Statement of the European Innovation Council Board on the 2026 EIC Work Programme

The EIC Board advocated for the 2026 Work Programme to focus on Advanced Innovation Challenges, co-funding of accelerator challenges, achieve a streamlined Accelerator application process, and stronger ecosystem integration to drive Europe's innovation leadership. The Board endorses the 2026 Work Programme as the pivotal milestone in advancing Europe's deep-tech and scale-up ambitions. WP26 bridges current achievements with Framework Programme 10 aspirations. Reinforcing the EU's Startup and Scaleup Strategy, the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and recommendations from the Draghi report, this programme confirms the EIC's role as a cornerstone of Europe's technological sovereignty.

In this context, the Board **strongly welcomes** the introduction of the EIC **Advanced Innovation Challenges** as a groundbreaking pilot implementing our long-standing recommendation for high-risk, high-impact ARPA-like programmes. This two-stage approach with demand-logic integration and end-user orientation represents a needed thorough shift toward mission-oriented innovation that positions the EIC at the forefront of global deep tech funding. We view this as the cornerstone for defining the next Framework Programme's approach to breakthrough innovation.

The Board **commends** the **major simplification of the EIC Accelerator**, implementing our priority to streamline the **innovator's journey**. Reusable applications, qualified technical due diligence by deep tech experts to drive accelerated timelines represents the most significant improvement, though monitoring will be essential to ensure delivery matches design intent.

The Board welcomes the continued application of the EIC Board framework for Challenge selection. This will ensure a synergistic tripartite plan which prioritises deep tech, European strategic priorities and an ecosystem sufficiently advanced for EIC funding to have meaningful impact. Despite the budget tightness, the successful **co-funding arrangements with Pillar 2 and other programmes will** enable ambitious Challenge implementation while further positioning the EIC as an essential tool to bring breakthrough innovations to market and validates EIC board emphasis on cross-programme synergies to maximize impact.

Regarding the other elements of the Work Programme, the Board also welcomes:

- Increased **focus on impact** while fostering a higher **budget per project** within **Pathfinder** to fund innovations with high market potential, supporting researchers to become entrepreneurs and deliver social impact. Furthermore, the board advises that applications adopt a **transdisciplinary approach**, going beyond interdisciplinarity of scientific domains.

- **Expansion of EIC Transition Eligibility** since the WP26 now explicitly includes research results from Horizon Europe and Horizon 2020 Research Infrastructures as eligible sources for the EIC Transition call, in addition to existing eligibility for outputs from EIC Pathfinder, ERC Proof of Concept, and Pillar 2 of Horizon Europe. This measure aligns with the Board's recommendation to broaden the pipeline into Transition funding, strengthening links with high-potential upstream.

- **Refinements to the STEP Scaleup Call** based on lessons from its 2025 implementation. These clarifications aim to simplify and align the award criteria more closely with the EIC Accelerator, and update Seal of Excellence references to match current regulation. While a permanent scale-up fund remains outstanding yet in this Work Programme, the proposed **"Scaleup Europe Fund"** under the ***Choose Europe to start and scale*** strategy is a positive response to our calls.

- The **introduction of innovative support mechanisms** aligned with the Startup and Scaleup Strategy, following our recommendations to **strengthen the European innovation ecosystem**. We particularly welcome the establishment of a **Trusted Corporate Network** (TCN), which implements our advice to deepen **corporate-startup engagement** across Europe's key industries (deep-tech, health, climate, digital, and space) beyond traditional matchmaking through advanced procurement opportunities and senior-level corporate involvement while reinforcing EU sovereignty.

- **Increased focus on diversity and international positioning**, reflecting the Board's emphasis on evidence-based policy and global competitiveness. The **bi-annual Gender and Diversity Innovation Index** addresses our recommendation to comprehensively track women's participation across the innovation ecosystem, while **increased budget for international activities** directly implements our international strategy advice, including trade fair support, global expansion programmes, and enhanced EIC thought leadership positioning.

- The relaunch of **the Plug-In scheme** for Member States and Associated Countries to certify programmes for EIC Accelerator pre-selection represents an important step toward enhanced ecosystem integration, allowing national qualified companies to progress directly to full application stage.

- **Continued focus on operational excellence** through maintained budgets for existing calls and improved Business Acceleration Services. However, we emphasize that with challenging funding success rates, Member States should maximize use of the Seal of Excellence and budget transfer possibilities to support high-quality unfunded projects

The 2026 Work Programme is a pivotal milestone, marking the EIC's evolution into a mature, mission-driven institution at the heart of Europe's innovation future. It balances continuity with bold new initiatives, strengthening **Europe**'s position in deep tech despite budget challenges. But **to compete** globally, Europe must **invest decisively** to make the EIC faster, bolder, more integrated, and more trusted.

The Board fully supports the **autonomy** of **Programme Managers** and proposes piloting a transition to Programme Directors, giving them greater authority in line with the **ARPA model**. The Board will advise them in creating a **balanced project portfolio** that secures future **competitive** technologies in the 2026 and 2027 Work Programmes, ensuring robust methodologies that foster **innovation** to strengthen **European technological sovereignty**. Furthermore, the EIC Board also recommends tools such as Advanced Purchase Agreements and Market Commitments to reduce risks and accelerate commercialization.

Looking ahead, the Board recommends that, in the future, an expert evaluation be conducted on the **satisfaction levels of Business Acceleration Services** at both national and regional levels, **providing authoritative evidence on their effectiveness** and **clarifying their added value** within the European Innovation Council framework. Furthermore, the Board recommends undertaking a comprehensive **review** of the **current portfolio** to support its advice on future technological objectives.

The Board will work with the EIC to ensure the **2027 Work Programme** provides a **bridge to** the **next MFF**, experimenting as far as possible within the current legal framework while preparing for future opportunities. It will push for ecosystem integration, internationalization, diversity, **reduction of administrative barriers** and **simplification**, including further simplification of the Accelerator. The Board will also monitor **evaluation processes**, linking success not only to scientific excellence but to innovation potential, and in 2027 will recommend an even more thorough analysis, with particular focus on the **impact of Pathfinder** applications in addressing societal needs.

The Board remains committed to advising the Commission, monitoring progress, and shaping the next MFF to secure the EIC's growth and impact. Its goal is clear: **to ensure the EIC empowers breakthroughs that shape Europe's economic and strategic future**.

EIC Board

Brussels, October 2026