FIT FOR FUTURE Platform Opinion

Topic title	Governments interoperability strategy AWP 2022 European interoperability framework *Legal reference*
Date of adoption	05 December 2022
Opinion reference	2022/SBGR3/10
Policy cycle reference	☑ Contribution to ongoing legislative process CWP 2022, Annex II *Commission work programme reference* This initiative evaluates the current European interoperability framework and assess its support in setting up interoperable digital public services. It also elaborates the proposal on the EU governments interoperability strategy, announced in the Communication 'Shaping Europe's digital future'. The aim is to establish a common EU level interoperability governance to ensure cross-border coordination, support public sector innovation and define minimum common specifications for secure and borderless public sector data flows and services. It will: - set up a shared governance of interoperability with the Member States that will have the mandate to steer the development of interoperability between EU public administrations; - ensure that EU policy proposals are interoperable, digital-ready and designed to be interoperable from the start and foster synergies for their implementation; - deliver minimum common interoperability open specifications and standards for the implementation of EU policies and programmes; - support and promote the development and reuse of common open, human-centric interoperability solutions and specifications by public administrations across the EU;

	- reinforce innovation and international cooperation by mutual learning and cooperation across public administrations. Indicative adoption: Q4 2022	
	☐ Contribution to the (ongoing) evaluation process	
	- *Title of the (ongoing) evaluation*	
	No	
	☐ Included in Annex VI of the Task force for subsidiarity and proportionality	
	No	
	☐ Other	
	No	
Have your say: Simplify!	*No relevant suggestions on this topic have been received from the public.*	
Commission follow up	REFIT Scoreboard:	Interoperability strategy
	Have your say portal:	Interoperable digital public services – European Interoperability Framework evaluation & strategy
	Other:	State-of-Play Report on Digital Public Administration and Interoperability 2024
	Annual Burden Survey:	The EU's efforts to simplify legislation (2022)

SUGGESTIONS SUMMARY

Suggestion 1:	Analyse in relevant impact assessments, the feasibility of setting-up an Interoperability governance system, with well-defined roles at EU and national levels
Suggestion 2:	Proper involvement of subnational authorities in the Interoperability governance
Suggestion 3:	Put in place an effective mechanism that guarantees integration of interoperability from the start on and by design in the legislative procedure at EU level
Suggestion 4:	Use the Joinup platform to promote and organise an exchange of national good practices and solution
Suggestion 5:	Organisational and semantic interoperability layers need to be improved to reflect time dimension of data
Suggestion 6:	Restructure the existing system of EIF recommendations to reflect their multidimensional aspects (tagging)
Suggestion 7:	Reinforce participation of GovTech, open source software developers, "early adopting" public administrations and other voluntary third parties in development of interoperability products, giving prominence mainly to open source solutions
Suggestion 8:	Include interoperability experts from public sector administration, also covering local and regional administration, in an EU competence and training support centre

SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE LEGISLATION ANALYSED

The European Interoperability Framework (EIF) is part of the Communication (COM(2017)134) from the European Commission adopted on 23 March 2017. The framework gives specific guidance on how to set up interoperable digital public services. The first version of the EIF was adopted in 2010. As the field of information technology is developing by fast speed and new EU policies have emerged, the EIF needed an overall revision after six years of existence. The framework had to better react on emerging technological trends like open data and cloud computing. It also needed to be fully aligned with the most recent EU policy development. The new EIF is undertaken in the context of the Commission priority to create a Digital Single Market in Europe and it puts more emphasis on how interoperability principles and models should apply in practice.

It offers public administrations 47 concrete recommendations on how to improve governance of their interoperability activities, establish cross-organisational relationships, streamline processes supporting end-to-end digital services, and ensure that both existing and new legislation do not compromise interoperability efforts. The updated interoperability recommendations have been made more specific to facilitate their implementation, with a

stronger focus on openness and information management, data portability, interoperability governance, and integrated service delivery.

The European Commission governs and coordinates implementation and monitoring of the framework, using key performance indicators and measurable targets through the ISA² programme.

Further sources of evidence:

Have your Say entry page

Public consultation

Legislation framework webpage

European Interoperability Framework (EIF) – Implementation Strategy

ISA² programme, ISA² interim evaluation

Study supporting the evaluation of the implementation of the EIF

Recommendations of the Expert group on the Interoperability of European Public Services

Consultation of the CoR network of Regional Hubs on Governments Interoperability Strategy conducted in July and August 2022

PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

Existing Commission evidence suggests the following issues:

EU citizens' and businesses' expectations of their governments are growing and changing: they want open, transparent, efficient, inclusive, borderless, interoperable, personalised, user-friendly, trustworthy and secure end-to-end digital public services. Member States are modernising their administrations by introducing digital public services and engaging with the private sector (GovTech). However, without coordination, they risk **creating isolated digital environments and electronic barriers that may prevent the necessary cross-border, cross-domain data flows and the sharing and reuse of digital solutions.** This makes it difficult for citizens and businesses to access digital public services and data in countries other than their own and thus hampers progress on the digital single market. It is widely accepted that interoperability is the key enabler for breaking down e-barriers and fostering digital transformation.

Through its non-binding guidance and with the support of the programme for interoperability solutions for European public administrations, businesses and citizens (ISA²), the EIF seeks to establish a holistic approach to interoperability in the EU. It is commonly accepted as the reference in digital government, even beyond the EU. At the same time, the interim evaluation of the ISA² programme (finalised in 2019) shows that **insufficient interoperability remains a very real problem.**

Conclusions of the supporting study on the EIF's evaluation indicate that the final achievements of the EIF in the provision of interoperable, user-centric public services in the EU and the development of a European public services ecosystem **have been limited, revealing the need for more action**. There are indeed increasing demands for the EU to take action. Central governments, regions, cities and the GovTech sector have all called on it to ensure **EU level cooperation and provide a more consolidated reusable digital infrastructure with common standards and digital building blocks, and a coherent European framework for secure, interoperable and trustworthy data -sharing**.

The key findings from the ISA^2 interim evaluation suggest that whereas the original needs are still relevant, **there are new needs and problems related to the interoperability of digital public services that are currently experienced by consulted stakeholders at both national and EU levels.** These include needs for more prescriptive approach to design interoperable public services, for improved communication between administrations (including at regional and local levels) and sharing of best practice, accounting for new developments (e.g. blockchain, privacy-by-design, self-sovereign identities). Other issues pertain to, for example, **limited awareness of interoperability itself and interoperability initiatives at the regional and local levels**.

The evaluation suggested as well a **need for more guidance in the implementation of the EIF**. For example, whereas the principles put forward by the EIF are generally relevant for the development of interoperable digital public services, some of them are either too abstract (preservation of information, assessment of effectiveness and efficiency, and subsidiarity and proportionality) or require more clarification and practical guidance to increase their effectiveness (transparency, technological neutrality and user-centricity). **Further, the layered interoperability and the conceptual model are considered useful in enhancing interoperable digital public services, but further guidance could make them more actionable**, as confirmed both by the consulted stakeholders and findings from the EIF Monitoring Mechanism. For the layered interoperability, further improvements could be made with implementing the recommendations on the levels of interoperability governance, organisational and legal interoperability. Indeed, a key takeaway from the consultation activities is the need to put more emphasis on **the non-technical layers of interoperability**, recognising that interoperability is a complex concept, not restricted to technical issues. Additional in-depth analyses show that the effectiveness and clarity of recommendations could be enhanced by i) restructuring them around the type of stakeholders targeted, ii) grouping them around similar areas addressed, and iii) distinguishing between basic and more advanced recommendations.

The voluntary take-up of the EIF and its recommendations has brought benefits that are recognised by public administrations, but more could be done to build a truly cohesive approach across the EU. They are considered mostly mutually reinforcing but there are several areas in which EIF recommendations are overlapping, at least thematically. **The overlaps do not generate issues, but by better grouping the recommendations, the key messages could be rendered clearer and thus the recommendations could be made more actionable.**

Findings from the European Committee of the Regions' network of Regional Hubs indicate that local and regional authorities face different challenges when aligning their information systems

and achieving their interoperability at local, national and inter-regional level. These range from the fragmentation of available technical solutions and interoperability products to a differentiated approach of national governments towards subnational entities regarding interoperability standards and procedures to involve them in decision-making process, often incoherent training and a retrospective incompatibility of interoperability products. The current EIF is also considered as insufficiently specific and providing mere recommendations instead of compulsory solutions.

(**Source**: Call for evidence, ISA^2 interim evaluation, EIF evaluation study)

The Fit for Future Platform has acknowledged the issues raised by the legislation concerned as follows:

Regarding: modernisation and future proofing of existing laws, including via digitalisation, the efficient labelling, authorisation and reporting obligations, the simplification of EU legislation:

Simplification and adapting of the existing framework to the principles of "better regulation".

If relevant, specific issues on the local and regional level:

A balance between the application of the subsidiarity and proportionality principles and the top-down approach to interoperability solutions has to be stroke by defining role of representatives of local and regional authorities in the interoperability governance framework.

SUGGESTIONS

Suggestion 1: Analyse in relevant impact assessments, the feasibility of setting-up an Interoperability governance system, with well-defined roles at EU and national levels

Description: A comprehensive interoperability governance system should be created at EU and national levels.

The system should consist of: (1) a strategic layer (Interoperable Europe Board), whereas each Member State should be represented by one expert (not nominative participation) and the European Commission should fulfil the tasks of its secretariat (to be provided with appropriate human and financial resources), (2) operational layer (Interoperability Advisory Board) made of ad hoc thematic committees. Both layers should be also reflected at national level, whereas a National Interoperable Europe Board should also consist of representatives of local and regional authorities (each Member State to define its own rules on the membership of such entities).

National Interoperable Europe Boards would also be in charge of defining catalogues of mandatory information content and recommended reusable interoperability products (i.e., systems, solutions, applications) at national level. The option of merging National Interoperable Europe Boards with currently existing National Interoperability Framework Observatory (NIFO) could also be considered.

Expected benefits: an increased awareness of recommended and mandatory reusable interoperability products in Member States and clearer role of central government and local/regional authorities in the process of definition of interoperability products.

Suggestion 2: Proper involvement of subnational authorities in the Interoperability governance

Description: Local and regional authorities are closest to citizens in terms of interaction with public authorities, being in charge – to a different extent according to each Member State's constitutional setup – of the large number of administrative procedures. As such, they are forced to interact with different public/private/international actors and interoperability is key in providing efficient and effective public services.

Local and regional authorities experience a differentiated approach when it comes to discussions on new interoperability solutions and products and their recommendations based on real practice at subnational level do not find their way systematically into interoperability products.

Therefore, subnational authorities should be given a proper involvement in discussing proposals for interoperability solutions, defining recommended and mandatory solutions (common information content) at national and/or EU level, testing new solutions (fulfilling a role of sandboxes) and promoting good practice. The Commission should intensify efforts to reach out to subnational authorities from all types of territories through existing better regulation tools, including public and targeted consultations or network debates when it comes to public sector interoperability. It is also recommended that representatives of local and regional authorities be integral members of relevant committees at national level (at strategic and operational level) in order to involve citizens' representatives in the design of the relevant eGov services and be given advisory role in the Interoperability Europe Board (name tbc – entity at EU level). It should be taken into account that there are already European directives that deal with thematic interoperability, such as the INSPIRE Directive[1]. In order to ensure that solutions are practical and in accordance with the requirements of citizens and businesses, the adequate involvement of representatives of their interests is important.

Expected benefits: reduction of administrative burdens thanks to the involvement of the sub-national actors in the policy implementation design and proper application of the principles of

[1] Directive 2007/2/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 March 2007 establishing an Infrastructure for Spatial Information in the European Community (INSPIRE);

subsidiarity and proportionality while striking a balance with the top-down approach inherent to the interoperability framework.

Suggestion 3: Put in place an effective mechanism that guarantees integration of interoperability from the start on and by design in the legislative procedure at EU level

Description: An effective mechanism, applicable from top (EU) to bottom (national, sub-national) levels should be set up, allowing for effective definition of interoperability solutions and for clear guidance on how to ensure that every piece of planned legislation is interoperable and digital-ready by default. In addition, the mechanism introduced should foster new systems being fully interoperable with existing infrastructure and that retrospective compatibility is ensured. The principle "once only" for any data inserted into databases has to be implemented and fully functional, providing that privacy of data is not compromised.

For example, an "Interoperability assessment" could be introduced, when a new legislation (both at EU and national level) would set up a new or significantly modify an existing network and information system and/or when personal data protection, cybersecurity, requirements for trustworthy artificial intelligence systems would be set up. The assessment would be performed by national experts gathered under national interoperability advisory entities/contact points. Their opinion would be part of the "impact assessment" of any relevant new legislative proposal. At EU level, this opinion would stem from the European Commission work. It should be taken into account that there are already existing bodies that deal with thematic interoperability such as INSPIRE National Contact Points (concerning spatial data interoperability).

Expected benefits: the new legislation would be digital-ready from the onset.

Suggestion 4: Use the Joinup platform to promote and organise an exchange of national good practices and solutions

Description: The European Commission created the Joinup platform to provide a common venue that enables public administrations, businesses and citizens to share and reuse IT solutions and good practices, and facilitate communication and collaboration on IT projects across Europe. It offers several services that aim to help e-Government professionals share their experience with each other.

The existing platform should promote a real exchange of knowledge among Member States and regional and local authorities. It could be reinforced into a comprehensive catalogue to gather essential information on the existing and future interoperability products, which could be **clustered by type of issue occurring at national/local level**. As such, it would be more demand-driven and offer user-friendly solutions, including:

- Mandatory reusable interoperability solutions as defined by the Interoperable Europe Board and its advisory bodies (and implemented in form of a Commission implementing act);
- Recommended and currently used reusable interoperability products as recommended by relevant national entities;
- Products/ideas under development, where interested parties could, on a voluntary basis, contribute to their development and deployment. The platform should also contain information on the latest state of play of ideas' development and final outcome, including a possible legislative action at EU level, if such action is considered necessary to attain objectives of the proposed idea. One of such ideas to be considered includes a proposal to replace the current system to issue tax residence certificates in the EU by an automated communication system to exchange tax residence data between central tax administrations of EU Member States, set up at EU level

The platform should also be translated into all EU languages (keeping English as pivot language), but still be open to any EU and third countries' entities.

Expected benefits: An increased awareness of recommended and mandatory reusable interoperability products in Member States as well as of products under development

Suggestion 5: Organisational and semantic interoperability layers need to be improved to reflect time dimension of data

Description: The time dimension for solutions in any of the four interoperability dimensions should be strengthened as ensuring interoperability is a continuous task; interoperability is regularly disrupted by changes to the environment. In addition, a backward/retrospective compatibility of data and registries needs to be ensured, in order to take account of possible modifications of the structure, content and meaning of records in time.

Clear and concise records of all interoperability products should be kept, with a time stamp of when a product in question has been introduced, for how long it has been used as mandatory and/or recommended solution, in order for relevant authorities to retrospectively identify products that were used over a period of time. In addition, such a measure would prevent overlapping solutions to exist in parallel. Backward compatibility should be ensured so to allow smaller administrations (urban and rural) to adapt at their own pace, by taking into account their specific resource constraints, while striking the right balance between new features and innovation and backwards compatibility (IT legacy).

Expected benefits: Versioning numbers typically present in interoperability products cannot guarantee by themselves time tracking or backwards compatibility. They should be accompanied at least by a date of release. The release-date stamping of any asset should in any case be considered as a basic and easily implemented good practice. Furthermore, backward compatibility should become a good practice and allow to document changes to ease the gradual implementation of an interoperable, digital administration as result of smart, non-duplicated, long-lasting investments, especially for small regional and local governments, and the

guarantee of accessing the information held by public administration over the time. Should such a compatibility not be ensured, then documentation should clearly explain which parts of the previous version of the asset no longer apply.

Finally, interoperability usually applies to services, applications, specifications, and data models. But it also applies to regulations, organisational arrangements, and information. The latter is the most forgotten reusable asset, but it needs specific (and not easy) policies to guarantee that such information can be read by electronic means in longer term, in other words, to guarantee interoperability of the information over time when such information is relevant.

Suggestion 6: Restructure the existing system of EIF recommendations to reflect their multidimensional aspects (tagging)

Description: In order to simplify and clarify the EIF, its recommendations should be restructured for a better clarity. Since a recommendation can be related to different aspects, a tagging system can help as it could provide a flexible multi-factorial classification of recommendations. Factor types could be, for instance, EIF dimension, EIF principle, EIF conceptual model component, target stakeholder, addressed area, basic vs advanced nature of the recommendation, and even other recommendations as pre-conditions.

Expected benefits: This is a flexible mechanism to organise recommendations and even principles in a multi-factorial way, which can be complemented by a web tool to find recommendations related to specific needs. The labels used to tag recommendations can be extended as much as needed; besides labels should be classified by factor types that can be easily identified. This kind of tool should also be of help to non-expert users to implement interoperability in administrations with little resources in a priority-driven incremental way within the comprehensive EIF framework, as well as to assess compliance with interoperability requirements related to specific factors. In this way, administrations will be enabled to address their specific problems in order of their priorities.

Suggestion 7: Reinforce participation of GovTech, open source software developers, "early adopting" public administrations and other voluntary third parties in development of interoperability products, giving prominence mainly to open source solutions

Description: Expert third parties, in particular developers of 0pen source software, as well as voluntary experts from academia, civil society etc., should be given a prominent role in defining and deciding on recommended and mandatory interoperability products. Given their experience and their knowledge of the state-of-the-art solutions and directions that the software development go to, their active participation in the decision-making process is key.

By choosing open-source solutions, the continuity of projects can be guaranteed, preventing a "vendor lock-in", the security can be enhanced by peer review process, allowing also the expert community to contribute to the direction of those solutions. By having a non-conditional service

freely available, interoperability can also be accessed by all members of the community and will not be specific to for-profit organisations only.

Therefore, it is recommended that representatives of third parties are given opportunities to participate in meetings covering specific topics in the Interoperable Advisory Board at EU level, without however rendering the functioning of the Board more complex or burdensome.

Expected benefits: The discussion on solutions to become recommended and/or mandatory would be enriched with experience from the past and solutions currently under development. Overlapping and/or diverging solutions from those currently existing would be avoided.

Suggestion 8: Include interoperability experts from public sector administration, also covering local and regional administration, in an EU competence and training support centre

Description: Interoperability experts from local and regional administrations should be given the opportunity to have a prominent role in training and peer-review activities. They can contribute with their experience and their knowledge of the needs of smaller administrations to the knowledge and support activities for interoperable Europe.

It is recommended that in addition to inviting staff by smaller administrations to voluntarily participate in the trainings, representatives of local and regional administrations can take an active role in sharing their knowledge and expertise on interoperability as trainers and reviewers.

It is also recommended that administrations reinforce specific trainings and motivate their personnel through support programmes, such as workshops for Digital Accessibility Leaders or "local government digitalisation leader" competitions whose goal would be to highlight the best and most advanced interoperability solution. Central governments should be also involved in organisation and financing of these support schemes, e.g. from the RRF or Cohesion policy programmes.

Expected benefits: building competence on interoperability would be enriched with experience from regional and local trainers as these reflect the perspectives and needs of the local and regional administration.

ABSTENTIONS

- 1 MS