A REFLECTION PAPER
FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Cohesion Funded by the EU

Better Cohesion. Better Impact. Better Europe.

THIRTY YEARS OF PRACTICAL LESSONS. GLOBAL EXPERIENCE. LOCAL RESULTS.

Wherever in the world I have worked,
in every development context,
I always return to the best practice
I learned from EU cohesion policy.

It showed me what's possible when we keep things simple, work together and focus on people and places.

This paper shares **seven proven ways** to make public investment more effective – and help Europe **deliver greater value** for people, places and our shared future.

> Good practice isn't just about what works.
> It's about how we share what works – and make it useful.



At every scale, across every region, the lesson is the same:
people, ideas and investment achieve more when they work together.

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PREPARED FOR THE 10TH REPORT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL COHESION
Contributing evidence and experience to inform the review of EU cohesion policy and future funding systems after 2028.

EUROPE'S BEST INVESTMENT TOOL
Proven flexible. Proven effective. Proven to last.

GOOD PRACTICE DELIVERS MORE VALUE
Better outcomes. Stronger communities. A smarter, more resilient Europe.

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2 Investment That Outlives the Funding



FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS SHOULD BE DESIGNED TO DISAPPEAR.

Financial instruments are powerful catalysts. They help bridge funding gaps, unlock private investment, share risk and crowd in additional finance. But they are not the destination.

They are short-term gap fillers, not long-term cohesion commitments.

The beauty of a financial instrument is simple: it fills a gap that the private sector sees as too risky. **One round shows that the gap wasn't risky.** The market takes over. The instrument can end. **That is how smart public money works.**

MAKE INVESTING AFFORDABLE FOR ALL

By sharing risk and leveraging public money, financial instruments open the door to investment in more places and for more people.

MAKE PUBLIC MONEY GO FURTHER

Every euro invested can mobilise more private capital—multiplying impact where it's needed most.

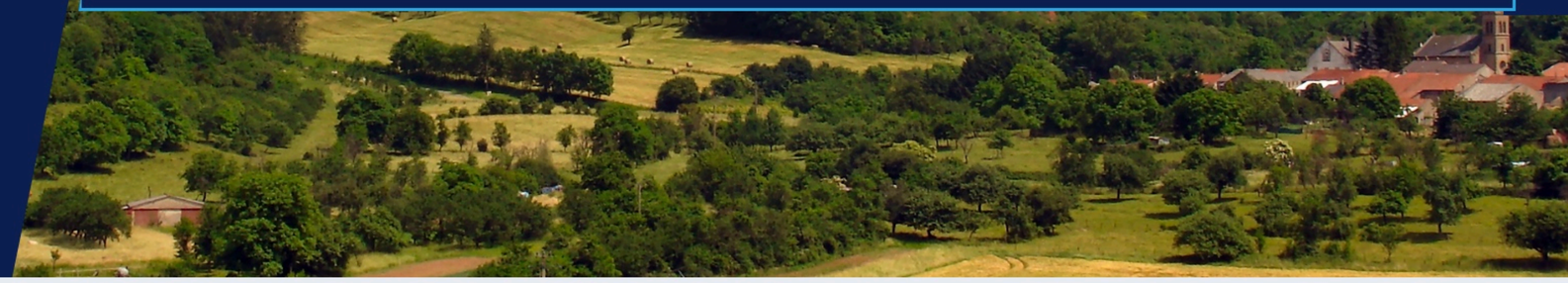
MARKET-LED. FAST. EFFECTIVE.

Once the gap is proven closed, investment scales faster—delivering prosperity, jobs and stronger communities.

DESIGNED TO DISAPPEAR.

Successful instruments bridge the gap, prove the market and then step aside. That is the goal, not perpetual support.





THE EIB ADDS VALUE

The EIB is a key player in promoting cohesion projects and earns management fees for doing so.

VARIETY IS BETTER THAN MONOPOLY

Many other financial instruments exist using ERDF co-financing. Diversity drives innovation and better results.

AI CAN HELP US RISE ABOVE EXCLUSIVITY

Artificial intelligence can broaden our perspective, connect good practice and remove privileged information silos.







ONE ROUND CAN CHANGE THE STORY.
THEN THE STORY CONTINUES WITHOUT US.
GOOD INSTRUMENTS END. STRONGER MARKETS LAST.

FOCUS ON IMPACT. DESIGN TO EXIT.

Use financial instruments to start, scale and accelerate—but always with the end in mind: a self-sustaining, inclusive and prosperous Europe.

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3 Europe already has one single united EU fund.

IT IS CALLED THE EURO.

Everything else is just
names – programming names.

Over the years, cohesion policy has shown remarkable flexibility.
Infrastructure. People. Environment.
Innovation. Communities.
All can be supported when programmed together.









> The strength of cohesion policy has always been its flexibility to **do what every other fund can do.**

SIMPLIFYING EU FUNDS IS SIMPLE:

DELETE THE "S" FROM FUNDS.

One Fund.
One Euro.
Countless Possibilities.

Names can evolve.
Programming can be modern.
Benefits remain for all.

One purpose:
Stronger together for Europe.

FROM SILOS TODAY...

More than 40 separate funds and programmes.

- Just Transition Fund
- Globalisation Adjustment Fund
- Connecting Europe Facility
- Single Market Programme
- Creative Europe
- Erasmus+
- Customs Programme
- Fiscalis Programme
- Pericles Programme
- Solvency Support Instrument
- Technical Support Instrument

ERDF **ESF+**
Cohesion Fund
CAP **EAFRD**
Horizon **EMFAF**
InvestEU
Innovation Fund
Digital Europe
European Defence Fund

- European Maritime, Fisheries & Aquaculture Fund
- Union Civil Protection Mechanism
- Neighbourhood, Development & International Cooperation Instrument
- Home Affairs Fund
- Asylum & Migration Fund
- Internal Security Fund

TO SYNERGIES TOMORROW

Fewer structures. Better connections. Greater impact.



SYNTHESISING EU FUNDING SILOS CREATES SYNERGIES AND BETTER SYSTEMS.

EVERYONE INSIDE THE FUND. NOBODY OUTSIDE.

- All regions. All people. All sectors.
- Equal access to opportunity.
- Fair rules. Shared prosperity.
- Stronger together.
- Fairer Europe.

ONE FUND.
ONE SET OF RULES.
ONE STANDARD OF FAIRNESS.
Transparency.
Accountability.
Solidarity. Results.

COHESION IN ACTION. FLEXIBILITY IN PRACTICE. RESULTS THAT LAST.

Invest once.
Return continuously.
Reinvest endlessly.

ONE FUND. ONE EURO. EVERYONE INSIDE. NOBODY OUTSIDE.
THAT'S FAIR EUROPE.

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4 FUTURE COHESION PROGRAMMING SHOULD REINFORCE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DECISION-MAKERS TO THINK TOGETHER RATHER THAN SIMPLY REPORT TO ONE ANOTHER.

Good decisions happen when everyone shapes the road ahead.



DIFFERENT FUNDS
ONE TERRITORIAL VISION

FLEXIBLE PROGRAMMING
STRONGER TOGETHER

JOINED-UP DEVELOPMENT
WITHOUT CENTRALISATION

ONE OF THE GREATEST STRENGTHS OF COHESION POLICY IS ITS FLEXIBILITY.

Europe can achieve joined-up development without creating a single centralised programme.

SINGLE PROGRAMMING DOCUMENTS: A FRAMEWORK THAT CONNECTS

I experienced this most clearly through the Single Programming Documents (SPDs) in Scotland.

SPDs were tailored to their territory and mine covered the vast, dispersed Highlands & Islands Objective 1 region.

Pioneers in integrated programming, the SPDs provided a framework that connects investments and strengthens territorial development.

THE VALUE COMES FROM THE CONNECTIONS

- Roads → supported businesses
- Skills → supported infrastructure
- Environmental investment → supported tourism
- Education → supported long-term competitiveness

Projects were rarely viewed in isolation. They were considered as part of a wider territorial strategy.

JOINT MONITORING COMMITTEES REMAIN ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST SUCCESSFUL INNOVATIONS

Perhaps the best example of this integrated thinking was the Joint Monitoring Committee.

On the same day, in the same room, decision-makers responsible for different programmes, different sectors and different public priorities **approved projects together.**



WHY IT WORKS SO WELL

A new college is not considered simply as a construction project.

At the same meeting, members can also approve complementary investments in skills, business support, transport links or that will enable that college to create greater long-term value.

Forestry investments can be coordinated with transport improvements, including rail investments to keep timber off fragile rural roads.

Fishing communities can benefit from infrastructure that simultaneously strengthens wider regional development.

Projects no longer compete simply for funding. They contribute towards shared territorial outcomes.









DECISION-MAKERS GET BETTER RESULTS WHEN THEY HAVE THE SPACE TO THINK TOGETHER.

Future programming should embed and expand these opportunities so investment is shaped together, not passed between desks.

PEOPLE TOGETHER. IDEAS TOGETHER. IMPACT TOGETHER.

Future programming should continue creating opportunities for decision-makers to think together rather than simply report to one another.

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5 WE CAN NOW BETTER REWARD WHAT CREATES MOST CHANGE.

Impact forecasting with new tools means future cohesion policy can invest better with durability in mind and prove the value that endures for people, places and Europe.

INVEST FOR THE LONG TERM. DELIVER FOR GENERATIONS.

Durability turns today's investment into tomorrow's resilience, prosperity and opportunity.

MEASURE WHAT LASTS. FUND WHAT WORKS.

Impact forecasting helps us identify which investments create the strongest, most enduring value.

REWARD WHAT CREATES LASTING CHANGE.

We can now better reward projects that strengthen places, people and our future.

DESIGN FOR DURABILITY FROM DAY ONE.

Build programmes that adapt, learn and keep delivering long-term impact.

BETTER EVIDENCE. BETTER DECISIONS. BETTER EUROPE.

Stronger evidence today means smarter choices and a more resilient Europe tomorrow.

DURABILITY COULD BE A BENEFICIAL NEW CRITERION FOR FUNDING DECISIONS.

Projects that build skills, strengthen places and create knowledge can deliver value long after the investment is made. Impact forecasting helps us understand the scale of that value and fund what matters most.



DURABILITY COULD BE A BENEFICIAL NEW CRITERION

JOINTLY GOVERNED THROUGH SPDS AND JOINT MONITORING

IMPACT FORECASTING HELPS IDENTIFY AND COMPARE WHAT LASTS

CASE STUDY: DOUNREAY POWER STATION

A MODEL OF DURABLE IMPACT.

When ERDF and ESF were approved through the Single Programming Document (SPD), it was a response to a serious regional challenge: the safe decommissioning of Dounreay nuclear power station on Scotland's north coast.

The risks were significant. The task was complex, urgent and costly. But the vision was transformational: to turn a potential liability into a lasting asset for the region, the UK and the world.

ERDF and ESF worked together through the SPD, with strong oversight from the Joint Monitoring Committee. This made it easier to align funding, share expertise and deliver a joined-up response that would not have been possible otherwise.

This good practice project's knowledge has helped support thousands of jobs around the world, built skills and infrastructure, advanced nuclear decommissioning techniques and restored the environment. It also attracted global investment and positioned the site as a centre of excellence—still receiving major investment today for its next phase of decommissioning and regeneration.

Imagine knowing and valuing, at the outset, the full global scale of this project's durable impact. Impact forecasting with new tools can help us do exactly that—so we can **recognise, compare and invest in what creates the greatest, most enduring value.**





WHY IT WORKS SO WELL

- A regional threat was turned into a global opportunity.
- ERDF and ESF working together through the SPD made more possible.
- Joined monitoring ensured coordination, accountability and learning.
- Investment in skills, innovation and infrastructure created lasting economic value.
- Proven expertise at Dounreay now benefits decommissioning worldwide.

DURABILITY IS MORE THAN IMPACT. IT IS IMPACT THAT ENDURES.

When we can see further, we can fund better and deliver more for Europe.

THE OPPORTUNITY IS NOW.

Impact forecasting with new tools helps us invest smarter from day one. Better metrics. Better choices. Better Europe.

BETTER EVIDENCE. BETTER DECISIONS. BETTER EUROPE.

We can now better reward what creates most change. Let's use the tools we have to invest in Europe's most durable future.

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6 MAKING THE INVISIBLE MUCH MORE VISIBLE

Cohesion policy creates value that often stays invisible in economic data but is felt every day in people's lives.

BETTER CONNECTIONS. BROADER BENEFITS.

Infrastructure links islands to markets, people to services and communities to each other.

IMPROVED SERVICES. REAL DIFFERENCE.

Faster access to emergency services, better transport options and stronger daily connections improve lives in practical ways.

STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER FUTURE.

When places are connected, businesses grow, young people stay and communities thrive.

BEYOND GDP. TOWARDS TRUE VALUE.

Going Beyond GDP and True Cost Accounting help reveal the full social, environmental and territorial value of investment.

THE HEBRIDES STORY

During a Joint Monitoring Committee visit to the Hebrides, local residents were asked what difference European funding had made.

The answer was not about jobs.

It was simply:

> *"An ambulance can now get to us an hour quicker."*

That single sentence showed how cohesion policy creates forms of public value that standard economic indicators rarely capture – benefits that change lives but often remain invisible in the numbers.

THE HEBRIDES ISLAND CHAIN



MAKING THE INVISIBLE MUCH MORE VISIBLE

To see the full impact of cohesion policy, we must measure, communicate and understand the wider value it creates.

RECOGNISE WHAT MATTERS
Identify the full range of social, environmental and territorial benefits that investment creates.

MEASURE WHAT COUNTS
Use approaches such as True Cost Accounting to capture value beyond traditional economic indicators.

MAKE IT VISIBLE
Share stories and evidence clearly to strengthen public understanding and policy support.

IMPACT THAT LASTS
Better information leads to better choices, stronger accountability and more resilient communities.

THE AIM OF TOOLS LIKE TRUE COST ACCOUNTING AND GOING BEYOND GDP IS NOT TO WRITE MORE TEXT ABOUT QUALITATIVE INDICATORS, BUT TO CONSISTENTLY QUANTIFY COMPARABLE NUMERIC VALUES FOR QUALITATIVE INDICATORS.

A VALUE SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR EUROPE

For cohesion policy to reach its full potential, our value system must be:

RELEVANT
Reflecting what people and places need today.

CONSISTENT
Built on shared methods and common standards.

ADAPTABLE
Updated regularly as societal values and evidence evolve.

TRANSPARENT
Clear, open and understandable to all.

ACCOUNTABLE
Linked to outcomes that improve lives and build trust.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE COHESION POLICY

- **See the full value, not just GDP**
  Highlight wellbeing, environment and territorial resilience alongside economic results.
- **Use methods that deliver real numbers**
  Apply True Cost Accounting and other robust tools to produce consistent, comparable numeric values for qualitative indicators.
- **Apply a shared approach across Europe**
  Use common principles and standards so value is comparable, credible and transferable between regions and Member States.
- **Keep it current**
  Invest in systems and resources that regularly refresh data and evidence to reflect changing societal priorities and emerging challenges.
- **Communicate what changes lives**
  Make the benefits visible in ways that people understand – strengthening public support and democratic accountability.

BETTER INFORMATION. BETTER DECISIONS. BETTER OUTCOMES.

When we measure and communicate the full value of investment, we build stronger communities, a healthier environment and a more resilient Europe.

STRONGER TOGETHER. CLEARER VALUE. LASTING IMPACT.

Future programming should reinforce opportunities for decision-makers to think together, compare what matters and invest where it delivers the greatest value for people and places across Europe.

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7 GOOD PRACTICE AS A POLICY INSTRUMENT

Sharing what works turns experience into impact.

SHARING GOOD PRACTICE IS BECOMING A POLICY INSTRUMENT

Why the next return on public investment will increasingly come from replication rather than rediscovery.

PROGRAMMING SUCCEEDS WHEN GOOD IDEAS ARE ALLOWED TO TRAVEL

Cohesion policy has shown how investment, ideas and people can connect places and create lasting value.

This helps those ideas travel further – faster and with greater impact – so every new programme builds confidently on what Europe already knows works.



These two memories – an ambulance reaching people sooner, and a programme learning together – point to the same conclusion:

cohesion policy delivers the greatest value when good ideas are shared, replicated and built upon.

One of the most useful ways to make this happen is to treat good practice as a policy instrument in its own right.



WHY SHARING GOOD PRACTICE MATTERS

MORE IMPACT PER EURO
Replication multiplies the value of what already works.

LESS TIME WASTED
Learn from proven solutions instead of starting from scratch.

STRONGER DECISIONS
Better evidence and peer learning lead to better choices.

BETTER PLACES FOR PEOPLE
Ideas that travel create lasting change on the ground.

SUSTAINABLE FUTURES
Good ideas support resilience, wellbeing and green transitions.

THE AIM OF TOOLS LIKE TRUE COST ACCOUNTING AND GOING BEYOND GDP IS NOT TO WRITE MORE TEXT ABOUT QUALITATIVE INDICATORS, BUT TO CONSISTENTLY QUANTIFY COMPARABLE NUMERIC VALUES FOR QUALITATIVE INDICATORS.

SHARING THAT CATALYSES MEASURABLE ACTION

DOCUMENT IT WELL
Clear, concise, decision-focused good practice descriptions that highlight results, enablers, costs and context.

MAKE IT FINDABLE AND USABLE
Practical tools, searchable platforms and AI assistance help decision-makers find and adapt what they need, when they need it.

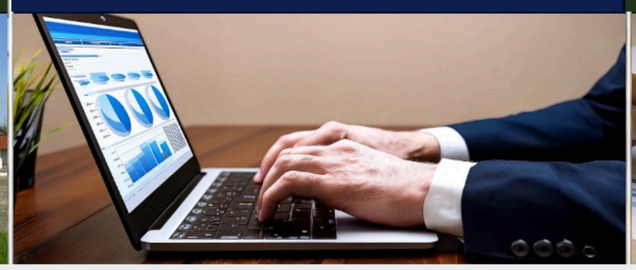
ENABLE REPLICATION
Provide the guidance, partners and support that help regions and Member States put proven ideas into action.

KNOWLEDGE PLANNING IS THE FOUNDATION



- Define what knowledge we need, who needs it and for what decisions.
- Avoid duplication by clarifying roles: Member State networks, EU level bodies, managing authorities and external partners each have a distinct remit.
- Use communication and behavioural science expertise to tailor messages and foster adoption – cohesion professionals bring the right insight and relationships to accelerate change.

AI AMPLIFIES GOOD PRACTICE



- AI tools such as **Impact Signatures** can help make good practice smarter, faster and more useful.
- Capture and structure knowledge consistently.
- Extract key insights and Impact Signatures that summarise what works, for whom, at what cost and with what results.
- Recommend relevant examples, partners and adaptations.
- Support translation, learning and policy uptake across Europe.

IMPACT & RESULTS DRIVE MORE SHARING



- Linking funding to measurable outcomes creates a strong incentive for regions to share what works.
- Track how shared good practice is used, adapted and replicated.
- Measure the difference it makes.
- Invest more in what delivers the greatest public value.
- Turn replication into the biggest multiplier of impact.

SHARING GOOD PRACTICE BUILDS A SMARTER, STRONGER EUROPE.
When we capture what works, make it accessible and support its replication, we save time, spend public money better and create more value for people and places.

GOOD IDEAS TRAVEL. IMPACT MULTIPLIES. EUROPE BENEFITS.
Future cohesion policy should be designed to help good practice travel well – guided by knowledge, powered by technology, driven by results and measured by the difference it makes.

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8 LEADER:

THE VEHICLE, FUNDING THE FUEL

Vehicles endure. Fuel changes.
The journey matters most.

LEADER is a vehicle.
Funding is simply the fuel.

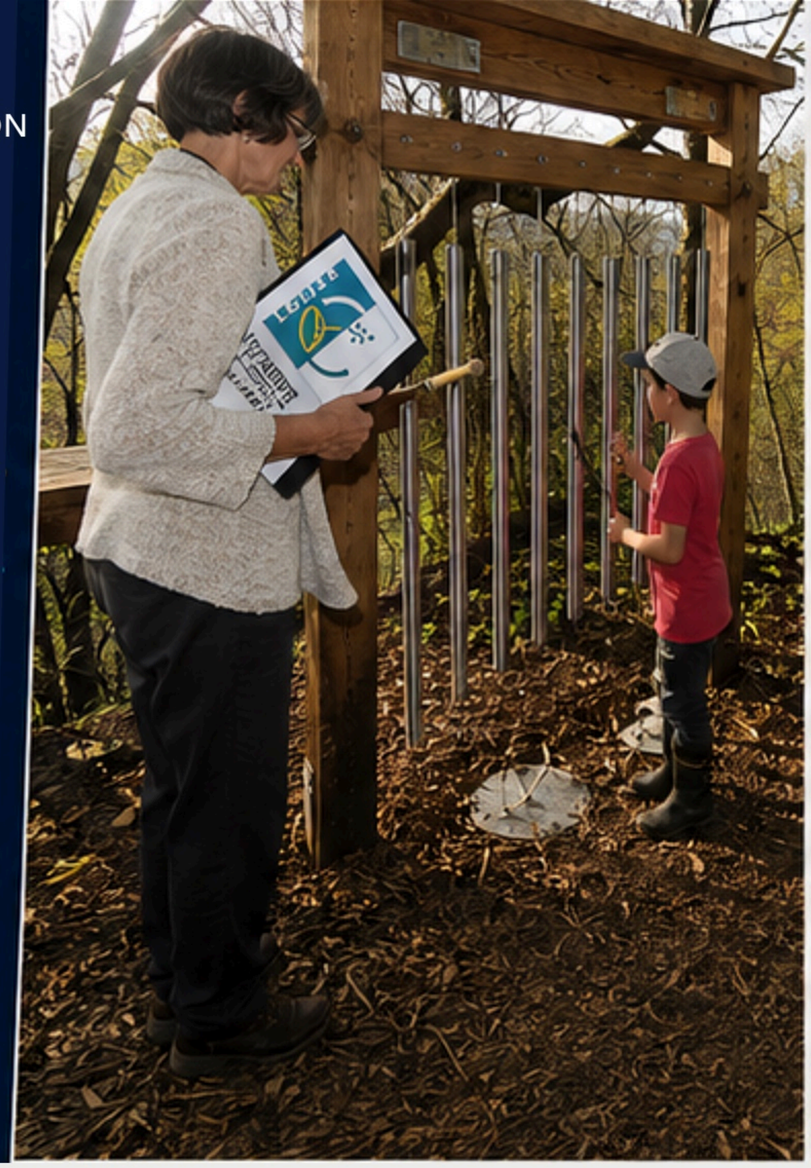
Everybody argues about funding.

Almost nobody talks about delivery vehicles.

LAGs (Local Action Groups) work like local monitoring committees.

They bring partners together, agree priorities, make decisions, monitor progress, learn and adapt – delivering large-scale cohesion investment through local knowledge, accountability and results.

It's Europe's proven model for making big investments work on the ground.





CLLD: THE FRAMEWORK

Community-led Local Development (CLLD) is the overall methodological framework across cohesion policy.

It is the methodology factory that:

- Designs the approach
- Builds and improves the model
- Keeps it adaptable and relevant

CLLD provides the system.
LEADER is the vehicle.
Funding is the fuel.
Together, they deliver results that last.

THE NEXT STEP FOR COHESION POLICY:

EUROPE SHOULD PRESERVE AND REUSE SUCCESSFUL DELIVERY VEHICLES, NOT JUST FUND SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS.

Before we invent new delivery mechanisms, let's protect, strengthen and replicate the ones that have already proven they work.

ONE PROVEN VEHICLE. MANY FUELS.

I've seen LEADER run on different fuels.
Every time, the vehicle kept delivering.

ERDF EAFRD ESF EMFAF

The funding changed.
The vehicle kept working.
That taught me something important.

A CLEAR LESSON FOR EUROPE

When a delivery model works, we should keep it.
Not just celebrate it – sustain it and scale it.

- Proven to deliver at local level
- Built on partnership and trust
- Delivers real impact on the ground
- Works across funds and sectors
- Adapts, learns and improves
- Creates value that lasts

Good vehicles deliver people, ideas and investment to where they can make the biggest difference.

DIFFERENT LEVEL.
SAME FUNCTION.
SAME DISCIPLINE.
SAME PURPOSE.

Local stewardship
for better results.

THE FUTURE IS ALREADY ON THE GROUND.

Let's invest in what works, replicate it,
and build a stronger, smarter Europe together.

STRONG VEHICLES. SMART FUEL. LASTING JOURNEYS.

Europe has the vehicles.
Let's make sure they keep driving results that last.