

COST Open Call - Review Panel Members' Guide

COST Open Call 2024-1 Evaluation

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Document Change History

Version	Release date	Summary of changes
1.0	January 2024	Version for OC-2023-1
1.1	November 2024	OC-2024-1 updates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changed the title of the document • Minor linguistic and formatting changes, including the text reduction for Section 1 • Update in the Terms and Conditions • Introduced the section on the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence • Changed procedure for any change of marks approval requested by the Review Panel

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INTRODUCTION

This guide aims to instruct Members of the Review Panels (RPs) for the revision and quality check of the Consensus Evaluation Reports (CER) and the resolution of differences in non-approved CERs. Assigned RP Members shall be familiar with the COST framework. To learn about COST, COST Actions and the COST Open Call, RP Members are invited to read the following documents:

- [COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval \(COST 101/21\)](#)
- [COST Open Call – Applicant Guidelines \(Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval - SESA\)](#)

General information about COST and its activities is available at www.cost.eu/who-we-are/about-cost/.

1. OVERVIEW OF COST FRAMEWORK, COST ACTION AND OPEN CALL PROCESS

The COST Association is the legal entity in charge of the management and implementation of the COST strategy, policy and activities towards the achievement of the COST Mission. The overview of the COST structure and its intergovernmental dimension can be found at <https://www.cost.eu/who-we-are/about-cost/>.

1.1. The COST framework: mission and policy

COST is a pan-European intergovernmental framework¹ dedicated to European-based Science and Technology (S&T) networking activities aiming at allowing their participants to jointly develop their ideas and new initiatives across all scientific disciplines through trans-European coordination of nationally or otherwise funded research activities. COST has been contributing since its creation in 1971 to closing the gap between science, policy makers and society throughout Europe and beyond.

The COST **Mission** is to strengthen Europe's capacity to address scientific, technological and societal challenges, by funding bottom-up, excellence-driven, open and inclusive networks (COST Actions) in all areas of science and technology.

COST is also implementing a **Policy** towards **Excellence and Inclusiveness**, built upon two pillars:

- strengthening the excellence through the creation of cross-border networking of researchers;
- promoting geographical and gender balance and foster the participation of Young Researchers and Innovators², throughout its activities and operations.

with the following objectives:

- encouraging and enabling researchers from less research-intensive countries across Europe to set up or join COST Actions. These countries are denominated Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC) (see [Annex I – Level A: Country and Organisations table](#));

¹ See the list of countries and organisations in COST 088/21 Rules and Principles for COST Activities, [Annex I](#).

² See COST Glossary - <https://www.cost.eu/Glossary>

- counterbalancing research communities' unequal access to knowledge, infrastructures, funding and resources;
- providing strong means to increase the visibility and integration of researchers to the leading knowledge hubs of Europe, as well as to acquire their necessary leadership skills, regardless of their location, age or gender;
- smoothly contributing to trigger structural changes in the national research systems of COST Members;
- identifying excellence across Europe to contribute to ERA widening objectives.

Through global networking, COST also encourages the participation of researchers and innovators affiliated in non-COST Members³ and Specific Organisations⁴ in COST activities on the basis of mutual benefit. The participation of researchers from Near Neighbour Countries (NNCs) is particularly welcome, according to the provisions on eligibility for participation and reimbursement established in the [Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

COST funds networking activities and not research itself, and no budget forecast is requested at the proposal stage. The research and development activities needed for the achievement of the Action objectives rely on nationally or otherwise funded research projects and resources (e.g., employees' time, infrastructures and equipment).

1.2. COST Actions

COST Actions are:

- Pan-European:** the COST inter-governmental framework spans over 41 Full Members, one Cooperating Member, and one Partner Member;
- Bottom-up:** the priorities are defined by the research community and the scientific management decisions are entrusted to the Action Management Committees. The COST framework is especially well-suited to promote **Multi-, Inter- and Trans-disciplinary collaborations**;
- Open** throughout their lifetime to new members and are **adaptable** in terms of internal organisation and strategy. They shall promote actively the participation of the next generation of researchers and innovators;
- Output and Impact-Oriented:** COST Actions are set up to achieve specific objectives within their four-year duration based upon the sharing, creation, dissemination and application of knowledge. COST Actions are monitored against their expected output and impact.

N.B.: When assessing a) and b), it is important to consider that these features may not be yet fully accomplished at proposal level. It is therefore fundamental to assess whether the proposal describes appropriate strategies to address them.

The research and development activities needed for the achievement of the Action objectives are not funded by COST and rely on nationally or otherwise funded research projects and resources (e.g., employees' time, infrastructures and equipment).

COST Actions have a four-year duration and the **networking tools** funded by COST are the following:

- Meetings (e.g., Management Committee (MC) meetings, Working Group meetings);
- Training Schools;
- Mobility of Researchers and Innovators (Short-Term Scientific Missions – STSMs; Virtual Mobility - VM);
- Presentations at conferences organised by third parties (ITC Conference Grants, YRI Conference Grants, and Dissemination Conference Grants).

³ States that are not COST Members. They can be Near Neighbour Countries or Third States (also called International Partner Countries)

⁴ https://www.cost.eu/Country_Organisations_Table

COST Actions can also receive funding for other expenses:

- Dissemination and Communication Products;
- Expenses incurred for the benefit of the network.

The Action's activities are decided by the Action MC and approved by the COST Association. The rules applying to their funding are defined in the [Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

1.2.1. COST ACTION STRUCTURE

The intergovernmental dimension of COST is reflected in the structure of a COST Action.

The **Action Management Committee (MC)** is the decision-making body. The Action MC is responsible for the coordination, implementation and management of the Action activities and for supervising the appropriate allocation and use of the grant with a view to achieve the Action's scientific and technological objectives. It is composed of:

MC Members: up to two representatives of the COST Full or Cooperating Member. Nomination of MC Members is a national prerogative, follows national procedures, and is performed by the COST National Coordinator's (CNCs)⁵.

MC Observers:

- up to two representatives of the COST Partner Member. Action MC Observers from the Partner Member are nominated by the respective COST National Coordinator (CNC);
- up to one representative of the Specific Organisation that joined the Action. Action MC Observers from Specific Organisations are nominated by the Specific Organisation.

The MC takes decisions by simple majority vote. MC Observers have no voting rights.

Working Groups (WGs) are in charge of developing the scientific activities needed to achieve the Action objectives, in line with the Action strategy defined by the Action MC.

1.2.2. PARTICIPANTS

COST Actions are open throughout their lifetime to anyone with a legal affiliation located in a COST Member or in any NNC or Third State (IPC⁶). Action Participants are defined as any individual being an Action MC Member, an Action MC Observer, a Working Group member or an *ad hoc* participant:

- **Action MC Members and Observers:** their role is to pro-actively participate in the implementation of coordination and management decisions in the Action and be a gateway to their national community;
- **WG members:** any individual affiliated to a legal entity in any Country in the world may become a WG member. Their participation shall be approved by the Action MC, based on an application submitted through the Action page on the COST website. Their role is to contribute to the achievement of the Action objectives through their participation in WG(s);
- **Ad hoc Participants:** Individuals who are not MC or WG members and are selected by the Action MC for a specific contribution towards the achievement of the COST Action Objectives. Examples of *ad hoc* participants can be STSM grantees, trainees and trainers in Training Schools, or invited speakers at COST Action Workshops and Conferences.
- The rules to participate in a COST Action may be found in the [Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

⁵ Before the start of the Action (date of the first Management Committee meeting), persons nominated by the CNC will automatically become Action MC Members. After the Action's first MC meeting, new Action MC Members need to be validated by the Action MC.

⁶ International Partner Countries (IPC) – Third States: States that are neither COST Members nor COST Near Neighbour Countries (e.g., Argentina, Japan, US, etc.).

1.3. The COST Open Call

The COST Open Call is implemented via the Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) procedure. COST publishes the official announcement of the Open Call on [Funding Documents & Guidelines](#) with the Collection Date, the schedule, the description of the procedure and reference to the evaluation criteria. Further information including an Open Call infographic is available on the [Open Call page](#) on the COST website.

The Open Call involves a one-stage submission process. Proposals are submitted through a dedicated secured online tool, [e-COST](#). The proposal evaluation and selection follow a three-step process, with Step 2 being the focus of these guidelines:

Step 1 – Evaluation by Independent External Experts

Step 2 – Revision and Quality Check of Consensus Evaluation Reports by the Review Panel

Step 3 – Proposals’ Selection by COST Scientific Committee (SC)

Step 4 – Approval of the shortlisted proposals by the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO)

The shortlist of proposals selected by the SC is submitted to the CSO for approval. Further details about the three-step process and the approval are provided in the rules on [COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval \(COST 101/21\)](#).

2. REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK

This chapter provides practical guidance on the revision and quality check by the RP of the CERs prepared by the Independent External Experts (IEEs). RP Members are assigned by the COST Association to each proposal under evaluation. Each RP Member will have access to both the Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs) prepared by the IEEs and to the CERs during the consensus phase.

2.1 Evaluation schedule

The revision and quality check are performed in several steps. The foreseen schedule for the revision and quality check of proposals submitted to the COST Open Call 2024-1 is communicated in the automated notifications addressed to Review Panel Members. The COST Association reserves the right to slightly modify the foreseen schedule. Assigned RP Members will be informed in a timely manner in case of any modification.

2.2 Acceptance of Terms and Conditions

The RP Member logs in to e-COST and clicks on the link “My Review Panel reports for [Open Call Collection number]” (Figure 1).

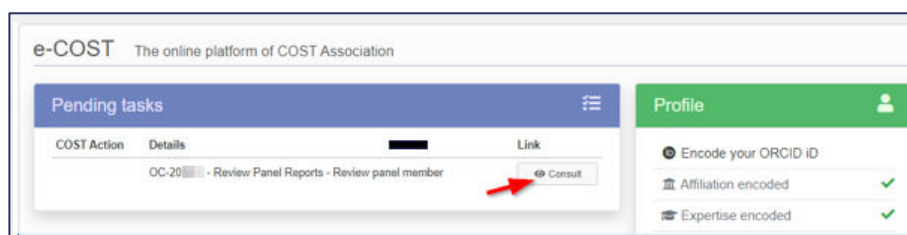
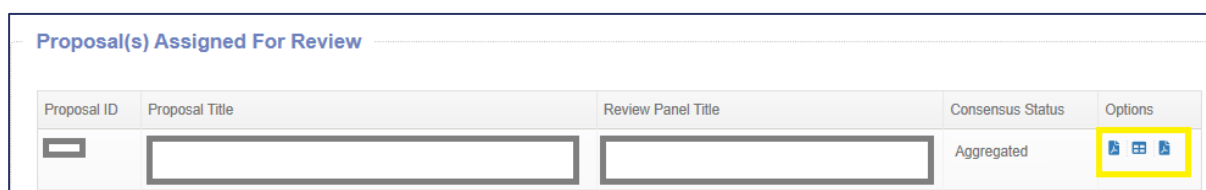


Figure 1: Screenshot of e-COST on how to access the evaluation panel.

This leads to the Terms and Conditions page where the RP Member must confirm that they will carry out the tasks in accordance with the Evaluation Terms and Conditions, including;

- Declaration of no Conflict of Interest (Section 3.1);
- Declaration of confidentiality agreement (Section 3.2);
- Agreement on terms of participation to Actions stemming from proposals being assigned by the concerned RPM. This entails not to become either a WG or MC member of these Actions. *Ad hoc* contribution or being Action Rapporteur may be envisaged;
- Consent to sharing contact details with other Experts evaluating and reviewing the proposal(s) to which I am assigned, including Experts who are based in non-EU/EEA countries or countries not recognised by the EU Commission as offering an adequate level of protection of personal data.

Once the RP Member has confirmed, the page will display the proposals assigned for the preliminary quality check during the CER preparation (Figure 2). For each proposal three icons are displayed. The first icon from the left gives access to a pdf of the proposal, the second icon gives access to a summary table of marks and comments for each question, and the third one allows to download the CER in pdf.






Proposal ID	Proposal Title	Review Panel Title	Consensus Status	Options
			Aggregated	  

Figure 2: Screenshot of e-COST showing how to access the Proposal and the evaluation pages.

Additionally, to allow gaining an overall understanding of the topics of the proposals allocated to the RP, the RP Member has access to all the proposals within the RP, not only those individually assigned for the quality check.

N.B.: in case a Col arises (real, potential, perceived - see Chapter 3.1 for definitions) during the evaluation, the RPM must **immediately**:

- inform the COST Association (via email to opencall@cost.eu or via the link “contact COST” on the e-COST page with the overview of the list of proposals);
- stop reviewing **all assigned** CERs.

Should the Col be confirmed by the COST Association, any of the provided comments and scores will be discarded and the honorarium will not be paid.

In case that Col arises after the evaluation, the COST Association will examine the potential impact and consequences of the Col and will respond appropriately.

2.3 Preliminary Quality Check of CER during its preparation

One of the three IEEs is assigned as the proposal Rapporteur by the COST Association. The Rapporteur coordinates the preparation of the remote Consensus Evaluation Report (CER) taking into account the submitted Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs) by seeking consensus among the other two IEEs. The CER must address all the evaluation questions.

The RP Member shall be involved in all pertinent discussions with the IEEs during the preparation of the CER. For this reason, the names and e-mail addresses of the RP Member and the IEEs assigned to a proposal are visible to each other only during the consensus phase and must be kept **confidential** (please see Chapter 2.5 for more information).

The role of the RP Member is to carry out a preliminary quality check of the CER, addressing the following aspects: content, consistency between comments and marks, completeness, clarity and language. **The RP Member does not evaluate any proposal.**

For each proposal, the IEEs and the RP member will receive:

- access to IERs submitted by all IEEs in a *read-only* format and;

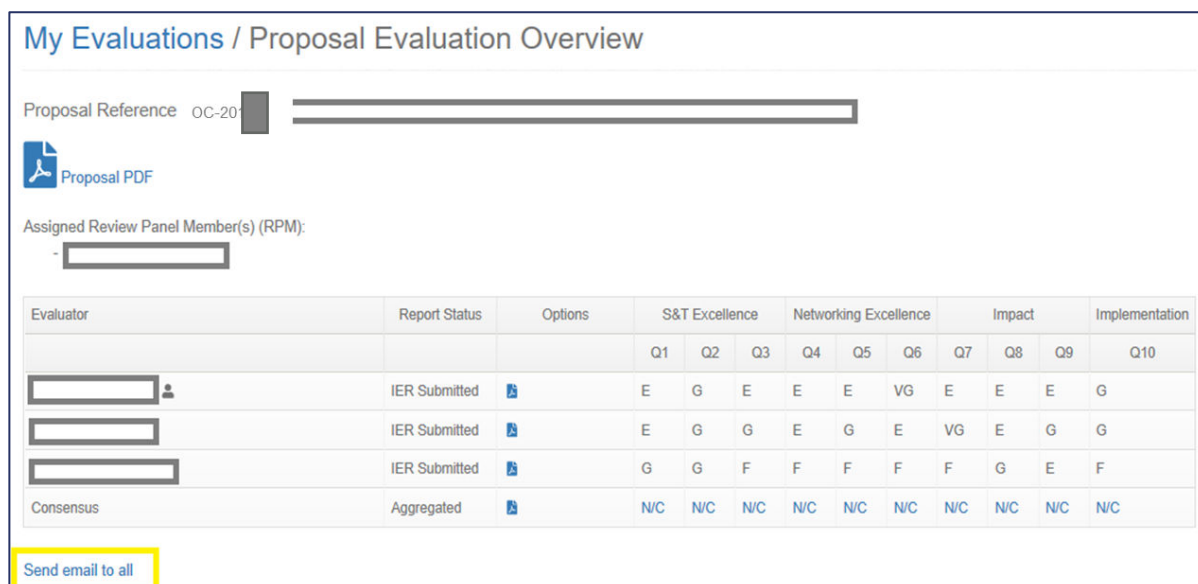
ii. an e-COST email notification with the following:

- contact details of the other two IEEs;
- contact details of the appointed Rapporteur;
- contact details of the assigned RP Member;
- deadline for submitting the final CER for voting.

The assigned RP Member will have access to the IERs and the draft CER and will be able to interact with the IEEs during the drafting of the CER, in order to carry out a preliminary quality check.

For a smooth consensus process, it is important to establish and communicate clearly an internal timeline and collaboration modality for each of the activities, namely the drafting and submission of the CER by the Rapporteur, how feedback from the IEEs and RP member on the draft will be implemented (e.g., email exchanges, dedicated call/meeting) as well as and the voting process.

A “Send Email to all” function is available in e-COST (Figure 3) to facilitate the communication during the consensus between the IEEs and RP Member.



Evaluator	Report Status	Options	S&T Excellence			Networking Excellence			Impact			Implementation
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
[Redacted]	IER Submitted	[Icon]	E	G	E	E	E	VG	E	E	E	G
[Redacted]	IER Submitted	[Icon]	E	G	G	E	G	E	VG	E	G	G
[Redacted]	IER Submitted	[Icon]	G	G	F	F	F	F	F	G	E	F
Consensus	Aggregated	[Icon]	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C

Send email to all

Figure 3: Screenshot of e-COST showing the “Send email to all” possibility (highlight in yellow box).

For the preparation of the draft CER, the Rapporteur must complete and save all mandatory sections of the ten evaluation questions. When the Rapporteur has prepared the CER, the RP Member and the other two IEEs will be notified and receive an automatic e-notification informing them that the draft CER is ready for discussion and feedback.

In order to see the IER and CER marks and comments the RP Member can:

- click on the icons corresponding to the IER and CER and open a pdf document; or;
- click, for each question, on the letter(s) in the “Consensus” row (Figure 4).

Questions in grey need to be completed. The triangle indicates the current position.

S&T Excellence			Networking Excellence			Impact			Implementation
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
▲									

S&T Excellence >> Soundness of the Challenge

Q1. Does the proposal demonstrate a comprehensive command of the state of the art in the field and present a relevant and timely challenge?

Evaluator	Mark	Comments
<input type="text"/>	E	The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner. <input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	VG	The proposal addresses this question in a very good manner. <input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	E	The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner. <input type="text"/>

Figure 4: Screenshot of e-COST showing the possible marks to be selected for a given question.

In addition to show the comments and marks from the IERs for the selected question, the tool allows encoding the consensus comment and mark (Figure 5).

Consensus

☒ The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner.
☐ The proposal addresses this question in a very good manner.
☐ The proposal addresses this question in a good manner.
☐ The proposal addresses this question in a fair manner.
☐ The proposal addresses this question in a poor manner.
☐ The proposal fails to address the question under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.

Main strengths:

Please write between 10 and 250 words. Words: 57

Figure 5: Screenshot of e-COST showing the comment box to be filled in for each of the ten evaluation questions.

The RP Member should then send their feedback following the preliminary quality check of the draft CER, for instance using the “Send email to all” function described previously (Figure 3).

Before the deadline for voting, the Rapporteur can revise the CER and consequently notify as many times as necessary its content to the two other IEEs and the RP Member. Once the discussions are finalised, and prior to the deadline for voting, the Rapporteur submits the final version of the CER for approval by the two other IEEs and the RP Member in e-COST.

N.B.: Once submitted, the CER on the e-COST platform is final and can no longer be edited.

👉 The Rapporteur should allow sufficient time (at least 2 days) for the IEEs and RP Member to vote on the CER, thus avoiding non-approval of the CER. The time needed from launch to finalising the voting can be minimised in case the CER submission is done during a call/meeting to collaborative finalise

the CER. In this case, the IEEs and RP Member have the chance to immediately vote upon the CER submission.

The CERs validated by the RPs are communicated as evaluation feedback to the Main Proposers after Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) approval. Hence, they must be accurate, complete and clear.

Under the COST rules, a Main Proposer may submit a request for redress to the COST Association in case of factual error(s) and / or procedural shortcoming, i.e., whenever:

- the evaluation of the proposal has not been carried out in accordance with the procedures set out in the COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval - Level B (COST 101/21; http://www.cost.eu/proposal_sesa);
- the Consensus Evaluation Report contains a factual error(s) that is verifiable by a non-expert. Examples of what is a factual error or not are provided below:

Example of a factual error - the evaluation report states: “The state-of-the-art section in the proposal does not mention the new developments in Black hole theory”, while in fact on p. 3 of the proposal there is a section called “Black hole theory – new developments”.

An example of what is not considered a factual error - the evaluation report states: “The proposal does not sufficiently discuss new developments in Black hole theory”. Such a statement is considered as the scientific judgement of the IEEs, which cannot be appealed under the redress procedure.

Therefore, comments in a CER shall be:

- consistent with the selected mark;
- strictly related to each specific evaluation criterion;
- substantial (no hollow statement);
- adequately justified, providing enough feedback to the proposers, concise and to the point;
- factual, evidence-based, and not formulated as subjective opinions: “*This proposal is...*” and not “*I think that...*”, “*I feel that...*”;
- written having in mind the proposer as recipient (avoid discriminatory language, be polite, be fair, etc.);
- clear and avoiding acronyms or technical terms (see Table 1).

CER revision check-list: when reviewing the report, the following should be checked:

- is the CER adequately justified and of an appropriate length?
- do the comments provided justify the selected marks? For instance: what is the degree of seriousness of the weaknesses listed? Does it appropriately fit the selection of the description / mark in the scale provided?
- are the proposal's strengths and weaknesses carefully explained?
- has any quotation been double-checked? (Please be aware that factual errors lead to redress procedure)
- does the report contain any contradictory statements or references such as “*see External Expert 1 report*” or “*not applicable*”?
- if you were the Main Proposer, would you find this report fair, accurate, clear and complete?

Table 1: Comparison of clear and unclear comments.

Unclear comments	Clear comments
are ambiguous	are precise and highlight strengths and weaknesses
are not justified	are duly justified
are contradictory	are consistent
are descriptive	are explanatory and express an analysis
make assumptions	are based on facts
include words like <i>perhaps</i> , <i>think</i> , <i>seems</i> , <i>assume</i> , <i>probably</i>	include words such as: <i>because</i> , <i>specifically</i> , <i>for example</i>

Table 2 shows some examples of inadequate versus adequate comments.

Table 2: Comparison of adequate and inadequate comments.

Inadequate comment	Adequate comment
I find the proposal far too ambitious	The proposal presents ambitious plans. However, the methodology is not adequately explained and fails to address the two key aspects of A and B ...
The proposal does not show a good understanding of the state of the art	This proposal fails to adequately describe the state of art in X or Y and it does not take Z sufficiently into account ...
There is no indication of involvement of stakeholders	The involvement of stakeholders' is not adequately addressed. In particular, X and Y are not targeted by ...

2.4 Voting on the CER

Following the CER submission, the IEEs and the RP Member need to vote on the CER by selecting one of the two options as shown in Figure 6A ('approve' or 'NOT approve'). It is not mandatory to reach consensus. In case of non-approval of the CER by either an IEE or the RP Member, a justification shall be provided, and a second RP Member will be assigned for further revision (Figure 6B).

After voting, the RP Member will immediately receive a confirmation email in their email account registered in e-COST; if not, the RP member should immediately contact opencall@cost.eu.

The CER prepared by the Rapporteur is approved if the other two IEEs and the RP Member approve it. If an IEE or the RP Member does not provide an approval/non-approval vote, this CER will be considered non-approved.

Figure 6A: Approval Vote

My Consensus Evaluation Vote

☒ I approve the Consensus Evaluation report

☐ I do NOT approve the Consensus Evaluation report

Figure 6B: Non-Approval Vote

My Consensus Evaluation Vote

☐ I approve the Consensus Evaluation report

☒ I do NOT approve the Consensus Evaluation report

Justification

(justification is needed if the IEEs and/or RP member do not approve the CER)

250 words limit

Figure 6: **A/** Screenshot of e-COST showing the voting pane for the submitted CER in case of approval. **B/** Screenshot of e-COST showing the voting pane for the submitted CER in case of non-approval.

In case the CER is not submitted by the Rapporteur, the CER status is considered Not Approved (Figure 7).

CONSENSUS VOTE & STATUS DETAILS		
Expert	Vote	Justification
Outcome of the vote	Completed	Consensus not achieved due to non-submitted Consensus report

Figure 7: screenshot of e-COST showing the consensus vote status for a non-submitted CER.

2.5 Remote revision and quality check of CER

The CER quality check starts when all the CERs have been submitted and voted on. The COST Association informs all RP Member of the start and duration of the quality check via an e-COST notification, asking them to complete the quality check.

The RP Member can access the CER assigned to them as follows:

- click on the hyperlink in the e-notification (and then log in to e-COST when prompted), or;
- log in to e-COST directly and then click on “Review Panel reports for [Open Call Collection number]” (Figure 2).

The RP Member can access the page displaying first a list of the proposals assigned for quality check, followed by a list of all other proposals allocated to the RP (access to these CERs is in read-only format). To prepare for the RP meeting, each RP Member carries out a remote quality check of assigned CERs.

There are two main types of CER revision and quality check:

- **Approved CER (*app*):** both IEEs and the assigned RP Member approved the CER submitted by the Rapporteur. In this case, the revision and quality check of the approved CER will be carried out by the assigned RP Member. This is covered in Chapter 2.5.1.
- **Non-Approved CER (*nap*):** at least one of the IEEs and/or the assigned RP Member did not approve the CER submitted by the Rapporteur. In this case a second RP member is assigned, and the two RP Members jointly prepare the CER. This is covered in Chapter 2.5.2.

N.B.: The basis for the quality check is the CER in e-COST. The RP Member has no longer access to the identities of evaluators in the system. IERs are no longer displayed for Approved CER, while IER information is displayed in the pdf document of the Non-Approved CER.

In case the RP Member needs access to the IERs of an Approved CER, this can be requested to the Science Officer responsible for the RP and shall not be directly requested to the IEEs.

2.5.1 REVISION OF APPROVED CER

Next to each approved CER (status of proposal ‘*app*’) assigned to a RP Member, the consensus status ‘Approved’ and two small icons are displayed (Figure 8):

- the left icon (pdf document) gives access to the text of the proposal;
- the right icon gives access to a summary table of marks of the CER.

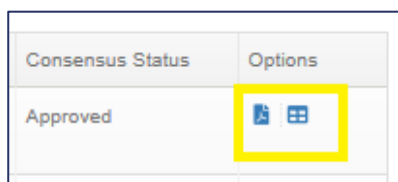


Figure 8: Screenshot of e-COST showing how to access the CER and the summary table of the marks.

Clicking on the right icon will show the following information (Figure 9):

- Consensus row:
 - Report status, marked ‘Approved’;
 - summary table of marks of the CER (read-only);
 - CER accessible as pdf document (icon under ‘Options’).
- Review panel report row:
 - Report status, marked ‘Incomplete’;
 - summary table of marks of the RP Report (comments editable via ‘N/C’ hyperlink).

Evaluator	Report Status	Options	S&T Excellence			Networking Excellence			Impact			Implementation
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Consensus	Approved		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
Review panel report	Incomplete		N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C

Figure 9: Screenshot of e-COST showing the status of the CER at quality check phase.

To perform the quality check, the RP Member needs to click on 'N/C' (Figure 9). The panel shown in Figure 10 will be displayed.

Questions in grey need to be completed. The triangle indicates the current position.

S&T Excellence			Networking Excellence			Impact			Implementation
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 10: Screenshot of e-COST showing the ten questions to be addressed by the RP Member for the quality check.

To perform the quality check, the RP Member needs to click on the 'X' under each question and review all the comments included in the comment box(es) of the CER (Figure 11).

S&T Excellence >> Soundness of the Challenge

Q1. Does the proposal demonstrate a comprehensive command of the state of the art in the field and present a relevant and timely challenge?

☒ The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner.
☐ The proposal addresses this question in a very good manner.
☐ The proposal addresses this question in a good manner.
☐ The proposal addresses this question in a fair manner.
☐ The proposal addresses this question in a poor manner.
☐ The proposal fails to address the question under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.

Main strengths:

Figure 11: Screenshot of e-COST showing the mark and comment reported in the CER.

The RP Member can either “Pre-validate” the comments (to accept the existing comments with no linguistic and content changes) or “Edit” the comments.

In case the comment is “Edited”, the type of edit (Form or Content) must be specified, to facilitate the discussions during the RP meeting:

- Form: refers to stylistic or linguistic edits such as corrections of typos or misspellings;
- Content: refers to modifications of text including removal of words or sentences found inappropriate or with factual errors (please see Chapter 2), as well as edits to ensure coherence between comments and marks.

In case an edit involves both form and content, the latter should be selected (Figure 12).

Reason for modification

-- Please Select --

-- Please Select --

Form

Content

Figure 12: Screenshot of e-COST showing the options for modifying the comments in a CER.

To save the pre-validated or edited comment and move to the next question the RP Member should click “Next” (Figure 13). Once all ten questions have been reviewed, the CER shall be submitted by clicking the “Submit” button.

Please note that once the report is submitted no further modifications are possible. The system generates a pdf of the CER which will be accessible at “My Reviews”.

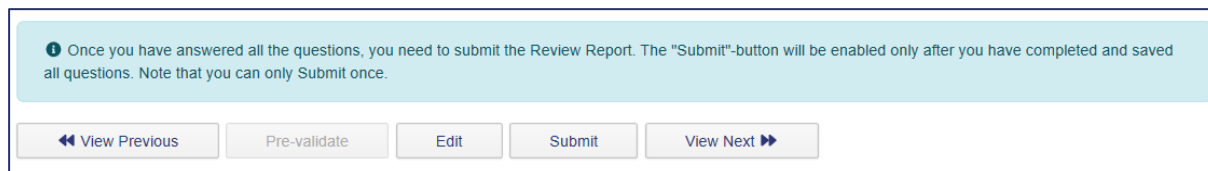


Figure 13: Screenshot of e-COST showing how to save changes applied to questions in a CER and move to a following question/comment.

In case of identified discrepancies between the comment and the mark, or the comment does not address the question, the RP Member shall propose a revision of the mark and/or the comment (without re-evaluating the question), to be finalised during the RP Meeting. Shall a mark change be proposed, the RP Member shall inform the Science Officer in charge of the RP.

In case of change of mark recommended by the RP Member responsible for the CER, a justification for the proposed change shall be formulated and approved by the Review Panel at the meeting.

2.5.2 REVISION OF NON-APPROVED CER

The CER is not approved (status of proposal ‘*nap*’) when:

- the Rapporteur submits the CER and at least one of the other two IEEs does not approve it, or;
- the Rapporteur submits the CER and the RP Member does not validate it, or;
- when the Rapporteur does not submit the CER.

Cases a) and b) are covered in the Chapter 2.5.2.1 and case c) in the Chapter 2.5.2.2. **Please remember that the role of the RPM is to ensure the quality of the CER, and not to (re)evaluate the proposal.**

2.5.2.1 IEE(S) OR RPM DID NOT APPROVE THE CER

An additional RP Member is assigned to a non-approved CER. The two RP Members shall review and resolve the discrepancies and prepare a revised version of the CER, taking into consideration the comments given by the IEEs. For this, the two assigned RP Members are given access to:

- 1) the Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs);
- 2) the non-approved CER and;
- 3) the justification(s) provided by the IEE(s) and/or RP Member for not approving the CER.

The two RP Members assigned to the proposal shall **jointly**:

- prepare a CER based on the information available;
- in case of disagreement among the IEEs, resolve the discrepancy by selecting any mark corresponding to their comments within the range of marks given by the IEEs, or the non-agreed consensus mark.

In case only the assigned RP Member did not approve the CER, a mark change (aligned with the original or revised comment) and a justification shall be proposed.

Shortly after the RP meeting, the COST Association will contact the IEEs requesting their approval of the revised CER. A non-approval of the revised CER by the IEEs will require a justification and a revised comment.

- one of the two RP Members encodes and submits the CER in e-COST.

The CERs will then be validated during the RP Meeting.

In case no consensus is achieved before the RP Meeting between the two RP Members assigned to the proposal:

- the RP Members shall inform the COST Association by sending an email to the Science Officers (SOs) in charge of the RP;
- in exceptional cases, the RP can ask that one or two additional IEEs evaluate remotely the proposal in question⁷. In this case, the RP shall make use of the additional Individual Evaluation Report(s) to prepare the final CER (comments and marks).

In e-COST, next to each proposal assigned to a RP Member, the consensus status 'Not approved' and two small icons are displayed (Figure 14):

- the left icon (pdf document) gives access to the text of the proposal;
- the right icon gives access to a summary table of marks of the CER.

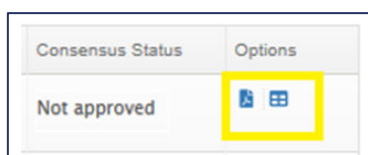



Figure 14: Screenshot of e-COST showing how to access the CER and the summary table of the marks.

When clicking on the right icon the following information is available (Figure 15):


- not approved CER available as pdf document, icon under 'Options';
- summary table of the marks of the not approved CER;
- status of the RP Report, below marked 'Incomplete';
- justifications given by IEE(s) for not approving the CER.

My Evaluations / Proposal Evaluation Overview

Proposal Reference: OC- [REDACTED]

 Proposal PDF

Assigned Review Panel Member(s) (RPM): [REDACTED]

Evaluator	Report Status	Options	S&T Excellence			Networking Excellence			Impact		Implementation	
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
EE1	IER Submitted		E	VG	E	F	E	E	VG	E	E	VG
EE2	IER Submitted		E	VG	E	E	VG	E	VG	E	E	G
EE3	IER Submitted		VG	G	VG	G	E	E	VG	E	E	VG
Consensus	Not approved		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
Review panel report	Incomplete		N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C

Consensus Vote & Status Details

Expert	Justification
EE2	[REDACTED]
EE3	
RPM	

Figure 15: Screenshot of e-COST showing the information available to the RP Member when the CER summary table of marks.

⁷ COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval - Level B (COST 101/21; http://www.cost.eu/proposal_sesa)

To perform the quality check, one of the two RP Members (both RP Members are given the same access rights to the system) shall take the lead of encoding the comments and marks. The RP Member shall click on 'N/C' whereby the grid with the ten questions will be displayed (Figure 16).

Questions in grey need to be completed. The triangle indicates the current position.

S&T Excellence			Networking Excellence			Impact			Implementation
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
▲									

Figure 16: Screenshot of e-COST showing the ten questions to be addressed by the RP Member for the quality check of non-approved CERs.

To access individual comments and marks given by each IEE and carry out the quality check for each question, the RP Member shall click on the respective 'X' (Figure 16).

The RP Members shall review all the comments included in the comment box(es) of the CER and arbitrate any discrepancies between the evaluations and marks provided by the IEEs.

The RP Members, upon agreement, will select the mark within the range of marks given by the IEEs and provide a consensus comment originating on the IEEs comments and consistent with the selected mark (Figure 17).

In case the available marks do not reflect the comment agreed by the RP Members, the Science Officers in charge of the RP panel shall be informed and the issue will be discussed in the RP meeting.

☐ The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner.
 ☒ The proposal addresses this question in a very good manner.
 ☐ The proposal addresses this question in a good manner.
 ☐ The proposal addresses this question in a fair manner.
 ☐ The proposal addresses this question in a poor manner.
 ☐ The proposal fails to address the question under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.

Main strengths:

Please write up to 250 words. Words: 0

The proposal would benefit from certain improvements:

Please write up to 250 words. Words: 0

Figure 17: Screenshot of e-COST showing the mark and the respective comment boxes to be completed by the RP Members.

For any comment, which is "Edited" the type of edit (Form / Content) needs to be specified. This indication is meant to facilitate the discussions during the RP meeting.

- Form: refers to stylistic and / or linguistic edits such as corrections of typos / misspellings;
- Content: refers to modifications of text including removal of words / sentences found inappropriate or with factual errors (please see Section 4), as well as edits to ensure coherence between comments and marks.

In case an edit involves both form and content (Figure 12), the latter should be selected.

The RP Member shall click "Next" to save the edited comment and move to the next question (see Figure 13). When all the ten questions have been reviewed, the CER shall be submitted by clicking the "Submit" button. **Once the report is submitted, no further modifications are possible in this**

preparatory remote revision. Upon submission, the pdf of the CER becomes available at the “My Reviews” page.

2.5.2.2 RAPPORTEUR DID NOT SUBMIT THE CER

The procedure described in Chapter 2.5.2.1 applies in the case of a non-submitted CER, with the only difference that the RP Members have access only to the IERs. Figure 18 shows the consensus vote status for a non-submitted CER.

CONSENSUS VOTE & STATUS DETAILS		
Expert	Vote	Justification
Outcome of the vote	Completed	Consensus not achieved due to non-submitted Consensus report

Figure 18: Screenshot of e-COST showing the consensus vote status for a non-submitted CER.

To prepare the CER the assigned RP Members shall follow the instructions in Chapter 2.5.2.1.

2.6 The Review Panel meeting

The RP Meeting takes place after the remote revision and quality check. Each RP is assisted by Science Officers from the COST Association.

Prior to the meeting, in collaboration with Science Officers each RP has a Rapporteur assigned. The role of the Rapporteur is to collect the input from the other RP Members and prepare the RP report for the COST Scientific Committee. Science Officers support the RP in determining the working methodology, moderating the meeting, assisting the Rapporteur in the preparation of the RP report, and encoding the finalised CERs on e-COST.

The objectives of the RP meeting are to:

- finalise the CERs of the proposals;
- enable discussions among RP Members belonging to different RPs, to address common issues, including recommendations to the Scientific Committee;
- analyse the proposals allocated in order to provide insights on the trends, early signals and overall quality within each RP.

Upon receiving the RP Reports, the COST Association prepares a consolidated report for the Scientific Committee, which consists of two parts:

- a) the overall ranking of proposals after the RP meeting;
- b) the compilation of each RP analysis on the trends, early signals and overall quality.

The detailed agenda, the template of the RP Report, and specific instructions for the RP Meeting are sent by Science Officers prior to the meeting.

N.B.: the information obtained during the preliminary quality check phase (CER preparation) must be kept confidential, i.e., there shall be no disclosure of:

- IEEs’ comments in the IERs;
- IEEs’ identities (name, e-mail, etc.).

2.7 Responsibilities, guiding principles and use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

RP Members are responsible for carrying out their tasks themselves and shall not delegate their work. They shall treat all proposals equally and impartially on their merits.

The RP Member must perform the quality check and finalise the CERs on the e-COST platform within the given deadline. This is part of their contractual obligations. In case of non-compliance with the latter, the honorarium of the RP Member could be cancelled.

In respect to the possible use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), RP Members:

- must be human experts;
- should check the CERs solely on the content;
- must not upload any parts of the proposal or CER to any online service or to an unauthorised third party, including Generative AI tools;
- should perform the quality check of the assigned CERs according to each assessment criteria;
- must make all efforts to protect confidentiality of proposals, independent external experts, and evaluations;
- must not use Generative AI tools for any quality check of the scientific content of the proposal or CER. They may only make use of Generative AI tools for improving the readability of their reviews while ensuring no loss of confidentiality.

3 CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Open Call Evaluation, Selection and Approval procedure fulfils three core principles: excellence, fairness and transparency. COST strives to avoid any Conflict of Interest (Col) and all those involved in the Evaluation, Selection and Approval process must commit to confidentiality.

3.1 Conflict of Interest

COST expects an ethical behaviour from all the participants in COST activities.

The Conflict of Interest (Col) rules apply to all those concerned by the SESA process (CNCs, Independent External Experts, Review Panel Members, Scientific Committee Members, and CSO members). Each individual involved in the evaluation, selection and approval of proposals shall have only one role in the evaluation, selection and approval of a COST Action and may not take any benefit from any Action approved under that specific Collection. In particular:

- Independent External Experts and Review Panel Members having evaluated a proposal may not participate in the Action deriving from that proposal, they however may be invited for an *ad hoc* contribution or be Action Rapporteur for that Action;
- CNCs and Scientific Committee Members may not join any Action in any way during their mandate;
- CSO members may not join any Action in any way during their mandate.

A Conflict of Interest can be real, potential or perceived.

1. Cases of Real Conflict of Interest

The person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, and Scientific Committee Member):

- has been involved in the preparation of the proposal;
- has been involved in any previous evaluation step in the same Collection.

2. Cases of Potential Conflict of Interest

The person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, and Scientific Committee Member):

- was aware of the preparation of the proposal;
- has a professional or personal relationship with a proposer;
- stands to benefit directly or indirectly if the proposal shall be accepted or rejected.

3. Cases of Perceived Conflict of Interest

The person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, Scientific Committee Member):

- feels for any reason unable to provide an impartial review of the proposal.

Table 3 provides an overview of the possible cases of Conflict of Interest in the evaluation of COST Action proposals.

Table 3: Summary of the cases of Conflict of Interest, marked with **✗**.

Position	Main Proposer and Network of Proposers	Independent External Expert	Review Panel Member	Scientific Committee Member	CNC	CSO
Main Proposer and Network of Proposers (Submission)	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Independent External Experts (Evaluation)	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Review Panel Members (Revision)	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
COST Scientific Committee Members (Selection)	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗
CSO (Final approval)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓

If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified before the evaluation starts:

- the evaluator may not participate in the evaluation/selection procedure in the ongoing collection and shall be replaced.

If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified during the evaluation:

- the evaluator shall stop evaluating/selecting in the ongoing collection and shall be replaced;
- any comments and marks already given by the evaluator shall be discarded.

If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified after the evaluation has taken place, the COST Association shall examine:

- the potential impact and consequences of the Conflict of Interest and take appropriate measures.

The COST Association has the right to take the lead in any resolution process of a Col situation at any moment of the evaluation and selection.

All cases of Col are recorded by the COST Association. All those related to nationally nominated actors (Review Panel Members and COST Scientific Committee Members) are reported to the COST National Coordinator.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Any person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, and Scientific Committee Member) shall sign a declaration stating/accepting he/she:

- is not aware of any conflict of interest regarding the proposal(s) to be evaluated/selected;
- shall inform immediately the COST Association of any conflict of interest discovered during the evaluation process;
- shall maintain the confidentiality of the procedure.

Failure to declare the Col may have the following consequences:

- notification to the COST Association Director;
- notification to the respective CNC for Review Panel Members;
- notification to the CSO for Scientific Committee Members;
- removal from the COST Expert Database.

3.2 Confidentiality

COST expects that each person involved in the SESA process (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, Scientific Committee Member, CNC and CSO member):

- treats confidentially any information, including personal data of any natural person concerned by or involved in the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of the proposals process, and document, in any form (i.e., paper or electronic), disclosed in writing or orally in relation to the performance of the evaluation;
- processes any confidential information or documents as described above only for the purposes and for the duration of the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of proposals process;
- does not, either directly or indirectly, disclose any confidential information or document related to proposals or applicants, without prior written approval of the COST Association;
- does not discuss any proposal with others, including other evaluators or staff not directly involved in evaluating the proposal, except during formal discussions at dedicated ad hoc Review Panels and Scientific Committee meetings;
- does not disclose any detail of the evaluation process and its outcomes, nor of any proposal submitted, for any purpose other than fulfilling their tasks as evaluator;
- does not disclose the names of other experts participating in the evaluation;
- does not communicate with proposers on any proposal during or after the evaluation until the approval of CSO.

Under no circumstances should the proposers contact any of the actors involved in the SESA process regarding their proposal. Any attempt to do so may lead to immediate exclusion of the proposal from the process.

4 HONORARIA AND CERTIFICATE

Honoraria⁸ shall be paid to the Independent External Experts and Review Panel Members involved in the SESA procedure as follows:

1. Independent External Experts: EUR 50 per proposal, based on submitted Individual Evaluation Report (IER) and voting on the Consensus Evaluation Report (CER). The proposal Rapporteur is entitled to an additional EUR 50 per proposal, based on the submitted CER.
N.B.: in case a proposal is declared as non-eligible, the IEE having submitted an IER for that proposal is still entitled to the payment of the honorarium as described under point 1 above, even in the absence of a CER vote or CER being submitted.
2. Review Panel members: EUR 400 per Collection Date, based on the active involvement in the consensus process and quality check of the proposals (remotely and at the dedicated RP meeting).

⁸ See [COST 101/21 COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval \(SESA\) – \(Level B\)](#)

RPMs having completed the assigned review(s) can download a participation certificate (PDF document) from e-COST Reviews page, as displayed in Figure 19.



Participation Certificates		
Collection ID	Role	Download Certificate
OC- 	Review Panel Member	

Figure 19: Screenshot of e-COST showing RPM participation certificate.

ANNEX 1: ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

To be eligible for a COST Action, the proposal shall:

- ✓ include a Network of Proposers from **at least 7 different COST Full or Cooperating States** amongst which at least 50% shall be from COST Inclusiveness Target Countries (Annex of the COST Open Call – Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) Guidelines (http://www.cost.eu/proposal_sesa_guidelines) address S&T challenges destined only for **peaceful purposes**;
- ✓ respect the template of the Technical Annex, **word and page limits**: the length of the Technical Annex must not exceed fifteen (15) pages.
- ✓ be written in **English**, the working language of the COST Association
- ✓ be **anonymous** in order to comply with the double-blind principle of the evaluation:

*Proposals may not contain any **direct or indirect reference to people and/or institutions** participating in the Network of Proposers (Main or Secondary Proposers). This leads to the fact that proposers and/or institutions' names should **neither be explicitly mentioned, nor be potentially identifiable** through links to web pages or through references to their role and/or participation in existing or ended projects, grants, networks.*

Note on "References":

In the "References" section of the proposal, it is possible to quote proposers' own publications, provided that:

- a) there is no emphasis that the publication is authored by one or more of the proposers and
- b) it is only one or a few of the references in the reference list provided.

Table 4 illustrates examples of eligible and non-eligible statements.

Table 4: Examples of statements resulting in ineligibility and statements that are eligible.

Statements resulting in ineligibility	Eligible statements
"Several members of the proposers' network have been involved in previous FP7 projects, like ATTPS and ADAPTIWALL, and COST Actions, such as FP0901" (direct reference).	"The Action will seek contact with / reach out to / draw on the expertise of / build on / ... previous FP7 projects, like ATTPS and ADAPTIWALL, and COST Actions, such as FP0901."
"Among government-run public services we have the Department of Health of Catalonia on board" (direct reference).	"The Network of Proposers already includes a / several government-run public service(s)."
Some of the Proposers' names are emphasised in the references section, e.g. " Smith A & Jones B (2020), Journal of Physics", where A. Smith is a proposer (direct reference).	No emphasis on proposers' publications in the references section in any way, e.g., "Smith A & Jones B (2020), Journal of Physics".
"The Network of Proposers has already generated some output", with in the footnote a link to a YouTube video or webpage in which secondary proposers can be identified (indirect reference, potentially identifiable).	"The Network of Proposers has already generated some output", without links to a YouTube video or webpage in which secondary proposers can be identified
The Technical Annex referring to the expertise of the network members through specific publications (the authors of these publications come from an institution participating in the proposal: indirect reference).	The Technical Annex referring to the expertise of the Network of Proposers, possibly also mentioning the field, sub-field and expected contribution to the respective WG(s) / activities but without mentioning specific publications.

ANNEX 2: EVALUATION CRITERIA, QUESTIONS AND SCORING SYSTEM

The evaluation criteria, the respective maximum marks for the different sections, and the overall threshold required for shortlisting are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Evaluation criteria and maximum mark per criterion.

S&T EXCELLENCE	NETWORKING EXCELLENCE	IMPACT	IMPLEMENTATION
Total mark for the section = 15 points	Total mark for the section = 15 points	Total mark for the section = 15 points	Total mark for the section = 5 points
TOTAL MARKS AWARDED = 0 – 50 points			
OVERALL THRESHOLD = 34 points			

The evaluation criteria and specific questions are illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6: Evaluation criteria and evaluation questions

Question Number	Evaluation Criterion	Evaluation Question
Q1	S&T Excellence	Does the proposal demonstrate a comprehensive command of the state of the art in the field and present a relevant and timely challenge?
Q2	S&T Excellence	Does the proposal describe an innovative approach to the challenge that advances the state-of-the art in the field?
Q3	S&T Excellence	Are the objectives presented relevant to the challenge, clear and ambitious?
Q4	Networking Excellence	Does networking bring added value in tackling the challenge in relation to existing efforts at the European and/or international level?
Q5	Networking Excellence	Does the proposed network contain, or present a credible plan for securing, the critical mass and expertise for achieving the objectives and thus addressing the challenge?
Q6	Networking Excellence	Does the proposal identify the most relevant stakeholders and present a clear plan to involve them as Action's participants?
Q7	Impact	Does the proposal clearly identify relevant and realistic impacts for science, society and/or competitiveness (including potential innovations and/or breakthroughs)?
Q8	Impact	Does the proposed networking clearly contribute to knowledge creation, transfer of knowledge and career development?
Q9	Impact	Is the plan for dissemination and/or exploitation of results clear and attainable and does it contribute to the dialogue between science and the general public or policy?
Q10	Implementation	Is the work plan (WGs, tasks, activities, timeframe, deliverables and risk analysis) appropriate to ensure the achievement of the objectives?

The scoring system uses a harmonised scale for all the evaluation criteria as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Scale for the evaluation criteria

Mark	Abbreviation displayed in e-COST	Label	Description
5	E	Excellent	The proposal fully addresses all relevant aspects of the question. Any shortcomings are minor.
4	VG	Very Good	The proposal addresses the question very well, although certain improvements are still possible.
3	G	Good	The proposal addresses the question well, although improvements would be necessary.
2	F		While the proposal broadly addresses the question, there are significant weaknesses.
1	P	Poor	The question is addressed in an inadequate manner, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
0	Fail	Fail	The proposal fails to address the question under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.

On e-COST, depending on the mark selected for each question, it is necessary to specify strengths and/or weaknesses as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Strengths and Weaknesses linked to marks in e-COST

Mark / Label		Strengths	Weaknesses
5 / Excellent	The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner.	Main strengths: <comment>	Not applicable
4 / Very Good	The proposal addresses this question in a very good manner.	Main strengths: <comment>	The proposal would benefit from certain improvements: <comment>
3 / Good	The proposal addresses this question in a good manner.	Main strengths: <comment>	The proposal has some weaknesses and the following improvements are necessary: <comment>
2 / Fair	The proposal addresses this question in a fair manner.	Positive aspects: <comment>	The proposal has significant weaknesses: <comment>
1 / Poor	The proposal addresses this question in a poor manner.	Not applicable	There are serious inherent weaknesses: <comment>
0 / Fail	The proposal fails to address the question under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.	Not applicable	Justification: <comment>