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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

**SMEs Going Digital - A Blueprint for ICT Innovation Vouchers**

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## SUMMARY

The digital revolution has not yet delivered its full potential for innovation and growth for microenterprises and SMEs. Promoting ICT (information and communication technologies) uptake as an innovative business solution for SMEs is a key factor for success: software and intangibles combined with adequate investments in hardware and high-speed connectivity are essential to improve the business of microenterprises and SMEs.

The objectives of implementing ICT innovation vouchers in EU regions are: to improve the competitiveness of microenterprises and SMEs by developing new products, processes and businesses; and to stimulate demand for a large range of innovative ICT-related services – notably e-commerce including cross-border online sales – and thus contribute to reaching the *Digital Agenda for Europe's* priorities.

The analysis of existing (but not necessarily ICT-related) voucher schemes across the EU confirms that the voucher as a delivery mechanism is particularly efficient for reaching out to micro-enterprises and SMEs in a non-bureaucratic manner. However, it should be noted that there is no "one-size-fit-all". Each ICT innovation voucher scheme should be tailor-made according to relevant specific factors such as the ICT potential and intensity of each region, its integration with other innovation management measures, the capacity to manage the scheme, previous experience in supporting such measures or the need for improvement in ICT-uptake of SMEs.

Each scheme will be developed and implemented by regional and local authorities. The schemes can be funded either by national means or through the EU Structural and Investment (ESI) funds (mainly ERDF<sup>1</sup> but also ESF and EAFRD). If EU-funds are used to support such schemes, all relevant European and national provisions apply regardless whether they are explicitly mentioned in this paper or not. These relate, for example, to procurement and State aid law, management and control systems, monitoring, co-financing, pre-financing and audit rules.

This blueprint for the creation of schemes by regions has been set up in close consultation between all relevant Commission' services, and after consultation with experts. It explains the benefits stemming from the implementation of ICT innovation vouchers schemes. It also addresses the main choices that regions need to make in order to successfully implement such a scheme. The statements in this paper should be regarded as guidelines by the Commission services on how to set up an ICT innovation vouchers scheme successfully; the set-up should be consistent with national and regional development needs, as well as with the institutional and legal arrangements of Member States.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/thefunds/index\\_en.cfm](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/thefunds/index_en.cfm)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of existing innovation voucher schemes shows that vouchers are a useful instrument in the framework of regional strategies for innovation and growth of SMEs. This document presents the rationale for boosting ICT uptake for SMEs and the basic steps to design an ICT innovation vouchers scheme that a region could include in its smart specialisation strategy for the next programming period of the ERDF. The Commission services will offer support to facilitate the uptake of ICT innovation vouchers schemes by developing guidelines, presenting examples and best practices and offering training to interested regions and Member States.

## 2. MICROENTERPRISES AND SMEs GOING DIGITAL: CONTEXT

ICT uptake and use is one of the most important drivers that enable start-ups and SMEs to achieve high growth and create jobs. Several studies provide supporting evidence, in particular for SMEs that establish an active presence on the web.

Based on research across the G-20 countries, web-connected SMEs tend to have 22% higher revenue growth compared to SMEs with low or no use of the web over the last three years<sup>2</sup>.

Digitally engaged SMEs also create more jobs. In Germany, for instance, 93% of SMEs with an active web presence increased employment over the past three years, compared with only 50% of those who were not active in terms of web presence. A similar pattern can be identified in other countries around the world<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, ICT enables SMEs to increase competitiveness and reach global markets. For example, 81% of the smaller commercial firms selling on the eBay platform export to at least five foreign countries<sup>4</sup>. This would be impossible for an offline SME. The importance of using new ICT to enhance business or “soft” processes for increasing productivity is well recognised in the growth of companies.

However, European companies are making, on average, slow progress in adopting ICT<sup>5</sup>.

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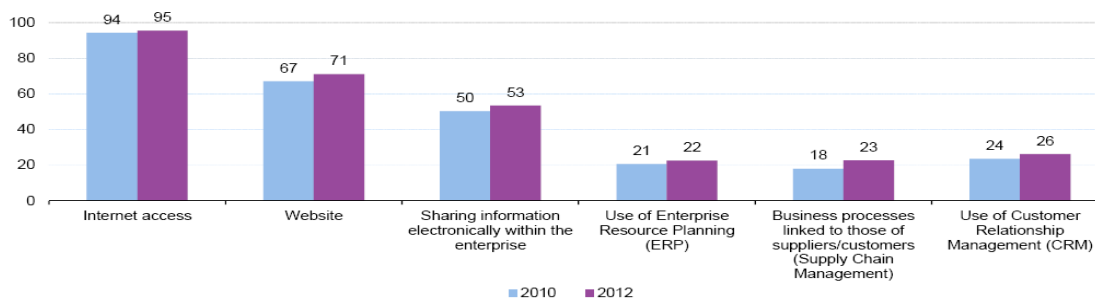
<sup>2</sup> Boston Consulting Group, “The \$4.2 Trillion Opportunity - the Internet Economy in the G-20”, The Connected World, March 2012, page 14

<sup>3</sup> BCG (2012), page 14

<sup>4</sup> eBay (2012). “Towards Commerce 3.0”, eBay EU Liaison Office, March 2012, page 9

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat, Statistics in focus, Enterprises making slow progress in adopting ICT for e-business, ICT usage in enterprises 2012 (6/2013), page 1

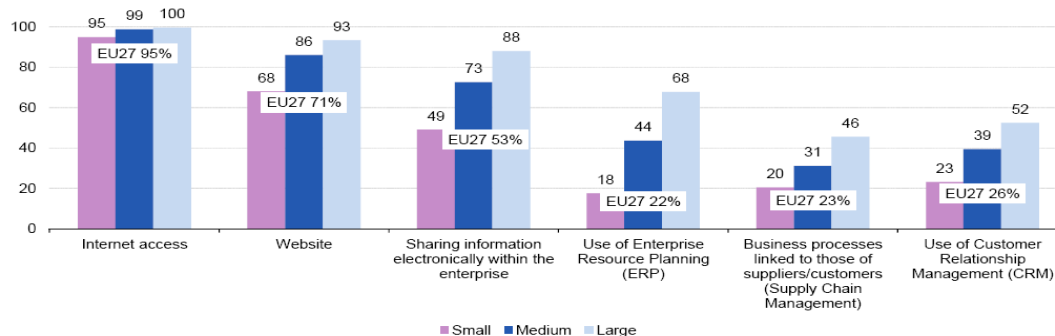
**Figure 1: Adoption of e-business technologies in enterprises, EU27, 2010 and 2012 (% of enterprises)**



Source: Eurostat (online data codes: [isoc\\_ci\\_in\\_en2](#), [isoc\\_ci\\_it\\_en2](#), [isoc\\_bde15dip](#))

The gap between SMEs and large enterprises is bigger when it comes to using more advanced ICT applications. Whereas broadband connectivity and having a website are becoming standard, e-commerce and adoption of more sophisticated ICT tools for internal processes are less frequently used in SMEs<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 2):

**Figure 2: Enterprises adopting technologies for e-business, by size class, EU27, 2012 (% of enterprises)**



Source: Eurostat (online data codes: [isoc\\_ci\\_in\\_en2](#), [isoc\\_ci\\_it\\_en2](#), [isoc\\_bde15dip](#))

These differences weigh on the growth results of SMEs. But these numbers also indicate a huge potential to improve the competitiveness of microenterprises and SMEs that are not fully exploiting ICT.

Five ‘value levers’<sup>7</sup> illustrate why ICT and the internet represent a huge potential for more efficient business processes and thus for more competitive SMEs:

- Geographic expansion
- Enhanced marketing
- Improved customer interactions
- Leveraging of cloud computing
- Easier and quicker recruitment of staff

Indeed, in the coming years in Europe an acceleration of investments is expected for three main technologies: mobility, cloud-based services and unified communications<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Eurostat, (6/2013), page 2

<sup>7</sup> Boston Consulting Group (2012), page 15

Many SMEs, unfortunately, do not have sufficient knowledge or resources in order to introduce ICT-related activities in their business models.

Depending on the scale of a vouchers scheme as part of a broader strategy for innovation and sustainable growth, such a scheme could contribute to systemic change in a regional economy.

Action is definitely needed: The latest report on cohesion policy programme implementation shows *"that broadband investment along with services and applications provided to SMEs including e-commerce are experiencing particularly severe delays"*<sup>9</sup>. While large variations can be observed between projects and regions, overall there is a clear potential for a new instrument to address this ICT gap.

### **3. BASIC ELEMENTS OF A SCHEME**

An ICT innovation vouchers scheme is a tool that regional authorities can choose from a larger range of innovation services for microenterprises and SMEs. It can provide leverage for competitiveness and growth of enterprises. It is also a way to improve cross-sector economic interactions and innovative solutions for SMEs in order to modernise and make the local and regional economy competitive.

#### **3.1. What is an ICT innovation voucher and for which purpose?**

##### *Definition of an innovation voucher*

A widely accepted definition of "innovation vouchers" is given by the OECD<sup>10</sup>: *"small lines of credit provided by governments to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to purchase services from public knowledge providers with a view to introducing innovations (new products, processes or services) in their business operations"*. Vouchers facilitate the access of SMEs to know-how and technology and give incentives to knowledge/service providers (universities, research centres, private companies, etc.) to collaborate with SMEs.

Furthermore, according to the OECD *"the main purpose of an innovation voucher is to build new relationships between SMEs and public research institutions which will: i) stimulate knowledge transfer directly; ii) act as a catalyst for the formation of longer-term more in-depth relationships"*<sup>11</sup>.

##### *Why ICT-specific vouchers?*

Vouchers for ICT innovation offer an efficient solution to boost ICT uptake by microenterprises and SMEs across Europe.

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<sup>8</sup> ["Building Competitiveness and Business Performance with ICT"](#), INSEAD eLab ICT Report, White paper in collaboration with AT&T (February 2013), page 5

<sup>9</sup> Factsheet: ICT infrastructure and services. Strategic Report 2013 on cohesion policy programme implementation, March 2013

<sup>10</sup> OECD Innovation Policy Platform, "Innovation Vouchers", February 2010, page 1

<sup>11</sup> OECD Innovation Policy Platform, "Innovation Vouchers", February 2010, page 1

Innovation vouchers are not only important in terms of technology transfer and innovation but they also serve as a starting point for increasing collaboration between SMEs and knowledge/service providers. In times of economic crisis and of limited resources in microenterprises and SMEs, an ICT innovation vouchers scheme facilitates access to specialist services that can otherwise be difficult to tap for SMEs. Such a scheme nevertheless requires a careful analysis of a region's needs. The objective of an ICT-specific voucher is to offer ICT knowledge and expertise for analysing and offering the appropriate ICT business solutions to SMEs. The ICT services accessible through an ICT innovation voucher range from e-commerce and e-skills to new ICT-based business models and solutions.

### **3.2. Who benefits from an ICT innovation vouchers scheme?**

#### *Microenterprises and SMEs*

Microenterprises and SMEs are the primary beneficiaries of such schemes. They should already be established companies located in territories targeted by an ICT voucher scheme.

At the same time, there will be added value for:

#### *Regions and Member States*

Dynamic digital development, increase of competitiveness and innovation-driven economic growth are the main benefits a region or a Member State can expect from the implementation of an ICT innovation vouchers scheme.

#### *ICT knowledge/service providers*

ICT service providers play a crucial role by offering their services to microenterprises and SMEs. They should be enterprises or public bodies registered in the European Union able to deliver the required services. In general, they are selected by the local authorities to be allowed to participate in the scheme (following an accreditation/certification process). Enterprises can freely choose their service providers and thereby ensure sufficient competitive price pressure. This ensures that the best expertise is being sought anywhere in the region or beyond.

### **3.3. How to set up an ICT innovation vouchers scheme in a region?**

Policy makers should start a process of analysing their particular situation, developing a vision, identifying competitive advantage, setting strategic priorities and making use of smart policies to maximise the knowledge-based development potential of any region, be it strong or weak, high-tech or low-tech. In this framework ICT innovation vouchers can be developed.

For the managing authority of a Member State or a region wishing to set up an ICT innovation vouchers scheme, the implementing process would then be the following:

#### *Step 1: Define in the operational programme an ICT innovation vouchers scheme*

The strategy of smart specialisation<sup>12</sup> foresees that each region analyses its ICT needs and opportunities for its regional development and growth as well as for research and innovation

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<sup>12</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/research/regions/index\\_en.cfm?pg=smart\\_specialisation&lg=en](http://ec.europa.eu/research/regions/index_en.cfm?pg=smart_specialisation&lg=en)

(the so-called "digital growth"). An ICT innovation vouchers scheme is one of the types of actions to be supported and foreseen in the related Operational Programme. The operational programme shall set out clear intervention logic behind the use of vouchers, similar to other types of actions foreseen.

The decision to use vouchers should be taken as part of a broader strategy to support ICT uptake and innovation in a regional economy. The impact of such a scheme will need to be assessed. An ICT innovation vouchers scheme should only be considered if it targets innovative solutions and does not subsidize trivial or non-sustainable activities. It has to fit real ICT needs and potentials of local entrepreneurs.

Experience shows that the introduction of a voucher scheme makes more sense if it is combined with other existing or new policies or instruments supporting ICT and/or entrepreneurship and/or innovation: for instance entrepreneurship mentoring, coaching, networking, etc. Ways should be sought to integrate both aspects in a scheme.

### *Step 2: Identify an implementing body for the ICT innovation vouchers scheme*

The identification of the body that will implement a vouchers scheme is crucial. This task is often taken on by the local/regional business development or innovation agency. Its network and capacity is essential to translate and match demand for ICT solutions from SMEs with innovative solutions offered by ICT providers. The implementation body must be independent from the market service providers (see section 4 below). In the context of the ESI funds, this can be the managing authority of the respective programme or an intermediate body designated<sup>13</sup> by the Member State to whom implementation tasks of the managing authority are delegated.

The implementing body will focus on matching each demand with a relevant service offer delivering added value in terms of determining the needs on the demand side. It will also check customer satisfaction and quality of the service delivered.

Commitment of the relevant regional authorities through promotional support activities also helps greatly in publicising the scheme and boosting local ownership. According to the available amount of funding, the promotional strategy to make a vouchers scheme known usually includes PR campaigns, use of existing networks and institutions (e.g. chambers of commerce), websites and social networks, email campaigns and awareness raising events.

### *Step 3: Tailor the ICT voucher scheme to the regional implementation*

According to the capacities of the implementing body and the economic reality of the region, as well as the potential impact expected by the regional policy makers, the implementing body will develop and implement the process to obtain and redeem ICT vouchers. The implementing body will also foresee a monitoring mechanism in order to measure the performance of the scheme in the short, middle and longer terms. Further details and

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<sup>13</sup> The ERDF allocation intermediate bodies in charge of a voucher scheme should be designated in compliance with the rules of Art. 113(6 -7). Management and monitoring issues should be in line with Art. 114 of the Common Provision Regulations (CPR). Certification issues should be in line with Art. 115 of the CPR



guidelines on how an ICT innovation vouchers scheme could work are described below. Different perspectives are presented in order for the regions to decide how they would like to further adapt a scheme to their reality or simply refine certain conditions in order to focus on a specific desired impact. The key goal – beyond any tailor-made solutions – is to keep the scheme "*fast and light*" for the applicants.

### **3.4. Receiving and using vouchers**

For a microenterprise or an SME, the process will be the following:

#### *Step 1: Request for the voucher*

To benefit from an innovation voucher scheme, an SME will submit an application (indicative maximum of three pages) demonstrating how using ICT services will contribute to innovation of its business – e.g. introducing ICT in its business model, sales process or goods/services production – possibly after having received some coaching from specialised business support providers engaged by the regional authority in order to help them concretise its project.

The application form will be simple and short to keep the scheme attractive by being “fast and light”. It is strongly recommended to streamline application procedures to a minimum while respecting EU rules. An innovation vouchers scheme would normally be open for application at any time.

The timeframe for approval/rejection of applications and for official notification should be short, and preferably not exceed 5-10 working days.

#### *Step 2: Allocation of the voucher*

The application is subsequently examined by the implementing body to ensure its potential contribution to the competitiveness of the enterprise.

After approval of the application, the enterprise receives a voucher from the implementing body. The value of the voucher may vary according to the cost of the submitted project but does not usually exceed a pre-defined amount of at most EUR 10.000. It should be limited to *service* provision, i.e. hardware/equipment should be excluded from its scope.

#### *Step 3: Use and redemption of the voucher*

The SME buys the ICT services eligible for funding, usually from an accredited ICT knowledge/service provider, in exchange of the voucher.

The SME should be able to choose from an open list of ICT service providers. The choice will be visible to the implementing body which needs to accredit the provider in case it is a new one for the given scheme.

Depending on the local implementation rules of the scheme, either the SME or the ICT service provider will then be reimbursed by the implementing body.

## **4. FURTHER DETAILS ABOUT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ICT INNOVATION VOUCHERS SCHEME**

### **4.1 FUNDING AND VOUCHER REDEMPTION**

There are several funding options for voucher schemes and no "one-size-fits-all" solution. Three main choices need to be made:

- (1) *Rate of funding for the voucher:* For simplicity, the voucher could cover the full cost of the beneficiary's project as long as they are eligible under Member States provisions. This option is particularly attractive for micro-enterprises and for lower value vouchers. However, a co-funding contribution from the beneficiary can help prevent cases of abuse and lead to the participation of beneficiaries who have real incentives and strong commitment to ICT adoption for concrete projects. In the case that the scheme is supported by ESI Funds, the co-financing rules of the specific operational programme apply.
- (2) *Sources of funding for the scheme:* Support to the regional authority for implementing the scheme could come from national sources or from ESI funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Agriculture Regional Development Fund (EARDF) or the European Social Fund (ESF) which all have thematic objectives and investment priorities in the ICT and SME fields. In that case, all rules applicable to the respective operational programme apply to the vouchers scheme. Particular attention should be given to compliance with procurement and State aid rules (e.g. de minimis<sup>14</sup>).
- (3) *Vouchers' redemption:* Two alternatives must be considered by the implementing body:
  - SMEs/micro enterprises first pay the knowledge/service provider and then get the value of the voucher reimbursed by the implementing body. In this case SMEs should be able to fund the foreseen activities ex ante. The ERDF rules will have to be respected particularly regarding audit requirements.
  - SMEs/micro enterprises transfer the voucher to the knowledge/service provider when the services are delivered satisfactorily. The provider will then directly seek reimbursement from the implementing body.

### **4.2 IMPLEMENTING BODY AT REGIONAL/LOCAL LEVEL**

A judicious choice of the implementing body for an ICT innovation vouchers scheme is important. The region must ensure that this body has the capacity and experience in managing such schemes, e.g. including access to business mentoring. On a case-by-case basis, regional authorities may decide to manage the scheme directly or to outsource its implementation to regional/local intermediaries with sufficient capacity and knowledge services such as regional

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<sup>14</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1998/2006:

[http://ec.europa.eu/competition/consultations/2013\\_de\\_minimis/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/competition/consultations/2013_de_minimis/index_en.html)

development agencies, innovation agencies, chambers of commerce, universities, cluster organisations and other SME intermediaries/multipliers (i.e. EEN<sup>15</sup>).

The implementing body undertakes the necessary publicity and provision of information about the scheme. It handles assessment of applications and the selection process of suitable ICT knowledge/service providers matching demand with service offers.

Connecting the applicants to the relevant knowledge/service providers is an important step of the admission process that the implementing bodies should take care of. Matching the selected applications to the pre-defined range of services requires match-making of both applicants and providers which could be performed using e.g. e-platforms or coaching. Various options have been tested so far on how to connect the participating businesses to the knowledge/service providers in order to achieve successful and high-impact projects. Experience has shown that pre-defined ranges of services, match-making e-platforms or events have a greater likelihood of delivering better policy outcomes (see examples in Appendix I). On the contrary, free and unlimited choice of providers/projects and subsequent mere administrative approval of projects can jeopardise policy targets and reduce the overall impact of vouchers.

The implementing body is also responsible for the financial management of the scheme according to the requirements of the managing authority in compliance with the appropriate rules of reporting imposed for the use of ESI funds, particularly concerning state aid tracking and audit.

#### **4.3 ELIGIBILITY & ADMISSION CRITERIA FOR SMES/APPLICANTS**

Eligibility rules are determined by national and regional authorities but generally applicants will be micro, small and medium-sized enterprises<sup>16</sup> located in the region where the voucher scheme is launched.

Typically, the voucher scheme would target SMEs and microenterprises after their first stage of development, in the growth phase of their business life-cycle, in order to achieve maximum impact. However, the use of vouchers as a complementary instrument to help start-ups building ICT competences and activities from the beginning is also a possibility.

Admission criteria assessed by the implementing body should include how the idea presented in the application will help the enterprise to improve their competitiveness by developing new services, products or processes.

The managing authority may want to put restrictions on the number of vouchers that can be attributed per year per microenterprise/SME.

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<sup>15</sup> Enterprise Europe Network <http://een.ec.europa.eu/>

<sup>16</sup> As defined in the EU recommendation 2003/361 [http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index_en.htm)

#### 4.4 IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL ICT KNOWLEDGE/SERVICE PROVIDERS

In order to identify the right type of services for enterprises, the implementing body in the region could pre-evaluate the needs of the microenterprises and SMEs on its territory according to their ICT intensity. Without obligation, a simple typology of the use of ICT by businesses can be a useful analysis tool for regions to determine the intensity of the programme, the range of amounts of vouchers, etc.:

- "No web"<sup>17</sup>/low web – very small SMEs/micro enterprises with no presence on the web and/or with low ICT knowledge.
- "Medium web" – SMEs that are already on the web and/or have some limited use of ICT.
- "High web" – SMEs in need to introduce specialised ICT innovation to fully exploit their digital potential in their production/sales processes.

There are three main alternative methods for selecting service providers in existing voucher schemes across Europe:

- (1) *The implementing body issues a call for expression of interest by potential providers*<sup>18</sup> to create an accredited list of voluntary providers that have proven their capacity to deliver ICT services. The SMEs can then choose, or can be matched to the most suitable service provider for its application. The final list is closed and binding. No other provider can be chosen. In this case, the array of services offered is given.<sup>19</sup>
- (2) *A given list to which further providers may subsequently be added*, if selected for a specific project. This non-binding list not only provides SMEs with a solid reference list but also leaves them free to propose to the implementing body any other ICT provider they deem fit for serving their specific need. The implementing body will check whether it fulfils the criteria.
- (3) *The choice of knowledge/service providers is free for the SMEs*. This alternative presents a risk for an implementing body that cannot check the provider's capacity to deliver the services. The danger is that the scheme may not have the desired impact.

Knowledge/service providers are ICT-related companies/public bodies established in any Member State of the European Union. Regions and Member States can seek participation of providers from outside regional and national borders as it is in the region's and Member State's interest to widen the scope of services offered for the best price/quality ratio and the best offer available in the European market. It also helps small firms to widen their customer basis or expand their cross-border activities.

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<sup>17</sup> Boston Consulting Group (2012), page 14

<sup>18</sup> In the choice of eligible knowledge/service providers, the region needs to ensure a diversity of services offered in order to match the request of all kinds of beneficiaries from micro-enterprises to SMEs.

<sup>19</sup> For an example in the creative sector, see <http://www.howtogrow.eu/ecia/>.

High quality of the supplied services and of knowledge/service providers is essential. Quality control regarding the knowledge/service providers and the supplied services, for instance through simple reporting from the beneficiaries, is needed. Repeated negative evaluations of the service quality should lead to a provider's removal from the list.

#### **4.5 ICT KNOWLEDGE AND SERVICES FOR SMEs**

Appropriate ICT services are identified and defined in coherence with the ICT intensity of each enterprise, in order to avoid funding "business as usual" activities (i.e. basic digital skills should be eligible only for no/low Web SMEs); or to propose a too advanced solution to a company that will not be able to benefit from it in a sustainable manner.

An independent business coaching to make a diagnostic and advise the SMEs on the strategic solution to their problems can be a key asset for the success and sustainable impact of a voucher scheme. Successful voucher schemes have included a significant degree of brokerage between SMEs and potential service providers. This aspect should be taken into account when choosing the regional implementing body. The brokerage service should be free of charge for the SMEs and be planned and programmed when seeking approval of the scheme through the ESI funds. Regions may set up specific organisations or use existing structures such as innovation agencies, cluster organisations or SME intermediaries to act as brokers.

A non-exhaustive list of services to fulfil the different types of ICT needs for enterprises to develop their business with new services, products or processes could include:

- (1) Digital auditing: to help SMEs assess their ICT needs and identify their gaps through tailored digital auditing.
- (2) ICT design and development: website design, development of simple mobile and tablet applications, development and/or integration of business software applications and systems, multilingual ICT applications, customized e-marketing, etc.
- (3) Implementation of e-commerce solutions, platforms and facilities.
- (4) Customized e-business solutions services: applications for enterprise resource planning, human resources, finances, customer relationship management, supply chain management, invoicing and delivery systems and new business models development.
- (5) Evaluation of processes or product design, solution architecture, product testing, validating, prototyping, certifying, use of ICT analytic tools or automatic error reporting systems, demonstration to facilitate faster product and/or service to market.
- (6) ICT training for digital entrepreneurship to be embedded in a coherent manner in combination with the services provided. The e-skills to be acquired might cover topics as e-leadership, e-commerce, mobile and social media and other ICT skills relevant to the development and implementation of new innovative business models.

To achieve the policy goals of ICT uptake with real and sustainable impact locally and the applicants' goals with freedom of choice for the best possible ICT solution, a combination of ICT solutions and e-skills can be set up.

A key aspect of a voucher scheme is that the business need from the microenterprise or SME drives the nature of the ICT service. According to the complexity of each project, applicants could add activities to this baseline scenario. This approach will ensure that each project implemented via a voucher will have an impact in the business models of applicants, in terms of new revenue generation, being profitable, scalable and sustainable and leading to a real transfer of know-how and expertise.

## **5. PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT & INDICATORS**

As circumstances and priorities can evolve quickly, monitoring the implementation will allow measuring the effectiveness and adjust the voucher scheme.

Firstly, key performance indicators will need to be established. In the case of ESI funds contributing to the scheme, the indicators must be in line with the monitoring and evaluation system of the contributing programme.

Secondly, a combined approach of complementary qualitative (e.g. survey of beneficiary SMEs on the relevance and timeliness of the service provided, sustainability and future prospects, etc.) and quantitative indicators should be built for each voucher scheme assessing, for example:

### *Output indicators:*

- the number of SMEs that took part in the voucher scheme and their profile (e.g. size (turnover/staff), age, low/medium/high-web, sector of activity, location (urban/rural), etc.);
- the resources spent.

### *Result/Impact indicators:*

- satisfaction rate of the applicants;
- number of SMEs who are still exploiting their voucher-based skills one year later;
- cost reduction resulting from orders received via their developed website/IT application (funded by the voucher).

Data on these indicators can be collected by means of surveys addressed to participating SMEs, interviews between SME representatives and the implementing bodies, final reports and/or conferences after project completion. Ex-post counterfactual evaluation could be considered. In order to ensure the response of beneficiaries to such requests, voucher schemes usually connect the collection of monitoring information to the redemption of the voucher – in such cases the process will be as user-friendly and light as possible.

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[http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/regional-sme-policies/documents/no.4\\_service\\_innovation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/regional-sme-policies/documents/no.4_service_innovation_en.pdf)

## **APPENDIX I - REALISED/EXISTING VOUCHERS FOR INNOVATION SCHEMES IN EUROPE**

Vouchers for ICT Innovation have their roots on a number of different Innovation Voucher schemes implemented across Europe. Voucher schemes were originally developed in the Netherlands (in the region of Limburg) in 1997 and conceived mostly as research Vouchers (boosting the collaboration with academic institutions). Innovation Voucher nowadays are spread across Europe (European Commission, 2009) financing innovation in a different number of sectors (from Green Tech to Creative Industries) with different kinds of Service providers. However, the focus of innovation Voucher schemes on ICT uptake is limited.

A number of studies/reports have been published, identifying relevant good practices across the EU.

In 2009, the Commission published a thorough study on national and regional Innovation Voucher schemes in the EU. The study showed that a variety of schemes had been set up, mostly according to national targets and preferences. Differences were most significant in elements like the value of the Voucher (from €3.000 to more than €10.000), on the origin of the knowledge/service providers (national or EU-wide choice) and on the set of eligible services. As far as administrative matters are concerned, application forms varied from 2-7 pages across countries, whereas the processing time for successful projects did not exceed 3 weeks and could be as little as five days.

In 2010, the OECD published a small paper on the idea of Innovation Vouchers and the basic features of such schemes, inspired by relevant experience in the EU and worldwide. It was reported that an Innovation Vouchers project's life-span does not usually exceed 6-12 months.

North West Development Agency (UK): The "INNOPOLIS" partnership launched a pilot scheme for Innovation Vouchers from 2008 to 2010. The total budget of the project reached £4.4 million (2 of which coming from ERDF – INTERREG IVC). The aim was to link the local Knowledge providers (Colleges, universities) with businesses to exchange specialist expertise and increase productivity and competitiveness. Two types of Vouchers were granted: a £3.000 one (100% funded) and a £7.000 one (70% funded).

Creative Credits (Manchester City, UK): This Voucher scheme introduced by NESTA aimed at matching SMEs and creative businesses to support knowledge transfer and innovation. What is peculiar about the scheme is the matching process. NESTA created the "Creative Gallery", a pool of creative businesses offering a range of pre-defined ICT services/knowledge. Successful SMEs (chosen randomly) would find a creative business suitable for their plan, and come up with a concrete project. The project was financed by the £4.000 Voucher and a contribution of £1.000 at least by the SME.

4CNW: This is a Voucher scheme delivered by The Creative State North West to foster development of the Creative Industries and to boost wider innovation ability in the North West Region of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. It seems to be particularly successful in the Sligo area (North West of Ireland). The scheme makes use of Innovation/talent



Vouchers to sponsor collaborations between Creatives and industry in 4 target sectors (Agri-Food, Tourism, Technology and Life Sciences). The main peculiarity of this scheme is an initial cataloguing of creative knowledge/service providers and a subsequent matchmaking with SMEs. Through this matchmaking mechanism the scheme pairs appropriate creative skills with relevant business needs. This approach is similar to the abovementioned Creative Credits one. Vouchers are not financed with regional funds. The amount founded is between €1,000 and €5,000. The programme complementary offers on-going business supports, and an interactive creative directory and mobile app to help Creatives to help them to be found by the broader business environment.

MOBIP: following a proposal made by MOBIP (the Mobile Services Innovation Platform) a Voucher scheme in support of mobile services companies has been launched in Greece. The scheme (called "Digi-mobile") is financed through regional funds and is aimed at promoting the wider use of mobile services by other sectors companies. Applications in this context are in various sectors. The scheme is funded at 75% and eligible companies must have more than 20 employees and be older than one year.

Green Innovation Vouchers: This type of Innovation Vouchers is quite popular around Europe. It is not sector-specific but it focuses on the environmental dimension of the approved project, therefore is beyond the scope of this paper. It could be noted though that these schemes usually require larger and more technical projects and tend to focus on larger SMEs. Currently, there is a nationwide scheme in the UK (run by the Technology Strategy Board). A comprehensive review of Green Innovation Vouchers across Europe was published in 2011 by "Greenovate! Europe" and DG Enterprise and Industry, including examples from France, Germany, Austria and Finland. The Vouchers were awarded to renewable energy projects and they were of a value higher than €50,000.