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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

On the mid-term evaluation of the Consumer Programme 2014-2020

{SWD(2019) 382 final}

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Article 169 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union requires the EU to contribute to protecting the health, safety and economic interests of consumers through actions in the field of consumer protection and also to take consumer protection requirements into account in defining and implementing other Union policies and activities. This can be achieved as a part of the efforts to build a proper functioning internal market in which both consumers and business benefit equally. In addition, the EU may adopt measures to support, supplement and monitor the policy pursued at national level to promote consumers' rights to information, education and to organise themselves.

The EU has put in place a set of consumer rights and policies that aim to achieve this objective through either horizontal instruments or sector-specific legislation. Recent efforts to keep this framework up-to-date and fit to address evolving markets include the review of the Consumer Protection Cooperation Regulation¹ as well as the Fitness Check of Consumer and Marketing Law², which led to the adoption in April 2018 of the New Deal for Consumers³.

The practical realisation of these priorities is underpinned by funding from the EU budget granted through the multi-annual Consumer Programme 2014-2020⁴. The programme has an allocated amount of EUR 188.8 million for the years 2014-2020. It was adopted to support the implementation of the policy priorities set out in the European Consumer Agenda - Boosting Confidence and Growth⁵. Article 13(2) of the Regulation provides that the Commission shall submit a mid-term evaluation report of the programme to the European Parliament and the Council.

The Regulation sets **its general objective** as being to "ensure a high level of consumer protection, to empower consumers and to place the consumer at the heart of the internal market, within the framework of an overall strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The Programme will do so by contributing to protecting the health, safety and the legal and economic interests of consumers, as well as to promoting their right to information, education and to organise themselves in order to safeguard their interests, and supporting the integration of consumer interests into other policy areas. The Programme shall complement, support and monitor the policies of Member States".

The programme builds on the actions funded under the previous programme covering the period 2007-2013⁶. It ensures a smooth transition and a continuation of the multiannual measures while taking into account the mid-term evaluation of the previous programme's successes and areas requiring more attention.

Since the end of 2014, the implementation of the 2014-2020 Consumer Programme also takes account of the guidance provided by the following Commission priorities: a deeper and fairer

¹ REGULATION (EU) 2017/2394 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 12 December 2017 on cooperation between national authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws and repealing Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017R2394&from=EN>

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/swd2017208f1staffworkingpaperenv3p1889270.pdf>

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/item-detail.cfm?item_id=620435

⁵ The Consumer Programme 2014-2020 was established by Regulation (EU) No 254/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32014R0254>

⁶ COM/2012/0225 final

⁷ Decision No [1926/2006/EC](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3A132052) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 establishing a programme of Community action in the field of consumer policy (2007-2013) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3A132052>

internal market, a connected Digital Single Market, and a more resilient Energy Union. Furthermore, the Programme supports the consumer-relevant policy contribution to sustainable consumption/circular economy initiatives, in particular in the context of the EU Circular Economy Action Plan⁷.

2. SCOPE, PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EVALUATION

2.1. Scope and purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of the mid-term evaluation of the Consumer Programme 2014-2020 is to review the achievement of the objectives of all its measures, the state of play regarding the implementation of the eligible actions set out in its Article 4 and the specific actions referred to in its Annex I. This evaluation analyses the allocation of funds to the beneficiaries, the efficiency of the use of resources and the Programme's European added value, taking into consideration developments in the area of consumer protection and other consumer-relevant EU policies, with a view to a decision on the renewal, modification or suspension of the actions. The preliminary findings of the evaluation have been taken into account in the preparation of the proposal for the Single Market programme for the next MFF⁸.

The evaluation also addresses the scope for simplification, the Programme's internal and external coherence including possible synergies/complementarities with other EU Programmes, the continued relevance of all objectives, as well as the contribution of the measures to the Union priorities of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The longer-term impacts and the sustainability of effects of the Programme have been evaluated to the extent feasible given that the Programme is still being implemented with a view to feeding into a decision on a possible renewal, modification or suspension of a subsequent Programme in terms of scope, nature and cost.

The evaluation considers the implementation of the Programme in all EU Member States (taking account of the date of accession), as well as in Norway and Iceland. The evaluation period is the period covered from 2014 until 2017.

2.2. Methodology and limitations

The evaluation was carried out between October 2017 and April 2018. This report is accompanied by a Staff Working Document which was supported by a study⁹ carried out by an external contractor.

For the purpose of this evaluation a broad range of reports, academic literature and other documentation on the actions and activities funded under the Consumer Programme were

⁷ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Closing the loop - An EU action plan for the Circular Economy , COM/2015/0614 final <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52015DC0614>

⁸ Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL establishing the Programme for single market, competitiveness of enterprises, including small and medium-sized enterprises, and European statistics and repealing Regulations (EU) No 99/2013, (EU) No 1287/2013, (EU) No 254/2014, (EU) No 258/2014, (EU) No 652/2014 and (EU) 2017/826 COM/2018/441 final - 2018/0231 (COD) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1540389031742&uri=CELEX%3A52018PC0441>

⁹ Published on 18 January 2019 <https://publications.europa.eu/fr/publication-detail/-/publication/5e9ee253-22b0-11e9-8d04-01aa75cd71a1/language-en>

collected, reviewed and processed. To ensure a coverage of interests as broad as possible, a wide variety of stakeholders were consulted for the evaluation. A public consultation took place from 10 January 2018 until 9 March 2018 as part of a consultation on EU funds in the area of Investment, Research and Innovation, SMEs and Single Market preparing the post 2020 funding programmes.

At the moment of the evaluation, the majority of financed actions were still at the early stage of the implementation providing limited data on results of actions and impacts of the programme. Therefore, the mid-term evaluation of the programme mostly relied on stakeholders' assessments regarding the programme implementation and outputs of actions financed under the Consumer Programme.

Where possible, findings from interviews were triangulated with quantitative analysis of outputs and actions. To the extent possible, the analysis of evaluation questions was informed by a comparison with a baseline situation (end of the previous programming period).

3. KEY ELEMENTS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME

3.1. The Programme's specific objectives and its eligible actions

To pursue the Consumer Programme's general objective, under its article 3 the Regulation sets **four specific objectives** to be achieved through a series of eligible actions, as follows:

Specific Objective I – Safety. Under this specific objective, the programme aims to consolidate and enhance product safety through effective market surveillance throughout the Union. The following eligible actions of the Consumer Programme contribute to this objective:

- Scientific advice and risk analysis relevant to consumer health and safety regarding non-food products and services including support for the tasks of the independent scientific committees established by Decision 2008/721/EC;
- Coordination of market surveillance and enforcement actions on product safety with regard to Directive 2001/95/EC¹⁰, and actions to improve consumer services safety; and
- Maintenance and further development of databases on cosmetics.

Each of the actions above is carried out through specific activities funded under the Consumer Programme. The main activities funded under Objective I are:

- The Rapid Alert System for dangerous non-food products (RAPEX);
- Joint cooperation and enforcement actions in the area of non-food consumer product safety;
- Exchange of safety enforcement officials in the field of product safety and
- EU databases on cosmetics (Cosmetic ingredient database, Cosmetic Product Notification Portal).

Specific Objective II - Consumer information and education, and support to consumer organisations. The programme aims under this specific objective to improve consumers' education, information and awareness of their rights, to develop the evidence base for consumer policy and to provide support to consumer organisations, including taking into

¹⁰ Directive 2001/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 December 2001 on general product safety <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32001L0095>

account the specific needs of vulnerable consumers. Objective II comprises the following eligible actions:

- Building and improving access to the evidence base for policymaking in areas affecting consumers, for designing smart and targeted regulations and for detecting any market malfunctioning or changes in consumers' needs, providing a basis for the development of consumer policy, for the identification of the areas most problematic for consumers and for the integration of consumer interests into other Union policies;
- Support through financing of Union-level consumer organisations and through capacity building for consumer organisations at Union, national and regional level, increasing transparency and stepping up exchanges of best practices and expertise;
- Enhancing the transparency of consumer markets and consumer information, ensuring consumers have comparable, reliable and easily accessible data, including for cross-border cases, to help them compare not only prices, but also quality and sustainability of goods and services; and
- Enhancing consumer education as a life-long process with a particular focus on vulnerable consumers.

Each of the actions above is implemented through specific activities funded under the Consumer Programme. The main activities funded under Objective II are:

- Consumer scoreboards¹¹ and surveys (the Consumer Conditions Scoreboard and Consumer Markets Scoreboard);
- Consumer market studies¹²;
- Capacity building for consumer organisations ("Consumer Champion" project);
- Support to EU-level consumer organisations ;
- EU consumer information/awareness raising campaigns
- The European Consumer Complaints Registration System and related support measures (ECCRS); and
- EU consumer education resources ("Consumer Classroom" project).

Specific Objective III - Rights and redress. The programme aims to develop and reinforce consumer rights in particular through smart regulatory action and improving access to simple, efficient, expedient and low-cost redress including alternative dispute resolution. The following eligible actions of the Consumer Programme contribute to the achievement of this objective:

- Preparation by the Commission of consumer protection legislation and other regulatory initiatives, monitoring the transposition by Member States and the subsequent evaluation of its impact, and the promotion of co-regulatory and self-regulatory initiatives and monitoring the real impact of those initiatives on consumer markets; and
- Facilitating access to dispute resolution mechanisms for consumers, in particular to alternative dispute resolution schemes, including through a Union-wide online system and the networking of national alternative dispute resolution entities, paying specific attention to adequate measures for vulnerable consumers' needs and rights; monitoring of the functioning and the effectiveness of dispute resolution mechanisms for

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/consumers/consumer-protection/evidence-based-consumer-policy/consumer-scoreboards_en

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/consumers/consumer-protection/evidence-based-consumer-policy/market-studies_en

consumers, including through the development and maintenance of relevant IT tools and the exchange of current best practices and experience in the Member States.

Each of the actions above is carried out through specific activities funded under the Consumer Programme. The main activities funded under Objective III are:

- Behavioural studies (e.g. on consumer decision making in insurance services, on the transparency of online platforms; on advertising market practices in online social media);
- Other EU consumer policy studies (e.g. evaluations, study on enforcement authorities' powers in the application of Consumer Protection Cooperation (CPC) Regulation);
- Organisation of the Consumer Summit;
- Organisation of the Citizens' Energy Forum;
- Maintaining and administrating the Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) Platform; and
- Communication campaigns and actions on Alternative Dispute Resolution/ODR.

Specific Objective IV – Enforcement: It aims to support enforcement of consumer rights by strengthening cooperation between national enforcement bodies and by supporting consumers with advice. Objective IV is carried out under the following two eligible actions of the Consumer Programme:

- Coordination of surveillance and enforcement actions with regard to Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004; and
- Financial contributions for joint actions with public or non-profit bodies constituting Union networks which provide information and assistance to consumers to help them exercise their rights and obtain access to appropriate dispute resolution, including out of court online resolution schemes (European Consumer Centres Network).

Each of the actions above is carried out through specific activities funded under the Consumer Programme. The main activities funded under Objective IV are:

- The Consumer Protection Cooperation (CPC) Network, including the CPC system and joint actions for the enforcement of consumer protection laws;
- Exchange of enforcement officials under the CPC;
- Trainings for enforcement officials (E-Enforcement Academy);
- Financial support to European Consumer Centres Network (ECC-Net); and
- Trainings for ECC-Net.

3.2. Programme management and beneficiaries

The programme is being implemented by means of annual work programmes adopted by the Commission with the assistance of an advisory Committee with representatives from Member States¹³. Each annual work programme sets out the actions to be undertaken in a given year, including the allocation of financial resources to each action, as well as the selection and award criteria to attribute the funds. The actions are implemented mainly by calls for tender and calls for proposals.

Since 2008, the Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency (CHAFEA)¹⁴, an executive agency established in Luxembourg, implements an important part of the multi-

¹³ The committee is an advisory committee as defined by Regulation (EU) No 182/2011

¹⁴ For more details on the executive agency please refer to : <http://ec.europa.eu/chafea/about/about.html>

annual programmes. For each annual work programme, the Agency and the Commission jointly agree what programme actions the agency will implement.

The beneficiaries of the grants, procurement contracts and joint actions are public bodies, private non-profit-making bodies and private entities in all EU Member States. The target groups include public consumer protection authorities and other responsible entities, officials responsible for enforcing consumer protection legislation (e.g. exchanges of officials), European consumer organisations, higher education institutions, students or teachers.

3.3. Budget and state of implementation of the programme

The implementation of the Consumer Programme 2014 – 2020 is ongoing: most of the related performance targets for 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017 have been achieved. The 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 annual work programmes, with a budget of EUR 21.9 million, EUR 22.5 million, EUR 23.7 million, and EUR 24.7 million respectively, were executed, with a final rate of implementation of 98,3%, 99%, 99,52%, and 94,4% respectively¹⁵. The implementation of the work programmes proceeded as planned except that the absorption of the budget by the Member States authorities was lower than expected and the remaining balance has been channelled to awareness raising campaigns. At mid-term, implementation of the specific actions set out in Annex I of the Regulation is well on track. Only a limited number of specific actions have not yet been implemented or only partially.

- **Specific objective I – product safety**

EUR 13.1 million (14%) of the funds committed under the Programme between 2014 and 2017 were spent on activities related to Specific Objective I. The largest activity in terms of funds committed is joint cooperation and enforcement actions in the area of non-food safety (EUR 6.2 million, or 47% of the funds committed under Objective I). Approximately EUR 2.9 million (22% of the funds committed under Objective I) has been committed to RAPEX. The smallest activity by budget size (not including networking and events or other supporting activities) is the exchange of officials in the area of product safety (3% of the funds committed under Objective I).

- **Specific Objective II – Consumer information and education and support to consumer organisations**

EUR 35.1 million (37%) of the funds committed under the Programme between 2014 and 2017 were spent on activities related to Specific Objective II. The largest activity in terms of funds committed between 2014 and 2017 is EU consumer information and awareness raising campaigns (EUR 9.0 million), which make up 26% of the funds committed under Objective II. Consumer scoreboards and surveys (EUR 8.9 million) and support to EU-level consumer organisations (EUR 6.0 million) are the second and third largest activity, respectively. The smallest activity by funds committed (not including networking and events or other supporting activities) is the European Consumer Complaints Registration System (ECCRS) (2% of the funds under Objective II).

- **Specific Objective III – Consumer rights and redress**

EUR 13.0 million (14%) of the funds committed under the Consumer Programme between 2014 and 2017 were spent on activities related to Specific Objective III.

¹⁵ Implementation of 2018 budget is still ongoing in 2019.

47% of the funds committed under Objective III relate specifically to online / alternative dispute resolution (ODR/ADR): the two largest activities funded under this objective are the maintenance, administration of ODR Platform (approximately EUR 3.0 million), communication campaigns, and promotion actions on ODR/ADR (approximately EUR 3.1 million). Behavioural studies (EUR 2.4 million) and other EU consumer studies (EUR 1.9 million) also make up a substantial part of the funds committed under Objective III. The smallest activities funded between 2014 and 2017 are the Consumer Summit (7% of the funds committed under Objective III) and the Citizens' Energy Forum (0.4%).

- **Specific Objective IV – Enforcement**

EUR 30.2 million (31%) of the funds committed under the Consumer Programme between 2014 and 2017 were spent on activities related to Specific Objective IV.

The largest activity in terms of funding is by far the ECC-Net. With approximately EUR 24.8 million in funds committed, the ECC-Net accounts for 82% of the spending under Objective IV of the Consumer Programme between 2014 and 2017. The next largest activities are the CPC network (7% of the funds committed under Objective IV) and training for enforcement officials in the framework of the E-Enforcement Academy (5% of the funds committed under Objective IV). The smallest activity (not including other supporting activities) relates to the exchange of enforcement officials (1% of the funds committed under Objective IV).

- **Cross-cutting activities**

Approximately 4% of the budget belongs to the 'Administrative' budget line, which is used to fund cross-cutting activities, such as travel and accommodation costs of the participants for events or meetings.

4. WHAT HAS THE CONSUMER PROGRAMME ACHIEVED?

As showed in the accompanying staff working document¹⁶, the Consumer Programme is performing generally well at mid-term with regard to its specific objectives. The following parts assess how the programme functioned in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added-value and present the views of the stakeholders consulted.

4.1. Effectiveness

Objective I Product safety

The activities implemented under the Programme have been largely effective in consolidating and enhancing product safety through market surveillance in the EU, allowing for substantial progress in achieving Objective I compared to the baseline period. Information exchange and cooperation between Member States have improved, thereby reducing differences in enforcement across the EU.

The Rapid Alert System for dangerous non-food products-RAPEX has become an effective and important pillar of the EU market surveillance architecture. Its main target groups across

¹⁶ SWD(2019) 382 COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Accompanying the document REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the mid-term evaluation of the implementation of the Consumer Programme 2014 - 2020

the EU recognised and appreciated the system. Joint actions, training and networking are considered to be effective by national authorities. These activities lead to coordinated approaches to common problems, direct contacts between authorities from different countries and exchange of good practices. They also support Member States' authorities in addressing new challenges. For instance, through the E-Enforcement Academy, it was possible for the Member States to co-operate, in order to conduct on-line investigations through high-quality trainings and learning materials.

Limited staff and financial resources for market surveillance and enforcement in Member States influence however the level of achievements, as reported by interviewees. Stakeholders consulted during the evaluation cited the continued presence of unsafe products on the market as well as emerging risks, e.g. from new, technically complex products or from e-commerce with third countries, as evidence that market surveillance needed to continuously adapt to new challenges.

Nevertheless, consumer trust in product safety has increased during the Programme period. About three quarters of retailers agree that public authorities actively monitor and ensure compliance with product safety legislation in their sector.

Overall, the perception of stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of actions implemented in the first four years of the current Consumer Programme was positive, as equally positive was the perception of the benefits that most of these activities have achieved in the Member States.

Objective II - Consumer information and education, developing the evidence base and support to consumer organisations

Consumer scoreboards and market studies have significantly contributed to developing the evidence base for consumer policy, leading to policy uptake at EU level. Together they are useful tools for benchmarking purposes at the national level. Also, the programme support to the EU-level consumer organisation *Bureau Européen des Unions des Consommateurs-BEUC* is considered by the evaluation to be effective. The organisation made an important and consistent contribution to representing consumer interests at the EU level.

The evaluation considers the *Consumer Champion* training courses valuable and highly appreciated by stakeholders. However, the online learning courses and the interactive platform are not used according to the expectations. The capacity of consumer organisations at the national level remained insufficient, mostly due to a lack of resources. Consumer awareness campaigns funded under the Programme have good results, with the campaigns' targets in terms of hits or impression achieved. Long term impacts are, however, difficult to sustain.

The targets set for this objective in the Regulation relating to the European Consumer Complaints Registration System are already met¹⁷. However, in spite of positive indicator values, interviewees emphasised the efforts needed for providing complaints data and suggested that the system needed improvement/changes.

The key factors that influence the level of achievements of this objective are often external in nature. In the area of consumer information and education, these factors include limited staff and financial resources available in the Member States, but also the limited integration of

¹⁷ The 2020 target of « Number of complaint bodies (70) and number of countries (20) submitting complaints to the ECCRS » was already surpassed in 2015 with 73 complaint bodies from 20 countries.

consumer education into national curricula. In the area of capacity building of consumer organisations, resource constraints of the target organisations, which cannot appropriately be addressed by the provision of training alone represent main factors impacting the progress.

Objective III Consumer rights and redress

The Online Dispute Resolution-ODR platform has been relatively successful in attracting consumers to register their complaints. The target for 2020 in terms of complaint numbers is likely to be achieved¹⁸.

The main benefit of the ODR platform appears to be that traders contacted through the platform often informally solve the problem directly with the affected consumers without any involvement of an ADR scheme. Positive trends with respect to accessibility of and consumer satisfaction with ADR can be observed based on EU survey data. They possibly reflect ongoing efforts in the Member States to improve ADR systems and a broader recognition of ADR as an efficient means of redress.

Behavioural studies are also an essential tool to support evidence-based policymaking that considers how real consumers interact in real markets with real companies, complementing evidence from legal and economic studies. However, stakeholders think that policymakers do not make sufficient use of these studies, or that the studies could be better promoted. Several studies have fed directly into the development of EU consumer policy initiatives, with the practical value of the studies being confirmed by stakeholders.

Objective IV: Enforcement

The evaluation showed that important progress has been achieved towards Objective IV. This is evidenced by significant results in reaching most of the targets set in the Programme. The activities funded complement each other well and have been largely effective in supporting enforcement of consumer rights by strengthening cooperation between national enforcement bodies and by supporting consumers with advice.

Activities related to the *Consumer Protection Cooperation Network-CPC* have grown in importance and have seen an improvement in terms of achieving their aim. However, there are still differences between Member States in making use of the CPC System and engaging in enforcement requests.

Exchanges of enforcement officials are an appreciated activity that has seen increased participation, but that is unevenly used by Member States. Also, the E-Enforcement Academy has received a high assessment of effectiveness by the national authorities to which the participating officials belong, although participation in its first year in operation has remained lower than planned, especially in web-based modules.

The output of the European Consumer Centres-ECCs is significant, and the quality and timeliness of the ECCs' services is also assessed positively in the recent specific evaluation. This is despite disparities in this respect between ECCs in different Member States. The main challenge for the ECCs is still their visibility.

¹⁸ The 2020 target of cases dealt with the ODR system is 100.000 against the baseline (in 2010) of 17.500 cases; as in 2017, 55.002 cases were dealt with by the ODR, such trend, if confirmed, should make the achievement of the 2020 target possible.

The consultation carried out during the evaluation shows that in parallel to the implementation of activities under the Consumer Programme, consumers' trust that public authorities protect their rights and that retailers respect consumer rights has increased. This correlates with a slight reduction of problems experienced by consumers. Two thirds of retailers consider public authorities to actively monitor and ensure compliance with consumer legislation in their sector. However, this percentage has decreased over the last years.

Limited staff and financial resources of consumer protection authorities in the Member States are considered key factors influencing level of achievements related to the Programme objective. Other key factors include the rapid innovation of products and services, as well as new distribution channels that make effective consumer protection more difficult. While this development offers many advantages for consumers as well as for businesses, there are also increased risks for widespread infringements of consumer rights and difficulties with enforcement of consumer rights. Effective enforcement of consumer rights was made a central part of the New Deal for Consumers launched by the European Commission.

4.2. Efficiency

Based on the limited evidence collected during the evaluation as well as the feedback from concerned stakeholders, the costs of the Programme activities and the related benefits appear to be largely proportionate. In terms of efficiency of specific activities, network meetings and events, in particular, are assessed by participating authorities and consumer organisations as activities, which despite limited resources, achieved highly positive results. These include improved coordination, mutual learning and exchange of best practices in different areas of EU consumer policy.

The evaluation showed that improving the capacity of institutions and beneficiaries contributed to enhancing the efficiency of activities under the Programme. When this was not the case, stakeholders repeatedly cited the limited availability of human and financial resources of some national authorities and consumer organisations as the key limiting factor to efficiency of many programme actions.

Simplification measures have been taken for rules and procedures. These include the use of electronic tools for the submission and evaluation of proposals, the management of grants, e-monitoring and e-reporting. While this development is resource intensive in the beginning for the design and testing of tools, the level of satisfaction from applicants and grant beneficiaries justifies these efforts, and financial gains are expected in the next years. Nevertheless, stakeholders interviewed saw a further potential for simplification regarding application procedures (59%), reporting requirements (54%) and programme management (47%). The feedback from stakeholders also stressed the need for strong coordination between the Commission services and the executive agency CHAFEA.

4.3. Relevance

The four objectives and priorities of the Consumer Programme 2014-2020 are still relevant and meet the needs of consumers and of the stakeholders concerned (consumer organisations, member states authorities, business organisations etc.). The four specific objectives and the eleven specific actions help to better focus the Programme's actions and avoid overlaps and potential duplications among the different objectives. At the same time, these specific actions have the flexibility to allow for synergies that in some cases are clearly required. For example,

the E-enforcement Academy covered both, the enforcement officials and officials responsible for product safety.

The programme is indeed flexible enough to take into account evolving market issues and new needs of beneficiaries.

4.4. Coherence

The different actions within the Consumer Programme 2014-2020 are coherent and work together. Overlaps and inconsistencies between the programmes activities are minimised by design, using a hierarchical (or 'tree') structure with four specific objectives, which are linked to eleven specific actions, under which approximately 30 main activities are funded. No overlaps or inconsistencies were identified in the framework of the analysis of the implemented actions/activities by the evaluation. The feedback from stakeholders corroborated this.

The 2014-2020 Consumer Programme was considered by interviewees to be largely coherent with EU consumer policy in general as set out in the European Consumer Agenda, as well as with other EU programmes and other EU consumer-relevant policies, such as the Digital Single Market strategy, the Energy Union or the Circular Economy Action Plan.

4.5. EU added value, complementarity and sustainability

The EU added value of the Consumer Programme 2014–2040 is overall high. 93% of interviewed national stakeholders attributed to the Consumer programme a key role in achieving consumer policy and protection results, and affirmed that it had a moderate or great impact on the development of national consumer-related policies.

Stopping or withdrawing such an EU intervention would mean that opportunities to demonstrate the relevance of the single market and generally of the EU to ordinary citizens will be missed. Lacking this EU intervention, at national level, governments would either need to put more resources into domestic efforts, or end up not updating and enforcing rules for lack of resources, or updating and enforcing them in different ways to the detriment of legal certainty and harmonisation in the Single Market. Discontinuation of EU level support would risk resulting in continued wide discrepancies in consumer representation, education and information and to negative perceptions of the EU.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

The Consumer Programme is playing a crucial role in underpinning the EU's Consumer Policy and delivering on concrete actions that are to the benefits of European consumers and concerned stakeholders.

This report on the mid-term evaluation of the 2014-2020 Consumer Programme confirms its importance in helping to ensure a high and consistent level of consumer protection across the European Union and to empower consumers as key actors of the Single Market.

With consumer issues becoming increasingly cross-border or even of EU-wide nature, the Programme is also showing its added value through financing actions that ensure a coherent and consistent protection of all European consumers.

As changes affecting our economy intensify, notably in the face of a growing digitalisation of the market place, the next EU programme in the field of consumer policy will have to become increasingly more agile and able to respond to rapid changes. These findings have been taken

into consideration in the framework of the preparation of the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) and the future EU funding programmes.