

FOLLOW-UP TO OBSERVATIONS IN THE PARLIAMENT'S 2018 DISCHARGE RESOLUTION

Financial Regulation, Art. 262: Follow-up measures

1. *In accordance with Article 319 TFEU and Article 106a of the Euratom Treaty, Union institutions and Union bodies referred to in Articles 70 and 71 of this Regulation shall take all appropriate steps to act on the observations accompanying the European Parliament's discharge decision and on the comments accompanying the recommendation for discharge adopted by the Council.*
2. *At the request of the European Parliament or of the Council, Union institutions and Union bodies referred to in Articles 70 and 71 shall report on the measures taken in the light of those observations and comments, and, in particular, on the instructions they have given to any of their departments which are responsible for budget implementation ... The reports from Union institutions and Union bodies referred to in Articles 70 and 71 shall also be transmitted to the Court of Auditors.*

1.1 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION OF 14 MARCH 2020 WITH OBSERVATIONS FORMING AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE DECISION ON DISCHARGE IN RESPECT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GENERAL BUDGET OF THE EUROPEAN UNION FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 2018, SECTION VI – EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE (2019/2060(DEC))

The European Parliament,

- A. whereas in the context of the discharge procedure, the discharge authority wishes to stress the particular importance of further strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the Union institutions by improving transparency and accountability, and implementing the concept of performance-based budgeting and good governance of human resources;
1. Welcomes the conclusion of the Court of Auditors (the 'Court') that the payments as a whole for the year ended 31 December 2018 for the administrative expenditure of the European Economic and Social Committee (the 'Committee') were free from material error and that the examined supervisory and control systems were effective;

No follow-up required.

2. Notes that the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) from July until November 2018 received allegations about harassment concerning a senior member of the Committee, the president of the Employer's Group (Group I) since April 2013, from five different sources and that on 6 November 2018 OLAF decided to open an investigation;

No follow-up required.

3. Notes that one case of harassment was reported in 2018 through the formal procedure (article 24 of the Staff Regulations and article 12§1 of the Committee's decision on the prevention of harassment); reminds that the administrative inquiry has been concluded and a minimal disciplinary sanction has

been imposed on the person accused although all possibilities of appeal have not yet been exhausted; notes that three additional cases of harassment, to some extent connected to each other, were reported in 2018 through seven whistleblowing reports; notes that two administrative inquiries were launched and the matters were referred to OLAF in January 2019;

No follow-up required.

4. Notes that on 17 January 2020 OLAF addressed its report and recommendations to the president of the Committee as provided in the cooperation agreement between the Committee and OLAF; expresses concern that OLAF made findings of harassment against two staff members, of improper behaviour (serious misconduct) against one staff member and one member of the Committee, and of misconduct against other staff members, and that it also decided to refer the matter to the Belgian authorities;

OLAF informed the EESC that its recommendations concerning the investigation in question were also being sent to the Belgian Federal Public Prosecutor's Office.

5. Deplores the findings of OLAF as regards psychological harassment, grave misconduct and inappropriate behaviour by the president of Group 1 towards his subordinates between 2013 and 2018; notes that under Belgian law harassment constitutes a criminal offence; notes, furthermore, that Article 4 of the code of conduct for the members of the Committee on dignity has been breached and that such behaviour is not compatible with the Union values of respect for and protection of human dignity within the work place as provided for in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; calls on the Committee to report to the discharge authority in a timely manner on what it has done to follow up on the recommendations by OLAF;

The EESC is committed to its reporting obligations both with regard to the discharge authority and OLAF.

See the reply to point 6 of the EP resolution.

6. Expects the Committee to duly inform the discharge authority before September 2020 of the measures taken to follow up OLAF's recommendations and to rectify the wrongdoings;

The EESC President received the report from OLAF on 17 January 2020. Pursuant to Article 7, paragraph 4, of the Code of Conduct, the President formally requested on 27 January 2020 that the Advisory Committee on the Conduct of Members assess the alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct and advise on the possible steps to be taken. In parallel, the Secretary-General instructed the competent services to take all the appropriate accompanying measures in order to ensure the wellbeing of the Group I secretariat staff and of any other persons concerned, taking into account their specific needs, in order to offer medical, psychological and administrative support. All of the above measures are complemented by some initiatives handled directly by the current management of the Group secretariat.

7. Calls on the Committee to consistently apply Article 8 of its code of conduct without any delay, namely by starting the necessary procedure against persons concerned and by promptly referring such matters to the advisory committee on the conduct of members;

After having received the conclusions of the Advisory Committee, the President shall invite the member concerned to submit his written observations, consult the enlarged presidency and then ask the Bureau to take a decision on the measures that may be taken in accordance with the Members' Statute and the Committee's Rules of Procedure.

According to the degree of severity of the member's behaviour, the following sanctions may be applied:

- a written warning;

- **inclusion of the written warning in the Bureau minutes and, where applicable, in the plenary session minutes;**
 - **temporary suspension of the member from any duties as rapporteur, president or member of a study group, and from any participation in missions and extraordinary meetings.**
8. Stresses its concern with respect to the current work environment within the Committee, particularly in Group I, and asks the Committee to take the necessary measures to establish the respectful and trustworthy environment necessary for the personal wellbeing and professional development of the staff; further reminds the Committee that a bad work environment causes inefficiency, stress and lack of productivity;

The Secretary-General has instructed the Director of Human Resources and Finance to meet all those concerned by the OLAF report in order to provide appropriate additional assistance (see the answer to point 6 of the EP resolution).

The EESC has and will continue to pay extremely careful attention to its work environment, in full compliance with the duty of care of the administration towards staff. Whilst several actions have already been taken (which are further developed in the reply to point 11 of the EP resolution), the EESC strives to further improve a respectful and trustworthy working environment.

9. Notes that on 22 January 2020 Group I proceeded to the election of its current president as candidate to become president of the Committee from October 2020 when the presidency of the Committee is to be held by Group I for two-and-a-half years;

No follow-up required.

10. Recalls the Report of the European Ombudsman on dignity at work in the EU institutions and agencies: SI/2/2018/AMF, which states with respect to high-ranking personnel that individuals 'are particularly vulnerable to harassment where there is a power imbalance between the parties involved. This can be mitigated through more demanding rules for high-ranking personnel, who are not covered by the Staff Regulations, such as commissioners, judges, members of the Court of Auditors, members of the Economic and Social Committee and so on. These could include aggravated disciplinary measures, such as compulsory retirement or removal of pension rights. High-ranking personnel should be informed of all anti-harassment rules and policies at the beginning of their mandates in a comprehensive manner and at regular intervals.';

The provisions of the Staff Regulations are not applicable to the EESC members, as they are not employed, but appointed as EESC members. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Rules 301 and 302) lays down the EESC's composition and compensation. The EESC is ready to consider further improvements to its system based on its internal experience and the benchmarks of other institutions. Awareness-raising actions (including training sessions) will be put at the disposal of members.

11. Requests that the Committee put in place and implement an action plan to actively prevent and tackle harassment in the working environment, to raise awareness of harassment and to foster a culture of zero tolerance with regard to harassment;

The EESC continues its zero-tolerance policy towards any behaviour which is likely to undermine human dignity. Following the OLAF report and on top of specific related follow-up measures, at the beginning of 2020 the EESC Directorate for Human Resources and Finance initiated an in-depth assessment and reflection on the overall existing framework. This process aims to identify potential gaps and further improve, where necessary, all types of available measures to address issues linked to harassment, taking also into account amongst other things, existing best practices, the recommendations of the report of the European Ombudsman on dignity at work and the outcome of the 2016 EESC staff survey.

This ongoing reflection will result in a detailed action plan, as requested by the EP, which would cover in particular:

- a revision package concerning the decisions on harassment, whistleblowing and disciplinary procedure in order to improve the robustness of the legal arsenal where necessary, to increase synergies between these instruments and to reinforce the Committee's ethics and integrity framework. A working group was set up including representatives from the administration and the staff committee with the aim of collecting the widest possible input for improvements.**
- the continuation of various awareness-raising initiatives such as monthly presentations by the confidential counsellors to newcomers and presentations/discussions with managers and other target groups. The Respect@work campaign of 2019 was manifold and included a participatory approach, staff consultations, new communication tools such as a digital "advent calendar of kindness", post-its etc., and last but not least a dedicated intranet page, which is constantly updated in order to inform staff on the follow-up to the campaign (e.g. new training opportunities related to understanding and dealing with harassment for both staff and managers, and the revision of the ethical framework).**
- the organisation of dedicated training activities. In line with the Internal Control Standards, which require ensuring that staff are aware of relevant ethical and organisational values and the associated rules and procedures, several Ethics and Integrity courses were offered in-house, along with an information campaign. While this training has been obligatory for all newcomers for several years now, those who were recruited before may never have followed this course. The campaign is being continued in 2020 with the aim of reaching as many staff members as possible. A similar training course on "Diversity and Respect at Work" is also available to members. The first session had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus situation but it will be reorganized as soon as the evolution of the pandemic allows.**

All of these activities are aimed at staff and some at the EESC members, with the end goal of further raising awareness among all involved of the zero-tolerance policy towards harassment at the EESC.

12. Calls on the Committee to improve measures allowing staff to make formal harassment complaints, to organise regular training for confidential counsellors and to set up a pool of independent investigators which the Committee can call on during formal harassment investigations;

In order to further improve the mechanisms allowing staff to make formal harassment complaints, the decision on harassment and the decision on administrative investigations are currently being revised. This includes a reflection about the creation of a well-trained and specialised team that could be dedicated to administrative inquiries.

In order to further improve the informal procedure and the possibility for staff members to share their concerns on any perceived situation of harassment, the number of confidential counsellors has been increased. The new team received a six-day initial training programme with an external trainer (a psychologist and coach specialized in the prevention and treatment of psycho-social risks). The whole network of confidential counsellors receives continuous support through regular supervision and they follow various additional training sessions such as those on conflict resolution, assertiveness, etc.

The EESC confidential counsellors are part of an inter-institutional network, allowing for the exchange of best practices.

13. Notes with satisfaction the examples of good practice from the Court's anti-harassment policy which has strong disciplinary measures for culpable members, such as compulsory retirement or denial of pension rights, and calls on the Committee to emulate those examples;

While the EESC seeks permanent inspiration from the other EU bodies, and is actively looking into best practices in the context of the above-mentioned action plan, in light of legal differences between the institutions, not all measures can be put in place as such. Specifically, it is not within the Committee's power to impose a forced retirement or deny pension rights to any of its members.

By adopting the Code of Conduct in 2019 as a part of the revised Rules of Procedures, the EESC made an important step towards stronger disciplinary measures, as it allows sanctions for members breaching the Code of Conduct. The new Advisory Committee is a fully independent body issuing recommendations in the event of possible wrongdoing by a member. According to the degree of severity of the member's behaviour, the following sanctions may be applied: a written warning; inclusion of the written warning in the Bureau minutes and, where applicable, in the plenary session minutes; temporary suspension of the member from any duties as rapporteur, president or member of a study group, and from any participation in missions and extraordinary meetings.

The Committee is ready to consider improvements to its system (see also the reply to point 10 of the EP resolution).

14. Regrets, as a general observation, that chapter 10 'Administration' of the Court's Annual Report has a rather limited scope and conclusions, notwithstanding the fact that Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) Heading 5 'Administration' is considered to be low risk;

The Committee will follow any decision taken by the Court of Auditors in this respect.

15. Notes that the Court selected a sample of 45 transactions from the MFF Heading 5 'Administration' of all Union institutions and bodies; notes that the sample was designed to be representative of the range of spending under Heading 5, which represents 6,3 % of the Union budget; notes that the Court's work indicates administrative expenditure as low risk; considers, however, the amount of transactions selected in relation to the 'other institutions' to be insufficient and asks the Court to increase the number of transactions to be examined by at least 10 %;

No follow-up required.

16. Notes that in 2018 the Committee's budget amounted to EUR 135 630 905, compared to EUR 133 807 338 in 2017, corresponding to an increase of 1,36 %; notes an overall rate of implementation of 98,66 %, compared to 96,5 % in 2017 and 97,2 % in 2016;

No follow-up required.

17. Welcomes the overall prudent and sound financial management of the Committee in the 2018 budget period; welcomes the fact that the commitment rate for Title 1 'Expenditure relating to persons working with the Committee' was 98,94 % and for Title 2 'Buildings, equipment and miscellaneous operating expenditure' 97,97 %;

No follow-up required.

18. Observes with concern that the final appropriations for travel and subsistence allowances for Members are slightly increasing, to EUR 20 247 625 in 2018 (compared to EUR 19 819 612 in 2017 and EUR 19 561 194 in 2016), despite the reduction in numbers of meetings; acknowledges that the related unused appropriations only amount to 1,05 %;

As indicated in the reply to point 25 of the EP resolution, the Committee adopted 215 opinions and reports in 2018 compared to 155 in 2017. A higher number of opinions and reports issued also means that more members were involved in preparing these opinions (also via study visits, hearings, etc.), which explains higher costs for travelling and other reimbursements.

Travel costs and subsistence allowances depend on a series of variable elements besides the number of meetings such as, for example, unpredictability in air travel fares and the meeting place, the number of participants in each meeting and their place of residence, the number of meeting days, the means of transport used by the beneficiaries and the chosen itinerary pursuant to the available flight connections. A comprehensive report detailing travel costs and allowances is submitted every year by 30 April to the European Parliament and to the Council.

19. Welcomes the Committee's Decision No 2018/C 466/02 of 10 December 2018, according to which the Committee's members are reimbursed upon presentation of the supporting documents the actual costs of their travel tickets up to a maximum of the discounted business class (preferably economy class or similar) air fare; notes that the current system, which is based on actual costs, is in line with both the relevant Council decision and with the system in place at Parliament; appreciates that the Committee encourages shared transport solutions such as public buses and car-sharing as well as hiring coaches when this proves to be the most cost-efficient solution;

The Committee is fully committed to improving and fine-tuning its reimbursement system. The current system, in line with the Council decision, is based on the reimbursement – upon presentation of supporting documents – of actual travel costs incurred. The Committee reimbursement system is largely inspired by the European Parliament system, and is implemented with a constant focus on efficient and cost-saving solutions. Besides encouraging shared transport solutions and facilitating the use of low cost airports, the Committee requires its travel agency (which is the same as the one that provides services for the European Parliament) not only to negotiate special rates with airlines and other transport providers, but also to systematically propose to Committee beneficiaries suitable cost-efficient alternatives for their travels.

20. Notes that in 2018 the budget group of the Committee focused in particular on assessing how to control spending and improve forecasting for the budget item covering members' travel and subsistence allowances and that as a result, a call for tender on 'Analysis and proposal for improvements of the current projection system concerning cost reimbursement of EESC members, delegates and experts' was launched in October 2018; calls on the Committee to inform Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control on any results achieved;

The call for tender resulted in a detailed report from the external contractor on possible improvements to the current projection system, also indicating possible scenarios for changing the current system.

A detailed action plan on the implementation was set up following the EESC Bureau decision, which should have delivered the first results by end of April 2020. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, and the very volatile effects of this crisis on the members' reimbursement, the implementation of the project has been delayed.

21. Observes that the appropriations carried forward (EUR 8 204 796) from 2018 to 2019 (compared to EUR 9 232 069 from 2017 to 2018) amount to 6,05 % of the total appropriations, which is again mainly due to the budget lines 'Members of the institution and delegates', 'buildings' and 'data processing'; deplores the fact that many appropriations automatically carried forward from 2017 to 2018 were particularly overestimated; reminds the Committee that it is essential to make a realistic budget adjustment in accordance with real needs; recalls that excessive overestimation or underestimation indicates poor budgetary planning and entails negative pressure on the sound and prudent financial management;

The carry-forward amount in the last two years is higher than in previous years due to the more extensive end-of-year exercise, which implies transfers of unused funds on some budget lines to other budget lines in need of funds. The budget lines "buildings" and "data processing" received funds especially to cope with the historical backlog on these lines due to previous years. As the amount from this exercise is only available at the end of the year, the services are not able to spend these in the same year and they cannot be calculated exactly

beforehand, as they become part of the carry forward of the next year. The amount carried forward on the budget lines related to "Members of the institution and delegates" was needed in order to handle the members' reimbursement claims still in the following year. Since 1 January 2019, a general deadline of six weeks for submitting these reimbursement claims was set up to reduce the reimbursement lead times and therefore also to reduce the need for carry-overs on these budget lines. The system has proved to be efficient.

22. Stresses that the Committee's budget is purely administrative; notes that the Committee assessed how to apply the principles of performance-based budgeting to administrative appropriations only; welcomes the Committee's initiative to work together with other institutions to establish a set of interinstitutional guidelines on the implementation of performance-based budgeting for institutions that have only administrative expenditure;

No follow-up required.

23. Recognises that in 2018 a decision on internal control standards was updated, formalising the existence of an internal control process within the Committee, including the appointment of an internal control coordinator; notes that the Committee launched an exercise for compliance with the 16 internal control standards by means of an ad hoc questionnaire, followed by a report, which was the basis for the authorising officer to decide on a catalogue of measures for 2019 aiming to further improve compliance with the internal control standards; welcomes the training and awareness raising taking place in this context;

No follow-up required.

24. Notes the fact that salaries make up approximately half the Committee's budget; welcomes the internal audit on salary payments which was finalised in 2018 and is to provide assurance that procedures had improved after an audit carried out in 2010; notes that the audit found the salary payment process to be stable and not to pose any undue risks; notes the agreed action plan which had already been implemented partly by the end of 2018 with all the other elements scheduled for implementation by the end of 2019;

No follow-up required.

25. Observes that in 2018 the Committee adopted a total of 215 opinions and reports (compared to 155 in 2017); welcomes the efforts made to increase its overall efficiency; specifically welcomes all the efforts, in particular in 2018, which led to a vision to shape the Committee's future IT environment to be compatible with modern administration and to envisage a digitally transformed, user focused and data-driven Committee for the next 10 years; notes that currently only 3 % of the Committee's budget is devoted to IT products; notes that the implementation of the digital strategy of the Committee will need extra resources;

For the past couple of years, the Committee has been indeed asking for a substantial increase in its IT budget. It is the only possible way to achieve the goals mentioned in the above observation and for the implementation of the Committee's digital strategy. Only if an increase of the IT budget up to 4.5% of the total budget is allocated will it be possible to address these risks, to cover market-driven increases in software licence costs, as well as in SLAs, investments in security, cloud and mobile computing, extra resources for faster delivery of new and improved information systems, and finally extra internet capacity. This scenario would allow the Digital Strategy to be implemented within the foreseen timeframe and also allow the Committee to catch up and close the gap vis-à-vis the other EU Institutions. Ideally, in the long run this figure of 4.5% should go up to 6%.

On the other hand, low investment rates in IT in recent years has led to a difficult situation. Firstly, with regard to the lower rates of replacement of IT infrastructure (servers, storage and network equipment) and secondly, the slower delivery of new applications (due to the limited number of external programmers, which could be financed by a limited budget).

Also, an increase in the IT budget limited to the inflation rate will not improve current situation significantly but will, on the contrary, lead to a deadlock situation – slow progress towards the Digital Workplace, slow delivery of Information Systems and restricted network capacity. It will also lead to budget shortages in relation to paying increasing costs related to market-driven increases in software licence costs and increasing costs related to Service Level Agreements (SLA) with the European Commission.

More recently new pressures on the IT budget have arisen in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, namely: completing the Digital Workplace by issuing all staff with portable PCs, migrating to a hybrid cloud environment and providing technical support for videoconferences, and supporting the Buildings Strategy. However, the EESC has proposed an increased budget for IT for the year 2021 and welcomes the fact the European Parliament shares its view during the ongoing budgetary procedure.

See also the reply to point 53 of the EP resolution.

26. Acknowledges that artificial intelligence (AI) will change the labour market and displace a big proportion of jobs currently existing; encourages the Committee to follow this issue closely; supports the work done by the Committee on AI by issuing an opinion and organising a first stakeholder summit on AI in June 2018 with the Commission in order to stress the importance for the Union of ensuring that AI is safe, unbiased and in line with Union values;

No follow-up required.

27. Welcomes the Committee's efforts to increase the data protection and cybersecurity of the Committee; further welcomes the cooperation with the Computer Emergency Response Team for the EU Institutions, bodies and agencies and the active participation in the IT Interinstitutional Committee Security subgroup;

No follow-up required.

28. Stresses that a service level agreement between the Commission and the Committee on human resources, including training, was concluded in 2018 and has increased the transparency and predictability of costs related to IT training as requested in Parliament's 2017 discharge resolution; notes with concern, however, that the advantage of increased transparency is partly offset by a substantial increase in prices charged by the Commission and asks the Committee to analyse the situation together with the Commission in the interests of finding improvements;

The new SLA between the Commission and the EESC indeed brings more transparency and clarity in the field of training courses. The analysis showed that the price increase compared to the previous year is not as high as initially expected and lies at around 4%. This somehow adds pressure to the EESC budgetary projections each and every year.

29. Points out that the establishment plan approved by the budgetary authority confirmed a staff increase from 665 posts in 2017 to 668 in 2018 (compared to 727 in 2013); recognises that a 5 % reduction is much more difficult to absorb when applied to a relatively small establishment plan because of the need to maintain certain key functions in terms of business continuity and that such an overall reduction rate requires a greater effort from smaller institutions;

No follow-up required.

30. Notes the measures to implement the whistleblowing decision of 2016, such as the adoption of an internal decision on ethics counsellors; acknowledges that three additional members of staff were selected in 2018 to join the active team of trained counsellors; notes the role of the ethics counsellors to advise and assist members of staff in order to help them fulfil their obligations in the best way

possible regarding the reporting of serious misconduct (whistleblowing), as stated in Parliament's 2016 discharge resolution;

No follow-up required.

31. Notes with concern that the number of the requests of assistance addressed to the ethics counsellors increased from 25 in 2017 to 42 in 2018 and stresses with particular concern that 33 of such requests were from women while the number of requests from men remained stable at nine;

As of 2018, the confidential counsellors have been organising various awareness-raising initiatives, such as monthly presentations to newcomers and presentations/discussions with managers and other target groups. Colleagues have been encouraged to come and see confidential counsellors as early as possible about any workplace issue causing concern. This has contributed to creating a working atmosphere where in general colleagues feel more at ease to contact confidential counsellors on issues such as conflicts with other colleagues and/or managers, management style, perceived harassment etc. As two thirds of all staff members of the EESC are female, the proportion of requests from women to confidential counsellors is only slightly above this percentage.

32. Notes all the measures undertaken to strengthen the effectiveness of the anti-harassment policy, such as training on specific topics, opportunities for the confidential counsellors to network, and regular supervision by an external consultant; notes that a revision of the current decision on harassment is under consideration to ensure better synergies with other relevant regulations, such as on whistleblowing; notes that the course on ethics and integrity is compulsory for all staff and covers standards of behaviour in the workplace, including what harassment is and how to deal with it; deeply regrets that all these measures have failed to avoid the related cases of harassment and to protect the victims; reminds the Committee that a proactive, real and urgent protection (including against threats, blackmail and bribery attempts) of all of the victims and whistleblowers must be one of the key priorities of these measures; calls on the Committee to reinforce and improve the measures undertaken until now and above all effectively protect all of the victims; asks the Committee to report back to the Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control in this regard;

The protection of victims and whistleblowers will continue to remain central in the zero-tolerance approach followed by the EESC. As already mentioned in the replies to points 11 and 12 of the EP resolution, the EESC continues to actively prevent and combat harassment, and to promote a respectful workplace at all levels. The EESC confirms that the aspects of victim protection will also be duly taken into account in the context of the ongoing reflections and establishment of a detailed action plan.

33. Notes with appreciation the cooperation between the Committee and OLAF; observes that both institutions signed administrative arrangements in 2016 which set out the procedure to be followed for the handling of fraud cases; further notes that in July 2019 the Committee's president and secretary-general met OLAF's director-general in order to create better synergies and ensure more efficient exchange of information;

No follow-up required.

34. Notes that the new code of conduct for members, which is annexed to the Committee's new rules of procedure that entered into force in March 2019, for the first time contains penalties for members involved in situations where a member does not fulfil his or her obligations according to the code of conduct; regrets that such penalties are neither sufficiently severe nor aligned with the recommendations of the European Ombudsman; recalls that using Union funds to defend the institutional reputation or members subject to an adverse judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) or by courts of the Member States is a misuse of public funds and recalls that institutional legal services are to be used for the purpose of defending the institution only, not to defend the interests of individuals; asks the Committee to urgently strengthen the code of conduct for members in order particularly to add penalties that may be more effective and dissuasive; notes

that an advisory committee on the conduct of members has been established and that this committee will give any member who so requests guidance on the interpretation and implementation of the code of conduct, and advise the president of the Committee on possible steps to be taken and on alleged breaches of the code of conduct; strongly recommends that harassment training is made available to all members, as it has been the case in Parliament since the beginning of the current parliamentary term;

As far as harassment and respect at work are concerned the administration is taking a variety of action. Measures include training, publication of brochures, awareness-raising campaign, etc. See the replies to points 10, 11 and 13 above.

35. Recalls that the Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control asked for regular updates of the Committee's ethics and integrity framework; welcomes that in 2018 preparations started for a campaign on 'Respect@work', meant to foster respectful workplace relations for all, which among other actions will feed into a revision of the ethics and integrity framework in 2019; calls on the Committee to report back in the next annual activity report;

In 2019, an awareness-raising and participative initiative (the Respect@work campaign) to foster respectful workplace relations was organised and the importance of a fair, inclusive and ethical work environment was promoted via posters, a video production and the distribution of Respect@work branded products such as post-its and conferences. In addition, in order to reach out to all staff and to ensure their views were heard, an online survey entitled "What is respect@work for you?" and a consultation forum were also organized. Both exercises attracted a significant number of participants and contributed to the reflection on the further need to strengthen a culture of trust and dialogue.

The EESC will gladly provide an update on the developments in the ethics and integrity framework and the 'Respect@work' campaign in the 2019 AAR.

36. Recalls that the legal service of the Committee was substantially weakened for four years from March 2010 when the head of the legal service was dismissed with immediate effect from his duties after having denounced serious irregularities and illicit pressures by the secretary-general at the time; also recalls that this position was vacant for three-and-a-half years, that the European Civil Service Tribunal found against the Committee in this case (judgment in Case F-41/10 RENV, Bermejo Garde v European Economic and Social Committee), that the Committee had to pay more than EUR 100 000 and that only in 2014 a new head of the legal service was appointed and the legal service reinforced with five lawyers;

The above-mentioned file was fully closed by a Judgment of the Civil Service Tribunal of 2 June 2016 and no additional developments are expected concerning this case as the official's requests were satisfied.

37. Is very concerned about the recent changes which may again weaken the legal service of the Committee, including that it since 1 January 2020 is attached directly to the secretary-general as the only legal service among the Union institutions, that since September 2019 it has lost one of its five lawyers on a permanent basis, that some staff members, including the head of unit, have been included in mobility instead of being considered specialised staff as in the other institutions and that it has suffered a drastic reduction in the number of formal consultations;

Amongst other changes, the new structure of the EESC – in place since 1 January 2020 – attached the Legal Service directly to the Secretary-General, in order to increase its visibility and impact. The number of lawyers has stayed stable compared to previous years. In addition, the legal capacity was reinforced in the MEM unit (Members' Working Conditions) to allow the treatment of specific issues in relation with the Member's statute. Concerning the question of specialised staff, including staff belonging to the Legal service who should be exempted from the EESC's mobility policy, a reflection is ongoing.

38. Stresses the importance of having a strong and independent legal service, taking into account that since their creation, the Union institutions have provided themselves with internal legal services whose main functions are legal advice and representation and defence before the CJEU; , therefore asks the Committee to ensure that its legal service has a sufficient number of staff to perform its duties and is able to keep its independence; asks the Committee to eliminate all measures that could weaken the legal service in the exercise of its corresponding activities and functions; also reminds the Committee of the importance of consulting the legal service on the Committee's decisions in order to assure they comply with the law and to avoid making serious mistakes and subsequent legal, long and onerous proceedings;

The legal service is consulted whenever appropriate and whenever such consultation could bring added value.

39. Fully regrets public allegations caused by the recruitment procedure for the new secretary-general of the Committee; notes the arguments raised by the secretary-general in the answers to Parliament's questions for the 2018 discharge; stresses the importance of strictly ensuring the accomplishment of complete transparency in all the phases of the entire the whole procedure (publication, selection, appointment and establishment) without any exceptions as set out in the Committee's rules of procedure and in the Staff Regulations in order to comply with them and also to avoid any reputational risk, not only for the Committee but for all the Union institutions;

The EESC reiterates the information already provided in the answers given by the Secretary-General to the Parliament's questions for the 2018 discharge. The EESC confirms that it always takes the greatest care in ensuring transparency and efficiency in all aspects and stages of all recruitment procedures in strict accordance with the Staff Regulations and the Committee's Rules of Procedures, with a view to securing the best possible recruitment (publication of vacancy notices in the EU Official Journal, assessment centre, etc.).

40. Welcomes the efforts made to increase the Committee's visibility, by both strengthening its relations with the media and putting the focus on online communication to further remove language-related and disability-related barriers; highlights in relation to social media communication the accompanying training policy and on-demand tailored coaching sessions for both the members and the staff of the Committee; notes the slight reduction in the number of press releases in 2018 (approximately 60 compared to 70 in 2017) as part of a strategy aiming to develop the format of 'web stories' in order to have a more focused communication on the most important topics of the Committee; asks the Committee to report back to Parliament on its experiences in this respect;

All communication efforts undertaken by the EESC aim to ensure that the views expressed by the EESC reach the other EU institutions, as well as civil society organisations in Member States. Both press releases and web stories are tools to achieve this goal and follow the newswriting style of an inverted pyramid, with the newest/most relevant information coming first. A press release is chosen for topics covered by an opinion or event deemed to be most newsworthy or relevant for the EESC's work, or if it relates to the EESC's flagship event. It is thus published the same day or a day following the plenary or the said event.

Other opinions to be promoted are usually covered through web stories. This format is chosen for subject matter which is believed to be of a more limited, specialised or local interest. It also allows for certain topics to be covered in a more detailed way.

41. Notes that the Committee implemented a wide range of communication activities to mark its 60th anniversary in May 2018; welcomes the fact that the Committee received 9 419 visitors in 2018 (compared to 7 820 in 2017) and that the traditional Open Day on 5 May attracted some additional 2 888 visitors (compared to 2 700 in 2017); notes that the Committee's plenaries which are web-streamed has a potential reach of between three and eight million people; notes that the overall online interaction, such as retweets, 'likes' and replies, has been increasing and has reached between 680 and 1 840 mentions per plenary;

No follow-up required.

42. Notes that the appropriations for translation outsourcing increased (20,2 %, in 2018, slightly above the 20 % target, compared to 17,1 % in 2017 and 16,61 % in 2016) in the context of the cooperation agreement signed with Parliament and the resulting reduction in translation staff; notes further that the total cost of outsourced translation in 2018 was EUR 4 417 613 compared to EUR 7 208 710 that would have been the total cost of in-house translation;

No follow-up required.

43. Invites the Committee to continue its rationalisation measures in the area of translation;

The Directorate for Translation will continue to rationalise through the common management of translation units, always aiming to ensure streamlining of working methods and the exchange of good practices. It will also continue to push for the rationalisation of legislative document production through the use of structured formats, such as XML, which will allow for efficiency gains both in translation and in the requesting services.

44. Notes that the administrative cooperation agreement entered into between the Committee, the Committee of the Regions and Parliament in 2014 came to end on 31 December 2019; notes that to date the 2014 agreement has not been renegotiated or extended; is of the opinion that the 2014 agreement was very unbalanced for the Committee and the Committee of the Regions (the 'Committees'), that transferred a total of 60 translators to Parliament (36 from the Committee) and, in exchange obtained only the use of the services of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS); notes with concern that as a consequence the Committees had to hire contract staff and outsource their translation service; notes with concern that to compensate for the reduction in translation staff, Parliament has provided additional funds (EUR 1 200 000 from 2015 to 2016) to the Committees to cover the outsourcing of the translation services and that these funds can be reallocated to other policy areas if they are not fully used for outsourced translation (the Committee used this reallocation possibility in the last three years); is of the opinion that these circumstances are not in line with the criteria of overall prudent and sound financial management and should be reviewed in the event of an extension of the present agreement or in the negotiation of a new agreement; recognises that, from a political point of view, the agreement must be updated to face current challenges, such as the new MFF or the new cohesion policy rules; recognises the Committees' good cooperation in promoting citizen's participation in the 2019 European elections;

The current cooperation agreement between the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, signed in 2014, continues to provide a valid basis for fruitful cooperation between the three parties: it is not restrained by an expiry date. On the other hand, the EESC would like to see that that the cooperation agreement with the European Parliament is respected in its entirety, including the stipulation to provide the Committee with sufficient funds for the outsourcing of translation, to compensate for the posts transferred to the EP.

45. Recognises the follow-up to the Committee's 2016 staff survey on psychosocial risks at work by the launch of several initiatives, such as workshops for managers on absence management, conflict management and how to handle poor performance; also welcomes the mentoring system for new colleagues and actions to increase the wellbeing and commitment of staff; notes that the staff absence rate seems to have reached its peak in 2017 (5,5 %), and that it decreased slightly to 5,35 % in 2018 (compared to 4 % in 2015); notes with concern, however, the increase in long-term sick leave among the Committee's heads of unit; calls on the Committee to report back on all achievements relating to the reduction of the staff absence rate;

In the framework of the action plan related to psycho-social risks, a mentoring scheme for newcomers was relaunched at the beginning of 2019. Due to the success of the mentoring programme, a need to increase the number of mentors has arisen and a new call for interest is currently being organised. As part of the action being taken to further address the findings

of the staff survey on psychosocial risks at work, where the management of conflicts in the workplace was identified as a potential area for improvement, a Respect@work campaign was organised in 2019 as detailed under the reply to point 35 of the EP resolution.

Furthermore, a full day of training on "Respectful working environment" was part of a specific training cycle for heads of sector, who are often responsible for the operational management of their sector and therefore have close contact with their staff. This training will be continued in 2020 for other target groups.

Last but not least, in order to evaluate the actions taken as a follow-up to the 2016 staff survey, the EESC plans to launch a new staff survey on psycho-social risks at the end of 2020.

According to preliminary analysis, the actions taken seem to have already had a positive influence on the absence rate due to sickness. In 2019, the absence rate due to sickness within the EESC general secretariat decreased for the second consecutive year and was at 5%. The EESC cannot confirm an increase in the average sickness rate of its head of unit compared to 2017; while in 2017 the average was nine days, the average in 2018 was eight days. However, the overall number of days of absence was indeed negatively impacted in 2019 by the specific long-term sick leave of two middle managers.

The EESC confirms that the average absence rate is one of the key HR performance indicators that will continue to be monitored.

46. Welcomes the ongoing progress towards achieving geographical balance for the Committee's managers, in particular with respect to the Member States that joined the Union in or after 2004; notes with regard to gender balance that the Committee now has a higher proportion of female than male managers (52 % in 2018, 41,4 % in 2017 and 37,5 % in 2016); notes that 80 % of the colleagues requesting part-time work were women in 2018 even though the right is the same for men and women; welcomes the fact that the Committee regularly raises awareness of the available working patterns;

No follow-up required.

47. Welcomes the Committee's efforts to build a more diverse and inclusive work environment and culture by taking actions in favour of people with disabilities, such as making the intranet and website digitally accessible to persons with visual impairment, publishing a brochure called 'Access Able Brussels' to provide all necessary information for newcomers with disabilities moving to Brussels, and hosting the Inter COPEC conference dedicated entirely to disability issues;

No follow-up required.

48. Recalls the necessity of developing a long-term human resources policy framework which promotes work-life balance, lifelong guidance and career development, gender balance, teleworking, non-discrimination, geographical balance and the recruitment and integration of people with disabilities;

Over the years, the EESC has already developed a robust and rather exhaustive policy framework on all the replies to the above points. The recent appointment of a new HR Director as from 1 January 2020 will allow the continuation of the reflection on a new integrated HR Strategy. This new approach will aim to implement a cutting-edge Talent Management strategy in the mid- to long-term.

49. Recognises that by means of an administrative cooperation agreement, the Committees have set out a large number of procedures for collaboration between their services and have also established and organised joint services in which both human and financial resources from the two Committees are pooled together (namely translation and logistics); welcomes that the internal audit service of the two Committees collaborate closely concerning the joint services under the provisions of the

cooperation agreement; encourages the Committee to extend its administrative cooperation agreement with the Committee of the Regions beyond 2019;

The European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions have a long-standing record of highly developed administrative cooperation. Building on the Committees' mutual will to keep a stable relationship, the current administrative cooperation agreement, which entered into force on 1 January 2016, has been extended until 31 December 2020. Ad hoc cooperation and exchanges of best practices are also developed outside the fields covered by the cooperation agreement.

50. Welcomes the annual savings amounting to EUR 11,8 million as regards infrastructure and EUR 0,72 million as regards rent, maintenance, consumables and staff due to the fact that the Committees are sharing resources in these areas; also welcomes the fact that the annual budgetary savings as regards IT due to the cooperation between the Committees amount to approximately EUR 5 million; notes that an example of synergies through the cooperation with Parliament, which creates savings in terms of staff costs amounting to EUR 3,3 million (at 2016 salary levels), is the Committees' use of EPRS (36 Committee posts were transferred to the EPRS for this purpose);

No follow-up required.

51. Calls on the Committee to analyse further the situation in order to identify additional areas for joint services with the Committee of the Regions; highlights that this kind of interinstitutional cooperation can significantly reduce the overall expenditure of the Committee; calls on the Committee to inform Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control on any results achieved;

The administrative cooperation between the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions is a very good example of interinstitutional cooperation, seeking effectiveness and efficiency in their administrations while recognising each other's distinct institutional role and political identity. While the joint services serve both institutions in a number of fields, such as translation, infrastructure, logistics, security and IT, the EESC is ready to explore further synergies (i.e. medical service, managing of meeting rooms, etc.) with the CoR during the next upgrade of the existing fruitful relationship.

52. Notes that the cooperation agreement between the Committees, signed in 2016, establishes a firm legal framework for long-term, efficient and effective cooperation and demonstrates that the Committees are acting in partnership while respecting each other's powers and prerogatives; notes that the agreement ended on 31 December 2019 and that it was decided to extend it for one year while a new agreement is being negotiated; asks the Committees to make the necessary efforts to conclude a new agreement as soon as possible in order to allow further synergies and savings;

The Committee is interested in keeping a stable relationship with the Committee of the Regions beyond end of 2020, and aims for a prolongation of the current cooperation agreement. Possible improvements to the existing close administrative cooperation between the EESC and the CoR are being discussed and it will be explored whether additional efficiency measures could be found to cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

53. Recalls that once again the Committees dedicated less than 3 % of its total budget to IT and that IT projects and equipment have suffered from structurally underfinancing for several years; notes with concern that in order to address their backlog in IT projects and systems, the Committees continue to use mopping-up exercises at the end of the year to finance IT projects; asks the Committees to implement as soon as possible the new digital strategy and multiannual IT expenditure plan;

In June 2019, the Bureau adopted the Digital Strategy for the EESC that presents the vision for the EESC IT environment and identifies the major IT challenges that support this vision.

In relation to IT systems, the most visible result to date is the Members Portal module to support paperless meetings. This module was used for the first time during the February 2020

plenary session. The Bureau has decided that from September 2020 onwards, "paperless" will become the default option (applied to plenary sessions and Bureau, group and CAF meetings). Development of the new back-office application for processing amendments and a business-led study on Document Management are further examples of action in progress. The project to develop a Strategic Management tool is being initiated. Revision of Agora and the Members' Portal is planned for 2021/2022, involving the Questors. Paperless workflows and procedures, especially for financial management, are being rolled out using the applications already available. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that increasing charges imposed by the European Commission for the use of shared applications in the domain of financial and human resources remain a matter for concern, as they create additional constraints to an already very narrow IT budget.

In parallel, work is going on in relation to the Digital Workplace project, which covers the redesign of the end-user environment and its underlying digital infrastructure. The most visible result has been the increasing use of portable PCs by staff. Currently, some 2/3 of staff are equipped with portables and this proportion is set to rise to 5/6 over the coming months. The office automation, mail and unified communication tools have been upgraded in 2019. Users are encouraged to migrate from shared drives to team sites. A migration plan to a hybrid cloud is being developed and costed. In addition to the above work, the IT service is preparing to support the Buildings Strategy (network equipment acquisition and increased IT logistics capacity for the changes of buildings as from 2021).

Despite these major developments, progress still remains to be made and end of year credit transfers remain necessary to fund IT projects. In particular, it will be necessary to reinforce network capacities and end user equipment in order to allow 100% of the staff to telework in order to cope with crisis situations such as the COVID-19. These supplementary appropriations will allow important improvements to be made, as happened at the end of 2019 when twenty additional projects were financed to upgrade the IT infrastructure and to increase application development capacity. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic the EESC has responded well by quickly adjusting its working methods, putting in place solutions for remote meetings by way of the Webex and Interactio applications. The current pandemic crisis, however, has only underlined the need for further investments in IT infrastructure and solutions.

See also the reply to point 25 of the EP resolution.

54. Notes that the agreement between the Committees and the Commission on the exchange of the Commission's VMA building for the Committees BEL68/TRE 74 buildings was signed on 28 August 2019; notes that the exchange will become effective on 16 September 2022; notes with concern that the main priority identified by the Committees' buildings policy is the geographical concentration of the buildings; notes with concern that this exchange results in a loss of office space of 10 440 m² for the Committees and, thus, a need to find extra offices to accommodate around 200 members of staff after the exchange, which cannot be entirely offset by alternative measures in the short-term, such as a more intensive use of space in the other buildings or an increased use of teleworking, but will necessitate the purchase of another adjacent building to compensate for this reduction; notes also the need to renovate the VMA building in the short to medium term; fears the consequences that this agreement will have not only for the finances of the Committee but also for the wellbeing of the staff concerned; regrets that the legal service has not been consulted on a matter of such scope and importance for the Committee;

See the reply to point 55 of the EP resolution.

55. Notes that the Committees have recently established a joint working group for the purpose of preparing a further analysis in order to find adequate solutions; notes that another working group is tasked with reflecting on new ways of working; stresses that the well-being, manner of work and work space of staff must suffer no negative consequences arising from the exchange of buildings; welcomes that the administration of the Committee is keeping all stakeholders informed via staff

meetings and through the management of the concerned services and will take into consideration the concerns and suggestions put forward; calls on the Committees to inform Parliament's Committees on Budgetary Control and on Budgets on any results achieved;

Exchanging the B68 and TRE74 buildings for the VMA will result in an effective loss of 10 440 m² of office space (13 396 m² minus the VMA surface area of 2 956 m² currently occupied by the European Commission), which cannot be entirely offset in the short term by alternative measures such as stepping up the office space density of the other buildings and increasing teleworking.

Around 400 staff members are currently accommodated in the B68 and TRE74 buildings. Given the unused spaces, around 200 additional staff members could be accommodated in the BvS and REM buildings as they stand at present. Extra offices will therefore have to be found to accommodate the remaining 200 staff members once the B68 and TRE74 have been exchanged for the VMA, hence the need for a compensatory office building.

On 11 December 2019, the European External Action Service (EEAS) informed the Committees that the Belliard 100 building would be available by early 2021 and proposed transferring its current lease to them. At 5 200 m², the Belliard 100 building would allow the Committees to cope smoothly with the exchange of buildings foreseen for September 2022. In addition, renting the B100 as from beginning of 2021 would allow part of the staff leaving the VMA building to be accommodated during the refurbishment works phase scheduled for between spring 2021 and summer 2022.

Taking into consideration these elements, the Bureaus of both Committees gave a mandate to the Secretaries-General in February 2020 to undertake negotiations with the EEAS in view of concluding an agreement allowing the Committees to take over the rental contract of B100 as from early 2021.

The Staff Committee and staff in general have been informed about these developments.

These negotiations started in March this year and are still going on. Results are expected before summer 2020.

In October 2019, the Secretaries-General of the Committee and of the European Committee of the Regions agreed to "create a working group on the future allocation of space in order to analyse the overview of all office space (independent of current use) available as of Sept 2022, examine the budgetary aspects, and propose an action plan (taking into account the respective decision making processes of each Committee). The Working Group should be led by the Directorate of Logistics, and should embrace Directorates of Human Resources and Finance, liaison officers, SG teams, and - from time to time – staff representatives".

The working group met several times and drew up a proposal for criteria and principles to be applied when allocating space to the various services. This document was presented to the Staff Committees at two meetings (13 and 27 March 2020) and all their questions and remarks were answered.

This final decision by the Secretary-General was immediately communicated to all staff of both Committees at the beginning of April 2020. In the coming months discussions will continue at directorate level to choose the space configuration most appropriate to each of them and Staff Committees will be involved in this process.

The joint VMA working group defined the guiding principles for the future allocation of space as well as objective parameters allowing for equal treatment of all services/entities. The staff representatives were involved in two different meetings of the above working group before the formal endorsement by management of both Committees of the above-mentioned methodology and guiding principles. Staff have been also directly informed regularly through

different channels and will be consulted/involved in the upcoming phase of the detailed design of floor arrangements and assignment of individual workspaces for the services concerned by the upcoming moves.

56. Expresses serious concerns about the confirmation of the presence of asbestos in critical places of the VMA building including the parking area; deplores the fact that an inventory realised by a specialised external contractor was carried out in September 2019 only one month after the signature of the agreement with the Commission; deplores the fact that the agreement was signed without informing all stakeholders in due time about the possibly presence of asbestos in the VMA building; also deplores the fact that members and staff have not been informed about the situation and asks the Committee to remedy the situation in an adequate and effective way;

In September 2019, a specific inventory of all VMA areas, construction materials and equipment possibly containing asbestos was carried out by an external contractor specialised in this matter. An additional check was carried out in September 2019 on the air quality on each floor of the building, including parking levels. No asbestos fibres have been detected in the air.

Following those two positive results, the Committees received an asbestos-safe certificate for the VMA in September 2019. This certificate specifies that the building contains asbestos, but without risk for normal use of the building.

Hence, the VMA building is fully compliant with all regulatory requirements on asbestos applications. The result of the analysis is published on the intranet of the Committees and is accessible to all staff members.

The studies for the VMA refurbishment work programme have been going on since the summer of 2019 and the work could start at the beginning of 2021. Although the few materials containing asbestos fibres are located outside the VMA office area to be renovated, it is planned to remove all those materials during the execution period of these renovation works.

It was already known that a limited amount of asbestos was present, and this was confirmed by further analysis in September 2019. For all materials where it was not sure if they contained asbestos fibres or not, a supplementary laboratory analysis was carried out. Therefore, sixteen construction materials were checked. One material indeed contained asbestos fibres. This concerned a sample taken from a joint between conducts very near to the gas counter, inside the gas counter room with very limited access.

Three other construction materials containing asbestos fibres in the VMA building have already been known for more than ten years:

- 1. Parking -1 and -2: cement pipes for lightning conductor protection**
- 2. Parking -1: joints between two parts of the water drainage pipes connected to the sewage pump.**
- 3. Heating room -1: joints between two parts of the heating chimney for smoke extraction**

In September 2019, following the positive results of the two aforementioned analyses, the Committees received an asbestos-safe certificate for the VMA. It specifies that the building contains asbestos but without risk for normal use of the building. The VMA building is thus fully compliant with all regulatory requirements on asbestos applications.

57. Notes that the Committees received an asbestos-safe certificate for the VMA building in September 2019 and that this certificate specifies the building contains asbestos without risk for normal use of the building; taking into account especially that the next use of the building will not be normal use, but a situation of construction, is deeply concerned about the future developments on the issue;

No follow-up required.

58. Notes that the effects of prolonged and unsafe asbestos exposure on human health are well documented and are always a source of concern and alarm among the population in general and therefore asks the Committees to carry out a policy of total and proactive transparency and information about the management of the situation before and after the effective occupation of the VMA building while at the same time avoiding alarmism;

As already indicated in the reply to point 56 of the EP resolution, the VMA building was declared asbestos-safe. All information about materials containing asbestos fibres in all Committees' buildings, including the result of the analysis, is published on the intranet of the Committees and accessible to all staff members. Any new available information in relation with the topic will be made available to the staff.

59. Is concerned that 19,56 % (2 835) of the payments with a payment time of 30 days were delayed (with an average payment delay of 46,12 days); calls on the Committee to strengthen its efforts to respect the payment deadlines set in the Financial Regulation;

Ninety-seven percent (97%) of delays in the payment of invoices are due to invoicing errors made by the supplier of travel services; in order to dispose of a clearer indicator on this matter, the EESC is now suspending the incorrect invoices in its accounting books.

60. Welcomes the fact that the rate of unused slots of interpretation services decreased over the last years (2,61 % in 2018, 3,6 % in 2017 and 4,38 % in 2016); acknowledges the measures implemented throughout 2018 and encourages the Committee to keep its positive trend towards fewer cancellations of interpretation services;

No follow-up required.

61. Appreciates the Committee's intention to further improve transparency and facilitate access to the Committee's documents based on an interinstitutional meeting on transparency held in Luxembourg on 25 September 2018; notes that the Committee has launched an exercise to take advantage of the best practices of other Union institutions and bodies resulting in an action plan to be launched in 2019 covering topics such as its rules of procedure, its code of conduct for members, creation of a transparency register and access to documents;

No follow-up required.

62. Notes that the European Ombudsman in June 2017 issued the 'Recommendation of the European Ombudsman concerning the alleged failure by the European Economic and Social Committee to ensure that a member declared all relevant interests', resulting in the Committee amending its rules of procedure in order to reflect the changes requested by the European Ombudsman and that the amended rules of procedure entered into force on 15 March 2019; notes that the European Ombudsman came to a conclusion about the absence of maladministration in an inquiry regarding a complaint related to a selection procedure in 2018;

No follow-up required.

63. Notes that the declarations of interests for the president and the vice-presidents of the Committee are available and accessible on the Committee's members' internet pages; notes that following the amended rules of procedure members must upon appointment draw up a declaration of any interest, financial or other, that might have an impact on their work at the Committee; notes that these declarations are also made available to the general public on the Committee's website; notes that members have to confirm explicitly the validity of the content of their declarations at least once a year and make revisions as soon as any change in their situation occurs;

No follow-up required.

64. Notes that members are not obliged to declare the address of the organisation or company by which they are remunerated; notes, however, that upon taking office and in the case of any changes members are required to complete and sign declarations of interests; notes that 25 members have provided the administration with a registered address in Belgium;

No follow-up required.

65. Notes that the Committee does not have the intention to change the system of requiring one signature to confirm the presence of Members in meetings to a system requiring two signatures, one at the beginning of the meeting and one at the end of the meeting; asks the Committee, in order to improve its working methods, to further study practices and experiences at Parliament and other Union institutions and bodies regarding the presence record and will benchmark best practices; asks the Committee to report back on any achievements in its next annual activity report;

The present system for confirming presence used at the Committee seems appropriate, but the EESC is always willing to improve its working methods and will carefully study all the systems for verifying presence applied in the European Institutions, including the EP, with a view to benchmarking the best practices.

66. Notes the Committee's work done related to the Decision of the European Ombudsman in the case 1306/2014/OV to prepare guidelines on managing conflicts of interests at work with the aim of providing guidance in cases where staff members need to perform overlapping functions when handling a single subject, which is particularly the case in relation to staff representation activities;

No follow-up required.

67. Welcomes the Committee's policy relating to 'revolving doors', which includes following up on the external activities carried out by its former senior officials; notes that the Committee publishes a related report every year;

No follow-up required.

68. Notes that the Committee established a group in 2017 to monitor developments with respect to the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw from the Union and assesses the need for reactions or positions by the Committee; notes that on the assumption that the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union would take place, a total of EUR 318 600 was deducted from the 2019 budget and an additional amount of EUR 173 062 from the 2020 budget to reflect the 'evident changes' to Members' travel costs and to the co-financing of IT equipment for members;

No follow-up required.

69. Reiterates the need to streamline, accelerate and improve the discharge procedure; proposes in this regard to set a deadline for the submission of the annual activity reports of 31 March of the year following the accounting year; regrets that this deadline was not respected for the 2018 annual activity report as requested in the 2017 discharge resolution; welcomes the Committee's readiness to follow this best practice which would provide the discharge institution with time for a more in-depth and better conducted discharge procedure;

The EESC is ready to comply with any new decision in this respect, but it stresses the importance of all institutions adhering to the same timetable.

70. Notes that the second ad hoc group on the future of the Committee with a focus on how to rationalise the Committee's internal bodies presented its follow-up report at the end of 2017; notes that the bureau of the Committee decided in January 2018 to reduce the number of Members sitting on a large number of the Committee's internal bodies and to limit the number of their meetings held each year; notes that the bureau decided to refocus the remits of some of the Committee structures; asks the Committee to provide Parliament with clarifications on savings in connection with this

modernisation in order to boost transparency and accountability;

Pursuant to the Bureau decision of January 2018, there was a considerable reworking of the distribution of members and maximum number of meetings for each of the EESC legislative sections. As a result, the total number of participating members in the sections was reduced from 498 to 474 and the total number of meetings was reduced from 142 to 111 (with 19 of those meetings being optional).

71. Welcomes the efforts of the Committee to promote the circular economy through its opinion and, in cooperation with the Commission, through the European circular economy stakeholders' platform compiling initiatives and best practices;

No follow-up required.

72. Supports the efforts made by the Committee to decrease its environmental footprint; notes with satisfaction a slight decrease in the consumption of electricity (3 %) and paper (17 %) and of office waste (3 %); observes, however, the increase in the consumption of gas (5 %) and water (17 %) caused by the installation of a new gas heater and water leakages during construction work;

No follow-up required.

73. Highlights all the achievements in recent years in areas such as the performance-based budgeting, the ethical framework with all its related rules and procedures, the enhanced communication activities and the increasing amount of measures to improve transparency; welcomes the significant amount of interinstitutional service and cooperation agreements; underlines the importance of the collaboration and sharing of experience among the Union institutions and bodies; suggests that the Committee analyse the possibility of formalised networking activities in different domains in order to share best practises and develop common solutions;

The EESC is actively and fully involved in several formalised inter-institutional networks (e.g. CPQS, Staff Regulations Committee, RUF) where topics of relevance as mentioned in the current discharge may be discussed. These formal networks are complemented by regular informal contact at all levels of hierarchy. The EESC strives to continue to benefit from both exchanges of best practice between all institutions and from possible synergies between institutions in the field of finance and HR.

74. Notes the importance of political dialogue between the Committee and Parliament to make sure that valid contributions from the Committee can be incorporated into the work of Parliament; in that context reiterates its request to pursue its best efforts in strengthening the political cooperation between these two institutions.

The Committee has a long-standing commitment to improving the quality and impact of political cooperation with the European Parliament. One key recurring occasion to improve on this cooperation is the yearly meetings with the CCC and its chair, as provided for in the cooperation agreement between the two institutions. In 2018, this took place with a bilateral meeting in December, after the mid-term election of the EESC President in April. This occasion is a key moment for political discussion between the two institutions and it represents a unique opportunity for improving relations. In the same month, the presidents of the two institutions met to sign an agreement to support the European Elections in 2019, which led to several events and initiatives on both parts.

However, the Committee is ready to further strengthen political cooperation with the European Parliament through more inclusive participation of the EESC members in the MEPs' activities and vice-versa, by scheduling joint meetings and/or events on EU affairs, and by establishing levels of regular political cooperation, etc.
