

WIFI4EU – Promotion of internet connectivity in local communities

The European Commission has launched an initiative aimed at providing free access to fast internet in local communities. The European Parliament is due to discuss and vote on WIFI4EU during its September plenary.

Background

The Commission is of the opinion that the EU lags behind other industrialised nations, such as South Korea and Japan, when it comes to access to fast fixed and wireless internet. Closing this gap is one of the Commission's highest priorities. The intention is to create a [European gigabit society](#) through improving internet connectivity using both optical fibre and wireless networks.

Commission proposal

The WIFI4EU [proposal](#) is part of that strategy to create a gigabit society, and effectively aims at creating some demand pull. The initiative is meant as a way to boost awareness among users of the advantages of high-speed internet access, by establishing a scheme offering free WIFI connections in [spaces](#) where public services are offered, such as public administrations, libraries and hospitals, and also in outdoor spaces accessible to the general public. Targeted financial support would be provided in the form of grants and/or financial assistance for the deployment of local wireless access points. Over a period of three years, a total of €120 million of EU investment would be mobilised through the [Connecting Europe Facility](#) (CEF), both through increasing its financial envelope by €50 million, and the reallocation of €70 million inside the CEF. In addition, planning procedures would be simplified and regulatory obstacles reduced. It is intended to avoid the crowding out of commercial efforts and the distortion of competition.

European Parliament position

The ITRE committee adopted its [report](#) (rapporteur: Carlos Zorrinho, S&D, Portugal) on 25 April 2017. The report broadly supports the Commission's initiative, including the financial framework. The committee insisted on the connectivity being delivered free of charge and free of restrictions. It also encouraged prolonging the financing beyond the time-span of three years set out in the proposal. The scope of potential recipients was slightly modified. Geographical balance should be achieved and the digital divide addressed. Local SMEs should be favoured in procurement. A single authentication system should be used across all Member States, and the mining of data for commercial use should be prohibited, as would commercial advertisement. The approval of applications should be simplified, and financial assistance should be through a system of vouchers. Particular efforts should be made to make potential users aware of the availability of these services, and to ensure that users are aware they are financially supported by the EU.

Outcome of the trilogue negotiations

The [result](#) of the trilogue meetings between EP and Council, reflect most of Parliament's demands. The most prominent departure from Parliament's position is a more modest increase in the financial envelope, of €25 million instead of €50 million, although with the possibility to increase it to the full €50 million if that were needed. Also, there is no explicit extension of the scheme beyond three years, nor mention of favouring local businesses. On 29 May 2017 the Council's Permanent Representatives Committee agreed on the draft compromise text. On 21 June the ITRE committee approved the text, paving the way to final adoption.

First reading: [2016/0287\(COD\)](#); Committee responsible: ITRE; Rapporteur: Carlos Zorrinho (S&D, Portugal). For further information, see the EPRS 'EU Legislation in Progress' briefing, [WIFI4EU](#).

