



### **PEACE IV Programme Monitoring Committee**

#### **European Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland for 2014 – 2020 (PEACE IV)**

##### **Assessment Process for INTERREG VA and PEACE IV Programmes**

1. In response to feedback from the Consultative process and to opportunities presented in the new programme regulations, there is renewed focus on simplification within the Programmes. As such, measures have been introduced to help reduce the level of bureaucracy associated with the previous programming period, including the application assessment process.
2. The Managing Authority, the Member States and the European Commission have agreed the principles for project selection, as detailed in the approved INTERREG VA Programme. Similar wording is proposed for the PEACE IV Programme. For ease of reference the agreed wording in the Cooperation Programme is included in Annex 1.
3. The purpose of this document is to outline the streamlined application and assessment process that will be put in place to give effect to the agreed wording in the Cooperation programme.
4. This document outlines the arrangements for the EU Programmes 2014-2020, 36 week Assessment Process as agreed between SEUPB and the Member States. This process has taken account of respective Member State guidance, views and best practice. In the case of Northern Ireland this includes -The Northern Ireland Guidance for Economic Appraisal and Evaluation (NIGEAE), which was recently supplemented by a Finance Director Circular issued by Department of Finance and Personnel to all Government Departments, FD (DFP) 07/15).

5. The FD (DFP) 07/15 circular had a significant contribution in enabling this process to adhere to the European Commission's request to reduce bureaucracy and speed up the processing of financial assistance.
6. The FD/DFP 07/15 refers to assessing efficiency with regard to the net benefits to Northern Ireland, however it has been agreed that the guidance when used by Government Departments in Northern Ireland, is to be applied to the relevant Programme for which funding is being sought, and in the case of the Cross Border INTERREG VA and PEACE IV Programmes, the assessment should be of the benefits to the eligible area and not only relate to the benefits to Northern Ireland
7. INTERREG VA and PEACE IV are funded under the European Territorial Cooperation and therefore must adhere to the provisions of Regulation 1299/2013 and in particular the requirement that projects are selected by a cross border steering committee which acts as the final decision making body (Article 12): Member States and <sup>1</sup>Accountable/ Policy Departments are represented on the Steering Committee.
8. All projects will be assessed against pre-defined selection criteria, as stated within the Cooperation Programme, including the cross border cooperation criteria. These criteria have been agreed with the Member States and the European Commission, and approved by the Monitoring Committee:
  - a. Contribution of the project to the defined results and outputs of the programme;
  - b. Quality of project design (including specific requirements detailed in the Cooperation Programme.);
  - c. Quality of project team and implementation arrangements;
  - d. Value for money;
  - e. Quality of cross border co-operation with demonstrable added value;
  - f. Contribution towards sustainable development;
  - g. Contribution towards equality.

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<sup>1</sup> Government Departments in Northern Ireland and Ireland that provide the funding mechanism for the EU Programmes have a dual role of policy and funding, and are known as Accountable Departments, for the INTERREG V Programme, the Scottish Government and respective sections have a policy oversight role, and therefore they are known as Policy Departments.

9. The Cooperation Programme has been agreed and adopted and includes specific result and output targets, with corresponding financial allocations. The Programmes have been developed and approved by the Member States and the European Commission on this basis. Project assessment must operate within this strict framework, which restricts the range of possible investment options.
10. Project assessment is based on the principle of assessing the information submitted at the time of application. Project development support will be provided prior to submission. However after submission there will be no opportunity for the applicant to further develop their project other than responding to specific queries or points of clarification. The proposed INTERREG VA and PEACE IV Project Assessment Model including the two Stage Application Process is included in Annex 2.
11. As part of the project development support, SEUPB will provide Development Workshops which aim to assist potential applicants in developing high standard applications. Further training in relation to effective project implementation will be offered to successful applicants throughout the programming period.
12. The Joint Secretariat (JS) of the SEUPB will have the primary responsibility for conducting project assessment. It will be a single assessment process leading to the tabling of recommendations to the Steering Committee.
13. Full induction training will be offered to the Steering Committee at the beginning of the programme to ensure that they are aware of their roles and responsibilities. In addition, information seminars will be offered to the Accountable/Policy Departments and participation will be encouraged.
14. The JS will publish a timetable for calls for at least the following 12 months. This will give applicants advance warning of when a call is expected. It will also enable the JS and Accountable/ Policy Departments to plan their internal resources in line with the timetable for calls.
15. The JS will make a call for applications based on the outputs and results within the Cooperation Programme. The Accountable/ Policy Department will be consulted during the preparation of the call. The financial allocation to the call will be stated in

the call documentation. The call will also include the dates for the Steering Committee Meetings that will be held in relation to Stage 1 and Stage 2 assessment. The call will be approved by the Steering Committee (including the Accountable/ Policy Departments) before publication. This approval may be by written procedure in the absence of a scheduled meeting.

16. The closing date for the call will normally be 6-8 weeks after the opening date. Pre-application advice will be available to support applicants during this period. Upon receipt, completed application forms will be available to Accountable /Policy Departments.
17. The JS will complete Stage 1 assessment within 8 weeks of the call closing-date. The assessment criteria used will be those listed in the Cooperation Programme. In particular cases, the JS may seek the views of expert technical advisors when compiling the assessment report. The assessment report will be forwarded to all members of the Steering Committee (including relevant Accountable/Policy Departments) one week before the Steering Committee meeting. The Steering Committee will decide if the project is rejected or proceed to Stage 2.
18. Applicants that are rejected at Stage 1 will be officially notified by the Joint Secretariat stating the reasons for the decision. In addition to information relating to the scoring of the project, applicants will be offered a de-briefing meeting no later than 28 days following receipt of the rejection letter.
19. Applicants are also entitled to request a review in line with the *Review Procedure for Unsuccessful Applications* (Annex 3).
20. Following the Steering Committee decision, successful applicants will be invited to move to Stage 2, and will be given 6 weeks to submit a business plan. The structure and content of the business plan will be available at the time of the initial call. It is anticipated that applicants will have already progressed the preparation of the business plan before receiving a stage 1 approval. The business plan will be proportionate to the funding requested. The business plan template has been agreed with DPER and DFP.

- 21.** Exceptionally, applicants may ask for an extension of the 6 week period to prepare their business plan, if that is the case “the clock will be stopped” in relation to that individual application. The planned Steering Committee will still proceed as indicated and consider whatever other applications have been submitted in accordance with the original schedule. If an applicant takes in excess of the 6 week period, without prior agreement with SEUPB, their application will not be accepted.
- 22.** Stage 2 assessments will be based on the criteria stated within the Cooperation Programme and call for application. No other criteria will be used.
- 23.** Following the closing dates for applications, the submitted business plans will be forwarded immediately to the relevant Accountable/Policy Departments. The Accountable/Policy Departments will be requested to make observations/advice/guidance on the business plan. The Accountable/Policy Department can also request information in relation to points of clarification at this stage. Any comments received from the Accountable/Policy Department will inform the assessment report. Comments should be received by the JS within 4 weeks.
- 24.** The JS may commission supplementary technical assessment reports that they consider necessary to inform their assessment. In a limited number of cases, based on the size, complexity and nature of the project an economic appraisal may be commissioned, but this would be the exception rather than the rule.
- 25.** The JS will prepare a detailed assessment report on the application based on programme criteria and informed by: (i) any technical assessment report; (ii) any economic appraisal carried out and (iii) any comments received from the Accountable /Policy Department.
- 26.** The assessment report is a robust assessment of the project against criteria that has been agreed with the Member States. It is considered that within the context of ETC programmes the assessment report meets the requirements of an appropriate and proportionate methodology for assessing value for money and satisfies accountability requirements. The assessment report covers all the main points outlined in FD(DFP) 07/15. The presentation of the report will be based on programme criteria.

27. The assessment report (and any supplementary technical reports / economic appraisals) will be circulated to Accountable/Policy Departments as soon as they are available and **not later** than 4 weeks before the scheduled Steering Committee. Whilst there will be no iterative process between the JS and the Accountable/ Policy Department at this stage in relation to the documentation issued, the JS will be available to clarify aspects of the assessment report prior to the Steering Committee.
28. The Accountable/Policy Department will complete all their necessary internal governance procedures prior to the Steering Committee, and in line with their respective delegated limits.
29. The Steering Committee will be held not later than 28 weeks from the date of the Stage 1 Steering Committee.
30. The Steering Committee will consider the assessment report and make the final decision on the funding application. The Accountable/ Policy Departments will attend the Steering Committee and articulate the views of the Accountable/Policy Departments. The Steering Committee will seek a consensus on applications, and clearly record the basis for its decisions based solely on the agreed selection criteria.
31. In line with Article 12(1) of Commission Regulation (EC) No: 1299/2013, the Steering Committee will make the final decision on all funding applications. There will be no additional approval processes post Steering Committee.
32. In line with the requirements of Article 115(2) of Commission Regulation (EC) No: 1303/2014, all successful applications will be published on the SEUPB website. The list shall be updated following Steering Committee decisions and at least every six months.
33. It is anticipated that a reserve list will be generated following certain calls. This will consist of those projects that have scored above the minimum scoring threshold but where there are insufficient funds to support all projects reaching the minimum score. The reserve list is not a guarantee of funding.
34. Similar to Stage 1, applicants rejected at Stage 2 will be officially notified by the Joint Secretariat stating the reasons for the decision. In addition to information relating to

the scoring of the project, applicants will be offered a de-briefing meeting no later than 28 days following receipt of the rejection letter.

35. Applicants are also entitled to request a review in line with the *Review Procedure for Unsuccessful Applications* (Annex 3).
36. In the event of the 36 weeks assessment timeframe not being achieved, the Managing Authority will review the assessment process and publish an update indicating the reasons for the delay on the web site of the programme so as to ensure transparency for all applicants and the programme monitoring committee will be informed in the framework of its meetings.
37. In summary the Accountable/ Policy Departments will have input at the following stages:
  - (a) Comment on the draft call for applications during preparation and then participate in Steering Committee decision approving the call;
  - (b) Invitation to attend any development workshops held with applicants before submission of Stage 1 applications;
  - (c) Receipt of Stage I applications immediately upon receipt of application by SEUPB;
  - (d) Receipt of Stage I assessment report one week prior to Steering Committee;
  - (e) Participation at Stage I Steering Committee to approve those applications moving to Stage 2;
  - (f) Invitation to participate in any workshops held with Stage 2 applicants and raise any issues of concern;
  - (g) Immediate receipt of Stage 2 Business Plan upon receipt by SEUPB. 4 weeks to comment on business plan and request any points of clarification from SEUPB.
  - (h) 22 week period between receipt of Business Plan and Steering Committee, to facilitate any internal processes required by Departments;
  - (i) Receipt of SEUPB assessment report not later than 4 weeks before the Steering Committee;
  - (j) Attendance at Stage 2 Steering Committee to consider projects, and approve and reject projects accordingly.

38. It is anticipated that where possible, projects of a less complex nature that have moved to stage 2 will receive a final approval / rejection decision in advance of the 36 week maximum approval period.
39. SEUPB will carry out continuous monitoring in terms of project approvals, assessment timelines and project implementation. As part of this, Accountable/Policy Departments will be regularly updated in terms of financial allocations and project jurisdiction.
40. This Assessment Process will be reviewed to assess effectiveness in December 2016. This review will examine;
- (a) Processing of applications within the required maximum 36 week timeframe;
  - (b) Published reasons for failure to meet the assessment timeline in line with paragraph 36.
  - (c) Recommendations to further streamline the assessment process; and
  - (d) Information provided at the application stage to allow effective assessment.

**The Monitoring Committee are asked to:**

- (a) **Note** the assessment process which will be used for the PEACE IV Programme;
- (b) **Note** the assessment models illustrated at Annex 2;
- (c) **Note** the Review Procedure for Unsuccessful Applications at Annex 3.

**Annex 1: Extract from Cooperation Programme.**

**Information on calls for grant aid:** *The Managing Authority will publish a rolling 24 month programme of calls for applications. Calls will have a high degree of focus and will detail the results and outputs required and total financial allocation of each call. A calendar of fixed Steering Committee dates will be published at the time of the call which will provide transparency on the targets for processing times. The decision-making procedures and criteria will very clearly set out in the terms of reference of each call. Except in duly justified cases endorsed by the Steering Committee, processing of applications shall be completed in a maximum of 36 weeks. Should the maximum processing times not be met, an up-date indicating the reasons for the delay will be published on the web site of the programme so as to ensure transparency for all applicants and the programme monitoring committee will be informed in the framework of its meetings.*

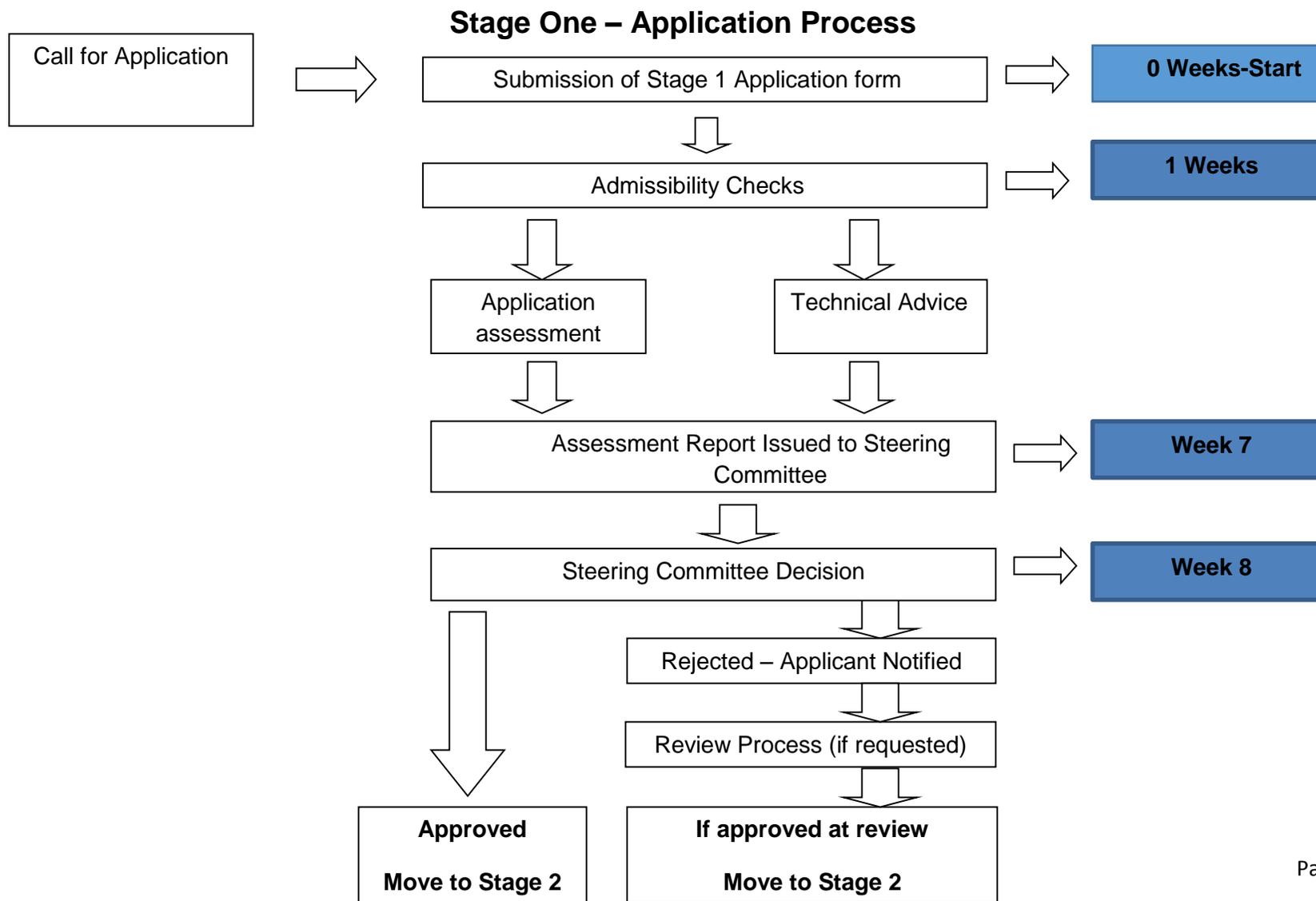
**Application process:** *Support will be available to potential applicants through information seminars and workshops. A two stage application process will be used. Stage one will be a short application form, with applicants receiving a decision within a maximum of 12 weeks of applying. Applications emerging from stage one of the process will then be invited to provide additional detailed information for stage two of the application process.*

**Assessment:** *The primary purpose of the assessment process is to assess the potential of the proposed projects to deliver the specified results and outputs of the programme in a cost effective manner. In stage two of the process, the JS and all other relevant bodies (e.g. accountable departments) will proceed with the full assessment of the application in accordance with the procedures and criteria described in the terms of reference so as to make recommendations to the Steering Committee and to issue letters of offer. Except in duly justified cases, stage two of the process shall not exceed 24 weeks, including the issuing of the letter of offer to the applicant. The principle of proportionality will be applied in the assessment and decision-making process so as to take adequate account of the different types and scale of projects and project applicants and the levels of financial support sought.*

**Allocation of funding:** *The regulations require that the final decision on the allocation of grant aid is made by the Steering Committee (appointed by the Programme*

*Monitoring Committee). The Steering Committee will include representatives of the Member States, accountable/policy departments and social partners. The Steering Committee will have access to required technical and financial expertise to make an informed decision. There will be no additional approval processes post-Steering Committee.*

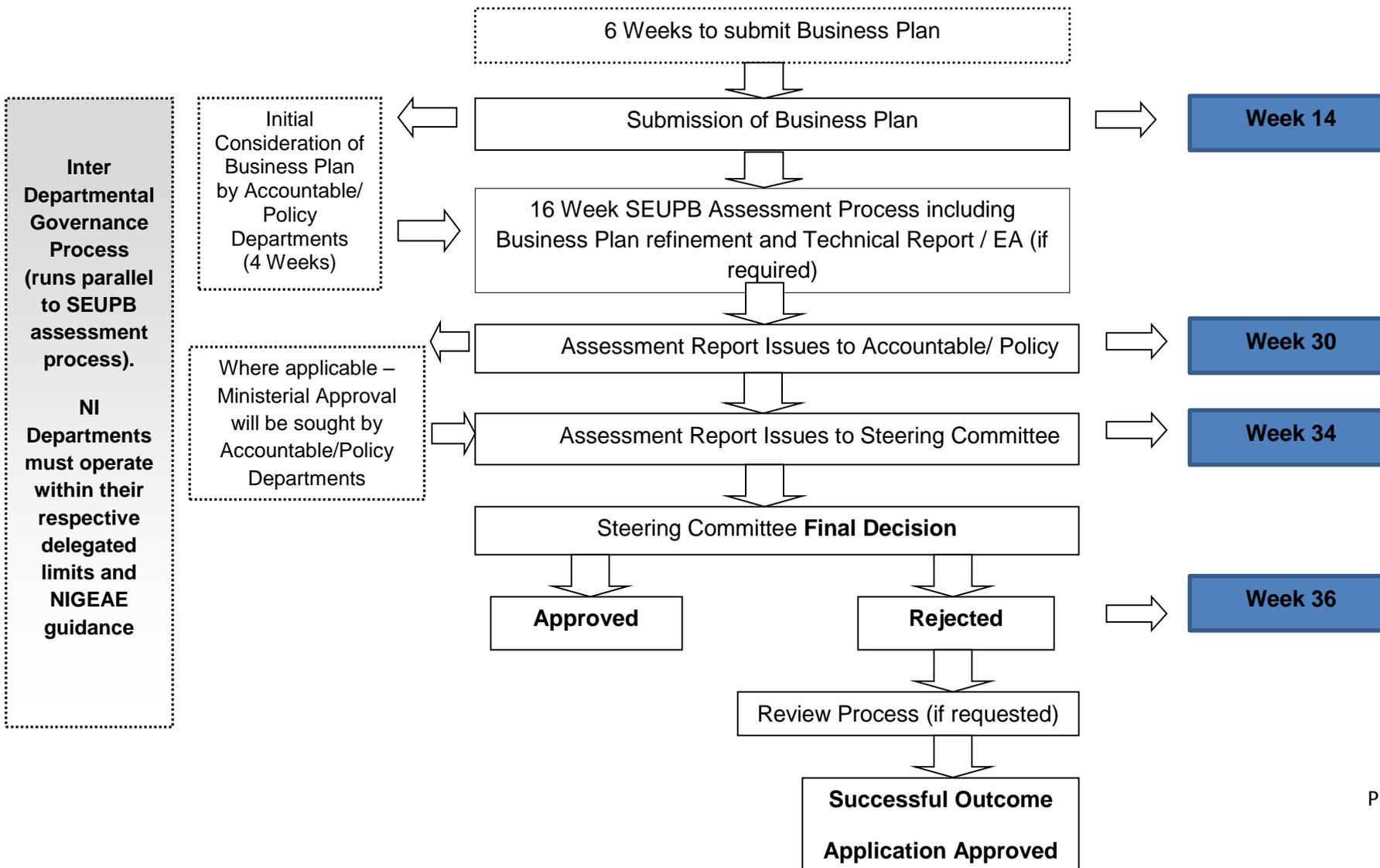
Annex 2 – Proposed INTERREG VA and PEACE IV Project Assessment Model



### Stage Two – Application Process (open)

**ACCOUNTABLE / POLICY DEPARTMENT**

#### SEUPB Process



## Annex 3

### Review Procedure for Unsuccessful Applications

#### 1.0 Introduction

This procedure sets out the process for Project Review that will be implemented in the event that an applicant wishes to appeal the decision of the Steering Committee.

1.1 The procedure will be administered by a Review Panel which will be constituted independently of the Steering Committees.

1.2 The purpose of the Review Procedure is to ensure that the decisions taken and procedures followed by Steering Committee for individual applications are applied fairly and consistently. The Review will provide an independent process through which an applicant will have the opportunity to demonstrate to the Review Panel:

- The outcome was a decision that no reasonable person would have made on the basis of the information provided to the Steering Committee ; **and/or**
- That there was a failure in adherence to procedures or systems that materially affected or could have materially affected the decision.

Appeals on any other grounds will not be considered.

#### 2.0 The Review Procedure

2.1 Following the decision to reject an application, the Steering Committee will justify the decision and the applicant will be officially notified by SEUPB's Joint Secretariat (JS) in writing stating the reasons for the decision.

2.2 The applicant will also be provided with:

- the detailed information on the scoring of the project;
- an opportunity for a de-briefing as outlined in point 2.3 below;
- a copy of the Review Procedures.

2.3 It is expected that a de-briefing meeting will be conducted by JS no later than 28 days following receipt of a rejection letter. The meeting will be conducted either over the telephone or in a face to face meeting with the applicant alone. At this meeting, the applicant will be afforded the opportunity to discuss the reasons for rejection; the scoring and the basis for the decision taken will be clearly communicated to the applicant.

2.4 At the de-briefing meeting the applicant will also be informed of the formal Review Procedure and advised that a decision will **only** be reviewed under the following circumstances:

- The outcome was a decision that no reasonable person would have made on the basis of the information provided to the Steering Committee ; **and/or**
- That there was a failure in adherence to procedures or systems that materially affected or could have materially affected the decision.

2.5 A review can only be requested by the applicant following a de-briefing by a member of staff from JS. Any request for a review should be made in writing **no later than 14 days** after the de-briefing meeting has been held. The request must clearly demonstrate the grounds upon which a review is being requested – as outlined in paragraph 2.4.

2.6 The SEUPB Managing Authority (MA) will manage the Review Process in order to ensure that reviews are carried out in a timely and efficient manner.

2.7 The MA will convene the Review Panel, which is independent from the Steering Committee. The INTERREG Review Panel will comprise of five members, none of

whom were involved in the original selection process; the Chair of the Monitoring Committee, three other Monitoring Committee members and one independent representative. The PEACE Review Panel will comprise of four members, none of whom were involved in the original selection process; the Chair of the Monitoring Committee, two other Monitoring Committee members and one independent representative.

- 2.8 The MA will act as secretariat to the Review Panel and will provide advice and guidance as required. The Review Panel may seek independent legal or other professional advice if required.
- 2.9 The Review must be completed within eight weeks of receipt of the request for a review, unless it is not practical to do so, in which case the applicant will be informed of the earliest possible date of the review by JS.
- 2.10 The decision of the Review Panel will be binding on the applicant and the Steering Committee and shall not be subject to any further Review or appeal within the Programme.

### **3.0 Conducting the Review – Stage One rejection**

- 3.1 The process detailed below applies to projects rejected at Stage One of the application process. Those projects that have been rejected at Stage Two will be reviewed through the process outlined in Section 4.0.
- 3.2 At the Stage One review, **only** written evidence will be considered by the Review Panel. The applicant will detail the basis for their request for a review based on the two grounds outlined in paragraph 2.4. Upon receipt of a written request for a review, the MA will invite the JS to make a written submission.
- 3.3 Neither the applicant nor the JS will be invited to attend the Review Panel meeting, nor will they have an opportunity to orally present their case for review.

- 3.4 The Review Panel will receive all the documentation considered by the Steering Committee **at least 10 days** in advance of the meeting. This will include signed documentation relating to all stages of the selection process and the record of the reasons for the Steering Committee decision. The Review Panel will also receive a copy of the written request for the review and any submission from the JS.
- 3.5 In reaching its determination the review panel will **only** consider the information that was available to the assessment process i.e. the information in the application form. No other additional or new information that was not part of the application form will be considered.
- 3.6 The Review Panel will convey its decision to the applicant in writing within 14 days of its meeting. The minutes of the Review Panel will then be placed onto the SEUPB website. If an applicant is successful in their review, their application to Stage Two will not be disadvantaged as result of the time taken to complete the review.

#### **4.0 Conducting the Review – Stage Two rejection**

- 4.1 The process detailed below applies to projects rejected at Stage Two of the application process.
- 4.2 Upon receipt of a written request for a review, the MA will convene the Review Panel as outlined in Paragraph 2.7 above. The request for a review should detail the grounds of the review based on paragraph 2.4.
- 4.3 The Review Panel will receive all the documentation considered by the Steering Committee **at least 10 days** in advance of the meeting. This will include signed documentation relating to all stages of the selection process, the record of the reasons for the Steering Committee decision and a copy of the written request for the review.
- 4.4 At the Stage Two review, the applicant and the JS will have the right to attend the Review Panel meeting, but not to be represented by lawyers or other advisers

external to the applicant's organisation. The Review Panel can proceed even if either the applicant, the JS, or both are absent.

- 4.5 The applicant may present their case for review to the Panel. The presentation should last no longer than ten minutes; and should be consistent with the written submission in paragraph 4.2. The JS will have a right to respond to any such presentation. The Review Panel may ask questions of clarification of any participant.
- 4.6 The applicant and the JS will then withdraw from the room and the Panel will discuss and reach a consensus determination.
- 4.7 The Review Panel will convey its decision to the applicant in writing within 14 days of its meeting. The minutes of the Review Panel will then be placed onto the SEUPB website.

## **5.0 Other Information**

- 5.1 The SEUPB shall ensure that sufficient funds have been retained from the Programme budget for allocation to those projects which have a successful outcome to their review.