



Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)

Call for proposals

CEF 2 Digital – European Quantum Communication
Infrastructure - The EuroQCI initiative

(CEF-DIG-2022-EUROQCI)

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HEALTH AND DIGITAL EXECUTIVE AGENCY (HaDEA)

HaDEA B - Digital, Industry and Space
HaDEA B1 - Connecting Europe Facility - Digital

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

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0. Introduction

This is a call for proposals for EU **action grants** in the field of “European Quantum Communication Infrastructure - The EuroQCI initiative” under the Digital strand of the **Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)**.

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

- Regulation 2018/1046 ([EU Financial Regulation](#))
- the basic act ([CEF Regulation 2021/1153](#)¹).

The call is launched in accordance with the [2021-2025 Work Programme](#)² and will be managed by the European Health & Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) (hereafter ‘the Agency’).

The call covers the following **topic**:

- **CEF-DIG-2022-EUROQCI-WORKS – European Quantum Communication Infrastructure - The EuroQCI initiative - Works**

NOTE: The term ‘project’ used in the call documentation is synonymous to the term ‘action’ used in the CEF Regulation 2021/1153.

We invite you to read the **call documentation** on the Funding & Tenders Portal Topic page 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)

¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/1153 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 establishing the Connecting Europe Facility (OJ L 249, 14.7.2021, p. 38–81).

² Commission Implementing Decision C(2021) 9463 final of 16 December 2021 concerning the adoption of the work programme for 2021-2023 and the financing decision for the implementation of the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF).

- 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)
- 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 the successful applicants will have to sign in order to obtain the grant (*including cost eligibility, payment schedule, accessory obligations, etc.*).

1. Background

Europe's critical infrastructures, sensitive communications and data are vulnerable to cyber-attacks and other security threats. Advances in supercomputing and the advent of quantum computing may soon undermine modern encryption systems, threatening the security of transmitted data and secure access to remotely stored data in the long term.

To keep the EU's government data and critical infrastructures safe in the medium and long term, the EU must develop new and more secure forms of encryption and devise new ways of protecting the EU's critical communication and data assets.

In order to address this challenge, and as set out in the new Joint Cybersecurity Strategy,³ the Commission is working with Member States and the European Space Agency towards the deployment of a secure quantum communication infrastructure (EuroQCI) spanning the entire EU, its outermost regions, and overseas countries and territories (OCTs), to meet the needs of national governments and public services of general interest.⁴ The EuroQCI will provide an unprecedented way of securing communications and data, integrating innovative and secure quantum products and systems into conventional communication infrastructures, by enhancing them with an additional layer of security based on quantum physics, i.e. quantum key distribution. The EuroQCI will consist of a terrestrial component relying on new and/or existing fibre communication networks linking strategic sites at national and cross-border level, complemented by a space satellite component to cross-link and cover the entire EU. As it will contribute to the security of the Union, it will use existing and new

³ [43 JOIN\(2020\) 18 final, 16.12.2020](#)

⁴ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-quantum-communication-infrastructure-euroqci>

technologies developed and manufactured in the EU. The EuroQCI's deployment is partly supported by the Digital Europe Programme, while CEF Digital supports the interconnection of national quantum communication infrastructure networks between neighbouring countries, as well as the interconnection of the EuroQCI's ground and space segments.

In line with article 9.4. (d) of the CEF Regulation 2021/1153, this call will support the interconnection of national quantum communication infrastructure networks within and between Member States, including its outermost regions, and OCTs.

2. Objectives – Scope (including digital security requirements) – Expected impact

Objectives

CEF Digital actions to co-fund the terrestrial backbone network components will be complementary to those developed through the Digital Europe Programme and will be focused on supporting cross-border links between two or more national quantum communication networks in Member States, and/or linking the EuroQCI's terrestrial and space segments.

It is also anticipated that Member States will complement actions under CEF Digital with possible funding from the Recover and Resilience Facility (RRF).

Scope

The following priorities have been set to address the needs of EU's national governments and critical infrastructures supporting services of general interest (hereafter "critical public infrastructures"):

- Deployment of cross-border quantum terrestrial backbone networks for interconnecting neighbouring national quantum communication infrastructures across borders, built with EU technologies, including if necessary, through the deployment of "trusted nodes" (i.e. secure access points to the network which make it possible to link distant sites securely).⁵
- Interconnection with the EuroQCI's space segment, developed under the Secure Connectivity programme⁶, which will be implemented via the optical ground stations serving as an interface between the EuroQCI's space components and its terrestrial fibre network.
- Provision of fibre links between the EuroQCI and a pan-European network of Security Operation Centres (SOCs).

This scope includes the actions needed at the level of telecommunications networks to manage encryption keys efficiently and securely in an end-to-end manner and ensure their transmission to recipients.

This topic will support the deployment of quantum communication infrastructure for routes between Member States, including OCTs:

⁵ The EuroQCI Action Plan states that links between terrestrial networks 'will be guaranteed by a number of trusted nodes, as an interim solution to be replaced later on by solutions extending user connectivity to much larger distances (e.g., by using quantum repeaters, which are now under development in nationally- and EUfunded R&D projects).'

⁶ Proposal by the European Commission:
https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/proposal_regulation_union_secure_connectivity_programm_e.pdf

- where the national segments of quantum communication infrastructure are already in place or where their deployment is already ongoing or operationally planned;
- and
- where a crossborder link between at least two EU countries, (including outermost regions and OCTs), or a space segment interconnection is foreseen.

In case of co-funding from national funds (including Cohesion Funds and the RRF) State aid rules apply (see section 10 of the Work Programme for details).

Proposals under this topic shall address works, with the possibility to include studies. Activities identified as studies are eligible for funding under this call only if included in the works action. This includes the preparatory work required prior to signing a contract with a supplier and application for required permits. These activities should be executed in separate work packages and can then benefit from the funding rate specific for studies part (*see section 10*).

Proposals should define the post-project ownership of the infrastructure and describe the operational relationship(s) between the different participants in the value chain for providing services.

Funding will only be open to consortia which may include, for example, private operators or authorities (*see section 6*).

Digital security requirements

The proposals under this topic are subject to **strict exclusion of non-EU controlled entities**, under Article 11.4 of the CEF Regulation 2021/1153⁷. The assessment of the foreign (non-EU) control will be addressed in principle during the evaluation of proposals and at the latest during the grant agreement preparation. Participants will be requested to submit an **ownership control questionnaire** for this purpose to determine their control status. They will also be requested to submit supporting documents in order for the Commission to determine that the entities are not controlled by third countries or nationals of third countries or by entities established in third countries.

All the proposals submitted to this topic must include **security declarations** by the participating entities, which confirm and demonstrate that the network technologies and equipment (including software and services) funded on the basis of the CEF programme comply with security requirements as specified in the present call text, in accordance with the applicable EU law, national law, and EU guidance on cybersecurity⁸ and indicate that no security-sensitive equipment or services deployed

⁷ Art. 11 (4) of the CEF Regulation 2021/1153 states: "The work programmes may provide that legal entities established in third countries associated to the CEF in accordance with Article 5, and legal entities established in the Union but directly or indirectly controlled by third countries or nationals of third countries or by entities established in third countries, are not eligible to participate in all or some of the actions under the specific objectives set out in Article 3(2), point (c), for duly justified security reasons. In such cases, calls for proposals and calls for tenders shall be restricted to entities established, or deemed to be established, in Member States and directly or indirectly controlled by Member States or by nationals of Member States."

⁸ Such as: the Commission Recommendation (EU) 2019/534 of 26 March 2019 Cybersecurity of 5G networks, C/2019/2335; the Report on EU Coordinated Risk Assessment of the Cybersecurity of 5G Networks of 9 October, 2019; the Council Conclusions on the Significance of 5G to the European Economy and the Need to Mitigate Security Risks Linked to 5G of 3 December, 2019; the Cybersecurity of 5G networks - EU Toolbox of Risk Mitigating Measures of 29 January, 2020; and COM(2020)50 of 29 January 2020 on Secure 5G deployment in the EU – implementing the toolbox.

or used within the proposal will be procured from third country suppliers⁹, and that effective measures are in place to address underlying security issues¹⁰, including, wherever relevant, measures to avoid falling under foreign jurisdiction obligations, or third country influence.

Based on the security declaration in the proposal, as well as the evaluation carried out by independent experts, the Commission or funding body, where appropriate, may carry out a follow-up assessment of the fulfilment of the security conditions in the declaration, including as regards beneficiaries suppliers, and sub-contractors. Funding for actions, which do not comply with the conditions related to security, may be suspended, terminated, or reduced at any time in accordance with the Financial Regulation.

The Commission intends to provide to the funded projects by mid-2024 at the latest the security baseline of EuroQCI (classified at level RESTREINT UE/EU RESTRICTED). Proposals must therefore address, where appropriate, the following issues to facilitate the future accreditation of the QKD network in **section 7.2 of the Application Form Part B** in terms of methodology and operational implementation approach:

- Regarding optical ground stations (OGS), cross-border links of terrestrial QKD networks and links to the SOCs: Provide information on how they will fulfil the requirements for accreditation by the responsible National Security Authority¹¹. A deliverable in the relevant work packages (application form part B section 6) that explains how the design and implementation of the OGS, implementation of the cross-border links or the link to the SOC will be assessed in line with the security baseline (once received from the Commission) and how potential deviations can be removed after the project (including a timeline and budget estimate to this end) must be included. It is expected that this deliverable will be classified at least at level RESTREINT UE/EU RESTRICTED.

All projects must be able to receive and create European Union Classified Information at the level of RESTREINT UE/EU RESTRICTED¹² or the equivalent at national level. If participating entities do not possess the necessary qualifications (e.g. facility security clearances), it is recommended to start the process to obtain them even before the call closure.

Projects involving EU classified information must undergo **security scrutiny** to authorise funding and may be made subject to specific security rules (detailed in a security aspects letter (SAL) which is annexed to the Grant Agreement).

These rules (governed by Decision 2015/444¹² and its implementing rules and/or national rules) provide for instance that:

- projects involving information classified TRES SECRET UE/EU TOP SECRET (or equivalent) CANNOT be funded;
- classified information must be marked in accordance with the applicable security instructions in the SAL;

⁹ According to the EU coordinated risk assessment, the risk profiles of individual suppliers can be assessed based on several factors. These factors include the likelihood of interference from a third country. This is one of the key factors specified in paragraph 2.37 of the EU coordinated assessment. https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=62132

¹⁰ In particular, telecom operators may rely on third party entities to perform certain tasks, such as the maintenance and upgrade of the networks and software, as well as other outsourced managed services, in addition to the supply of network equipment. This may constitute a source of security risk. Thus, a thorough security assessment may also be required of the risk profile of the suppliers tasked with these services, in particular when these tasks are not performed in the EU.

¹¹ Annex III of <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015D0444>

¹² See [Commission Decision \(EU, Euratom\) 2015/444 of 13 March 2015 on the security rules for protecting EU classified information](#)

- information with classification levels CONFIDENTIEL UE/EU CONFIDENTIAL or above (and RESTREINT UE/ EU RESTRICTED, if required by national rules) may be:
 - created or accessed only on premises with facility security clearing (FSC) from the competent national security authority (NSA), in accordance with the national rules;
 - handled only in a secured area accredited by the competent NSA;
 - accessed and handled only by persons with valid personnel security clearance (PSC) and on a need-to-know- basis;
- at the end of the grant, the classified information must either be returned or continue to be protected in accordance with the applicable rules;
- action tasks involving EU classified information (EUCI) may be subcontracted only with prior written approval from the granting authority and only to entities established in an EU Member State;
- disclosure of EUCI to third parties is subject to prior written approval from the granting authority.

Please note that, depending on the type of activity, facility security clearing may have to be provided before grant signature. The granting authority will assess the need for clearing in each case and will establish their delivery date during grant preparation. Please note that the grant agreement cannot be signed until at least one of the beneficiaries in a consortium has facility security clearing.

Further security recommendations may be added to the Grant Agreement in the form of security deliverables (*e.g. create security advisory group, limit level of detail, use fake scenario, exclude use of classified information, etc*).

Beneficiaries must ensure that their projects are not subject to national/third country security requirements that could affect implementation or put into question the award of the grant (*e.g. technology restrictions, national security classification, etc*). The granting authority must be notified immediately of any potential security issues.

For further background on security requirements, please see sections 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4 as well as sections 2.2 (paragraph "Strengthen cybersecurity and resilience") and section 4.1.3 of the Work Programme.

Expected impact

The call aims to:

- Enable reliable and resilient transmission of sensitive communications and data between public authorities, research entities and critical public infrastructures in Member States, including outermost regions and OCTs.
- Boost Europe's capabilities in developing quantum-secure optical telecommunication networks and their capacity to secure its critical public infrastructures, especially those that cross national borders and serve more than one Member State.
- Promote quantum-based secure networks and the emergence of a new ecosystem that would enable a large market uptake. This will ultimately support the growth of a pan-European quantum industry that will develop new, innovative systems and technologies critical for the EU's strategic autonomy and digital sovereignty.

The key performance indicators will be:

- the number of cross-border interconnections and
- the number of optical ground stations deployed.

3. Available budget

The available call budget is **EUR 90 000 000**. This budget might be increased provided that the total additional budget cumulatively allocated to the topic across all calls of the work programme is lower than 20% of the total budget of the multiannual plan.

We reserve the right not to award all available funds, depending on the proposals received and the results of the evaluation.

4. Timetable and deadlines

| Timetable and deadlines (indicative) | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Call opening: | 12 October 2022 |
| <u>Deadline for submission:</u> | <u>13 April 2023 – 17:00:00 CEST</u> <u>(Brussels)</u> |
| Evaluation: | May-July 2023 |
| Information on evaluation results: | July 2023 |
| GA signature: | November/December 2023 |

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 [Search Funding & Tenders](#) 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 (*to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, then assembled, and re-uploaded*)

- Part C (*to be filled in directly online*) containing additional project data
- **mandatory annexes and supporting documents** (*to be uploaded*):
 - detailed budget table per WP (*template available in the Submission System*)
 - activity reports of last year (unless exempted from operational capacity check; *see section 7*)
 - list of previous projects (key projects for the last 4 years) (*template available in Part B*)
 - timetable/Gantt chart (*template available in the Submission System*)
 - letters of support (MS agreement) (*template available in the Submission System; the list of MS contact points is published in the [HaDEA website](#)*)
 - ownership control questionnaire (*template available in the Submission System*)
 - security declarations signed by the participating entities (*template available in the Submission System*)
 - other annexes.

Please note that the amounts entered into the summarised budget table (filled in directly online) must correspond to the amounts calculated in the detailed budget table. In case of discrepancies, the amounts in the online summarised budget table will prevail.

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 the 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**.

Proposals are limited to maximum **120 pages** (Part B). Evaluators will not consider any additional pages.

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)).

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*).

Please note however that this call is subject to restrictions due to security reasons. This means that entities must not be directly or indirectly controlled from a country that is not an eligible country.

Moreover:

- participation in any capacity (as beneficiary, affiliated entity, associated partner, subcontractor or recipient of financial support to third parties) is limited to entities from eligible countries
- project activities (included subcontracted work) must take place in eligible countries (*see section geographic location below and section 10*)
- the Grant Agreement may provide for IPR restrictions (*see section 10*).

Specific cases

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 organisations¹³ are eligible. The rules on eligible countries do not apply to them.

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 persons¹⁴.

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

EU restrictive measures — Special rules apply for certain entities (*e.g.* 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)¹⁵ and entities covered by Commission Guidelines No [2013/C 205/05](#)¹⁶). 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).

¹³ An 'international organisation' means an intergovernmental organisation (other than the EU) with legal personality under international public law (including specialised agencies — with or without legal personality — set up by international organisations and referred to in Article 156(1) EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

¹⁴ See Article 197(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

¹⁵ 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](#).

¹⁶ Commission guidelines No [2013/C 205/05](#) on the eligibility of Israeli entities and their activities in the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967 for grants, prizes and financial instruments funded by the EU from 2014 onwards (OJEU C 205 of 19.07.2013, pp. 9-11).



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

Consortium composition

Proposals must be submitted by minimum 2 applicants (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities).

In case of terrestrial connections, proposals must be submitted by minimum 2 applicants (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities) from minimum 2 different eligible countries.

Eligible activities

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

Projects should take into account the results of projects supported by other EU funding programmes. The complementarities must be described in the project proposals (Part B of the Application Form).

Projects must comply with EU policy interests and priorities (*such as environment, social, security, industrial and trade policy, 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 up to 36 months (extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment).

Project budget

Project budgets (maximum grant amount) are expected to be indicatively up to EUR 5 000 000 per project.

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 these 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, based on 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.

If the evaluation of this award criterion is positive, the applicants are considered to have sufficient operational capacity.

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

- description of the consortium participants
- applicants' activity reports of last year
- list of previous projects (key projects for the last 4 years).

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 participate¹⁷:

¹⁷ See Articles 136 and 141 of EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

- 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 misconduct¹⁸ (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, decisionmaking- or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- guilty of irregularities within the meaning of Article 1(2) of Regulation No [2988/95](#) (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decisionmaking- or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- 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, decisionmaking- or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant).

Applicants will also be refused if it turns out that¹⁹:

- 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** (assisted by independent outside experts) 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 for each topic against the operational capacity and award criteria (3 phases: individual evaluation, consensus phase and panel review) and then ranked according to their scores (*see sections 7 and 9*).


¹⁸ Professional misconduct includes: violation of ethical standards of the profession, wrongful conduct with impact on professional credibility, false declarations/misrepresentation of information, participation in a cartel or other agreement distorting competition, violation of IPR, attempting to influence decision-making processes or obtain confidential information from public authorities to gain advantage.

¹⁹ See Article 141 EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

For proposals with the same score (within a topic or budget envelope) a **priority order** will be determined according to the following approach:

1. Score obtained under the 'Priority and urgency' criterion
2. Score obtained under the 'Maturity' criterion
3. Score obtained under the 'Catalytic effect' criterion
4. Score obtained under the 'Impact' criterion
5. Score obtained under the 'Quality' criterion.

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. Proposals that are below the budget threshold (i.e. passed, but not ranked high enough to receive funding) will be awarded a Seal of Excellence.

 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. 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 are 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:

- **Priority and urgency:** evaluating correspondence of the proposal with the sectoral policy objectives and priorities, measuring its EU added-value and, where applicable, assessing the possible synergies with other sectors or CEF Digital topics and, where applicable, ensuring a geographical balance of the CEF digital support in the respective area. (5 points)
- **Maturity:** assessing the maturity of the action in the project development. The criterion will measure, among others, i) the readiness/ability of the project to start by the proposed start date and to complete by the proposed end date, ii) the status and planning of the contracting procedures and of the necessary permits, and iii) information on the financial availability needed to complement the CEF investment (5 points)
- **Quality:** evaluating the soundness of the implementation plan proposed, both from the technical and financial point of view, the architecture and design approach, the organisational structures put in place (or foreseen) for the implementation, the risk analysis, the control procedures and quality management and the communication strategy of the applicant. Moreover, when applicable, it will also assess the information related to the

operations/maintenance strategy proposed for the completed project (5 points)

- **Impact:** assessing, when applicable, the economic, social, competition and environmental impact, including the climate impact, and other relevant externalities. This criterion may be substantiated by a Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA), in which case the evaluation will look at the soundness, comprehensiveness, and transparency of the analysis as well as proposed means to monitor its impact. The criterion will also assess, where applicable, the safety, security, cybersecurity of electronic communication networks, interoperability and accessibility aspects of the proposal, innovation and digitalisation, as well as its cross-border dimension, and contribution to network integration and territorial accessibility, including in particular for Outermost Regions and islands. Moreover, the criterion will assess, where applicable, potential complementarities with other public funding programmes. (5 points)
- **Catalytic effect:** evaluating the effect of the EU financial assistance on the realisation of the project, for instance by overcoming a financial gap generated by insufficient commercial viability, high upfront costs or the lack of market finance, increasing the capacity to mobilise differentiated investments sources, improving the quality of the project or accelerating the overall investment plan. (5 points).

| Award criteria | Minimum pass score | Maximum score |
|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Priority and urgency | 3 | 5 |
| Maturity | 3 | 5 |
| Quality | 3 | 5 |
| Impact | 3 | 5 |
| Catalytic effect | 3 | 5 |
| Overall (pass) scores | 15 | 25 |

Maximum points: 25 points.

Individual thresholds per criterion: 3/5, 3/5, 3/5, 3/5 and 3/5 points.

Overall threshold: 15 points.

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. Retroactive application can be granted exceptionally for duly justified reasons — but never earlier than the proposal submission date.

Project duration: up to 31.12.2026 (extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment).

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 will also be invited to check and update information about output indicators.

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 (maximum grant amount): projects of any budget are admitted. The grant awarded may be lower than the amount requested.

 Please be aware that you may be asked to request an amendment to reduce the grant awarded if your project encounters major delays during the project implementation. If you do not comply with this request, we may have to terminate the grant (see art 32).

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 rates fixed in the Grant Agreement (maximum **50%** for the costs of studies, maximum **70%** for the costs of works in outermost regions, and maximum **30%** for all other costs categories ('project funding rate')

You can apply for a higher project funding rate if your project concerns:

- strong cross-border dimension including the space segment: maximum 50%

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 Seconded persons
 - A.4 SME owners and natural person beneficiaries
- 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
 - D.2 Studies
 - D.3 Synergetic elements
 - D.4 Works in outermost regions
- E. Indirect costs

Specific cost eligibility conditions for this call:

- personnel costs:
 - average personnel costs (unit cost according to usual cost accounting practices): Yes
 - SME owner/natural person unit cost²⁰: Yes
- subcontracting costs:
 - country restrictions for subcontracting costs: Yes, subcontracted work must be performed in the eligible countries or target countries
- travel and subsistence unit cost²¹: No (only actual costs)
- equipment costs: full cost
- other cost categories:
 - costs for financial support to third parties: not allowed
 - studies: Yes
 - synergetic elements: Yes
 - works in outermost regions: Yes
 - land purchases: No

²⁰ 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)7715).

²¹ Commission [Decision](#) of 12 January 2021 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(2021)35).

- indirect cost flat-rate :0%of the eligible direct costs (categories A-D, except volunteers costs, if any)
- VAT: VAT 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
 - eligible cost country restrictions: Yes, only costs for activities carried out in eligible countries or target countries are eligible
 - other ineligible costs: Yes, costs related to purchase of land

Reporting and payment arrangements

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


After grant signature, you will normally receive a **prefinancing** to start working on the project. The amount will be established based on the grant type or estimated project duration at the time of grant signature and will be up to 30% of the maximum grant amount. The prefinancing will be paid 30 days from entry into force/financial guarantee (if required — whichever is the latest).

There will be **one or more interim payments** (with detailed cost reporting).

In addition, you will be expected to submit one or more progress reports not linked to 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 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 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 formally NOT linked to individual consortium members, which means that you are free to organise how to provide the guarantee amount (*by one or several beneficiaries, for the overall amount or several guarantees for partial amounts, by the beneficiary concerned or by another beneficiary, etc.*). It is however important that the requested amount is covered and that the guarantee(s) are sent to us 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.

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

Security rules: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 13 and Annex 5)*

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):*

- communication and dissemination plan: No
- additional communication and dissemination activities: Yes
- special logos: No

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

- Member State information: Yes

- specific rules for digital infrastructure projects: Yes
- durability: Yes
- specific rules for blending operations: No
- special obligations linked to restrictions due to security
 - implementation in case of restrictions due to security: Yes

Other specificities

n/a

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 EULogin user account](#).

Once you have an EULogin 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 [Search Funding & Tenders](#) section (or, for calls sent by invitation to submit a proposal, through the link provided in the invitation letter).

Submit your proposal in 4 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
- Part C containing additional project data. To be filled in directly online.
- Annexes (see section 5). Upload them as PDF file (single or multiple depending on the slots; the budget table can be uploaded as Excel file).

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 might 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](#)
- FAQs on the Topic page (for call-specific questions in open calls; not applicable for actions by invitation)
- [Portal FAQ](#) (for general questions).
- call information on the [HaDEA website](#).

Please also consult the Topic page regularly, since we will use it to publish call updates.

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: HADEA-CEF-DIGITAL-CALLS@ec.europa.eu. Please submit your questions²² no later than 10 days before the submission deadline. Questions received after 13 February 2023 may not be answered.

Please indicate clearly the reference of the call and topic to which your question relates (see *cover page*).

²² Interested applicants are invited to see first if a question is already answered from the existing FAQs published on the Funding & Tenders Portal.

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 CANNOT 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).

- **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 with a legal or capital link 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).
- **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).
- **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 double funding** — There is a strict prohibition of double 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 declared to two different EU actions.
- **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).
- **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 Model 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 a 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 one of them (or it 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 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](#).