I / FTE TA and FTE CA - 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 CA[133] **In-house scenario** Actual average costs per FTE at DG per TA and CA **Status quo scenario** • Actual average cost per FTE at EA - For BBA (Brussel Based Agencies): same as for optimised scenario - 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 DG RTD

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 FTE[134] 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, in-house) and for each of the years 2021-2024. However, actual productivity data for programmes currently implemented in-house was not considered, instead the analysis follows the same assumptions as in the original model updated with actual average costs for the Commission.

[132] 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.
[133] The data was provided by the Commission.
[134] 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 CA (Full-Time Equivalents at Executive Agencies Temporary Agents), BBA CA (Brussel Based Agencies Contract Agents), BBA TA (Brussel Based Agencies Temporary Agents); DG cost of coordination (sum of total DG cost at TA and CA level for overseeing EAs).

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

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

4.4.2. Key findings from the retrospective Cost-Benefit-Analysis

This sub-section presents the main findings of the retrospective CBA which was carried out to examine efficiency in comparison to initial expectations and alternative scenarios.[135] Methodologically, it compares the assumptions of the ex-ante CBA with the developments during the period 2021-2024.[136] Please note that when we compare the scenarios, the in-house scenario is a hypothetical model and does not reflect actual figures.

Main findings of the cost-benefits analysis

The findings of the retrospective cost-benefit analysis support the Commission's decision to outsource the work to HaDEA. The actual estimated savings (EUR 99 million) of the optimised scenario compared to the in-house scenario are 24% higher than the savings estimated in the 2021 exercise (EUR 80 million), under the hypothetical assumption of the original CBA that the Commission productivity would be 10% lower.

A deeper analysis revealed that the optimised scenario not only maintained lower staffing requirements but also achieved substantial cost savings. For instance, in 2021, the total cost difference between the optimised and in-house scenarios was a striking 26.1 million EUR, representing a 52% reduction. Although this gap narrowed slightly over time, the optimised scenario still delivered significant savings of 26.4 million EUR in 2024, equating to an 18% difference to estimates. Furthermore, the optimised and status quo scenarios exhibited strong alignment between estimated and actual costs, with variances generally within 5%, reflecting effective budget planning. In contrast, the in-house scenario showed larger deviations, particularly in later years, where actual costs exceeded estimates by up to 9% in 2024.

Overall, the optimised scenario emerged as the most advantageous option of the CBA model, combining stable staffing levels, cost efficiency, and effective resource allocation.

Full-time equivalents

The analysis of the total number of FTEs reveals that the optimised scenario consistently outperformed the status quo and confirmed lower average staff costs compared to the in-house scenario throughout the 2021–2024 period.

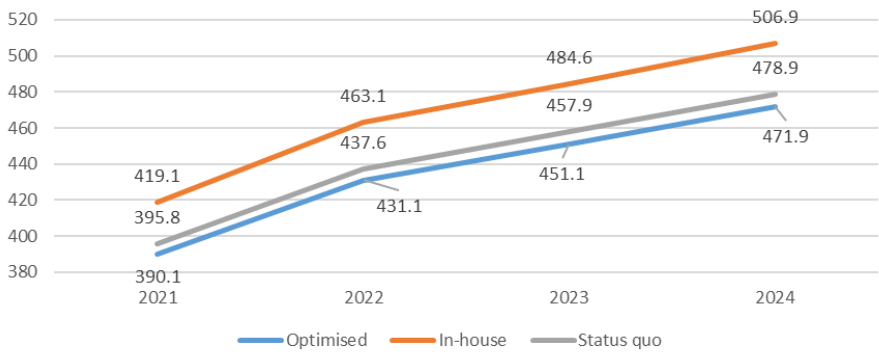
All scenarios exhibit a gradual increase in staffing requirements over the four years. The actual numbers showed an increase by 81.7 FTEs from 2021 to 2024. Compared to that, the

[135] This evaluation question deals with examining the efficiency in comparison to initial expectations and alternative scenarios. It seeks to assess whether the actual performance, productivity gains, and costs align with the projections made in the 2021 ex-ante cost-benefit analysis. This question is highly relevant as it evaluates the efficiency of resource allocation and decision-making, providing insights into whether the chosen management approach delivered optimal value.

[136] Methodology: 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"). The actual FTE numbers were taken from the AWPs and the estimated from the SFS/ex-ante CBA.

hypothetical actual in-house scenario would require an increase of 87.8 FTEs from 2021 to 2024. The level of FTEs can be seen in Figure 19.

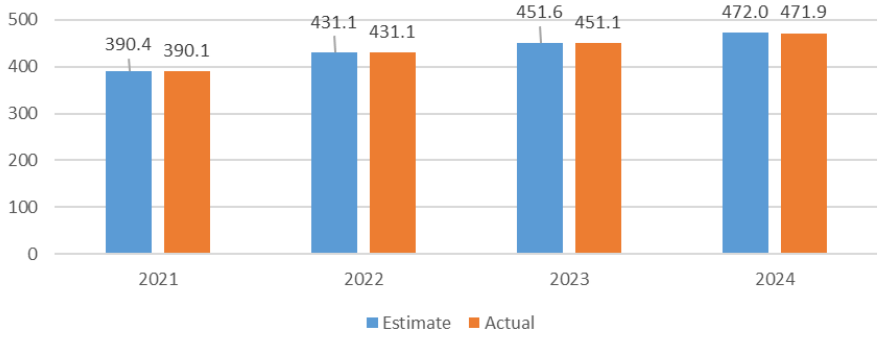
Figure 19: Total FTEs by scenario



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

When looking at the comparison of the estimated and actual numbers of FTEs in the optimised scenario (see Figure 20), it becomes evident that there were no large deviations between the two figures from 2021-2024. The estimated number of FTEs closely mirrored actual staffing levels, with only minor discrepancies. The gradual increase in both estimated and actual FTEs from 2021 to 2024 reflects HaDEA's growth and uptake of its activities over the years.

Figure 20: Estimated vs. actual number of FTEs in optimised scenario



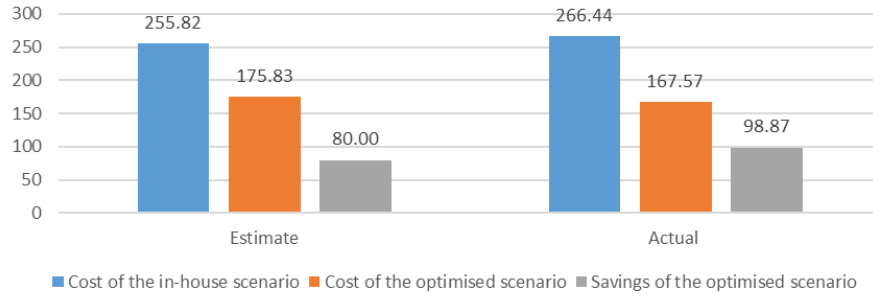
Source: Authors' elaboration based on SFS, ex-ante CBA and AWP.

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

Staff costs and savings

The average staff costs, derived from Title I and Title II ("habillage"), were calculated in alignment with the ex-ante Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA), encompassing not only staff expenditure but also costs related to building and IT infrastructure (see also Annex section 1.2.1). The analysis shows that over the period 2021–2024, the total actual costs of the Executive Agency ("optimised") scenario amounted to EUR 167.57 million. This figure is approximately 5% lower than the estimate provided in the SFS yet still represents a cost saving of EUR 98.87 million compared to the estimated expenditures under the theoretical in-house scenario. Most notably, the actual savings (EUR 98.87 million) of the optimised scenario compared to the in-house scenario were 24% higher than the estimated savings (EUR 80 million) under the hypothetical assumptions already described.

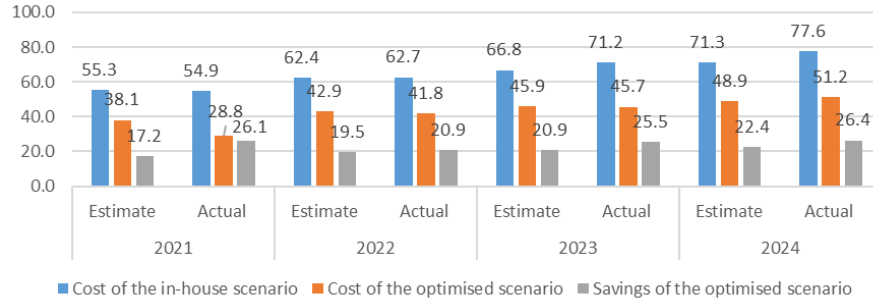
Figure 21: Estimated and actual costs and savings of the executive Agency scenario in 2021-2024, million EUR



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. The increase of actual costs of both the in-house and the optimised scenario over the evaluation period is rooted in the increase of 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 by Title I and to a smaller extent by Title II, which reflects that average administrative cost per staff member has increased, due to salary progression and the high inflation figures during the period.

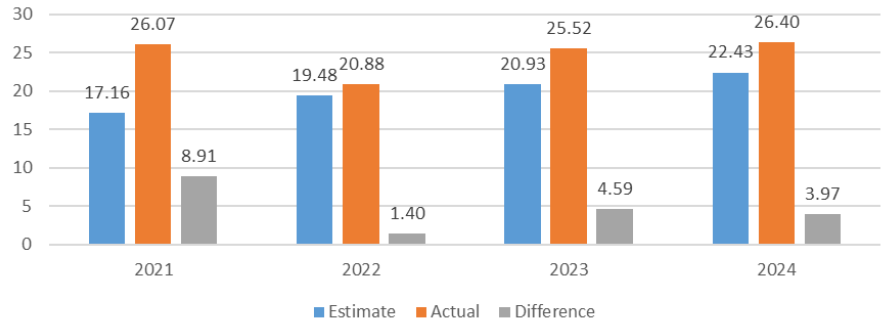
Figure 22: Estimated vs. actual costs and savings of the executive Agency scenario per year for 2021-2024, million EUR



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

Examining the annual savings of the optimised vs. the in-house scenario (i.e. looking only at the grey bars from the figure above but now comparing estimated and actual savings, as shown in the figure below, indicates that the optimised scenario, in comparison to the in-house scenario, delivered higher-than-estimated savings. In 2021, the actual savings of EUR 26.07 million exceeded the estimate by EUR 8.91 million, which could be partially due to the establishment of HaDEA as a new EA. In the following years the actual savings were still higher than the estimated savings but less pronounced compared to 2021. The following figure illustrates the actual and estimated savings for the years 2021-2024.

Figure 23: Estimated vs. actual savings of the optimised vs. the in-house scenario for 2021-2024, million EUR



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

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

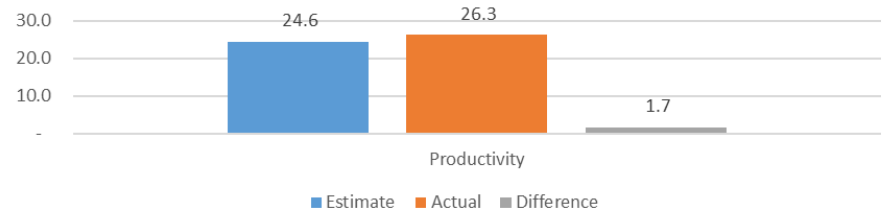
Productivity

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

Productivity = Commitment appropriations (in million EUR) / FTEs

The actual productivity indicator exceeds the estimate (+1.7).[137]

Figure 24: Estimated vs. actual productivity of the optimised scenario for 2021-2024



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

As can be seen in the Annex Section 1.2.2, the actual commitment appropriations in the evaluation period (2021-2024) were 7% higher than estimated, while the actual FTE numbers were almost identical to the estimates in 2024. As a result, the productivity indicator, measured as commitment appropriations per FTE, mirrored the trends in commitment appropriations i.e. actual productivity exceeds the estimate by 7% (+1.7).

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

[137] 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.

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

4.4.3. Workload assessment methodology

HaDEA is organised to manage a broad programme portfolio. To manage workload, HaDEA introduced a Workload Assessment (WLA) methodology for the first time in 2022. This instrument was further developed in 2023 by incorporating qualitative feedback from staff in addition to quantitative data. As explained in an interview with Agency's staff, the 2023 update also integrated the assessment of horizontal support functions (e.g. legal, communication, internal control).

HaDEA's workload assessment methodology consists of a two-phase framework. The first phase establishes conceptual foundations and collects necessary data, while the second phase involves analysis and recommendations. The analytical model is activity-based, integrating quantitative workload indicators with qualitative assessments of task complexity, providing a comprehensive view of workload volume and task difficulty.

The assessment process began with a review of internal documents and interviews with twelve-unit heads to understand activities and workload patterns. This led to the identification of 47 core activities, which were validated with management and used to develop workload indicators. A self-assessment was conducted among staff gathering data on time allocation and perceptions of workload, achieving a response rate of over 75%.

Specific workload indicators were created to quantify time for each task, with projections for staffing needs in 2024 based on 2022 data. A complexity scoring system was also introduced to account for various factors affecting workload. The final results were calibrated to ensure consistency across data sources, translating findings into full-time equivalent (FTE) staffing needs.

Since its first assessment in 2022, HaDEA has refined its methodology, addressing challenges related to legacy programmes and resource allocation. The second assessment in 2023 expanded the scope and included subjective components, with collaboration from external consultants.

Data sources included quantitative HR data and qualitative insights from staff and management. A cross-functional group ensured data quality and coherence. The analysis informs future staffing needs, with profiles developed to reflect typical task distributions. Recommendations for resource allocation were tailored to align staffing with operational demands.

Despite these improvements, significant challenges persist according to the Agency's staff interviewed, in particular with regard to:

- The assessment of the programme complexity. Projects within the same programme vary greatly in management effort, making it hard to establish a uniform metric across e.g. action grants, direct grants to Member States, and operating grants.
- The lack of harmonisation in defining horizontal support functions across the Agency led to inconsistencies in resource classification and workload assessment, complicating management efforts.
- The flexibility in staff reallocation and the ability to respond quickly to workload peaks is limited. To mitigate short-term staffing gaps or workload pressures—such as during peak periods or to cover long-term sick leave—HaDEA has relied on interim solutions, including interim staff.
- At the same time, however, frequent staff rotation and changes of project officers can also be a concern from the perspective of business continuity and Feedback to Policy.

- Although the WLA tool was enhanced in 2023, it continues to face challenges in fully reflecting the diverse levels of complexity inherent in different grant types and program structures.

Payment structure within HaDEA

HaDEA employs a diverse range of payment models tailored to the specific needs of its programmes, prioritising administrative efficiency and scalability.

One of the most innovative approaches was implemented under the WiFi4EU initiative within CEF Telecom programme (which is a legacy programme that has been discontinued). Here, HaDEA adopted a voucher-based lump sum model, granting each participating municipality a fixed amount per voucher, irrespective of actual costs incurred. This simplified model eliminated the need for detailed invoice verification, significantly reducing administrative burden for both HaDEA and beneficiaries. It also enabled rapid processing and scalability, which was essential given the initiative's reach (over 8,800 municipalities).

In contrast, the EU4Health programme used a unit cost-based payment structure for travel and subsistence. While this model aims to streamline financial management, it has raised concerns among beneficiaries regarding its rigidity. Stakeholders have called for greater flexibility in the payment model to better reflect real-world financial needs and improve programme responsiveness.

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

5. Conclusions and lessons learned

This section presents the main conclusions and recommendations from the current evaluation of HaDEA's operations between April 2021 and March 2024. Triangulated evidence indicates that, during this period, HaDEA consistently delivered substantial value to the European Commission and its stakeholders. Assessed against the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence, HaDEA successfully met its operational objectives while maintaining high performance standards. The retrospective cost-benefit analysis confirms that the optimised scenario generated aggregated actual savings compared to the hypothetical in-house scenario.

Conclusions

Effectiveness

HaDEA has generally performed well in implementing its delegated programmes, consistently achieving performance targets and KPIs. Satisfaction with the Agency's programme delivery remains high among both the Commission and external stakeholders. However, some challenges persist, particularly regarding the experience of unsuccessful applicants and the execution of smaller-scale programmes.

HaDEA demonstrated strong compliance with its legal framework, operating effectively, with no documented instances outside the scope of its mandate identified, and no legal cases were recorded during the evaluation period. HaDEA effectively carried out its delegated tasks across the entire project lifecycle, including grant management, monitoring, evaluation, and communication.

Since its establishment in 2021, HaDEA operates under the same internal control framework as the European Commission. The Agency has fostered an internal control culture through both bottom-up and top-down approaches. An annual internal control survey gathers feedback from staff and managers on the system's effectiveness.

HaDEA has developed a comprehensive external communication strategy that evolved from overcoming early visibility challenges, caused by recent establishment and pandemic restrictions, to implementing targeted outreach through country missions, partnerships, and digital channels, resulting in stronger stakeholder engagement and general growing awareness of its programmes. Nonetheless, visibility of smaller programmes is more limited, and outreach could be further tailored to target audiences. Social media performance, despite being set up from scratch, is mixed and could be more strategic.

The Agency has fulfilled its reporting requirements as defined in the legal basis and the MoU between the Agency and the parent DGs. The Agency used formalised reporting structures to inform DGs of programme operations, strategic developments, and risk-related issues. This was primarily achieved through regular Steering Committee meetings, and other regular meetings where operational updates were presented and discussed. Overall, while HaDEA's reporting is robust and compliant, there is room to enhance its strategic value and operational efficiency by refining the content, frequency, and coordination of reporting activities.

Efficiency

HaDEA has demonstrated strong performance in programme management, consistently meeting key efficiency targets throughout the 2021–2024 period. The Agency achieved full budget execution rates for both operational and administrative expenditure, reflecting sound financial stewardship.

Its organisational structure is designed to support effective programme implementation combining central service units, clustered in Department C, with programme implementation units in Departments A and B.

High levels of staff engagement and motivation have been identified as key contributors to HaDEA's performance. Notably, the Agency reported improved engagement scores compared to its 2021 internal satisfaction results, supported by the in-house technical expertise and institutional knowledge developed over time. However, limited career development opportunities, an issue common across Executive Agencies, remain a concern and may affect long-term staff motivation. In this context, continued efforts to enhance staff mobility would be beneficial. This includes implementing and expanding the Inter-Agency HR Strategy 2023–2027 in collaboration with other agencies, as well as exploring additional internal mobility mechanisms within the existing legal framework to broaden career prospects

HaDEA has implemented several measures aimed at reducing its environmental impact, including obtaining EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) accreditation in 2024. Initial steps have been taken to promote environmental sustainability, such as reducing emissions and digitalising procedures.

HaDEA has made significant progress in digital transformation, achieving full compliance with corporate IT and data governance principles, onboarding key programmes to eGrants, and introducing innovative tools such as dashboards, mobile apps, and automated calculators. Despite these advances, challenges remain around user-friendliness of the Commission's corporate IT systems, the complexity of processes for beneficiaries, and the need for more structured staff training. At the same time, these IT systems, IT systems, associated procedures, and related training fall under corporate responsibility. HaDEA is required to use these systems and processes but has no authority over their design, management, or governance. Future efficiency gains are expected to stem from the adoption of advanced digital technologies, including automation and Artificial Intelligence, subject to policy approval. Leveraging these innovations could enhance operational processes and streamline workflows.

Coherence

Despite the broad and diverse thematic portfolio, HaDEA's programme portfolio is clear and coherent with no major overlaps, gaps or inconsistencies. Overall, it is also perceived as well aligned with EU policy priorities.

Overall, the allocation of responsibilities and tasks between HaDEA and its parent DGs is widely regarded as clear and well-defined, with staff on both sides expressing confidence in the established communication channels and protocols. Nonetheless, some evidence points to the need for more structured, frequent, and proactive exchanges to ensure alignment on evolving priorities.

During the evaluation period, the Feedback to Policy mechanism was notably strengthened. The establishment of a dedicated framework contributed to a more structured and systematic approach. Generally, the Agency has contributed to policy discussions through reporting and project analysis, demonstrating the potential of this enhanced framework. However, internal stakeholders see room for more strategic and structured feedback processes—particularly in identifying and highlighting policy-relevant results and responding effectively to ad-hoc demands.

Retrospective Cost-Benefit Analysis

The retrospective cost-benefit analysis confirms that outsourcing to HaDEA was the most advantageous option. The optimised scenario delivered actual savings of €99 million—24% higher than initial estimates—while maintaining stable staffing levels and strong alignment between planned and actual costs. Compared to the in-house scenario, which incurred higher costs, the optimised approach consistently achieved superior cost-effectiveness. Although the status quo scenario offered stability, it lacked the substantial savings and operational benefits demonstrated by the optimised model.

Lessons learned

Though overall evaluation results are positive, the evaluation has identified several factors, which have limited the effectiveness, efficiency or coherence of the agency in the study period. Some of the shortcomings are currently in process of being addressed, while in other cases further actions could be explored to try to address those shortcomings. Below we provide a list of lessons learned from the evaluation period 2021-2024:

- The experience of designing and implementing HaDEA's outreach from scratch has proven highly effective in enhancing programme visibility and stakeholder engagement. This success highlights the importance of maintaining and further developing these efforts as a strategic priority. By continuing to refine and leverage these outreach mechanisms, the Agency can significantly increase awareness of its programme portfolio, particularly for newly established programmes that currently lag behind compared to the Horizon Europe Clusters. In doing so, the Agency will not only sustain and deepen engagement with stakeholders already familiar with HaDEA but also broaden its stakeholder community.
- Over the evaluation period, HaDEA's workforce expanded significantly, and the Agency remained close to its occupancy targets. In parallel, several staff became eligible for internal mobility across EAs or successfully passed competitions and joined the European Commission. Nonetheless, turnover persists in certain positions, and gaps remain at programme level in specialised and technical profiles required for complex project implementation. Strengthening collaboration across Agencies—building on the shared Agencies' human resources strategy and the MoU between the Agencies on sharing of reserve lists — may be beneficial to shorten recruitment lead times and provide faster access to candidate reserve lists. Jointly organised selection procedures could also broaden the pool of potential applicants and improve recruitment efficiency.
- HaDEA conducted a detailed workload assessment across all staff categories offering qualitative insights into workload perceptions. This instrument was further developed in 2023 by incorporating qualitative feedback from staff in addition to quantitative data. While the Agency, like also the other EAs, have made significant progress in developing data informed, context sensitive workload methodologies, adopting a harmonised WLA framework, supplemented with metrics such as grant type, duration, and number of applications per call, may be worthwhile to consider, as it could reflect programme complexity more accurately and could improve comparability across the six EAs. Implementing a uniform framework could improve Agencies' capacity to compare data, thereby enhancing transparency and facilitating benchmarking.
- While Horizon Europe users have generally adapted to existing systems, newer delegated programmes have faced greater onboarding challenges. Feedback from both internal staff and external stakeholders highlights persistent issues with registration, validation, and system usability—including unintuitive interfaces and fragmented communication. The amendment process for contracts and grants is also seen as time-consuming. These insights show how continued investment in user training might be beneficial, as it could improve interface design, and streamline procedures to enhance overall efficiency and user satisfaction.
- HaDEA could further improve and strengthen its F2P functions through improved strategic planning and enhanced coordination with parent DGs. Considering also the workload concerns shared with regards to F2P, opportunities to further streamline this process could be explored. For instance, HaDEA could reinforce inter-Agency cooperation on F2P related information requests by sharing best practices, coordinating similar demands, and developing shared analytical approaches as request volumes and complexity increase.

- While proactiveness in anticipating policy needs or issues is valued by parent DGs, some of these noted that the planning process can be overly rigid, limiting the ability to adapt to evolving priorities. The fast-changing policy landscape often collides with Agency's workload peak periods, challenging HaDEA's capacity to respond rapidly and flexibly to ad hoc demands. Although the F2P framework leaves room to accommodate and ad hoc requests, operational mechanisms for integrating emerging needs, and preserving the value of planning while meeting policymakers' expectations, could be strengthened. For example, Agencies could proactively provide regular updates to parent DGs on policy-relevant results in areas of recurring interest, ensuring timely, relevant information for decision-making and freeing resources to address new requests.

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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 Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) for the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 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 HaDEA effectively fulfilled its mission and objectives. The delimitation of responsibilities and tasks between HaDEA and DG SANTE (lead parent DG), as well as with the remaining parent DGs, 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 focus better on its primary policy-making tasks and enables cost savings.

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