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COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

Brussels, 8.5.2008
SEC(2008) 1882

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING PAPER

**Action plan on an integrated approach for providing
Single Market Assistance Services
to citizens and business**

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the course of the past ten years, the Commission has launched a large number of services to provide information, advice and problem-solving assistance to citizens and businesses to help them make better use of the possibilities that Europe and its single market offer to them. These services have generally been successful, but their abundance often confuses the intended users, who do not know which service to go to with their queries or requests for assistance. On the one hand, being sent from pillar to post can be a frustrating and time-consuming experience for citizens and businesses and, on the other, signposting elsewhere represents a significant burden for the assistance services thereby reducing their efficiency.

This problem is addressed in the Commission strategy to improve communicating Europe¹ inter alia by streamlining information and assistance networks supported by the Commission. A feasibility study is currently underway to assess the viability of progressively streamlining contact centres under a few if not a single umbrella. In this overall context, the Commission, in its Communication of 20 November 2007 on a single market for 21st century Europe², announced a one-stop-shop for access to information, assistance and problem solving systems managed by the EU and dealing with single market rights and possibilities. This plan is meant to be a pioneer action in the field of the single market that will be fully integrated into the overall streamlining efforts, as outlined in the above mentioned communication strategy.

Assistance services can be made more efficient and users offered a better service by creating a single entry page that shows users in a glance where to go with their query. The single entry page would link through to the existing websites of all participating assistance services. In addition, the present plan sets out a list of actions aimed at improving cooperation between the existing services to provide citizens and businesses with a less fragmented information, advice or problem-solving service. The concept is not based on the creation of yet another new service, or on a merger of all services and networks involved, but on the introduction of a high degree of coordination, cooperation and streamlining between them. The actions set out below are intended as the start of a process of convergence with a view to providing a high-quality, seamless service to the public (see Annex 1 for a schematic presentation of the integrated approach).

2. OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

The objective of the Single Market Assistance Services approach is to offer a streamlined service package to help citizens and businesses understand and exercise their EU rights in cross-border situations within the EU.

The services participating in the project will:

- Inform citizens, consumers or businesses about EU rights and about national procedures;
- Give individual, tailor-made advice on legal and procedural issues;
- Assist in solving problems that arise when EU rights are not respected by public authorities or by businesses;

¹ SEC(2005)985 final, 20.07.2005

² COM(2007)724 final, 20.11.2007

- Ensure that requests/queries falling within any of the above three tasks are transferred quickly to the most appropriate service regardless of where or how they enter the system;
- Report back to the relevant Commission departments on frequent problems encountered by citizens and businesses in the context of cross-border activities and transactions.

The following services will participate in the project:

- Europe Direct call centre
- Europe Direct network
- Your Europe portal
- Eures
- Eurojus
- Citizens Signpost Service (CSS)
- SOLVIT
- European Consumer Centres (ECCs)
- Enterprise Europe Network (resulting from the merger of former Euro Info Centres and Innovation Relay Centres).

(See Annex 2 for a description of the services.)

Some of the above networks have a mandate that extends beyond the objective of the integrated approach and provide services that will remain outside the scope of the project (e.g. Europe Direct, disseminating information about a wider range of policy areas, and the Eures job portal).

Europe Direct should be promoted as a front office for general queries regarding Europe and for transferring questions to other back office services.

Other services, the ECCs, the Enterprise Europe network and Eures, will continue to combine their own front and back office functions but will also systematically transfer queries to other services where appropriate.

The Citizens Signpost Service and SOLVIT will operate as back office services receiving queries via Europe Direct or from other services with a front office function. While it will still be possible to submit queries direct to these networks, promotion will not be targeted to the general public, but to other networks and intermediaries.

3. ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT THE INTEGRATED APPROACH

To implement the actions set out below, a common Single Market Assistance Services webpage will be created, with a part accessible only to the members and coordinators of the networks and a part accessible to the general public (see Annex 3). This part, a single page, not a stand alone site or portal, is intended for signposting citizens and businesses to the right service. This new page will therefore be offered as a tool for those who do not really know where to turn to. It will be linked to all relevant, existing EU information webpages.. Existing EU information webpages will of course remain *directly* accessible for all citizens and firms, as is the case at present.

3.1. Promotion & signposting

The purpose of the project is to evolve towards a more streamlined offer of services that will make it easier for citizens and businesses to find the right one to deal with their

query/problem and will ensure that any of the participating services forward queries to one of the partner services where appropriate.

If all services would be known under a single umbrella name this could facilitate brand recognition and avoid confusion between services with names that sound very similar. To what extent this is feasible is currently being examined in a study announced by the Commission communication on a strategy to improve communicating Europe (see footnote 1). Awaiting the outcome of that study and the policy conclusions to be drawn from it, all participating services will continue to work under their own name and address different target groups (citizens, businesses, consumers, job seekers, etc.), a common promotion campaign would not be appropriate. However, those services that cater for the same target group could at least coordinate their promotion efforts.

Furthermore, signposting should be improved on the websites of the participating services and on other webpages on Europa that are related to single market rights and opportunities, to help the general public find the right service regardless of where they enter the system.

Action points

- On the common SMAS webpage (internal part), create a calendar with promotion campaigns and events of all participating services to allow others to participate where appropriate.
- Insert links to the common SMAS webpage (external part) on all websites of participating services and other relevant webpages on Europa.

3.2. Better links to transfer queries between networks

Instead of signposting people to other networks, the participating services will endeavour to make direct transfers of cases, including all available information, to other networks. This will avoid people being sent from one door to another and having to repeat their queries several times.

Tailor-made systems for transferring cases already exist among some of the participating networks (between CSS and Europe Direct, CSS and SOLVIT). As a pilot project, a number of Eures advisors have been granted direct access to submit queries to the CSS.

Where no links yet exist, the system for transferring cases from one network to another should be user-friendly and easy to implement. It should be based on a simple transfer of queries by e-mail.

Action points

- Develop agreed rules for transfer (data protection, deadlines, information to customers, avoiding circular transfers, registration for statistical purposes).
- Include on the common SMAS webpage (internal part): (1) the above transfer rules, (2) an updated list of e-mail addresses of contact points within each service to which queries can be signposted, (3) a clear description of types of cases/queries that can be handled by each of the services.

3.3. Quality & performance standards/quality control

For the direct transfer of queries, networks have to be confident that the receiving network will also offer a reliable, good-quality service.

For this purpose, the participating services will develop a common quality of service agreement that will cover a minimum of common rules: inter alia, acknowledgement of receipt, keeping citizens and businesses informed about deadlines and progress.

In addition, in view of the diversity of the participating services, each of them will maintain its own, more specific quality and performance standards and its own quality control system, but information about both these standards and the control system will be made available to the other services.

The new Enterprise Europe Network is developing a code of conduct aimed at better informing and serving businesses.

Finally, there should be a procedure for investigating complaints about cases that were transferred and did not receive adequate treatment. This feedback can help to improve the system.

Action points

- Develop a common quality of service agreement.
- Publish additional specific quality standards on the common SMAS website (external part).
- Establish a procedure for investigating complaints regarding transferred cases.

3.4. Training

All participating services organise training sessions, workshops and other events for their members. These offer good opportunities to inform all services involved about the SMAS approach and how to implement it. All services should be fully aware of what the other services can offer, of rules and procedures for transfer of cases and of the importance of applying the common quality standards.

In addition, exchange of best practices regarding training sessions and other events would be useful for all participating services.

Action points

- Create a calendar of training and other network events on the common SMAS website (internal part).
- Include information on other networks and on transfer of cases in training and other events.

3.5. Feedback for policy development

In the course of their tasks, all services involved collect valuable material on questions, queries, problems and complaints submitted by citizens and businesses. Much better use should be made of this material to provide feedback for policy development.

Two of the participating services (ECC and CSS) currently produce feedback reports summarising complaints they receive in particular policy areas. Europe Direct and the Enterprise Europe Network intend to produce such reports in the near future.

For future contracts network coordinators should consider broadening the scope of policy feedback reports to include material from other services with relevant basic material.

Action points

- Each service to provide a short description of the type of basic material regarding cases and queries handled that can be made available to Commission policy departments for reporting purposes, to be included on SMAS webpage (internal part).
- Links to policy feedback reports to be made available on the common SMAS webpage (internal part).

3.6. Information and reporting on all participating networks

To create synergies, avoid overlaps and spread best practices between networks, it is important to make information about what they are and how they work available in comparable formats.

The Commission is developing a web catalogue with basic information on all the networks it operates to provide services to a general or more targeted public. The catalogue will also include detailed information on all services participating in the SMAS project.

In addition, the networks produce their own regular activity and development reports but these are not always easy to find. Links to these reports should be made available from the common SMAS webpage. It would also be helpful to create some graphs which give an overview of case flow and other basic statistics for all networks.

Action points

- Link to web catalogue on all networks to be included on common SMAS webpages.
- Links to regular activity and development reports of each of the participating services to be made available on a single webpage.
- A summary overview of the key figures on the functioning and development of the networks involved in SMAS to be included on the common SMAS webpages.

3.7. Improving information and navigation on Europa websites

Informing citizens and businesses about their rights and opportunities in the single market is crucial for ensuring that Europe really “works”. The internet is the most efficient and effective tool to reach out to a large audience with this information. A good website that is easy to navigate, up-to-date and written with the user in mind can respond to many questions and queries that would otherwise have to be answered individually. However, Your Europe, the main citizens and business rights portal on Europa, does not perform this task very successfully and could be improved.. Different Commission departments also develop their own pages with similar content, some of it better and more up-to-date but difficult to find. To improve the situation, it is worth looking at examples of national government portals, some of which provide excellent models for communicating complex information in a simple way to different target audiences.

The Commission adopted an new internet strategy ³ aimed at making the Europa website more customer oriented. Improvements of the Your Europe portal will be undertaken as part of that exercise.

Action points

- Examine how the Your Europe portal can be improved and avoid duplication with other Commission webpages.
- Identify and encourage best practices in the presentation of EU rights on Europa webpages.
- Improve signposting to and from Europa webpages with information on citizens and business rights and opportunities in the EU.

3.8. Synergies between the Commission and Single Market Assistance Services

The Commission's role is not just to manage the services participating in the SMAS project; it should also ensure that this package of services becomes an integral part of its own working methods.

First of all, Commission departments should make communication and sharing expertise with the above services a top priority. This can be done, for instance, by systematically writing up frequently asked questions and making them available on Europa via the Your Europe portal and other interlinked pages. Secondly, the Commission should use the integrated service package, as outlined, to redirect queries/complaints that are still addressed direct to the Commission so that its policy and enforcement units can act as back office but do not have to handle large volumes of incoming mail from the public. Thirdly, the Commission should make better use of the wealth of information available in the databases of the above services to get a better view of single market problems reported by citizens and businesses. They should use this information systematically as source material for impact assessments, reports on the implementation of legislation and the development of their policy websites..

Action points

- Give more priority to providing good-quality, user-friendly information on EU rights on webpages and to systematic updating.
- Replace e-mail addresses of policy units on Commission webpages offering information and assistance as much as possible by the Europe Direct mailbox or any of the other more specialised networks with a front office function.
- Make more use of database material of the services participating in SMAS for impact assessment and policy development.

3.9. Avoiding duplication and simplifying the services on offer

The recently created Enterprise Europe Network is an example of a merger between two existing networks (Euro Info Centres and Innovation Relay Networks), and the European Consumer Centres are also the result of a merger. Within the list of services participating in the Single Market Assistance Services project, there appears to be further scope for rationalisation, namely between Eurojus and the Citizens Signpost Service. These two

³ SEC(2007)1742, 21.12.2007, Communicating about Europe via the Internet- Engaging the citizens

networks offer the same type of service (advice on legal matters) to the same target audience (citizens) and are both financed via contracts managed by the Commission. While the CSS has a wider coverage (all EU Member States) and a better developed support structure (inter alia a database), Eurojus covers EU law in general and offers the advantage of having a physical presence in the Commission offices in the EU Member States. A merger could create major synergies and would make the service more visible to EU citizens. As a first step, the two services could start working under the same name even before a full merger was implemented.

Action point

- Implement a merger of Eurojus and the Citizens Signpost Service.

4. TIMING AND RESOURCES

The actions listed under 3.1-6 above can all be implemented within eight months and will require one person working full time on the various aspects, with the active cooperation of the network coordinators.

Actions listed under 3.7 (websites) are more complicated to bring about and will require a more professional approach to presenting and explaining EU rights to a large audience. This will involve rethinking the structure and navigation of websites, better ways of collecting information, more professional drafting of user-friendly text and rigorous updating practices. While the actions can be implemented gradually, it will probably take up to two years to develop from the current situation to a first-class EU rights portal where user-friendly information on EU rights is only a few mouse clicks away.

Actions listed under 3.8 are about awareness raising within the Commission, changing working methods and making optimum use of all networks for the public.

For action 3.9 (merger between CSS and Eurojus) a year will be needed to prepare and implement a merger. As both services are provided by external contractors, timing will also depend on the current contracts.

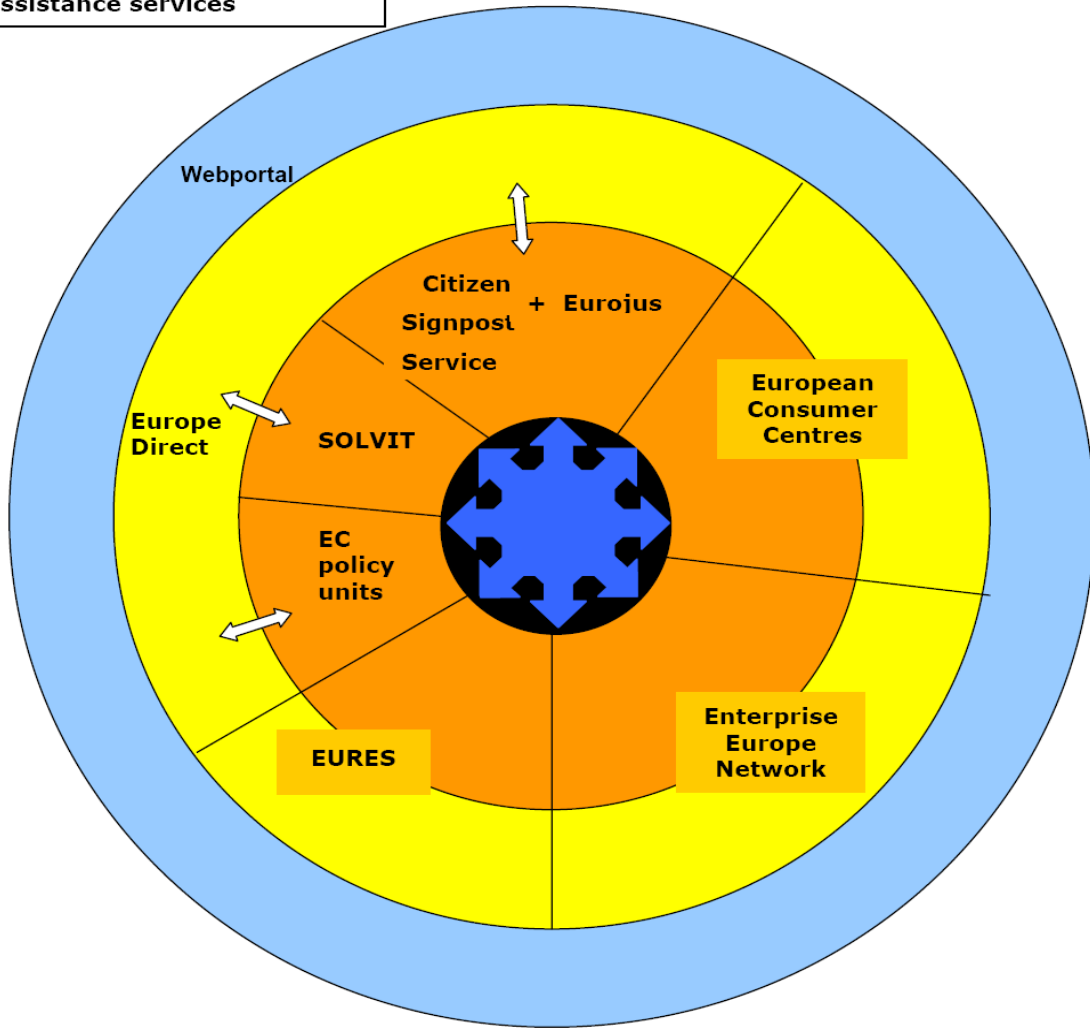
	Action	Timing	Resources
1	Promotion & signposting	8 months	8 man-months + input from network coordinators
2	Improve transfer of queries		
3	Quality and performance standards		
4	Training		
5	Feedback for policy development		
6	Information and reporting		
7	Improve content and navigation of websites	2 years	To be examined
8	Synergies between Commission and assistance services	2 years	4 man-months + cooperation from policy units

9	Merge Eurojus and CSS	1 year	4 man-months + input from network coordinators
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ANNEX 1

**Integrated approach for
Single Market
assistance services**

Annex 1



	Common webportal with general information on citizens, business and consumer rights (improved version of 'Your Europe')
	Front office: individual information and signposting
	Back office: specialised assistance
	Networks with combined front and back office functions
	New /improved links between networks

ANNEX 2

Overview of participating services

Service	Mission statement & services provided	Target audience	DG responsible
Europe Direct call centre	To answer general questions from the public on the European Union's activities and policies and to guide citizens towards the sources of information and advice that best meet their needs	General public	Communication DG
Europe Direct network	To promote EU-related discussions and arrange information dissemination at local level and to give feedback to the European Institutions.	General public	Communication DG
Eurojus	To provide advice to EU citizens on legal issues concerning EU law and assist in difficulties with national and European authorities	Citizens	Communication DG
Eures	To facilitate mobility in the European labour market by providing services to workers and employers wishing to take advantage of the right to free movement of workers in the EU	Job seekers and employers	Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities DG
Citizens Signpost Service	To provide advice to European citizens on legal issues regarding the exercise of their EU rights in cross-border mobility situations	Citizens	Internal Market and Services DG
SOLVIT	To solve cross-border problems encountered by citizens and businesses due to incorrect application of EU rules by national public authorities, without formal procedures and within ten weeks	Citizens and businesses	Internal Market and Services DG
European Consumer Centres	To provide a full service to consumers from information to dispute resolution to enable them to take full advantage of the single market, with special reference to cross-border issues.	Consumers	Health and Consumer Protection DG
Enterprise Europe Network	To provide business, innovation and trans-national technology cooperation integrated services to European businesses based on a network of 554 support service organisations involving more than 4000 staff in 40 countries.	Businesses	Enterprise DG
Your Europe portal	To provide detailed practical information on citizens and business rights and opportunities in the EU and its single market plus advice on how to exercise these rights in practice	Citizens and businesses	Internal Market and Services DG & Enterprise DG

ANNEX 3

Content of common webpages to implement the action plan

	<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>
<i>Information</i>	Description of the service package offered by the participating services	Link to COMM catalogue of all external networks
	Links to regular reports of participating services	
	Links to websites of participating services	
	Summary overview of the key figures on the functioning and development of participating services	
<i>Transfer of queries</i>		List of contact points in all networks with phone numbers and e-mail addresses
	Common quality agreement	
	Links to individual quality standards	
	Complaints procedure	
		Agreed rules for transfer of cases
<i>Promotion</i>		List of upcoming promotion campaigns and events for all participating networks
<i>Feedback</i>		Description of material that can be made available for reporting purposes
		Links to available feedback reports
<i>Training</i>		Calendar of training events