

# COST Open Call – Proposers' Guidelines

Level C

**March 2026**

**Open Call oc-2026-1**

**COST 104/21  
V5.0**

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## Document Change History

Version	Release date	Summary of changes
1.0 (former oc-2022-1)	15 December 2021	<p>Updates to launch oc-2022-1, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- included clear examples of eligible statements on anonymity,</li> <li>- list of information to be provided to evaluators has been modified (deleting those which were not an evaluation criteria),</li> <li>- the amended list of ITCs,</li> <li>- updates of the links to reference documents in the context of Horizon Europe,</li> <li>- change of terminology and definition: Early Career Investigators (ECI) is changed to Young Researchers and Innovators (YRI), and</li> <li>- amendments resulting from the change on the rules for participation of researchers and innovators from NNC and Third States (IPC)</li> </ul>
1.1 (former oc-2022-1)	13 April 2022	<p>Minor updates, linguistic and formatting changes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- correction of the release date on page 3 (15 December instead of 29 October 2021)</li> <li>- due to the deletion of a Chapter in the previous version, a series of references to Chapter numbers needed to be updated</li> <li>- the “sections” of the Guidelines were renamed as “Chapters” to avoid confusion with the “sections” of the proposal, which are also described in the Guidelines</li> </ul>
2.0	18 November 2022	<p>Updates to launch oc-2023-1, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Updated link to Country and Organisation table</li> <li>- Sentence added for resubmissions to use the correct template</li> <li>- Clarification on outermost regions status for Open Call</li> <li>- Text edits / reference updates</li> <li>- Link added to the European Commission website on gender equality in research and innovation</li> </ul>
2.1	December 2022	<p>Updates to launch oc-2023-1, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anonymity clarification for proposal section added (general feature and Network of Proposers)</li> <li>- Honoria information for iEEs and RPMs added</li> </ul>
3.0	November 2023	<p>Guidelines updated for oc-2024-1, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clarification on Action funding level in Chapter 1.2</li> <li>- Summary table showing proposal section visibility by SESA actors in Chapter 2.4</li> <li>- Merged Chapter 2.4.2 (Technical Annex) and former 2.6 (Key Concepts definitions) to improve readability and avoid repetitions</li> </ul>
4.0	November 2024	<p>Updates to launch oc-2025-1, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Changed title of the document</li> <li>- Renamed Chapters to Sections in these Guidelines</li> <li>- Renamed Sections to Parts in the Proposal Template</li> <li>- Shortened Section 1 to make it more readable and to the point</li> <li>- Introduced the new annotated version of the Technical Annex</li> <li>- Introduced the new scoring system of the remote individual evaluation</li> <li>- Introduced a Section on Generative Artificial Intelligence</li> <li>- Introduced the notion of Acceptability of COST Action’s proposals</li> </ul>
5.0	March 2026	<p>Updates to launch oc-2026-1, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduction of new eligibility criteria;</li> <li>- Removal of Review Panels;</li> <li>- Revision of the role of the Scientific Committee in the selection of proposals;</li> <li>- Revision of Honoraria.</li> </ul>

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## INTRODUCTION

This document provides a practical step-by-step guide to the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Open Call rules and procedures for Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) of COST Action proposals, as decided by the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO).

Proposers are invited to read the set of COST Implementation Rules, namely:

- [COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval \(COST 101/21\)](#)
- [Annotated Rules for COST Actions \(COST 094/21\)](#)

These documents are legally binding and take precedence over any guidelines. In case of any contradiction between the COST Implementation Rules and the current guidelines, the COST Implementation Rules shall prevail.

Both documents are available at: <https://www.cost.eu/funding/documents-guidelines/>.

## 1. OVERVIEW OF COST FRAMEWORK, COST ACTIONS, 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 framework<sup>1</sup> dedicated to supporting European-based Science and Technology (S&T) networking activities, enabling collaboration between researchers, innovators, and other relevant stakeholders. COST participants can jointly develop ideas and new initiatives across all scientific disciplines through trans-European coordination of nationally or otherwise funded research activities. Since its creation in 1971, COST has significantly contributed to reducing the gap between science, policy makers and society in 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 Innovators<sup>2</sup>, 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](#));

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

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

- Counterbalancing unequal access of research communities 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 national research systems of COST Member Countries;
- Identifying excellence across Europe to contribute to ERA widening objectives.

Through global networking, COST also encourages the participation of researchers and innovators affiliated to legal entities in non-COST Members<sup>3</sup> and Specific Organisations<sup>4</sup> 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](#).

## 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.

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 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).

COST Actions can also receive funding for other expenses:

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

COST Actions are funded via yearly **Action Grant Agreements (AGAs)** based on annual **Work and Budget Plans (W&BPs)**, detailing the activities designed to achieve the objectives defined in the MoU. The Action's activities are decided by the Action Management Committee (MC) and approved by the

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

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.cost.eu/Country\\_Organisations\\_Table](https://www.cost.eu/Country_Organisations_Table)

COST Administration. The rules applying to their funding are defined in the [Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

**No budget forecast is requested when submitting a proposal.** The average funding received during the 4-year duration of a COST Action amounts to approximately 600,000 EUR. The amounts are variable from a grant period to another and depends, among others, on the size of the network and overall budget available.

### 1.2.1. COST ACTION STRUCTURE

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

The **Action Management Committee** is the decision-making body and is responsible for the coordination, implementation and management of the Action activities and for supervising the appropriate allocation of the grant in view to achieving the Action objectives.

The MC 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)<sup>5</sup>.

**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 and networking activities needed to achieve the Action objectives, in line with the Action strategy defined by the Action MC.

### 1.2.2. PARTICIPANTS<sup>6</sup>

COST Actions are open to anyone with a legal affiliation located in a COST Member or in any NNC or Third State (IPC<sup>7</sup>). A **legal entity** can be (non-exhaustive list): a public entity (national, regional, local public authority or any other kind of public entity), universities, research centres, SMEs, large companies, NGOs, as well as Specific Organisation or any other form of legal entity recognised under a national or international framework<sup>8</sup>.

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);

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> For more detailed information, please check [COST 094/21 Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

<sup>7</sup> International Partner Countries (IPC) – Third States: States that are neither COST Members nor COST Near Neighbour Countries (e.g., Argentina, Japan, US, etc.).

<sup>8</sup> Section 4.1.1.1.1 in the [COST 094/21 Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

- **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 eligibility for reimbursement and the rules for participation depend on the status of Country or Specific Organisation the participant is affiliated to according to COST rules (see [Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#) and [Annex I – Level A : Country and Organisations table](#)).

The rules to participate in a COST Action may be found in the [Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

### 1.3. COST Open Call process

The COST Open Call is implemented via the Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) process. COST publishes the official announcement of the Open Call on the COST Website (webpage [Funding Documents & Guidelines](#)) with the Collection Date, the schedule, the description of the process 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 is a one-stage submission process where proposals may be registered and submitted between the opening of the call and the Collection Date. All proposals shall be collected on this (Collection) Date.

Proposals are evaluated and selected on a competitive basis, taking into account the available funds for the particular Open Call Collection.

The proposal submission, evaluation, selection and approval comprise the following phases:

- Proposal Submission by a Main Proposer on behalf of a network of proposers;
- Proposal Assessment for Eligibility;
- Proposal Evaluation by Independent External Experts;
- Consensus and Quality check;
- Proposal Assessment for Acceptability when relevant by the COST Association and the Scientific Committee;
- Proposal Selection by the Scientific Committee;
- Proposal Approval by the CSO.

## 2. PREPARING AND SUBMITTING A PROPOSAL FOR A COST ACTION

### 2.1. Requirements for the network of proposers

Proposals shall be submitted by a Main Proposer acting on behalf of a network of proposers.

In each Open Call Collection, each individual may participate either as Main or Secondary Proposer in one proposal only. Secondary Proposers in previously submitted proposals shall no longer be able to withdraw from the network they have joined nor accept invitations to any other proposal within the same Collection. The dedicated online platform will block multiple participation within the same Collection. Bypassing this rule will result in the following:

- Main Proposer submits more than one proposal in the same Call: this will result in the declaration of ineligibility of all proposals submitted by this Main Proposer in that capacity;
- Main Proposer submits a proposal and is secondary proposer in other proposal(s): this will result in the declaration of ineligibility of the proposal submitted by this Main Proposer, and the person will be removed as secondary proposer from the other proposal(s);

- Secondary proposer is in more than one previously submitted proposal: this will result in the removal of this individual as secondary proposer from all proposal(s).

The Network of Proposers shall be composed of:

- At least seven (7) COST Full or Cooperating Members amongst which at least fifty per cent ( $\geq 50\%$ ) shall be from COST Inclusiveness Target Countries<sup>9</sup> (see also in Annex to the present guidelines the required minimum number of COST Inclusiveness Target Countries per number of COST Full or Cooperating Members represented in a proposal);
- At least forty per cent ( $\geq 40\%$ ) of individuals who are Young Researchers and Innovators during the calendar year of the collection date<sup>10</sup>.

The table below shows who can be part of a Network of Proposers as Main Proposer or Secondary Proposer by affiliation.

**Table 1:** Eligibility conditions to participate in the Network of Proposers by affiliation (✓ = Yes, ✗ = No).

Proposers affiliated in	Eligible as	
	Main Proposer	Secondary Proposer
A legal entity in a COST Full/Cooperating member	✓	✓
A legal entity in a COST Partner member	✗	✓
A legal entity in a Near Neighbour Country (NNC)	✗	✓
A legal entity in a Third State	✗	✓
Specific Organisations		
EU Institutions, Bodies, Offices and Agencies (EC/EU)	✓	✓
European RTD	✓	✓
International Organisations	✗	✓
Individuals with no affiliation to a legal entity	✗	✗

**AnnexPlease note:** No letter of intention is required from any of the institutions involved in the Network of Proposers (Main or Secondary Proposers). All proposers must have a registered and updated e-COST profile (<https://e-services.cost.eu>), and only one profile shall be used.

## 2.2. How to submit a proposal

Proposals shall be registered and submitted via a secure online tool designed for this purpose (e-COST). The online tool allows the Main Proposer to access, edit and submit the proposal until the Collection Date. The Main Proposer shall use only one e-COST user profile.

The proposal has a “**draft**” status until it is **submitted**. Once it is submitted, it may still be revised as many times as needed until the Collection Date. Only the last submitted version of a proposal shall be considered for evaluation.

<sup>9</sup> [Annex I – Level A: Country and Organisations table](#). NB: for the participation in the network of proposers, the ITC status of researchers and innovators from EU Member States Outermost Regions will be counted as the EU Member State they are linked to e.g., Guadeloupe will be counted as France (non-ITC), researchers affiliated in a legal entity in Azores will be counted as Portugal (ITC). The European Commission and EU bodies, offices or agencies, European RTD Organisations and International Organisations do not count as COST Full or Cooperating Members, independently of their geographical location in one of the COST Full or Cooperating Members

<sup>10</sup> see the [Glossary](#)

**N.B.: when being revised, the proposal reverts to the “draft” status. To be evaluated, it needs to be submitted again before the Collection Date.**

Only proposals having a “submitted” status will be evaluated. Please note that after the Collection Date, the data of submitted proposals are only available in “read” mode, hence none of its sections is transferable to another Open Call collection. The data of proposals which have not been submitted will be deleted after the Collection Date.

To avoid possible congestions of the e-COST platform, it is highly recommended to avoid submitting the proposal just before the submission deadline. The COST Association cannot be held responsible for any delay due to, for example, heavy internet traffic or connection difficulties.

A submitted proposal shall not be identical, not even in part, to another one submitted during the same collection. Should this occur, only the proposal which is submitted first shall be considered.

A COST Action proposal is composed of the following parts:

- General Features
- Technical Annex
- References
- Network of Proposers

Each part is explained in detail in Section 2.4.

All enquiries concerning the Open Call can be addressed directly from the “contact us” link in e-COST or by sending an e-mail to [opencall@cost.eu](mailto:opencall@cost.eu).

## 2.3. Eligibility and acceptability of proposals

In order to be evaluated, a proposal must comply with the **eligibility criteria** described in Section 2.3.1. Proposals may be declared ineligible at any stage of the SESA process. The Main Proposer is informed by the COST Association of the ineligibility of their proposal, upon which the Main Proposer may submit a redress request complying with the procedure described in Section 3.5.

Additionally, in order to be funded, a proposal must comply with the **acceptability criteria** detailed in Section 2.3.2. The compliance is assessed only for those proposals which are in the selection zone and are susceptible to be funded (Section 3.1.3). The Main Proposer is informed by the COST Association of the unacceptability of their proposal. The decision is not subject to redress.

### 2.3.1. ELIGIBILITY

**Please pay particular attention to this Section and to each one of the following eligibility criteria<sup>11</sup>.**

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

- Be submitted by an eligible Main Proposer who is not Main or Secondary proposer in any other proposal in the same Open Call;
- Be put forward by a network of proposers affiliated to legal entities from at least seven (7) COST Full or Cooperating Members, amongst which  $\geq 50\%$  shall be from COST Inclusiveness Target Countries, with proposers having a registered e-COST profile;
- Be put forward by a network of proposers with at least forty per cent ( $\geq 40\%$ ) of Young Researchers and Innovators<sup>12</sup> among its participants;

<sup>11</sup> See also [COST 101/21 COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation Selection and Approval](#), Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> see [Glossary](#)

- Have all of its sections, including the Technical Annex, submitted in e-COST (the Technical Annex shall no longer be uploaded as pdf, in e-COST)
- Contain neither links nor references to any additional information about the proposal beyond the Technical Annex (web link to pages describing the proposal, audio-visual material, etc);
  - Be written in **English**, the working language of the COST Association;
  - Be **anonymous, hence contain neither direct nor indirect reference** to the proposers and/or institutions participating in the network of proposers. This means that names of proposers or their institutions 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 etc. that are mentioned in the proposal, **irrespective of their size**. Examples resulting in ineligibility due to the breach of the anonymity criterion are provided here below.

**Table 2:** Examples of statements resulting in ineligibility due to the breach of the anonymity criterion.

<b>Examples resulting in ineligibility</b>
“Prof. Smith” will coordinate the Action activities within WG5 (direct reference)
“Several members of the proposers’ network have been involved in previous FP7 projects, like “XYZ” and “XYZ” , and institutions/organisations/networks/COST Actions, such as CAXXXXX” (indirect reference)
“Among government-run public services we have the Department of Health of “XXX” on board” (direct reference)
“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)

**Note on “References”:** In the “References” part of the proposal, you may quote proposers’ own publications, provided that there is no emphasis in the text (e.g., in bold/italics or with links) that the publication is authored by one or more of the proposers. Proposals can be declared ineligible at any time during the evaluation and selection procedure.

### 2.3.2. ACCEPTABILITY

COST Action proposals shall respect fundamental ethical principles as described in the [Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#) (COST 094/21) and in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity<sup>13</sup>, including **originality** of findings and ideas, and **peaceful** purposes of the addressed S&T challenges. As mentioned in Section 2.3, this check is performed only on those proposals that based on their score should enter the shortlist of proposals.

## 2.4. Proposal structure

The proposal for a COST Action is composed of the following parts:

- General Features including “Summary”
- Technical Annex
- References
- Network of Proposers

The instructions related to each part are given below.

### 2.4.1. GENERAL FEATURES

**Table 3:** General Features of the proposal to be filled in e-COST.

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<sup>13</sup> European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (<https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/>), Berlin, ALLEA – All European Academies (Version June 2023).

General Features
<b>Open Call Collection identifier (automatically filled by e-COST)</b>
<b>Proposal reference (automatically filled by e-COST)</b>
<p><b>Title</b> Mandatory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Max. 12 words</li> </ul>
<p><b>Acronym</b> Mandatory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only original acronyms should be adopted, i.e., not in use by any other public or private entity or research group, even if they are part of the Network of Proposers</li> <li>• Acronyms may only contain letters and numbers. The use of symbols is not accepted, with the exception of “-” and “@”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Summary</b> Mandatory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Max. 250 words</li> <li>• The summary is accessible to potential Independent External Experts when their availability is requested</li> <li>• The summary illustrates the challenge(s) that the Action is proposing to address and will be published on the COST website, should the Action be approved.</li> </ul> <p><b><i>Be brief, clear and “to the point”: illustrate your ideas in a concise manner and include what is the main</i></b></p>
<p><b>Key expertise needed for evaluation</b> Mandatory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum 1 key expertise and maximum 5 must be indicated from a drop-down list. Multiple choice selection of sub-fields to be chosen from six main S&amp;T fields: natural sciences, engineering and technology, medical and health sciences, agricultural sciences, social sciences and humanities.</li> </ul> <p><b><i>Please be aware that the key expertise(s) you provide in this section support the identification of relevant Independent External Experts evaluating the proposal.</i></b></p>
<p><b>Keywords</b> Mandatory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum 3 and maximum 5 keywords</li> <li>• Each keyword not exceeding 60 characters</li> <li>• These should exclusively refer to the S&amp;T content of the proposal, including techniques or methodologies used or developed and/or infrastructures involved. Keywords are separated by commas. Keywords may be composed by multiple words. Generic keywords, such as “interdisciplinary”, “research coordination”, “science” or “networking”, as well as their combinations, should be avoided as they bring no information on the specific expertise needed to evaluate the proposal.</li> </ul>

## 2.4.2. TECHNICAL ANNEX

The Technical Annex is composed of the following criteria:

- **Criterion 1. EXCELLENCE IN S&T AND NETWORKING**
- **Criterion 2. IMPACT**
- **Criterion 3. IMPLEMENTATION**

Follow the instructions provided and pay particular attention to the following:

- All parts of the Technical Annex shall be completed in the e-COST platform;

- The length of the Technical Annex shall not exceed **fifteen (15)** pages, roughly equivalent to 45,000 Characters;
- The Main Proposer can generate a pdf of the proposal at any time;
- The GANNT chart (section 3.D of the Technical Annex) is mandatory. Additional figures or tables can be exceptionally added to illustrate the text in other sections. They must be readable and shall not lead to exceed the maximum length of the Technical Annex;
- The **anonymity** criterion must be respected throughout the proposal.

The instructions to complete each criterion are listed below.

**Table 1:** The online form of the Technical Annex with annotations.

## **1. EXCELLENCE IN S&T AND NETWORKING**

### **A. Main challenge**

*Describe clearly and concisely the issue or need that the proposal aims at addressing. The main challenge can be of different nature: e.g., scientific, technological and/or societal. Describe also why and how it is relevant and timely.*

### **B. Objectives**

*Describe the objectives addressing the main challenge presented above and elaborate how they are relevant, concrete and achievable within the lifetime of the proposed Action.*

*The objectives shall entail both research coordination and capacity building objectives. Hereafter, we provide a non-exhaustive list of examples of research coordination and capacity building objectives.*

*Research coordination:*

- *Development of a common understanding/definition of the subject matter;*
- *Coordination of research methodologies;*
- *Coordination of experimentation or testing;*
- *Comparative analysis of data;*
- *Development of knowledge needing international coordination;*
- *Etc.*

*Capacity building:*

- *Fostering knowledge exchange;*
- *Bridging separate fields of science/disciplines;*
- *Enabling collaboration from different stakeholders, e.g., academia, industry, policy makers, NGOs;*
- *Etc.*

### **C. State-of-the-art**

*Describe how the proposal builds on the state-of-the-art and to what extent its approach and methodologies will advance the state of the art, including former and existing efforts (research projects, other networks, etc.) at European and/or international level.*

### **D. Rationale for choosing networking to address the main challenge**

*Demonstrate clearly and concisely why a pan-European network is the most appropriate approach to tackle the main challenge as opposed to e.g., a research project. This is important because COST funds networking activities and not research.*

### **E. Critical mass of the network**

*Elaborate how the proposed network has the critical mass and the range of expertise needed to address the main challenge and objectives. If this is not yet achieved at proposal level, describe a credible plan to grow the network and ensure meaningful engagement by all relevant participants,*

Please note that the COST Policy (Country coverage, gender balance and involvement of Young Researchers and Innovators) must not be addressed in this criterion.

## **2. IMPACT**

### **A. Impact related to objectives**

*Describe how the proposal aims to achieve realistic and innovative impacts. Impacts can be on science, society, policy, or any other relevant area, and short-, medium- or long-term. Also describe how the proposed Action will produce impact on research coordination and capacity building.*

### **B. Involvement of stakeholders**

*Describe the stakeholders targeted by the proposed Action and the tailored plans to involve the identified categories. Specify the role in which they will be engaged in the proposed Action, their added-value and the challenges you may face to include them.*

### **C. Communication, dissemination and valorisation**

*Describe the plans for communication, dissemination and valorisation of results and how they target the relevant audience (research community, policymakers, civil society, etc.). If relevant, please describe the exploitation plan and the targeted audience, including IPR<sup>14</sup>.*

## **3. IMPLEMENTATION**

### **A. Action Structure**

*Describe the different Working Groups, their interrelation and how they address the main challenge and contribute to achieve the objectives.*

*If the management structure entails additional roles beyond the mandatory COST Action ones, (i.e., Management Committee, Working Group Leaders, Action Chair, Vice Chair, Science Communication Coordinator, Grant Awarding Coordinator), please describe them here and explain how they are intended to address the main challenge and contribute to achieve the objectives.*

### **B. Work plan (tasks, activities and timeframe)**

*Describe the work plan (e.g., tasks, activities, milestones and timeframe) to address the main challenge and ensure the achievement of the objectives.*

*Please note that you do not need to provide a budget breakdown at this stage, since the budget is allocated to the approved Actions by the COST Association on the basis of specific parameters and subject to budget availability (see Section 1.2 of these Guidelines).*

### **C. Deliverables**

*Describe the proposed Action's major deliverables and their timeframe.*

*Deliverables are tangible outputs of the Action such as: reports, documents, technical diagrams, papers, publications, content for training schools, input to standards, best practices, white papers, etc.*

*COST Action networking activities (e.g., meetings, training schools, etc.) are not deliverables but means to achieve the objectives.*

### **D. Gantt chart**

<sup>14</sup> See [COST 094/21 Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

*Provide a Gantt chart of the time schedule for the different activities, tasks, milestones and deliverables according to the management structure of the proposed Action.*

#### 2.4.2.1. Writing Style Guide

The COST Association strongly recommends complying with the following, when writing the proposal:

- Check language and spelling;
- Use capital letters for COST-specific and Action-related expressions. A non-exhaustive list: COST Action, Action Chair, Action Management Committee, Working Group, Short-Term Scientific Mission (STSM), Training School, Core Group;
- Explain all acronyms, including those commonly used in the Framework Programme context;
- Use the term “Europe” or “COST Member Countries” when referring to the overall geographical scope of COST. “European Union” or “EU Member States” should only be used to refer to the EU as a player (“EU legislation”, “EU programmes”, “EU policies” etc.) or when only EU Member State(s) need to be explicitly mentioned, excluding COST Members that are not Member States of the EU;
- Use the terms “framework” or “scheme” when referring to COST (COST is an intergovernmental framework, not an “EU instrument”, although it is funded by the EU Framework Programme);
- Avoid pronouns such as “I”, “we”; rather use “the Action”;
- Avoid expressions such as “planned” or “proposed” when referring to the Action; rather use “aims at”, “will”, etc.

#### 2.4.2.2. Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The COST Association acknowledges the use of AI in compliance with the following:

- Proposers must be human beings;
- Proposers are fully and solely responsible for all content in the submitted proposal independently of how it was authored;
- Proposals are judged solely on the content submitted, independently of whether any Generative AI tools were used. Any undesired content produced by Generative AI tools is the responsibility of the proposers;
- Proposers should be aware that Generative AI tools may provide ideas that are not new, innovative or relevant;
- Proposers should be aware that Generative AI tools may suggest existing text fragments, provide incorrect information and otherwise generate content that may be interpreted as scientific misconduct.

#### 2.4.3. REFERENCES

**Table 2:** Online part of the proposal regarding the References.

References
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non mandatory but recommended;</li> <li>• Max. 500 words;</li> <li>• Section to list relevant references on the topic of the proposal. The list of references is displayed to the Independent External Experts.</li> </ul>

#### 2.4.4. NETWORK OF PROPOSERS

Please complete this part online taking into account the eligibility criteria described in Section 2.3 of these Guidelines.

In the “Network” part of the proposal, only the Main Proposer can encode the details of the Secondary Proposers by filling in the following mandatory fields:

- First name;
- Last name; and
- E-mail address.

By clicking on the “envelope” icon, an automatic notification is sent to invite the Secondary Proposer candidate. The Secondary Proposer candidate can accept the invitation by following the link communicated in the automatic notification. To do so, they must have an e-COST profile duly completed (user details and affiliation).

**N.B.: The email address used by the Main Proposer to invite the Secondary Proposer candidate must be the same as the one registered in e-COST under the Secondary Proposer’s profile.**

Based on the e-COST profiles of the Main and Secondary Proposers, only the following information on the Network of Proposers, automatically extracted and aggregated, will be displayed to the Independent External Experts.

**Table 3:**Part of the proposal regarding the Network of Proposers - Features.

Network of Proposers - Features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COST Inclusiveness Target Countries (%)</li> <li>• Number of Proposers</li> <li>• Geographic Distribution of Proposers</li> <li>• Gender Distribution of Proposers (% F, % M, % Other)</li> <li>• Number of Young Researchers and Innovators (% YRI)</li> <li>• Core Expertise of proposers: distribution by sub-field of Science</li> <li>• Institutional distribution of Network of Proposers</li> <li>• COST Full Members (number and list in alphabetical order)</li> <li>• COST Cooperating Members</li> <li>• COST Partner Member</li> <li>• NNCs (number and list in alphabetical order)</li> <li>• IPCs (number and list in alphabetical order)</li> <li>• European RTD Organisations</li> <li>• European Commission, EU Bodies, Offices and Agencies</li> <li>• International Organisations</li> </ul>

In case the Secondary Proposer is affiliated to a legal entity in a COST Full Member or COST Cooperating Member, they can indicate their interest to be considered by the COST National Coordinator (CNC) for nomination to the Action’s Management Committee (MC) either via e-COST when accepting the invitation or by contacting the [COST CNCs](#).

## **3. HOW COST PROPOSALS ARE EVALUATED, SELECTED AND APPROVED – CORE PRINCIPLES AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST RULES**

The SESA process fulfils three core principles: excellence, fairness and transparency. COST strives to avoid any Conflict of Interest (CoI)<sup>15</sup> and all those involved in the SESA process must commit to confidentiality.

### **3.1. Proposal Evaluation, Selection and Approval**

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<sup>15</sup> See [COST 101/21 COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval \(SESA\) – \(Level B\)](#)

As outlined in Section 1.3, the proposal Evaluation, Selection and Approval process **is divided into phases, which are described below.**

### 3.1.1. PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

#### **Individual Evaluation Report (IER)**

Three Independent External Experts carry out the remote peer-review evaluation.

They are identified and assigned to proposals on the basis of their relevant expertise, taking into account, among other factors, the Research Areas and keywords indicated in the proposals (see Section 2.4.1).

This phase follows a double-blind evaluation process, meaning that the identity of both the Independent External Experts and the proposers remain confidential. The evaluation is performed remotely. Each External Expert evaluates the assigned proposal individually and submits an Individual Evaluation Report for each proposal.

The table below presents the evaluation criteria, the respective range of marks and the thresholds.

**Table 4:** Evaluation criteria and range of marks per criterion.

<b>EXCELLENCE IN S&amp;T AND NETWORKING</b>	<b>IMPACT</b>	<b>IMPLEMENTATION</b>
Range of marks: 0 – 5 <b>Threshold: 3</b>	Range of marks: 0 – 5 <b>Threshold: 3</b>	Range of marks: 0 - 3
<b>RANGE OF MARKS AWARDED: 0 – 13</b>		

<b>Proposals failing to achieve the threshold either in “Excellence in S&amp;T and Networking” or “Impact” shall not be selected for funding.</b>
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The specific questions addressed by the Independent External Experts on each of the criteria are presented below.

#### **Criterion 1: Excellence in S&T and Networking**

- A. Describe to what extent the main scientific, technological and/or societal challenge is relevant and timely.
- B. Explain how the objectives are relevant to the main challenge, achievable within the lifetime of the proposed Action, concrete, and ambitious.
- C. Describe to what extent the proposal builds on the state of the art and explain to what extent its approach and methodologies will advance the state of the art.
- D. Describe to what extent the proposal demonstrates that establishing a pan-European network is the most appropriate approach in relation to the main challenge and objectives.
- E. Describe to what extent the proposed network has the critical mass and the range of expertise needed to address the main challenge and objectives. If not, describe to what extent the proposal presents a credible plan to grow the network and ensure meaningful engagement by relevant participants.

*Threshold: Good (3)*

*Scores: empty section (0), poor (1), fair (2), good (3), very good (4), excellent (5)*

## Criterion 2: Impact

- A. Describe to what extent the proposal aims to achieve realistic and innovative impacts. Impacts can be on science, society, policy, or any other relevant area, and short-, medium- or long - term.
- B. Describe to what extent the proposal identifies the relevant stakeholders and presents a clear and tailored plan to engage them in the Action activities.
- C. Describe to what extent plans for the communication, dissemination and valorisation of the results of the proposed Action are clear, attainable, and targeted to relevant audiences (research community, policymakers, civil society, etc.).

*Threshold: Good (3)*

*Scores: empty section (0), poor (1), fair (2), good (3), very good (4), excellent (5)*

## Criterion 3: Implementation

- A. Describe to what extent the work plan and the structure of the proposed Action (WGs, leadership structure, tasks, activities, timeframe, deliverables, and internal communication) appropriately address the main challenge and ensures achievement of objectives.

*No threshold*

*Please note that for this criterion there are only four possible scores: empty section (0), insufficient (1), standard (2), outstanding (3)*

### 3.1.2. CONSENSUS REPORT AND QUALITY CHECK

#### **3.1.2.1 Consensus Evaluation Report preparation and submission (CER)**

Before the start of the CER phase, one of the three Independent External Experts is appointed as Rapporteur. Following the submission of the Individual Evaluation Reports, the rapporteur is responsible for:

- Coordinating and facilitating the preparation of the CER remotely;
- Drafting the CER, ensuring that it meets the **quality standards established by COST**;
- Submitting the CER in e-COST before the deadline.

The experts should endeavour to reach a consensus, but the consensus shall not be imposed.

#### **3.1.2.2 Consensus Evaluation Report Quality Check**

The COST Administration is responsible for:

- Monitoring the timely submission of all CERs;
- Ensuring the final quality check of the CERs.

#### **3.1.2.3 Resolution Committee**

The COST Administration shall establish a Resolution Committee in charge of:

- Resolving divergences and inconsistencies in non-approved Consensus Evaluation Reports;
- Arbitrating any other issues identified in the Consensus Evaluation Reports that require formal resolution, typically when a change of mark is involved.

The Composition of the Resolution Committee shall be as follows:

- Head of Science Operations (Chair)

- Open Call Scientific Management Member(s)
- Science Officer(s) in charge of the concerned proposals
- External Expert(s) to guarantee the impartiality and integrity of the process, and to provide an expert opinion on the drafting of the proposed CER
- Legal Officer (when needed)

The Resolution Committee will endeavour to remain as limited in size as possible.

#### **3.1.2.4 Establishment of the shortlist of proposals**

The COST Administration shall:

- a. Establish the shortlist of proposals based on their score, excluding proposals which did not meet the thresholds on “Excellence in S&T and Networking” and/or “Impact” criteria;
- b. Report to the Scientific Committee on the outcome of the process described above, and the shortlist of proposals to be certified by the Scientific Committee.

### **3.1.3. PROPOSAL SELECTION**

The Scientific Committee shall assess the acceptability of proposals that could enter the shortlist of proposals and have been identified as potentially breaching the Rules and Principles for COST Activities. This is followed by the Scientific Committee making a recommendation to the COST Administration.

The Scientific Committee shall receive the shortlist of proposals, as well as relevant information on proposals.

The Scientific Committee shall check and endorse the shortlist of proposals for approval by the CSO. The shortlist of proposals consists of:

- a. proposals above the defined cut-off mark\* (hereafter ‘zone A’), and
- b. proposals with a score equal to the cut-off mark (hereafter ‘zone B’), ranked based on the following criteria applied sequentially:
  - i. Mark of the excellence criterion
  - ii. Mark of the impact criterion
  - iii. Mark of the implementation criterion
  - iv. Random selection (automated procedure) applied only as a final tie-break among the remaining equal proposals. Note: If the automated procedure cannot be used, a random selection will be run manually as an alternative option.

*\* The cut-off mark is the total mark of the N<sup>th</sup> proposal in the ranked list (sorted in decreasing order), with N being the number of proposals to be funded subject to available budget.*

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#### **3.1.4. PROPOSAL APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE OF SENIOR OFFICIALS (CSO)**

The final decision on approval and funding for new COST Actions is taken by the CSO, on the basis of the shortlist submitted by the Scientific Committee taking into account the available budget. The CSO may decide not to approve Actions selected through the process described above.

The Technical Annex of a proposal approved by the CSO will form the basis of the Action’s Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The procedure for starting a COST Action is described in the [Annotated Rules for COST Actions](#).

CNCs will receive the results either before or at the same time as the Main Proposers. The result of the evaluation and selection shall be made available to the Main Proposer via e-COST.

## **3.2. Conflict of Interest**

COST expects an ethical behaviour from all the participants in COST activities in accordance with the principles established in the [Rules and Principles for COST Activities](#).

Actors involved in the evaluation, selection and approval of proposals shall have only one role in the evaluation, selection and approval of a COST Action proposal and may not take any benefit from any Action approved under the particular Collection Date they participated in.

The present rules shall apply to all actors concerned by the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of COST Action proposals (Independent External Expert, Scientific Committee Members, CNC, and CSO Delegates).

In particular:

- Independent External Experts having been respectively involved in the evaluation and quality check of a proposal shall not be MC Member nor WG member 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, Scientific Committee Members, and CSO Delegates may not join any Action in any way during their mandate;
- A former CSO Delegate, CNC or Scientific Committee Member may not be MC Member, WG member, be invited for an *ad-hoc* contribution nor be Action Rapporteur in any Action selected or approved during their mandate.

Table 5 presents cases where a position shall be incompatible with submission, evaluation, selection and approval of COST Action proposals.

**Table 5:** Summary of the cases of incompatibilities marked with ✗.

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

### 3.2.1. CASES OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

**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 process (Independent External Expert 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 process (Independent External Expert 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 process (Independent External Expert and Scientific Committee Member):

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

### **3.2.2. DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

Before performing any evaluation, any actor involved in the evaluation or selection process (Independent External Expert and Scientific Committee Member) shall sign a declaration stating/accepting she/he:

- 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.

### **3.2.3. CONSEQUENCES**

Any actor involved in the evaluation or selection procedures shall immediately declare a Conflict of Interest. Failure to do so shall have the following consequences:

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

All cases of Conflict of Interest shall be recorded and, for nationally nominated actors (Scientific Committee Members), reported to the COST National Coordinator.

1. If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified before the evaluation starts:
  - the Independent External Expert may not participate in the evaluation/selection process in the ongoing collection and shall be replaced.
2. If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified during the evaluation:
  - the Independent External Expert shall stop evaluating/selecting in the ongoing collection and shall be replaced;
  - any comments and marks already given by the Independent External Expert shall be discarded.
3. 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.
4. If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified during the selection by the Scientific Committee, the concerned actor shall not participate in the discussion related to the proposal for which they have a Conflict of Interest.

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

### 3.3. Confidentiality<sup>16</sup>

Each actor involved in the submission, evaluation, selection and approval procedure (Independent External Expert, Scientific Committee Member, COST National Coordinator (CNC), Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) Member and COST Administration) shall:

- Treat 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;
- Process 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;
- Not disclose, directly or indirectly, confidential information or documents relating to proposals or proposers, without prior written approval of the COST Association;
- Not discuss any proposal with others, including other evaluators or staff not directly involved in evaluating the proposal, except during Scientific Committee meetings;
- Not disclose any detail of the evaluation process and its outcomes or of any proposal submitted for evaluation for any purpose other than fulfilling their tasks as evaluator;
- Not disclose the names of other experts participating in the evaluation;
- Not communicate with proposers on any proposal during or after the evaluation until the approval by the CSO.

Further, under no circumstances should the proposers contact any of the actors involved in the evaluation, selection and approval procedure regarding their proposal. Any attempt to do so may lead to immediate exclusion of the proposal from the evaluation, selection and approval process.

### 3.4. Feedback to proposers

The decision on proposals approved for funding by the CSO is communicated to the Main Proposers.

The Consensus Evaluation Reports resulting from the evaluation are made available to all proposers via e-COST.

### 3.5. Redress Procedure

In order to comply with the fairness and transparency principles of the COST evaluation process, the COST Association has established a redress procedure. The Main Proposer shall thereby have the possibility to submit a request for redress **within 15 calendar days** after being notified of the proposal non-eligibility and/or following the communication of the result of the evaluation.

Redress shall be allowed only in case of potential procedural shortcomings and/or factual errors, i.e., whenever:

- The Network of Proposers considers that the evaluation has not been carried out in accordance with the procedure set out in the current document;
- The Network of Proposers deems that the Consensus Evaluation Report bears factual errors.

**Requests for redress dealing with the expertise based assessment by the Independent External Experts shall not be admissible.**

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<sup>16</sup>See [COST 101/21 COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval \(SESA\) – \(Level B\)](#)

**Decisions on the compliance of proposals with COST's acceptability criteria (described in Section 2.3.2) shall not be subject to redress.**

The redress procedure may be initiated only by email to [redress@cost.eu](mailto:redress@cost.eu) by the Main Proposer who shall:

- indicate the proposal number and title;
- provide a detailed description of the alleged procedural shortcoming(s) and /or factual error(s).

The outcome of the redress procedure is definitive and communicated to the Main Proposer.

## 4. HONORARIA

Honoraria<sup>17</sup> shall be paid to the Independent External Experts and Resolution Committee External Experts involved in the SESA process as follows:

1. Independent External Experts: EUR 50
2. Rapporteurs: EUR 100
3. Resolution Committee External Experts: EUR 50 per proposal

## 5. DEFINITIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

The [Annex II](#)<sup>18</sup> of the Rules and Principles for COST Activities set the definitions of the terms and acronyms used in these guidelines.

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<sup>17</sup> See [COST 101/21 COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval \(SESA\) – \(Level B\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Annex II - Level A: Definitions and Abbreviations applicable throughout COST Implementation Rules - Glossary](#)

## ANNEX

**Table 6:** Required minimum number of COST Inclusiveness Target Countries per number of COST Full or Cooperating Members represented in a proposal.

<b>Number of COST Full or Cooperating Members</b>	<b>Minimum number of ITC</b>
7	4
8	4
9	5
10	5
11	6
12	6
13	7
14	7
15	8
16	8
17	9
18	9
19	10
20	10
21	11
22	11
23	12
24	12
25	13
26	13
27	14
28	14
29	15
30	15
31	16
32	16
33	17
34	17
35	18
36	18
37	19
38	19
39	20
40	20
41	21
42	21