



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

Call for proposals

Implementation of a European Tracking Service for pensions (ETS)

ESF-2023-ETS

Version 2.0
8 May 2023



HISTORY OF CHANGES			
Version	Publication Date	Change	Page
1.0	14.03.2023	▪ Initial version	
2.0	08.05.2023	▪ Deadline for submission postponed by 15 June 2023	10
		▪	
		▪	



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

EMPL.D – Social rights and Inclusion
EMPL.D.2 – Social protection

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

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0. Introduction

This is a call for proposals for EU **action grant** in the field of social policy under the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**.

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

- Regulation 2018/1046 ([EU Financial Regulation](#))
- the basic act (ESF+ Regulation [2021/1057](#)¹).

The call is launched in accordance with the 2023 Work Programme² 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 first amendment of the 2023 Annual Work Programme of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and in particular its Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand by the legislative authority. In case there are substantial changes, we may have to modify the call (or even cancel it).

The call covers the following topic:

- **ESF-2023-ETS — Implementation of a European Tracking Service for pensions**

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)

1 [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).

2 Commission Decision [C\(2022\)9194](#) final of 14.12.2022 on the adoption of the 2023 annual work programme within the framework of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and in particular its Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand and its financing decision (Annex)

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

1. Background

This call for proposals is financed under the **Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand of the ESF+** which is a European-level financing instrument managed directly by the European Commission. It provides financial support to achieve high employment levels, fair social protection, a skilled and resilient workforce ready for the future world of work, as well as inclusive and cohesive societies aiming to eradicate poverty.

Ensuring transparency and access to pension information is an important element of the implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, in particular its principle 15 "Old age income and pensions" and principle 12 "Social protection"³. In the modern social protection systems, individuals' awareness of their pension rights is increasingly important to enable them to make informed decisions about their career and savings needs and secure adequate pensions. With growing professional and geographical mobility of workers, an increasing complexity of pension systems and shifting of responsibility for ensuring adequate pensions towards individuals, workers face the challenge of following pension entitlements in different schemes to which they were affiliated during their career. On their part, pension providers need to provide information to their members and former members as they move and change address over very long periods.

National pension tracking services (NTS) – online platforms giving users one-stop access to information about their pension rights – have been set up in a number of Member States. The main goal of the NTS is to provide an overview of individualised, objective and impartial information to citizens and savers about accrued entitlements⁴ and projected retirement income provided by all possible pension sources in a simple and understandable manner. Existing NTSs are one of the most popular ways for citizens to receive aggregate pension information.

In the case of cross-border mobile workers and EU citizens, the challenge of following their pension rights is multiplied by having entitlements in different national systems

³ [European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

⁴ Accrued entitlements refer to current statutory pension rights and accumulated capital or retirement benefits in supplementary pensions

and schemes. While the pension rights accrued in schemes which are part of the public/statutory systems of Member States are aggregated upon retirement under the terms of the EU social security coordination rules⁵, these rules do not provide for access to the information on the value of pension rights during the career. When it comes to occupational and personal pension schemes, EU law guarantees minimum requirements for the acquisition and preservation of occupational pension rights for mobile workers, as well as minimum requirements concerning information obligations of pension providers⁶. However, the lack of aggregated information and having to follow multiple pension entitlements in different countries remains a challenge, in particular for highly mobile workers with diverse careers; in some cases, even finding one's former pension scheme in another country can be a formidable challenge.

Given the persisting gaps in the cross-border access to information on individual pension entitlements, which create obstacles for the transparency and pension coverage for mobile workers and citizens, cross-border pension tracking services can become an important element for the facilitation of cross-border mobility in Europe, protecting the rights of mobile workers and citizens and for improving future pension adequacy and sustainability.

In November 2019, the European Council adopted its **Recommendation on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed**⁷, where the effective provision and preservation of social security rights, including pensions, was highlighted as a priority. Article 15 referring to transparency in the provision of social protection states that: *"Member States are recommended to ensure that [...] individuals have access to updated, comprehensive, accessible, user-friendly and clearly understandable information about their individual entitlements and obligations free of charge."* Recital 22 of the Recommendation further establishes that *"transparency can be achieved in different ways, for example, by sending updates on individual entitlements, setting up online simulation tools regarding benefit entitlements, creating online and off-line one-stop information centres or personal accounts. Digitalisation can, in particular, contribute to improving transparency for individuals."*

In addition, as part of **the Action Plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights**, launched by the EC after an extensive public consultation in March 2021, it was recognized that⁸: *"Social protection across national borders is a pre-condition of a well-functioning internal market. Existing and new forms of labour mobility facilitated by digitalisation, from generalised teleworking across borders to digital nomads working remotely across the EU, require seamless interactions between mobile workers and administrations, while reducing the risk of errors and fraud. Innovative solutions, notably digital ones, can facilitate the physical and virtual mobility of citizens, support the portability of social security rights and the cross-border verification of social security coverage by administrations, and address challenges in the identification of people for social security coordination purposes."* In

5 [Regulation \(EC\) No 883/2004](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004 on the coordination of social security systems and [Regulation \(EC\) No 987/2009](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 September 2009 laying down the procedure for implementing Regulation (EC) No 883/2004 on the coordination of social security systems.

6 [Directive 2014/50/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 on minimum requirements for enhancing worker mobility between Member States by improving the acquisition and preservation of supplementary pension rights Text with EEA relevance, [Council Directive 98/49/EC](#) of 29 June 1998 on safeguarding the supplementary pension rights of employed and self-employed persons moving within the Community and [Directive \(EU\) 2016/2341](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2016 on the activities and supervision of institutions for occupational retirement provision (IORPs)

7 Council Recommendation of 8 November 2019 on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed, [2019/C 387/01](#)

8 The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, page 30, available [here](#)

this context, the implementation of cross-border pension tracking services will support the functioning of the European internal market and facilitating access to social protection for EU workers.

In January 2022 the **European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority** (EIOPA) provided Technical advice on the development of national Pension Tracking Systems (NTS), called for their establishment and further development in all Member States, including the possibility to access the national pension data systems in real time cross-border if the person concerned provides its consent⁹.

In 2018 the European Commission (EC) issued the Call for proposals VP/2018/003, which called for, among other socially innovative policy actions, the *“development of web-based cross-border pension tracking services that help mobile workers follow their pension rights accrued in different Member States and pension schemes in the course of their career”*. A grant was awarded to a consortium of European pension stakeholders to develop a pilot of a European Tracking Service for Pensions. The project concluded at the end of 2022. The pilot project provided general information on pension landscapes in a wide range of EU countries and developed functionality that assists mobile workers in finding their pension providers. It also developed a “proof of concept” for full-fledged pension tracking, demonstrating the feasibility of exchanging individual pension information, coming from national data sources in one Member State, in a secured way to the end user via a platform based in another Member State. The deliverables and findings of the pilot project are described in detail in project’s final report¹⁰.

Building on the policy needs and analysis presented above, the present call for proposals aims to support the roll-out of cross-border pension tracking services for mobile citizens, including access to individualised pension information, **as described in section 2**. The current project aims to support the roll-out and expansion of cross-border tracking services over the next five years; it should be seen as a step towards the long-term goal to connecting the majority or ideally all national tracking services (NTSs) in the EU to a single tracking platform.

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

Objectives (expected outcome)

Cross-border pension tracking can support the process of **modernisation and digitalisation of social protection systems across Europe** through the provision of its digital service, providing structured information on pension benefits via a centralised European platform. This has the potential to substantially improve communication on pensions also at national level.

The main purposes of the call are to facilitate the access of workers who exercise their right to free movement to pension information, thus contributing to their pension awareness and pension adequacy, and to support the capacity of national pension schemes to provide such information, in particular to former members who have moved to another country, by bringing together information from pension sources in different Member States, preferably NTSs, and present it in a meaningful way for the user – mobile worker or citizen.

9 [EIOPA's advice to the European Commission](#)

10 [Final project report of 11/2022](#)

The cross-border pension tracking services shall be established on a not-for-profit basis and provide the pension information to users free of charge.

The successful applicant will be expected to:

- develop and operate an online service that allows users (cross-border workers and citizens) to receive, free of charge, in a user friendly format, through a web portal or application, at least the following information:
 - database of pension providers with search functionality that helps mobile workers identify and contact their former pension providers, covering all 27 EU Member States at the end of the project period;
 - access to individual pension information (such as the current value of pension entitlements held in different schemes and, where available, the projected value of pension rights or benefit level at the retirement age) from at least five to seven Member States;
- implement and develop an appropriate governance structure, allowing for future geographical expansion of the service;
- develop and expand a network of pension institutions and stakeholders throughout the 5 years project period, building the commitment to extend cross-border tracking services to additional EU Member States; encourage existing and newly established NTSs to participate in cross-border pension tracking, including through facilitating agreement as regards the data model and standards;
- support the digitalisation of the national pension systems and secure their cross-border interoperability;
- raise awareness of the cross-border tracking service among the end users, national authorities, social partners and the wider stakeholder community;
- monitor the use and regularly evaluate the service from the perspective of end users;
- develop a strategy for long-term development of cross-border tracking services in the EU beyond the time frame of the present project, including ensuring the financial sustainability.

These objectives should be implemented gradually over the project's 5-year timeline, according to following milestones:

- 1) Within 36 months from the signature of the Grant Agreement:
 - a. Further improve the functionality of the online service/web portal, extend and complete the pension provider database to at least all 27 EU Member States;
 - b. Provide access to individual pension information from at least three Member States (such as the current value of pension entitlements held in different schemes and, where available, the projected value of pension rights or benefit level at the retirement age);
- 2) At the end of the project period:
 - a. Provide access to individual pension information from at least five to seven Member States (such as the current value of pension

entitlements held in different schemes and, where available, the projected value of pension rights or benefit level at the retirement age).

Themes and priorities (scope)

The actions supported by this call will contribute to the implementation of EPSR principles number 12 'Social protection' and number 15 'Old age income and pensions' and facilitate EU freedom of movement by providing an overview of individualised, objective and impartial information to EU movers about accrued pension entitlements and projected retirement income by all possible pension sources in a simple and understandable manner. Once these functionalities have been achieved, EU cross-border pension tracking service should ideally also facilitate a sound retirement planning.

The main priorities of the call are:

- to identify and apply appropriate digital solutions for identification and authentication of users, allowing to transfer the necessary pension data from national data holders to the cross-border tracking service;
- to set up the connectivity of NTSs as a prerequisite to access or collect individual pension information of mobile EU citizens;
- to implement and operate cross-border pension tracking services;
- to carry out further development of the service, including the connection of as many NTS and potential other stakeholders as possible.

Raising awareness of the initiative, mobilising the relevant stakeholders and creating broad interest and buy-in will be considered as another priority for this action.

Activities that can be funded (scope)

In order to achieve the objectives described above, the principal activities during the project will include establishing connections to national tracking services (NTS), improving the functionality of the service, including by extending the pension provider functionality by adding more pension providers, strengthening the organisational capacity and promoting pension communication.

The successful applicant should in the first place identify how personal pension data may be safely transferred from data holders to the cross-border tracking service in the context of existing legal frameworks, such as data protection rules, at national and EU level. The successful applicant will be strongly encouraged to make use of the existing or planned digital building blocks developed in the framework of the European Digital Strategy, such as eDelivery, eIdentification, eSignature and Automated Translation.

The types of activities which may be funded under this call for proposals include:

- actions aiming at the creation and improving of networks;
- digital infrastructure development, such as web portal / platform / application for providing access to individual pension information and database of pension providers;
- awareness and dissemination actions;
- conferences, seminars;
- capacity building and training activities;

- analysis, studies.

Expected impact

The project is expected to facilitate the access to pension information and improve pension awareness of mobile workers, self-employed and citizens who have worked and accrued pension rights in the participating countries.

3. Available budget

The available call budget is **EUR 5 000 000**. This budget might be increased by maximum 20%.

The Commission expects to fund one proposal.

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:	14 March 2023
<u>Deadline for submission:</u>	<u>15 June 2023 – 17:00:00 CET</u> <u>(Brussels)</u>
Evaluation:	June – July 2023
Information on evaluation results:	August 2023
GA signature:	October 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 and then assembled and re-uploaded*)
- **mandatory annexes and supporting documents** (*to be uploaded*):

- detailed budget table/calculator: not applicable
- CVs (standard) of core project team
- list of previous projects (key projects relating to the subject of the call in 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 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 **70 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 law bodies, including Member States' organisations, or non-profit private law bodies)
- be established in one of the eligible countries, i.e.:
 - EU Member States (including overseas countries and territories)
 - non-EU countries:
 - listed EEA countries and countries associated to the ESF+ or countries which are in ongoing negotiations for an association agreement and where the agreement enters into force before grant signature ([list of participating countries](#)).

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

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 NOT 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 persons¹¹.

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'¹². ⚠ 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 (*see list above*) may participate in the call and can sign grants if the negotiations are concluded before grant signature (with retroactive effect, if provided in the agreement).

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)*¹³ and entities covered by Commission Guidelines No [2013/C 205/05](#)¹⁴). 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).

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

[Consortium composition](#)

Proposals by both single applicants and consortia are allowed.

To be eligible, applicants must:

fall into one of the categories below, either

- public law bodies, including Member States' organisations
- or non-profit private law bodies

Proposals submitted by a consortium should be composed of at least two applicants (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities)

¹¹ See Article 197(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

¹² For the definitions, see Articles 187(2) and 197(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

¹³ 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](#).

¹⁴ 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).

Eligible activities

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.*).

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 54 and 60 months (extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment).

Project budget

Project budget (maximum grant amount) is expected to range between EUR 4 500 000 and 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 needed, it may also be done for affiliated entities.

If we consider that one or more participants' 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 the participants 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, 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 operational capacity via the following information:

- general profiles (qualifications and experiences) of the staff responsible for managing and implementing the project (CVs of the proposed persons who will perform the main tasks, notably project manager and key personnel)
- description of the consortium participants
- list of previous projects (key projects relating to the subject of the call in the last 3 years)
- C1 level of English for the project manager or the coordinator
- 4 years of proved international team management activities for the coordinator

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

Public bodies and Member State 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 participate¹⁵:

- 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 misconduct¹⁶ (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)

¹⁵ See Articles 136 and 141 of EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

¹⁶ 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.

- 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 that¹⁷:


- 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.

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. 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

¹⁷ See Article 141 EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

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:

- **Relevance:** clarity and consistency of project, objectives and planning; extent to which they match the themes and priorities and objectives of the call; potential to develop cross-border cooperation (**Max. 30 points**)
- **Quality:**
 - **Project design and implementation:** technical quality; methodology for implementing the project (concept and methodology, management, procedures, timetable, risks and risk management, monitoring and evaluation); feasibility of the project within the proposed time frame; cost effectiveness (sufficient/appropriate budget for proper implementation; best value for money) (**Max. 25 points**)
 - **Project team and cooperation arrangements:** quality of the consortium and project teams; appropriate procedures and problem-solving mechanisms for cooperating within the project teams and consortium (**Max. 25 points**)
- **Impact:** ambition and expected long-term impact of results on target groups/general public; appropriate dissemination strategy for ensuring sustainability and long-term impact; sustainability of results after EU funding ends (**Max. 20 points**)

Award criteria	Minimum pass score	Maximum score
Relevance	21	30
Quality — Project design and implementation	17,5	25
Quality — Project team and cooperation arrangements	17,5	25
Impact	14	20
Overall (pass) scores	70	100

Maximum points: 100 points.

Individual thresholds per criterion: 21/30, 17.5/25, 17.5/25 and 14/20 points.

Overall threshold: 70 points.

Proposals that pass the individual thresholds AND the overall threshold will be considered for funding — within the limits of the available call budget. 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](#).

Milestones and deliverables

'Deliverables' — Outputs to be submitted to the EU (publication, leaflet, progress report, brochure, list, etc.) that must be produced at a given moment during the action (normally not at the same time as the periodic/final reports).

'Milestones'— Control points in the project that help to chart progress (kick-off meetings, steering committees, etc.). They may correspond to the completion of a key deliverable, which allows the next phase of the work to begin or is needed at intermediary.

The milestones and deliverables for the 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.

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: between 54 and 60 months (extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment).

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): *see section 6 above*. The grant awarded may be lower than the amount requested.

The grant will be a budget-based mixed actual cost grant (actual costs, with unit cost and flat-rate elements). This means that ONLY certain types of costs (eligible costs) and costs that were *actually* incurred for your project (NOT the *budgeted* costs) will be reimbursed. 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 applicants are advised to read Commission decision [C\(2021\)35](#) which determines how the reimbursement for travel, accommodation and subsistence costs will be made.

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).

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
- B. Subcontracting costs
- C. Purchase costs
 - C.1 Travel and subsistence
 - C.2 Equipment
 - C.3 Other goods, works and services
- E. Indirect costs

Specific cost eligibility conditions for this call:

- personnel costs:
 - SME owner/natural person unit cost¹⁸: No
 - volunteers unit cost¹⁹: No
- travel and subsistence unit cost²⁰: Yes
- equipment costs: depreciation
- other cost categories:
 - costs for financial support to third parties: not allowed
- 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 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

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ 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).

²⁰ 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).

- kick off meeting: costs for kick-off meeting organised by the granting authority are eligible (travel costs for maximum 2 persons, return ticket to Brussels and accommodation for one night) only if the meeting takes place after the project starting date set out in the Grant Agreement; the starting date can be changed through an amendment, if needed
- other meetings: a maximum of 10 meetings may be held with the Commission and potential additional participants in the project, such as national Pension Tracking Services, in Brussels or another Member State (estimated at one meeting every six months). The lead applicant must nominate the project coordinator and will participate in the meetings with the Commission. Lead applicants may also be invited to other ad hoc meetings or events during the lifetime of the action. These venues can be an opportunity for raising awareness to the action and disseminating information. The estimated budget should include provisions for participation in the monitoring and reporting activities and meetings above as well as in, at least, three EU level events.
- other ineligible costs: No

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 upon the project progress and may be adjusted in case of risk:

- **actions between 54 and 60 months:** prefinancing payments linked to annual reporting periods will be made as follows:
 - 20% 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, third and fourth prefinancing of 20% in each case at the 24th month, the 36th and 48th month from the entry into force of the grant agreement and after receiving additional prefinancing reports and the actual progress report of the implementation of the action. 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 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 to 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 limited joint and several liability with individual ceilings — *each beneficiary up to their maximum grant amount*.

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)*:

- specific rules for ESF+ actions: Yes
- specific rules for financial support to third parties: No

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 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 [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 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 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).

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:

- general questions on ESF+: [EMPL-EaSI@ec.europa.eu]
- call-specific questions: EMPL-ESF-2023-ETS@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).
- **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 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](#).