



STAR GROWTH 2nd OPEN CALL GUIDE

SMP - COSME-2021-TOURSME

Sustainable Tools & Activities for Rural Tourism and Ecotourism SMEs Growth

Announcement of the STAR GROWTH 2nd Open Call for Tourism SMEs

Action acronym: STAR GROWTH

Action Grant Agreement number: 101085746

Action full name: Sustainable Tools & Activities for Rural tourism and ecotourism SMEs Growth

Call identifier: SMP-COSME-2021-TOURSME

The STAR GROWTH consortium publishes its open call, respecting transparency, equal treatment, conflict of interest and confidentiality. In particular, the call will be carried out by respecting the following principles:

Excellence: A high level of quality in the context of the topics and criteria specified in the call is required for proposals to be selected for funding;

Transparency: Clear rules and procedures will be the basis for funding decisions to ensure transparency. All applicants will be provided with sufficient feedback regarding the evaluation outcome of their proposals, thereby promoting transparency throughout the funding process;

Fairness and impartiality: Equal treatment is ensured for all proposals submitted to the call to maintain fairness and impartiality;

Confidentially: All proposals and related data, knowledge and documents are treated in confidence;

Efficiency and speed: Evaluation of proposals and award of the financial support will be as rapid as possible, commensurate with maintaining the quality of the evaluation, and respecting the legal framework.

1) Overall & specific objectives, priorities and expected results of the proposed action

Overall & specific objectives

The overall objective of the action following the STAR GROWTH project is to enhance the sustainable growth of SMEs operating, in the rural tourism and ecotourism sectors in Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Romania and Italy by providing technical and financial support, whilst boosting their awareness, development and capacity in the area of sustainability and digitization. More specifically, the action aims at:

- Supporting 90 rural tourism and ecotourism SMEs in Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Romania and Italy in developing their skills and capacities in sustainable tourism, whilst creating sustainability strategies in line with the needs and priorities of their territory.
- Providing capacity building and technical assistance to the selected SMEs, by applying well known sustainability frameworks and tools (such as Environmental footprint methods, EMAS, EU Ecolabel, ISO 14001:2015, CSR, HCMI etc.);
- Fostering innovative practices and digitization oriented solutions, which can provide business destinations with enhanced social, economic and environmental awareness and responsibility;



- Building effective mechanisms for best practice exchange and dissemination of transferable tools and knowledge between the SMEs, also at a European level.

Priorities of the action

Through the STAR GROWTH Open Call, the STAR GROWTH project will support rural tourism and ecotourism SMEs (at least 90) by empowering and supporting their sustainable and /or digitalization transition. To this end, the STAR GROWTH Open Call aims to:

- Support SMEs by adopting sustainable and innovative practices through customised technical support activities and capacity building programs;
- Support SMEs through processes of i) preparation and / or application for sustainability / environmental certification, ii) preparation and / or generation of Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) studies and Organization Environmental Footprint (OEF) studies, iii) implementation of improvement measures following the recommendations of the PEF / OEF studies, iv) developing of sustainability strategy plans;
- Support SMEs for training and capacity building activities in order to empower their staff towards innovation and sustainability;
- Support SMEs by increasing SMEs' competitiveness via boosting innovation in sustainable and resilient tourism.

The STAR GROWTH Open Call is open to both tourism SMEs lagging behind in terms of sustainability performance, digitalisation and innovative practices and solutions, and those that are more advanced to facilitate knowledge transfer and exchange of good practices among them and promote business cooperation.

After the closure of initial STAR GROWTH Open Call in July 2023, we decided to launch The second Open Call with the purpose of filling vacant positions and allocating available funds for SMEs in Cyprus, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Italy or Romania. .

Expected results

Expected results include an increased SME visibility, digitisation and sustainability, that may assist rural competitiveness and enhance the social, economic and environmental well-being through an increased and sustainable economic growth, improved quality of life, and increased innovation.

2) Applicant eligibility and exclusion criteria

Applicant eligibility

SMEs of the tourism sector can apply to receive financial support. Companies shall meet the following criteria to be eligible:

- Having economic activity related to the tourism sector in one of the following three categories:
 - 15510 — Hotels and similar accommodation
 - 15520 — Holiday and other short-stay accommodation
 - 15530 — Camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks

NACE codes are given for indicative purposes alone; the SMEs must provide evidence that they are operating in one of those three categories;

- Being established for at least one financial year, as proved through the Company Registration, which may be delivered in local or English language;



- Being a small- or medium-sized enterprise (SME), according to the [EU Recommendation 2003¹](#);
- Being established in an EU Member State and operating in Cyprus, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Italy or Romania²;
- Operating in “predominantly rural regions” and “significantly rural regions / Intermediate”. In other words, SMEs operating in “predominantly urban regions” are not eligible for receiving funding in the form of grants. SMEs operating in “predominantly urban regions” will be added to Network list for inviting to SG events, as they could be possible candidates for participating based on their already expressed interest. SMEs must define their operating region in the application form.

Definition for Rural and Ecotourism SMEs for STAR GROWTH Open Call is based on Urban-Rural Typology, by NUTS 3 regions³, where regions are classified into different types of regions according to the share of the population living in rural municipalities. There are three types of typologies, as listed:

- i) Predominantly rural regions: >50% of the population lives in rural municipalities or <50% of the population lives in urban municipalities;
- ii) Significantly rural regions / intermediate: 15-50% of the population lives in rural municipalities or 50-85% of the population lives in urban municipalities;
- iii) Predominantly urban regions: <15% of the population lives in rural municipalities or >85% of the population lives in urban municipalities.

Exclusion criteria

Applicants will be excluded from the evaluation process if they present the following elements:

- Receiving funds and support under other SMP-COSME-2021-TOURSME4 projects (double funding is not allowed);
- Presenting the characteristics of a “company in difficulty”, as defined by the EU Regulation n.651/2014 of the European Commission.

3) Time frame and size of grants

Time frame

The activities of the STAR GROWTH 2nd Open Call will start after the STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement (SG-APA) is signed, indicatively in **February 2024**.

The activities proposed in the application form must be carried out within the framework of the STAR GROWTH project timeline, namely from the foreseen start, provisionally in the beginning of 2024, to the foreseen end, in June 2025.

Size of grants

An SME could apply for a lump-sum grant of up to a maximum amount of **7,500.00 EUR** out of which 750 EUR for Travel & Accommodation costs (for participating in STAR GROWTH events) and up to 6750 EUR for External Expertise & Services costs.

An SME is only **eligible for one** STAR GROWTH grant.

The type of the grant is **lump-sum**. It means that the final payment will be made to the SMEs following the completion and approval of the activities/deliverables which are proposed by the SMEs in their proposals. Each

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2003:124:0036:0041:en:PDF>

² In the 1st Open Call, companies from Greece were initially eligible. However, due to the sufficient number of applications received during the first call, Greek companies are no longer eligible in the 2nd Open Call

³ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/RCI/#?vis=urbanrural.urb_typology&lang=en

⁴ ² I-STARs; LOOK-UP; CE4RT; COASTOUR; TRACE; FIRST MILE; ETSM 2030; SUSRUR; ECOTOURS





SME must propose one or more deliverable(s) in their applications.

Awarded SMEs will receive payments in two instalments:

- Pre-financing: **35%**; payment expected 1 month after signing of the STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement with SMEs.
- Final payment: up to **65%**; payment expected 1 month after approval of the deliverable(s).
- Applicants must submit the deliverable(s) that they propose in their application. The quality of deliverables will be checked by the Support Scheme Steering Committee and Evaluation Committees in each country.

The following table shows the total budget of STAR GROWTH Open Call (1st and 2nd Open Call) and its distribution in the participating countries.

Country	Total indicative available budget	Provisional number of SMEs per country
Greece	112,500.00 EUR	15
Cyprus	112,500.00 EUR	15
Slovenia	112,500.00 EUR	15
Bulgaria	112,500.00 EUR	15
Italy	112,500.00 EUR	15
Romania	112,500.00 EUR	15
	675,000.00 EUR	90

Table for the remaining budget for the 2nd STAR GROWTH Open Call:

Country	Total indicative available budget	Provisional number of SMEs per country
Cyprus	7.500,00 EUR	1
Slovenia	67.500,00 EUR	9
Bulgaria	75.000,00 EUR	10
Italy	45.00,00 EUR	6
Romania	75.000,00 EUR	10
	270.00.00 EUR	36

4) Types of eligible activities and eligible costs

Eligible activities

- **Preparation and application for sustainability / environmental certification** (EU Ecolabel certification⁵, EMAS registration⁶, ISO 14001:2015⁷, CSR⁸, HCMI⁹ etc.) with following foreseen outcomes: *audit & data*

⁵ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy/eu-ecolabel-home_en

⁶ https://green-business.ec.europa.eu/eco-management-and-audit-scheme-emas_en

⁷ <https://www.iso.org/standard/60857.html>

⁸ <https://www.unido.org/our-focus/advancing-economic-competitiveness/competitive-trade-capacities-and-corporate-responsibility/corporate-social-responsibility-market-integration/what-csr>

⁹ <https://sustainablehospitalityalliance.org/resource/hotel-carbon-measurement-initiative/>



collection activities, action plans, reports, accreditation activities, dissemination activities & material;

- **Preparation and / or generation of Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) studies and Organisation Environmental Footprint (OEF) studies** as well as **implementation of improvement measures following the recommendations of the PEF / OEF studies** with following foreseen outcomes: *a study (PEF, OEF), dissemination activities & material, report on activities carried out;*
- **Development of sustainability strategy plans** with following foreseen outcomes: *report on the activities carried out, strategy plan documents;*
- **Training and capacity building activities** in order to empower their staff towards innovation and sustainability, e.g. i) Upskilling and re-skilling of tourism SMEs' staff on sustainability, digital innovation and data management issues, ii) knowledge transfer and cross-sectoral collaboration aimed at boosting innovation in sustainable and resilient tourism;
- **Uptake of innovative and digitised, sustainable solutions** that will increase SMEs' digital awareness and competitiveness with following foreseen outcomes: *development of specialised digital tools or upgrade of existing digital tools for increasing competitiveness and / or sustainability;*
- **Development of mechanisms to transparently share sustainability relevant data and information** for use by consumers, national tourism offices and other tourism actors with following foreseen outcomes: *public reports, dissemination activities & material, links to websites & photos.*

Eligible costs

1. Costs of third parties' providers (with listed deliverables as proof of evidence) as follows:

- i) Costs associated with **submitting the application process and activities for obtaining sustainability / environmental certificates.**
Examples of proof of deliverable: a document (statement, certificate, invoice or others) proving that SME applied for the mentioned certificate within the timeframe, specified in chapter 3;
- ii) Costs associated with a) **preparation and / or generation** of Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) studies and Organization Environmental Footprint (OEF) studies, b) **implementation of improvement measures following the recommendations** of the PEF / OEF studies, and c) **developing of sustainability strategy plans.**
Examples of proof of deliverable: a document (*a study (PEF, OEF)*), dissemination activities & material, report on activities carried out; strategy plan documents;
- iii) Costs related to **the consulting and or technical services**, performed as training, capacity building activities, 1:1 consulting, mentoring, team building or as an IT solution system delivery.
Examples of proof of deliverable: a document (Certificate / statement / list of participants or others) proving participation;
- iv) Cost of **third parties' providers**, based on activities as defined within SG - APA. Third parties may also include specialised consumables (e.g. sensors) provided they are well defined in the application. Infrastructure (e.g. HVACs), equipment (e.g. PCs, printers) and related services (e.g. repairs, software updates) are not eligible under this category.
Proof of deliverable: Deliverable as described within activities in the SG – APA.

2. Travel and accommodation cost (with listed deliverables as proof of evidence) for:

- i) **participating in technical supporting activities**, namely Support to SMEs performing PEF / OEF studies and applying for environmental / sustainability certification carried out as a 2-day seminar by country project partners in 2024.



Proof of deliverable: participation list; Eligible cost for 2 persons. In case of on-line performance, no travel and accommodation costs could be claimed as a payment request. In case that the event is held online, the amount intended for participation will not be paid;

- ii) **participating in capacity building activities**, namely Business cooperation support activities, carried out as a 2-day knowledge transfer workshop and 2-day peer to peer learning workshop, by a country project partner in 2025.

Proof of deliverable: participation list; Eligible cost for 2 persons. In case of on-line performance, no travel and accommodation costs could be claimed as a payment request. In case that the event is held online, the amount intended for participation will not be paid.

5) Application and Submission Process

Application

The application form is available on the following website: <https://stargrowth.eu/>. The STAR GROWTH- 2nd Open Call announcement and supporting documentation will be available in English as well as in all national languages (Greek, Bulgarian, Slovenian, Italian, Romanian and Turkish, also an official language for Cyprus).

The STAR GROWTH 2nd Open Call will be **extended till 13th December 2023**. In case that deadlines are changed, this will be immediately published on the call page and all linked project partner's webpages. In addition to that, all already registered applicants will be informed about this change.

The application form will be submitted online with the following required documents as attachment:

- Company registration certificate, proving for being established at least one year (as Attachment);
- Declaration of legal representative of the SME (truthfulness, double financing and mandate, **ANNEX 1**).

The application can be submitted in the national language as mentioned above; however, the applicant can choose to submit the application also in English. Applicants must be aware that there will be no opportunity to make changes on the application and resubmit.

Applicants can address their questions related to STAR GROWTH 2nd Open Call to opencall@stargrowth.eu.

Receipt process

On receipt of each application an email as an Acknowledgement of receipt will be sent to each applicant. As part of the acknowledgment, an announcement will also be made that applicants are invited to participate in future activities of the STAR GROWTH project, regardless of the outcome of the assessment.

Late submissions will not be accepted, and applicants will be informed by an email within a "call closed" message sent by opencall@stargrowth.eu.

Communication of results

After the evaluation, the ranking list will be published on the STAR GROWTH website. Only awarded applicants will be listed, with the title and overall scope of the action. However, all applicants will be informed about the evaluation results.

6) Evaluation criteria and evaluation procedure

Evaluation criteria

The evaluation phase is integrated by different groups of criteria which will be assessed according to following scores from 0-5:



Score	Description
0	The proposal is incomplete and does not provide enough information to assess its compliance with the evaluation criterion.
1-Poor	The evaluation criterion is not fully met, and the proposal displays serious flaws that limit its effectiveness.
2-Fair	The proposal shows a general alignment with the evaluation criterion, but there are significant shortcomings that need to be addressed.
3-Good	The evaluation criterion is well-addressed in the proposal, but further improvements are necessary to enhance its effectiveness.
4-Very Good	The evaluation criterion is well-satisfied by the proposal, yet some aspects could be further developed to maximise its impact.
5-Excellent	The proposal effectively meets all the relevant aspects of the evaluation criterion with only minor shortcomings.

The award criteria that will be evaluated are as follows:

Criterion No	Name of Criterion	Description	Max. score
Award Criterion 1	Increased visibility of SMEs	Improving SMEs' recognition and exposure to potential customers, stakeholders and partners.	<i>(Minimum threshold 3/5)</i>
Award Criterion 2	Impact on rural & ecotourism in local / regional / national ecosystem (e.g. via certification approaches, networking, eco clusters)	The impact requires a commitment to continuous improvement and a focus on sustainability, quality, and customer satisfaction, which can ultimately benefit tourism SMEs as well as the broader society.	<i>(Minimum threshold 3/5)</i>
Award Criterion 3	Increased competitiveness by means of digitization and / or training and capacity building activities	Competitiveness is potentially enhanced through improved efficiency and effectiveness, cost savings and a positive impact on the environment and society etc.	<i>(Minimum threshold 3/5)</i>
	Remark(s)		<i>(Overall min. threshold 9/15)</i>

In case proposals, which are on the funding cut-off line, have the same score, a third evaluator will be invited to the evaluation process and will be asked to rank them.

Evaluation procedure

Once the applicants have submitted their proposals, the Support Scheme Steering Committee in each country will proceed to check the eligibility criteria and, if successful the proposal will be sent into an evaluation process, managed by the Evaluation Committee.

Applications from individual countries will be checked by the Support Scheme Steering Committees and evaluated by members of Evaluation Committee in the country from which the application comes from.

Each evaluator will record his/her evaluation of each application on the evaluation form. Each proposal will be assessed by 2 evaluators according to the criteria specified above and an average will be calculated for each evaluation.

Only proposals ranked equal or over 9 points (overall threshold) will be pre-selected. A threshold of 9 will be set, meaning the proposals ranked with less than 9 will not be considered for funding.

If the scores given (0 to 15) by the two evaluators differ by 3 or more, a third evaluator will be consulted; in this case the final mark will be the average of the three.



The evaluation will take place at least four weeks from the close of the call with option to extend to 6 weeks, since it is foreseen during holiday season (Christmas, New Year 2024).

It is expected that 15 SMEs per country (90 in total from 1st and 2nd Open Call) meeting the requirements and receiving a positive evaluation (equal or above the threshold for each of the assessment criteria) and the highest score will be selected for funding.

Eligible SMEs receiving a lower score will be added on a reserve list, as long as they fulfil all the minimum thresholds for each of the assessment criteria. Their proposals may be accepted for funding in case of exclusion of some of the awarded SMEs.

Causes that could lead to the exclusion of awarded SMEs:

- i) Withdrawal from the selection process. The withdrawal must be notified through a form signed by the legal representative and forwarded by e-mail to the national contact person;
- ii) Delay in answering the notification of approval. After the publication of the final rankings, SMEs will be notified either in case of acceptance or refusal of their proposal. In case of missing answer to the successful notification after 20 days from the date of receipt, the SME in object will be automatically considered excluded and replaced by an eligible SME on the reserve list;
- iii) Delay in sending back the signed STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement. In case of unsigned STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement after 30 days from the date of receipt, the selected SMEs will be automatically considered excluded and replaced by an eligible SME on the Reserve list.

Each country will prepare a list of several possible evaluators in order to be prepared for situations where one of the evaluators withdraws, or is in conflict with the received application, or it is necessary to review many applications. The final Evaluation Committee will be defined after the close of the call. In that case experts / members for the Evaluation Committee will be selected without a risk of possible conflict of interest.

Evaluators must sign a declaration of confidentiality concerning the contents of the applications they read as well as a declaration of freedom from conflict of interest.

A panel for Evaluation Committee will be convened to discuss the results of the ranking, to approve the selected/awarded SMEs and to discuss next steps. They will then meet or communicate together to prepare a single “consensus” form for each application (as Final Score), representing opinions and scores on which the evaluators agree and which they will sign.

In case the evaluation process will be implemented with the help of on-line tools, the evaluator form needs to be signed electronically.

A ranking list per each country will be defined by the Evaluation Committee. There will be 6 country-based ranking lists (TOP 15 per country, TOP 90 TOTAL from 1st and 2nd Open Call), published on a STAR GROWTH website with awarded SMEs. The ranking lists are set up separately for the 1st and 2nd Open Call, i.e. there will be a ranking list for the 1st Open Call and another one for the 2nd Open Call.

7) Provision of financial support

Awarded SMEs will sign a STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement for receiving a grant. A template of a STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement is proposed in **Annex 2**. Within the STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement there will be specific arrangements that the STAR GROWTH consortium may impose to award SMEs.

After approval of the STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement by the consortium, each Support Scheme Steering Committee will coordinate the process of signing a STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement within the foreseen deadlines.

Within the STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement conditions, requirements and obligations to SMEs will be determined and specified, as follows:



- Specific requirements for SMEs to be involved into activities implemented through STAR GROWTH project. In line with "Mapping of participating tourism SMEs specific needs and of relevant initiatives and practices" interviews with awarded SMEs need to be conducted. In line with "Mentoring services to SMEs for adopting sustainable and innovative practices", awarded SMEs need to be included into mentoring sessions for the period of 13 months. In line with "Support to SMEs performing PEF/OEF studies and applying for environmental sustainability certification", awarded SMEs must participate in a 2-day seminar, with at least two persons per SME. In line with "Business cooperation support activities" awarded SMEs must participate to 2-day knowledge transfer workshop and to 2-day peer to peer learning workshop;
- Specific reporting obligations, in line with "Monitoring and evaluation support scheme results". An on-line, so called, 'impact map' will be developed for public impact visibility and the dissemination of the project activities. This high quality visibility product will be developed by the STAR GROWTH consortium and will not burden the participating SMEs. It will be based on data collected from the SMEs and then processed into indicators and published in a totally anonymised form. These impact indicators will be publicly communicated online and will conform with the privacy policy provisions. This reporting is the sole responsibility of the STAR GROWTH consortium and will add to the visibility of the SMEs as well as of the project overall; again, it will not burden the SMEs that will only contribute concise data, pertinent to their action. The data collection will again be organised by the STAR GROWTH consortium. The consortium will provide a midterm report on the impact indicators, providing an overview of the impact achieved. The SMEs will be offered the possibility to optionally comment on this report as well as on the information constantly communicated online, via the Impact Map;
- Specific arrangements for providing the financial support, e.g. how will the deliverable be checked and how will the payments be made;
- Specific rights for Consortium partners to access and use the results of the activities and outputs of STAR GROWTH 2nd Open Call, in line with foreseen Organization of dissemination events.

Within the STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement also obligations of consortium partners to awarded SMEs are listed.

Information and contacts:

Web address for further information (full call text/proposal guidelines): www.stargrowth.eu.

During the STAR GROWTH Open Call there will be a main contact email opencall@stargrowth.eu for coordination with applicants (Acknowledgements, Q&A, notifications about postponing deadlines). Applicants communicate via this email only in English, while acknowledgments will be sent to applicants in all the mentioned languages. As for results, every national contact point will communicate the selection results at national level in the relevant language.

For any further support, please consult opencall@stargrowth.eu. Also please note that a specific section of the STAR GROWTH webpage (www.stargrowth.eu) will be dedicated to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). For the FAQ section we will add a disclaimer: »If there are any discrepancies in the translated version, the English version shall prevail«.

Contact of coordinates per country

Supporting coordination and communication activities in national languages could be conducted via coordinates per country.



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These coordinates' contacts are as follows:

IRSEI – Accademia IRSEI

Contact person: Mr. Federico Mazzara

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Contact phone: +393299566256

APINTECH – Applied Industrial Technologies

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Contact phone: +35724721182

EU- ROM – EU- ROM Training Consultancy

Contact person: Mr Babis Grammatikopoulos

Contact email: babgramm@gmail.com

Contact phone: +40213130565

TPLJ – Technology park Ljubljana

Contact person: Mr. Gasper Juvancic

Contact email: gasper.juvancic@tp-lj.si

Contact phone: +386 1 620 34 00

NTC BG Guide – National Tourism Cluster Bulgarian Guide

Contact person: Mrs. Desislava Mincheva-Yordanova

Contact email: stargrowth@bg-guide.org

Contact phone: +359884293280

8) Annexes for applicants

ANNEX 1 – Declaration of Legal representative (mandate, double funding, truthfulness) Template

ANNEX 2 – STAR GROWTH Action Plan Agreement Template

Annexes are published as attachmentc of this document.

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