



ISLAND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ACTION THROUGH RESILIENT SMEs

# I-STARS

## OPEN CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

### Grants Scheme for Tourism Businesses

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

Version 3.0  
13 November 2023

*Disclaimer*

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<b>GENERAL OPEN CALL INFORMATION</b>	
Project	Island Sustainable Tourism Action through Resilient MSMEs (I-STARS)
Funding Source	Single Market Programme (SMP COSME)
Call Budget	€700,000
Maximum Funding Per Project	€5,600
Minimum targeted number of awarded MSMEs	125
Funding rate of financial support	100%
Launch Date	19 July 2023
Deadline <b>(extended)</b>	<b>06 December</b> 2023, time 17:00 CET
Call Page	<a href="https://ccci.org.cy/istars-project/">https://ccci.org.cy/istars-project/</a>
Online Application Form	<a href="https://forms.ccci.org.cy/istarsgrants/">https://forms.ccci.org.cy/istarsgrants/</a>
Eligible countries	Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain
Local Implementing Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <a href="#">Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry</a> (Cyprus)</li> <li>➤ <a href="#">Network of the Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the European Union (INSULEUR)</a> (Greece)</li> <li>➤ <a href="#">Observatory on Tourism for Islands Economy</a> (Italy)</li> <li>➤ <a href="#">Mallorca Chamber of Commerce</a> (Spain)</li> <li>➤ <a href="#">Mallorca Turisme Foundation</a> (Spain)</li> <li>➤ <a href="#">Vagabond Tours of Ireland</a> (Ireland)</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Call Helpdesks</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Cyprus: tel. +357 22889840, <a href="mailto:istarscyprus@gmail.com">istarscyprus@gmail.com</a></li> <li>○ Greece: +30 2271041170, <a href="mailto:istarsgreece@gmail.com">istarsgreece@gmail.com</a></li> <li>○ Italy: tel. +39 3513064307, <a href="mailto:istarsitaly@gmail.com">istarsitaly@gmail.com</a></li> <li>○ Spain: tel. +34 971710188, <a href="mailto:istarsspain@gmail.com">istarsspain@gmail.com</a></li> <li>○ Ireland: tel. +353 874275822, <a href="mailto:istarsireland@gmail.com">istarsireland@gmail.com</a></li> </ul>

## 1. Background Information

### 1.1 I-STARS PROJECT CONTEXT



Island tourism-based development is at a crossroads. The unprecedented socio-economic impacts caused by the covid-19 pandemic and the still very uncertain future scenario of the newly emerging post-pandemic world have indeed pointed out how responsible governance and management of islands' natural resources and their tourism activities, addressing climate change impacts, the diversification of islands' economies, and the promotion of innovative and personalized tourist experiences are all necessary steps towards increasing islands' resilience in case of future economic downturn or health- and environment-related crises.

**Why islands?** The I-STARS project chose to target tourism **Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)**, especially those located on islands, which were ravaged by COVID-19, and which rely heavily on tourist inflows (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain), from any tourism related NACE class sector. Although tourism is often seen as the 'golden ticket' for the development of many islands, uncontrolled tourism growth poses potential threats and puts pressure on natural resources and on the quality of life of local communities. These aspects are particularly significant for islands, which due to geographic isolation, small size, and economy, are more vulnerable and in need of solutions to shift to sustainability. Some alternative-tourism islands have also fared better the socio-economic crisis by focusing on providing personalized, nature-based experiences to mostly domestic tourists, demonstrating that the 'smallness' factor also allows on the other hand for such regions to be flexible and willing to explore and up-take solutions for improvement, creating unique opportunities out of this ominous situation, as global tourism is picking up again.

Despite clear indications that global tourism is picking up again, there is here a unique opportunity for many islands to review the paradigm of the 'business as usual' tourism development.

**Why tourism MSMEs?** Tourism, on which islands are extremely dependent – and for some almost exclusively - was one of the hardest hit economic sectors by the pandemic. Tourism also depends on environmental resources with climate defining the length and quality of tourism seasons and with island destinations being more vulnerable to climate change impacts than other destinations and while 80% of all tourism takes place in islands and coastal areas. With MSMEs making up for

99.8% of tourism enterprises in the EU, the MSME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe, also identifies capacity building and support to MSMEs as a key factor for the transition to sustainability and digitalization. The I-STARS project recognising this emerging need, and that the quadriptych of sustainability (human, social, economic & environmental) is more important than ever, aims to provide impetus to the tourism ecosystem, especially on islands, ensuring that the recovery after the COVID-19 crisis is being leveraged for the twin transition (Green & Digital).

## 1.2 I-STARS PROJECT DESCRIPTION

I-STARS is a project co-funded by the European Commission under the **Single Market Programme (SMP)**, which aims at building a more resilient, innovative, and sustainable tourism ecosystem by taking at least 125 tourism MSMEs operating in Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Spain, and Italy, on a transformation 'journey', the 2030 journey to recovery and sustainability. At the same time, at least 300 MSMEs will be boosted as far as their development and capacity in sustainable innovations is concerned through free online courses.

Among the tourism industry, there is indeed still a lack of awareness of the tangible benefits of 'greening' the tourism ecosystem, by applying circularity actions that result in reduced costs in the long-term, tapping into profitable markets for low-carbon products and services, or promotion of businesses by using ecological labels. There is also a lack of sufficient skills and resources to develop business innovations around sustainability objectives and demand. Tourism actors need skills to understand the elements of environmental sustainability, but also to implement energy and resource efficiency measures, as well as how to deploy renewables on-site. In specific, the *Island Sustainable Tourism Action through Resilient MSMEs* project aims at monitoring the sustainability performance of at least 125 tourism MSMEs whilst boosting their awareness, development, and capacity in sustainable innovations.

The participating MSMEs will shift towards more sustainable and responsible management through the uptake of certification schemes, sustainability initiatives, digitalization, and the implementation of innovative solutions for sustainable tourism providing them with heightened resilience to shocks, enhanced social, economic, and environmental awareness and responsibility. Their skills and capacities in sustainable business practices will be significantly boosted via their participation in cross-sectoral webinars and the development of an innovative transnational e-learning space incorporating peer learning and knowledge sharing among tourism professionals and MSMEs. Their sustainability performance will be monitored and reported through the development of a relevant framework and indicators integrated in the participating MSMEs' business model before, during, and after being supported by the project.

## 1.3 OBJECTIVES

The I-STARS Grants for Tourism Businesses aim to assist Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), especially those operating on islands, from the tourism sector shift towards more sustainable and responsible management through the uptake of appropriate solutions ranging from resource management (energy, waste, water, carbon), sustainability initiatives, sustainability certification schemes to strategies and implementing measures, providing them as such with heightened resilience to shocks, enhanced social, economic, and environmental awareness and responsibility. MSMEs will receive customized services from Consultants<sup>1</sup>, experts on Sustainability, tailored to each individual MSME's particular case. The awarded grants shall boost tourism MSMEs awareness, development, and capacity to integrate sustainable innovations in their business practice, adopting sustainability, resilience and circularity as drivers of their competitiveness in the rapidly changing global tourism market scenario.

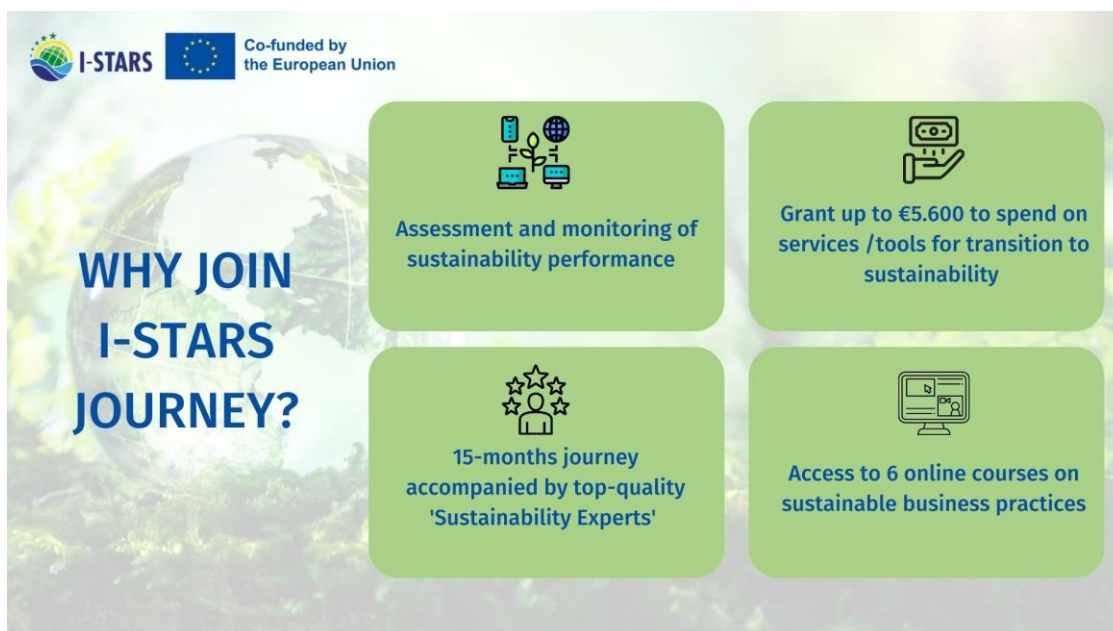
The Programme will directly work with at least 125 tourism MSMEs operating in 5 European countries (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain). These MSMEs will be boosted to become 'champions' of sustainability and inspire other MSMEs in their local contexts. The awarded MSMEs projects will contribute to build a more sustainable and resilient European (island) tourism sector.

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<sup>1</sup> An indicative list of Consultants has been compiled by the I-STARS consortium and is available [here](#).

This Guide for Applicants provides an overview of the approach and detailed information on how to participate in the I-STARS Open Call for Grants. Interested parties are requested to contact their country Call Helpdesk with any further questions.

## 2. Overview of the I-STARS Support Programme for Tourism Businesses



### 2.1 SUPPORT PROVIDED

The I-STARS Support Programme is divided in two (2) interconnected Phases, presented below.

#### Phase 1: Capacity Building / Training support

Six (6) online and interactive courses will be developed and made available for **free** through the I-STARS e-learning platform (<https://istars.talentlms.com/>), and will be compulsory for all successful/awarded MSMEs and available for free also for additional interested tourism enterprises. The courses will be cross-sectoral, self-paced online courses. The combined duration of the courses is approximately 30 hours broken down into 25 hours of online engagement in e-learning space + 5 hours of assessment quizzes. The courses will cover the following themes: (1) Energy management; (2) Waste Management; (3) Water management; (4) Food-waste management; (5) Stakeholder engagement; (6) Digital upskilling to record customer experience and feedback.

Phase 1 estimated implementation period: January – April 2024.

#### Phase 2: I-STARS Grants Scheme for Tourism Businesses (Financial Support to Third Parties through an Open Call for proposals)

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase of the I-STARS Support Program includes financial support of maximum **€5,600** per awarded tourism MSME. This financial support will be provided in the form of **grants** against the payment of services offered by Sustainability Experts, customized to each awarded MSME.

The customized support services under Phase 2 aim to enhance sustainability strategies and practices related to sustainable tourism for the MSMEs involved in the programme, providing direct support to at least 125 (island) tourism MSMEs selected through the present Call. Direct support will be provided to enhance sustainability, resilience, cooperation and competitiveness of the MSMEs.

**The MSMEs awarded the I-STARS Grants must complete their training in all six (6) online training courses (Phase 1 above)**



**within a 4-months period in order to be eligible to proceed with their customised support from Sustainability Experts.** MSMEs will also undertake a sustainability self-guided assessment (I-STARS Monitoring Tool). This assessment will measure the sustainability performance of MSMEs at two stages: **before** embarking on their sustainability journeys, and again at the **end of their journeys** to highlight the changes and improvements made during the journey.

Throughout their transition journey towards sustainability, awarded MSMEs together with their Sustainability Experts will be monitoring their progress and reporting to the Implementing Agency of their country, through a simple online form (template provided under Annex V).

Phase 2 estimated implementation period: May 2024 – July 2025 (maximum duration 15 months).

## 2.2 PROCEDURES RELATED WITH DIRECT FINANCIAL SUPPORT / GRANT (PHASE 2)

The financial support provided under Phase 2 will be offered to successful MSMEs in the form of **grants**.

Upon approval of their application under this Open Call, awarded MSMEs will sign the I-STARS Grant Agreement for Tourism Businesses (Annex IV) signed between the MSME and the local I-STARS Grant Implementing Agency. MSMEs will then commence their capacity building activities (Phase 1), which they must complete within a maximum period of four (4) months. Phase 2 can begin only if Phase 1 is completed.

Thereafter, the MSME will enter into an Agreement with their chosen Sustainability Expert(s) and the sustainability journey will begin, lasting a maximum of 15 months. During this journey, awarded MSMEs and their Expert(s) will be called to submit three (3) progress monitoring reports (3rd, 9th and 15th month of their journey) using a simple online form (template provided under Annex V). If a journey lasts less than 15 months, it will be commonly agreed together with MSME-Sustainability Expert and MSME I-STARS local Implementing Agency, so that a reduced number of monitoring reports will be delivered. Progress monitoring will aim to assess and verify that there is adequate progress in achieving the results and objectives of the awarded Grant, and the respective activities/services are delivered according to expectations on behalf of both the MSME and the Sustainability Expert.

Upon successful completion of the sustainability journey (Phase 2 activities), and the payment of the Expert(s) by the MSME, the MSME submits the final progress monitoring and financial report. Upon its approval and within a maximum of 30 working days after its submission, the I-STARS local Implementing Agency will proceed to deposit the approved grant amount in the bank account of the MSME.



### 3. I-STARS Grants Scheme for Tourism Businesses (Phase 2)

#### 3.1 AVAILABLE BUDGET

The overall indicative amount available under this Call is **€700,000**, equally allocated to each of the five following countries: Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain. The Implementing Agencies of this Call reserve the right not to award all available funds. If the allocation per country cannot be used due to insufficient quality or number of proposals received, the Agencies reserve the right to reallocate the remaining funds to the other countries. Additionally, after selecting successful applicants, in the case of any remaining funds these will be allocated to MSMEs in the reserve list, as per the ranking list (highest scored proposals first). Since this involves residual funds, the grant disbursed may differ from the budget requested in the submission of the proposal.

The financial support under this Call is provided in the form of **grants**. The awarded MSMEs can use the grants against the provision of services offered by Sustainability Experts/Service Providers, including the cost of purchase of Tools and/or Technology Solutions if necessary for the better uptake/adoption of sustainable business practices (**max. 20% of total grant amount**). For the full list of eligible activities and eligible costs please refer to *Sections 3.3.3 and 3.3.4* below.

The maximum amount of grant per applicant under this Call is set to be **€5,600**. There is no minimum amount.

Funding amounts to **100%** of eligible expenses up to a maximum of €5,600. No co-financing on behalf of the MSME is required. However, in case of any extra costs these will be co-financed by the awarded MSME.

Funding is awarded as a one-off payment, upon completion of the sustainability journey of each awarded MSME **and** after the **successful submission and approval of the final progress monitoring and financial report**.

Country	Total indicative available budget	Indicative Range of MSMEs per country
Cyprus	€140,000	12-40
Greece	€140,000	12-40
Ireland	€140,000	12-40
Italy	€140,000	12-40
Spain	€140,000	12-40
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>€700,000</b>	

#### 3.2 INDICATIVE TIMETABLE & DEADLINES

Timetable & Deadlines (indicative)	
Call opening	19 July 2023
<b>Extended</b> deadline for submission of applications	<b>06 December</b> 2023, 17:00 CET (Brussels)
Evaluation & Notification of results	November 2023
Signature of Grant Agreement	December 2023
Implementation period of Grant actions	May 2024 – July 2025
Payment of grant amount to awarded MSMEs	The latest within 30 working days after submission of final monitoring report including financial report

### 3.3 ELIGIBILITY

#### 3.3.1 Eligible Applicants

Who can apply for the I-STARS Open Call for Grants for Tourism Businesses? In order to be eligible, the applicant must:

- ✓ be a Micro, Small or Medium-sized Enterprise (MSME)<sup>2</sup>

COMPANY CATEGORY	STAFF HEADCOUNT	TURNOVER	BALANCE SHEET TOTAL
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ € 50 m	≤ € 43 m
Small	< 50	≤ € 10 m	≤ € 10 m
Micro	< 10	≤ € 2 m	≤ € 2 m

- ✓ have VAT registration number;
- ✓ have economic activity related to the tourism sector (see Annex VI for the full list of NACE codes)
- ✓ be in operation for at least 2 years (according to Company/Business Registration date)
- ✓ be established and operating in at least one of the following eligible countries (priority will be given to MSMEs established/operating in island regions of these eligible countries, but other eligible MSMEs from all across the territories of the indicated countries are also invited to apply, refer also to the Selection Criteria under Section 4.3):
  - Cyprus (areas controlled by the Republic of Cyprus),
  - Greece,
  - Republic of Ireland,
  - Italy,
  - Spain
- ✓ register on the I-STARS eLearning platform <https://istars.talentlms.com> **before** submitting their application under this Call.

#### 3.3.2 Exclusion criteria

Applicants which are subject to an EU exclusion decision or in one of the following exclusion situations that bar them from receiving EU funding can NOT participate:

- bankruptcy, winding up, affairs administered by the courts, arrangement with creditors, suspended business activities or other similar procedures (including procedures for persons with unlimited liability for the applicant's debts)
- in breach of social security or tax obligations (including if done by persons with unlimited liability for the applicant's debts)
- guilty of grave professional misconduct (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- committed fraud, corruption, links to a criminal organisation, money laundering, terrorism-related crimes (including terrorism financing), child labour or human trafficking (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- shown significant deficiencies in complying with main obligations under an EU procurement contract, grant agreement, prize, expert contract, or similar (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- guilty of irregularities within the meaning of Article 1(2) of Regulation No 2988/95 (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)
- created under a different jurisdiction with the intent to circumvent fiscal, social or other legal obligations in the country of origin or created another entity with this purpose (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant).

<sup>2</sup> [Commission Recommendation 6 May 2003](#) on the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. MSME has fewer than 250 employees and annual turnover below €50 million or balance sheet below €43 million.

### 3.3.3 Eligible Activities (Phase 2)

An awarded MSME can commence implementing Grant activities (Phase 2) only after completing the capacity building activities (Phase 1).

It is a prerequisite that awarded tourism MSMEs must conduct a Sustainability performance assessment **right before and straight after** funded activities, using the I-STARS Monitoring Tool (compulsory activity for all). This tool will be provided to all awarded MSMEs before their sustainability journey begins.

The I-STARS Grants can be used for the purchase of following activities/services/solutions:

- ✓ Preparation, application and audit fees for sustainability certification schemes (such as EU Ecolabel, EMAS, etc.)
- ✓ Development of a Sustainability Strategy Plan/s **AND** the implementation of measures leading to transition to sustainable business systems. This can include (non-exhaustive list):
  - Energy audits developing strategies to reduce energy use
  - Waste audits and management strategies
  - Food waste audits and management strategies
  - Water use audits and management strategies
  - Sustainability actions & mechanisms to transparently share sustainability relevant data and information for use by consumers, national tourism offices and other tourism actors
  - Corporate Social Responsibility strategy
  - Carbon management plan/strategy
- ✓ **Purchase of Tools or Software/Technology solutions** necessary to monitor and/or improve sustainability performance and **ONLY IF** they are derived from recommendations generated via the above reports such as certification schemes, sustainability strategies, OEF, etc. These solutions/tools must provide clearly identifiable added value to MSMEs in their business management. A non-exhaustive list of such solutions/tools could be water-conserving fixtures, water 'reducers', energy efficient lighting/motion sensors, waste management tools (e.g. composting units, etc.). **Costs under this category are allowed up to 20% of total grant amount**, while they must be authorized and approved by the I-STARS Grants Selection Committee.
- ✓ Organisation Environmental Footprint (OEF); including consulting, generation & implementation of recommendations of OEF studies.
- ✓ Training and capacity-building activities to empower staff of tourism MSMEs towards innovation and sustainability. **Costs under this category are allowed up to 20% of total grant amount**, in order to encourage more certification uptake.

**NOTE:** applicants can apply for more than one of the above-listed activities. If the cost of the action exceeds €5,600, then any extra costs will be co-financed by the applicant. The grant amount, however, cannot exceed €5,600.

### 3.3.4 Ineligible activities

The I-STARS Grants **cannot** be used for:

- Marketing or branding of products/services (including websites, e-commerce, mobile applications);
- Market research;
- Usual business consulting services, accounting or legal services;
- Tools and Software/Technology solutions not related to the improvement of sustainability performance of a MSME, nor included in the recommendations derived from sustainability assessments, sustainability certification schemes, and strategies/plans;

- Actions already completed;
- Actions commenced prior to the award of the grant;
- Actions financed by other programs, including EU, national/regional/local, international funding sources (double funding is strictly forbidden).

### 3.3.5 Eligible costs

Eligible costs are only those necessary for the realization of eligible activities under *Section 3.3.3* and supported by proof of evidence as follows:

- ✓ Costs for services provided by Sustainability Experts / Consultants [proof of evidence in the form of invoices, receipts, bank transfer of payment, report on activities and measures carried out, studies/strategies developed (e.g. OEF, Circular Economy, etc.)].
- ✓ Costs for acquiring sustainability certification with a third-party audited certification body – to include registration fees (valid within the co-financing period), training, support and third-party auditing (proof of evidence in the form of invoices, receipts, bank transfer of payment, copy of Certificate issued by Certification body, document proving application to acquire certification within the co-financing period).
- ✓ Costs for acquiring tools and/or software/technology solutions (proof of evidence in the form of photos, invoices, receipts, bank transfer payments); **up to 20% of total grant amount.**
- ✓ Costs for participation in training and capacity-building activities related to improvement of sustainability performance, including costs for travel, accommodation and/or participation fees (Agendas, boarding passes, accommodation invoice & receipt, invoices & receipts from training provider, bank transfer payments, copy of Certificate of attendance issued by training provider); **up to 20% of total grant amount.**

### 3.3.6 Ineligible costs

The following costs are **not** eligible:

- Debt and debt service charges (interest).
- Provisions for losses or potential future liabilities.
- Duties, taxes and charges, including VAT. VAT is eligible only in the case it is non-deductible by the MSME (in which case supporting evidence is required).
- Loans to third parties.
- Fines, penalties and expenses of litigation.
- Contributions in kind.
- Payments made in cash and/or cheque.

The grant under this Call does **not** constitute “State Aid” and as such is not to be taken into account for the calculation of the “**De Minimis**” rule.

## 4. Evaluation & Award Procedure

Evaluation procedure is carried out after the Call **extended** deadline of **06<sup>th</sup> December** 2023.

Evaluation takes place locally in each of the 5 I-STARS countries. Five (5) Evaluation Committees composed of 2 internal evaluators from each Consortium Partner are set up as follows:

Number of evaluators in each local Evaluation Committee	Responsible Organization	MSMEs applications evaluated
2	Cyprus CCI	<b>Cyprus</b> based MSMEs applicants
2	INSULEUR	<b>Greece</b> based MSMEs applicants
1 from MCCI + 1 from FMT	Mallorca CCI & FMT	<b>Spain</b> based MSMEs applicants
2	OTIE	<b>Italy</b> based MSMEs applicants
2	Vagabond Tours	<b>Ireland</b> based MSMEs applicants

Each local Committee is appointed after the close of the Call when all applicants are known.

Evaluators are independent of any applicant. They sign a 'Declaration of Confidentiality and of Freedom from Conflict of Interest' form.

### 4.1 EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCEDURE

EVALUATION & SELECTION PROCESS	
<b>Step 1</b>	<p><b>Admissibility and eligibility check.</b></p> <p>During this check, the following criteria will be assessed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the application deadline has been met.</li> <li>• If the application form is duly and fully completed in English language.</li> <li>• If the applicant is established/operates in the eligible countries: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Cyprus (areas controlled by the Republic of Cyprus),</li> <li>○ Greece,</li> <li>○ Republic of Ireland,</li> <li>○ Italy,</li> <li>○ Spain</li> </ul> </li> <li>• If the applicant is an MSME<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• If the applicant MSME is established/operates in the tourism sector (NACE Codes under Annex VI)</li> <li>• If the following documents have been submitted:</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> [Commission Recommendation 6 May 2003](#) on the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. MSME has fewer than 250 employees and annual turnover below €50 million or balance sheet below €43 million.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Annex I – Application Form (online form)</li> <li>✓ Annex II – Budget Form</li> <li>✓ Copy of official Company Registration Certificate, or other suitable official document proving the operation of an enterprise (registration date must be over 2 years)</li> <li>✓ Declaration of Legal Representative of the MSME (Annex III)</li> </ul>
<b>Step 2</b>	<p><b>Proposal qualitative evaluation.</b> Each local Committee member proceeds with recording their evaluation of each application on the evaluation form, using the Award Criteria specified below (<i>Section 4.3</i>). The total score derived from each evaluator is then calculated for each application.</p>
<b>Step 3</b>	<p><b>Ranking and selection.</b> Within a maximum of 15 working days from the closing date of the Call, each local Committee finalizes the evaluation of the received applications, generates a ranked list and selects the final 25 highest scored MSME beneficiaries, including a reserve list of 15 (total 40). The proposals in the reserve list may be accepted for funding in case of last minute drop-outs, underutilization of allocated funds and/or exclusion of some of the awarded MSMEs.</p> <p>The list of awarded MSMEs per each of the five countries will be developed (minimum targeted number of 125 MSMEs) and published on the I-STARS Call Page, as well as on the Implementing Agencies institutional websites.</p> <p>It will be aimed that a balanced number of tourism MSMEs from each of the countries will be awarded. In the case that the full amount of €5,600 per MSME will not be absorbed by the awarded MSMEs (this depends on the total cost of the actions), then more eligible MSMEs will be able to benefit from the I-STARS Grants Scheme.</p>

## 4.2 EXCLUSION CAUSES

### Causes that could lead to the exclusion of awarded MSMEs

(i) withdrawal from the selection process. In the case an awarded MSME decides to withdraw at any point in time, the MSME legal representative must notify in writing the local Implementing Agency of the Call.

(ii) Delay in signing and sending back to the local Implementing Agency the ‘Successful Applicants Letter’ and/or the Agreements with the Agency and chosen Experts. Following the evaluation of the applications, letters will be sent to successful and unsuccessful applicants. Successful applicants will receive a ‘Successful Applicants Letter’ which they must sign within a maximum of 14 calendar days, as well as the Agreements with their Experts/Consultants. If any of these are not signed by the specified date, Pre-Approval is cancelled and transferred to the next eligible MSMEs included in the reserve list.

The Evaluation Committees reserve the right to ask for additional information and/or supporting documentation – according to national requirements. Failure to provide such information/documents will result in the disqualification of the MSME application.

### 4.3 SCORES AND AWARD CRITERIA

Each local Evaluation Committee will evaluate independently the eligible applications and will assign individual and final scoring by ranking each criterion with marks between 0 and 5 (except Award Criterion 1.3) which will indicate the assessments as defined in the below grid. Half point scores are not given.

SCORE	DESCRIPTION
0 – None	The information requested is missing, incomplete or considered irrelevant or inadequate, compared to the specific criterion
1 – Poor	The information provided lacks relevant quality and contains significant weaknesses, compared to the specific criterion
2 – Fair	While the overall information provided broadly addresses the criterion, there are significant weaknesses
3 – Good	The proposal addresses the criterion well, although improvements would be necessary
4 – Very good	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although certain improvements are still possible
5 - Excellent	The information provided is clear, coherent and successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion in question

The award criteria based upon which applications will be assessed are the following:

Description	Score	Award criterion
<b>1. Motivation &amp; alignment with I-STARS project objectives</b>  <i>Applicants must demonstrate a clear set of objectives aligned with the definition of the I-STARS goals and objectives</i>	0-5 (min. 2/5)	(1.1) motivation for transition to sustainability
	0-5 (min. 2/5)	(1.2) relevance/alignment of proposed activities with Call eligible activities
	0 or 3	(1.3) tourism business established/operating on an island in at least one of the eligible countries
<b>2. Impact</b>  <i>Applicants must demonstrate the expected outcomes and impact the I-STARS Grant Scheme will have on their business, as well as on their local community and environment</i>	0-5 (min. 2/5)	(2.1) expected improvements/benefits on applicant's business to be gained as a result of receiving the I-STARS Grant
	0-5 (min. 2/5)	(2.2) contribution to the tourism sustainability of the island and level of replicability of the solution in the tourism industry



<b>3. Feasibility of transition towards sustainability</b>  <i>Applicants must demonstrate the applicant's team is committed to learn/grow and has the necessary skills and management experience to be able to implement the transition to sustainability</i>	0-5 (min. 2/5)	(3.1) level of commitment to complete the I-STARS journey;
	0-5 (min. 2/5)	(3.2) previous experience/level of readiness with sustainable solutions and/or certifications; (e.g. participation in sustainability seminars/trainings / past attempt to acquire sustainability certifications)
	0-5 (min. 2/5)	(3.3) level of interest in continuing/pursuing further sustainability after completion of I-STARS 2030 journey (e.g. examples of activities implemented towards protection of the environment, collaboration with local community, renewing certification labels, etc.)
<b>Overall score: .. /38</b> <b>Overall Min score 19; Max score 38</b>		<b>Remarks</b>

Using the overall scores of each application, the evaluators generate the ranked list of their country, and finally select the highest scored applications.

The criteria for the ranking for each list will follow the rules:

- Rule 1: The Applications will be ranked based on their overall score (sum of the criterion 1 to 8);
- Rule 2: In case following Rule 1 there are Applications in the same position, **priority will be given to the one submitted earliest.**
- Only proposals scoring equal to or over 19 points (overall threshold) will be considered; proposals scoring lower than 19 points will not be considered for funding.

## 5. Notification of Results

Following the evaluation of the applications, letters will be sent to successful and unsuccessful applicants by the local Evaluation Committee.

- unsuccessful applicants will receive the 'Call Results Letter' mentioning that their application was not successful, while an unsigned version of the evaluation report of their application will be enclosed.
- successful applicants will receive the 'Successful Applicants Letter', and within a maximum of 14 calendar days must sign the Agreement with the I-STARS local Implementing Agency, as well as the Agreement with their chosen Sustainability Expert/Consultant. If Agreements are not signed by the specified dates, Pre-Approval is cancelled and transferred to the next eligible applicant (taken from the reserve list).
- successful applicants put aside in the reserve list will receive the 'Reserve List Letter', should they be financed in case of last minute drop-outs, underutilization of allocated funds and/or exclusion of some of the awarded MSMEs.

## 6. How to submit an Application

- **Step 1:** read the Application Form, provided under Annex I only for reading purposes.
- **Step 2:** get in touch with Sustainability Experts of your choice and get a quote on their fees. You can consult the [I-STARS Sustainability Experts Directory](#), or you can identify your own. If you identify an Expert not already in the I-STARS Directory, please contact your local [Implementing Agency](#) who will evaluate whether that Expert is qualified

to carry out the proposed work and join the Directory.

- **Step 3:** register on the I-STARS eLearning platform <https://istars.talentlms.com>.
- **Step 4:** fill in and submit your Application Form online, by clicking [here](#). No other means of applications are permitted.

The application form will be submitted online with the following required supporting documents as attachments (PDF format):

- ✓ Budget Form (Annex II)
- ✓ Copy of official Company Registration Certificate, or other suitable official document proving the operation of an enterprise (registration date must be over 2 years). This Certificate can be submitted in original national language, if not available in English; a courtesy translation must be provided in such a case.
- ✓ Declaration of Legal Representative<sup>4</sup> of the MSME (Annex III) signed and dated by Legal Representative.

## 6.1 LANGUAGE

Applications must be submitted in English language only. Applications submitted in any other language will be deemed ineligible and will not be evaluated. As English is the official language of the I-STARS project, all communications, deliverables, and monitoring reports will be accepted only in English.

## 6.2 DEADLINE FOR APPLICATIONS

Applications must be submitted before the Call **extended** deadline **Wednesday 06<sup>th</sup> December 2023, 17:00 CET**. After this deadline, applications will be automatically rejected, and will not proceed to the evaluation stage.

Once the application is submitted and within 5 working days, applicants will receive a confirmation e-mail message (with date and time of application submission). If you do not receive this confirmation email, please get in touch with the I-STARS implementing agency of your country as indicated below:

<p><b>Call Helpdesks</b></p> <p><b>Local Implementing Agencies</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Cyprus:</b> tel. +357-22889840, <a href="mailto:istarscyprus@gmail.com">istarscyprus@gmail.com</a></li> <li>○ <b>Greece:</b> +30 22710 41170, <a href="mailto:istarsgreece@gmail.com">istarsgreece@gmail.com</a></li> <li>○ <b>Ireland:</b> tel. +353 874275822, <a href="mailto:istarsireland@gmail.com">istarsireland@gmail.com</a></li> <li>○ <b>Italy:</b> tel. +39 3513064307, <a href="mailto:istarsitaly@gmail.com">istarsitaly@gmail.com</a></li> <li>○ <b>Spain:</b> tel. +34 971710188, <a href="mailto:istarsspain@gmail.com">istarsspain@gmail.com</a></li> </ul>
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## 6.3 MULTIPLE SUBMISSIONS

A MSME applicant may **not** submit more than one application under this Call.

## 6.4 RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE BENEFICIARIES

### 6.4.1 Proper use of funding

The selected MSMEs are indirect beneficiaries of European Commission funding. As such, they are responsible for the proper use of the funding and must ensure to comply with obligations under Single Market Programme specific requirements.

<sup>4</sup> Legal Representative is known to be the person within the Micro, Small or Medium-sized enterprise (MSME) recognized as legally representing that enterprise.

#### 6.4.2 Promoting the action – visibility of EU funding

Selected MSMEs must promote the I-STARS project and its results by undertaking following activities:

- a. hanging up the poster on receiving financial support from EU funds in the company premises (design & layout provided by the project coordinator);
- b. publication on the MSME website or social media page on receiving financial support from EU funds, if available;
- c. publication of at least one social media post on the received financial support. In the event that the MSME does not have a website and/or social media account, then publication of at least one press release on the received financial support must be produced and disseminated widely to local/national media.

#### 6.4.3 Keeping records and supporting documents

Beneficiaries must — for at least 5 years after final payment from the EISMEA to the I-STARS Consortium — keep records and other supporting documents to prove the proper implementation of the action/obligations in line with the accepted standards in the respective field (if any).

### 6.5 ABSENCE OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Applicants shall not have any actual or/and potential conflict of interest with the I-STARS selection process and during the project implementation. Any attempt by an applicant to obtain confidential information, enter into unlawful agreements with competitors or influence the evaluation committees during the process of examining, clarifying, evaluating and comparing applications will lead to the rejection of its application and may result in administrative penalties.

I-STARS Implementing Agencies, their external experts, and their employees, cannot become a recipient of support via this Open Call.

### 6.6 DATA PROTECTION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

To process and evaluate applications, I-STARS Implementing Agencies will need to collect Personal and Organisation Data of the MSMEs. Each local Implementing Agency will act as Data Controller for data submitted through the Application forms for these purposes. Data is managed in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR). Each applicant will accept the Privacy policy terms to ensure coverage of GDPR provisions.

During implementation of the I-STARS Support Programme and for five years after the end of the programme, the parties must keep confidential any data, documents, or other material (in any form) that is identified as confidential at Service Agreement signing time ('confidential information').

Applicants shall disclose confidential information in their sole discretion if the applicants consider it necessary or desirable for the purpose of assessing the application.

If information has been identified as confidential during the financial support programme execution, the I-STARS Implementing Agencies will strictly apply confidentiality rules and will not use such information for any other purpose other than to meet the requirements and objectives of this Call.

As a requirement of the funding organization, the names of participating MSMEs will be published on the [I-STARS Call Page](#). Information/data will also be shared with the grant awarding body (European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA)), who may also publish general information accordingly.

## 7. List of Annexes

### 7.1 ANNEXES TO BE COMPLETED & SUBMITTED

**ANNEX I:** Application Form template (to be filled in and submitted ONLINE by clicking [here](#))

**ANNEX II:** Budget Form

**ANNEX III:** Declaration of Legal Representative of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprise (MSME)

### 7.2 ANNEXES FOR INFORMATION PURPOSES

**ANNEX IV:** I-STARS Grant Agreement model between MSME & I-STARS Implementing Agency (to be signed after the successful evaluation process)

**ANNEX V:** Monitoring Reporting templates for MSMEs & Sustainability Experts (to be filled in online after award and during sustainability journey)

**ANNEX VI:** Eligible NACE Codes