



## Shaping best practice

The South Yorkshire Objective 1 region, in collaboration with the European Commission and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, is organising a seminar on 'Shaping best practice' in Sheffield, United Kingdom, on 9 and 10 October 2003. The aim of the seminar is to promote the exchange of experience and the dissemination of best practice between authorities involved in the implementation of Objective 1 and Objective 2 Structural Funds programmes in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Topics to be covered include: support to SMEs, the information society, research and technological development, and innovation-transfer to SMEs. Further details are available at:

[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/sources/docconf/sheffield2003/index\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/sources/docconf/sheffield2003/index_en.htm)

## Lessons in promoting regional innovation

After almost 20 months of activity, the Innovating Regions in Europe (IRE) thematic networks are preparing a series of open conferences to present the main findings of their work. The conferences will provide a good opportunity to learn about good practices developed in Europe to promote regional innovation. The first six thematic conferences, which begin in September 2003, will cover: innovative clusters, the promotion of women's entrepreneurship, securing dynamic rural development in the Baltic Sea, business innovation and growth from exploitation of academic research, the development of the food industry in Europe, and entrepreneurship building and business incubation. Further information is available at:

<http://www.innovating-regions.org/network/levents/futureEvents.cfm>

## Structural Funds help bridge the digital divide

**On 25 July the European Commission adopted guidelines on the conditions and procedures governing the implementation of the Structural Funds in the electronic communications sector.**

Within the framework of the regional development programmes co-financed by the Structural Funds in the period 2000–06, approximately EUR 10 billion has been allocated to interventions aimed at supporting the development of telecommunications applications and services.

In March 2003 the European Council in Corfu endorsed a Commission proposal to publish guidelines on 'criteria and modalities of implementation of Structural Funds in support of the electronic communications sector, especially for broadband, in particular in rural and remote areas of geographic isolation and low population density'. The Commission presented a first draft of these guidelines in June and requested the public to comment on these by 5 July. Some 45 contributions from regional and national authorities, operators and industry were received.

Launching the final guidelines on 25 July, Michel Barnier, Commissioner for regional policy, said it was clear that the most remote and least populated regions would not be able to secure the high levels of investment they need to access modern communication networks from the market alone. He said that the Community could support these regions by redirecting aid from the Structural Funds under the

mid-term review, but he cautioned that such support must stay within the rules on competition and competitive tendering.

The primary objective of the guidelines is therefore to give greater legal certainty to economic operators, particularly in the regions, when drawing up and implementing investment projects in the electronic communications sector (mobile telephony, high-speed Internet access, etc.). The draft guidelines lay down general criteria and operating procedures to help the regions evaluate and select investment projects. They are specifically designed to:

- encourage regional and local authorities to commit to projects that are part of an overall regional development strategy;
- ensure that the specific features of each region are taken into account in deciding where to target action;
- be neutral in the choice of which technology to part-finance;
- ensure that efforts to promote access to electronic networks are open and do not risk distorting competition.

Further information is available at:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/consultation/telecom\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/consultation/telecom_en.htm)

## Accession countries must act urgently

**As negotiations on Structural Funds programmes begin with a further three acceding countries, a new Commission report highlights a number of issues which must be urgently addressed if the new Member States are to benefit fully from the funds by the beginning of 2004, as envisaged in the Accession Treaty.**

Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia began negotiations with the Commission on future Structural Funds programmes in July. Poland and the Czech Republic had already commenced negotiations in June. Hungary will receive more than EUR 3 billion in Structural and Cohesion funding in the period between 2004 and 2006, while Slovakia and Slovenia will receive EUR 1.7 billion and EUR 457 million respectively.

While the Accession Treaty envisaged that the new Member States could benefit from expenditure eligibility from 1 January 2004, this is only the case if all the necessary legislation has been aligned and fully transposed by 31 December 2003. But a recent Commission communication, assessing the progress made by the 10 countries

joining the EU in May 2004 in preparing to manage the Structural and Cohesion Funds, highlights 10 areas that still require urgent action.

These 10 areas include: public procurement, institutional arrangements and inter-ministerial coordination, financial management and control, accounting systems, recruitment of additional staff, programme negotiations, project preparation, partnership, monitoring, and national co-financing. Unless urgent action is taken to address these issues, the Commission has warned that there will be delays in the approval of Community funding. Further information is available at:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/sources/docoffic/official/communic/comm\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/communic/comm_en.htm)

## Solidarity funding of EUR 56.2 million for Italy and Spain

**The European Commission has sought the agreement of the Council and the Parliament to mobilise up to EUR 8.6 million for Spain and EUR 47.6 million for Italy from the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF).**

The grant for Spain is to be used primarily to reimburse the costs of emergency clean-up measures following the sinking of the *Prestige*. The oil spill from the *Prestige* continues to affect the coastal areas of the four northern autonomous regions of Spain (Galacia, Asturias, Cantabria and the Basque Country). The Spanish authorities expect that over 885 000 people will be affected by the disaster, with economic losses in both the fishing and tourism sectors estimated at over EUR 1.2 billion for the next two years.

In Italy, EUR 30.8 million is to be used to reimburse the costs of emergency measures following a series of earthquakes in the regions of Molise and Apulia. Some 243 000 inhabitants in 79 municipalities were directly affected by the earthquakes, and the damage to property and infra-

structure, which caused major disruption to the regions concerned, is estimated at EUR 1 558 million.

An additional EUR 16.8 million is to be used to reimburse the cost of emergency measures following the eruption of Mount Etna. Around 86 % of the one million population of the Province of Catania were directly affected by the disaster. Severe damage caused by subsequent earthquake tremors and lava affected 160 000 people and left over 3 000 homes and a number of public buildings unsafe. The cost of the damage is estimated at EUR 849 million.

Payments from the EUSF will flow immediately after approval by the Council and the European Parliament and following the signature of the Italian Government and the European Commission.



**European Commission**  
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