

PILOT PROJECT

Building capacity for tourism

Toolkit

For Tourism stakeholders applying to EU funds

EISMEA/2023/OP/0024



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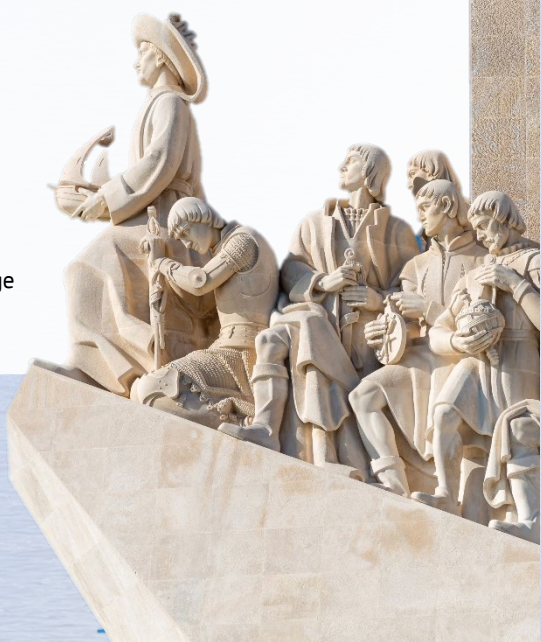
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USING THE TOOLKIT

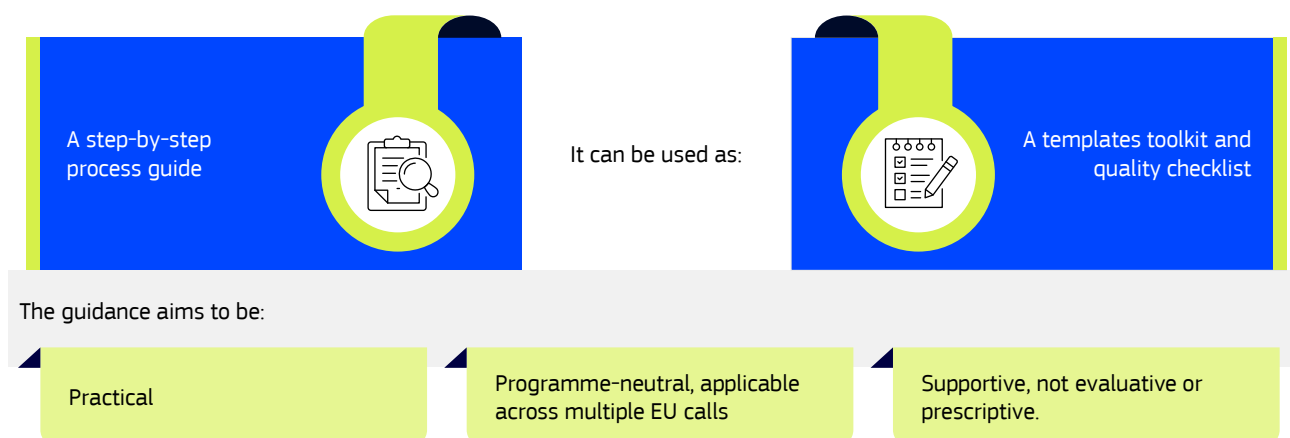
EU funding programmes offer important opportunities for tourism businesses, especially small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), to innovate, cooperate and contribute to wider EU policy objectives. However, EU funding is competitive and follows specific rules and expectations that may differ from national or regional support schemes.

This **Toolkit** is designed to help tourism businesses, especially SMEs operating in the tourism ecosystem (accommodation, tour operators, experiences, attractions, destination services, and tourism tech), by highlighting common good practices (Dos) and frequent mistakes (Don'ts) observed across EU tourism related funding programmes.

The Toolkit is comprised of four main sections, namely: the **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**, the **Dos and Don't Manual**, the **General Guidelines for improving the quality of applications**, and the **Compendium of Best Practices**. Albeit the four can be used as standalone documents, together they aim to assist the tourism business stakeholders, especially SMEs in their journey for securing funding.

The **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)** section provides practical answers to the most common questions tourism SMEs and other stakeholders encounter when exploring EU funding opportunities. It explains key concepts, eligibility requirements, application processes and funding rules in clear and accessible language, helping users better understand how EU funding works and what to expect when preparing an application. While the FAQs offer practical guidance and orientation, applicants should always refer to the specific documentation and requirements of each funding opportunity before applying.

The **Dos and Don'ts Manual** covers the full application lifecycle: selecting the right call, designing a fundable project, producing a complete application (forms, narrative, annexes), submitting through the relevant portal, and preparing for contracting and reporting.



It is noted that where a call provides its own template or other specific instructions, the applicant should **always follow the call's requirements and templates**.

The **General Guidelines** respond to the need to improve the quality, effectiveness, and success of tourism SMEs applications to EU funding programmes. Its purpose is to provide a set of clear, evidence-based general guidelines that support tourism SMEs in navigating the complexity of EU funding mechanisms and in submitting stronger and more competitive applications.

The **Compendium of Best Practices** (Annex II) is a practical, evidence-based reference that showcases how tourism organisations have successfully accessed European, national and regional funding. Drawing on real examples, it provides SMEs with practical insights into funding pathways, common challenges and the organisational and strategic factors that support successful applications. By illustrating how funding has

been secured in practice, the Compendium aims to help tourism SMEs better understand available opportunities, reduce uncertainty and strengthen their capacity to access public funding. The **common mistakes** when applying for EU funding sub-section complements the Compendium by presenting the "negative mirror" of successful applications, and it is based on barriers, challenges and lessons learned reported by SMEs, comparative analysis across successful trajectories and reconstruction of failure patterns from real application experience.

This Toolkit **does not replace official call documents, nor does it guarantee funding**. Its purpose is to **help applicants** better understand what evaluators typically expect and how to avoid avoidable weaknesses.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)



UNDERSTANDING EU FUNDING & PROGRAMMES (1/2)

1. What is EU funding, and what is it for?

EU funding is money from the European Union to support projects that help EU goals (for example: greener business, digital tools, new skills, or stronger regions). It is used to reduce gaps between regions and to help businesses and communities grow. Funding is given through programmes and calls that pay part of your project costs if your project matches the call.

2. What is the difference between EU funds and national funding schemes?

EU funding comes from the EU budget and follows EU rules and EU priorities. National or regional schemes are paid from your country or region's public budget and follow local rules. In practice, EU funding and national funds vary on the way and place of application but sometimes they finance similar types of opportunities. Always check the call: who manages it, what it funds, and what paperwork is needed.

More information: EU funds originate from the **European Union budget**, which is financed primarily through Member States' contributions and other EU-level revenue. These funds are designed to support **EU-wide policy objectives**, such as cohesion, green and digital transitions, innovation, skills, rural development or maritime sustainability.

Depending on the fund, financing can be provided through:



Direct management (managed by the European Commission and its executive agencies)



Shared management (co-managed with national and regional authorities).



Different forms, including **grants, financial instruments** (loans, guarantees, equity), **cascade funding** for SMEs, or **sectoral programmes** such as those under Cohesion Policy (e.g., ERDF, ESF+, CF, JTF, EMFAF, EAFRD).

National funding schemes, by contrast, are financed **directly from each country's public budget** and respond to domestic political, economic and territorial priorities. They may include national grants, subsidies, tax incentives or thematic programmes designed to address region-specific or sector-specific needs. While national schemes often have more flexible procedures and a narrower scope, they do not necessarily align with EU policy frameworks unless explicitly co-funded together with EU programmes.

In practical terms, the main differences lie in the **origin of the resources**, the **policy objectives they pursue**, the **types of financial instruments available**, and the **administrative rules** governing eligibility, reporting and co financing obligations.

3. What is the difference between direct and shared management funds?

In direct management, the European Commission (or an EU agency) runs the call: you apply on the EU portal and compete EU-wide. In shared management, the EU sets the overall rules, but your national or regional authority runs the call, and you apply locally. Many practical SME opportunities (training, small investments, green or digital upgrades) are often in shared-management programmes but the EU also offers targeted funding to SMEs.

UNDERSTANDING EU FUNDING & PROGRAMMES (2/2)

More information:

- **Direct management** funds are EU programmes that are run entirely by the European Commission, meaning that the Commission itself publishes the calls, evaluates all applications and signs the grant agreements. For an SME, this means applying directly through EU level portals such as the Funding & Tenders Portal and competing with organisations from all Member States. The programmes operating under this system include Horizon Europe, the Single Market Programme and its SME window SMP COSME, the Digital Europe Programme, the Innovation Fund, EU4Health, LIFE, Creative Europe, the European Defence Fund and Erasmus+.
- **Shared management** funds are jointly administered by the European Commission and the national or regional

authorities. While the Commission sets the rules, calls and selection processes occur at national or regional level. This category includes the European Regional Development Fund (**ERDF**), the European Social Fund Plus (**ESF+**), the Cohesion Fund (**CF**), the Just Transition Fund (**JTF**), the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (**EMFAF**), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (**EAFRD**) and the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (**EAGF**).

- For SMEs — especially tourism SMEs — this distinction matters because most relevant opportunities (digitalisation, training, green transition, small-scale investment, rural tourism, etc.) are financed through **shared-management** instruments accessed locally rather than directly via EU portals.

4. What is the difference between grants, financial instruments and loans?

A grant is money you usually do not pay back, as long as you follow the rules & deliver what you promised. Financial instruments (like guarantees or equity) & loans must be repaid, but they can be easier or cheaper than normal bank finance because the EU shares the risk. Always check the call to see what type of support it offers.

More information:

- **Grants** are the simplest form of EU funding for SMEs because they are non-repayable if the company follows the rules of the grant agreement. They typically fund training, digitalisation, pilots, or small investments and are awarded through competitive calls.
- **Financial instruments**, are **repayable** tools (loans, guarantees, equity) designed to ease access to finance, reduce lender risk and improve financing conditions (lower interest, reduced collateral).
- **Loans** supported by EU mechanisms are also **repayable**, channelled via Member States or intermediaries & often benefit from EU guarantees or interest-rate reductions

In short, grants are money you do not repay, financial instruments are repayable tools designed to make access to finance easier for SMEs, & loans are repayable credit made more accessible thanks to EU guarantees or support schemes.

5. Is there EU micro-funding for SMEs?

Often yes. Many SMEs access small grants through 'cascade funding' (also called Financial Support to Third Parties). The EU funds a bigger project, and that project then launches simpler open calls for SMEs (usually smaller amounts, faster decisions, lighter applications). These are often for pilots, testing, or quick adoption of solutions.

How it works in practice

You apply to an open call run by the EU-funded project (not directly to the commission)

If selected, you receive funding as a "third party", with reporting requirements defined by that project

The topic is normally tightly linked to the parent project's objectives (often digital/innovation-oriented)

A useful place to start is the Commission's overview of Cascade Funding Calls / FSTP hosted within the Funding & Tenders environment.

PROGRAMMING PERIODS & FRAMEWORKS

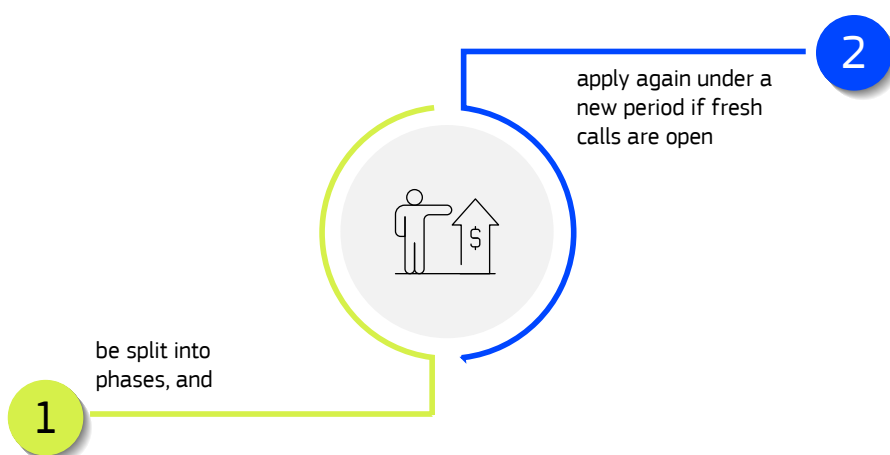
1. What is a programming period (e.g. 2021–2027)?

A programming period is the EU's multi year budget cycle. During that time, the EU sets priorities, rules, and budgets for programmes. For you, it matters because it shapes what kinds of projects are funded and the conditions (topics, rates, eligibility dates). The current period (2021–2027) shapes all calls available to SMEs across Europe.

2. Can a project be funded under more than one programming period?

Generally, no: a project cannot receive funding simultaneously from two programming periods.

However, long-term initiatives may:



Eligibility dates and cost rules always apply to each specific call

TOURISM & SME ELIGIBILITY (1/2)

1. Are tourism SMEs eligible for EU funding?

Yes, tourism SMEs can apply—if their project matches the call's goals. Some calls mention tourism directly. Many others fund themes like sustainability, digitalisation, skills, or regional development where tourism projects can fit. Eligibility is always defined by each call, so check the specific rules.

2. How do I know if my SME meets the eligibility criteria?

Read the 'Eligibility' section of the call. It usually states: who can apply (legal type), where you must be based, your company size, and what projects are allowed. If you are unsure, contact the call's helpdesk or the managing authority before you invest time writing the proposal.

3. Are micro-enterprises also eligible?

Often yes, because micro enterprises are usually part of the SME definition. But some calls require a minimum capacity (for example, staff, turnover, or experience). Check the call to see if there are extra requirements for very small companies.

4. As a tourism SME, which priorities should my project fit into to be relevant for EU funding?

Tourism projects are often funded when they support big EU priorities such as: (1) digital tools and data (e.g., online services, smart visitor management), (2) sustainability (e.g., energy efficiency, lower emissions, circular solutions), and (3) resilience (e.g., skills, crisis planning, climate adaptation). The best fit depends on the call, so use the call's keywords and expected results.

More information:

Most tourism-relevant calls tend to cluster around three thematic axes:

Digitalisation: adopting digital tools, data, AI, cybersecurity, interoperable systems, sustainable management digital tools, smart visitor management, online distribution, etc.

Sustainability:

reducing emissions and resource use, circular business models, biodiversity-friendly tourism, sustainable mobility, energy efficiency, etc.



Resilience:

crisis preparedness, diversification of markets and seasons, workforce skills, business continuity, climate adaptation and risk management.

This framing aligns closely with the EU tourism policy emphasis on the twin transition (green + digital) and the broader push to strengthen the tourism ecosystem's capacity to adapt and compete.

5. Are there EU calls specifically for my type of tourism business (e.g., cultural tourism, rural tourism, hospitality, events, nature tourism)?

Sometimes. Some calls focus on areas like sustainable destinations, cultural heritage, digital tourism services, tourism skills, or resilience. Often the call will not name your niche, but your project can still fit if it clearly supports the call's objectives.

(A structured overview of tourism relevant programmes, opportunities, thematic priorities and subsector examples will be available in the updated EU Funding Guide)

6. Can tourism-related stakeholders be eligible even if the call is not explicitly "tourism-focused"?

Yes. Many calls are open to any sector and focus on goals like innovation, sustainability, digitalisation, or regional development. If your tourism project contributes to those goals and you can show it clearly, you may be eligible.

TOURISM & SME ELIGIBILITY (2/2)

7. Can non tourism companies be eligible for funding under tourism related calls?

Often yes, if the call allows it and their role supports tourism needs (for example: technology, training, data, energy solutions). Many EU calls welcome cross sector partners when they help deliver the project's goals.

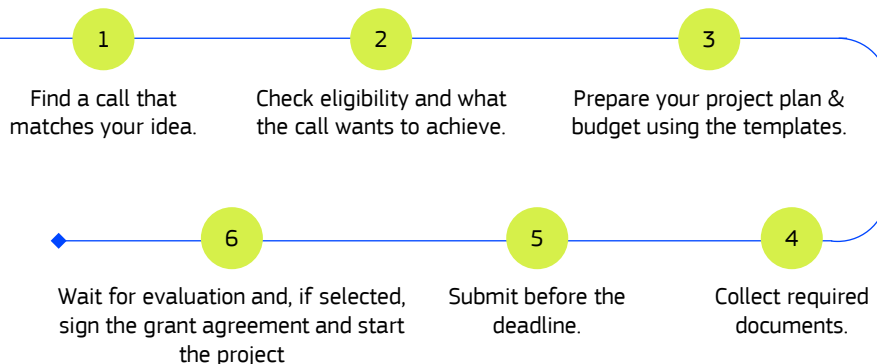
8. Can organisations from outside the EU participate in EU-funded projects?

Partners from outside the EU may participate in EU-funded projects only when this is explicitly allowed in the call or programme rules. Their participation is typically subject to specific conditions defined by the funding authority. For SMEs, this means that non-EU organisations can sometimes join a consortium—particularly in programmes focused on cooperation, innovation or international collaboration—but they may not always be eligible to receive EU funding directly and may instead have to participate without financial support or under restricted arrangements.

Whether their involvement is permitted, funded or limited depends entirely on the individual call for proposals, so SMEs should always check the eligibility section carefully to understand what types of international partners are allowed and how their role must be justified within the project.

APPLICATION PROCESS (1/3)

1. What are the main steps in applying for EU funding?



The exact steps may vary depending on the programme, but this general structure applies across EU funding schemes.

(For a more detailed, step by step walkthrough of the application process and practical templates, please refer to the EU Funding Guide and the Tourism Funding Toolkit)

2. Do I need to register my organisation before applying?

Usually yes. Most calls require your organisation to be registered on the relevant portal so the funder can verify who you are (legal and financial details). The call or portal explains what to register and when.

3. Can I apply as a single applicant?

It depends on the call. Some calls allow a single SME. Others require a consortium (several organisations, sometimes from different countries). The call text will say whether a single applicant is allowed.

4. What factors increase the chances of success in EU funding applications?

Focus on



Tight fit to the call

mirror the call's objectives, expected outcomes and keywords



Credible impact story

measurable results such as job creation, enhanced skills, reduced emissions, digital adoption or reduced seasonality.



Strong work plan

clear tasks, milestones, and deliverables, with the right partner assigned to each



Right partners

complementary expertise, proven capacity, and strong dissemination channels



Clean budgeting

realistic costs, justified per activity, consistent with the funding rate



Evidence of readiness

baseline data, pilot sites, stakeholder support, permissions if needed



Use official tools

portal templates, guidance, and (where useful) partner-search resources

(For a consolidated set of recommendations, checklists and real-life examples drawn from successful and unsuccessful applications, please refer to the Compendium of Best Practices and the General Guidelines available in the EU Tourism Guide)

APPLICATION PROCESS (2/3)

5. How do I register on the Funding & Tenders Portal and obtain a PIC number?

PIC (Participant Identification Code) is the 9-digit identifier you will use when participating in many EU calls. Steps:

- 1 Create an EU Login account: This provides access to the Funding & Tenders Portal services

- 2 Go to "Participant register" and register your organisation: Here you will get registered and obtain a 9-digit PIC number.

APPLICATION PROCESS (3/3)

6. How do I register on the Funding & Tenders Portal and obtain a PIC number?

3 Enter core organisation details (typical requirements)

- Legal name and legal form
- Address and Member State
- VAT number (if applicable) and other identifiers requested by the portal
- Basic organisation information (size/type or activity area)

The screenshot shows the 'Participant Register' form on the EU Funding & Tenders Portal. The form is divided into six steps: 1. Identification, 2. Organisation Data, 3. Legal Information, 4. Authorized Users, 5. Summary, and 6. Success. The 'Identification' step is currently active. It contains the following fields:

- Legal name: Text input field.
- Registration country: Dropdown menu.
- Registration number: Text input field.
- VAT number: Text input field, with a radio button option for 'not applicable'.
- Website: Text input field.

At the bottom of the form, there are 'Save' and 'Return the Form' buttons.

4 Submit the registration to obtain the PIC: You will then use the PIC in applications and correspondence.

Tip for SMEs: Register early — PIC registration is often required before you can be formally added to a proposal.

(Detailed screenshots, checklists and step by step instructions on PIC registration will be provided in the Tourism Funding Toolkit and in the training materials and online courses to be hosted via the EU Academy)

PARTNERSHIPS & CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION (1/2)

1. How do I find partners from other EU countries?

Use networks you already trust (associations, clusters, chambers, past projects). Also use official tools like the Funding & Tenders Portal partner search (linked to specific calls) and tourism communities like the Transition Pathways for Tourism platform. Start with a short 'project idea' and the type of partner you need.

More information:

- The **EU Funding & Tenders Portal** is the European Commission's central online platform for managing EU funding programmes. It includes a dedicated **Partner Search** section linked to each call for proposals. Through the portal, organisations can create a detailed organisational profile, publish expressions of interest for specific calls, and browse partner profiles posted by other organisations from across the EU. The portal is publicly accessible and can be reached via the European Commission's funding and grants website (available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home>)
- In addition, the **T4T Platform (Transition Pathways for Tourism)** is an EU-supported online community specifically focused on the tourism ecosystem. The platform brings together tourism SMEs, destinations, clusters, research organisations and public authorities. It offers dedicated spaces for networking, sharing project ideas and identifying potential partners aligned with EU priorities for the green and digital transition of tourism. Access is available through the official T4T website after simple registration (available at: <https://transition-pathways.europa.eu/tourism>)

Together, these platforms provide complementary approaches: the Funding & Tenders Portal supports structured partner searches linked to concrete EU calls, while the T4T Platform facilitates sector-specific networking and early-stage matchmaking within the tourism community.

2. How can I use the EU Funding & Tenders Portal to find project partners?

To find partners using the EU Funding & Tenders Portal, you will need to:

1 

Create an EU Login and organisational profile: Register on the portal and complete the organisation's profile, including expertise, previous experience, country, type of organisation and thematic interests. A well-described profile increases visibility to potential partners.

2 

Identify a relevant call for proposals: Use the search and filter functions to identify EU calls relevant to tourism, sustainability, digitalisation or SME support. Each call has its own dedicated page.

3 

Access the partner-search section of the call: This section displays profiles of organisations looking for partners and allows you to publish your own partner-search request.

4 

Publish a partner-search profile or project idea: Describe the project concept, the type of partners sought (e.g. destination managers, technology providers, research organisations) & the expected role within the consortium.

5 

Browse & contact potential partners: Review partner profiles posted by other organisations & use the portal's contact functions to initiate discussions.

6 

Follow up and build the consortium: Once contact is established, discussions typically move offline to refine roles, responsibilities and the final consortium structure before proposal submission

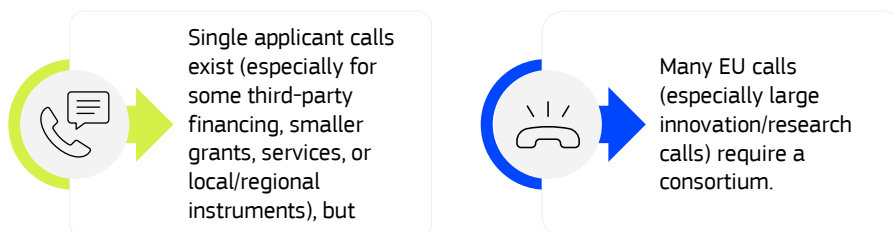
Using the portal in this way allows SMEs to identify reliable cross-border partners already interested in EU-funded projects and aligned with the specific requirements of each call.

PARTNERSHIPS & CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION (2/2)

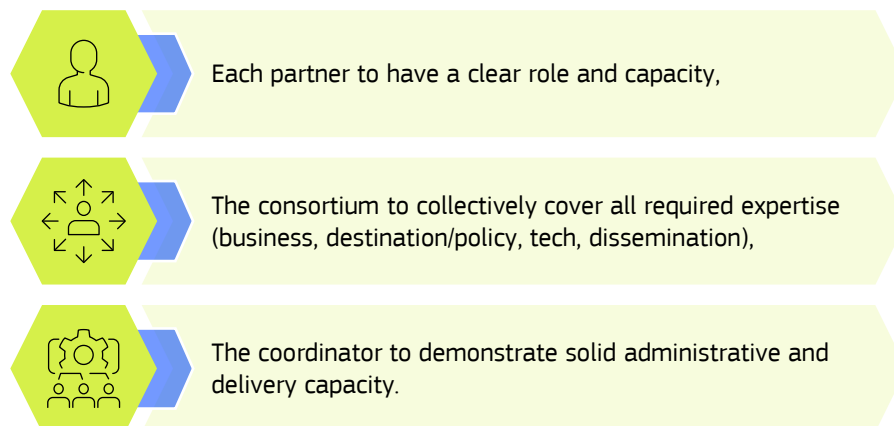
3. What are the minimum requirements for forming a consortium?

It depends on the call. Some allow one applicant. Others require several partners. For example, many Horizon Europe calls, a common rule is at least three independent organisations from three different EU Member States or associated countries (with at least one from an EU Member State).

Minimum requirements vary from one programme or call to another. In broad terms:

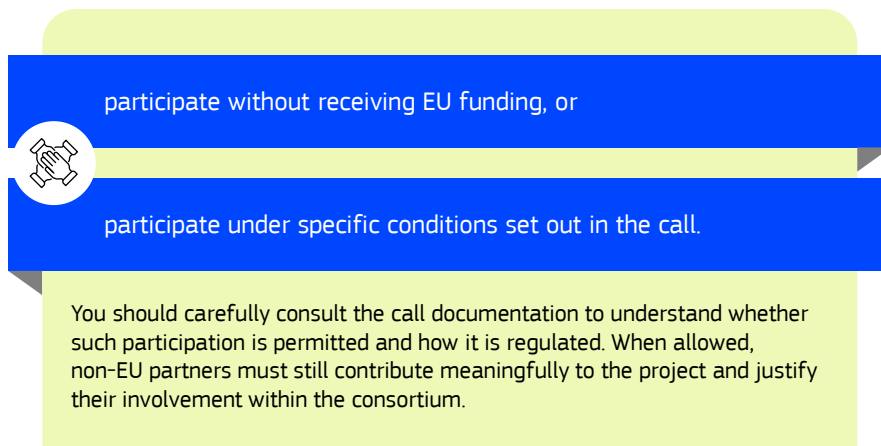


Beyond formal eligibility, evaluators generally expect:



4. Can partners outside the EU participate?

Participation of partners from outside the EU is possible only if explicitly allowed by the programme or call. In some cases, third-country partners may:



DOCUMENTATION & REQUIREMENTS

1. What documents are usually required when applying?

Applicants are usually required to submit a set of **administrative documents** (such as legal and financial declarations), a **project proposal**, and a **detailed budget**. Depending on the type of project and the specific call, additional documents may be requested, such as a **business plan**, a **feasibility study** or relevant **permits or authorisations**. All required documents and templates are clearly listed in the **call guidelines**, which should always be checked carefully before starting the application.

2. Do I need to provide proof of SME status?

Yes, most calls require applicants to demonstrate their SME status. This is usually done through a formal declaration and supporting financial information, such as turnover or staff numbers. Providing accurate information is important, as SME status can affect eligibility and funding conditions.

BUDGET, FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS & CO-FINANCING

1. What is co-financing?

Co financing is the **part of the project cost that the EU does not pay**. Most calls fund only a percentage of eligible costs, so you (and/or your partners) must cover the rest with your own money or other funding. The call tells you the funding rate and what costs are eligible. If you are an SME, it is important to plan co-financing from the outset, as it affects the level of financial capacity required and may influence whether additional partners or complementary funding sources are needed.

2. Can I combine EU funding with national or regional schemes?

Often yes, but you cannot pay the same cost twice. You must declare all funding sources and follow the rules of each scheme. Check that the call allows combining funds and keep clear accounting to show which costs are paid by which source.

EVALUATION & SELECTION PROCESS

1. How are proposals evaluated?

The evaluators use criteria written in the call, usually covering: fit with the call objectives, quality of the plan, feasibility (can you deliver), expected impact, and value for money. Proposals must reach minimum quality scores to be selected.

2. Who evaluates my proposal?

Depending on the programme, proposals may be evaluated by staff of the managing authority, independent experts, or a combination of both. Evaluation procedures are designed to ensure transparency, impartiality and consistency across applications.

3. How long does evaluation take?

Timelines vary by call. Some decisions take a few weeks, others take a few months. Many calls publish an 'indicative timetable' (evaluation results and grant signature dates) in the call documents.

USING THE FUNDING GUIDE & TOOLS

1. Where can I quickly see all the open EU calls that could fund a tourism SME like mine?

- Start with the EU Funding & Tenders Portal for EU-level calls (you can search by keywords and filter by 'open'). For tourism-specific networking and opportunities, also look at the Transition Pathways for Tourism (T4T) platform. For shared-management funding, check your national or regional managing authority portals.
- *For a step-by-step approach and curated tourism-relevant programmes, consult the EU funding guide (forthcoming), which will consolidate the most relevant funding lines and practical application tips.*

Useful links:

- EU Funding Guide <https://transition-pathways.europa.eu/tourism/learning-resources/navigating-eu-funding-guide-tourism-businesses-and-stakeholders>
- EU Funding & Tenders Portal: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal>

More information:

01

The EU Funding & Tenders Portal: This is the European Commission's central platform where most EU programmes publish calls and manage applications. It includes call pages, templates, guidance documents, and (for many calls) a partner-search function. How to use it easily?

- search by keywords (e.g., "tourism", "SME", "heritage", "digital", "sustainable", "destination")
- filter by programme and status (open/closed)
- open the call page and read the eligibility + funding rate + required documents

02

The T4T platform (Transition Pathways for Tourism): This is a dedicated EU space for the tourism ecosystem to connect, follow policy priorities, and spot collaboration opportunities that are specifically tourism focused. It is particularly useful for networking and early-stage matchmaking around tourism transition themes.

2. What is the EU Funding Guide and how can it help me?

The EU Funding Guide is a practical overview of the main funding options, basic concepts, and how to navigate calls. For tourism SMEs, it helps you understand where to look, what terms to search for, and how to compare opportunities before you invest time in an application.

EU Funding Guide: [Guide on EU funding for tourism - Mobility and Transport](#)

DO'S AND DON'TS MANUAL



THE APPLICATION LIFECYCLE

EU funding for tourism is not designed to subsidise routine business operations. Instead, it supports projects that contribute to EU policy objectives, such as sustainability, digitalization, resilience, social inclusion, and cross border cooperation.

Tourism projects are typically funded when they demonstrate:



A clear problem or
challenge



A contribution to EU
priorities



Benefits that go beyond a
single business or location

A key concept is EU added value. This means explaining why EU-level support is needed and how the project generates benefits that could not be achieved through local or national funding alone.

Tourism SMEs typically access European funding through two delivery routes:

National or regional programmes (shared management):

Investment support delivered by a Managing Authority (often linked to cohesion policy funds and recovery instruments).



EU-level calls (direct management):

Competitive EU calls, often requiring stronger evidence and sometimes partners across countries.

Regardless of route, successful applications share the same fundamentals: **strong call-fit, a credible delivery plan, measurable impact, and an audit-proof budget.** The below chapters aim to help applicants build a strong application.



THE APPLICATION LIFECYCLE IN 12 STAGES

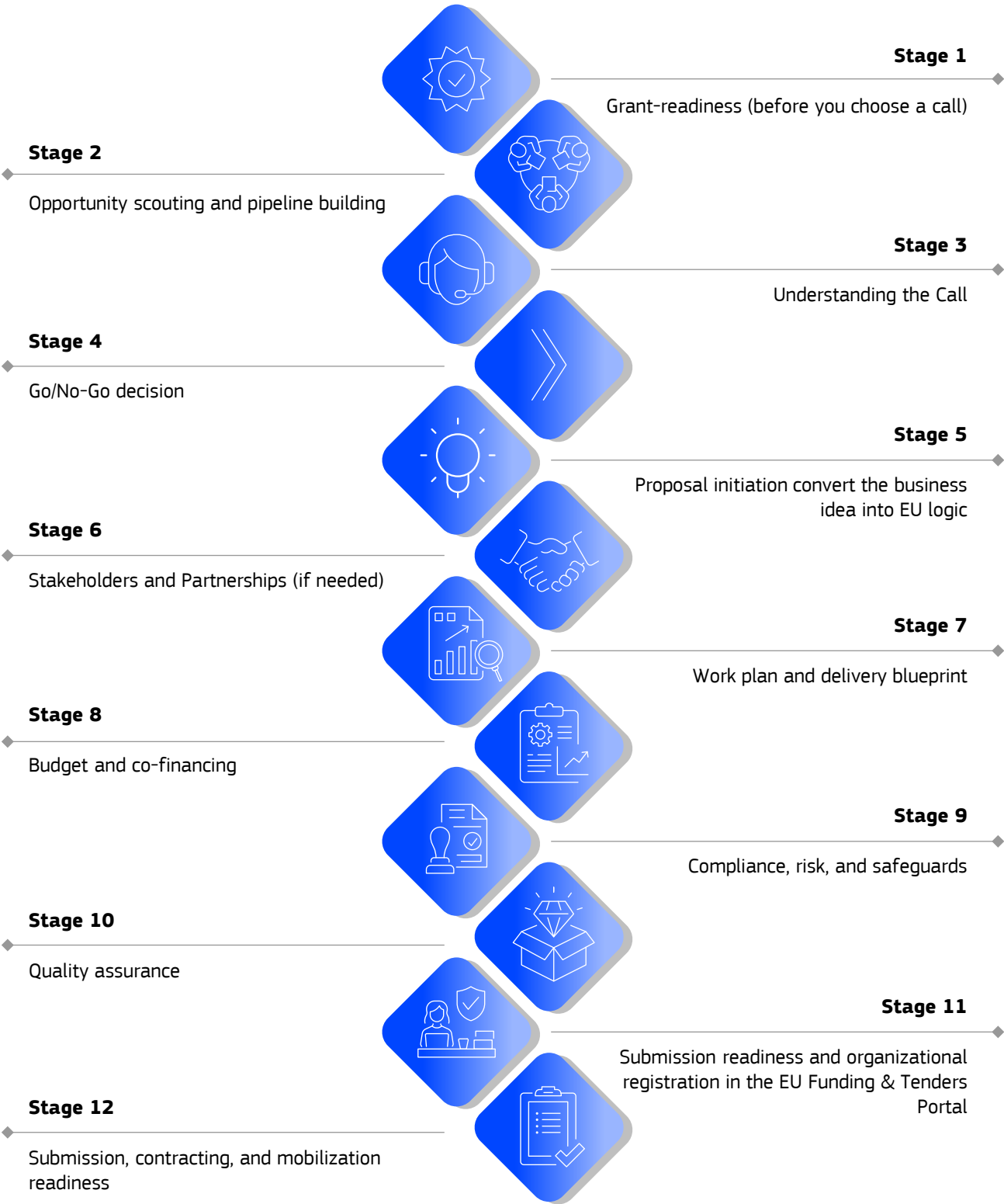


Figure 1: The 12 Stages Flow Chart

This section of the manual guides applicants through the entire lifecycle of the application process using a stage by stage approach. Each stage clearly outlines its objective, the required actions, practical guidance on how to carry them out, and the expected outputs. Applicants are encouraged to treat these outputs as key process deliverables.

STAGE 1: GRANT READINESS (BEFORE YOU CHOOSE A CALL)



Objective and actions

- ➔ Create a **“grant readiness” folder**, i.e. a folder that contains legal and financial documents, administrative materials and standard declarations. Focus on documents that need time to be issued or that you expect considerable delays in issuing them. It is critical to ensure that time will not be lost during the submission process for administrative documents (e.g. social insurance certificates, tax certificates, etc.).
- ➔ Assign **internal roles**: A person should be assigned the role of **monitoring-scouting of incentives**, grants and other funding opportunities. Other important roles might include Project Owner, Proposal Lead, Finance/Budget Owner, Compliance/Quality Reviewer. The same individual can hold multiple roles, but it must be noted that each of the roles' responsibilities is critical for the successful preparation of the application.



How to act

Assume everything will be audited later and store evidence as you go.



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

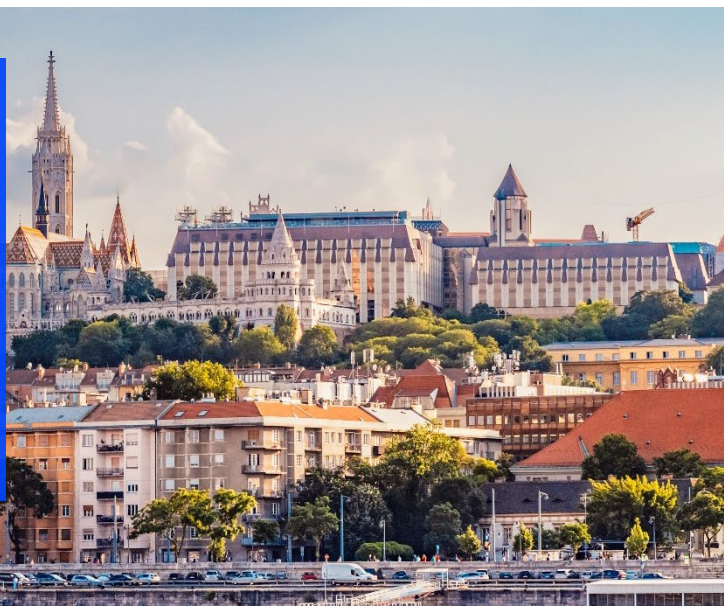
- Grant readiness folder
- Role allocation
- Document index

Chapter checklist

- ☐ Assign clear roles and responsibilities
- ☐ Have a folder with the standard administrated material

Further tips:

Be realistic about what your team can handle. Do not plan a project that your staff and time cannot realistically support. Decide early if you need external help. Many small businesses succeed because they use consultants or support organisations from the start. Accept that funding means paperwork. If you are not ready for documentation and administrative work, problems will appear later. Think long-term, not one-off. Funding works best when it builds experience call after call.



STAGE 2: OPPORTUNITY SCOUTING AND PIPELINE BUILDING



Objective and actions

- ➔ Build a pipeline of relevant calls and notices (EU-level and national/regional).
- ➔ Track deadlines, funding rates, requirements, and expected outcomes.
- ➔ Identify likely partners and support networks (e.g. destination bodies, associations, tech providers).



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Call pipeline tracker
- Initial partner/stakeholder shortlist.



How to act

- Avoid one-off hunting. Aim for a pipeline where each call is assessed consistently.
- Identify potential stakeholders/ networks that can help connect with experienced partners. It is crucial to have a sound network of contacts at public and private level.

Chapter checklist

- ☐ Build a simple tender tracker, a document with the basic information of relevant calls
- ☐ Have a first "go-to" list of external partners

Further tips:

It would be useful to perform a competition analysis and find out the funding programmes that competitors go after as well as the success rates for each programme. Remember to plan in advance and identify potential external partners. Search regularly, not randomly. A simple but structured research system saves time and avoids missed opportunities. Have in mind that smaller funding can be better. Many SMEs benefit more from small, targeted schemes than from large, complex ones.

STAGE 3: UNDERSTANDING THE CALL



Objective and actions

- ➔ The call for proposals is the main reference document and must be read carefully. Important information is often spread across several documents, including annexes, work programmes, templates and FAQs.
- ➔ **Be crystal clear on what the call wants.** Strong applications show clear understanding of priorities and expected contribution.
- ➔ **Confirm eligibility early and strictly.** Eligibility criteria are repeatedly reported as a key barrier and a common failure point.
- ➔ **Assume documentation will be heavy.** Complex requirements and long documents are a recurring pain point for SMEs.
- ➔ "Call for proposals" is used here as a general term covering all relevant funding instruments, including tenders and grants.



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- A clear picture of the opportunities that are relevant to your business
- A clear picture of relevant partners



How to act

Applicants should Identify:

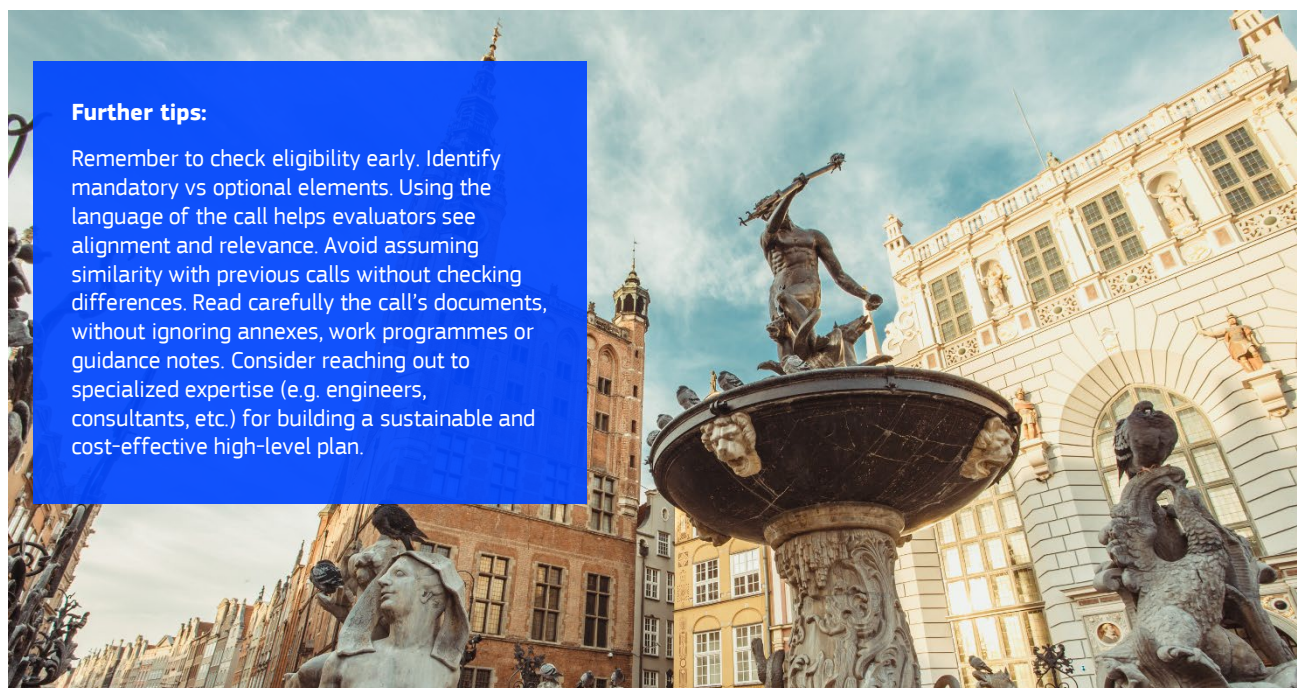
- Objectives and priorities of the call. It is highly recommended for applicants to **link** the funding priorities with their **business model** and strategy. The company should have a clear strategy and follow up on this. It is the strategy that should guide the decision to apply for a specific grant and not the other way around.
- Eligibility criteria. Each call defines clearly the typology of actions to be funded
- Mandatory activities or outputs
- Evaluation criteria

Chapter checklist

- ☐ I have read all call documents and annexes
- ☐ I understand eligibility and mandatory requirements
- ☐ I have reached out to the appropriate experts
- ☐ I use the same terminology as the call

Further tips:

Remember to check eligibility early. Identify mandatory vs optional elements. Using the language of the call helps evaluators see alignment and relevance. Avoid assuming similarity with previous calls without checking differences. Read carefully the call's documents, without ignoring annexes, work programmes or guidance notes. Consider reaching out to specialized expertise (e.g. engineers, consultants, etc.) for building a sustainable and cost-effective high-level plan.



STAGE 4: GO/NO-GO DECISION



Objective and actions

- ➔ Score the opportunity: eligibility match, strategic fit, evidence strength, delivery capacity, co-financing requirements, and complexity.
- ➔ Check if your team can handle the workload. Time and resource constraints are a recurring reason SMEs struggle.
- ➔ Evaluation of return on investment.
- ➔ Availability of internal capital. Think about cash-flow before you commit. SMEs report stress from delays, VAT recovery, and the need for liquidity beyond the grant.
- ➔ Assess the success rate of this type of calls.
- ➔ Define a bid strategy (what you will emphasise, what you will not include).
- ➔ Lock internal deadlines and review checkpoints.
- ➔ Time and resource constraints are a recurring reason SMEs struggle.
- ➔ Avoid "nice-to-have" projects. Strong lessons show that targeted, need-driven projects are safer than speculative ones



How to act

Be precise: 'Maybe eligible' is a No-Go until proven otherwise.



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Go/No-Go sheet
- Bid plan with timeline

Chapter checklist

- ☐ Eligibility is confirmed
- ☐ Capacity and key staff are realistically assessed before final decision
- ☐ I have reached out to the appropriate experts
- ☐ I have performed a cost-benefit analysis for the submission decision (anticipated effort vs. benefit * success rate)

Further tips:

Avoid assuming that minor non-compliance will be overlooked. Respect all formal requirements (format, length, deadlines) before the final decision. Verify eligibility before investing time in proposal writing. In the case of co-financing, remember to always check how this reflects to the sustainability of the overall investment and to company strategy. Can the private contribution be covered by the company's funds or a loan must be secured?

STAGE 5: PROPOSAL INITIATION – CONVERT THE BUSINESS IDEA INTO EU LOGIC (PROBLEM, OBJECTIVES, KPIS)

Strong EU funded projects start with a clear problem-opportunity definition (e.g. in the areas of innovation, twin transition or competition), not a list of activities. Applicants should explain the “what” (what problem exists), the “who” (who is affected) and the “why” (why current solutions are inefficient).



Objective and actions

- ➔ Write a clear problem statement with numbers and stakeholders affected. Deep dive into the evaluation criteria and organically integrate them into the proposal.
- ➔ Define SMART objectives and a logic chain: outputs -> outcomes -> impacts.
- ➔ Set KPIs with baselines, targets, methods, and data sources.



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Concept note
- KPI register (baseline/target/method/owner).



How to act

Use numbers. Every objective must be measurable.

Simple, focused projects are often stronger than complex ones.

Use charts and tables to demonstrate the delivery team, the resources committed and the expected outcomes. Prerequisites and feasible timetable (e.g. Gantt chart¹) should be also included.

Keep the scope realistic for your size. Successful cases avoid over-scaling beyond operational capacity.

Use the right expertise to strengthen structure. Proposal quality improves when specialised support helps shape the application.

Chapter checklist

- ☐ Start from a clear problem
- ☐ Activities should directly address the problem
- ☐ The project logic is easy to follow
- ☐ Outputs and impacts are clearly separated
- ☐ Impacts are realistic and credible
- ☐ EU added value is clearly explained

1. A Gantt chart is a horizontal bar chart used in project management to visualize project schedules, tasks, and timelines. It displays start/end dates, task durations, dependencies, and progress, helping teams track what needs to be done and when. For an indicative example, see here

Further tips:

Try to **quantify** results where possible and **link** impacts with EU priorities. Don't confuse outputs (what you produce) with impacts (what changes). Avoid combining unrelated actions under one project. Instead, start by clearly describing the problem your project addresses and design activities that directly respond to this problem/opportunity.

STAGE 6: STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERSHIPS

(IF NEEDED)

Many EU funding projects require partnerships. Partnerships should be purpose-driven, not symbolic. Each partner must bring specific expertise or access to target groups.

Evaluators typically look for complementarity, clear roles and effective coordination. Quality matters more than the number of partners.



Objective and actions

- ➔ Decide what can/must be done in-house and what must be done by partners.
- ➔ Secure letters of commitment/support where required (specific contributions, dates, signatures).
- ➔ Create a partner role matrix (RACI) and governance approach.



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Partner matrix
- Letters of support
- Governance outline.



How to act

- De-risk delivery: show you have the right capabilities, not just ambitions.
- Remember that you have to justify **how and why** the project will be shared among partners and what the governance model among partners will look like in practice.
- Choose partners you trust and can work with. Partnership and consortium challenges are a recurring barrier in practice.
- Use networks to access the right partners. Access to opportunities often comes through project networks and intermediary ecosystems.

Chapter checklist

- ☐ Each partner has a clear role
- ☐ Partners bring complementary skills
- ☐ Cooperation is meaningful, not formal

Further tips:

Try and build **complementary partnerships**. Avoid including partners for “geographical balance” or assume that partner reputation replaces clear responsibilities. Be aware of a reasonable public-private balance. Don't forget to demonstrate internal management capacity.

Don't underestimate coordination load. SMEs repeatedly face time/resource constraints that partnerships can intensify.

STAGE 7: WORK PLAN AND DELIVERY BLUEPRINT

A well-structured work plan shows that the project is feasible. Activities should be grouped logically, sequenced over time and supported by a realistic timeline.

Risk identification is encouraged and demonstrates professionalism and sound planning



Objective and actions

- ➔ Structure work into work packages (WPs) or workstreams with tasks, owners, dependencies, and dates.
- ➔ Define deliverables and milestones with acceptance criteria (what 'DONE' means).
- ➔ Describe relevant experience, even from small-scale or local project.
- ➔ Build a realistic timeline including procurement lead times and permits.
- ➔ Show you can deliver with your real team. "Team design and internal resources" repeatedly appears as a key success factor.
- ➔ Keep delivery plans practical and coherent. Strong cases show focused, fit-for-purpose project scope instead of overcomplicated designs.
- ➔ Include administrative workload in your plan. Administrative burden and reporting effort can be disproportionate for small teams.
- ➔ Build in regulatory feasibility. Strong lessons stress early handling of licences/permits and legal constraints.
- ➔ Use external support to protect delivery capacity. Some SMEs succeed by outsourcing specialised tasks while staying focused internally



How to act

Write who does what by when, with what inputs. Remember to link this with the overall governance structure, especially when multiple stakeholders are involved.



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

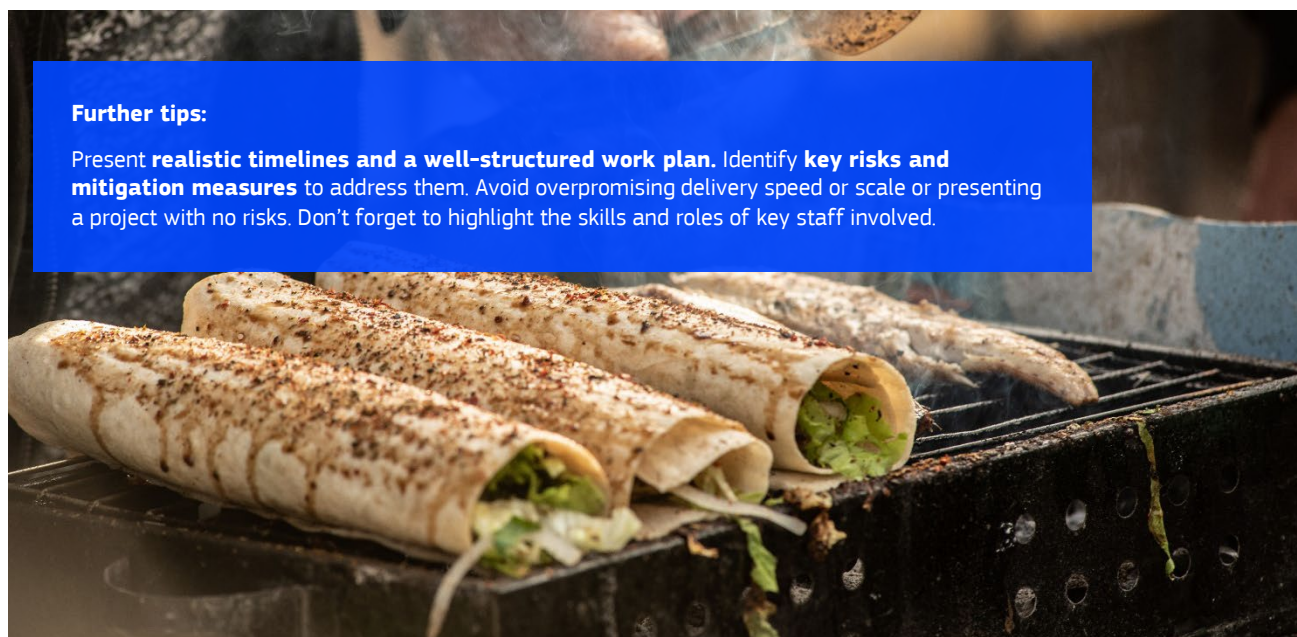
- Work package table
- Milestones/deliverables table
- Gantt charts or Waterfall charts.

Chapter checklist

- ☐ Activities are logically structured
- ☐ Timeline is realistic
- ☐ Risks and mitigation measures are identified

Further tips:

Present **realistic timelines and a well-structured work plan**. Identify **key risks and mitigation measures** to address them. Avoid overpromising delivery speed or scale or presenting a project with no risks. Don't forget to highlight the skills and roles of key staff involved.



STAGE 8: BUDGET AND CO-FINANCING

The budget must clearly reflect planned activities. Evaluators assess whether costs are reasonable, justified and proportionate. The importance of transparency is highlighted.



Objective and actions

- ➔ Build budget from the work plan (time rates, quotes for subcontracting/equipment).
- ➔ Cross-check eligibility of each cost category against the call rules.
- ➔ Ensure costs are linked to planned activities
- ➔ Document assumptions and secure co-financing evidence.
- ➔ Plan liquidity beyond the grant. SMEs report VAT recovery delays, co-financing pressure, and the need for cash buffers.
- ➔ Expect rules to shift during implementation. Some cases highlight evolving compliance rules that can change eligibility mid-project.
- ➔ Make your cost logic credible. Weak cost analysis can trigger evaluator doubts about feasibility.
- ➔ Budget for the expertise you actually need. Experienced consultants can raise award chances and reduce friction.
- ➔ Check whether the admin effort is worth the money. SMEs note that delays and workload can make some schemes unattractive.



How to act

Explain major cost items in simple and transparent terms



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Finalized budget table
- Budget narrative
- Eligibility cross-check
- Co-financing proof.

Chapter checklist

- ☐ Budget aligns with activities
- ☐ Major costs are explained
- ☐ Value for money is demonstrated

Further tips:

Try to align budget with activities. Aim to explain cost drivers and demonstrate value for money. Avoid using unclear or lump-sum logic without explanation. Remember to assess availability of private financing when co-financing is required.



STAGE 9: COMPLIANCE, RISK, AND SAFEGUARDS



Objective and actions

- ➔ Create a risk register with mitigations and contingencies (operational, legal, market, data).
- ➔ Prepare data protection/ethics notes (especially for customer/booking data).
- ➔ Document procurement approach and conflict-of-interest safeguards.
- ➔ Plan for administrative friction as a real risk. SMEs consistently report administrative burden as a major obstacle.
- ➔ Treat compliance as an active risk-management task. Systematically identify eligibility, legal and administrative constraints early, document how they are addressed, and include buffers for evolving rules to prevent issues during implementation.
- ➔ Include a buffer for changing requirements. Some evidence notes policy/standard updates and evolving rules during delivery.



How to act

Remove reasons to reject you: compliance is a scoring strategy.

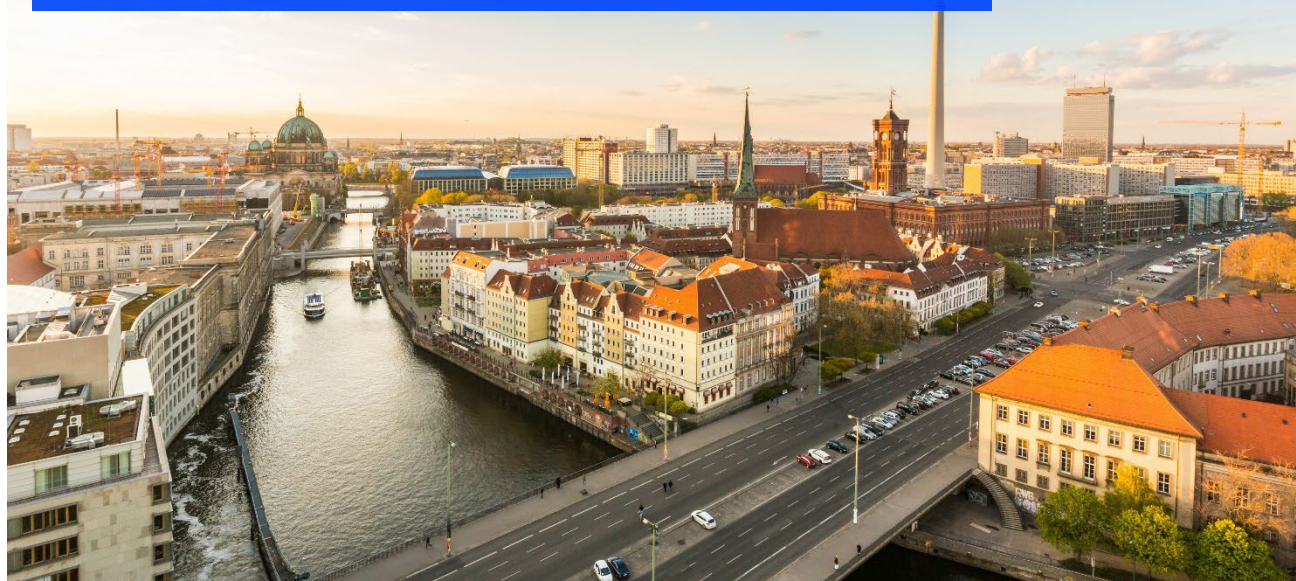


Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Risk register
- Ethics/data annex
- Procurement plan

Further tips:

Formal errors can disqualify otherwise strong applications. Don't ignore legal/regulatory feasibility. Early compliance planning strengthens credibility and reduces implementation risk.



STAGE 10: QUALITY ASSURANCE



Objective and actions

- ➔ Run two reviews: Evaluator Pass (scorability) and Audit Pass (evidence).
- ➔ Resolve inconsistencies (dates, figures, partner roles, KPIs) and ensure all questions are answered.
- ➔ Check formatting/page limits and mandatory annexes



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Issue log
- Final Quality Assurance sign-off

Chapter checklist

- ☐ Proposal is internally consistent
- ☐ Language is clear and concise
- ☐ Expected results are clearly defined
- ☐ Results are realistic and achievable within the project duration
- ☐ Final review completed before submission



How to act

- Assume evaluators will scan the document: make the “story” obvious in a very few minutes
- Make your proposal easy to score. Weak structure reduces competitiveness; strong structure improves proposal quality.
- Over-document feasibility. Strong lessons stress that evaluators need numbers, plans, and evidence (not assumptions).
- Check the “story” is consistent. Time pressure and limited capacity often cause inconsistencies in weak applications.
- Fix language and clarity issues. Language barriers repeatedly reduce effectiveness and increase misinterpretation.
- Ask someone experienced to review it. SMEs repeatedly benefit from expert feedback and advisory support to raise quality.

Further tips:

Review the final application for consistency and clarity. Do not rely solely on automated checks in submission portals.

STAGE 11: SUBMISSION READINESS & ORGANIZATIONAL REGISTRATION IN THE EU FUNDING & TENDERS PORTAL



Objective and actions

- ➔ Set up EU Login (or national portal accounts) for key staff.
- ➔ Complete organization registration (Participant Identification Code -PIC- or equivalent) and validate authorized roles.
- ➔ Run a 'practice run' upload early to catch technical issues.



Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Portal readiness checklist
- Evidence of access/roles.



How to act

- Never leave portal setup for the last week.
- Expect a heavy documentation push. Complex requirements and administrative burden are common and can overwhelm small teams.
- Don't submit with "missing pieces." SMEs repeatedly struggle when paperwork and proof are incomplete.
- If you have partners, tighten coordination. Partnership challenges are a frequent barrier and can derail readiness.
- Make eligibility unmistakable. Eligibility issues are often raised when proof is weak or interpretation is unclear.
- Use external support if you're stretched. Many SMEs succeed because a capable person manages paperwork and iterations.



STAGE 12: SUBMISSION, CONTRACTING, AND MOBILIZATION READINESS



Objective and actions

- ➔ Submit early, resolve portal warnings, archive the exact submitted version.
- ➔ Prepare for clarification/negotiation (if applicable) and contracting documents.
- ➔ Set up reporting cadence and evidence collection from day 1 to avoid callbacks.



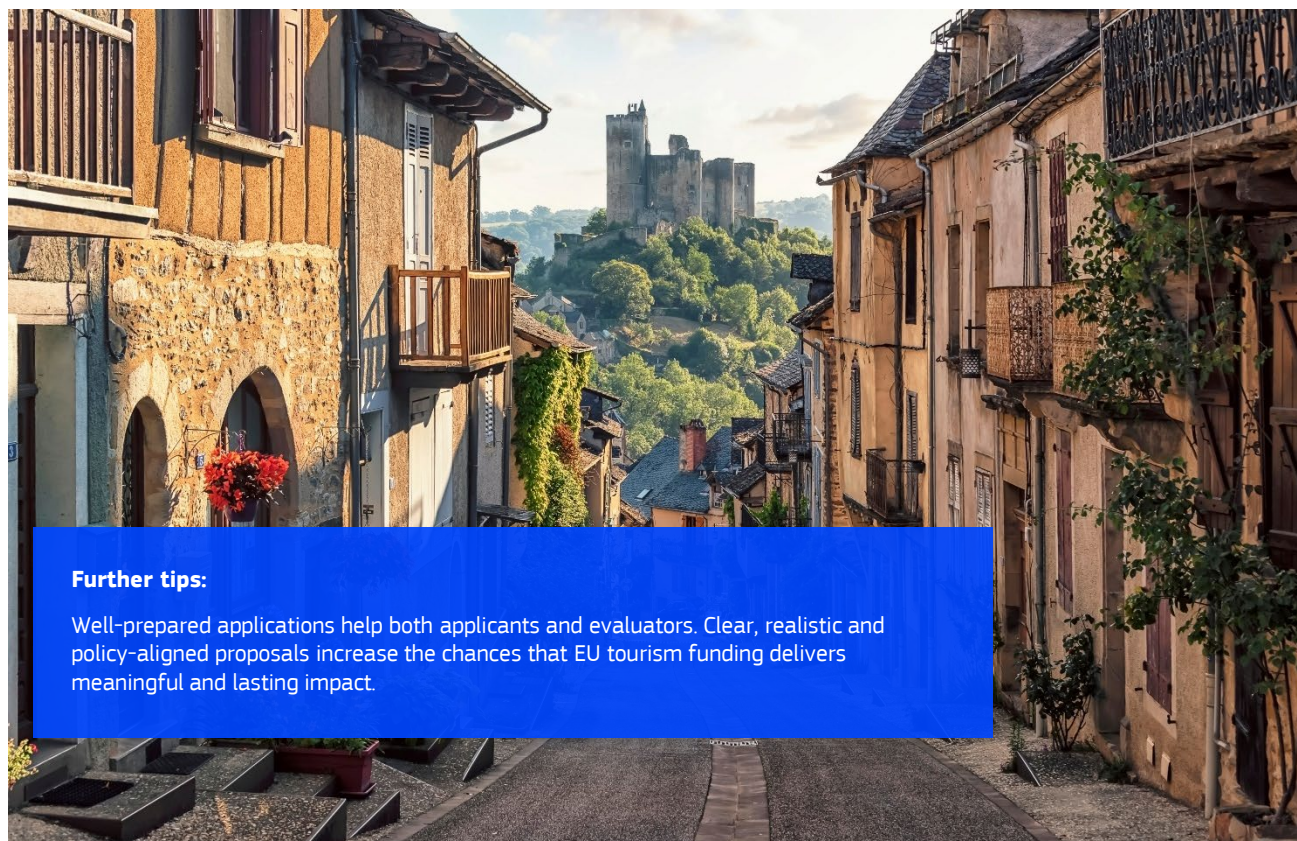
Outputs you must have at the end of this stage

- Submission receipt
- Contracting checklist
- Mobilization plan



How to act

- Treat submission as the start of delivery.
- Expect delays and plan for them. SMEs report slow evaluation and high stress around processing and payments.
- Protect your cash-flow after award too. Liquidity, VAT, and reimbursement timing can create real pressure.
- Watch for changes in eligibility interpretation. Evidence shows that re-interpretation of rules can have strong financial consequences.
- Keep your support ecosystem active. SMEs rarely succeed in isolation; continued support helps manage complexity.
- Use each funded project to build capability. Experience builds cumulative advantage and improves future success rates.



Further tips:

Well-prepared applications help both applicants and evaluators. Clear, realistic and policy-aligned proposals increase the chances that EU tourism funding delivers meaningful and lasting impact.

CRITICAL FACTORS THAT ADD VALUE FOR FUTURE SMES' APPLICATIONS TO EU FUNDS

Strong call-fit and disciplined "programme–project alignment"

Explicit and disciplined alignment between the proposed project and the call's objectives clearly emerges as one of the most recurrent and decisive success factors. Successful SMEs are not those with the most ambitious ideas, but those that are able to demonstrate a clear understanding of why the programme exists and how their project directly contributes to its specific priorities, target logic and expected outcomes.



Value added in practice

SMEs increase competitiveness when they can demonstrate a clear and direct fit between the call's intent and their project scope, rather than presenting a generic investment or a broad wish list.

Quality of the proposal (clarity, coherence, and completeness)

Successful submissions stand out because their narrative is coherent and complete: the project logic is consistent, the content is well structured, and key points are easy to identify. Weak submissions often fail not because the idea is irrelevant, but because it is presented in a way that creates ambiguity or leaves gaps in understanding.



Value added in practice

A clearly structured proposal that allows an evaluator to quickly understand the "why, what, and how," with no internal contradictions across the project narrative.

Strong access to information and opportunity identification capability

Winning applicants tend to identify opportunities that genuinely match their profile and intended investment, including different routes to support (e.g., direct EU calls, cascade mechanisms, or instruments managed at national/regional level). Mis-targeting (applying to the wrong type of opportunity or misunderstanding the funding channel) often leads to avoidable failure.



Value added in practice

A disciplined approach to selecting opportunities and understanding the funding route, enabling the SME to position the application correctly and allocate effort efficiently.

Effective use of support ecosystems (advisory and intermediary support)

Many strong applications show that SMEs compensate for limited internal capacity by leveraging external support (specialised advisors, local/regional support structures, or knowledgeable intermediaries). Conversely, the absence of a support ecosystem is frequently associated with higher friction, errors, and weaker submissions.



Value added in practice

Targeted external support that strengthens the application's technical and administrative robustness, especially for micro or first-time applicants.

CRITICAL FACTORS THAT ADD VALUE FOR FUTURE SMES' APPLICATIONS TO EU FUNDS

Credible team design and resourcing

Applications perform better when they demonstrate realistic internal capacity to prepare the application and deliver the project. Limited bandwidth and unclear internal role allocation often translate into weak documentation, inconsistencies, or underdeveloped sections.



Value added in practice

A credible resourcing approach that matches the project's ambition, signaling that delivery and reporting obligations can be met.

Partnership building that is functional and capability-driven

Where collaboration is part of the funding logic, strong applications demonstrate that partners add concrete value (capabilities, access, delivery roles) and that collaboration is manageable. Weak applications often struggle with coordination complexity, unclear roles, or partnerships that do not strengthen delivery credibility.



Value added in practice

Partnerships built around complementarities and delivery needs, not symbolic participation, strengthening both feasibility and implementation confidence.

Procedural maturity from prior funding experience

Applicants with previous exposure to funding mechanisms often display better anticipation of process requirements and documentation standards, which improves overall submission quality. Where experience is limited, strong applications compensate through support structures and disciplined preparation.



Value added in practice

Demonstrating procedural readiness (through experience or organised preparation) reduces execution risk and strengthens trust in the applicant's reliability.

Managing complexity and administrative burden proactively

Complexity and documentation burden repeatedly emerge as practical barriers. Strong applications do not underestimate this: they plan for it, reduce avoidable friction, and maintain completeness and consistency under time pressure.



Value added in practice

Early planning and disciplined documentation management that prevents omissions and last-minute degradation of quality.

CRITICAL FACTORS THAT ADD VALUE FOR FUTURE SMES' APPLICATIONS TO EU FUNDS

Correct interpretation of eligibility and admissibility boundaries

A recurring failure mode is investing effort into applications that are directionally relevant but structurally weak due to eligibility misunderstandings or unclear positioning within eligibility rules.



Value added in practice

Confirming eligibility early and ensuring the project design clearly sits within admissible action types (reducing the risk of rejection and increasing evaluator confidence).

Legal and regulatory readiness as part of feasibility

Practical feasibility often depends on regulatory constraints (permits, licences, compliance obligations). Strong cases show awareness of these constraints and treat them as part of delivery credibility rather than an afterthought.



Value added in practice

Demonstrating early awareness of regulatory requirements and feasibility constraints reduces perceived delivery risk and strengthens the project's plausibility.

A BLUEPRINT FOR THE APPLICATION PACK

Most programmes request: (a) administrative forms (Part A or equivalent), (b) narrative/technical description (Part B), and (c) annexes/supporting documents. The pack below serves as an **indicative** template. Always make sure that you **use the call's specific forms and templates**.

Executive Summary

- Problem and evidence: who is affected and why it matters now.
- Solution: what you will implement and why it works.
- Objectives and KPIs: baselines and targets.
- Key milestones: what will be delivered and by when.
- EU added value: why EU funding is needed (and what changes with funding).

Administrative Forms Pack (Part A or equivalent)

- Accurate organization data: legal name, legal form, address, VAT/tax IDs, bank details (as required).
- Declarations on honour / exclusions / double funding statements (per call requirements).
- Partner/consortium data, roles, and authorized representatives (if applicable).

Annex Pack (audit-proof supporting evidence)



Budget narrative and cost eligibility cross-check.



Quotes and market checks (where available/allowed).



Risk register and mitigation plan to address the identified risks.



Data protection and ethics notes (if data/tech involved).



Letters of commitment/support (where expected).



Communication, dissemination, and EU visibility plan (where required).

Narrative Content (Part B) aligned to scoring

Write so an evaluator can award points without guessing. Use the call's headings and mirror the scoring criteria. Common building blocks include:

- **Relevance and approach:**
 - Objectives
 - Methodology
 - Innovation/Differentiation
- **Impact:**
 - Outputs-outcomes-impacts
 - Measurement plan
 - Sustainability/exploitation pathway
- **Implementation:**
 - Work plan
 - Governance
 - Resources
 - Risk management
 - Procurement approach



A BLUEPRINT FOR THE APPLICATION PACK

Quality control and submission

This section will assist you to ensure that the application is ready both for the evaluator “pass” and the audit (evidence) pass.

Two-pass review method

Key things to consider when assessing the application’s readiness include:

Evaluator pass:

- Can an evaluator award points quickly? Are claims supported with numbers, baselines, and targets?

Audit pass:

- Is every key figure traceable to a source (invoice, quote, dataset, internal report)?

Are assumptions documented?

- Consistency check: dates, partner roles, budgets, and KPIs match across narrative, forms, and annexes.

Version control and archive

It is important to always maintain a simple yet consistent archive so you can respond to clarifications and audits. The following table provides a practical example.

Folder	Contents	Naming convention
01_Admin	Legal entity docs, declarations, signatory proofs	YYYYMMDD_Admin_vX
02_Narrative	Part B drafts and final	YYYYMMDD_PartB_vX
03_Budget	Budget, quotes, calculations, co-financing proof	YYYYMMDD_Budget_vX
04_Annexes	Risk, ethics/data, comms/visibility, letters	YYYYMMDD_Annexes_vX
05_Submission	Submitted PDF/zip, portal receipt, final pack	YYYYMMDD_Submitted_FINAL

TEMPLATE FORMS

The following indicative templates aim to help applicants assess their internal capacity and coordinate their work before submitting the application. They aim to aid the applicant, not to replace the call's templates and they do not guarantee application success.

Template 1: Opportunity Shortlisting Scorecard

Decision rule (example): Go only if eligibility is confirmed and the total score is $\geq 24/35$, with no 'red' gaps in co-financing or delivery capacity.

Note: the template **provides indicatives** examples of for both the evidence/notes and the actions to close the gaps. Your final scorecard should **reflect the requirements** of the funding programme.

Criterion	Score (1-5)	Evidence / notes ¹ (what do we know)	Owner	Actions to close gaps ² (what do we need to do)
Eligibility match (SME, geography, sector)	[]	Do we meet all basic requirements? E.g. company size, country, sector	[Name]	Confirm unclear criteria, contact call helpdesk, adjust consortium if needed
Strategic fit to call priorities	[]	Does this opportunity match our goals and activities?	[Name]	Refine project idea, align with call priorities, drop if misaligned
Evidence strength (baseline data available)	[]	Do we have data/results to support our proposal?	[Name]	Collect missing data, gather past results, prepare documentation
Delivery capacity (team, suppliers, permits)	[]	Do we have the people, skills, and resources to deliver?	[Name]	Assign team, secure partners/suppliers, check permits or approvals
Co-financing secured	[]	Do we have our share of the funding available?	[Name]	Secure internal budget, confirm external funding, get written commitments
Complexity and risk (portal, partners, reporting)	[]	How difficult is the application and project management?	[Name]	Clarify requirements, simplify scope, seek expert support if needed
Expected competitiveness (signals from call text, budget size, etc.)	[]	How strong is the competition likely to be?	[Name]	Strengthen proposal, differentiate clearly, reconsider if chances are low

1. This is where you **justify** your score. Think “why did I assign this score?” and “what proof do I have to back it?”. It is about the **current reality**.

2. This is where you write **how to fix weaknesses or missing pieces**. Think in terms of “what is missing?” and “what do we need to do **before** applying”.

TEMPLATE FORMS

The following indicative templates aim to help applicants assess their internal capacity and coordinate their work before submitting the application. They aim to aid the applicant, not to replace the call's templates and they do not guarantee application success.

Template 2: project concept note

Project title: []

Lead member: []

Call reference & deadline: []

Problem statement (with data): [What is the tourism challenge? Who is affected? Include baseline numbers.]

Proposed solution: [What will be implemented? Why is it suitable?]

Objectives (SMART): [Objective 1... Objective 2...]

Key outputs (deliverables): []

Expected outcomes and impacts: []

KPIs (baseline -> target): [KPI table, see Template 3]

EU added value: [Why EU funds are needed and what changes with funding]

Implementation summary: [Work packages, timeline, partners/suppliers]

Budget headline: [Total cost, requested grant, co-financing source]



TEMPLATE FORMS

The following indicative templates aim to help applicants assess their internal capacity and coordinate their work before submitting the application. They aim to aid the applicant, not to replace the call's templates and they do not guarantee application success.

Template 3: KPI register (baseline, target, method, owner)

KPI	Baseline (Year/Value)	Target (Year/Value)	Measurement method	Data source	Owner
[KPI]	[Baseline]	[Target]	[Method]	[Source]	[Name]
[KPI]	[Baseline]	[Target]	[Method]	[Source]	[Name]
[KPI]	[Baseline]	[Target]	[Method]	[Source]	[Name]
[KPI]	[Baseline]	[Target]	[Method]	[Source]	[Name]
[KPI]	[Baseline]	[Target]	[Method]	[Source]	[Name]
[KPI]	[Baseline]	[Target]	[Method]	[Source]	[Name]

TEMPLATE FORMS

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Template 4: work package (wp) table

WP & Title	Objective	Key tasks	Lead / contributors	Start-End	Deliverables
[WP]	[Objective]	[Tasks]	[Lead; contributors]	[MM/YYYY - MM/YYYY]	[D# list]
[WP]	[Objective]	[Tasks]	[Lead; contributors]	[MM/YYYY - MM/YYYY]	[D# list]
[WP]	[Objective]	[Tasks]	[Lead; contributors]	[MM/YYYY - MM/YYYY]	[D# list]
[WP]	[Objective]	[Tasks]	[Lead; contributors]	[MM/YYYY - MM/YYYY]	[D# list]

TEMPLATE FORMS

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Template 5: Milestones and deliverables

ID	Type (M/D)	Description	Due date	Owner	Acceptance criteria
[M1/D1]	[Milestone/Deliverable]	[Description]	[Date]	[Name]	[What proves completion]
[M1/D1]	[Milestone/Deliverable]	[Description]	[Date]	[Name]	[What proves completion]
[M1/D1]	[Milestone/Deliverable]	[Description]	[Date]	[Name]	[What proves completion]
[M1/D1]	[Milestone/Deliverable]	[Description]	[Date]	[Name]	[What proves completion]
[M1/D1]	[Milestone/Deliverable]	[Description]	[Date]	[Name]	[What proves completion]
[M1/D1]	[Milestone/Deliverable]	[Description]	[Date]	[Name]	[What proves completion]

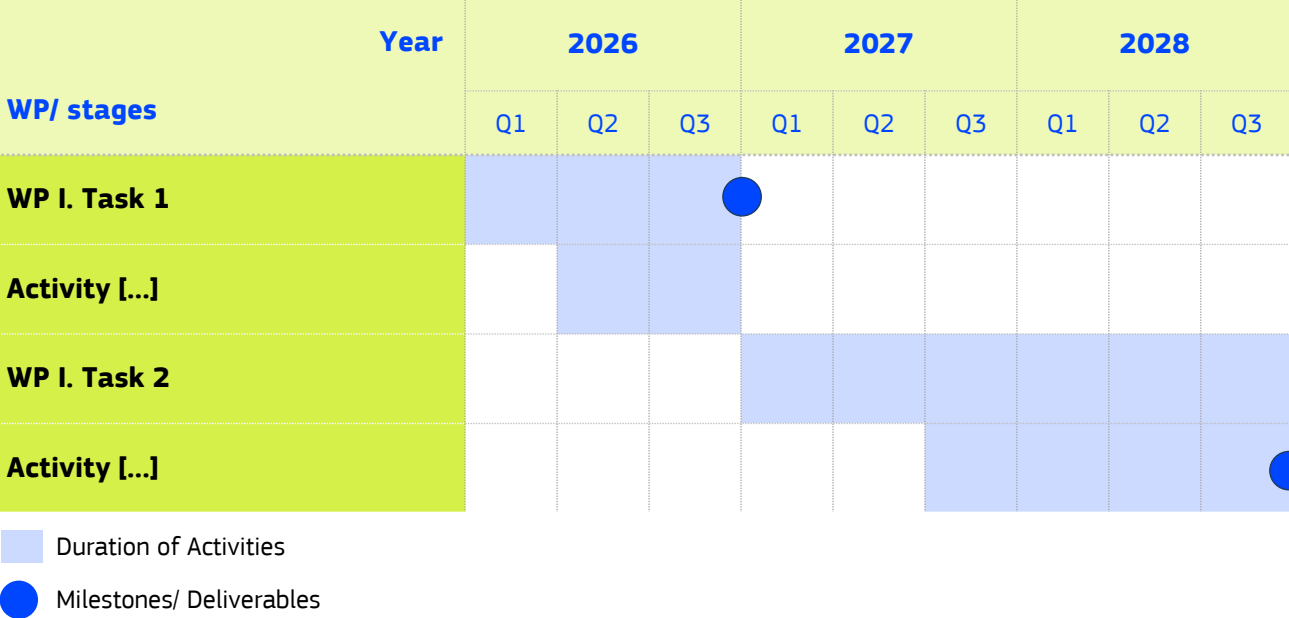
TEMPLATE FORMS

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Template 6: timetable (milestones, deliverables, tasks, etc.)

A timetable (Gantt chart) is usually required or strongly expected in EU funding applications because it demonstrates that your project is realistic, structured, and manageable. EU evaluators want to see clear work packages, logical sequence of activities, realistic timelines and achievable milestones and deliverables. A Gantt chart connects all of these in one view, making it easy for evaluators to see if deliverables are realistically scheduled, if milestones are placed logically and if the workload is balanced.

Keep in mind that in EU proposal evaluations, **“Implementation”** is a **major scoring criterion**. Below you can find an example of how a Gantt chart can look like.



TEMPLATE FORMS

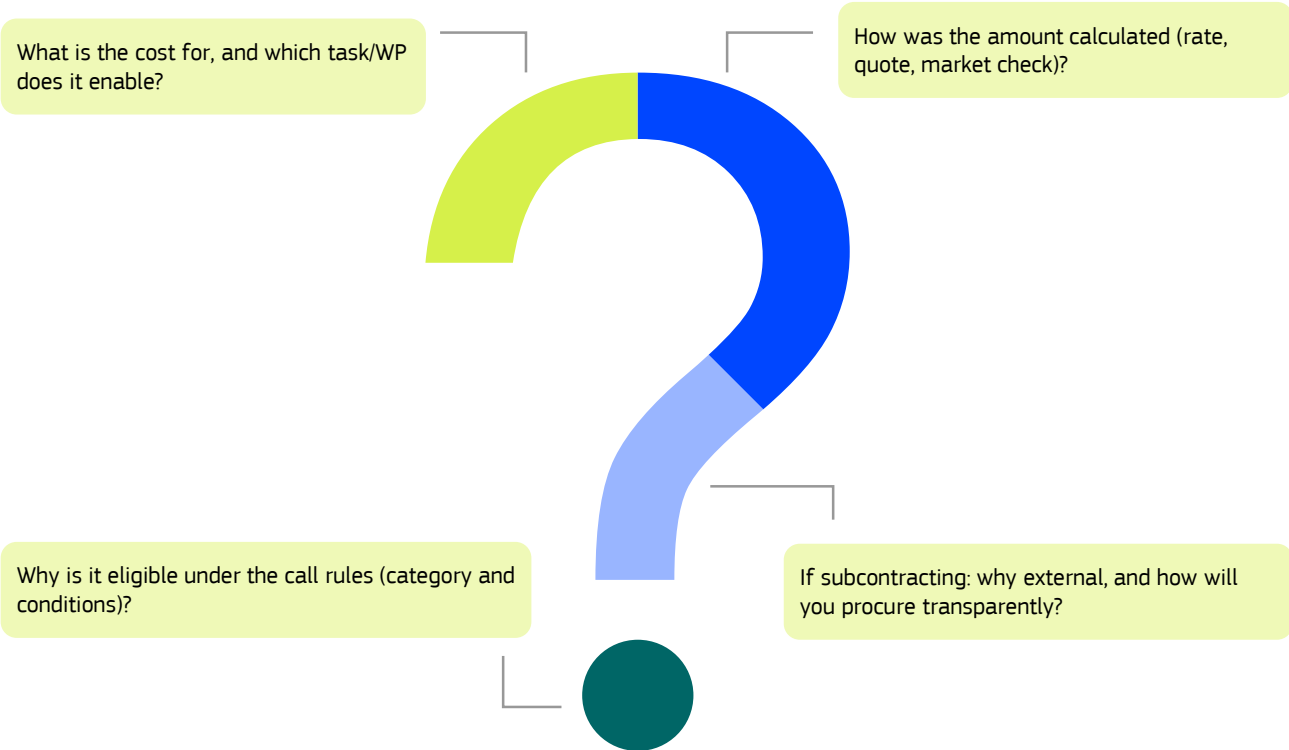
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Template 7: Budget Table and Narrative examples

Budget table (always adapt categories to the call rules):

Cost category	Unit	Quantity	Unit cost (EUR)	Total (EUR)	Justification / eligibility note
Personnel	[e.g., day/hour/item]	[#]	[EUR]	[EUR]	[Why needed; eligibility reference]
Subcontracting	[e.g., day/hour/item]	[#]	[EUR]	[EUR]	[Why needed; eligibility reference]
Equipment	[e.g., day/hour/item]	[#]	[EUR]	[EUR]	[Why needed; eligibility reference]
Travel	[e.g., day/hour/item]	[#]	[EUR]	[EUR]	[Why needed; eligibility reference]
Other direct costs	[e.g., day/hour/item]	[#]	[EUR]	[EUR]	[Why needed; eligibility reference]
Indirect costs (if allowed)	[e.g., day/hour/item]	[#]	[EUR]	[EUR]	[Why needed; eligibility reference]

Budget narrative examples (write 1-3 sentences per major cost item):



TEMPLATE FORMS

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Template 8: Risk Register

Risk	Type	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation	Owner
[Risk statement]	[Operational/Legal/Market/Data/etc.]	[L/M/H]	[L/M/H]	[Mitigation + contingency]	[Name]
[Risk statement]	[Operational/Legal/Market/Data/etc.]	[L/M/H]	[L/M/H]	[Mitigation + contingency]	[Name]
[Risk statement]	[Operational/Legal/Market/Data/etc.]	[L/M/H]	[L/M/H]	[Mitigation + contingency]	[Name]
[Risk statement]	[Operational/Legal/Market/Data/etc.]	[L/M/H]	[L/M/H]	[Mitigation + contingency]	[Name]
[Risk statement]	[Operational/Legal/Market/Data/etc.]	[L/M/H]	[L/M/H]	[Mitigation + contingency]	[Name]
[Risk statement]	[Operational/Legal/Market/Data/etc.]	[L/M/H]	[L/M/H]	[Mitigation + contingency]	[Name]

TEMPLATE FORMS

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Template 9: Compliance Checklist (Pre-submission)

Item	Status ("Yes"/"No"/"N/A")	Evidence / location	Owner
Eligibility confirmed (SME, geography, sector)	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
No exclusion criteria issues; declarations completed	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
Template used; page limits respected; mandatory annexes included	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
Budget categories eligible; co-financing evidence attached	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
Permits/authorisations plan included (if relevant)	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
Procurement approach documented; conflict of interest safeguards	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
Data protection and ethics addressed (if data involved)	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
Risk register complete with mitigations	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
EU visibility requirements included (if applicable)	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]
Portal access tested; dry-run upload completed	[]	[Link / folder path]	[Name]

TEMPLATE FORMS

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Template 10: Communication, Dissemination, and EU Visibility



- Target audiences:** [tourism SMEs, visitors, DMOs, local authorities, platforms, training bodies]
- Key messages:** [what changes, why it matters, evidence of benefits]
- Channels:** [website, social, events, press, partner networks, on-site signage]
- Outputs:** [events, toolkits, training sessions, publications]
- KPIs:** [reach, engagement, adoption, trained staff, etc.]
- EU visibility checklist:** emblem and funding statement/disclaimer used correctly across materials (as required by the call)



GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF APPLICATIONS TO THE EU FUNDING



GRANT READINESS

(BEFORE YOU CHOOSE A CALL)

Be realistic about what your team can handle.

Assess internal capacity before designing the project, not after the call is selected. The successful cases show that weak applications often underestimate the time needed to interpret requirements, collect evidence, prepare documentation, and respond to administrative iterations. A small team should therefore define who will own proposal preparation, technical inputs, budgeting, evidence collection, and later reporting before committing to the application.

Decide early if you need external help.

External support is most valuable when it is used before the proposal logic is fixed, not only to polish the final text. Several successful SMEs used consultants, intermediary tutors, regional organisations, or sector networks to interpret the call, structure evidence, and avoid eligibility or documentation gaps. If the team lacks previous EU funding experience, the support need should be treated as part of the project design and budget, not as an optional last-minute add-on.

Accept that funding means paperwork.

Administrative effort does not scale down simply because the applicant is small. Even modest grants can require evidence collection, portal registration, budget justification, procurement checks, progress reporting, and audit-ready documentation. Before applying, SMEs should estimate the management workload and assign dedicated time for administration instead of assuming that technical staff can absorb it alongside normal operations.

Check basic legal or permit requirements now.

For tourism SMEs, feasibility often depends on permits, licences, insurance, access rights, environmental rules, safety obligations, or local authorisations. These requirements should be mapped before submission and reflected in the work plan, timeline, and risk section. Treating them as future operational details weakens credibility and can create delays once the project is awarded.

Think long-term, not one-off.

The evidence shows that funding experience creates cumulative advantage: SMEs become better at reading calls, preparing documentation, managing partners, and anticipating reporting obligations. Even when a first application is small, it should be used to build reusable templates, internal routines, evidence files, and lessons learned that improve future applications.



Watershed Fly Fishing ensured full grant readiness by conducting a detailed internal assessment of legal requirements, licences, and operational constraints before applying. By proactively addressing feasibility and compliance issues, the company strengthened the credibility of its application and reduced implementation risks.

OPPORTUNITY SCOUTING AND PIPELINE BUILDING

Look only for calls that clearly fit your business.

Do not adapt your idea just to chase funding. The strongest cases show that funding should accelerate a strategic need the SME already has, not create an artificial project. Before investing time, check whether the call fits your business model, tourism segment, investment need, territorial context, and capacity to deliver. If the connection has to be forced, the proposal will usually become weaker, more generic, and harder to score.

Use people and networks, not only websites.

Many SMEs find the right calls through advisors, peers or local organisations. The evidence points to intermediary organisations, regional support services, sector associations, and previous project contacts as practical gateways to relevant opportunities. Do not rely only on open web searches; build a small funding intelligence network that can alert you to cascade funding, regional schemes, or sector-specific calls that may be easier to access and better suited to tourism SMEs.

Understand how the money is managed.

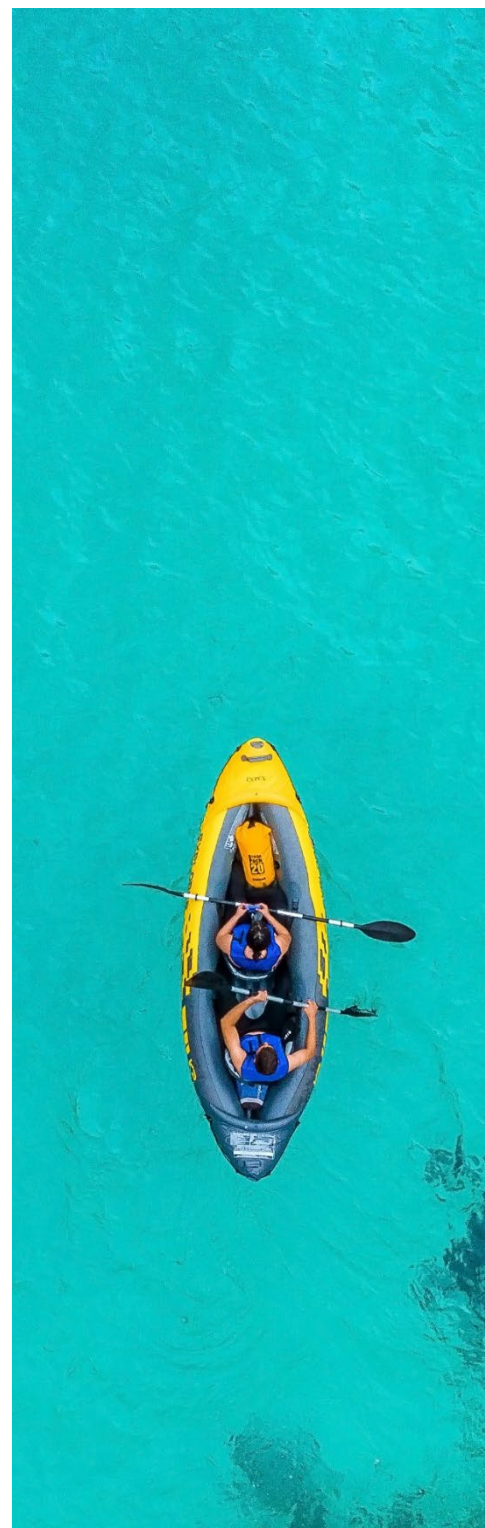
Some funding routes are simpler and better suited for small companies. Direct EU calls, shared management programmes, regional instruments, and cascade funding do not impose the same effort, competition level, documentation burden, or reimbursement logic. Before selecting a call, identify who manages the scheme, how applications are evaluated, whether support is provided, and how payments are made. This helps SMEs avoid over-complex opportunities when a more targeted route would deliver the same strategic value with less friction.

Smaller funding can be better.

Many SMEs benefit more from small, targeted schemes than from large, complex ones. For micro and small tourism operators, a lower-value call with lighter requirements, clearer guidance, and faster mobilisation may create more net value than a large programme requiring heavy coordination, advanced reporting, or high co-financing. Assess the opportunity by comparing expected grant value against workload, risk, timing, and implementation burden.

Search regularly, not randomly.

A simple but structured research system saves time and avoids missed opportunities. SMEs should maintain a light pipeline with upcoming calls, expected deadlines, eligibility notes, fit assessment, funding rate, and required documents. This prevents rushed decisions and allows the team to prepare evidence, partners, permits, or budgets before the deadline pressure starts.



Fattoria delle Api identified a suitable cascade funding opportunity through a regional business support newsletter and intermediary networks. This structured access to information enabled the SME to focus on a highly relevant sustainability-oriented call rather than applying broadly without targeting.

UNDERSTANDING THE CALL

Be crystal clear on what the call wants.

Strong applications show clear understanding of priorities and expected contribution. This means translating the call text into a practical checklist: objectives, target groups, eligible actions, expected outputs, award criteria, and policy priorities. Do not simply repeat the call language; explain how the proposed tourism activity concretely advances those priorities through specific activities, measurable results, and credible delivery arrangements.

Confirm eligibility early and strictly.

Eligibility criteria are repeatedly reported as a key barrier and a common failure point. Check applicant type, SME status, geography, sector, eligible activities, eligible costs, minimum and maximum grant amounts, co-financing requirements, and partnership conditions before any writing starts. If eligibility depends on interpretation, document the reasoning and seek clarification where possible; weak or ambiguous eligibility can undermine the whole application regardless of project quality.

Assume documentation will be heavy.

Complex requirements and long documents are a recurring pain point for SMEs. Treat the call package as a set of operational requirements, not as background reading. Identify which documents must be produced, which evidence must be attached, which declarations are needed, and who must sign or validate them. This reduces the risk of discovering administrative gaps when the technical proposal is already finished.

Watch for language and technical complexity.

These are repeatedly reported as obstacles that make the process harder and weaken outcomes. If the call language is technical, legalistic, or not in the applicant's strongest language, allocate time to translate requirements into plain operational terms. Misunderstanding terms such as eligible costs, admissibility, impact, milestones, indicators, or procurement can lead to proposals that appear relevant but fail to answer what evaluators actually need.

If unsure, use support to interpret requirements.

Step-by-step guidance is essential to reduce uncertainty. Use helpdesks, intermediary tutors, chambers, regional agencies, consultants, or experienced peers to validate the interpretation of eligibility, documentation, budget rules, and evaluation criteria. The value of support is not only improving language; it is preventing avoidable strategic and administrative mistakes before they become embedded in the proposal.



Watershed Fly Fishing systematically analysed the objectives of the EU Just Transition Fund and adapted its eco-guiding project to clearly demonstrate alignment with environmental priorities. This ensured that the proposal directly addressed programme expectations.

GO / NO-GO DECISION

Go only if the fit is strong and obvious.

Strong cases consistently link success to strategic fit with call priorities. A good Go decision should be based on evidence that the project matches the programme logic, eligible action types, target beneficiaries, expected outputs, and implementation timeframe. If the team needs to over-explain why the project fits, or if major parts of the idea fall outside the call scope, the safer decision is usually No-Go.

Check if your team can handle the workload.

Time and resource constraints are a recurring reason SMEs struggle. The Go/No-Go decision should include a realistic assessment of proposal preparation, internal approvals, document collection, budget work, partner coordination, submission, and future reporting. If the same people who run the business must also prepare the application, define what will be deprioritised or who will provide support.

Decide if you need external expertise.

A capable consultant can reduce errors and improve compliance and quality. This decision should be made before the proposal architecture is fixed. External help is most useful for interpreting the call, structuring the project logic, validating eligibility, preparing the budget, and stress-testing feasibility. It is less effective if brought in only to rewrite a weak proposal at the end.

Think about cash-flow before you commit.

SMEs report stress from delays, VAT recovery, and the need for liquidity beyond the grant. Before saying Go, check whether the company can pre-finance costs, absorb payment delays, manage non-eligible costs, and cover co-financing without weakening normal operations. A financially attractive grant can still be risky if the reimbursement profile creates short-term liquidity pressure.

Avoid “nice-to-have” projects.

Strong lessons show that targeted, need-driven projects are safer than speculative ones. The project should solve a real operational, market, sustainability, digitalisation, or competitiveness need already recognised by the SME. If the activity would not be a priority without the grant, it may be difficult to demonstrate commitment, feasibility, and impact convincingly.



KONTURE / Contact Rural Tour EU adopted a disciplined Go/No-Go approach by applying only to funding schemes that clearly matched its operational needs, financial capacity, and strategic priorities, thereby reducing administrative burden and avoiding participation in high-risk or low-value opportunities.

PROPOSAL INITIATION

(TURN THE IDEA INTO A FUNDABLE PROJECT)

Make the programme–project link explicit.

Strong cases follow a structured approach to align objectives, activities, outcomes, and added value. Start from the call priorities and show how each core activity contributes to them. Avoid generic claims such as supporting sustainability or innovation unless they are translated into concrete outputs, measurable improvements, target groups, and expected effects in the tourism ecosystem.

Write for competitiveness, not just correctness.

SMEs can lose because they underplay evidence and feasibility compared to stronger competitors. A compliant proposal is not necessarily a competitive proposal. Make the evaluator see why this SME, this project, this timing, and this funding route are the right combination. Use specific evidence, credible figures, concrete outputs, and a clear delivery logic to move beyond minimum eligibility.

Over-document feasibility (don't assume it's obvious).

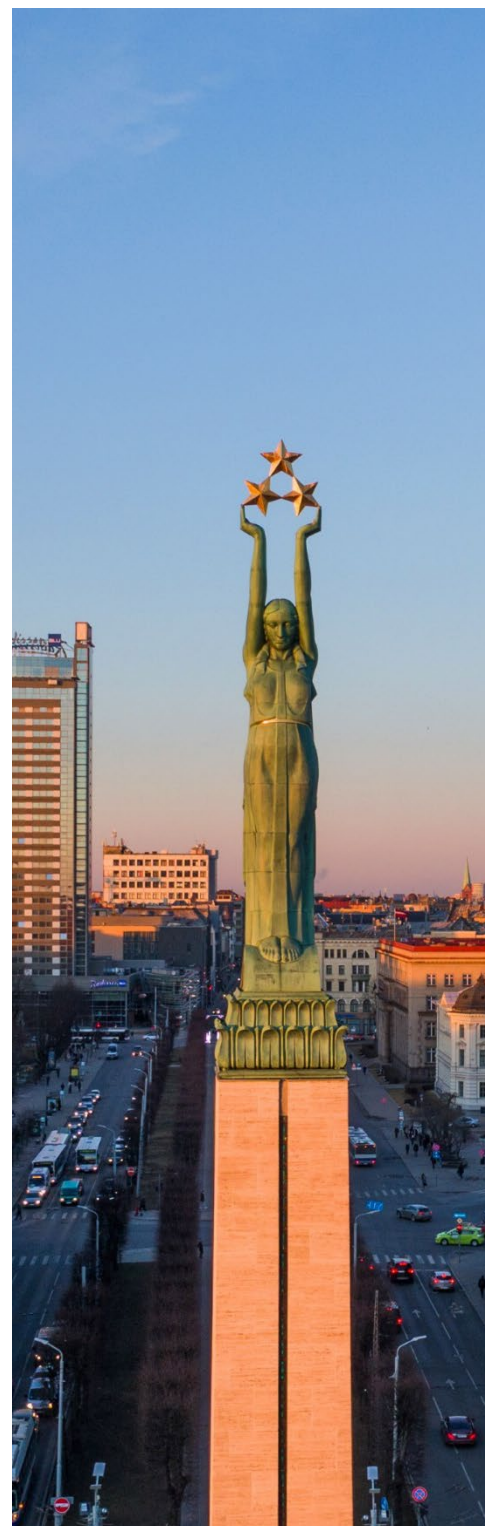
Strong lessons show you must show numbers, delivery plan, and supporting evidence. Evaluators cannot award points for assumptions. Include evidence of demand, operational readiness, supplier availability, permits or constraints, internal roles, milestones, risks, and budget logic. This is especially important for small tourism SMEs, where evaluators may otherwise question whether the team can deliver the proposed ambition.

Keep the scope realistic for your size.

Successful cases avoid over-scaling beyond operational capacity. A smaller, well-defined project with clear outputs is often more credible than an ambitious package that stretches staff, budget, partners, and timing. Scope should be calibrated to the SME's resources, delivery track record, administrative capacity, and ability to maintain normal business activity during implementation.

Use the right expertise to strengthen structure.

Proposal quality improves when specialised support helps shape the application. Expertise should be used to sharpen the intervention logic, define credible indicators, structure work packages, validate costs, and align the narrative with evaluation criteria. The aim is not to make the proposal sound more sophisticated, but to make it easier to understand, verify, and score.



ENNOV Solutions structured its proposal around a clear problem–solution fit aligned with EU priorities (low-carbon mobility), but its experience showed that competitiveness requires strong feasibility documentation, robust cost justification, and well-articulated delivery evidence to compete effectively against larger applicants.

STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERSHIPS

(IF NEEDED)

Only build partnerships that add real capability.

Effective partnership building is repeatedly identified as a success factor. Partners should fill a capability gap, provide access to a target group or territory, contribute technical expertise, or strengthen implementation capacity. Avoid adding partners only to make the proposal look broader; unnecessary partners increase coordination burden and can weaken credibility if roles are vague.

Choose partners you trust and can work with.

Partnership and consortium challenges are a recurring barrier in practice. Select partners based not only on reputation, but on responsiveness, clarity of contribution, administrative reliability, and willingness to meet deadlines. A technically strong partner can become a risk if it delays inputs, does not understand funding rules, or requires excessive coordination from a small lead team.

Use networks to access the right partners.

. Access to opportunities often comes through project networks and intermediary ecosystems. Chambers, regional bodies, destination organisations, clusters, previous beneficiaries, and sector associations can help identify partners with relevant experience and complementary roles. Use these networks early, because good partnerships require time to agree scope, responsibilities, evidence, budget shares, and governance.

Don't underestimate coordination load.

SMEs repeatedly face time/resource constraints that partnerships can intensify. Every partner adds communication, alignment, document collection, budget negotiation, risk management, and reporting tasks. If a consortium is needed, define simple governance: one lead, clear work package owners, internal deadlines, decision rules, and a single evidence repository.

Partner only when the funding route needs it.

Some opportunities are structurally easier for SMEs when not partnership dependent. If the call allows individual applicants and the project can be delivered credibly alone, avoid creating unnecessary consortium complexity. If partnership is required, make sure each partner is essential to the intervention logic and not just included to satisfy a perceived preference for collaboration.



Museumsverein Klostertal built a transnational consortium with partners from Austria, Serbia, Slovenia, and Portugal, ensuring each partner contributed complementary expertise and clearly defined roles, which strengthened both the proposal's credibility and the feasibility of cross-border implementation.

WORK PLAN AND DELIVERY BLUEPRINT

Show you can deliver with your real team.

Team design and internal resources repeatedly appears as a key success factor. The work plan should show who will actually deliver each activity, how much time they can realistically dedicate, and where external support will be used. Avoid presenting an idealised team structure that does not match the SME's day-to-day reality; evaluators need confidence that the proposed outputs can be delivered without overloading the same staff who run normal business operations.

Keep delivery plans practical and coherent.

Strong cases show focused, fit-for-purpose project scope instead of overcomplicated designs. A convincing work plan should translate the project idea into a small number of logical activities, clear milestones, realistic sequencing, and outputs that can be produced within the grant period. Do not add unnecessary work packages or ambitious deliverables only to make the project look larger; complexity increases management burden and can reduce credibility if it is not clearly justified.

Include administrative workload in your plan.

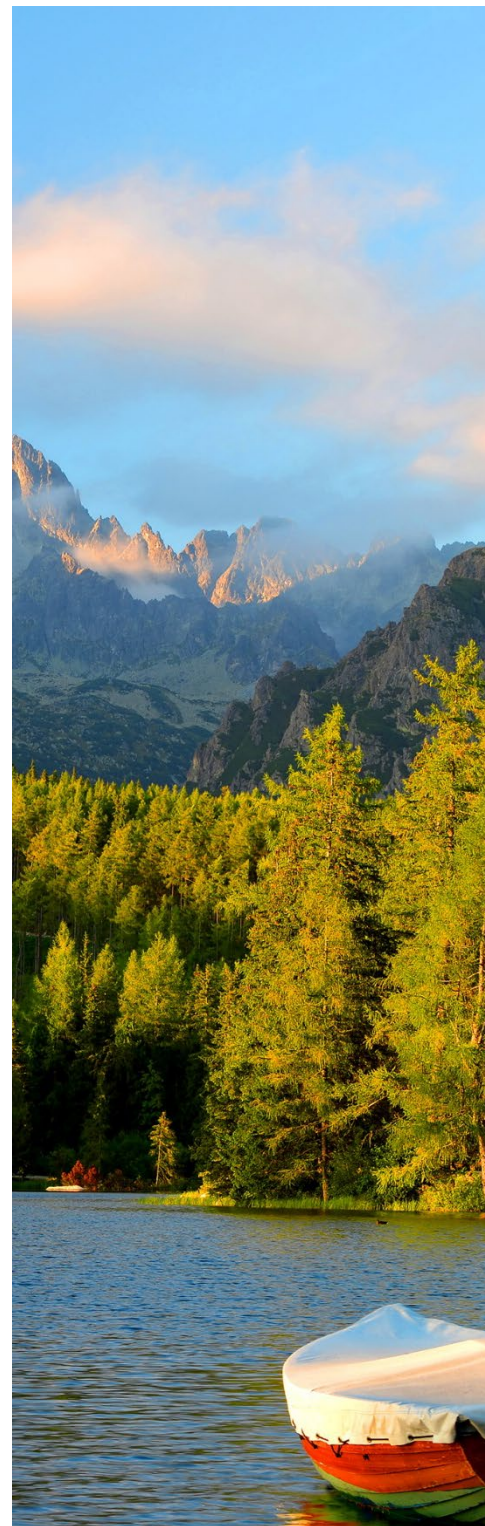
Administrative burden and reporting effort can be disproportionate for small teams. The bureaucratic effort required to manage EU funding does not scale down just because the beneficiary is small: timesheets, evidence files, procurement traces, communication records, budget monitoring, and reporting inputs still need to be produced and controlled. Before applying, assess whether the team has the work time and management capacity to carry these tasks without disrupting core business operations. Do not assume the technical team can manage administration in spare time; allocate dedicated person-days or person-months for project management and administration, and reflect this clearly in the work plan and budget where eligible.

Build in regulatory feasibility.

Strong lessons stress early handling of licences, permits and legal constraints. If the project depends on access rights, safety approvals, insurance, environmental conditions, local permits, supplier certifications, or public-space authorisations, these should be reflected in the work plan and timeline. Treat regulatory steps as delivery tasks with owners and deadlines, not as background assumptions.

Use external support to protect delivery capacity.

Some SMEs succeed by outsourcing specialised tasks while staying focused internally. External expertise can be used for technical design, digital development, evaluation, communication, legal checks, or project administration, provided that roles and outputs are clearly defined. This helps the SME avoid stretching internal staff too thin while still retaining ownership of the project's strategic direction and business relevance.



Conrad Events developed a realistic work plan focused on prototyping and testing an innovation-driven product, aligning technical ambition with internal capacity and external expertise, ensuring that delivery remained feasible and that key outputs could be demonstrated within the project timeframe.

BUDGET AND CO-FINANCING

Plan liquidity beyond the grant.

Do not treat the grant amount as cash immediately available. The cases reviewed point to pressure from co-financing, reimbursement timing, VAT recovery, and payment delays, which can be especially damaging for small tourism operators with tight margins. Before applying, prepare a basic cash-flow view showing when costs will be incurred, when grant payments are expected, what must be pre-financed, and what buffer is needed to continue operating normally.

Expect rules to shift during implementation.

Some cases highlight evolving compliance rules that can change eligibility mid-project. The budget should therefore include a degree of prudence: avoid relying on borderline costs, keep evidence for all expenditure, and monitor updates to guidance or eligibility interpretations during delivery. Where rules are unclear, clarify before committing funds, because later reclassification of costs can create financial exposure for small beneficiaries.

Make your cost logic credible.

A budget should not read as a list of expenses, but as evidence that the project is deliverable. Each relevant cost should connect to a work package, output, supplier need, staff role, or investment requirement. Evaluators should be able to understand why the amount is necessary, proportionate, and realistic for the SME's size and for the expected results. Weak or unexplained cost assumptions create doubts about feasibility even when the project idea is strong.

Budget for the expertise you actually need.

Experienced consultants can raise award chances and reduce friction, but only when their role is specific and necessary. If the SME needs support for technical design, grant management, communication, legal checks, or impact measurement, these costs should be planned transparently and linked to concrete outputs. Do not hide essential expertise outside the budget or assume it can be provided informally; under-budgeting critical support increases delivery and reporting risk.

Check whether the admin effort is worth the money.

SMEs note that delays and workload can make some schemes unattractive. Before applying, compare the expected grant value with the real cost of application preparation, reporting, evidence collection, cash-flow pressure, and staff time. A small grant can still be valuable if requirements are light and strategically aligned, but it may not be worth pursuing if the administrative burden disrupts operations or requires disproportionate management effort.

JHT Sweden strengthened the financial credibility of its project by building foundation, linking cost assumptions to market needs, expected outputs, improved evaluator confidence in feasibility and implementation capacity



COMPLIANCE, RISK, AND SAFEGUARDS

Proactively manage compliance risks.

Do not assume rules will remain stable; clarify eligibility, legal obligations and documentation requirements early and plan safeguards to absorb changes during implementation.

Don't ignore legal/regulatory feasibility.

Early compliance planning strengthens credibility and reduces implementation risk. For tourism SMEs, this may include permits, licences, insurance, employment rules, environmental obligations, consumer safety requirements, data protection, or local operating conditions. If these issues are relevant, the proposal should explain how they will be handled and who will be responsible, rather than leaving evaluators to assume they are manageable.

Plan for administrative friction as a real risk.

SMEs consistently report administrative burden as a major obstacle. Treat documentation, reporting, procurement evidence, partner inputs, payment claims, and audit trails as implementation risks that require planning. Assign owners, create a shared evidence system, define internal deadlines, and include management time in the schedule so administration does not become a last-minute disruption.

Treat compliance as an active risk-management task

Systematically identify eligibility, legal and administrative constraints early, document how they are addressed, and include buffers for evolving rules to prevent issues during implementation.

Include a buffer for changing requirements.

Some evidence notes policy or standard updates and evolving rules during delivery. Build flexibility into timelines, supplier arrangements, internal approvals, and budget monitoring so the project can adapt without losing control. This does not mean inflating the proposal; it means identifying where uncertainty exists and showing that the SME has a practical way to manage it.

Watershed Fly Fishing proactively integrated regulatory requirements into the project design, treating compliance as a core element of feasibility, addressing legal issues, or operational disruptions during project implementation.



QUALITY ASSURANCE

Make your proposal easy to score.

Evaluators should not need to infer relevance, impact, feasibility, or capacity. Structure the proposal so that every criterion is explicitly answered, using clear headings, direct evidence, and cross-consistent references between objectives, activities, outputs, budget, risks, and expected impact. The experience shows that strong applications reduce evaluator effort: they make the project logic visible and convert good ideas into scoreable arguments.

Over-document feasibility.

Strong lessons stress that evaluators need numbers, plans, and evidence, not assumptions. Quality assurance should check that claims are backed by concrete inputs: demand evidence, cost assumptions, delivery roles, technical readiness, permits, supplier quotes, milestones, and expected outputs. If a feasibility point is important to delivery, it should be visible in the proposal and not left implicit.

Check the “story” is consistent.

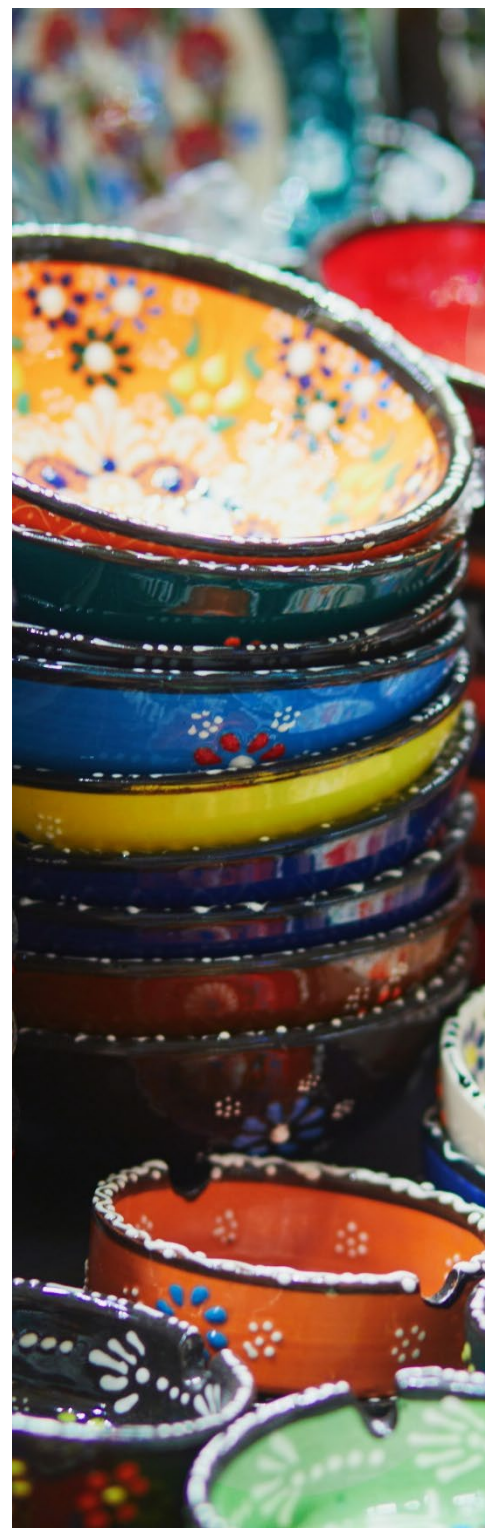
A frequent weakness in lower-quality applications is internal inconsistency: the problem statement does not match the activities, outputs are not linked to objectives, the budget does not support the work plan, or risks are disconnected from delivery reality. Before submission, run a consistency check across the proposal as if it were a single storyline: need, solution, activities, resources, outputs, impact, and safeguards must all point in the same direction.

Fix language and clarity issues.

Language barriers repeatedly reduce effectiveness and increase misinterpretation. The final review should simplify unclear wording, remove generic EU vocabulary that does not add evidence, and ensure technical terms are used consistently. A proposal should sound professional but not obscure: evaluators should immediately understand the need, solution, target group, delivery route, and expected impact.

Ask someone experienced to review it.

SMEs repeatedly benefit from expert feedback and advisory support to raise quality. The reviewer should not only proofread language, but stress-test the proposal against the award criteria: Is the call fit obvious? Are the outputs measurable? Is the budget justified? Are risks credible? Are eligibility and documentation complete? A short external review before submission can prevent errors that are difficult to correct later.



JHT Sweden strengthened proposal quality through a rigorous preparation phase including market analysis, demand assessment, and clear impact definition, ensuring the proposal was coherent, evidence-based, and easy for evaluators to understand and score competitively.

SUBMISSION READINESS AND ORGANISATIONAL REGISTRATION (PORTAL STAGE)

Expect a heavy documentation push.

Submission readiness is often lost in the final administrative phase, not in the project idea. SMEs should prepare corporate documents, eligibility evidence, financial information, declarations, partner inputs, and portal access early, because last-minute collection increases the risk of omissions and weak quality control. Where partners are involved, set internal deadlines before the official deadline to leave time for corrections.

Don't submit with "missing pieces".

SMEs repeatedly struggle when paperwork and proof are incomplete. A technically strong proposal can still fail or be weakened if declarations, legal documents, financial evidence, partner confirmations, signatures, or eligibility proof are missing or inconsistent. Use a submission checklist and complete the administrative file before the final writing sprint, not after it.

If you have partners, tighten coordination.

Partnership challenges are a frequent barrier and can derail readiness. Set internal deadlines before the official deadline, define exactly what each partner must provide, and centralise the latest versions of documents. Partner inputs should be checked for consistency with the proposal narrative, budget, roles, and eligibility evidence, because one weak or late partner file can compromise the whole submission.

Make eligibility unmistakable.

Eligibility issues are often raised when proof is weak or interpretation is unclear. The application should make it easy to verify applicant status, location, SME category, eligible activities, eligible costs, and any partnership or co-financing conditions. Do not rely on evaluators to infer eligibility from context; provide the evidence and explain borderline points clearly where needed.

Use external support if you are stretched.

Many SMEs succeed because a capable person manages paperwork and iterations. If the team lacks time or experience, assign a consultant, intermediary tutor, chamber contact, or internal administrator to control the submission process. This role should track requirements, version control, portal steps, signatures, and final checks, so the technical team can focus on content quality and delivery logic.



Fattoria delle Api benefited from structured guidance provided by an intermediary tutor within the funding programme, ensuring that all documentation, administrative requirements, and submission steps were completed accurately and consistently before final submission.

SUBMISSION, CONTRACTING, AND MOBILISATION READINESS

Expect delays and plan for them.

SMEs report slow evaluation and high stress around processing and payments. After submission, do not assume that award, contracting, pre-financing, or reimbursement will happen immediately. Plan internal timelines and supplier commitments with enough flexibility to absorb administrative delays without creating cash-flow or operational pressure.

Protect your cash-flow after award too.

Liquidity, VAT, and reimbursement timing can create real pressure. Once awarded, update the cash-flow plan with actual payment schedules, procurement timing, supplier invoices, co-financing needs, and any non-eligible costs. The project should not create a liquidity shock that forces the SME to delay implementation or compromise normal operations.

Watch for changes in eligibility interpretation.

Evidence shows that re-interpretation of rules can have strong financial consequences. During contracting and mobilisation, confirm which costs, activities, procurement choices, and reporting practices are accepted under the final grant conditions. If guidance changes, document decisions and seek written clarification where possible before spending.

Keep your support ecosystem active.

SMEs rarely succeed in isolation; continued support helps manage complexity. Maintain contact with advisors, intermediaries, managing bodies, partners, and experienced peers after the award, because many practical issues emerge during contracting and first implementation steps. Support is especially valuable for interpreting grant conditions, setting up reporting routines, and preparing the first evidence files correctly.

Use each funded project to build capability.

Experience builds cumulative advantage and improves future success rates. At the end of each project stage, save templates, evidence structures, reporting examples, budget lessons, partner feedback, and evaluator comments where available. This turns one funded project into a capability-building exercise, making the SME faster, more accurate, and more competitive in future funding rounds.



KONTURE / Contact Rural Tour EU demonstrated strong post-award maturity by managing multiple funding schemes over time and continuously improving internal processes, using each project as an opportunity to build long-term funding capability and organisational learning.

ANNEXES



ANNEX I: REUSABLE COMPONENTS CHECKLIST

This annex reproduces the reusable checklist that can be applied to most EU programmes and templates. Use it as an end-to-end completeness check. Note that the checklists presented here are intended to practically assist the applicant during the preparation and submission of an application and not to replace the call's official documents and templates.

How to use this checklist

Treat each section below as a 'mini-package' you should be able to hand to an evaluator or project officer. Many calls provide their own templates. When they do, follow the call template and map your content accordingly.

Call fit and eligibility dossier

One-page of a "fit" statement: scope, expected outcomes, target groups and why your project belongs in this specific call.

Eligibility checklist: country eligibility, SME status, consortium rules, admissibility requirements, page limits and deadlines.

Tourism relevance proof: the concrete tourism problem (seasonality, sustainability, accessibility, skills, digitalisation, visitor management) and the stakeholders affected.



Portal readiness and submission compliance

- 

EU Login accounts for key staff, clear internal roles for proposal drafting and submission.
- 

Organisation registration/PIC readiness (legal entity data, authorised roles, bank/legal documents as required).
- 

Submission plan: internal deadlines, file naming conventions, final validation checks and a 'practice-run' upload before the deadline, if possible.

ANNEX I: REUSABLE COMPONENTS CHECKLIST

Administrative forms pack (Part A or equivalent)

Accurate organisation and contact details (legal name, address, VAT, legal form).

Declarations on honour / exclusion criteria / double funding statements (as required by the call).

Partner data and roles (if joining a consortium).

Executive summary for evaluators

Problem, solution, objectives, and why EU funding is needed (EU added value).



What will be delivered and by when (top milestones).



Headline impacts and KPIs.





Project narrative aligned to evaluation criteria



Objectives: specific, measurable, realistic and time-bound. Try to include baselines and target values.



Methodology / approach: what you will do, why it works, and why you are capable to deliver it



Innovation and differentiation: what is new or improved vs. current practice.



Impact logic: outputs → outcomes → impacts. Be as specific as possible when explaining how you will measure and verify them.

ANNEX I: REUSABLE COMPONENTS CHECKLIST

Work plan and delivery blueprint

- Work packages (WPs) or workstreams with tasks, owners, dependencies and timing.
- Deliverables and milestones with clear acceptance criteria (what 'done' means).
- Project governance: decision-making, escalation, quality assurance and reporting cadence.
- Risk register with mitigation and contingency plans (including operational, legal, market and data risks, where appropriate).

Budget and cost-eligibility file (audit-proof)



Budget table plus a budget "narrative" that explains every major cost.



Cost eligibility cross-check (personnel, travel, equipment, subcontracting, indirect costs) against the applicable grant rules.



Procurement/subcontracting plan: what will be bought externally, why, and how you ensure best value and avoid conflicts of interest.



Consortium and capacity evidence (if applicable)

- Partner role matrix (RACI) and a concise description of each partner's unique contribution.
- Key staff CVs or short bios, plus relevant references/past projects.
- Letters of commitment/support (only if the call allows or expects them).

Data protection, ethics and compliance annexes

- Data management and protection plan: what data you collect (e.g., bookings, mobility, customer analytics), lawful basis, minimisation, retention, security.
- Ethics self-assessment and safeguards (especially if you handle vulnerable groups or sensitive data).
- IP and exploitation approach: who owns what, background/foreground, licensing and access rights.

Communication, dissemination & EU visibility package



Audience map and communication plan (tourism SMEs, DMOs, local authorities, visitors, platforms).



Dissemination & exploitation actions with KPIs.



EU visibility compliance: correct EU emblem use, funding statement/disclaimer, and placement on materials/results as required.

Final quality control bundle



Compliance check: templates used, formatting/page limits, mandatory annexes, consistent terminology.



Evaluator readability pass: strong headings, figures/tables where useful, clear 'why/what/how/so-what' story.



Final portal validation: all warnings resolved, correct upload versions, and submission before the deadline.

WATERSHED FLY FISHING

SECURING EU FUNDING THROUGH PROGRAM ALIGNMENT (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: Watershed Fly Fishing	Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): shared
Year: 2024	Granted amount: 42.000 €
Source programme: EU Just Transition Fund Programme 2021-2027 (EU JTF)	
Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Grant	

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: All 27 EU Member States
- Thematic axis: To mitigate the adverse effects of climate transition by supporting the most affected territories and workers concerned and to promote a balanced socio-economic transition.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): regional. In the Irish EU JTF context, the regions and communities in the Midlands that are most affected by the transition to climate neutrality: the full counties of Laois, Westmeath, Offaly, Longford and Roscommon and the municipal districts of Ballinasloe in Galway, Carrick-on-Suir and Thurles in Tipperary, and Athy and Clane in Kildare.

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): Develop a “catch and release” fishing initiative as a guiding service under the principles of eco guiding in Ireland.
- Duration: 4 months
- Main activities: Acquire a fishing boat suitable for operations, obtain comprehensive insurance coverage for the boat and business activities and secure all required legal licenses and permits to operate as a commercial fishing business in Ireland.
- Outputs: N/a.

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: N/a
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country	 Ireland
Size	micro (1 person)
Sector	 Tourism
Subsector	Eco-friendly guiding

Company activity

Watershed Fly Fishing is a professional fly-fishing guiding service operating in Ireland’s Midlands, primarily along the River Shannon system. The company offers expertly guided excursions targeting pike, trout, and perch, using a fully equipped sport-fishing vessel and, when appropriate, walk-and-wade experiences on Shannon tributaries. Its services emphasize high-quality instruction, environmental awareness, and an eco-conscious approach to angling. Beyond the technical aspects of fishing, Watershed Fly Fishing provides guests with an immersive experience of the region’s landscape, biodiversity, and cultural heritage. The area’s castles, monastic sites, and rich wildlife form an integral part of the outings, creating a distinguished and memorable experience for both local anglers and international visitors.

WATERSHED FLY FISHING

SECURING EU FUNDING THROUGH PROGRAM ALIGNMENT (2/2)

Success Factors

- Strategic fit with call priorities
- Emphasising the uniqueness of the local area, showcasing its rare and largely unseen natural landscape as a valuable and exclusive tourist experience.
- Positioning the project as nature-friendly, highlighting that although it involves fishing, it is specifically fly fishing, a method widely recognised as a low-impact and environmentally conscious practice.

Barriers & Challenges

- Lack of support ecosystem
- Received external support from the Irish Tourist Board and from a Local Enterprise Office, the latter providing guidance through a public procurement mentor.
- Participated in public information sessions as part of the local support ecosystem.
- Although support from the ecosystem was available, it often arrived too late and ultimately offered limited practical value.

Lessons learned

Apply a Methodological Framework Steps for Ensuring Strong Project–Programme Alignment:

- Conduct a comprehensive analysis and diagnostic review of the EU programme, examining its strategic objectives, priorities, eligibility criteria, and expected impacts.
- Define the programme's objectives in detail, breaking them down into specific, actionable components to fully understand what the funding body aims to achieve.
- Match each programme objective with elements of the proposed project, ensuring clear, direct connections between the programme's priorities and the project's planned activities, outcomes, and added value.
- Adapt and refine the project design where necessary, aligning its scope, methodology, sustainability approach, and expected results to better reflect and support the programme's goals.

Ensuring Full Compliance with Legal Regulations:

- Develop a thorough understanding of all relevant legal regulations and operational limitations applicable to the proposed project, including sector-specific requirements, licensing obligations, environmental rules, and any local compliance frameworks.
- Identify potential legal risks early on, acknowledging that certain regulatory issues may arise during implementation. Even if such risks do not ultimately materialise, proactively assessing them strengthens project feasibility and credibility.
- Ensure full awareness of all local legislative requirements, as compliance is the responsibility of the project promoter, not the funding authority. EU funders generally assume that applicants understand and can manage their legal obligations, rather than verifying every detail themselves.

This best practice shows that tourism SMEs can improve their chances of accessing sustainability-focused funding by clearly aligning their project with programme objectives and demonstrating strong environmental responsibility. Watershed Fly Fishing's approach, highlighting the uniqueness of its natural setting and emphasising low-impact, eco-friendly practices, illustrates how even micro-enterprises can build a compelling case. Other SMEs can replicate this by matching their services to green-transition goals and applying a structured method to ensure precise programme–project alignment.



ANONYMOUS ACCOMMODATION COMPANY

A LEAN SME'S PATH TO TOURISM MODERNISATION (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: Anonymous accommodation company

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Shared

Year: 2022

Granted amount: 170.000 €

Source programme: POR (Romanian Regional Operational Programme) part of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Romania
- Thematic axis:
 - Increasing the competitiveness of SMEs
 - Supporting sustainable urban development
 - Improving energy efficiency
 - Enhancing public infrastructure
 - Developing cultural heritage and tourism as a driver for local economic development
 - Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): Regional

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): The objective was to deliver affordable rooms with private bathrooms and essential amenities (a basic, not high-end, offer) to meet demand without overshooting the budget, helping a transition from hostel to a guesthouse model.
- Duration: 18-24 months.
- Main activities: Construction and fit-out the place.
- Outputs: N/A

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: N/A
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country

 Romania

Size

micro (1 person)

Sector

 Tourism

Subsector

Accommodation



ANONYMOUS ACCOMMODATION COMPANY

A LEAN SME'S PATH TO TOURISM MODERNISATION (2/2)

Success Factors

- Use of support ecosystems: The company highlights a single, capable consultant as the key success factor, managing the portals, paperwork, and iterations, and helping avoid the pitfalls that caused earlier failures with other firms. Accounting support (from other consultant), while not perfect, also contributed to compliance.

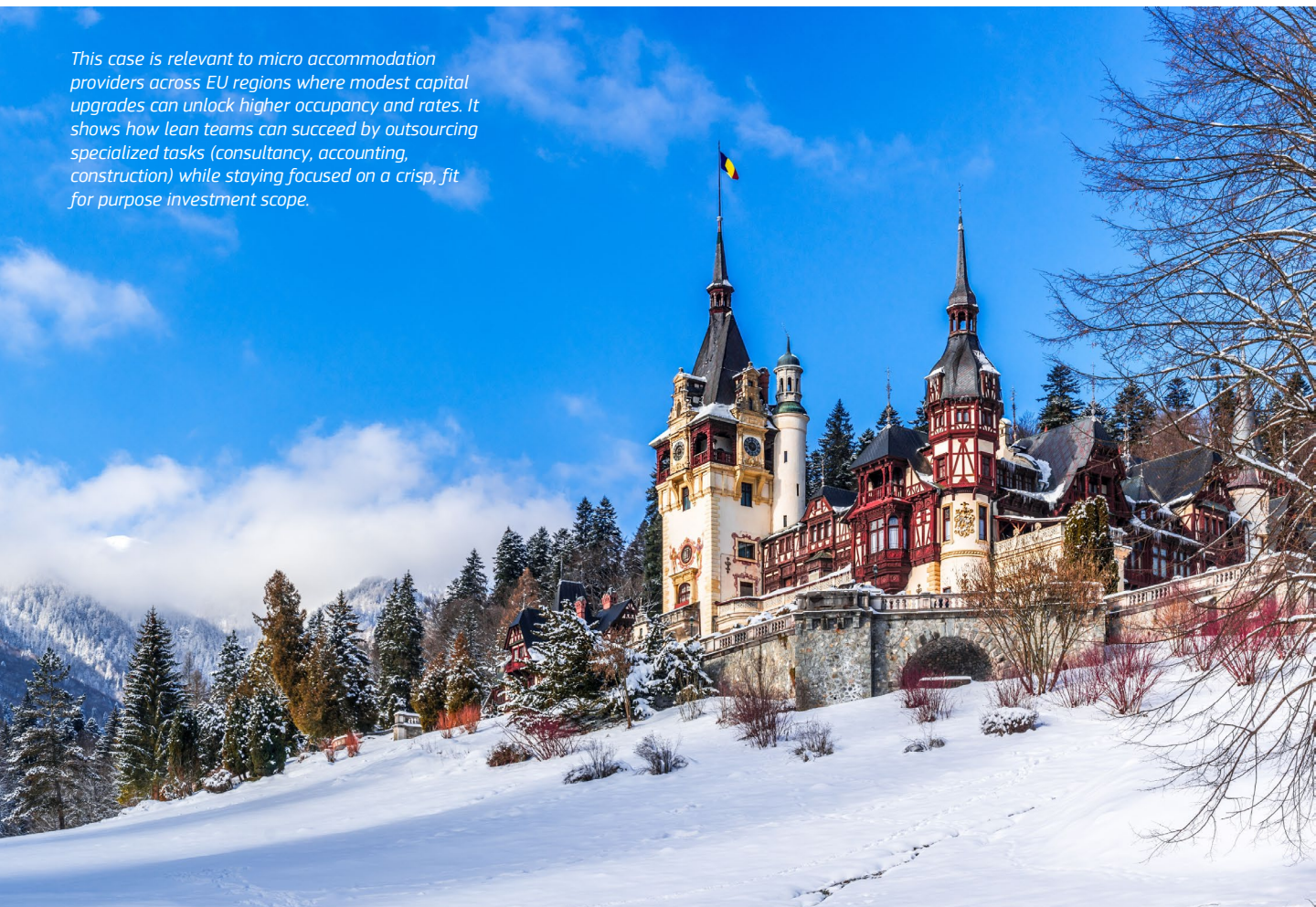
Barriers & Challenges

- Administrative burden: The company cites slow evaluation, complex document requirements, and stress around final payment processing. VAT recovery reportedly took approximately six months. Another administrative factor that impacted was the evolving compliance rules, because during implementation, regulatory changes altered eligibility and forced additional own-funding beyond the original plan.
- Time & resource constraints: With a tiny team, every delay has high opportunity cost, if co-financing is high, self-financing might be faster and economically preferable.

Lessons learned

- Budget beyond the grant: Plan liquidity for VAT and non-eligible items and expect policy/standard updates mid-project and keep a compliance buffer.
- Invest in the right expertise: A committed, experienced consultant can sharply increase the chance of award and reduce friction in execution.

This case is relevant to micro accommodation providers across EU regions where modest capital upgrades can unlock higher occupancy and rates. It shows how lean teams can succeed by outsourcing specialized tasks (consultancy, accounting, construction) while staying focused on a crisp, fit for purpose investment scope.



ENNOV SOLUTIONS – BUILDING A COMPETITIVE EU FUNDING PROPOSAL AS A SOLO FOUNDER (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: ENNOV solutions

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Direct*

Year: 2025

Granted amount: 30.000*

Source programme: Single Market Programme (SMP) – BEFuture

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Grant*

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Spain, Belgium, France, Germany, The Netherlands and Italy
- Thematic axis:
 - sustainability transition,
 - digital transformation,
 - innovation support,
 - cross-border collaboration.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): national (EU-framed initiative implemented regionally (EU-coordinated concept delivered through regional/national tourism boards))

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): reduce the per-participant carbon footprint at events by improving mobility choice (awareness of public transport, shared mobility, first/last-mile options).
- Duration: N/A
- Main activities: build a rapid MVP build of a basic yet reliable app and curation of local transport data around pilot events and testing with event organizers.
- Outputs: a functioning MVP app, a playbook for onboarding new venues/events, and early carbon-saving estimates tied to modal shift.

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: No
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country

France

Size

micro (1 person)

Sector

Tourism

Subsector

Sustainable Tourism

(*) Although the SME ultimately did not receive program funding, we consider her involvement as a mentor a good practice, as it provides an indirect way for SMEs to access funding that may be of interest to them.

ENNOV SOLUTIONS – BUILDING A COMPETITIVE EU FUNDING PROPOSAL AS A SOLO FOUNDER (2/2)

Success Factors

- Strategic fit with call priorities: Problem–solution fit, ENNOV Solutions targeted a clear pain point at events (visitors don't know local transport option) with a simple, testable tool. Although the company did not receive the funds, its experience and capability allow her to be a mentor for other SMEs that receive funds in the same call.

Barriers & Challenges

- Eligibility criteria: Evaluators flagged ENNOV's app cost analysis as insufficient. The company recognizes her presentation style likely underplayed feasibility evidence and risk mitigation
- Time & resource constraints: Post-results benchmarking showed several larger companies (tens of staff, significant turnover) winning the funds, while ENNOV's micro-proposal was rejected.

Lessons learned

- Importance of over-document feasibility: Don't assume pragmatism speaks for itself, the application must show the numbers, the delivery plan, and the evidence that contributes to the proposed goal.
- Design for evaluation optics: Build a richer narrative around context, market need, and policy alignment; anticipate comparative scoring against larger corporate decks.

This case is relevant to micro-entrepreneurs across the EU who aim to develop digital, low-carbon solutions for the tourism and events ecosystem, even with very limited internal capacity. It shows how solo founders can remain competitive by tightly framing their proposal around EU priorities and by clearly evidencing feasibility despite small budgets.



MUZEJ UJA (OLIVE OIL MUSEUM) – DIVERSIFYING HERITAGE OLIVE-OIL TOURISM THROUGH EU-SUPPORTED RURAL ACCOMMODATION (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: N/a

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Not publicly verified in the sources reviewed.

Year: 2018

Granted amount: €200,000*

Source programme: EU funds linked to an agriculture-related diversification project for holiday accommodation.

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Croatia, through the development of a tourism asset on the island of Brač.
- Thematic axis: Diversification of a family agricultural and heritage-based activity into rural tourism accommodation, linked to olive-oil production, gastronomy and local heritage interpretation.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU-funded support implemented in Croatia; the exact formal lineage could not be publicly verified in the reviewed sources.

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes.
- Consortium members: N/A
- Subcontractor: No subcontractor for project delivery; however, an external consultant or firm was engaged to prepare the application and paperwork.

SME profile

Country  Croatia

Size micro¹

Sector



Tourism

Subsector

Heritage tourism, olive-oil gastronomy experiences and rural accommodation

Company activity

MUZEJ UJA is a family-run heritage and experiential tourism business in Škrip, Brač, centred on a restored historic olive mill opened to the public in 2013 as the Olive Oil Museum. The business combines guided interpretation of olive-oil heritage, tastings of olive oil and local food, small-scale production and sales of its own products, and, following the funded investment, a holiday accommodation offer through Luxury House Natanel.

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): The project aimed to diversify the family business by adding a holiday accommodation offer, generating additional income through rural and heritage tourism while connecting guest stays with the museum, olive-oil production and local gastronomy. The interview explicitly refers to extra profit by hosting guests through rural areas and to the fact that they have a house to host. Public information confirms that the EU-funded investment was used to build a luxury holiday house.
- Duration: Approximately 2018–2022.
- Main activities: Preparation of the funding application and administrative documentation; development and construction of Luxury House Natanel; securing permits and categorisation for operation; and integrating the new accommodation offer with the museum's existing tourism experience based on olive oil, local products and cultural interpretation.
- Outputs: A new holiday accommodation asset, an expanded tourism offer that links museum visits, olive-oil tasting and accommodation, and a more diversified family business model combining heritage, gastronomy and hospitality.

(*) The interview notes also refer to a broader investment effort of around €450,000, with €200,000 coming from government and the funding opportunity.

1. (Size) Micro at the time described in the interview, where the business is characterised as a family-owned business employing two people. Publicly available information from a later stage indicates growth to four employees, suggesting expansion after the funded investment.

MUZEJ UJA (OLIVE OIL MUSEUM) – DIVERSIFYING HERITAGE

OLIVE-OIL TOURISM THROUGH EU-SUPPORTED RURAL ACCOMMODATION (2/2)

Success Factors

- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The project matched a diversification logic that connected rural accommodation with agriculture, local production, and tourism development.
- **Team design & resources:** The business already combined complementary activities, including olive-oil production, museum-based heritage interpretation, and hospitality, which strengthened the coherence of the project.
- **Access to information:** The company benefited from local information channels and advisory support connected to the island ecosystem.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** Consultants and local support actors played an important role in understanding the opportunity and managing the administrative process.
- **Quality of proposal:** The project was supported by specialised external expertise, which helped structure the application and manage procedural requirements.

Barriers & Challenges

- **Complexity of the Call:** The funding process required navigating complex programme requirements and documentation.
- **Administrative burden:** The preparation of forms and supporting documents represented a significant challenge.
- **Time & resource constraints:** Limited internal capacity made it difficult to handle the full process without external support

Lessons learned

- Specialised advisory support can be decisive for very small businesses applying for EU funding.
- Diversification is most effective when it builds on existing local assets, identity, and complementary activities.

This best practice illustrates how a very small, family-run heritage tourism business can use EU-supported investment to move from a single-asset model based on museum visits and olive-oil tasting towards a more diversified and resilient tourism offer that combines heritage, gastronomy, agriculture and accommodation. It represents a useful example for rural and island-based tourism SMEs because it shows that funding can be most effective when it reinforces authentic local identity, creates new revenue streams from existing assets, and is backed by a practical support ecosystem able to compensate for limited internal administrative capacity.

FATTORIA DELLE API – LEVERAGING SMALL CASCADE FUNDING TO BUILD SUSTAINABILITY CAPACITY(1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: Eco-Tours (EU-funded project providing cascade support to tourism SMEs)

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Cascade

Year: 2022

Granted amount: €6,000

Source programme: Single Market Programme

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Non-refundable grant (cascade funding)

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Italy (beneficiary level)
- Thematic axis: Sustainable tourism, capacity-building, environmental impact assessment
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: N/A
- Subcontractor: Yes – external sustainability expert (training and assessment services)

SME profile

Country



Italy

Size

Micro (single-person enterprise)

Sector



Tourism / Agritourism

Subsector

Experiential rural tourism linked to beekeeping and environmental education

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): Strengthen the sustainability profile of the micro enterprise by improving internal knowledge, assessing environmental impact, and increasing awareness of sustainability practices applicable to rural tourism activities.
- Duration: N/A
- Main activities:
 - Participation in targeted training sessions with a sustainability tourism expert
 - Analysis of enterprise data to understand environmental and operational impacts
 - Reflection on certification options and sustainability improvement pathways
- Outputs:
 - Increased internal capacity and knowledge on sustainable tourism practices
 - A clearer understanding of the enterprise's environmental footprint
 - Foundations for future sustainability-oriented investments and certifications

FATTORIA DELLE API – LEVERAGING SMALL CASCADE FUNDING TO BUILD SUSTAINABILITY CAPACITY(2/2)

Success Factors

- **Access to information:** The funding opportunity was identified through a regional newsletter distributed by an agency supporting enterprises and start-ups in Apulia. Regular exposure to structured information flows enabled timely awareness of a relevant call.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** A cooperative acting as tutor within the Eco-Tours framework guided the SME throughout the process, providing step-by-step support and reducing uncertainty during application and implementation.
- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The project aligned naturally with sustainability-focused objectives, allowing the SME to use funding in a coherent and targeted way without over-scaling beyond its real operational capacity.
- **Team design & resources:** Despite being a one-person enterprise, the SME compensated for limited internal capacity by relying on external experts funded through the grant.

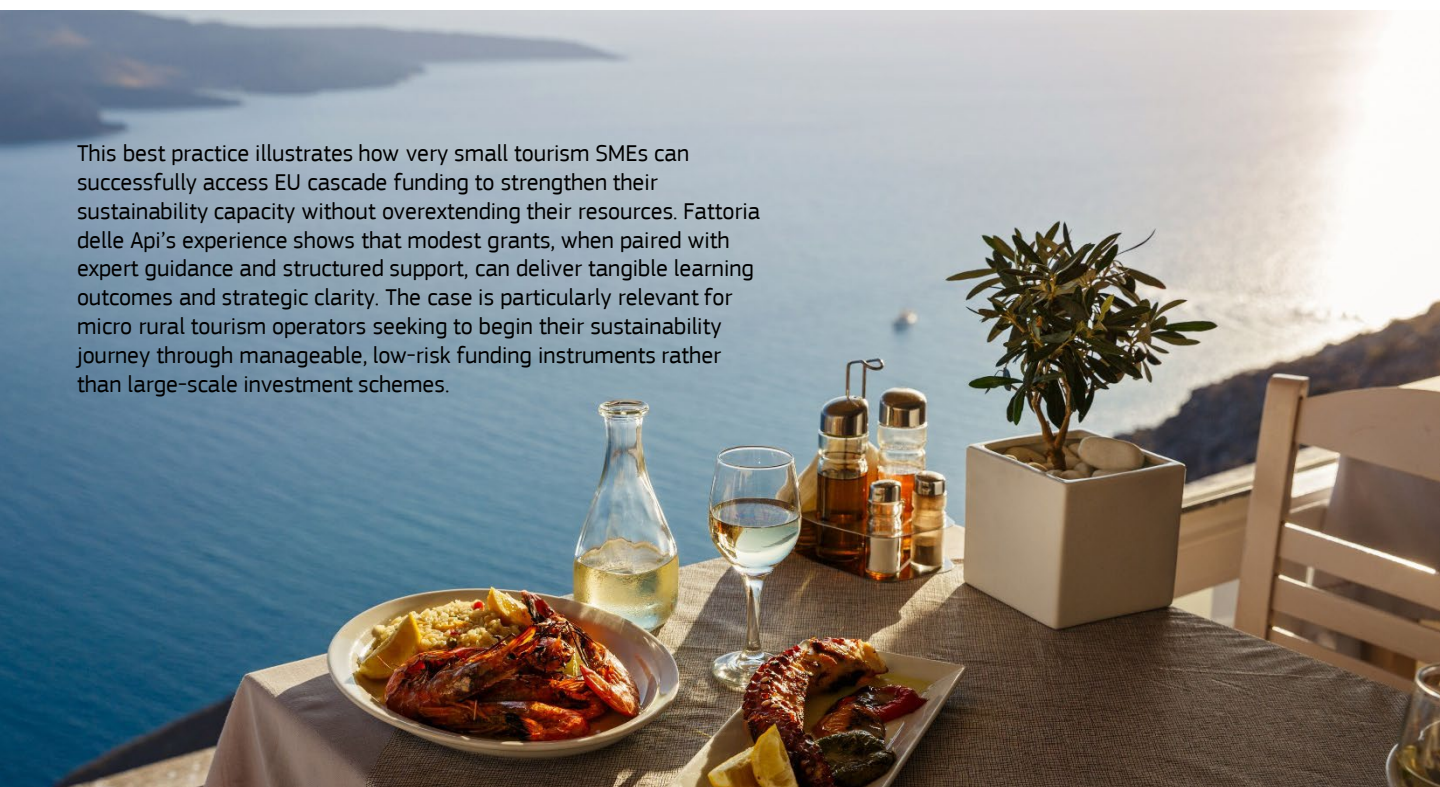
Barriers & Challenges

- **Limited internal capacity:** As a solo entrepreneur, managing funding activities alongside daily operations required significant effort and prioritisation.
- **Difficulty in understanding optimal use of funds:** The SME initially lacked clarity on how best to allocate the funding (e.g. certification versus training), highlighting the challenge micro-enterprises face when making strategic decisions with limited financial envelopes.
- **Language and technical complexity:** Navigating EU-funded schemes required interpretation support, particularly when understanding available options and administrative logic

Lessons learned

- **Small grants can be highly impactful when well targeted:** Even limited financial support can generate meaningful change when focused on knowledge-building and expert input rather than large investments.
- **Guided support is essential for micro-enterprises:** Having a tutor or intermediary significantly lowers barriers to entry and enables effective use of funds, especially for first-time or low-capacity applicants.

This best practice illustrates how very small tourism SMEs can successfully access EU cascade funding to strengthen their sustainability capacity without overextending their resources. Fattoria delle Api's experience shows that modest grants, when paired with expert guidance and structured support, can deliver tangible learning outcomes and strategic clarity. The case is particularly relevant for micro rural tourism operators seeking to begin their sustainability journey through manageable, low-risk funding instruments rather than large-scale investment schemes.



ZAVOD SOTOČJE MEDVODE – LEVERAGING LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDS TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM & SERVICES (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: N/A (multiple local CLLD calls under EAFRD)

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Shared management (regional / local implementation)

Year: 2020 – 2025

Granted amount: €20,000*

Source programme: European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) – Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Co-funded grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Slovenia
- Thematic axis: Local development, social inclusion, cultural services, mobility, community cohesion and quality of life in rural and semi-rural areas
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): Regional / local implementation of an EU programme

Type of application

- Single applicant: No
- Consortium members: Yes – mainly municipalities, public institutions and private or non-profit organisations active at local level
- Subcontractor: Yes – subcontractors were used for specific service delivery components (e.g. operational services linked to mobility or technical activities)

SME profile

Country  Slovenia

Size Small organisation (approximately 24 employees)

Sector



Tourism, culture, sports, youth and social services

Subsector

Community-based tourism and cultural services linked to local development

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): The funded projects aimed to improve the quality of life of local residents by strengthening community services, enhancing mobility, reinforcing social cohesion and expanding access to cultural and recreational activities. Tourism-related actions were embedded within a broader local development logic rather than treated as stand-alone commercial initiatives.
- Duration: Between 1 and 3 years, depending on the project
- Main activities:
 - Provision of free transport services for elderly residents (e.g. access to hospitals, pharmacies and health centres)
 - Purchase of equipment to support cultural activities (e.g. cinema equipment)
 - Acquisition of electric bicycles to improve local mobility
 - Organisation of cultural and social programmes for residents
 - Networking and cooperation activities between local stakeholders
- Outputs:
 - New or improved local services for residents
 - Enhanced access to mobility and cultural activities
 - Strengthened cooperation between public, private and community actors
 - Tangible improvements in local service infrastructure

(*) Between €20,000 and €70,000 per project, depending on the specific action

ZAVOD SOTOČJE MEDVODE – LEVERAGING LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDS TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM & SERVICES (2/2)

Success Factors

- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** Projects were deliberately adapted to align closely with the specific objectives and scoring criteria of each call, ensuring strong coherence with programme priorities.
- **Previous experience with funding:** Repeated participation in local and regional funding schemes built institutional familiarity with procedures, expectations and reporting requirements.
- **Team design & resources:** Responsibilities were clearly distributed internally, with staff members specialising in specific thematic areas and proactively identifying relevant calls.
- **Effective partnership building:** Strong cooperation with municipalities and local institutions enabled the organisation to build credible consortia and design projects grounded in real local needs.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** Support from the regional development agency (RRA LUR) played a key role in navigating administrative requirements and improving proposal quality.

Barriers & Challenges

- **Complexity of the call:** At the beginning, understanding funding rules and application requirements was perceived as difficult and time-consuming.
- **Administrative burden:** Reporting, documentation and reimbursement procedures required significant effort and attention.
- **Time & resource constraints:** Limited internal capacity made it challenging to manage proposal preparation and implementation alongside day-to-day operations.
- **Partnership & consortium coordination:** Coordinating multiple partners sometimes required additional time and effort, particularly when responsiveness varied.
- **Eligibility criteria:** While not a major obstacle, careful screening was necessary to ensure that only suitable calls were pursued.

Lessons learned

- **Alignment is decisive:** Selecting calls that genuinely match the organisation's mission and adapting project ideas to call priorities is essential for success.
- **Capacity grows through repetition:** Repeated participation in funding schemes gradually reduces uncertainty and improves efficiency in both application and implementation phases

This best practice demonstrates how a locally rooted organisation can successfully use EU co-funded rural development programmes to strengthen community-based tourism and services. Zavod Sotočje Medvode's experience shows that funding success does not necessarily rely on highly innovative or large-scale projects, but on strong alignment with local development objectives, stable partnerships and growing institutional capacity. The case is particularly relevant for small tourism and cultural organisations operating in rural or semi-rural areas, illustrating how EU funds can be used pragmatically to deliver tangible social and territorial benefits while progressively building long-term funding competence.



MUSEUMSVEREIN KLOSTERTAL – LEVERAGING PROGRAM

ALIGNMENT AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS TO SECURE EU FUNDING (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: Museumsverein Klostertal

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Grant

Year: 2022

Granted amount: 200.000 € (45.000 € for Museumsverein Klostertal)

Source programme: Creative Europe

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: All 27 EU Member States
- Thematic axis:
 - Preservation of cultural heritage
 - Sustainable tourism development
 - Use of hiking trails as a tool to connect tourism and heritage protection
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): national.

Type of application

- Single applicant: No
- Consortium members:
 - Museumsverein Klostertal (Austria) – project partner representing a regional museum & cultural heritage institution.
 - Urban Development Center (UDC) (Serbia) – lead/major partner with expertise in cultural heritage, innovation, and EU projects.
 - Gornjesavski muzej Jesenice (Slovenia) – museum partner involved in heritage protection and trail development.
 - Arouca Geopark (Portugal) – partner contributing mountain and geopark heritage expertise.
- Subcontractor: No

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): To preserve cultural heritage and use cultural heritage as a sustainable tourism asset, specifically through the development of hiking-based cultural routes and training of hiking guides.
- Duration: 36 months
- Main activities:
 - Development of heritage-based hiking concepts
 - Training and pilot testing with hiking guides
 - Cross-border exchange of practices between mountain regions
 - Collaboration with local tourism boards, municipalities, and hiking associations
- Outputs:
 - Training activities for hiking and heritage professionals
 - Pilot actions in four countries
 - Strengthened cooperation between cultural heritage and tourism stakeholders
 - Basis for follow-up projects and scaling to additional countries

SME profile

Country  Austria

Size small (3 people)

Sector



Tourism

Subsector

Heritage-based tourism

Company activity

Museumsverein Klostertal is a non-profit cultural association that operates the Klostertal Museum in Wald am Arlberg (Austria). Its core activity is the preservation, research, and communication of the social, cultural, and economic history of the Klostertal region through permanent and temporary exhibitions, educational programmes, and cultural events. The association also acts as a local cultural hub, working closely with residents, schools, tourism stakeholders, and municipalities, and it is actively involved in European cooperation projects that link cultural heritage with sustainable tourism and regional development.

MUSEUMSVEREIN KLOSTERTAL – LEVERAGING PROGRAM

ALIGNMENT AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS TO SECURE EU FUNDING (2/2)

Success Factors

- Previous experience with funding: Museumsverein has experience across EU programmes (LEADER rural areas, Interreg, Erasmus+ including accreditation, etc.), giving the organisation credibility in delivery and compliance.
- Effective Partnership Building: The consortium spans four countries and different mountain contexts, which the interview frames as a reason the consortium was viewed positively by the European Commission. The four-country partnership (Serbia, Slovenia, Austria, Portugal) and positions it as a collaborative European network combining heritage + outdoor tourism expertise. The consortium composition was also “narratively strong”: Alps + Serbia’s mountains + Arouca Geopark context are explicitly referenced as a positive factor.
- Use of support ecosystem: A critical success factor was combining European networking with local stakeholder engagement—tourism boards, municipalities, alpine/hiking associations—described as a “fundamental base” for the project. This is the kind of credibility point evaluators look for: implementation is not isolated within the consortium; it is embedded in the local tourism/heritage ecosystem

Barriers & Challenges

- Complexity of the Call: A specific friction point is that they are used to Erasmus+ style processes, while “projects going directly to the European Commission” have different procedural characteristics, so switching programme logic increases cognitive and administrative load.
- Administrative burden: The formal aspects and navigating “all the documents” without overlooking anything were “still challenging,” even with simplification efforts.
- Time & resource constraints: Museumsverein operates with three part-time staff, which naturally amplifies the burden of compliance and documentation management. Even when implementation is strong, limited internal bandwidth makes it harder to manage reporting, contracting, evidence collection, and multi-country coordination demands.

Lessons learned

- Choose experienced partners you can trust: This is the clearest lesson learned stated: identify experienced and valuable partners and, crucially, partners you can trust. In practice, INHERIT shows the value of letting a capable lead partner handle proposal mechanics while others contribute domain substance
- Define common goals early, then design around real capacity: The company stress the need for common goals and good preparation, including an honest assessment of what you can and cannot deliver with your internal capacity. This is particularly relevant for micro entities: scope ambition must be matched to available staff time and operational reality.
- Build a two-level network: EU/international + local implementers: The project design uses training and “ambassador” diffusion plus ongoing dissemination via social networks and public events (which is a strong sustainability mechanism after funding).

This best practice is easily transferable to other small tourism and heritage-based SMEs, as it shows that EU funding success depends less on size and more on clear alignment with programme priorities, strong partnerships, and practical project design. By joining consortia with experienced partners and anchoring projects in local tourism ecosystems, SMEs with limited resources can remain competitive and access EU funding effectively.



ETHICAL TOURS – LEVERAGING SUSTAINABLE FINANCE AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT EXPERTISE FOR SUCCESSFUL EU FUNDING (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: Ethical Tours

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Shared

Year: 2023

Granted amount: 42.000 €

Source programme: EU Just Transition Fund Programme 2021-2027 (EU JTF)

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: All 27 EU Member States
- Thematic axis: To mitigate the adverse effects of climate transition by supporting the most affected territories and workers concerned and to promote a balanced socio-economic transition.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): regional. In the Irish EU JTF context, the regions and communities in the Midlands that are most affected by the transition to climate neutrality: the full counties of Laois, Westmeath, Offaly, Longford and Roscommon and the municipal districts of Ballinasloe in Galway, Carrick-on-Suir and Thurles in Tipperary, and Athy and Clane in Kildare.

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): Establishing a Low-Impact Eco-Tourism Model in Ireland
- Duration: 9 months (from October 2023 (EOI) to June 2024)
- Main activities: Capital acquisition project, the main activities were the purchase of the electric bicycles and scooters.
- Outputs: N/A

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: N/A
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country

 Ireland

Size

micro (1 person)

Sector

 Tourism

Subsector

Ecofriendly guiding

Company activity

Ethical Tours is a sustainable tourism company based in Ballymahon, operating across Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. The company provides eco-friendly guided and self-guided experiences, including premium electric- and manual-bike tours, walking routes, and water-based activities delivered through local partners. With a strong commitment to regenerative tourism, Ethical Tours integrates sustainable practices throughout its operations, powered largely by on-site solar energy and guided by a strict Leave No Trace ethos. The company actively supports local communities, promotes responsible interaction with wildlife, and prioritises low-impact travel that connects guests with the region's cultural heritage and natural landscapes. Its mission is to offer meaningful, environmentally responsible experiences that benefit both visitors and the local environment while contributing to long-term climate action goals.

ETHICAL TOURS – LEVERAGING SUSTAINABLE FINANCE AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT EXPERTISE FOR SUCCESSFUL EU FUNDING (2/2)

Success Factors

- **Quality of proposal:** The proposal's strong quality stemmed from Ethical Tours's professional background in sustainable finance and project management, which enabled him to structure a clear, coherent and technically sound application fully aligned with the call's sustainability-driven framework.
- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The project demonstrated a strong strategic fit because eco-guiding tours naturally aligned with the sustainability objectives of the Just Transition Fund, particularly its focus on environmentally conscious mobility & nature-friendly tourism.
- **Previous experience with funding:** Ethical Tours had previous experience with the LEADER local funding programme, which helped the company understand funding processes and strengthened its application.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** Although no financial support was received, Ethical Tours benefited from the local support ecosystem, including access-to-market channels such as Fudge Ireland / Just Transition Ireland, which provided contextual guidance and visibility during the application process.

Barriers & Challenges

- **Administrative burden:** The principal hurdle for Ethical Tours was the heavy workload associated with the application process, which proved demanding for a micro-enterprise led by a single individual. The administrative burden, combined with the time-consuming nature of understanding eligibility criteria, fulfilling documentation requirements, and managing multiple steps of the funding procedure, created significant pressure.

Lessons learned

- **Challenges of starting a business from scratch:** Starting a business from scratch places an entrepreneur at an aspirational rather than a consolidated stage, which makes the entire funding journey significantly more challenging. Building a project while simultaneously building the business adds complexity: processes are less mature, internal structures are not yet established, and every administrative or technical requirement demands disproportionate effort. This early-stage condition increases the workload, amplifies uncertainties, and makes it harder to demonstrate the stability, track record, or operational readiness that more consolidated businesses can naturally showcase.
- **Rely on the Local Support Ecosystem:** A key takeaway from the Ethical Tours experience is the importance of relying on the full local support ecosystem when seeking access to funding. Local actors (such as Local Enterprise Offices or market-access channels like Fudge Ireland / Just Transition Ireland) can provide essential guidance, orientation, and visibility. Leveraging these networks helps entrepreneurs better understand funding requirements, access relevant information more quickly, and reduce the administrative burden that would otherwise fall entirely on a single individual.

This best practice illustrates how even very small tourism SMEs can successfully access EU-level funding when they align their projects with sustainability priorities and leverage local support ecosystems. Other tourism SMEs can replicate this approach by focusing on low-impact mobility, community-based partnerships, and environmentally responsible services, while using local advisory services to reduce administrative burden and enhance their competitiveness in sustainability-driven funding calls.



CASA DA GUITARRA – USING SPECIALIZED PLATFORMS TO ACCELERATE ACCESS TO FUNDING (1/3)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: Casa da Guitarra

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Direct

Year: 2025

Granted amount: 25.000 €

Source programme: SMARTIES for SMEs

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: The SMARTIES for SMEs funding scheme targets SMEs across five Mediterranean countries: Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Portugal, and Cyprus.
- Thematic axis:
 - Green & Digital Transition: Supporting tourism SMEs in adopting environmentally sustainable practices and digital innovations to strengthen resilience and competitiveness.
 - Regenerative Tourism: Promoting tourism models that restore, enhance, and positively impact local communities and environments, moving beyond traditional sustainability.
 - Tourism–Agri–Food Synergies: Encouraging integration between tourism and the agri-food ecosystem, with a strong emphasis on the Mediterranean Diet as a sustainability & cultural anchor.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): national

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: N/A
- Subcontractor: No

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): Given its strong experience-based model (craftsmanship, performances, cultural storytelling), the project's aims to enhance digital transformation (e.g., digital storytelling, online cultural products, ticketing, immersive presentations).
- Duration: 10 months (from January 2025 to October 2025)
- Main activities: The focus of the project was the digitalization of an exhibition we have here about the history of the Portuguese string instruments, the main activities are:
 - To capture the exhibition & to make it online in our website.
 - The second biggest part was to do a 3D model of the Portuguese guitars because they have an old collection of them.
 - Lastly, they developed a lot of research about the history of Fado in Porto.
- Outputs: N/A

SME profile

Country

 Portugal

Size

small (6 persons)

Sector

 Tourism

Subsector

Cultural & Music Shows

Company activity

Casa da Guitarra is a traditional musical instrument shop and workshop dedicated to Portuguese chordophones, especially the Portuguese Guitar, handcrafted locally by specialized luthiers. It functions as a meeting place for musicians, makers, and music lovers. Services include:

- Instrument-making workshop, repairs/restorations, a music school, and an instrument store featuring handcrafted string instruments treated as works of art.

- Concerts, workshops, classes, and exhibitions, fostering knowledge exchange and ensuring the preservation and dissemination of Portuguese musical heritage.
- Cultural experiences such as Fado Vitória, guided heritage visits paired with live fado in emblematic locations like the Monastery of São Bento da Vitória.

CASA DA GUITARRA – USING SPECIALIZED PLATFORMS TO ACCELERATE ACCESS TO FUNDING (2/3)

Success Factors

- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The strategic fit of Casa da Guitarra's project was decisive in securing the funding because the proposal aligned perfectly with the call's core priority: the digitalisation of cultural and tourism-related content. As the only business in Porto dedicated to preserving and showcasing the history of Portuguese string instruments, Casa da Guitarra offered a uniquely relevant cultural asset that matched the programme's objective of promoting sustainable and digital tourism experiences. Their plan to digitalise their physical exhibition, create 3D models of historic instruments, and expand research on the cultural heritage of Fado directly mirrored the call's intent to broaden access to cultural knowledge through digital channels.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** UPTEC played a central and indispensable role in Casa da Guitarra's success in securing the funding, acting as the key enabling institution throughout the entire process. First, UPTEC was the organisation that initially informed them about the call, channelled through the Tourism Institute of Porto, ensuring the company became aware of an opportunity that was very likely to fit their profile. UPTEC also guided them through the proposal-development phase by providing a session where the guidelines were explained and by offering direct support through a contact person available for questions during the final days of preparation. Once the project was approved, UPTEC continued to be instrumental: they assigned a dedicated grant manager who held periodic follow-up meetings and monitored progress, and they also provided access to a pool of mentors from which Casa da Guitarra selected the two specialists who supported branding, cultural content, and technological aspects of the project. These mentors, funded as part of the call's benefits, opened doors to new technical contacts and helped overcome internal capability gaps.

Barriers & Challenges

- **Time & resource constraints:** The main difficulty faced by Casa da Guitarra during the project was the limited financial support provided, which proved insufficient to execute the digitalisation plan as originally conceived. Although the 25.000 € grant enabled progress, the cost of core activities (particularly the 3D modelling of historical Portuguese instruments) far exceeded the available budget, with the company noting that a single 3D scan could consume the entire funding amount. As a result, they were forced to significantly adapt the scope, opting for lower-cost photographic 3D models that could not fully capture the texture and technical detail they had initially intended to showcase. This financial constraint not only reduced the ambition of the digital outputs but also required revising the project approach and timeline to fit within the restricted resources.

CASA DA GUITARRA – USING SPECIALIZED PLATFORMS TO ACCELERATE ACCESS TO FUNDING (3/3)

Lessons learned

- Reaffirming the Value of the Project's Core Concept: Casa da Guitarra would fully repeat the core idea of the project, as its strong alignment with the call's priorities proved to be one of the main reasons for its success. The concept of digitalising their unique cultural exhibition, creating 3D representations of historic Portuguese instruments, and expanding access to musical heritage perfectly matched the fund's focus on sustainable and digital tourism. They emphasised that the proposal was conceptually solid, beneficial for their long-term strategy, and well-positioned within the cultural-tourism landscape of Porto.
- Deep analysis of technical and financial requirements before applying: The main lesson learned was the importance of researching technical & financial requirements more thoroughly before defining the project scope. The team realised that key components were far more expensive and complex than anticipated. This lack of early technical research led to significant delays, forced them to reconsider their approach, & ultimately required scaling down the original ambition to fit the limited budget.

This best practice shows that tourism SMEs can boost their chances of winning digital-innovation funding by using specialised support platforms. Casa da Guitarra's experience demonstrates that aligning a project with programme priorities and relying on expert guidance (from incubators or mentoring networks) helps overcome technical gaps and strengthens proposals.



JHT SWEDEN – EVIDENCE-LED DESTINATION MARKETING WITH STRONG ECOSYSTEM ANCHORING (1/3)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: JHT Sweden

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Shared

Year: 2018

Granted amount: 7.000.000 €

Source programme: WELCOME BACK (Interreg Sweden-Norway)

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Sweden and Norway
- Thematic axis: SME growth in tourism via destination marketing, internationalisation and export readiness.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): national

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: N/A
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country  Sweden

Size medium

Sector



Tourism

Subsector

Destination promotion & territorial attractiveness

Company activity

Developing and creating opportunities for the tourism industry in Jämtland Härjedalen (Sweden)

Description of the project

- Project objective(s):
 - Increase international awareness of Jämtland Härjedalen.
 - Build export readiness among SMEs; strengthen support structures.
 - Convert awareness into trade relationships with international tour operators.
- Duration: 45 months (from 20 December 2018 to 30 September 2022)
- Main activities:
 - Market development via tour operators
 - Media & campaigns
 - Content & tools
- Outputs:
 - Market development via tour operators: Engaged +80 international tour operators (workshops, FAM trips), +60 new packages produced by regional actors for international markets and at least 14 packages identified as already on sale.
 - Media & campaigns: +20 press visits from target markets, features in Forbes (US), The Times (UK), Politiken (DK), Dutch Financial Times (NL), Landhaus Living (DE), Nordis (DE). Social campaigns in Finland & Denmark reached +12.5m impressions and +2.6m unique people.
 - Content & tools: 86 new web articles, 3 films, 500 photos, German travel guide, 2 maps, and an Export Guide for SMEs

JHT SWEDEN – EVIDENCE-LED DESTINATION MARKETING WITH STRONG ECOSYSTEM ANCHORING (2/3)

Success Factors

- **Quality of proposal:** The use of pre-existing evidence significantly strengthened the proposal's credibility, alignment with programme priorities, and perceived feasibility. JHT prepare the proposal with a full analytical phase covering market conditions, target segments, export readiness, and SME needs, including training gaps in sales and internationalisation. This systematic preparation allowed the team to present a proposal with a solid justification and clear strategic focus.
- **Previous experience with funding:** JHT is recognised regionally and nationally as a reliable, experienced, and financially disciplined organisation, which strongly enhances its success odds. They note themselves that they are "known as a good project owner" with strong control over finances and processes.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** JHT's deep anchoring in the regional tourism ecosystem is one of its strongest success factors, enabling exceptional stakeholder mobilisation and a unified territorial strategy. Their governance structure includes the main destination companies of the region (such as SkiStar) and facilitates close collaboration with Visit Sweden, providing both legitimacy and access to national-level promotional channels. This ecosystem strength is demonstrated by their ability to effectively engage SMEs and international partners.

Barriers & Challenges

- **Eligibility criteria:** Finding the "middle line" in eligibility & additionality. The project must add value beyond the organisation's ordinary mandate (e.g., marketing) without being "too far out".
- **Administrative burden:** Application platforms and rules are hard to navigate, requires money in the bank, specific "EU language", and connections with managing bodies (not beginner-friendly, risking that funds flow to the same mature).

JHT SWEDEN – EVIDENCE-LED DESTINATION MARKETING WITH STRONG ECOSYSTEM ANCHORING (3/3)

Lessons learned

- Importance of rigorous pre-writing evidence: A strong evidence base proved essential for credibility and competitiveness. JHT's preparatory work (market analysis, baseline assessment, segmentation, demand mapping, and clear need/impact logic) significantly strengthened the proposal. This groundwork enabled the team to articulate a compelling intervention rationale, demonstrate measurable gaps in international demand, and link activities directly to expected outcomes.
- Effective Ecosystem Mobilisation: JHT's ability to convene and mobilise the tourism ecosystem (regional destinations, Visit Sweden, SMEs, incoming operators, and local stakeholders) was a key factor to succeed. This created a multiplier effect: destinations contributed content and expertise; Visit Sweden amplified exposure; SMEs provided authentic product; and operators converted interest into market-ready packages. This mobilisation translated into concrete outputs, such as new operator packages, press interest, and earned media that JHT alone could not have achieved. The collaborative model also enabled a coherent national-level narrative, increasing trust from both EU evaluators and commercial partners.
- Strengthening Financial Preparedness and Cash-Flow Capacity: One of the primary challenges was meeting co-funding and early cash-flow requirements. For SMEs and regional organisations, the initial liquidity strain can be significant (especially since EU disbursements are typically back-loaded). JHT would benefit from securing more upfront capital (internal reserves, bridge financing, or guaranteed co-funding commitments) before submitting a proposal. This would reduce operational stress, avoid delays in activity launch, and allow the organisation to seize opportunities without being constrained by funding cycles.

This best practice shows that tourism SMEs can strengthen their chances of securing destination-marketing or internationalisation funding by grounding their proposals in solid evidence and leveraging strong regional ecosystems. JHT Sweden's experience illustrates how rigorous market analysis and deep collaboration with local stakeholders make projects more credible and impactful. Other SMEs can replicate this by building data-driven strategies and activating partnerships that enhance visibility, alignment, and feasibility.



CONRAD EVENTS – PROTOTYPE-DRIVEN ACCESS TO EU FUNDING

FOR INNOVATION-HEAVY TOURISM SMES (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: Conrad Events	Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): direct
Year: 2024	Granted amount: 30.000 (40% pre-financing, 60% balance upon acceptance of results).
Source programme: Single Market Programme (SMP) – BEFuture	
Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): grant	

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Spain, Belgium, France, Germany, The Netherlands and Italy
- Thematic axis:
 - sustainability transition,
 - digital transformation,
 - innovation support,
 - cross-border collaboration.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): National (EU-framed initiative implemented regionally (EU-coordinated concept delivered through regional/national tourism boards)

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: No
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country

 Belgium

Size

medium (10 people)

Sector

 Tourism

Subsector

Events

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): design and prototype an open-ear, bone-conduction headset (“CHEERS – Choose Your Ears”) tailored to the MICE context, enabling guided tours/workshops where users must hear their surroundings (traffic, colleagues). Also make a demo of working prototypes at IBTM Barcelona and advance TRL for a manufacturable product and explore market/industrialisation pathways.
- Duration: 12 months (started spring 2024, active work extended about a year)
- Main activities:
 - Technical benchmarking against existing open-ear devices.
 - Hardware design and rapid prototyping with suppliers in Israel, Hong Kong and China.
 - Branding/website and minimal marketing within tight category caps.
 - Piloting/demos at IBTM Barcelona, kick-off and closing events (Brussels, Ghent).
 - Compliance exploration (Bluetooth qualification, patent/licensing risk review)
- Outputs:
 - +5 working prototypes showcased at IBTM.
 - A functioning product concept ready for first 1,000–2,000-unit order (pending IP risk mitigation).
 - Brand/name (CHEERS) and a basic website/promo asset

CONRAD EVENTS – PROTOTYPE-DRIVEN ACCESS TO EU FUNDING

FOR INNOVATION-HEAVY TOURISM SMES (2/2)

Success Factors

- Quality of proposal
 - Clear, tangible hardware outcome solving an operational pain point for guided activities where situational awareness is critical.
 - Direct industry fit (MICE) and live trade-fair demonstration plan.
 - Lean collaboration with a highly skilled wireless engineer, accelerating technical problem-solving.
- Strategic fit with call priorities
- It addressed innovation in business events, safety/usability in urban environments, and deployable prototypes for immediate industry uptake (exactly what the BeFuture call sought to surface for Europe's events ecosystem).
- Team design & resources
 - Core SME team (10 staff) led development, with the CEO investing +300 personal hours.
 - External wireless expert contributed significant specialist R&D time.
 - Coach embedded by the programme for guidance.
 - Suppliers in Israel/Hong Kong/China for fast prototyping.
- Use of support ecosystems
 - Close, human support from Tourism Flanders/Brussels (direct email/phone contact, responsive clarification).
 - Trade-fair organisers provided a platform (though booth placement/exposure was suboptimal—see challenges).

Barriers & Challenges

- Time & resource constraints
 - Rigid budgeting Excel “straight-jacket” with narrow cost categories and caps (e.g., marketing max 15%).
 - Ineligibility of own staff time, despite R&D-heavy work (CEO alone invested +300 hours unfunded).
- Lack of support ecosystem: Sought risk/production insurance (e.g., via Flanders Investment & Trade or private insurers) for the first 1,000–2,000 units, but no suitable cover for the real commercial risks (IP challenges, DOA batches) was found.

Lessons learned

- Innovation & Market Deployment: Hardware projects require risk-sharing tools. No insurer or public scheme would cover real manufacturing risks (e.g., patent claims, defective batches) so IP planning must start early. EU suppliers respond slowly; parallel prototyping outside the EU may accelerate progress.
- Stakeholder Engagement & Ecosystem Support: Direct, human support from regional tourism boards is highly valuable (Tourism Flanders/Brussels provided responsive, personalised guidance that made implementation manageable) and coaching can be useful, but only when it adds real value.
- Administrative Process & Implementation: Keep procedures simple and proportionate to the small funding amount.

This best practice is highly relevant for tourism SMEs developing tangible, innovation-intensive products, especially those in hardware. It shows how even small teams can leverage EU cascade instruments to validate concepts through rapid prototyping and trade-fair demonstrations. The approach is useful for SMEs needing early-stage, low-budget funding to build and test real prototypes while navigating market, IP, and industrialisation challenges.

B&B ALTA MURGIA – ALIGNING THE COMPANY’S PURPOSE WITH EUROPEAN OPPORTUNITIES (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: First Mile*; COASTOUR¹

Funding modality (direct/cascade/shared): Cascade for First Mile & COASTOUR; shared / co-funded for Voucher Turismo & Voucher Internazionalizzazione

Year: 2024.

Granted amount: €7,000 under First Mile;²

Source programme: EU Single Market Programme (SMP / COSME) for First Mile and COASTOUR; Chamber of Commerce of Bari for Voucher Turismo and Voucher Internazionalizzazione.

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Competitive, non-refundable cascade grants for First Mile and COASTOUR; co-funded grants for the Bari Chamber of Commerce voucher schemes.

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Italy, France, Norway and Slovenia under First Mile; Denmark, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and Lithuania under COASTOUR; Italy at local level under the Bari Chamber of Commerce vouchers.
- Thematic axis: Sustainable tourism, behavioural change, green mobility, sustainability monitoring, SME resilience, tourism competitiveness, quality improvement and internationalisation.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU and local / regional.

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes.
- Consortium members: Not applicable at SME beneficiary level.
- Subcontractor: Not specified as a central feature of the applications; implementation relied mainly on the SME itself and, where relevant, on external service providers linked to the funded activities.

SME profile

Country

 Italy.

Size

Micro

Sector

 Tourism

Subsector

Rural and eco-friendly accommodation

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): To improve the sustainability, competitiveness and long-term resilience of the accommodation business through a progressive combination of behavioural sustainability actions, local community-oriented capacity building, green investment and international visibility measures.
- Duration: 2024 for the Bari Chamber of Commerce vouchers and the COASTOUR participation referenced by the SME; First Mile forms part of a wider project running from 2023 to 2025.
- Main activities: Implementation of behavioural sustainability actions for guests under First Mile; development of pedestrian and mobility-oriented guest materials; participation in COASTOUR with a strong preference for place-based knowledge transfer and practical learning; installation of a solar panel system through Voucher Turismo; and social media advertising and promotional actions through Voucher Internazionalizzazione.
- Outputs: Pedestrian and sustainable mobility maps; improved guest awareness around sustainability; local dissemination of practical knowledge; installation of solar energy infrastructure; and stronger online visibility and market outreach.
- Duration: The funding pathway is best understood as a cumulative sequence of actions implemented during 2024, while also building on the wider First Mile cycle and the SME’s growing experience with public funding.

*Enhancing Sustainability in European Tourism SMEs;

1. Sustainable and Resilient Transformation of the Rural Coastal Tourism Industry; Voucher Turismo – Anno 2024; Voucher Internazionalizzazione – Anno 2024.

2. €9,000 under COASTOUR according to the information provided by the SME; 70% co-financing with a maximum contribution of €7,000 under Voucher Turismo; up to 70% co-financing and a maximum contribution of €5,000 under Voucher Internazionalizzazione.

B&B ALTA MURGIA – ALIGNING THE COMPANY'S PURPOSE WITH EUROPEAN OPPORTUNITIES (2/2)

Success Factors

- **Access to information:** A decisive success factor was the SME owner's proactive search for opportunities on the web using sustainability-related keywords, which enabled discovery of calls despite limited initial familiarity with formal EU funding portals.
- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The business already had a strong sustainability orientation, which made it easier to align proposed actions with the environmental and tourism-transition priorities of the funding schemes.
- **Previous experience with funding:** Although First Mile was described as the first EU-level application, each subsequent opportunity increased the SME's confidence, learning and ability to identify and use further schemes.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** Explanatory sessions and direct clarification from project organisers helped the SME understand the opportunities and reduced the difficulty of first-time participation.
- **Team design & resources:** The lean structure of the SME enabled fast decision-making and the direct translation of small grants into practical, visible improvements in the business.
- **Quality of proposal / practical relevance:** The funded actions were concrete, realistic and closely linked to real operational needs of the company, which strengthened the coherence of the applications and implementation.

Lessons learned

- Start with accessible and relatively small funding instruments, as these can provide the confidence and practical experience needed to progressively engage with more opportunities.
- Funding works best when it is used strategically across several complementary schemes rather than as a one-off isolated opportunity.
- Small grants can generate significant impact when they are tightly connected to real business needs, such as sustainability improvements, visibility actions or energy investments.
- Better information visibility, simpler procedures and stronger partner-search support would make funding more accessible for rural micro tourism enterprises.

This best practice shows how a micro rural tourism SME can build a progressive and coherent funding pathway by combining EU cascade support with local co-financed instruments. Rather than relying on a single grant, B&B Parco Alta Murgia used different opportunities to improve sustainability, strengthen operational capacity, invest in green infrastructure and enhance external visibility. The case represents a practical example of how small tourism businesses can gradually develop funding capability, provided that opportunities are accessible, relevant and closely linked to their real development needs

Barriers & Challenges

- **Complexity of the Call:** The SME explained that some calls did not clearly specify key practical elements at the outset, such as budget logic, timeframe or level of expected ambition.
- **Administrative burden:** Local voucher schemes required substantial paperwork, invoicing and reimbursement procedures, making implementation more bureaucratic and time-consuming for a micro enterprise.
- **Time & resource constraints:** As a very small business, the SME had limited internal capacity to deal with repeated administrative and funding-management requirements.
- **Partnership & consortium:** The SME highlighted that many EU opportunities are difficult to access because they require international partners or destination structures that are not easily available in its local context.
- **Lack of support ecosystem:** The interview pointed to the absence of easily accessible trusted partnership ecosystems and structured matchmaking support for small rural tourism actors.
- **Trust barrier:** The SME also stressed that working with unknown organisations abroad can be difficult because trust and reliability are harder to assess in advance.

MERILL RURAL NETWORK – USING EU-FUNDED DIGITAL INNOVATION TO STRENGTHEN RURAL TOURISM IN MALTA (1/3)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: Cross-Re-Tour

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Cascade funding through a wider European project implemented in Malta through the Malta Tourism Authority

Year: 2023

Granted amount: €30,000 per innovative project

Source programme: COSME / Single Market Programme for SMEs

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Competitive, non-refundable grant support for innovative tourism projects

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: The wider Cross-Re-Tour project is transnational and involves several European countries, while the funded Merrill action specifically focused on Malta
- Thematic axis: Green and digital innovation in tourism, with a focus on sustainability, digitalisation, resilience, and improved operational models for tourism SMEs
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes, as a beneficiary under the Cross-Re-Tour support scheme in Malta
- Consortium members: Not applicable at beneficiary level, as the wider programme was implemented through a European partnership and nationally through the Malta Tourism Authority
- Subcontractor: Yes. The digital platform developed under the project was built in collaboration with a local IT company providing tailor-made digital solutions.

SME profile

Country

 Malta

Size

Micro / small organisation

Sector

 Tourism

Subsector

Rural tourism / ecotourism / agritourism

Company activity

Merill Rural Network is a community-based rural tourism and social enterprise initiative in Malta that supports farmers, breeders and artisans in diversifying their income through authentic tourism experiences linked to local food, wine, traditions and rural heritage. Its model connects tourism with agriculture, crafts, education and community development, helping preserve local identity while improving the economic sustainability of rural families.

Description of the project

- Project objective(s):
 - Strengthen the way rural tourism operates in Malta through digital innovation
 - Simplify the coordination and booking process for rural experiences hosted by farmers, breeders and artisans
 - Increase the resilience and long-term viability of community-based rural tourism
 - Use digital tools to improve the organisation, visibility and efficiency of the rural tourism ecosystem while remaining aligned with the network's social and environmental values
- Duration: The parent project runs for three years from September 2023, while Merrill's supported action was launched during the project implementation period
- Main activities:
 - Development of the Merill Rural SmartBook, a digital platform designed to improve coordination in rural tourism
 - Creation of a tool through which members of the network can manage bookings, availability and communication more efficiently
 - Collaboration with the tourism coordination team to centralise logistics and reduce the need for manual coordination
 - Co-creation of the platform with network members, especially farmers and artisans, through consultations, presentations and surveys to ensure that the solution truly reflected their needs and capacities
- Outputs:
 - The Merill Rural SmartBook digital platform
 - A more efficient and better coordinated booking system for rural tourism experiences in Malta
 - Improved communication and availability management for members of the network
 - A practical digital tool that strengthens the resilience and long-term sustainability of the rural tourism ecosystem

MERRILL RURAL NETWORK – USING EU-FUNDED DIGITAL INNOVATION TO STRENGTHEN RURAL TOURISM IN MALTA (2/3)

Success Factors

- Deep roots in the rural community: what makes this case especially interesting is that Merrill's strength comes from its legitimacy on the ground, working directly with farmers, breeders and artisans.
- Tourism as a tool for rural diversification: tourism is not the final goal, but a vehicle to help rural families diversify income, preserve traditions and strengthen local resilience.
- Ability to turn small funding into practical system change: the supported digital project is interesting because it addressed a concrete coordination problem in rural tourism and improved the functioning of the whole network.
- Strategic fit with call priorities: The project aligned strongly with the programme's priorities because it combined two core policy themes: sustainability and digitalisation. It aimed to modernise rural tourism operations while supporting a community-based, low-impact tourism model that reinforces local identity and strengthens small-scale rural actors.
- Previous experience with funding: Merrill had already gained experience through previous EU-supported actions, including earlier structural-fund support and smaller tourism-focused schemes. This prior exposure helped the organisation understand how to position itself, how to identify relevant opportunities, and how to use funding strategically to support its mission.
- Effective Partnership Building: The organisation's success was strongly linked to its growing network at both local and European level. Participation in European forums, engagement with expert-led initiatives, and strong cooperation with the Malta Tourism Authority helped position Merrill as a credible and attractive beneficiary for innovation-oriented tourism support.
- Access to information: Merrill accessed opportunities both through its own proactive scanning of programmes and through the networks it had built over time. Participation in forums, events and exchanges allowed the team to identify calls, understand priorities, and connect with relevant stakeholders.
- Use of support ecosystems: A decisive factor was the organisation's ability to operate within several support ecosystems at once: local rural communities, tourism institutions, European project circles and purpose-driven support organisations. This gave Merrill access not only to funding opportunities but also to the right partnerships and implementation support.

Barriers & Challenges

- Local ecosystems can be harder than European ones: an especially distinctive point in this interview is that the organisation often finds more friction locally than in EU-level collaboration, particularly in agriculture-related environments.
- Domestic funding structures do not always fit grassroots innovation: some local rural schemes are perceived as being more infrastructure-focused and less suited to organisations building community-based diversification models.
- Social-enterprise-type organisations often underinvest in networking: unlike business actors, they do not always develop partnerships and funding networks proactively enough.
- Need to balance innovation with institutional diplomacy: the organisation must remain outward-looking and visionary while also maintaining workable relations with more cautious public bodies.

MERILL RURAL NETWORK – USING EU-FUNDED DIGITAL INNOVATION TO STRENGTHEN RURAL TOURISM IN MALTA (3/3)

Lessons learned

- Ground-level credibility is one of the strongest funding assets: being close to real communities and real operational problems is what makes the organisation valuable to wider project ecosystems.
- EU projects are useful not only for money, but for learning and internationalisation: they provide access to new practices, new technologies and wider networks.
- Mission-first organisations should use funding strategically: projects work best when they strengthen an existing purpose-driven model instead of pushing the organisation away from its core identity.
- Bridges and connectors are essential: people who can connect grassroots actors with funding systems and institutions make a major difference in whether opportunities can be used effectively.

This best practice illustrates how a small, purpose-driven rural tourism organisation can use EU support not only to develop a digital tool, but to strengthen an entire community-based tourism model. Merill Rural Network's experience shows that successful access to funding depends on a combination of grassroots legitimacy, mission alignment, trusted institutional relationships, and the capacity to transform local operational needs into practical innovation. It represents a highly relevant example for rural tourism, agritourism and social-enterprise actors across Europe, demonstrating that digital transformation can be designed in a way that empowers local communities, preserves traditional livelihoods and improves the resilience of the wider tourism ecosystem.



HUNGARIAN HOSPITALITY EMPLOYERS' ASSOCIATION (VIMOSZ)* (1/3)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: TOURBAN – Accelerating SME Capacity & Innovation for Sustainable Urban Tourism

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Direct EU-funded consortium project combined with cascade support to SMEs

Year: 2020

Granted amount: Approximately €10,000 per SME under the Hungarian support scheme managed by VIMOSZ

Source programme: COSME – EU Programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Competitive grant, including financial support to third parties

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Spain, Germany, Estonia, the Netherlands, Denmark, Croatia and Hungary
- Thematic axis: Sustainable urban tourism, innovation, circular economy, resource efficiency, knowledge exchange and SME capacity-building
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU

Type of application

- Single applicant: No
- Consortium members: The project was implemented by a consortium including organisations from Spain, Germany, Estonia, the Netherlands, Denmark, Croatia and Hungary, coordinated by the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce
- Subcontractor: No specific subcontractor was highlighted. Instead, selected SMEs could access support through a pre-selected pool of consultants

SME profile

Country  Hungary

Size Small organisation / sectoral association acting as an intermediary for SMEs

Sector



Tourism and hospitality

Subsector

Employer representation, SME support & tourism business development

Company activity

VIMOSZ, the Hungarian Hospitality Employers' Association, acts as the voice of employers in the Hungarian tourism and hospitality sector. In this case, it participated as the Hungarian consortium partner in a European project designed to support tourism SMEs in becoming more sustainable, innovative and competitive. Through an open national call, it selected & supported seven Hungarian tourism SMEs.

Description of the project

- Project objective(s):
 - Help tourism SMEs adapt to more sustainable, innovative and resource-efficient business models
 - Strengthen SME capacity to respond to sustainability challenges in urban tourism
 - Support the uptake of innovation, sustainability practices and more efficient operations
 - Foster knowledge exchange and best-practice learning between similar tourism SMEs from different European countries
- Duration: 2020–2023
- Main activities:
 - Launch of an open national call in Hungary to select tourism SMEs for participation
 - Allocation of approximately €10,000 per selected SME
 - Participation of selected SMEs in networking events, webinars and thematic workshops
 - Access to a pool of consultants from which SMEs could choose the most relevant support
 - Training on issues such as energy efficiency, water management, marketing, sustainability & design thinking
 - Facilitation of targeted meetings between similar SMEs from different countries to discuss common problems and solutions
- Outputs:
 - Direct support to seven Hungarian tourism SMEs
 - Participation of Hungarian SMEs in a wider European community of practice
 - Adoption of new sustainability approaches, business ideas and service models by the supported SMEs
 - Practical improvements in business strategy, including energy efficiency, sustainability certification, accessibility and innovation
 - New business developments inspired by the support received, including more sustainable tourism models and new niche tourism activities

*Combining small grants, expert support & peer learning to help tourism SMEs become more sustainable

HUNGARIAN HOSPITALITY EMPLOYERS' ASSOCIATION (VIMOSZ)* (2/3)

Success Factors

- **Quality of proposal:** One of the strongest aspects of the project was its practical design. It did not rely only on financial support, but combined funding with training, consultancy and peer exchange. This made the intervention more useful and more transformative for SMEs.
- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The project was closely aligned with the programme's objectives because it focused directly on helping tourism SMEs become more sustainable, more innovative and more competitive. It addressed practical issues such as energy, water, marketing, sustainability and business model adaptation in urban tourism.
- **Previous experience with funding:** VIMOSZ already had experience with EU-funded projects before TOURBAN, which helped the organisation join the consortium and contribute effectively. This prior experience also made it easier to organise the Hungarian call and support SMEs through the programme.
- **Team design & resources:** The support mechanism worked well because it was not only a funding channel. SMEs also had access to consultants, webinars, training sessions and structured networking moments. This created a broader support environment in which companies could choose what was most relevant to them.
- **Effective Partnership Building:** A very positive factor was the international consortium structure. It created opportunities for Hungarian SMEs to meet similar companies from other countries, exchange ideas and discuss shared problems in an organised way. This European peer-learning dimension was one of the most valuable elements of the initiative.
- **Access to information:** VIMOSZ was able to publicise the open call effectively through strong sector communication channels, including a tourism daily bulletin reaching around 15,000 people and enterprises. This made it possible to attract interested SMEs through an open and visible selection process.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** The project benefited strongly from the surrounding support ecosystem created by the consortium. The combination of financial help, consultancy, networking events, webinars and community-building turned the programme into more than a grant scheme; it became a practical support platform for SME transition.

Barriers & Challenges

- **Language was a real barrier for SMEs:** one of the clearest obstacles was that participation required working in English, which made the process harder for some companies.
- **Young professionals often lack any training on EU funding systems:** the interview highlighted a structural gap in education, with graduates entering the labour market without understanding EU project logic, administration or accounting.
- **Nationally co-managed schemes are often far more bureaucratic:** compared with TOURBAN, other Hungarian or mixed national-EU schemes were described as much more burdensome and discouraging.
- **Access to good partnerships is itself competitive:** VIMOSZ joined the consortium at a late stage and still had to compete to be selected as the Hungarian partner.

HUNGARIAN HOSPITALITY EMPLOYERS' ASSOCIATION (VIMOSZ)* (3/3)

Lessons learned

- Small grants can trigger major transformation when embedded in wider support: even modest funding amounts can have strong effects when they are paired with expert guidance and structured learning.
- Tailored support matters more than generic support: the SMEs benefited most when they could choose the consultant, topic and support path that best matched their specific challenge.
- Cross-border peer exchange is a strong accelerator of innovation: some of the most valuable learning came from seeing how similar companies in other countries addressed comparable problems.
- Programme design should create trust, not fear: the experience suggests that SMEs respond far better to support models built on flexibility and confidence than to over-controlled, highly bureaucratic systems.

This best practice shows that SME support is most effective when it combines direct financial assistance with learning, expert guidance and peer exchange. Through TOURBAN, VIMOSZ helped seven Hungarian tourism SMEs not only access a modest grant, but also connect with a wider European ecosystem of ideas, consultants and practical solutions. The case demonstrates that even relatively small funding amounts can trigger major change when they are embedded in a broader support framework. It represents a highly relevant example for tourism support organisations, chambers and intermediary bodies across Europe, showing how to design SME support in a way that is practical, trusted and genuinely transformative. This best practice shows that SME support is most effective when it combines direct financial assistance with learning, expert guidance and peer exchange. Through TOURBAN, VIMOSZ helped seven Hungarian tourism SMEs not only access a modest grant, but also connect with a wider European ecosystem of ideas, consultants and practical solutions. The case demonstrates that even relatively small funding amounts can trigger major change when they are embedded in a broader support framework.

It represents a highly relevant example for tourism support organisations, chambers and intermediary bodies across Europe, showing how to design SME support in a way that is practical, trusted and genuinely transformative.



NATURE PARK OUR – USING INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION TO TURN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION INTO SUSTAINABLE DARK-SKY TOURISM (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: NIGHT LIGHT*

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Shared

Year: 2017

Granted amount: Approximately €216,348 for the Luxembourg partner, including around €183,896 in ERDF support

Source programme: Interreg Europe 2014–2020

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Co-funded grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Hungary, Spain, Denmark, Slovenia and Italy
- Thematic axis: Reduction of light pollution, protection of dark night skies, biodiversity preservation and sustainable tourism development linked to dark-sky areas
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU

Type of application

- Single applicant: No
- Consortium members: Province of Fryslân (Lead Partner), Hajdú-Bihar County Government, Avila County Council, Nature Park Our, Samsø Energy Academy, Business Support Centre Kranj, Basilicata Region, Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, and Island Government of La Palma
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country  Luxembourg

Size Small

Sector



Tourism / Environment / Territorial development

Subsector

Nature-based tourism, sustainable destination development and environmental management

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): The project aimed to improve regional policies to reduce light pollution, protect dark night skies and use these protected natural assets to support more sustainable territorial development. For Nature Park Our, the objective was to reduce light emissions in municipalities, strengthen environmental protection in vulnerable rural and protected areas, and support the development of sustainable dark-sky tourism initiatives.
- Duration: 2017–2021
- Main activities:
 - Participation in interregional learning and policy exchange on light-pollution management
 - Mobilisation of regional and local stakeholders around dark-sky protection
 - Identification and transfer of good practices from other European regions
 - Preparation of a regional action plan to reduce light emissions in municipalities
 - Awareness-raising and policy work linking environmental protection with sustainable tourism opportunities
- Outputs:
 - A regional action plan on light-pollution reduction
 - Stronger integration of light-pollution considerations into local and national policy frameworks
 - Increased awareness of dark skies as both an environmental and tourism asset
 - Improved basis for sustainable dark-sky tourism development in the region

*Improving regional policies to reduce light pollution and protect and valorise dark night skies

NATURE PARK OUR – USING INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION TO TURN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION INTO SUSTAINABLE DARK-SKY TOURISM (2/2)

Success Factors

- **Access to information:** A strong enabling factor was access to reliable programme information and support structures that helped identify relevant opportunities and understand how the project idea could fit Interreg priorities.
- **Effective partnership building:** One of the main success factors was the quality of the consortium. The project relied on a partnership made up of committed and experienced public actors from different European regions, which created trust, continuity and a strong basis for cooperation.
- **Previous experience with funding:** Prior experience with programmes such as LEADER and previous Interreg initiatives helped the organisation understand funding logic, cooperation requirements and the type of work expected in European projects.
- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The project responded to a real territorial need: reducing light pollution in a protected rural area while exploring sustainable ways of valorising dark skies. This gave the proposal a clear policy rationale and a strong fit with environmental and sustainable development priorities.

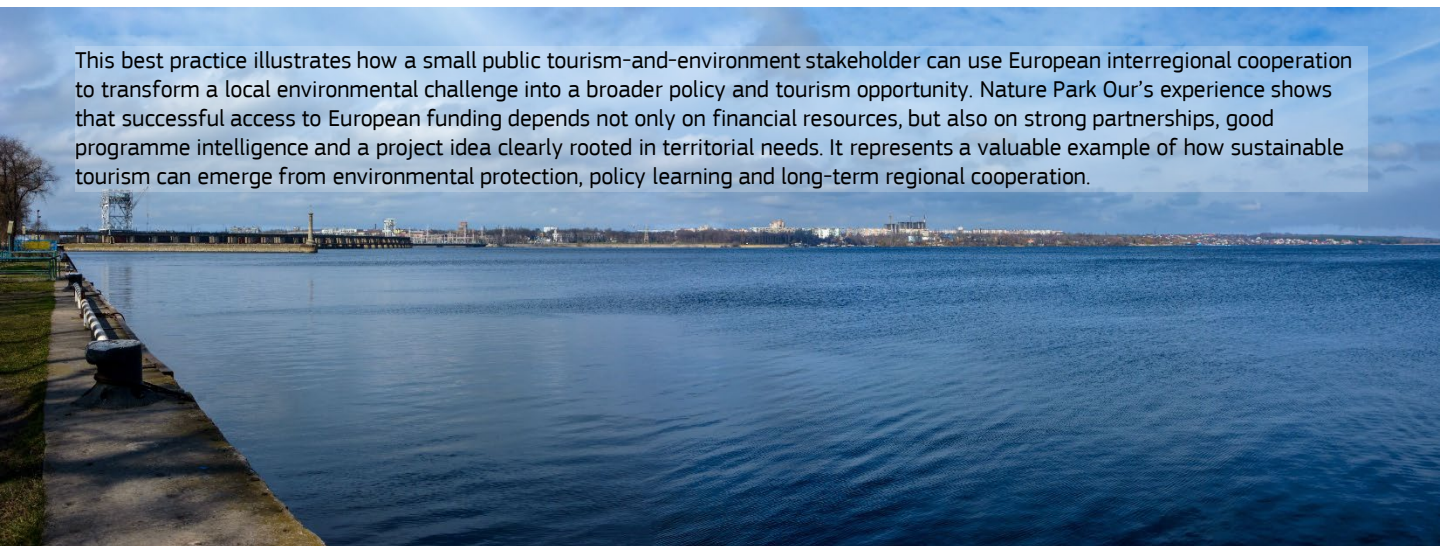
Barriers & Challenges

- **Administrative burden:** Administrative and financial reporting requirements were one of the main challenges, particularly in relation to controls, documentation, staff-cost reporting and programme-specific procedures.
- **Time & resource constraints:** As a small organisation with limited internal administrative capacity, managing a European cooperation project required a significant effort and placed pressure on available human resources.
- **Partnership & consortium risks:** Building and managing a strong partnership is essential but also challenging. The success of this type of project depends heavily on the reliability, continuity and commitment of the partners involved.
- **Complexity of the call:** Interreg-type projects can be highly complex for organisations that do not work with these procedures on a regular basis, especially when it comes to proposal preparation, financial planning and implementation requirements.

Lessons learned

- **Reliable partnerships are critical to success:** A strong consortium based on trust, continuity and real commitment is one of the most important conditions for a successful European project.
- **European cooperation projects generate value beyond funding:** Their impact lies not only in the financial support received, but also in the exchange of knowledge, policy learning, capacity-building and long-term relationships that they create.
- **Small organisations need support structures to access complex funding schemes:** Access to programme guidance, contact points and practical support can make a decisive difference in enabling smaller territorial actors to participate successfully in European funding.

This best practice illustrates how a small public tourism-and-environment stakeholder can use European interregional cooperation to transform a local environmental challenge into a broader policy and tourism opportunity. Nature Park Our's experience shows that successful access to European funding depends not only on financial resources, but also on strong partnerships, good programme intelligence and a project idea clearly rooted in territorial needs. It represents a valuable example of how sustainable tourism can emerge from environmental protection, policy learning and long-term regional cooperation.



SAILWAY – ACCESSING CIRCULAR TOURISM FUNDING THROUGH AN INTERMEDIATED EU SUPPORT SCHEME (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: ECOTOURS

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Cascade

Call framework publicly associated with the project: SMP-COSME-2021-TOURSME – COVID-19 Recovery through Sustainable Tourism Growth and SME Support

Year: : 2 years

Granted amount: : €9,000

Source programme: Single Market Programme (SMP).

Full project title: Empowering local communities turning them into laboratories for co-development of circular & sustainable tourism ecosystems

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Italy, Greece, France, Hungary, Spain & Cyprus. Public ECOTOURS sources state that the project targeted local communities in these six countries, including Galicia/Vigo in Spain.
- Thematic axis: Circular and sustainable tourism, community-based tourism ecosystems, environmental principles and standards, peer learning, and support for tourism SMEs.
- Funding programme lineage: EU. The project is described publicly as co-funded by the European Union under the Single Market Programme / COSME framework.

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes, at beneficiary level.
- Consortium members: The ECOTOURS partners includes PRISM, Universidade de Vigo, Petra Patrimonia Corsica, ENOROS Consulting Ltd, The Community Foundation of Agrigento and Trapani, ANKO, and The Chamber of Commerce and Industry Csongrad-Csanad County (CSMKIK).
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country  Spain

Size Micro

Sector



Tourism

Subsector

Nautical tourism / destination commercialisation.

Description of the project

- Project objective(s):
 - Support tourism SMEs in adopting more circular and sustainable practices.
 - Strengthen local tourism ecosystems through collaboration, peer learning and community-based approaches.
 - Contribute to the development of shared tourism solutions and digital tools linked to sustainable destination development.
- Duration: 2 years
- Main activities:
 - Participation in a structured support process involving international exchange and project-related activities.
 - Engagement in actions linked to collaborative destination development and digital tourism solutions.
 - Use of the grant to reinforce marketing, visibility and selected digitalisation-related needs within the business.
- Outputs:
 - Participation in international project activities and networking processes.
 - Contribution to a wider circular tourism initiative involving shared tools and destination-level cooperation.
 - Improved short-term business capacity through promotional and operational support.

SAILWAY – ACCESSING CIRCULAR TOURISM FUNDING THROUGH AN INTERMEDIATED EU SUPPORT SCHEME (2/2)

Success Factors

- **Access to information:** The opportunity became accessible through tourism-sector networking and intermediary support, which facilitated the SME's participation in a scheme that would have been difficult to access independently.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** The involvement of an intermediary structure reduced the distance between the European initiative and the SME, enabling participation through a more localised support channel.
- **Strategic value for the SME:** Although the scheme was operationally demanding, the funding generated tangible value by providing liquidity and supporting marketing and promotional activities that were directly relevant to the business.
- **Learning and networking dimension:** The transnational format contributed to knowledge exchange, exposure to other practices, and professional networking with actors in the tourism ecosystem.

Barriers & Challenges

- **Administrative burden:** The main challenge was the volume and complexity of administrative and justification requirements, which created a disproportionate burden for a micro-enterprise.
- **Time & resource constraints:** The SME had to manage the process largely with its own limited internal capacity, making compliance highly demanding in operational terms.
- **Strategic fit with implementation reality:** The overall project design was perceived as only partially aligned with the practical needs and working methods of very small tourism businesses.
- **Effectiveness of outputs:** Some of the project's digital components were seen as having limited long-term practical value for the business and for the intended tourism market.

Lessons learned

- Funding schemes targeting micro tourism SMEs should be more closely aligned with concrete business needs, particularly those related to liquidity, promotion, market access and manageable operational improvements.
- Administrative and reporting requirements should be proportionate to the size and capacity of the beneficiary in order to avoid discouraging participation.
- Support instruments are more effective when they build on existing market realities and practical sector dynamics rather than relying excessively on top-down or overly prescriptive project outputs.
- Intermediated support models can help micro-enterprises access EU funding, but their impact depends on balancing strategic ambition with implementation simplicity and operational relevance.

This best practice shows how a micro tourism SME can benefit from EU-supported sustainability schemes when funding is channelled through an enabling ecosystem. At the same time, it illustrates the importance of proportional administration, realistic project design and practical relevance for ensuring that very small tourism businesses can convert support into meaningful business value.



MASCONTOUR – LEVERAGING SPECIALISED EXPERTISE & EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIPS TO ACCESS EU TOURISM FUNDING (1/3)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: FUTOURISME¹

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Direct EU project funding at consortium level;

Year: 2024

Granted amount: Not disclosed

Source programme: Single Market Programme (SMP / COSME)

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Competitive grant under an EU project framework.

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: The project involved partners from Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Germany, France and Spain, and it was designed to support tourism SMEs in the experiential tourism field.
- Thematic axis: Digital and sustainable transition of tourism SMEs, including new business models, innovative services, skills development, e-learning, coaching and twin transition solutions.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU.

Type of application

- Single applicant: No.
- Consortium members: MASCONTOUR participated as part of a European consortium and was approached by third parties that were looking for specific expertise and a German partner profile that fit the proposal needs.
- Subcontractor: No.

SME profile

Country

 Germany

Size

Small

Sector

 Tourism consulting and advisory services

Subsector

Sustainable tourism consulting, capacity-building, e-learning and resilience-oriented tourism development.

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): To support tourism SMEs in the experiential tourism sector in their digital and sustainable transition through new business models, innovative services, skills development, training and technical support. For MASCONTOUR specifically, the project also represented an opportunity to contribute specialised expertise in tourism, e-learning and sustainability to a European consortium.
- Duration: The project was structured as a multiannual initiative with work packages running from M1 to M36.
- Main activities: MASCONTOUR supported proposal preparation for the work packages in which it was involved or mainly responsible, contributed expertise on e-learning and tourism, participated in implementation activities linked to training and SME support, and engaged in consortium coordination and reporting processes.
- Outputs: Contribution to project work packages, training and coaching activities, and specialised content linked to digital and sustainable tourism transition for SMEs. The company briefing sheet also indicates that MASCONTOUR appears in project-related outputs as an active content-producing partner. From MASCONTOUR's perspective, the project represents a sustained, multi-stage collaboration rather than a one-off funding action, combining proposal preparation, implementation and reporting over the life of the project.

1. Fostering Digital & Sustainable Transition of Tourism SMEs for Future Innovation and Resilience; Project ID 101121578.

2. within the wider project, financial support was also designed for SMEs through a dedicated grant scheme.

MASCONTOUR – LEVERAGING SPECIALISED EXPERTISE & EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIPS TO ACCESS EU TOURISM FUNDING (2/3)

Success Factors

- **Previous experience with funding:** MASCONTOUR already had prior experience in several international and EU-related programmes, including Interreg-related work, Switch Asia and Erasmus involvement. This previous exposure helped the company enter the project with a stronger understanding of European collaboration dynamics.
- **Team design & resources:** A key success factor was MASCONTOUR's highly specialised expertise in sustainable tourism, e-learning and tourism business support, which made the company attractive as a consortium partner. The interview explicitly states that the company was approached because others were looking for this concrete expertise.
- **Effective Partnership Building:** The consortium-building process worked because MASCONTOUR was invited by external actors who already had a first outline of the project and were seeking the right country and expertise fit. MASCONTOUR then assessed the proposal logic and joined on that basis.
- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The project matched MASCONTOUR's profile very well, as the call focused on digital and sustainable transition in tourism and the company already works precisely in resilience, sustainability, training and implementation support.
- **Access to information:** In this case, access to the opportunity came mainly through European project networks and direct approach by third parties, rather than through open discovery by the company itself. However, the interview also notes that MASCONTOUR is now increasingly proactive in scanning new calls.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** The company's broader European consulting and project ecosystem was clearly an enabling factor, since relationships with other actors opened the door to collaboration opportunities and later to new calls under discussion.

Barriers & Challenges

- **Complexity of the Call:** MASCONTOUR explained that this was its first COSME project and that the company was not fully familiar with all the technical and financial details at the beginning, which created a significant learning curve.
- **Administrative burden:** One of the clearest barriers mentioned in the interview was the amount of documentation and formal material that had to be reviewed and processed. MASCONTOUR described receiving very long documents and needing substantial time just to go through them.
- **Eligibility criteria / financial interpretation:** A major challenge arose because the company owner was initially considered as a consultant within the project logic, but later, after reporting, was treated differently due to ownership status. According to the interview, this re-interpretation had a significant financial impact and led to substantial losses for the company.
- **Time & resource constraints:** The company noted that proposal preparation and compliance work take considerable time, which is demanding for a small, specialised business. The burden is high not only during application but also during implementation and reporting.
- **Partnership & consortium:** MASCONTOUR acknowledged that partnership-building in EU projects always entails risk because consortia frequently involve actors that are not deeply known in advance. Although due diligence was carried out, the uncertainty remains an inherent feature of this type of funding.
- **Lack of user-friendly support tools:** The interview explicitly suggests that funding systems could be easier to navigate if practical tools such as better question-answering systems or chatbot-style support existed to simplify interpretation of complex documentation.

MASCONTOUR – LEVERAGING SPECIALISED EXPERTISE & EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIPS TO ACCESS EU TOURISM FUNDING (3/3)

Lessons learned

- Strong thematic expertise is one of the most effective ways for a small company to access EU consortium projects, because partners actively look for niche knowledge and credible implementation capacity.
- Previous project experience matters, but each funding programme still has its own rules and requires a dedicated learning effort, especially in financial interpretation and eligibility details.
- Small technical misunderstandings in EU funding can have very large financial consequences, so the interpretation of staff categories, ownership roles and budget rules must be clarified in detail as early as possible.
- For small, specialised firms, joining as a partner can be a realistic and effective route into EU funding, while becoming lead partner may remain difficult until administrative confidence and internal capacity are further strengthened.

This best practice illustrates how a small, specialised tourism consultancy can successfully access EU funding by positioning itself as a high-value expert partner within a European consortium. MASCONTOUR's experience shows that thematic credibility, international project experience and a clear niche in sustainable tourism and e-learning can open the door to participation in ambitious EU projects. At the same time, the case also represents the tensions that many small expert organisations face: they can contribute strongly to project substance and impact, but still encounter significant complexity in administrative and financial implementation. Overall, the case is a useful example of how access to EU funding for tourism stakeholders is not only about generating ideas, but also about being visible, trusted and strategically positioned within European collaboration networks.



EUPOLIS GRUPA – BUILDING LONG-TERM EUROPEAN COLLABORATION ECOSYSTEMS TO ACCESS TOURISM FUNDING (1/3)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: FU-TOURISM – Reference 101121573

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Direct, with the project itself later distributing financial support to SMEs through open calls

Year: 2023

Granted amount: €4.2 million total project budget at consortium level.

Source programme: Single Market Programme (SMP / SMP-COSME).

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Competitive grant / co-funded grant.

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Croatia, Spain, Belgium, Greece, Austria and Poland, with pilot destination-level work in Valencia and Poreč-Parenzo.
- Thematic axis: Green and digital transition of tourism SMEs, including sustainability, innovation, resilience, regenerative practices, new business models, Living Labs, and collaboration ecosystems for tourism.
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU.

Type of application

- Single applicant: No.
- Consortium members: EUPOLIS GRUPA (Coordinator), Finnova, Envolve, SYNYO, Vestbee, Open Impact, and destination-related partners linked to Valencia and Poreč-Parenzo.
- Subcontractor: Not specified.

SME profile

Country  Croatia

Size Small

Sector



Business consulting, innovation support and strategic development, with strong activity linked to tourism

Subsector

Tourism innovation, ecosystem building, strategic project development, and sustainable / regenerative tourism support.

Description of the project

- Project objective(s):
 - Support tourism SMEs to become more resilient, competitive, sustainable, innovative and digitalised.
 - Build a future-ready support ecosystem for the green and digital transition of tourism SMEs.
 - Create long-term collaboration structures, cluster dynamics and Living-Lab-type approaches that connect SMEs with innovation support organisations and other stakeholders.
 - Provide direct and expert support to SMEs and help them develop new business models, solutions and innovation pathways linked to tourism transition.
- Duration: 36 months (09/2023 – 09/2026).
- Main activities:
 - Coordinate and develop a European collaboration ecosystem for tourism SME transition.
 - Launch and manage open calls providing financial and expert support to tourism SMEs.
 - Mobilise SMEs through networks, campaigns, partners and existing ecosystem relationships.
 - Promote strategic capacity-building, destination-level pilots and 4-Helix / Living-Lab collaboration approaches.
 - Develop long-term cooperation between project partners and related ecosystems beyond the single project cycle.
- Outputs:
 - A transnational support ecosystem for tourism SMEs in transition.
 - Financial support and expertise for 102 SME projects.
 - Open calls and an acceleration programme offering grants and mentoring to selected SMEs.
 - Destination-level pilot activities and strategic collaboration models in Valencia and Poreč-Parenzo.
 - Wide dissemination and mobilisation of tourism SMEs through partner networks and campaigns.

EUPOLIS GRUPA – BUILDING LONG-TERM EUROPEAN COLLABORATION ECOSYSTEMS TO ACCESS TOURISM FUNDING (2/3)

Success Factors

- **Previous experience with funding:** The company had significant prior experience with European projects and EU funding applications. During the interview, it referred not only to FU-TOURISM but also to broader experience with demanding calls such as LIFE and Horizon, which contributed to its internal capacity and proposal readiness.
- **Team design & resources:** A key strength was the company's combination of project development capacity, ecosystem-building experience, partner engagement know-how and thematic expertise across tourism, regional development, culture, nature protection, agriculture and innovation. This multidisciplinary profile supported both proposal design and consortium coordination.
- **Effective Partnership Building:** Partnership building was one of the strongest enabling factors. The company was invited to join the consortium through its existing European network of collaborators, and that network had been built over time through conferences, exchanges and prior contact around common interests. The proposal therefore benefited from trust, continuity and a shared strategic direction.
- **Access to information:** The company explained that its first contact with EU funding opportunities historically came through newsletters, emails and the monitoring of specialised websites. In the case of FU-TOURISM specifically, however, the opportunity came directly through its transnational network, with partners proposing the call and supporting joint preparation.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** EUPOLIS GRUPA's own role as an ecosystem builder was itself a major advantage. Existing networks of collaborators, SMEs and support partners enabled the consortium not only to prepare the proposal, but also to spread information quickly, reach potential beneficiaries efficiently and ensure strong participation in the project's calls.
- **Long-term collaboration as a source of credibility:** the consortium was not improvised; it reflected ongoing shared interests, which gave the proposal greater coherence and strategic depth.
- **Capacity to mobilise real SME and stakeholder networks:** EUPOLIS was able not only to design the project, but also to activate relevant ecosystems of SMEs and support actors quickly and effectively.

Barriers & Challenges

- **High complexity of EU calls:** even for experienced organisations, the preparation of European proposals remains demanding and administratively heavy.
- **Slow funding timelines:** one of the most concrete challenges mentioned was the long delay between submission and project start, which reduces momentum and creates uncertainty.
- **Fragmented access to funding information:** opportunities are still often discovered through scattered newsletters, websites and informal channels, even for experienced applicants.
- **Some calls are too technical for most SMEs:** certain programmes require such a high level of expertise that they remain inaccessible for many smaller actors.

EUPOLIS GRUPA – BUILDING LONG-TERM EUROPEAN COLLABORATION ECOSYSTEMS TO ACCESS TOURISM FUNDING (3/3)

Lessons learned

- Invest in ecosystem-building before the call opens: A central lesson from this case is that successful European collaboration does not begin when the call is published. Relationships, shared concepts and common interests built years in advance became a major competitive advantage at proposal stage.
- Strong networks improve both access to calls and project implementation: Networks helped the company identify opportunities, shape the proposal, form the consortium and later reach SMEs quickly through existing contacts and campaigns. This makes network-building a highly transferable lesson for other tourism stakeholders.
- Simpler and more phased application processes would improve accessibility: The company clearly argued that EU funding procedures could be improved through simplification, phased application models and faster timelines. This is particularly relevant for SMEs, which often lack the internal capacity to absorb long and complex preparation processes.
- Better information-sharing systems are still needed for SMEs: Another important lesson is that discovering relevant EU funding remains too dependent on fragmented information channels and on the applicant's own initiative. Even experienced actors find funding websites difficult to navigate, which suggests a strong need for better notification systems and clearer information flows.

This best practice shows how a small tourism-related innovation and consulting SME can successfully access EU funding by building a long-term European collaboration ecosystem rather than approaching funding only as an isolated proposal-writing exercise. EUPOLIS GRUPA's experience demonstrates that ecosystem-building, sustained transnational networking, thematic alignment and a clear continuation vision can make a proposal more competitive and more sustainable over time. It represents a strong example for tourism stakeholders seeking to improve their access to funding not only through technical proposal skills, but also through deliberate investment in partnerships, shared concepts and trusted collaboration structures that exist before the funding opportunity appears.



THE HUNT MUSEUM – BUILDING EUROPEAN FUNDING CAPACITY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY CULTURAL HERITAGE INNOVATION (1/3)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: RECHARGE – Grant Agreement 101061233

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Direct

Year: 2021

Granted amount: Approximately €384,000 for The Hunt Museum

Source programme: Horizon Europe – Cluster 2: Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Competitive, non-refundable grant

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Estonia, Italy and Spain, with results designed for replication across cultural heritage institutions across Europe
- Thematic axis: Participatory cultural heritage, community engagement, resilient business models, and digital and on-site transformation of cultural heritage institutions
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): EU

Type of application

- Single applicant: No
- Consortium members: Erasmus University Rotterdam (Coordinator), Centrum Cyfrowe Foundation, Creativity Lab, Estonian Maritime Museum, European Fashion Heritage Association, The Hunt Museum, Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision, Platoniq Foundation, Textile Museum of Prato, and University of Valladolid
- Subcontractor: No

SME profile

Country  Ireland

Size Small

Sector

 Tourism / Culture

Subsector

Cultural heritage attraction / museum tourism

Description of the project

- Project objective(s):
 - Reinforce community participation as a source of economic and social value for cultural heritage institutions
 - Develop and test participatory business models that help diversify funding sources for cultural heritage organisations
 - Strengthen the museum's institutional capacity to participate in and manage European projects at a higher level
- Duration: 1 October 2022 – 30 September 2025
- Main activities:
 - Lead one of the largest work packages within the project
 - Manage nine cultural heritage Living Labs across Europe
 - Run its own Living Lab to test new participatory business models for cultural heritage
 - Build local community engagement processes and connect the museum with local organisations and companies
 - Participate in wider European project exchanges, events and collaborative experimentation around participatory heritage models
- Outputs:
 - Contribution to participatory business model development for cultural heritage institutions
 - Delivery of Living Lab activities and cross-European experimentation
 - Strengthened community engagement structures at local level
 - A network of local companies willing to support the museum
 - A community co-created sculpture trail linked to museum objects and local stories
 - Contribution to broader RECHARGE outputs such as practical tools, knowledge resources and replicable models for the sector

THE HUNT MUSEUM – BUILDING EUROPEAN FUNDING CAPACITY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY CULTURAL HERITAGE INNOVATION (2/3)

Success Factors

- **Strategic fit with call priorities:** The project aligned strongly with the museum's profile and mission. As a cultural heritage institution with a strong focus on community engagement, The Hunt Museum was well positioned to contribute to a project centred on participatory business models, resilience and innovation in the cultural heritage sector.
- **Previous experience with funding:** The museum had already participated in a number of European funding applications and had gradually built experience with programmes such as Horizon / Cluster 2, Digital Europe and Creative Europe. This previous exposure increased confidence, familiarity with requirements, and internal capacity to contribute effectively.
- **Team design & resources:** A critical enabling factor was the existence of staff members who had specialised over time in European project work, including a dedicated role focused on European projects. This made it possible to absorb the complexity of proposal writing and consortium coordination.
- **Effective Partnership Building:** The museum's growing network played a decisive role. Invitations to join consortia increasingly stemmed from previous collaborations, earlier proposal-writing processes and relationships developed through conferences and project activities. This helped position the museum as a trusted and useful partner.
- **Access to information:** Access to opportunities came mainly through professional networks and consortium contacts, although the museum also monitored the EU Funding & Tenders Portal and occasionally used it proactively to identify opportunities and approach potential partners.
- **Use of support ecosystems:** The main support ecosystem was the museum's European network of cultural heritage organisations, previous consortium relationships and project-related networking spaces. Participation in conferences and transnational activities also created further opportunities for collaboration and visibility.

Barriers & Challenges

- EU applications require a very specific language and logic: the museum described European proposals as operating almost in a different language from national or regional calls, making them harder to navigate.
- Heavy speculative time investment: preparing proposals demands a large amount of staff time, often with no guarantee of success, which is particularly challenging for a small organisation.
- Difficulty in defining a clear role in technical consortia: one of the challenges was finding a convincing and meaningful place for a cultural institution within highly technical projects.
- Dependence on dedicated internal capacity: this type of success would have been much more difficult without someone able to focus specifically on European projects.

THE HUNT MUSEUM – BUILDING EUROPEAN FUNDING CAPACITY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY CULTURAL HERITAGE INNOVATION (3/3)

Lessons learned

- EU funding capability can be built gradually: organisations do not need to start as experts; they can become strong applicants through repeated participation and practical exposure.
- Networks are part of the funding strategy: conferences, previous collaborations and visibility within European project circles directly influence future access to opportunities.
- The best projects are those that reinforce the organisation's identity: success is stronger when the project genuinely supports the institution's existing mission rather than pulling it in an artificial direction.

This best practice shows how a small cultural heritage and tourism stakeholder can successfully access direct EU funding by combining thematic alignment, progressive institutional learning, and strong European networking. The Hunt Museum's experience demonstrates that funding success is not only about winning a single project, but also about using that opportunity to strengthen internal capabilities, expand international partnerships, increase reputational visibility, and generate lasting value for local communities. It represents a highly relevant example for tourism and heritage stakeholders seeking to move from occasional participation in funding calls towards a more strategic and capacity-building approach to European funding.



KONTURE / CONTACT RURAL TOUR EU – BUILDING INCREMENTAL FUNDING CAPACITY* (1/2)

Identification of the funding opportunity

Opportunity ID: N/A (multiple national-level schemes linked to EU funding)

Funding modality (direct / cascade / shared): Shared management (EU funding implemented through national authorities)

Year: 2017–2024 (multiple calls over time)

Granted amount: Multiple small and medium grants and loans over time (typically ranging between approx. €7,000 and €50,000 per scheme)

Source programme: EU-funded schemes implemented through national authorities (including tourism internationalisation, innovation, digitalisation and green transition measures)

Type of aid (grant / non-refundable grant / competitive grant / co-funded grant / state aid): Combination of non-refundable grants and state-backed loans (de minimis aid)

Scope of the programme

- Countries impacted: Croatia (with indirect impact on international markets through internationalisation activities)
- Thematic axis: Internationalisation of tourism SMEs; Innovation and development of new tourism programmes; Digitalisation and green transition of tourism services; and post-COVID liquidity and operational resilience
- Funding programme lineage (EU, national, regional): National schemes co-funded by the European Union

Type of application

- Single applicant: Yes
- Consortium members: N/A
- Subcontractor: No (external consultants used only in early applications)

SME profile

Country

 Croatia

Size

Small enterprise

Sector

 Tourism

Subsector

Travel agency and tourism programme development (rural and thematic tourism)

Description of the project

- Project objective(s): The funded projects aimed to support the gradual growth and resilience of the company through international market access, development of innovative tourism programmes, digitalisation of services, and investment in operational infrastructure. Rather than a single large project, the company followed an incremental approach, using multiple smaller funding opportunities to strengthen different aspects of the business over time.
- Duration: Varies by scheme (typically short- to medium-term projects linked to specific investments or activities)
- Main activities:
 - Participation in international tourism fairs and exhibitions
 - Development of innovative tourism products and programmes
 - Investment in digital tools and equipment (e.g. apps, guide systems, IT equipment)
 - Office-related investments and operational upgrades
 - Liquidity support during the COVID-19 crisis
- Outputs:
 - Increased international visibility and market presence
 - Improved operational and digital capacity
 - More diversified and resilient tourism product portfolio
 - Enhanced ability to manage and apply for future funding schemes

*Through repeated national-level eu-co funded schemes

KONTURE / CONTACT RURAL TOUR EU – BUILDING INCREMENTAL FUNDING CAPACITY* (2/2)

Success Factors

- Previous experience with funding: A key success factor was the accumulation of experience over time. Starting in 2017, the company gradually learned how funding schemes work, how to read calls critically, and how to decide whether an opportunity was worth pursuing.
- Strategic fit with call priorities: The SME became increasingly selective, applying only to schemes that clearly matched its immediate business needs. This alignment reduced risk and ensured that funded activities were genuinely useful rather than speculative.
- Access to information: Funding opportunities were primarily identified through newsletters from national authorities, the Chamber of Commerce, and professional tourism associations, allowing the company to monitor relevant schemes without constant active searching.
- Team learning and internal capacity building: After initially relying on external consultants, the company progressively internalised proposal preparation and management, reducing dependency on external support and improving cost-effectiveness.

Barriers & Challenges

- Administrative burden: Reporting and follow-up requirements were described as the most demanding aspect, often requiring disproportionate effort relative to the funding amount, especially for small grants.
- Eligibility and implementation constraints: The SME faced rigid and sometimes impractical eligibility rules, particularly regarding invoicing practices, VAT treatment and eligible cost structures that did not reflect the realities of the travel and events sector.
- Time and resource constraints: As a small company, advancing costs upfront and waiting long periods for reimbursement created cash-flow pressure and occasionally forced the cancellation or postponement of planned activities.
- Institutional capacity gaps: A recurring challenge was the limited sector-specific expertise of some managing authorities, which led to misunderstandings and additional administrative exchanges during implementation.

Lessons learned

- Only apply when funding clearly matches current needs: The company learned to avoid large or speculative projects and to focus instead on smaller, targeted schemes that directly support ongoing business activities.
- Incremental funding builds resilience: Multiple small funding opportunities, when used strategically over time, can be more effective and less risky than a single large grant.
- Administrative effort must be weighed against benefits: SMEs should realistically assess whether the administrative and cash-flow burden of a scheme is justified by the expected support.

This best practice illustrates how a tourism SME can successfully access EU-related funding without relying on direct EU calls or complex consortia, by strategically using national schemes co-funded by the EU. KONTURE's experience shows that repeated participation in smaller funding opportunities, combined with growing internal expertise and selectivity, can gradually strengthen a company's resilience, competitiveness and confidence in dealing with public funding. The case demonstrates a pragmatic, low-risk pathway to EU funding that is highly transferable to other tourism SMEs with limited internal capacity and a strong need for operational stability.



COMMON MISTAKES

Introduction and Methodology

While the Compendium of Best Practices (Annex II) focuses on successful funding stories, this section addresses the complementary perspective: the identification of recurring weaknesses, errors and failure patterns observed across unsuccessful EU funding applications in the tourism ecosystem. The purpose is to:

- **Extract failure patterns from the tourism SMEs funding experiences analysed**
- **Translate negative evidence into actionable learning**
- **Provide applicants with on what to avoid, grounded in real operational experience**



Each identified mistake is assessed along two dimensions: frequency (how often it appears across the evidence base) and impact severity (the extent to which it directly affects evaluation outcome). The common mistakes were then **classified into four main categories**, consistent with EU evaluation criteria and project-neutral logic:

- **Strategic Mistakes:** such as weak or generic problem definition, failure to demonstrate EU added value or misalignment between project scope and call objectives.
- **Technical and Methodological Mistakes:** poorly structured work plans, non-measurable objectives and KPIs or weak linkage between activities, outputs and impacts.
- **Organisational and Administrative Mistakes:** examples include unclear role allocation in consortia or insufficient governance and coordination mechanisms.
- **Financial and Compliance-Related Mistakes:** budgets not aligned with activities, misunderstanding of cost eligibility rules or inadequate risk and compliance considerations.



Common mistakes not to repeat

STRATEGIC MISTAKES

M1 Submitting a proposal that is not tightly aligned with programme or call objectives (weak programme-project alignment)

➤ What it looks like:

The proposal describes a good business idea but does not explicitly connect it to the programme's objectives, priorities, and expected impacts, it does not demonstrate structured project-programme alignment. In practice, this happens when applicants describe a valid business investment or tourism improvement, but do not show how it contributes to the specific objectives, expected results and logic of the call. The project may make sense internally, yet still appear generic because the proposal does not translate programme language into activities, outputs and measurable results. The strongest cases succeeded because the project scope was already close to the priorities of the scheme and the fit was made explicit throughout the application. Where that link is weak, evaluators struggle to award relevance points and the proposal quickly loses competitiveness.

➤ Why it fails:

Evaluators cannot quickly see relevance, the project appears generic or mis-scoped versus the call's intent, reducing scores on relevance or fit.

➤ Diagnostic check question:

Can you map every programme/call objective to at least one concrete project activity and output?

COMMON MISTAKES

M2 Using EU priorities without practical application instead of demonstrating genuine strategic fit

What it looks like:

The proposal uses terms like “green/digital/resilience” but does not show how activities operationally deliver those priorities. In these cases, the project is not positioned in a way that makes “strategic fit with call priorities” explicit. A common error is to repeat terms such as “green”, “digital” or “resilience” without showing what the project will actually do under those headings. In the evidence base, successful applications did not rely on vocabulary alone: they connected sustainability or digitalisation to concrete actions such as expert input, targeted upgrades, pilot tools or operational improvements linked to real business needs. When proposals use EU priorities as labels rather than as design principles, the result is superficial alignment. This weakens credibility because evaluators assess operational delivery, not just thematic language.

Why it fails:

Evaluators’ reward demonstrated fit, not vocabulary and superficial alignment reduce relevance and credibility.

Diagnostic check question:

If you delete all “green/digital/resilience” wording, does the proposal still clearly show (through actions and outputs) how it delivers those priorities?

M3 Ignoring legal/regulatory feasibility that sits outside the funder’s responsibility

What it looks like:

The proposal assumes regulatory constraints will “be handled later” without showing awareness or an early plan for compliance. This mistake occurs when applicants assume permits, invoicing rules, VAT treatment or other regulatory conditions will be solved later and therefore do not address them in the proposal. The evidence shows that rigid eligibility rules and implementation constraints can create major friction, especially for small tourism operators whose day-to-day practices do not always match funding rules. If these constraints are not anticipated, the project can look risky at application stage and unstable during implementation. The issue is not only compliance; it is also delivery credibility.

Why it fails:

The project looks risky or unimplementable within the proposed timeline.

Diagnostic check question:

Have you identified the key legal/permit requirements and stated (briefly) how and when you will ensure compliance?

M4 Misunderstanding “additionality” (your project is seen as business-as-usual)

What it looks like:

The proposal describes activities that resemble the organisation’s normal mandate (e.g., standard marketing/operations), without clearly demonstrating what is truly new or additional under EU funding logic. Applicants often describe activities that look like normal business spending—general promotion, routine improvements or standard operations—without showing what would only happen because of the funding. This is particularly problematic in tourism, where many investments are useful for the business but not necessarily fundable under EU public-policy logic. In the successful cases, funded actions were framed as a clear step beyond ordinary activity: a new capability, a targeted sustainability improvement, a validated pilot or a strategic diversification move. Without that distinction, the proposal can be read as business-as-usual rather than as a genuinely additional intervention.

Why it fails:

Evaluators can consider the project insufficiently “additional” or not fundable at EU level.

Diagnostic check question:

Can you clearly state what the project delivers that your organisation would not do without EU support (i.e., the “additionality” statement)?

COMMON MISTAKES

M5 Ignoring competitive benchmarking and “evaluation context”

» What it looks like:

Some applicants write as though the evaluator only needs to decide whether the idea is good, instead of whether it is better justified than competing proposals. This leads to under-explained choices, limited evidence and weak differentiation. The best practices show the opposite approach: even very small organisations strengthened their position by showing focus, practical relevance, realistic scope and a clear path to delivery. In competitive calls, a proposal that is merely reasonable in isolation can still score poorly if it does not demonstrate why it is especially credible, timely or fit for purpose compared with alternatives. An applicant submits a proposal without anticipating that it will be compared with other applicants.

» Why it fails:

The proposal may be credible in isolation but loses comparatively because it does not over-compensate with proof of feasibility, readiness, and a compelling story.

» Diagnostic check question:

Have you explicitly addressed how your capacity remains competitive (evidence, focus, delivery plan), given other applicants?

COMMON MISTAKES

TECHNICAL MISTAKES

M6 Under-documenting feasibility (especially cost logic and delivery plan)

What it looks like:

This mistake appears when the proposal presents the solution at a high level but gives too little evidence on how it will be delivered, costed and managed. In practice, the project may depend on external experts, technical inputs or staged implementation, yet those elements are not explained in sufficient detail. The evidence shows that lean SMEs performed better when they broke the project into manageable and clearly justified components, rather than describing ambition in abstract terms. If cost logic and delivery sequencing are not visible, evaluators may assume the plan is under-developed even when the idea is sound. The proposal describes a solution but provides insufficient cost analysis and/or weak feasibility evidence.

Why it fails:

Evaluators may perceive the plan as under-justified.

Diagnostic check question:

Does every major cost and technical claim have a short justification that an evaluator can verify without inference?

M7 Failing to “design for evaluation optics”

What it looks like:

The proposal may be sensible, but the narrative/presentation underplays feasibility evidence and risk mitigation or makes it difficult to score (explicitly noted as a weakness in the evidence base). A proposal can be sensible in substance and still perform badly because the narrative is not structured in a way that makes scoring easy. This happens when evidence is scattered, risks are implied rather than explained, or key links between need, action and result are left for the evaluator to infer. The evidence base repeatedly shows that small applicants are disadvantaged when they rely on internal understanding instead of explicitly presenting the logic on paper. Stronger cases made the project easy to read and easy to score. Poor evaluation optics do not just reduce clarity; they directly reduce scorability.

Why it fails:

Evaluators cannot award points with unclear structure, it reduces scorability and competitiveness.

Diagnostic check question:

Could a third-party evaluator score each criterion directly from your text because you explicitly answer it where it appears?

M8 Weak or missing risk mitigation linked to feasibility

What it looks like:

A frequent problem is to claim that the project is feasible without demonstrating how likely delivery risks will be managed. In tourism SME contexts, risks often come from limited internal capacity, reimbursement delays, partner dependency or technical uncertainty. The document shows that small teams are particularly exposed when a single delay or bottleneck affects both implementation and normal operations. Successful cases were generally modest in scope, supported by external expertise, or built around realistic operational assumptions. Without credible mitigation, feasibility claims remain fragile and evaluators are likely to discount them. The proposal states feasibility but does not show credible risk mitigation.

Why it fails:

Without mitigation, feasibility claims look fragile and evaluators anticipate delivery failure.

Diagnostic check question:

For each top risk, have you listed one mitigation action that is realistic for your team and budget? <https://outlook.office365.com/owa/?ItemID=AAMkADlyOTViNjYyLTUxYjU0NGNkMi1hMjgzLTU0ZjllYTNmNzQxYQBGAAABAAAD4ndeBPghBS4GNF2MWhPFmBwCQppUzHASrK0NxyvXsOxaAAAA0EwnAACiQLm1U6wHSJzYzv7XjNs7AAZP3VwcAAA%3d&exvsurl=1&viewmodel=ReadMessageItem>

COMMON MISTAKES

M9 Not validating technical requirements early

What it looks like:

This mistake occurs when applicants define a digital tool, technical upgrade or complex output before checking the real requirements, costs and constraints. The evidence points to situations where SMEs initially lacked clarity on how best to use the funding or how demanding certain components would be in practice. In stronger cases, applicants kept the intervention concrete and proportionate—for example, focusing on a basic but reliable prototype, or on expert-supported improvements rather than over-designed technical ambition. Early validation matters because unrealistic assumptions later force scope reduction and weaken both credibility and impact. Applicants define technical outputs without sufficiently analysing technical and financial requirements in advance leading to later forced scope reduction.

Why it fails:

The project becomes less credible at proposal stage (if under-costed) or loses impact during delivery (if scope collapses).

Diagnostic check question:

Have you validated the most complex/expensive technical component with realistic costs and assumptions before finalising the project scope?

M10 Not building a rigorous “pre-writing evidence base” (weak proof of need and impact)

What it looks like:

The proposal describes activities without a strong analytical baseline (market needs assessment, segmentation or baselines). Many proposals start from an intuitive idea but not from a sufficiently documented problem, baseline or target need. The result is that the application describes activities without proving why these activities are necessary, why now, and for whom. The evidence repeatedly contrasts weaker, opinion-led approaches with stronger evidence-led ones, where applicants used practical market understanding, local needs, existing assets or clearly identified operational gaps to justify the intervention. Without a pre-writing evidence base, the proposal struggles to show a convincing problem–solution–impact chain and remains harder to evaluate positively.

Why it fails:

Evaluators cannot see a credible problem–solution–impact chain and the project look opinion-led rather than evidence-led.

Diagnostic check question:

Do you have baseline evidence (data/analysis) that proves the need and allows you to quantify targets and impacts?

COMMON MISTAKES

ORGANISATIONAL & ADMINISTRATIVE MISTAKES

M11 Not securing the right “support ecosystem” (or using weak support)

What it looks like:

One of the clearest patterns in successful applications is that support ecosystems matter, but only when they are relevant and competent. Successful micro and small applicants often relied on consultants, tutors, project organisers, local support actors or trusted intermediaries to interpret the call and manage the administrative process. Problems arise at both extremes: when the SME tries to do everything alone, or when it relies on weak or late-stage support that adds confusion rather than structure. For low-capacity applicants, the quality of support can be decisive for both submission quality and implementation stability. The SME either lacks external support for submission and paperwork or relies on ineffective support. The evidence shows a capable consultant or structured support ecosystem can be decisive.

Why it fails:

Administrative errors and process friction accumulate making proposal quality and compliance decline.

Diagnostic check question:

Do you have a named person or trusted external support responsible for managing portals, paperwork, & iteration cycles?

M12 Underestimating administrative burden and documentation workload

What it looks like:

The proposal underestimates the time/effort needed for complex document requirements and administrative steps. This error is highly recurrent across applications. Applicants focus on the funded activity itself but underestimate the effort required for forms, annexes, invoicing, reporting, reimbursements and follow-up exchanges. The evidence is particularly strong for micro-enterprises, where administrative work is sometimes regarded as disproportionate to the funding amount and disruptive to daily operations. Best practices explicitly show that SMEs should weigh the administrative burden against the expected benefit before applying. If that burden is not planned for, the process generates delays, mistakes and internal frustration from the outset.

Why it fails:

Time pressure increases mistakes, missed requirements, and incomplete documentation, then feasibility and compliance perception drop.

Diagnostic check question:

Have you allocated dedicated time (and an owner) for documentation management, separate from “project delivery” tasks?

M13 Weak partnership trust and partner selection (when partnerships are needed)

What it looks like:

This mistake consists of treating partners as formal requirements rather than as delivery-critical actors. The document highlights two related problems: insufficient access to trusted partnership ecosystems and difficulty assessing the reliability of unknown organisations, especially in cross-border contexts. Where partnerships were effective, they were grounded in clear complementary roles and confidence in the partner's ability to deliver. Where trust is weak or partner choice is opportunistic, evaluators see coordination risk, and implementation later suffers from unclear responsibilities, slower decisions and fragile governance. Partners are selected without clear trust/experience foundations. Evidence highlights the importance of choosing experienced partners you can trust and defining goals early.

Why it fails:

Governance and delivery credibility weaken, and evaluators see higher implementation risk and coordination uncertainty.

Diagnostic check question:

For each partner, can you state why they are experienced and what unique responsibility they have?

COMMON MISTAKES

M14 Not building a repeatable “opportunity scouting” system (missing structured information channels)

- **What it looks like:**

Applicants often find calls by chance, too late, or through scattered searches rather than through a routine system. The evidence shows that better outcomes were associated with structured monitoring: proactive web searches using relevant keywords, explanatory sessions, direct clarification from organisers, and repeated exposure to opportunities over time. This matters because good call selection is a prerequisite for a good application. Without repeatable scouting channels, SMEs either miss relevant opportunities or pursue schemes that do not match their real needs, capacity or timing. SMEs rely on ad-hoc discovery rather than systematic monitoring, despite evidence showing that structured information channels enable timely awareness and opportunity access.

- **Why it fails:**

Applicants miss suitable calls, engage too late, or chase misfitting opportunities, increasing failure probability.

- **Diagnostic check question:**

Do you have at least one repeatable channel and a tracking routine to systematically capture opportunities instead of relying on one-off searches?

M15 Treating partner-building as optional when access to funding is structurally “partnership-dependent”

- › **What it looks like:**

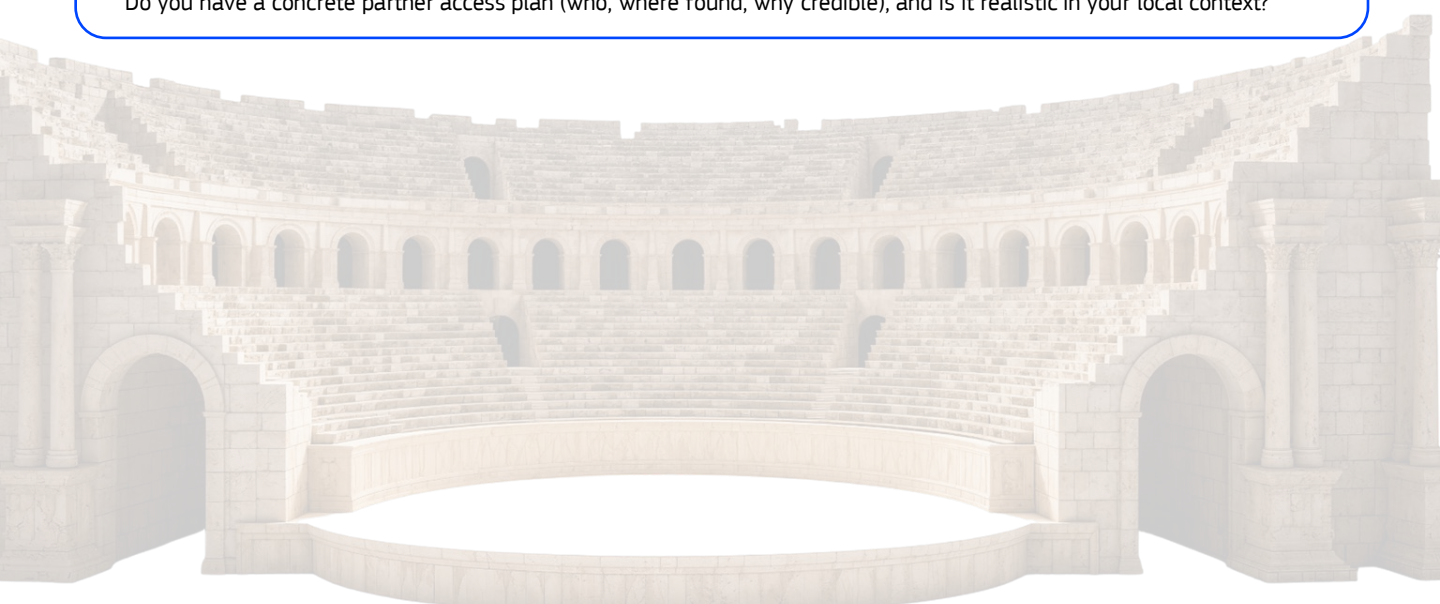
Many tourism SMEs underestimate how strongly access to some programmes depends on networks, intermediaries or a route into a wider consortium. Some opportunities are difficult to access because international partners or destination structures are not readily available in the applicant's context. It also shows that, for small specialised firms, joining as a partner can be a more realistic route than trying to lead alone. When applicants ignore this structural reality, they target calls they cannot realistically access or support with a credible consortium logic. The applicant targets calls that typically require partners but lacks a realistic partner access pathway.

- › **Why it fails:**

The proposal becomes non-viable (no access path) or under-credible (weak consortium logic).

- › **Diagnostic check question:**

Do you have a concrete partner access plan (who, where found, why credible), and is it realistic in your local context?



COMMON MISTAKES

FINANCIAL & COMPLIANCE-RELATED MISTAKES

M16 Not securing cash-flow capacity before submission

What it looks like:

Small firms advance costs upfront, wait for reimbursement and face pressure on normal operations in the meantime. In some cases, activities had to be postponed or cancelled because liquidity was tighter than expected. Lessons learned explicitly recommend budgeting beyond the grant amount and planning for VAT, non-eligible items and co-financing needs from the start. A project may be eligible and even well designed, but if the organisation cannot absorb early cash-flow pressure, implementation becomes fragile very quickly. The proposal assumes cash-flow will “work out,” but evidence shows co-funding and early liquidity can be a major challenge, and that securing more upfront capital reduces operational stress and delays.

Why it fails:

Even good projects become fragile; inability to pre-finance activities undermines feasibility and implementation readiness.

Diagnostic check question:

Can you demonstrate how you will cover co-funding and early cash needs before reimbursements?

M17 No buffer for evolving compliance rules during implementation

What it looks like:

Applicants often assume that the financial and compliance logic of the scheme will remain stable throughout implementation. The document shows that this is risky, particularly where policy or standards update mid-project or where eligibility interpretation evolves during delivery. In such situations, SMEs may need to inject additional funds or adjust activities under pressure. The lesson from the stronger cases is not to predict every change, but to keep a realistic compliance buffer in time, budget and management attention. Without that margin, even a funded project can become unstable. Applicants assume rules remain stable, but some evidence notes that evolving compliance rules can change eligibility and force extra own funding beyond the original plan.

Why it fails:

Mid-project changes create unplanned costs and non-compliance risk making implementation becomes unstable.

Diagnostic check question:

Have you included a realistic contingency (time/budget) to absorb potential compliance or eligibility changes without breaking delivery?

M18 Weak cost realism for technical components (mispricing leads to feasibility doubts or scope collapse)

What it looks like:

A regular weakness is to under-cost the most demanding elements of the project or to leave technical costs weakly justified. This is especially relevant for digital tools, innovation components or external expertise that appear simple in concept but are resource-intensive in practice. The best practices were usually careful to keep the investment focused, modest and linked to a clearly justified operational need. If cost realism is weak, evaluators downgrade feasibility; if the proposal is funded anyway, the likely result is later scope reduction and lower impact. Cost analysis is insufficient or technical components are under-costed.

Why it fails:

Evaluators downgrade feasibility. If awarded, implementation may require scope reduction that reduces impact.

Diagnostic check question:

For every major cost driver, can you show how it was calculated and why it is necessary for the outputs?

COMMON MISTAKES

M19 Ignoring the opportunity cost of administrative delays

What it looks like:

For very small tourism businesses, delays are not only an inconvenience; they carry a direct operational cost. The evidence explicitly notes that, in tiny teams, each delay has a high opportunity cost and prolonged administrative cycles can make self-financing appear faster or economically preferable. This means the true cost of a funding scheme is not limited to co-financing or paperwork, but includes lost management attention, delayed business decisions and pressure on normal operations. Proposals that ignore this reality are often over-ambitious relative to the team's actual absorption capacity. Teams, especially small ones, do not account for how delays and paperwork consume scarce capacity; evidence notes that with tiny teams, delays have high opportunity cost and administrative workload is heavy.

Why it fails:

The organisation becomes overburdened and proposal quality and delivery readiness decline.

Diagnostic check question:

Have you explicitly assessed whether the administrative/reporting workload is sustainable for your team size?

M20 Ignoring cost-category caps

What it looks like:

This error arises when the budget is designed around business logic alone rather than around the financial architecture of the call. The evidence highlights that rigid eligible-cost structures, VAT treatment issues and category constraints can significantly shape what is realistically deliverable. If the workplan depends on spending patterns that the scheme does not allow, the proposal becomes either non-compliant or operationally distorted. Stronger applicants adapt the project to the rules early; weaker ones discover too late that the financial template is driving the implementation model more than expected. The applicant designs a budget that clashes with strict category caps that can significantly shape implementation.

Why it fails:

Budget becomes non-compliant or unrealistic and implementation is forced into inefficient trade-offs, weakening feasibility and delivery quality.

Diagnostic check question:

Have you checked whether the call imposes category caps or rigid templates, and can your workplan still function within those constraints?

WHAT TO AVOID

Taken together, the evidence points to a set of recurring and deeply structural weaknesses in how many applicants approach public funding programmes. These mistakes are not isolated or technical in nature, they reflect systematic misunderstandings about the purpose of public funding, the expectations of evaluators, and the organisational requirements needed to translate an idea into a credible, implementable project. Across different types of calls and beneficiaries, the same patterns emerge, indicating that failure is more often rooted in project design and positioning than in the intrinsic quality of the underlying idea.

01

The dominant structural error: confusing a good idea with a fundable project

The evidence makes it very clear that the most systematic and damaging failure is the misalignment between the proposed project and the logic of the funding programme. Many initiatives are based on sound business or operational ideas, but they are not formulated or justified as public policy instruments.

This error appears in several recurring forms:

- Projects that describe activities but fail to explain why they should be selected over competing proposals.
- Superficial use of policy language (“green”, “digital”, “sustainable”) without translating it into concrete objectives, outputs, or verifiable impacts.

The outcome is straightforward: the evaluator does not perceive a real need for the project within the programme, even if the idea itself is strong. In practical terms, this shows that many applicants read the call as a source of funding, not as a strategic framework with its own internal logic that must be explicitly understood, respected, and demonstrated.

02

Misunderstanding feasibility: underestimating what evaluators need to “see”

Another major pattern highlighted is the insufficient demonstration of technical, financial, and operational feasibility.

Many proposals assume their logic is self-evident, whereas evaluators can only score what is clearly documented.

The most recurrent mistakes include:

- Incomplete or weak cost analyses, especially in technology, digitalisation, or innovation projects.
- Vague implementation plans with no clear allocation of responsibilities, timelines, or resources.
- A lack of structured reflection on risks and mitigation measures.

These weaknesses do not necessarily mean that the projects are unfeasible, rather, they indicate that the projects are not designed for evaluation. The issue is methodological rather than technical: applicants fail to translate internal knowledge into evaluable evidence. In competitive calls, this disproportionately disadvantages micro and small organisations compared to larger players who are accustomed to “over-documenting” feasibility.



WHAT TO AVOID

03**Systematic underestimation of administrative burden**

The analysis confirms that underestimating administrative workload is one of the most frequent and harmful errors, particularly for SMEs.

This mistake operates on three levels:

- Before award: complex forms, difficult eligibility criteria, multiple revisions and iterations.
- During implementation: reporting obligations, cost justifications, evidence collection.
- Afterwards: delayed payments, ex-post controls, and document reviews.

Many SMEs design projects focusing exclusively on delivery, without assigning specific resources (time, staff, external support) to administrative management. The result is organisational stress, avoidable errors, delays, and, in some cases, a retrospective assessment that “the funding was not worth the effort”. For small teams, the administrative burden can directly disrupt daily operations and create significant opportunity costs.

04**Capacity & governance failures, especially in micro-entities**

Another cross-cutting conclusion is that many projects fail because ambition is not properly calibrated to real organisational capacity.

Typical errors include:

- Designing projects whose workload is incompatible with the size of the team.
- Assuming that management, reporting, and coordination tasks will be absorbed “on top of” normal operations.
- Failing to clearly define roles and responsibilities, especially in projects involving partners or external providers.

These problems often remain invisible at application stage but surface quickly during implementation, helping to explain why some funded projects later reduce scope, experience delays, or generate significant internal frustration.

05**Financial mistakes: liquidity, eligibility, and false assumptions**

From a financial perspective, several recurring errors with very concrete consequences have been identified:

- Failure to plan liquidity beyond the grant amount
- Ignoring rigid budgetary constraints, such as category caps or ineligible cost types

These errors do not always prevent funding from being awarded, but they severely complicate implementation. In the most critical cases, they force beneficiaries to inject additional unplanned funds or to substantially scale down project ambition. The underlying issue is the lack of a cash-flow and financial risk perspective, which is particularly problematic for SMEs.

WHAT TO AVOID

06**Dependence on (or absence of) support ecosystems**

The study reveals two equally problematic extremes:

- Not relying on any support ecosystem at all (consultants, agencies, intermediaries, local networks).
- Relying on inadequate or late-stage support

Organisations that try to manage everything alone are more likely to make interpretation, procedural, or documentation errors. Conversely, poorly chosen support can provide false reassurance or introduce new compliance risks.

07**The underlying strategic flaw: treating funding as a one-off event**

Finally, the most fundamental error detected is that many applicants approach funding as an isolated opportunity rather than as part of a long-term learning trajectory.

This leads to:

- Little or no learning between calls
- Poor ability to judge whether a call is worth pursuing
- Frustration after negative experiences, discouraging future participation

Overall, the analysis of unsuccessful stories shows that the most critical failures do not stem from lack of innovation, commitment, or technical know-how, but from treating funding as a transactional opportunity rather than as part of a strategic, cumulative learning process. Applicants who fail to internalise the programme logic, realistically assess their capacity, and invest in institutional learning tend to repeat the same errors across calls, regardless of previous outcomes. In contrast, applicants that frame participation in funding schemes as a long-term capability-building exercise are better equipped to decide when not to apply, how to design evaluation-ready projects, and how to progressively improve success rates and implementation performance.

