

## Promotion of internet connectivity in local communities

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The Committee on Industry, Research and Energy adopted the report by Carlos ZORRINHO (S&D, PT) on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EU) No 1316/2013 and (EU) No 283/2014 as regards the promotion of Internet connectivity in local communities.

The committee recommended that the European Parliaments position adopted at first reading, following the ordinary legislative procedure, should amend the Commission proposal as follows:

Universal and free access: actions contributing to projects of common interest shall promote the provision of high quality local wireless connectivity that is free of charge and free from restrictions in local communities.

For the purposes of accessibility, those actions shall, to the extent possible, avoid potential language barriers.

Access points: in order to promote internet connectivity in local communities, the proposal encouraged the deployment of wireless local access points as part of simplified planning procedures with reduced regulatory barriers.

Members stressed that these access points should be able to form part of a network with a single authentication system that is valid across the whole Union, and other free local wireless connectivity networks should be able to join the system.

Simplified procedures: given the limited volume of financial appropriations measured against the possibly high number of applications, Members called for steps to be taken to ensure that administrative procedures are simplified so that decisions can be taken in a timely manner.

In this regard, they called for Regulation (EU) No 1316/2013 to be amended to ensure that certification of expenditure and annual reporting to the Commission are not obligatory for grants awarded under this Regulation.

Eligibility of actions: eligible institutions may use financial assistance to establish free local wireless connectivity in locations that are most suitable and accessible for community usage.

To be eligible, projects shall:

- be implemented by a public sector body capable of ensuring the financing of operating costs for minimum of three years;
- build on very high-speed broadband connectivity enabling delivery of high quality Internet experience to users is that free, easy to access, and uses state-of-the-art equipment, taking advantage of optimal technological solutions;
- respect the principle of technological neutrality, use public funding efficiently and are able to adapt projects to the best technological offers.

Financing: Member States may allocate their own resources or resources from the European Structural and Investment Funds to develop complementary services and offers that boost the sustainability of projects. Projects financed under this section shall be in operation and closely monitored by the Commission for at least three years.

The intervention shall be implemented by the most appropriate forms of financial assistance, notably grants, for instance through vouchers, available under the Financial Regulation. The principle of sound financial management should apply.

The available budget shall be allocated in a geographically balanced manner so that projects can be covered in all the Member States. The allocation shall also take into account the need to address the digital divide.

Priority shall be given to local SMEs in the context of the procurement and installation of equipment.