Employment: combating discrimination, guidelines for Community initiative EQUAL

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The committee adopted a non-legislative report by Ursula STENZEL (EPP/ED, A) on the Commission guidelines on the Community EQUAL initiative. The vote in committee was a complicated one, and the committee was split on various issues. It criticised the Commission for making the administrative structures and procedures of the programme far too complex. However, a major area of controversy was whether all asylum seekers should be allowed to benefit under the EQUAL programme. The report as adopted stated that all asylum-seekers (asylum applicants, those under temporary protection and those denied refugee status and threatened with repatriation) should be eligible for the programme. The report also wished to add various topics to the EQUAL guidelines under the different "pillars", such as combating all forms of discrimination, racism and xenophobia, developing more efficient forms of work organisation to reconcile family and professional life, and promoting the development of the local economy. It pointed out that any change in priorities for the EQUAL initiative would require that Parliament be consulted again, and also pointed out that problems could arise with co-financing at the preparatory stage of the initiative. It called on the Commission to set specific ceilings for administrative expenditure and to ensure proper coordination between the activities and budgetary funds provided by the EQUAL initiative and other relevant Community policy instruments in order to optimise the use of Community resources. After the vote, the main political groups in the committee signalled their readiness to negotiate further compromises in time for Parliament's plenary debate on the report.