



Evaluation Study supporting the interim evaluation of the programme on interoperability solutions for European public administrations, businesses and citizens (ISA²)

Synopsis Report of the consultation activities

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Background

The consultation activities aimed to collect stakeholders' views and opinions, thus contributing to the evidence base needed to achieve the two main objectives of the interim evaluation of the ISA² programme:

- **Evaluating the implementation of the programme** by considering seven evaluation criteria:
 - **Relevance** – the alignment between the objectives of the programme and the current needs and problems experienced by stakeholders;
 - **Effectiveness** – the extent to which the programme has achieved its objectives;
 - **Efficiency** – the extent to which the programme's objectives are achieved at a minimum cost;
 - **Coherence** – the alignment between the programme and comparable EU initiatives as well as the overall EU policy framework;
 - **EU added value** - the additional impacts generated by the programme, as opposed to leaving the subject matter in the hands of Member States;
 - **Utility** – the extent to which the programme meets stakeholders' needs; and
 - **Sustainability** – the likelihood that the programme's results will last beyond its completion.
- **Identifying areas of potential improvement** and devising recommendations to improve the functioning of the programme and **bring more value to its stakeholders**.

Types of consultation activities conducted

Before the interim evaluation was launched, one stakeholder provided feedback on the ISA² evaluation roadmap¹, noting that the "initiative is good, well planned, and funded", but also that "it could have benefitted from more advertising".² The input was received in June 2018.

During the evaluation process, a mix of consultation activities was chosen in order to reach out to a variety of stakeholders of the programme. To this end, seven stakeholder groups were identified:

- **Programme governance:** Commission representatives from the Interoperability unit of DIGIT and members of the ISA² Committee and Coordination Group;
- **Action owners:** Commission representatives in charge of specific actions defined under ISA²;
- **Solution users:** Commission and Member States representatives who are using/reusing ISA² solutions;
- **Stakeholders responsible for linked EU policies / initiatives:** Commission representatives who are in charge of EU initiatives linked to ISA², and who are thus in a position to provide feedback, *inter alia*, on the external coherence of the programme;

¹ For further details, please see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/ares-2018-2768206_en

² For further details, please see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/ares-2018-2768206/feedback_en?p_id=239250

- **Experts:** experts in IT and eGovernment able to perform an expert assessment of the programme and of the issues and developments in the field of interoperability;
- **Standardisation organisations:** Representatives of standardisation organisations who can provide feedback on the ISA² activities related to standards and technical specifications; and
- **Indirect beneficiaries and wider public:** Other beneficiaries of the programme or parties who are involved in or affected by the ISA² programme in any way, including the private sector and citizens.

Between 29 November 2018 and 1 March 2019, five consultation activities were conducted:

- **Targeted online surveys** (14.12.2018 – 23.01.2019)

Five online surveys were made available via EUSurvey, targeting the following stakeholder groups: programme governance, action owners, solution users, stakeholders responsible for linked EU policies/initiatives, and standardisation organisations.

The online surveys were initially set to close on 18 January 2019, but the deadline was extended to 23 January in order to accommodate last-minute requests received from stakeholders interested in participating in this consultation activity.

- **Targeted in-depth interviews** (12.12.2018 – 24.01.2019)

Interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the five groups targeted by the online surveys: programme governance, action owners, solution users, stakeholders responsible for linked EU policies/initiatives, and a standardisation expert. The interviews, based on questionnaires very similar to those used for the online surveys, facilitated the collection of additional qualitative data to complement data collected via such surveys.

The in-depth interviews were initially set to conclude on 18 January 2019. However, as some stakeholders were not available in the timeframe originally set, additional interviews were conducted up until 24 January 2019 to accommodate the different schedules of stakeholders.

- **Public consultation** (07.12.2018 – 01.03.2019)³

This activity gave all relevant parties, including primarily citizens, businesses, stakeholders associations and public administrations, the opportunity to express their opinions and views on the achievements of the ISA² programme. Experts were able to participate in the public consultation and report their level of expertise in the programme and in interoperability of digital public services. The public consultation was available in 23 EU languages on EUSurvey.⁴

- **ISA² Mid-Term Conference short questionnaire** (29 – 30.11.2018)

³ For further details, please see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/ares-2018-2768206/public-consultation_en

⁴ The public consultation yielded a relatively low response rate due to two main reasons. First, ISA² is a technical programme producing solutions addressed mainly to European public administrations; therefore, the direct contact between the average citizen/business and the programme is limited. Second, stakeholder groups that are in direct contact with the programme (e.g. solution users, action owners, etc.) were consulted via targeted online surveys and interviews.

A short questionnaire based on the public consultation questionnaire was distributed during the ISA² Mid-Term Conference (29 November 2018)⁵ and during the Kick-off workshop (30 November 2018) of the interim evaluation.

- **Kick-off workshop**

The workshop was held on 30 November 2018 at CEPS and aimed to present the interim evaluation and the planned consultation activities to the different stakeholder groups of the ISA² programme.⁶

The questionnaires used throughout the consultation activities were mainly based on Likert scale questions. Respondents were thus asked to provide their feedback by referring to a scale from (1) to (5) or (1) to (4), depending on the type of question:

- 1 - not at all; 2 - to a limited extent; 3 - to some extent; 4 - to a high extent; 5 - to the fullest extent; or
- 1 – definitely would not; 2 – probably would not; 3 – probably would; 4 – definitely would.

This approach facilitated the comparison of answers between respondents. In addition to the Likert scale questions, a number of open-ended questions were also included in order to gather more in-depth information from consulted stakeholders. Finally, the interviews also allowed collecting more detailed feedback from respondents.

With **a total of 129 respondents**, the consultation activities reached all stakeholders from the following groups: programme governance, action owners, solution users, stakeholders responsible for linked EU policies / initiatives, standardisation organisations and the wider public (Table A2 - 1). The results of the public and targeted consultation activities have been combined and analysed jointly in the final evaluation report.

Table A2 - 1 Number of consulted stakeholders by consultation activity and stakeholder category

Stakeholder category	In-depth interview	Online survey	Public consultation	Short questionnaire	TOTAL
Programme Governance	4	15	-	-	19
Action owners	3	20	-	-	23
Solution users	6	37	-	-	43
Stakeholders related to linked EU policies/ programmes/ initiatives	6	4	-	-	10
Standardisation organisations	1	4	-	-	5
Wider public	-	-	14	15	1
TOTAL	20	80	14	15	129

Note: Four technical experts performed an independent assessment of the programme. In addition, most of the respondents from the consulted stakeholder groups are experts of interoperability and of ISA², as shown in Figure A2 - 1 and Figure A2 - 2.

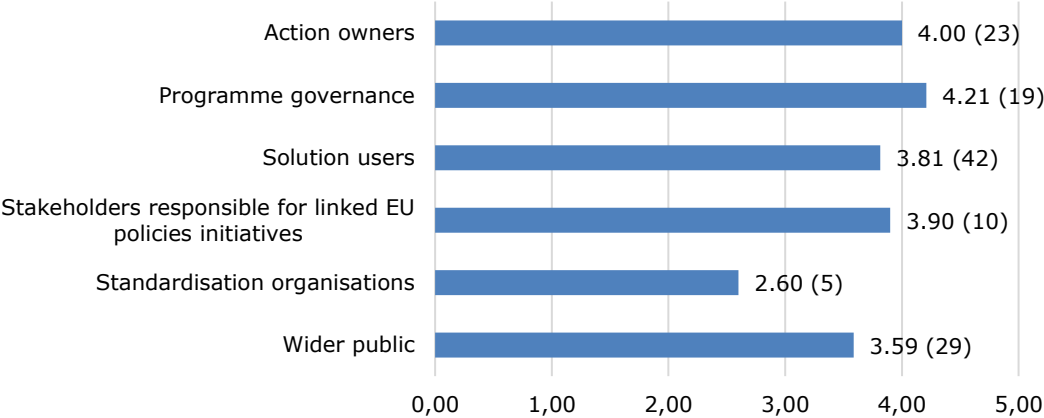
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

⁵ For further details, please see: https://ec.europa.eu/isa2/isa2conf18_en

⁶ For further details, please see: <https://www.ceps.eu/events/interim-evaluation-isa2-programme-final-workshop> and https://ec.europa.eu/isa2/events/isa%C2%B2-interim-evaluation-kick-workshop_en

The consulted stakeholders reported **high levels of expertise** both when it comes to the interoperability of public services (Figure A2 - 1) as well as to the ISA² programme as a whole (Figure A2 - 2). A slight exception appears in the case of solution users, who reported a relatively more limited knowledge of the programme in its entirety in comparison to the other stakeholder groups consulted. Even so, most respondents are familiar with at least five packages out of the total of nine ISA² packages of actions (Figure A2 - 3). In addition, the Evaluation Team included a **team of technical experts** who performed an expert assessment of the programme; their conclusions are presented throughout the final evaluation report.

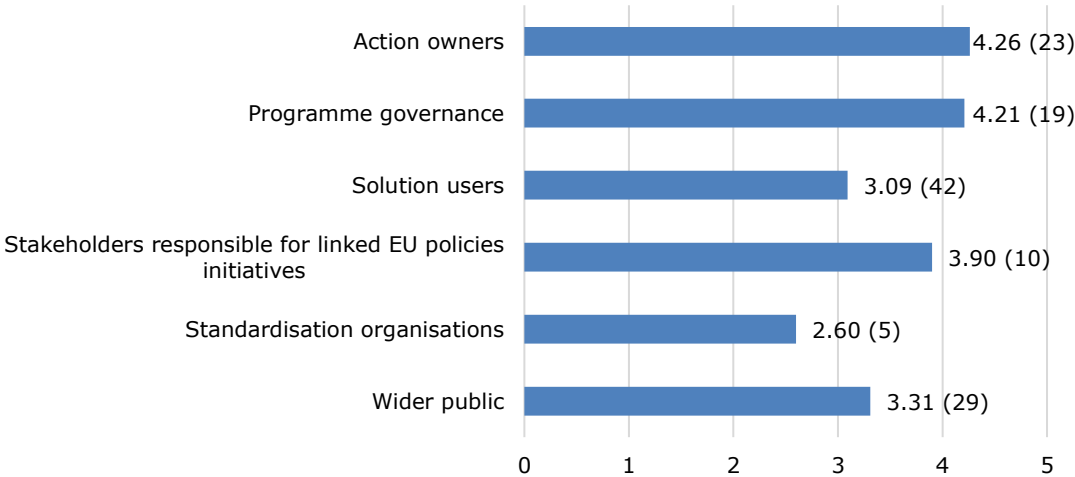
Figure A2 - 1 Knowledge of digital public services and interoperability (average score of answers, number of respondents)



Score: (1) not at all; (2) to a limited extent; (3) to some extent; (4) to a high extent; or (5) to the fullest extent.

Note: Averages do not account for respondents answering "don't know/no opinion" (DK/NO).
 Source: Authors' elaboration on data collected via consultation activities.

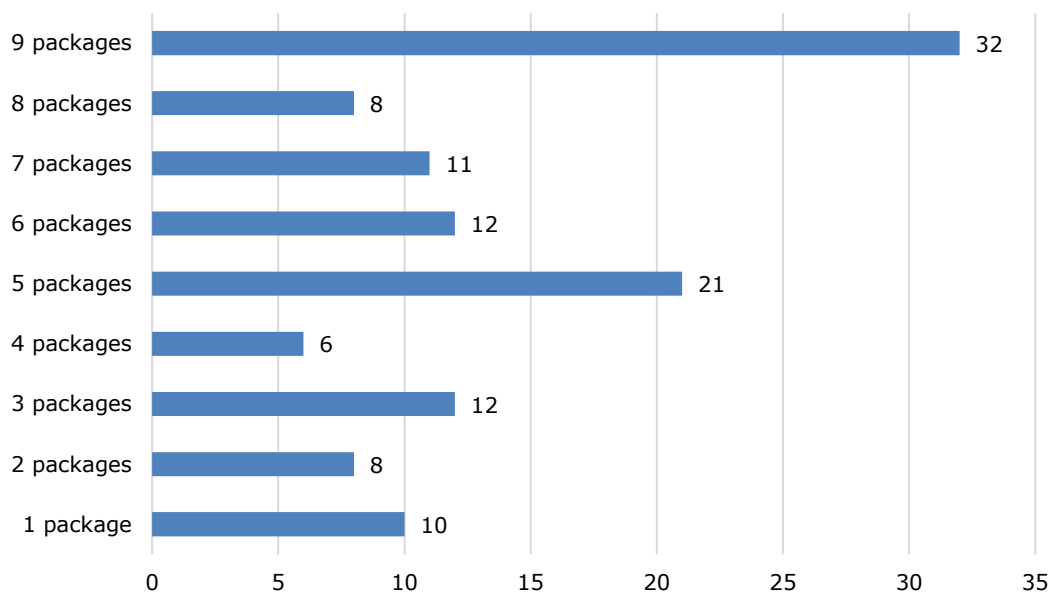
Figure A2 - 2 Knowledge of ISA² (average score of answers, number of respondents)



Score: (1) not at all; (2) to a limited extent; (3) to some extent; (4) to a high extent; or (5) to the fullest extent.

Note: Averages do not account for respondents answering "don't know/no opinion" (DK/NO).
 Source: Authors' elaboration on data collected via consultation activities.

Figure A2 - 3 Knowledge of ISA² action packages (number of respondents familiar with a given number of packages)⁷



Source: Authors' elaboration on data collected via consultation activities.

In terms of geographic distribution, solution users from different Member States provided their input via the in-depth interviews and the online surveys:

- At the EU level, solution users who responded to the consultation activities work in EU institutions located in different EU countries: Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden;
- At the national and regional levels, solution users (including respondents who answered as individuals) who provided their feedback come from the following 13 countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden.

During the public consultation, feedback was received from individuals residing in **six Member States** (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Spain, and the United Kingdom) and from public administrations from **three Member States** (the Czech Republic, Greece, and Spain).

Results

The consultation activities revealed a **general consensus among the different stakeholder groups** consulted and confirmed that **ISA² performs well in all seven evaluation criteria under investigation**. The feedback received during the consultation activities is summarised in what follows.

Relevance

The respondents to the consultation activities emphasised that **ISA² is fully relevant with respect to the evolving needs and problems in the field of interoperability**.

⁷ Stakeholders were considered to be familiar with a package if they indicated that they had knowledge of the package to some extent, to a high extent or to the fullest extent.

The majority of respondents indicate that: i) the **needs and problems originally addressed by the programme** are still experienced by European public administrations, businesses and/or citizens; and ii) by achieving its general objective, ISA² can address the needs and problems identified at the time the programme was established.

Respondents pointed out that there are **other needs and problems currently experienced** by stakeholders in the field:

- The need for a more binding legal framework for interoperability and a more prescriptive approach to designing interoperable public services;
- The need to improve the way administrations communicate with one another;
- The need to share best practices;
- The resource constraints experienced by national and local public administrations;
- The different political priorities among Member States hindering a consistent approach to interoperability in the EU; and
- The limited awareness of ISA² and other initiatives related to interoperability, especially at the regional and local levels.

On average, respondents to the consultation activities believe that the programme, through its general objective, could **address these new needs and problems to some extent**, as some of the issues mentioned fall outside the scope of the programme.

Effectiveness

The results achieved so far by ISA² are aligned with the objectives of the programme according to the consulted stakeholders, in particular when it comes to:

- Developing, maintaining and promoting a holistic approach to interoperability in the Union; and
- Facilitating the reuse of interoperability solutions by European public administrations.

However, the achieved results still do not fully match the expected results, as most of the actions are ongoing and solutions are still being developed. For instance, respondents emphasised that relatively more could be done to achieve the expected result of improved efficiency and productivity of the European public administrations.

External factors could improve but also jeopardise the way in which the programme achieves its objectives and delivers its results. The great majority of respondents confirmed that the **calls for common standards and frameworks from public administrations** are important external factors contributing to the performance of the programme. In contrast, **institutional complexity** in the form of multiple layers of governance and differences between national public administrations from various Member States and local public administrations within Member States could lead to coordination issues hampering cross-border and cross-sectoral interoperability.

Efficiency

Respondents from the programme governance as well as action owners provided feedback regarding the efficiency of the process for selecting actions funded by ISA². The process is considered **relatively efficient** and **fit-for-purpose** by the respondents from the two stakeholder groups. However, there are some measures that could be taken to further streamline the selection process, such as:

- Simplifying the rolling work programme;

- Simplifying the overall process by launching thematic calls for actions.

In addition, respondents from the same groups also outlined the amount of **time they spent on preparing and submitting a proposal** for an action to be considered by the ISA² programme. On average, six person-days are required to renew a proposal for actions already included in previous rolling work programme. In contrast, between 10 and 30 person-days are required to prepare and submit a proposal for a new action.

Coherence

The consultation activities focused on both the **internal coherence** of the programme, i.e. the synergies or overlaps existing between the ISA² actions, and its **external coherence**, namely the synergies or overlaps between ISA² and other EU initiatives, policies, or programmes.

Internal coherence

ISA² actions are characterised by **substantial synergies among each other and limited overlaps**. During the consultation activities, respondents also provided examples of synergies to support their assessment. Examples mentioned include:

- Solutions developed under the "SEMIC" actions are reused by the "Catalogue of Services" and the "Access to Base Registries" actions.
- The "Re3gistry" solution, part of the "ELISE" action, is used to share the codes for the "Core Vocabularies", part of the "SEMIC" action.
- The solutions developed as part of the "e-TrustEx" actions are reused by the action "European Public Procurement Interoperability Initiative".

External coherence

When it comes to external coherence, respondents to the consultation activities identified the highest level of synergies between ISA² and **CEF**. In contrast, among the EU programmes interacting with ISA², the **ESF** tends to be the least synergistic. Respondents indicated that **Horizon 2020** (in particular the work related to the once-only principle) and the SRSP (through the support given to Member States to align and integrate with cross-border services) also have some synergies with ISA².

Respondents also pointed at synergies and overlaps with other EU initiatives such as ERDF, Corporate IT Governance and the Single Digital Gateway.

EU added value

The majority of respondents believe that national or sub-national interventions would not be able to achieve or would achieve only to a limited extent the general and specific objectives in the field of interoperability that ISA² is pursuing. The consulted stakeholders consider that **ISA² plays an important role in ensuring a level of coordination that enhances interoperability among European public administrations**.

In addition, respondents emphasised that ISA² is able to **achieve its objectives at a lower cost** than comparable national or sub-national initiatives. Respondents also believe that ISA² has contributed to **enhancing cross-border interoperability** in the EU. Recurrent examples mentioned by stakeholders are the work done in the field of semantic interoperability and the fact that ISA² raises the awareness about interoperability in the EU, without which little progress would be made in the field.

When it comes to the **advancement of common EU policies**, consulted stakeholders noted that ISA² plays a central role in the implementation of the EIF (including its 2017 revision) by abiding by its principles and tracking the implementation. In addition, stakeholders emphasised that ISA² has also contributed to specific areas of a broader EU policy, namely the Digital Single Market.

Utility

Respondents in both EU and Member State public administrations confirm that the solutions developed or maintained by ISA² have **contributed to addressing the original needs and problems identified in the field of interoperability**. Respondents emphasised that while some of the new needs and problems experienced in the field are addressed by the solutions provided by ISA², others, such as the changing political priorities in the Member States, fall beyond the scope of the programme as it is currently defined.

The feedback received from respondents in terms of user satisfaction tends to be positive. Nevertheless, a number of measures were identified to increase the utility of the programme:

- Placing more emphasis on sharing best practices and providing support to users;
- Establishing a co-creation process with users;
- Improving the quality of existing solutions by better considering user needs;
- Ensuring the Member State commitment to use ISA² solutions; and
- Strengthening the promotion of ISA² solutions at the Member State level as well as among specific groups of professionals (e.g. standards development organisations).

Sustainability

Overall, consulted stakeholders have a **positive view of the sustainability of results** achieved so far. Nevertheless, while the global results of the programme are expected to last (as the progress made in the field of interoperability will not be lost), certain issues may arise when considering the specificities of different solutions and future steps towards enhanced interoperability. In fact, there are solutions requiring both **operations and maintenance costs** as well as **technical and operational support**, which would be unable to deliver further results if the programme were terminated. Additional obstacles to the sustainability of the programme include:

- Lack of development for existing solutions;
- Lack of coordination between European public administrations; and
- Limited dissemination and communication related to interoperability.

Further, **introducing a fee for users** in order to gain access to ISA² solutions is not considered a feasible solution in the event that funding would no longer be provided for the actions currently carried out by ISA². Finally, the vast majority of respondents, from all stakeholder groups, stressed that the **ICT-based modernisation of the public sector in Europe and the possibility to address the needs of businesses and citizens via improved interoperability of European public administrations** would be jeopardised, should ISA² be terminated without any similar EU programme being established in its place.