



**European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)
Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI)
strand**

Call for proposals

**Inclusive Incubation and Finance for More
Entrepreneurs**

ESF-2026-SE-INCUBATION

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CALL FOR PROPOSALS

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0. Introduction

This is a call for proposals for EU **action grants** in the field of inclusive entrepreneurship.

The regulatory framework for this EU Funding Programme is set out in:

- Regulation 2024/2509 ([EU Financial Regulation](#))¹
- the basic act (ESF+ Regulation [2021/1057](#))².

The call is launched in accordance with the Financing Decision³ and will be managed by the **European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL)**.

 Please note that this call is subject to the final adoption of the amendment to 2026 Work Programme. In case there are substantial changes, we may have to modify the call (or even cancel it).

We invite you to read the **call documentation** carefully, and in particular this Call Document, the Model Grant Agreement, the [EU Funding & Tenders Portal Online Manual](#) and the [EU Grants AGA – Annotated Grant Agreement](#).

These documents provide clarifications and answers to questions you may have when preparing your application:

- the [Call Document](#) outlines the:
 - background, objectives, scope, activities that can be funded and the expected results (sections 1 and 2)
 - timetable and available budget (sections 3 and 4)
 - admissibility and eligibility conditions (including mandatory documents; sections 5 and 6)
 - criteria for financial and operational capacity and exclusion (section 7)

¹ Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/2509 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 September 2024 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union (recast) ('EU Financial Regulation') (OJ L, 2024/2509, 26.9.2024).

² Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 21).

³ Please note that this call is subject to the final adoption of the amendment to 2026 Work Programme.

- evaluation and award procedure (section 8)
- award criteria (section 9)
- legal and financial set-up of the Grant Agreements (section 10)
- how to submit an application (section 11)
- the Online Manual outlines the:
 - procedures to register and submit proposals online via the EU Funding & Tenders Portal ('Portal')
 - recommendations for the preparation of the application
- the AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement contains:
 - detailed annotations on all the provisions in the Grant Agreement you will have to sign in order to obtain the grant (*including cost eligibility, payment schedule, accessory obligations, etc*).

1. Background

Entrepreneurship plays a key role in fostering dynamic labour markets, economic resilience, innovation and social cohesion across the European Union. Supporting business creation and self-employment contributes to job creation, economic diversification and the empowerment of individuals who may otherwise face limited opportunities in traditional labour markets. It can also help reduce poverty and social exclusion by enabling people on low incomes to generate revenue, build skills and strengthen their economic independence. However, access to entrepreneurship opportunities remains uneven across Member States and population groups.

New and aspiring entrepreneurs from under-represented groups in entrepreneurship — including young people, women, migrants, persons with disabilities, seniors, long-term unemployed individuals and people on low incomes — continue to face structural barriers when attempting to start or grow a business. These barriers include limited access to finance, insufficient tailored business support services, lack of networks or mentoring opportunities, lack of business and financing skills, lack of training opportunities, potential biases among investors and regulatory complexity.

While a wide range of incubation programmes and financial instruments exist across Europe to support new entrepreneurs and start-ups, many remain insufficiently adapted to the specific needs of these under-represented groups. Traditional incubation models may not adequately address specific challenges, non-linear professional pathways or the need for integrated targeted support combining the right capacity building, mentoring and access to financing solutions.

In addition, rapid economic and societal transformations, namely the digital and green transitions, require new approaches to entrepreneurship support that promote sustainability and inclusion simultaneously. Innovative incubation models and finance solutions can play an important role in enabling individuals facing specific barriers to successfully develop entrepreneurial activities.

Under the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), this Call for proposals aims to strengthen inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystems by supporting the development and testing of incubation approaches and financing mechanisms tailored to under-represented entrepreneurs.

The design of this Call builds on the strong analytical foundations developed through the *Missing Entrepreneurs* publication series⁴, which has become a key European reference for evidence-based policymaking on inclusive entrepreneurship.

The Call also capitalises on lessons learned from the European Commission-financed *Better Incubation* project, which explored how incubation services can better respond to the needs of vulnerable and under-represented entrepreneurs. Practical toolkits and guidelines developed under this previous project can serve as the theoretical and methodological basis for the proposed actions⁵.

The analysis produced by the EC-OECD Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy, including the adoption in December 2025 of a legacy set of “policy pointers”⁶, can also serve as reference material for applicants who chose to cover young people, in view of their difficult conditions in several Member States⁷.

Applicants may adopt different strategic approaches. Projects may remain generalist or focus on specific target groups, sectors or territorial contexts where particular gaps or barriers have been identified. Such specialisation may include, for example, initiatives targeting specific groups of entrepreneurs, sector-focused incubation approaches (e.g. digital, green or social economy activities) or responses to challenges faced in rural, remote or economically disadvantaged areas.

The Call contributes to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, notably principles relating to equal opportunities, active support to employment and social inclusion, as well as to EU priorities promoting inclusive growth, innovation and social economy development.

2. Objectives — Themes and priorities — Activities that can be funded — Expected impact

General Objective

The general objective of this Call for proposals is to promote inclusive entrepreneurship across the European Union by supporting incubation models and financing solutions that enable new and aspiring entrepreneurs from under-represented groups in entrepreneurship to start, sustain and scale viable business activities. Under this Call, incubation services include acceleration services⁸.

Specific Objectives

The Call aims in particular to:

⁴ See last edition (2023) under *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023* | OECD.

⁵ Available under <https://betterincubation.eu/>

⁶ See under <https://yepa-hub.org/reports/policy-pointers-from-the-youth-entrepreneurship-policy-academy/>

⁷ Youth unemployment is still significantly higher than overall unemployment in the EU, see Eurostat data for December 2025 under <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/3-30012026-bp#estat-inpage-nav-heading-1>.

⁸ According to the OECD, the “main distinguishing characteristic of incubators is the provision of a physical space where entrepreneurs can spend time to develop their new business ideas, often over a relatively long or in some cases open-ended time horizon. Accelerators are more focused on supporting later-stage start-ups with high growth potential, commonly adopting a cohort-based model with short and intensive time-bound programmes. While the supports and services offered by incubators and accelerators overlap, incubators are more likely to offer physical space to their start-ups, while accelerators are more likely to provide investor connections through, for example, demo days”. See OECD, *The appropriateness of the incubation and acceleration system to the needs of start-ups and scale-ups in Portugal*, March 2025.

- Develop and test incubation approaches adapted to the specific needs of under-represented entrepreneurs.
- Improve access to finance by linking incubation services with financing organisations such as microfinance providers or social investment vehicles.
- Strengthen entrepreneurial capacities, skills development and business readiness among target groups facing barriers to entrepreneurship.
- Foster cooperation among incubation actors, financial intermediaries, social economy organisations, and possibly as well with employment services, managing entities of local innovation ecosystems or research institutes.
- Generate transferable knowledge, tools and practices that can be replicated or scaled across Member States.

Themes and priorities (scope)

Proposals should address the following priorities, the fourth is however optional:

Priority 1 – Inclusive Incubation Models

Development or adaptation of incubation programmes specifically designed to respond to the needs of under-represented entrepreneurs. This may include personalised mentoring, peer learning, skills development, coaching or ecosystem integration measures that address social or structural barriers to entrepreneurship. The focus should be placed on practical projects rather than on the development of theoretical tools or studies.

Priority 2 – Better Access to Finance

Design and testing of financial support mechanisms facilitating access to funding for under-represented entrepreneurs. This may include inter-alia blended finance approaches, partnerships with microfinance providers, social investors or alternative funding mechanisms supporting early-stage business development.

Priority 3 – Integrated Support Pathways

Creation, testing and implementation of integrated support pathways combining priority 1 and 2, i.e. incubation services with access to finance but also possibly with market opportunities and long-term business support. Attention should be given to continuity between early entrepreneurial support and sustainable business growth.

Priority 4 – Fostering Ecosystem Cooperation

Strengthening cooperation among incubation actors, financial intermediaries, social economy organisations, and possibly as well with employment services, managing entities of local innovation ecosystems or research institutes.

Activities that can be funded (scope)

Eligible activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Activities supporting outreach, identification and engagement of potential entrepreneurs from under-represented groups, including awareness-raising;

- Work related to the design, development and implementation of innovative incubation programmes tailored to the needs of under-represented entrepreneurs;
- Provision of mentoring, coaching, peer-learning or training activities supporting entrepreneurial skills development;
- Testing financing mechanisms or facilitating access to existing financial instruments, including microfinance, guarantees or blended finance models;
- Development of partnerships between incubators, financial intermediaries, social economy organisations, employment services and innovation actors;
- Capacity-building activities for entrepreneurship support organisations to better serve disadvantaged target groups;
- Development of digital tools or platforms facilitating incubation services or access to finance;
- Training for potential investors and financial intermediaries to better recognise the needs and potential of specific target groups and to address potential biases in lending and investment decisions;
- Exchange of good practices, peer learning and mutual learning activities among participating organisations;
- Monitoring and evaluation activities assessing the effectiveness and scalability of the approaches.

Activities should demonstrate a clear innovation dimension and potential for transferability or scalability across different contexts.

Expected impact

Actions funded under this Call are expected to contribute to:

- Increased participation of under-represented groups in entrepreneurial activities;
- Improved access to tailored incubation services and financing opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs facing structural barriers;
- Enhanced entrepreneurial skills, business readiness and sustainability of supported enterprises;
- Strengthened cooperation between incubation providers, financial actors and employment or social inclusion stakeholders;
- Development of innovative, evidence-based approaches, as a possible source of inspiration for other initiatives;
- Improved knowledge and policy learning regarding effective inclusive entrepreneurship support mechanisms.

In the longer term, the Call is expected to contribute to more inclusive labour markets, job creation, strengthened social economy ecosystems and reduced inequalities in access to entrepreneurship opportunities within the European Union.

3. Available budget

The estimated available call budget is **EUR 1.500.000**.

We expect to fund 2 projects.

The availability of the call budget still depends on the final adoption of the amendment to 2026 Work Programme. We reserve the right not to award all available funds or to redistribute them between the call priorities, depending on the proposals received and the results of the evaluation.

4. Timetable and deadlines

Timetable and deadlines (indicative)	
Call opening:	28 May 2026
<u>Deadline for submission:</u>	<u>2 September 2026 – 17:00:00 CET</u> (Brussels)
Evaluation:	September - October 2026
Information on evaluation results:	November 2026
GA signature:	January - February 2027

5. Admissibility and documents

Proposals must be submitted before the **call deadline** (see *timetable section 4*).

Proposals must be submitted **electronically** via the Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Submission System (accessible via the Topic page in the [Calls for proposals](#) section). Paper submissions are NOT possible.

Proposals (including annexes and supporting documents) must be submitted using the forms provided *inside* the Submission System (⚠ NOT the documents available on the Topic page — they are only for information).

Proposals must be **complete** and contain all the requested information and all required annexes and supporting documents:

- Application Form Part A — contains administrative information about the participants (future coordinator, beneficiaries and affiliated entities) and the summarised budget for the project (*to be filled in directly online*)
- Application Form Part B — contains the technical description of the project (*template to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, assembled and re-uploaded*)
- **mandatory annexes and supporting documents** (*templates to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, assembled and re-uploaded*):

- detailed budget table/calculator: not applicable
- CVs (standard) of core project team
- activity reports of last year
- list of previous projects (key projects for the last 3 years) (*template available in Part B*).

At proposal submission, you will have to confirm that you have the **mandate to act** for all applicants. Moreover, you will have to confirm that the information in the application is correct and complete and that all participants comply with the conditions for receiving EU funding (*especially eligibility, financial and operational capacity, exclusion, etc*). Before signing the grant, each beneficiary and affiliated entity will have to confirm this again by signing a declaration of honour (DoH). Proposals without full support will be rejected.

Your application must be **readable, accessible and printable** (please check carefully the layout of the documents uploaded).

Proposals are limited to maximum **50 pages** (Part B). Evaluators will not consider any additional pages. Shorter proposals are welcome.

You may be asked at a later stage for further documents (*for legal entity validation, financial capacity check, bank account validation, etc*).

 For more information about the submission process (including IT aspects), consult the [Online Manual](#).

6. Eligibility

Eligible participants (eligible countries)

In order to be eligible, the applicants (beneficiaries and affiliated entities) must:

- be legal entities (public or private bodies)
- be established in one of the eligible countries, i.e.:
 - EU Member States (including overseas countries and territories (OCTs))
 - non-EU countries:
 - listed EEA countries and countries associated to the ESF+ ([list of participating countries](#)), or
 - countries which are in ongoing negotiations for an association agreement and where the agreement enters into force before grant signature.

Beneficiaries and affiliated entities must register in the [Participant Register](#) — before submitting the proposal — and will have to be validated by the Central Validation Service (REA Validation). For the validation, they will be requested to upload documents showing legal status and origin.

Other entities may participate in other consortium roles, such as associated partners, subcontractors, third parties giving in-kind contributions, etc (*see section 13*).

Specific cases and definitions


Exceptional funding — Entities from other countries (not listed above) are exceptionally eligible, if the granting authority considers their participation essential for the implementation of the action.

Natural persons — Natural persons are NOT eligible (with the exception of self-employed persons, i.e. sole traders, where the company does not have legal personality separate from that of the natural person).

International organisations — International organisations are eligible.

Entities without legal personality — Entities which do not have legal personality under their national law may exceptionally participate, provided that their representatives have the capacity to undertake legal obligations on their behalf, and offer guarantees for the protection of the EU financial interests equivalent to that offered by legal persons⁹.

EU bodies — EU bodies (with the exception of the European Commission Joint Research Centre) can NOT be part of the consortium.

Associations and interest groupings — Entities composed of members may participate as 'sole beneficiaries' or 'beneficiaries without legal personality'¹⁰.  Please note that if the action will be implemented by the members, they should also participate (either as beneficiaries or as affiliated entities, otherwise their costs will NOT be eligible).

Social partner organisations — These include notably the European social partner organisations that are consulted in accordance with Article 154 TFEU (for the list, see [List of consulted organisations](#)) as well as other European-level social partner organisations that are not included in this list, but who are for example involved in the preparation and launch of European social dialogue at sector level. Social partner organisations without legal personality are eligible provided that the conditions for entities without legal personality (*see above*) are met.

Countries currently negotiating association agreements — Beneficiaries from countries with ongoing negotiations for participation in the programme (*see list of participating countries above*) may participate in the call and can sign grants if the negotiations are concluded before grant signature and if the association covers the call (i.e. is retroactive and covers both the part of the programme and the year when the call was launched).

EU restrictive measures — Special rules apply for entities subject to [EU restrictive measures](#) under Article 29 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and Article 215 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU)¹¹. Such entities are not eligible to participate in any capacity, including as beneficiaries, affiliated entities, associated partners, subcontractors or recipients of financial support to third parties (if any).

EU conditionality measures — Special rules apply for entities subject to measures adopted on the basis of EU Regulation 2020/2092¹². Such entities are not eligible to participate in any funded role (beneficiaries, affiliated entities, subcontractors,

⁹ See Article 200(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.

¹⁰ For the definitions, see Articles 190(2) and 200(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.

¹¹ Please note that the EU Official Journal contains the official list and, in case of conflict, its content prevails over that of the EU Sanctions Map.

¹² Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget (OJ L 325, 20.12.2022, p. 94).

recipients of financial support to third parties, etc). Currently no such measures are in place.

 For more information, see [Rules for Legal Entity Validation, LEAR Appointment and Financial Capacity Assessment](#)

Consortium composition

The lead applicant of the consortium must be one of the following types of organisations:

- a network of incubators (including business support organisations and similar organisations);
- a network of microfinance providers;
- a network of providers of finance for social enterprises.

Any consortium must at least entail one network of incubators and one network of finance providers (either microfinance or finance for social enterprises). Besides this, consortia may include other relevant entities such as social economy organisations, employment services, managing entities of local innovation ecosystems or research institutes.

Furthermore, the consortium (lead applicant and co-applicants jointly) must be established (directly or via their national members) in at least 14 eligible countries.

Eligible activities

Applications will only be considered eligible if their content corresponds wholly (or at least in part) to the topic description for which they are submitted.

Eligible activities are the ones set out in section 2 above.

Projects must comply with EU policy interests and priorities (*such as environment, social, security, industrial and trade policy, etc*). Projects must also respect EU values and European Commission policy regarding reputational matters (*e.g. activities involving capacity building, policy support, awareness raising, communication, dissemination, etc*).

Financial support to third parties is **not allowed**.

Geographic location (target countries)

Proposals must relate to activities taking place in the eligible countries (*see above*).

Duration

Projects should normally range **between 18 and 24 months**.

Extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment.

Project budget

Project budgets (requested grant amount) are expected to be around **EUR 750.000** per project.

This does not however preclude the submission/selection of proposals requesting other amounts. The grant awarded may be lower than the amount requested.

7. Financial and operational capacity and exclusion

Financial capacity

Applicants must have **stable and sufficient resources** to successfully implement the projects and contribute their share. Organisations participating in several projects must have sufficient capacity to implement all projects.

The financial capacity check will be carried out on the basis of the documents you will be requested to upload in the [Participant Register](#) during grant preparation (*e.g. profit and loss account and balance sheet, business plan, audit report produced by an approved external auditor, certifying the accounts for the last closed financial year, etc*). The analysis will be based on neutral financial indicators, but will also take into account other aspects, such as dependency on EU funding and deficit and revenue in previous years.

The check will normally be done for all beneficiaries, except:

- public bodies (entities established as public body under national law, including local, regional or national authorities) or international organisations
- if the individual requested grant amount is not more than EUR 60 000.

If needed, it may also be done for affiliated entities.

If we consider that your financial capacity is not satisfactory, we may require:

- further information
 - an enhanced financial responsibility regime, i.e. joint and several responsibility for all beneficiaries or joint and several liability of affiliated entities (*see below, section 10*)
 - prefinancing paid in instalments
 - (one or more) prefinancing guarantees (*see below, section 10*)
- or
- propose no prefinancing
 - request that you are replaced or, if needed, reject the entire proposal.

 For more information, see [Rules for Legal Entity Validation, LEAR Appointment and Financial Capacity Assessment](#).

Operational capacity

Applicants must have the **know-how, qualifications** and **resources** to successfully implement the projects and contribute their share (including sufficient experience in projects of comparable size and nature).

This capacity will be assessed together with the 'Quality' award criterion, on the basis of the competence and experience of the applicants and their project teams, including operational resources (human, technical and other) or, exceptionally, the measures proposed to obtain it by the time the task implementation starts.

Applicants will have to show their capacity via the following information:

- general profiles (qualifications and experiences) of the staff responsible for managing and implementing the project (CVs of the proposed the persons who will perform the main tasks, notably project manager and key personnel)
- description of the consortium participants
- applicants' activity reports of last year
- list of previous projects (key projects for the last 3 years) (*template available in Part B*).

Additional supporting documents may be requested, if needed to confirm the operational capacity of any applicant.

Public bodies, Member State organisations and international organisations are exempted from the operational capacity check.

Exclusion

Applicants which are subject to an **EU exclusion decision** or in one of the following **exclusion situations** that bar them from receiving EU funding can NOT participate¹³:

- bankruptcy, winding up, affairs administered by the courts, arrangement with creditors, suspended business activities or other similar procedures (including procedures for persons with unlimited liability for the applicant's debts)
- in breach of social security or tax obligations (including if done by persons with unlimited liability for the applicant's debts)
- guilty of grave professional misconduct¹⁴ (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- committed fraud, corruption, links to a criminal organisation, money laundering, terrorism-related crimes (including terrorism financing), child labour or human trafficking (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- shown significant deficiencies in complying with main obligations under an EU procurement contract, grant agreement, prize, expert contract, or similar (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant) making or control
- guilty of irregularities within the meaning of Article 1(2) of EU Regulation [2988/95](#) (including if done by persons having powers of representation,

¹³ See Articles 138 and 143 of EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.

¹⁴ 'Professional misconduct' includes, in particular, the following: violation of ethical standards of the profession; wrongful conduct with impact on professional credibility; breach of generally accepted professional ethical standards; false declarations/misrepresentation of information; participation in a cartel or other agreement distorting competition; violation of IPR; attempting to influence decision-making processes by taking advantage, through misrepresentation, of a conflict of interests, or to obtain confidential information from public authorities to gain an advantage; incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence or similar activities contrary to the EU values where negatively affecting or risking to affect the performance of a legal commitment.

decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)making or control

- created under a different jurisdiction with the intent to circumvent fiscal, social or other legal obligations in the country of origin or created another entity with this purpose (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- intentionally and without proper justification resisted¹⁵ an investigation, check or audit carried out by an EU authorising officer (or their representative or auditor), OLAF, the EPPO, or the European Court of Auditors.

Applicants will also be rejected if it turns out that¹⁶:

- during the award procedure they misrepresented information required as a condition for participating or failed to supply that information
- they were previously involved in the preparation of the call and this entails a distortion of competition that cannot be remedied otherwise (conflict of interest).

8. Evaluation and award procedure

The proposals will have to follow the **standard submission and evaluation procedure** (one-stage submission + one-step evaluation).

An **evaluation committee** will assess all applications. Proposals will first be checked for formal requirements (admissibility, and eligibility, *see sections 5 and 6*). Proposals found admissible and eligible will be evaluated against the operational capacity and award criteria (*see sections 7 and 9*) and then ranked according to their scores.

For proposals with the same score a **priority order** will be determined according to the following approach:

Successively for every group of *ex aequo* proposals, starting with the highest scored group, and continuing in descending order:


- 1) Projects focusing on a theme that is not otherwise covered by higher ranked projects will be considered to have the highest priority.
- 2) The *ex aequo* proposals within the same topic will be prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the award criterion 'Relevance'. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on their scores for the criterion 'Impact'. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on their scores for the criterion 'Quality'.
- 3) If this does not allow to determine the priority, a further prioritisation can be done by considering the overall project portfolio and the creation of positive synergies between projects, or other factors related to the objectives of the call. These factors will be documented in the panel report.
- 4) After that, the remainder of the available call budget will be used to fund projects across the different topics in order to ensure a balanced spread of the

¹⁵ 'Resisting an investigation, check or audit' means carrying out actions with the goal or effect of preventing, hindering or delaying the conduct of any of the activities needed to perform the investigation, check or audit, such as refusing to grant the necessary access to its premises or any other areas used for business purposes, concealing or refusing to disclose information or providing false information.

¹⁶ See Article 143 EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.

geographical and thematic coverage and while respecting to the maximum possible extent the order of merit based on the evaluation of the award criteria.

All proposals will be informed about the evaluation result (**evaluation result letter**). Successful proposals will be invited for grant preparation; the other ones will be put on the reserve list or rejected.

 No commitment for funding — Invitation to grant preparation does NOT constitute a formal commitment for funding. We will still need to make various legal checks before grant award: *legal entity validation, financial capacity, exclusion check, etc.*

Grant preparation will involve a dialogue in order to fine-tune technical or financial aspects of the project and may require extra information from your side. It may also include adjustments to the proposal to address recommendations of the evaluation committee or other concerns. Full compliance will be a pre-condition for signing the grant.

If you believe that the evaluation procedure was flawed, you can submit a **complaint** (following the deadlines and procedures set out in the evaluation result letter). Please note that notifications which have not been opened within 10 days after sending will be considered to have been accessed and that deadlines will be counted from opening/access (see also [Funding & Tenders Portal Terms and Conditions](#)). Please also be aware that for complaints submitted electronically, there may be character limitations.

9. Award criteria

The **award criteria** for this call are as follows:

1. Relevance (40 points):

- Clarity and consistency of the action
- Objectives and extent to which they match the themes and priorities and objectives of the call
- Contribution to the EU strategic and legislative context
- European/trans-national dimension

2. Quality (40 points):

- Logical links between the identified problems, needs and solutions proposed (logical frame concept)
- Quality of the consortium and project teams
- Appropriate procedures and problem-solving mechanisms for cooperating within the project teams and consortium
- Methodology for implementing the project (concept and methodology, organisation of the work (procedures and allocation of resources), management, involvement of subcontractors, timetable, risks and risk management, monitoring and evaluation)
- Cost effectiveness (sufficient/appropriate budget for proper implementation; best value for money)

3. Impact (20 points):

- Ambition and expected long-term impact of results on target groups/general public
- Appropriate dissemination strategy
- Sustainability of results after EU funding ends.

Award criteria	Minimum pass score	Maximum score
Relevance	24	40
Quality	24	40
Impact	12	20
Overall (pass) scores	60	100

Maximum points: 100 points.

Individual thresholds per criterion: 24/40, 24/40 and 12/20 points.

Overall threshold: 60 points.

Proposals that pass the individual thresholds AND the overall threshold will be considered for funding — within the limits of the available budget (i.e. up to the budget ceiling). Other proposals will be rejected.

10. Legal and financial set-up of the Grant Agreements

If you pass evaluation, your project will be invited for grant preparation, where you will be asked to prepare the Grant Agreement together with the EU Project Officer.

This Grant Agreement will set the framework for your grant and its terms and conditions, in particular concerning deliverables, reporting and payments.

The Model Grant Agreement that will be used (and all other relevant templates and guidance documents) can be found on [Portal Reference Documents](#).

Starting date and project duration

The project starting date and duration will be fixed in the Grant Agreement (*Data Sheet, point 1*). Normally the starting date will be after grant signature. A retroactive starting date can be granted exceptionally for duly justified reasons — but never earlier than the proposal submission date.

Project duration: *see section 6 above*.

Milestones and deliverables

The milestones and deliverables for each project will be managed through the Portal Grant Management System and will be reflected in Annex 1 of the Grant Agreement.

Beneficiaries in ESF+ EaSI projects will have to ask attendees in activities/events to participate in an EU survey to provide policy feedback. This survey allows the granting authority to closely monitor training, mutual learning and awareness-raising events. The beneficiaries will receive a weblink to the survey, to be forwarded to the attendees. There are 3 available options for the dissemination level of your deliverables:

- **Public** — fully open (automatically posted online on the Project Results platforms)
- **Sensitive** — limited (not public) under the conditions of the Grant Agreement
- **EU classified** (EUCI) – under Decision 2015/444

EU classified is not necessary under ESF+EaSI programme, therefore you should only use Public and Sensitive. All main deliverables demonstrating progress in the implementation of the project as well as all results generated from it must be **public**. In few exceptional cases, some deliverables that originate from the internal management systems of the beneficiary might remained “sensitive”.

Please double check if your “public” deliverables can really be published on the Portal (a signed attendance list should not be public for instance) and modify the dissemination level if necessary.

Form of grant, funding rate and maximum grant amount

The grant parameters (*maximum grant amount, funding rate, total eligible costs, etc*) will be fixed in the Grant Agreement (*Data Sheet, point 3 and art 5*).

Project budget (requested grant amount): *see section 6 above*.

The grant will be a budget-based mixed actual cost grant (actual costs, with unit cost and flat-rate elements). This means that it will reimburse ONLY certain types of costs (eligible costs) and costs that were *actually* incurred for your project (NOT the *budgeted* costs). For unit costs and flat-rates, you can charge the amounts calculated as explained in the Grant Agreement (*see art 6 and Annex 2 and 2a*).

The costs will be reimbursed at the funding rate fixed in the Grant Agreement (**80%**).

Grants may NOT produce a profit (i.e. surplus of revenues + EU grant over costs). For-profit organisations must declare their revenues and, if there is a profit, we will deduct it from the final grant amount (*see art 22.3*).

Moreover, please be aware that the final grant amount may be reduced in case of non-compliance with the Grant Agreement (*e.g. improper implementation, breach of obligations, etc*).

Budget categories and cost eligibility rules

The budget categories and cost eligibility rules are fixed in the Grant Agreement (*Data Sheet, point 3, art 6 and Annex 2*).


Budget categories for this call:

- A. Personnel costs
 - A.1 Employees,
 - A.2 Natural persons under direct contract,
 - A.3 Secoded persons
 - A.4 SME owners and natural person beneficiaries

- A.5 Volunteers
- B. Subcontracting costs
- C. Purchase costs
 - C.1 Travel and subsistence
 - C.2 Equipment
 - C.3 Other goods, works and services
- D. Other cost categories
 - D.1 Financial support to third parties – Not applicable
- E. Indirect costs

Specific cost eligibility conditions for this call:

- personnel costs:
 - SME owner/natural person unit cost¹⁷: Yes
 - volunteers unit cost¹⁸: Yes (without indirect costs)
- travel and subsistence unit cost¹⁹: -Yes²⁰
- equipment costs: depreciation other cost categories:
- indirect cost flat-rate: 7% of the eligible direct costs (categories A-D, except volunteers costs and exempted specific cost categories, if any)
- VAT: non-deductible/non-refundable VAT is eligible (but please note that since 2013 VAT paid by beneficiaries that are public bodies acting as public authority is NOT eligible)
- other:
 - in-kind contributions for free are allowed, but cost-neutral, i.e. they cannot be declared as cost
 - project websites: communication costs for presenting the project on the participants' websites or social media accounts are eligible; costs for *separate* project websites are not eligible.

 **Volunteers costs** — Volunteers costs are not a classic cost category. There are no costs because volunteers work for free, but they may nonetheless be added to the budget in the form of a pre-fixed unit cost (per volunteer) and thus allow you to benefit from the volunteers' work for the grant (by increasing the amount of reimbursement up to 100% of the normal costs, i.e. cost categories other than volunteers). More information is available in the [AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement, art 6.2.A.5](#).

¹⁷ Commission [Decision](#) of 20 October 2020 authorising the use of unit costs for the personnel costs of the owners of small and medium-sized enterprises and beneficiaries that are natural persons not receiving a salary for the work carried out by themselves under an action or work programme (C(2020)7115).

¹⁸ Commission [Decision](#) of 10 April 2019 authorising the use of unit costs for declaring personnel costs for the work carried out by volunteers under an action or a work programme (C(2019)2646).

¹⁹ Commission [Decision](#) of 31 July 2024 authorising the use of unit costs for travel, accommodation and subsistence costs under an action or work programme under the 2021-2027 multi-annual financial framework (C(2024)5405).

²⁰ See [EU Grants AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement](#), art 6 on eligible costs: travel and subsistence costs must be declared using the unit cost according to Annex 2a of the grant agreement. If a particular instance of travel, accommodation or subsistence in the action is not covered by one of the unit costs mentioned in Decision C(2021)35 the actual costs may be used.

Reporting and payment arrangements

The reporting and payment arrangements are fixed in the Grant Agreement (Data Sheet, point 4 and art 21 and 22).

Payment of the grant is generally made in **prefinancing** instalments and a **final payment** (the balance).

The aim of the prefinancing is to provide the beneficiaries with a float. The prefinancing remains the property of the EU until the payment of the balance. The frequency and size of prefinancing will depend on the project duration but may be adjusted in case of risk.


The payment schedule is normally as follows:

- **actions between 12 and 24 months:** prefinancing payments linked to annual reporting periods will be made as follows:
 - an initial prefinancing payment of 40% paid within 30 days from the entry into force of the grant agreement or after receiving the financial guarantee (if required), whichever is the latest
 - a second prefinancing of 40% after receiving an additional prefinancing report. Where the consumption of the previous prefinancing is less than 70%, the amount of the new prefinancing payment will be reduced by the difference between the 70% ceiling and the amount used

There will be no interim payments.

Payment of the balance: At the end of the project, we will calculate your final grant amount. If the total of earlier payments is higher than the final grant amount, we will ask you (your coordinator) to pay back the difference (recovery).

All payments will be made to the coordinator.

 Please be aware that payments will be automatically lowered if you or one of your consortium members has outstanding debts towards the EU (granting authority or other EU bodies). Such debts will be offset by us — in line with the conditions set out in the Grant Agreement (*see art 22*).

Please also note that you are responsible for **keeping records** on all the work done and the costs declared.

Prefinancing guarantees

If a prefinancing guarantee is required, it will be fixed in the Grant Agreement (*Data Sheet, point 4*). The amount will be set during grant preparation and it will normally be equal or lower than the prefinancing for your grant.

The guarantee should be in euro and issued by an approved bank/financial institution established in an EU Member State. If you are established in a non-EU country and would like to provide a guarantee from a bank/financial institution in your country, please contact us (this may be exceptionally accepted, if it offers equivalent security).

Amounts blocked in bank accounts will NOT be accepted as financial guarantees.

Prefinancing guarantees are normally requested from the coordinator, for the consortium. They must be provided during grant preparation, in time to make the prefinancing (scanned copy via Portal AND original by post).

If agreed with us, the bank guarantee may be replaced by a guarantee from a third party.

The guarantee will be released at the end of the grant, in accordance with the conditions laid down in the Grant Agreement (*art 23*).

Certificates

Depending on the type of action, size of grant amount and type of beneficiaries, you may be requested to submit different certificates. The types, schedules and thresholds for each certificate are fixed in the Grant Agreement (*Data Sheet, point 4 and art 24*).

Liability regime for recoveries

The liability regime for recoveries will be fixed in the Grant Agreement (*Data Sheet, point 4.4 and art 22*).

For beneficiaries, it is one of the following:

- limited joint and several liability with individual ceilings — *each beneficiary up to their maximum grant amount*
 - unconditional joint and several liability — *each beneficiary up to the maximum grant amount for the action*
- or
- individual financial responsibility — *each beneficiary only for their own debts*.

In addition, the granting authority may require joint and several liability of affiliated entities (with their beneficiary).

Provisions concerning the project implementation

IPR rules: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 16 and Annex 5)*:

- rights of use on results: Yes

Communication, dissemination and visibility of funding: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 17 and Annex 5)*:

- additional communication and dissemination activities: Yes

Specific rules for carrying out the action: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 18 and Annex 5)*:

Other specificities

Consortium agreement: No

Non-compliance and breach of contract

The Grant Agreement (chapter 5) provides for the measures we may take in case of breach of contract (and other non-compliance issues).



For more information, see [AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement](#).

11. How to submit an application

All proposals must be submitted directly online via the Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Submission System. Paper applications are NOT accepted.

Submission is a **2-step process**:

a) create a user account and register your organisation

To use the Submission System (the only way to apply), all participants need to [create an EU Login user account](#).

Once you have an EU Login account, you can [register your organisation](#) in the Participant Register. When your registration is finalised, you will receive a 9-digit participant identification code (PIC).

b) submit the proposal

Access the Electronic Submission System via the Topic page in the [Calls for proposals](#) section (or, for calls sent by invitation to submit a proposal, through the link provided in the invitation letter).

Submit your proposal in 3 parts, as follows:

- Part A includes administrative information about the applicant organisations (future coordinator, beneficiaries, affiliated entities and associated partners) and the summarised budget for the proposal. Fill it in directly online
- Part B (description of the action) covers the technical content of the proposal. Download the mandatory word template from the Submission System, fill it in and upload it as a PDF file
- Annexes (*see section 5*). Upload them as PDF file (single or multiple depending on the slots). Excel upload is sometimes possible, depending on the file type.

The proposal must keep to the **page limits** (*see section 5*); excess pages will be disregarded.

Documents must be uploaded to the **right category** in the Submission System, otherwise the proposal may be considered incomplete and thus inadmissible.

The proposal must be submitted **before the call deadline** (*see section 4*). After this deadline, the system is closed and proposals can no longer be submitted.

Once the proposal is submitted, you will receive a **confirmation e-mail** (with date and time of your application). If you do not receive this confirmation e-mail, it means your proposal has NOT been submitted. If you believe this is due to a fault in the Submission System, you should immediately file a complaint via the [IT Helpdesk webform](#), explaining the circumstances and attaching a copy of the proposal (and, if possible, screenshots to show what happened).

Details on processes and procedures are described in the [Online Manual](#). The Online Manual also contains the links to FAQs and detailed instructions regarding the Portal Electronic Exchange System.

12. Help

As far as possible, ***please try to find the answers you need yourself***, in this and the other documentation (we have limited resources for handling direct enquiries):

- [Online Manual](#)
- Topic Q&A on the Topic page (for call-specific questions in open calls; not applicable for actions by invitation)
- [Portal FAQ](#) (for general questions).

Please also consult the Topic page regularly, since we will use it to publish call updates. (For invitations, we will contact you directly in case of a call update).

Contact

For individual questions on the Portal Submission System, please contact the [IT Helpdesk](#).

Non-IT related questions should be sent to the following email address: EMPL-SOCIAL-ENTERPRISE@ec.europa.eu.

 Please:

- send your questions at the latest 7 days before the submission deadline (*see section 4*)
- indicate clearly the reference of the call and topic to which your question relates (*see cover page*).

13. Important



IMPORTANT

- **Don't wait until the end** — Complete your application sufficiently in advance of the deadline to avoid any last minute **technical problems**. Problems due to last minute submissions (*e.g. congestion, etc*) will be entirely at your risk. Call deadlines can NOT be extended.
- **Consult** the Portal Topic page regularly. We will use it to publish updates and additional information on the call (call and topic updates).
- **Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Exchange System** — By submitting the application, all participants **accept** to use the electronic exchange system in accordance with the [Portal Terms & Conditions](#).
- **Registration** — Before submitting the application, all beneficiaries, affiliated entities and associated partners must be registered in the [Participant Register](#). The participant identification code (PIC) (one per participant) is mandatory for the Application Form.
- **Consortium roles** — When setting up your consortium, you should think of organisations that help you reach objectives and solve problems.

The roles should be attributed according to the level of participation in the project. Main participants should participate as **beneficiaries** or **affiliated entities**; other entities can participate as associated partners, subcontractors, third parties giving in-kind contributions. **Associated partners** and third parties giving in-kind contributions should bear their own costs (they will not become formal recipients of EU funding). **Subcontracting** should normally constitute a limited part and must be performed by third parties (not by one of the beneficiaries/affiliated entities). Subcontracting going beyond 30% of the total eligible costs must be justified in the application.

- **Coordinator** — In multi-beneficiary grants, the beneficiaries participate as consortium (group of beneficiaries). They will have to choose a coordinator, who will take care of the project management and coordination and will represent the consortium towards the granting authority. In mono-beneficiary grants, the single beneficiary will automatically be coordinator.
- **Affiliated entities** — Applicants may participate with affiliated entities (i.e. entities linked to a beneficiary which participate in the action with similar rights and obligations as the beneficiaries, but do not sign the grant and therefore do not become beneficiaries themselves). They will get a part of the grant money and must therefore comply with all the call conditions and be validated (just like beneficiaries); but they do not count towards the minimum eligibility criteria for consortium composition (if any). If affiliated entities participate in your project, please do not forget to provide documents demonstrating their affiliation link to your organisation as part of your application.
- **Associated partners** — Applicants may participate with associated partners (i.e. partner organisations which participate in the action but without the right to get grant money). They participate without funding and therefore do not need to be validated.
- **Consortium agreement** — For practical and legal reasons it is recommended to set up internal arrangements that allow you to deal with exceptional or unforeseen circumstances (in all cases, even if not mandatory under the Grant Agreement). The consortium agreement also gives you the possibility to redistribute the grant money according to your own consortium-internal principles and parameters (for instance, one beneficiary can reattribute its grant money to another beneficiary). The consortium agreement thus allows you to customise the EU grant to the needs inside your consortium and can also help to protect you in case of disputes.

- **Balanced project budget** — Grant applications must ensure a balanced project budget and sufficient other resources to implement the project successfully (*e.g. own contributions, income generated by the action, financial contributions from third parties, etc*). You may be requested to lower your estimated costs, if they are ineligible (including excessive).
- **Completed/ongoing projects** — Proposals for projects that have already been completed will be rejected; proposals for projects that have already started will be assessed on a case-by-case basis (in this case, no costs can be reimbursed for activities that took place before the project starting date/proposal submission).
- **No-profit rule** — Grants may NOT give a profit (i.e. surplus of revenues + EU grant over costs). This will be checked by us at the end of the project.
- **No cumulation of funding/no double funding** — It is strictly prohibited to cumulate funding from the EU budget (except under 'EU Synergies actions'). Outside such Synergies actions, any given action may receive only ONE grant from the EU budget and cost items may under NO circumstances be declared under two EU grants; projects must be designed as different actions, clearly delineated and separated for each grant (without overlaps).
- **Combination with EU operating grants** — Combination with EU operating grants is possible, if the project remains outside the operating grant work programme and you make sure that cost items are clearly separated in your accounting and NOT declared twice (*see [AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement, art 6.2.E](#)*).
- **Multiple proposals** — Applicants may submit more than one proposal for *different* projects under the same call (and be awarded funding for them).

Organisations may participate in several proposals.

BUT: if there are several proposals for *very similar* projects, only one application will be accepted and evaluated; the applicants will be asked to withdraw the others (or they will be rejected).

- **Resubmission** — Proposals may be changed and re-submitted until the deadline for submission.
- **Rejection** — By submitting the application, all applicants accept the call conditions set out in this this Call document (and the documents it refers to). Proposals that do not comply with all the call conditions will be rejected. This applies also to applicants: All applicants need to fulfil the criteria; if any one of them doesn't, they must be replaced or the entire proposal will be rejected.
- **Cancellation** — There may be circumstances which may require the cancellation of the call. In this case, you will be informed via a call or topic update. Please note that cancellations are without entitlement to compensation.
- **Language** — You can submit your proposal in any official EU language (project abstract/summary should however always be in English). For reasons of efficiency, we strongly advise you to use English for the entire application. If you need the call documentation in another official EU language, please submit a request within 10 days after call publication (for the contact information, *see section 12*).

- **Transparency** — In accordance with Article 38 of the [EU Financial Regulation](#), information about EU grants awarded is published each year on the [Europa website](#).

This includes:

- beneficiary names
- beneficiary addresses
- the purpose for which the grant was awarded
- the maximum amount awarded.

The publication can exceptionally be waived (on reasoned and duly substantiated request), if there is a risk that the disclosure could jeopardise your rights and freedoms under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights or harm your commercial interests.

- **Data protection** — The submission of a proposal under this call involves the collection, use and processing of personal data. This data will be processed in accordance with the applicable legal framework. It will be processed solely for the purpose of evaluating your proposal, subsequent management of your grant and, if needed, programme monitoring, evaluation and communication. Details are explained in the [Funding & Tenders Portal Privacy Statement](#).