

BlueActionAA – Community-Led Pilot Action Call

Guidelines for Applicants

[Updated on 04 February 2026]

**EMPOWERING COMMUNITY-LED
ACTION IN THE ATLANTIC & ARCTIC**



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BLUEACTIONAA

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OPEN CALL FOR PROPOSAL

Call ID: Community Led-Pilot Action Call

Call description: The BlueActionAA community led call aims to mobilise and engage communities across the Atlantic and Arctic regions in ambitious efforts to restore and protect marine and freshwater ecosystems.

Call opening: 28/11/25

Call deadline: 29/05/2026, 14:00h Brussels Time (CET)

Call budget: EUR 7.000.000

Cascade Fund manager: European Science Foundation (ESF).

Expected duration of projects: 6-24 months

Maximum amount of funding per project: EUR 2.000.000

Weblink for further information: www.blueactionaa.eu

Contact:

- technical.support@blueactionaa.eu for technical questions concerning the submission platform /or the cascade call grant process
- info@blueactionaa.eu for any questions you might have related to topic specific questions, and

Open Call platform: for a first connection and creation of account: [ESF platform](#) (for the first connection and creation of profile).

For subsequent connections: <https://esf.smartsimple.ie>

All the Open Call documents and templates available for download at: www.blueactionaa.eu

1 Call Introduction

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide instructions to applicants submitting proposals for the **Community-Led Pilot Action Call (call reference BAAC-01)**, as part of the BlueActionAA project www.blueactionaa.eu.

These guidelines contain information about the timeline, the eligibility criteria, the evaluation procedure, and the submission requirements of this specific call.

It is important to note that the information presented in this document might not apply to subsequent or parallel calls launched by BlueActionAA. BlueActionAA is organising 3 calls in total:

- One Community-Led Action call (this call)
- Two Transition Agenda Calls (Call 1 is organized in parallel to this call, Call 2 will be launched later in 2026)

These guidelines are provided for information purposes only and are not intended to replace the **Sub-Grantee Agreement template**¹, where the framework of rights and obligations of the Contracting Parties for the development of the funded project are defined.

1.1 BlueActionAA Community-Led Pilot Action Call Description

BlueActionAA Community-Led Pilot Action Call (BAAC-01) is focused on **community-led actions**. Community-led actions are defined as regional and local communities engaged in collective collaboration for innovation and uptake, acting as agents of change and long-term impact.

BAAC-01 aims to mobilise and engage communities across the Atlantic and Arctic regions in ambitious efforts to make progress toward all of the objectives of the EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030" (*Mission Ocean and Waters*)².

¹ The Sub-Grantee Agreement is a key document that defines the rights and obligations between a project funded by BlueActionAA and the BlueActionAA consortium, as represented by the European Science Foundation. The proposed template can be found in Annex 3, at the end of this document.

² [EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters](#)

The EU Mission Ocean and Waters provides a systemic approach to restoring the health of the ocean, seas, and inland waters by 2030. The scope of the Mission is designed to:

1. protect and restore marine and freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity, in line with the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030,
2. prevent and eliminate pollution of our ocean, seas and waters, in line with the EU Action Plan Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil, and
3. make the sustainable blue economy carbon-neutral and circular, in line with the proposed European Climate Law and the comprehensive vision outlined in the Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy.

BAAC-01 is focusing on initiatives that pilot or implement innovative solutions aimed at achieving one or more interconnected Mission objectives within the Atlantic and Arctic basins. BlueActionAA will provide financial aid through cascading grants to organisations and consortia, as well as technical assistance and capacity-building resources to ensure effective and sustainable ecosystem restoration actions.

1.2 Call Objectives

Submitted project proposals to BAAC-01 shall demonstrably contribute to the following Mission Ocean and Waters specific objectives and targets:

- 1) ***Protect and restore marine and freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity, in line with the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030***
 - a. Protect a minimum of 30% of the EU's sea area and integrate ecological corridors, as part of a true Trans-European Nature Network.
 - b. Strictly protect at least 10% of the EU's sea area.
 - c. Restore at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers.
 - d. Contribute to relevant upcoming marine nature restoration targets including degraded seabed habitats and coastal ecosystems.

- 2) ***Prevent and eliminate pollution of our ocean, seas and waters, in line with the EU Action Plan Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil***

- a. Contribute to relevant upcoming marine nature restoration targets including degraded seabed habitats and coastal ecosystems.
 - b. Reduce by at least 50% plastic litter at sea.
 - c. Reduce by at least 30% microplastics released into the environment.
 - d. Reduce by at least 50% nutrient losses, the use and risk of chemical pesticides.
- 3) ***Make the Advancing a sustainable blue economy that is carbon-neutral blue and circular economy, in line with the proposed European Climate Law and the comprehensive vision outlined in the Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy***
- a. Eliminate greenhouse gas emissions from maritime economic activities in the EU and sequester those emissions that cannot be avoided (net zero maritime emissions).
 - b. Develop zero-carbon and low-impact aquaculture, and promote circular, low carbon multi-purpose use of marine and water space.

Project proposals are expected to help achieve the goals of the EU Mission, 'Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030,' and contribute to *at least one* of these objectives and targets within the Atlantic and Arctic basin area.

BAAC-01 aims to distribute a total of EUR 7,000,000 in the form of **lump sum grants**.

- **Expected project budget: EUR 200,000 to EUR 2,000,000**
- **Expected project duration: 6 to 24 months.**
- **Expected: Minimum 5 projects will be selected.**

The main focus of BAAC-01 is to ensure Long-Term Impact³. The long-term sustainability and impact of the proposed projects will be the most important criterion in the evaluation procedure (see also section 4.3 and 4.3.3).

³ **Impact** is defined as longer-term effects on society (including environment), the economy and science enabled by the outcomes of the project. Impacts are related/contributing to the Mission Ocean and Waters's objectives.

1.3 Timeline

1.3.1 Call open for Applications

- Opening date for call: **28/11/2025**
- Deadline for submission: **29/05/2026**, 14:00h CET.

1.3.2 Evaluation

- Evaluation period: **01/06/2026 – 29/09/2026**
- Results: The communication of the evaluation's final results will be on **30/09/2026**, marking the beginning of the BAAC-01 sub-agreement signing process. There will not be any prior disclosure of information about the evaluation process before that date.

Details on the process (criteria, evaluation panels etc.) can be found in Section 4 of this document.

1.3.3 Onboarding of Successful Applicants

- Sub-grant agreement signature: **01/10/2026 – 30/10/2026**
- Starting date of the projects: **2/11/2026**
- Expected winning projects Inception / Kick-off meeting: **2/11/2026**

2 Rules and conditions

2.1 Eligibility criteria

To be eligible for funding, the applicants must be legally established in one of the eligible countries listed in section 2.1.1, be a type of entity listed in section 2.1.2, and propose activities that are demonstrably contributing to the Mission objectives in the Atlantic and Arctic basin area (section 1.2 Call Objectives).

2.1.1 Eligible Countries

Only applicants legally established/registered in any of the following countries (hereafter collectively identified as the “Eligible Countries”) are eligible for funding:

- The Member States (MS) of the European Union (EU):
Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary⁴, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden; including their outermost regions⁵;
- The Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) linked to the Member States⁶;
- Horizon Europe associated countries at the time the BlueActionAA grant entered into force (01/09/2025)⁷.

While no restriction applies, lead applicants (project coordinators) are particularly encouraged from the following Atlantic/Arctic Basin countries and territories: France, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Norway, Iceland, Greenland, Faroe Islands, UK and Canada.

2.1.2 Eligible entities

The Target Groups (TGs) of the BlueActionAA calls are composed of public or

⁴ In the case of Hungary, although it is an MS of the EU, according to [Council Implementing Decision 2022/2506](#), no legal commitments should be entered into with any public interest trust established based on the Hungarian Law IX of 2021 or with any entity maintained by said public interest trust.

⁵ The outermost regions of the European Union are Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Martin, French Guiana, Reunion, Mayotte, Azores, Madeira, Canary Islands.

⁶ https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/overseas-countries-and-territories_en

⁷ See ‘Third countries associated to Horizon Europe’ and associated restrictions here: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/guidance/list-3rd-country-participation_horizon-auratom_en.pdf

private sector entities or other actors, as long as they are proposing activities contributing clearly to the EU Mission Ocean objectives (see section 1.2 Call Objectives). The following have been identified as the five main Target Groups:

1. Regional and local public authorities.
2. NGOs, foundations (public and private), professional associations, civil society and citizen associations, engaged in local development and nature conservation activities.
3. SMEs⁸ and Large Enterprises.
4. Cultural and Educational organisations.
5. Relevant EU Research Infrastructures, research organisations and academia.

As a *non-exhaustive* example, the types of entities eligible to apply may include:

- Port authorities (including inland ports).
- Fishing communities, aquaculture producers and other representatives of blue economy.
- Operators of various vessels [transport, tourism related, fishing, etc.].
- Local Action Groups⁹ described by the Community-Led Local Development strategies¹⁰
- Administrative bodies and/or communities with decision making authority responsible for Waterfront cities, islands or regions.
- Conservation communities.
- Tourism-related public and private companies, NGOs, public institutions.
- Maritime infrastructure operators (incl. offshore platforms and their operators).
- Locally based companies.

⁸ We follow the EC definition of a Small or Medium Sized Enterprise: An enterprise is any entity engaged in an economic activity, irrespective of its legal form. An SME has a) <250 staff head count and b) either a Turnover of ≤ € 50 million OR a Balance Sheet total of ≤ € 43 million (but not necessarily both). More can be found on this link: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/smes/sme-fundamentals/sme-definition_en

⁹ [URBACT - Homepage | urbact.eu](http://urbact.eu)

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/guidelines/2014/guidance-on-community-led-local-development-in-european-structural-and-investment-funds

Please note that small and community-based organizations are explicitly welcome to the BAAC-01 call. Evaluation will focus on proportionality (e.g. size of project relative to capacity). A reminder that the possible requested budget is between 200,000 and 2,000,000 euros.

Also note that BlueActionAA will offer webinars to applicants (planned for January 2026) as well as offering support via our helpdesk (technical.support@blueactionaa.eu).

2.1.3 Consortium composition and application obligations

- To be eligible for funding, a consortium needs to have at a minimum 2 partners from different Target Groups represented (see section above “Eligible Entities”). It is not possible to apply as a single entity.
- Consortia applying for a BAAC-01 grant can have up to a maximum of 12 partners.
- At least one consortium member must have an established link with the local and regional communities that the project is associated with (for example, through local projects or by operating in the locality/region).
- Specifically for Target Group 5 (Relevant EU Research Infrastructures, research organisations and academia): BlueActionAA aims to fund community-led and impact-oriented actions rather than academic research-driven projects. Therefore, applications focused on academic research may not be considered eligible.
- BlueActionAA partners (or their affiliate entities or employees) are not eligible for this call.

2.2 Expected outputs

The applications submitted to this BAAC-01 Community Led Call are expected to foster a participatory approach, mobilizing a broad set of actors that take meaningful actions and supports long-term commitment to the protection, restoration and de-pollution of our ocean, seas and waters and to making the sustainable blue economy carbon-neutral and circular.

Applications should focus on implementing innovative solutions that go beyond the state of the art and that can combine, as appropriate, a combination of: technological, nature-based, social, cultural, regulatory, and financial innovations, as well as possible new governance models.

Applicants are expected to demonstrate measurable¹¹, verifiable¹², and ambitious¹³ progress towards reaching at least one or, whenever possible and applicable, several interlinked objectives and targets set out in the Mission

¹¹ Measurable progress denotes quantifiable achievements related to the project's objectives, which can be tracked and reported.

¹² Verifiable progress denotes progress that can be confirmed or substantiated via the achievement of milestones or achievements that can be validated by external reviewers, either through documentation (i.e. reports) or Key Performance Indicators.

¹³ Ambitious progress is taken to mean projects with challenging goals that try to go beyond the current state of technology, knowledge of societal conditions.

Ocean and Waters (see section 1.2 Call Objectives).

- The chosen focus of the proposed projects should depend on which objective(s) are considered most urgent for the communities dealing with specific conditions and realities in a particular area.
- If feasible, addressing several objectives in a clear and convincing manner, will be seen as an advantage.
- Attracting additional financing from Structural Funds or any national, regional, local programmes or private funding at any stage of the community-led pilot actions is strongly encouraged.

Examples of potential outputs, expected in the BlueActionAA community-led call: Digital innovation, ocean or freshwater observation, monitoring or restoration, data sharing, circular blue economy, cultural heritage and identity, skill development, citizen science and ocean literacy, conservation and environmental protection, tourism, maritime infrastructure and transport, energy production, partnership and network etc.

Applicants are encouraged to cooperate with scientific institutions to stimulate *transdisciplinary*¹⁴ innovation activities, which are based on best available science practices. Technological, social and/or political innovations can be considered in order to match innovative ideas with social needs.

It is important to highlight that the main focus of this BlueActionAA Community call is applied research and long-term impact creation for communities, rather than pure knowledge creation.

Projects are encouraged to build on existing applied research and innovation developed by projects financed under the current and/or previous EU framework programmes and other relevant EU and national programmes, linking also to the Mission Implementation Platform^[5], and where applicable, make use of Copernicus/Galileo/EGNOS and EMODNet.

2.3 Financial Support

The total budget available for this BlueActionAA Community call (BAAC-01) is

¹⁴ Transdisciplinary activities denote cooperation of diverse societal stakeholder groups (administration, civil society, business & industry, finance, etc.), not only across academic disciplines ('interdisciplinary').

7,000,000 (seven million) Euros.

The amount to be awarded **per project** is between **EUR 200,000 and EUR 2 million**.

The duration of projects is expected to be between **6 months and 24 months**.

It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that the requested amount is proportionate to the project duration and sufficient to achieve meaningful impact. Emphasis will be given during evaluation on the proposed project's "value for money" offer and appropriate alignment of the timelines, resources and requested budgets.

The maximum amount of funding granted to a single organisation under this call cannot exceed EUR 500,000. This applies to each beneficiary in the consortium, rather than the consortium as a whole. **Organisations can receive grant aid only once from BlueActionAA¹⁵**.

The financing provided for each funded project is determined through a lump sum scheme, taking into account the requirements specified in the call text and the duration of the project (see sections 3.1.3 and 3.2).

The amount requested by the respective participants must clearly be specified in the budget breakdown and must respect the maximum funding per organisation (see 3.4.2).

The grant is awarded to the project coordinator only.

Please note that grant payments are linked to completion of milestones and deliverables, not to actual cost evidence. There will be no financial reporting required from the projects. Payments will be cross checked vs deliverables and milestones identified in the proposals and agreed between the project and the BlueActionAA team, during the kickoff meeting between BlueActionAA and winning projects.

The eventual distribution of the funds to co-applicants will have to be

¹⁵ BlueActionAA aims to release three calls; one call for Community-led Actions (total budget €7,000,000) and two calls for Transition Agendas (total budget €2,000,000; €1,000,000 for each call). An organisation can apply to all three calls but can only receive financial support once, either as part of a Community-Led Action or Transition Agenda Action. See section 2.8 for further details on rule around multiple submissions.

managed by the project coordinator. In that case, a consortium agreement or equivalent must be signed between the project coordinator and the co-applicants, outlining, amongst others, the distribution of the funds to the consortium from the coordinator. A template consortium agreement can be provided at the time of project launch upon request and is available via the project website (www.blueactionaa.eu).

Despite the lump sum scheme, the initial budget request in the proposal *must* be broken down according to the application form budget template, for all partners in the proposal. Reviewers will check that the budget provided matches the activities described in the proposal, as this is an evaluation criterion (see section 3.3 Proposal Selection and Evaluation).

2.3.1 Budget categories

The total budget will be given to the sub-grantee project coordinator as a lump sum, meaning it will cover any type of expenses (travel, personnel, equipment, overheads etc.).

If the amount requested for capital costs (costs related to the acquisition, construction, or major improvement of fixed assets needed for the project. These include expenses on investment in tangible assets such as buildings, machinery, equipment, and infrastructure required for the implementation of the project) exceeds 30% of the total grant request, clear explanations must be provided within the proposal as to the reason why this needs to be so.

Overheads may be included as eligible costs up to a maximum of 25% of eligible direct costs.

Please note that the costs incurred by beneficiaries:

- must be in line with beneficiaries' usual accounting practices.
- must be reasonable / not excessive.
- must be in line with the proposed activities.

The BlueActionAA consortium reserves the right to come back to the applicants with a request for budget adjustments in case the review process identifies issues that might warrant such a request. For example, if the requested budget includes purchase of equipment or a service that the evaluation review considers not aligned with market practices, BlueActionAA might request the

project to align with the market value before signing off.

2.3.2 Subcontracting

Subcontracting is allowed. Nevertheless, subcontracting is strictly prohibited for core/essential tasks. Primary responsibilities associated with the project must be undertaken and carried out by the team members described in the proposal. It is essential to maintain a clear understanding that the core tasks should not be delegated to external entities or subcontractors. The team should possess the necessary expertise and capacity to fulfil these crucial obligations to ensure the successful execution of the Project.

Examples of core tasks that cannot be subcontracted: Project Management, full work packages or essential tasks the produce core deliverables to the project etc.

Examples of allowed subcontracting: specialist technical services, translations, external facilitation, etc.

2.3.3 Mandatory Budget categories

All projects are requested to reserve budget for the following (effort quoted is an indication, projects might need to make adjustments):

- Communication: Project should foresee work engaging with the BlueActionAA consortium in order to promote project results and communicate outputs to networks and meetings identified in cooperation with BlueActionAA. Visual, video and audio content will be requested from each project. *Estimated budget needed: 5 days.*
- Site visits: The BlueActionAA consortium will require all BAAC-01 projects to accommodate a site visit from BlueActionAA representatives. The intended visit shall take place during the middle of the project with a duration of *1-2 days*. Projects will be requested to allocate staff time to engage with the BlueActionAA representatives. BAAC-01 representatives will cover their own travel expenses.
- Long term impact is the main focus of the BlueActionAA grants. Projects should reserve budget for collaboration with the impact assessment

team of BlueActionAA and the creation and monitoring of suitable KPIs and collection of data to verify reaching the KPIs. Estimated budget needed: 10 days.

- **Networking and Coordination:** Projects must commit to participate in the community led and thematic cluster meetings organized by the BlueActionAA team which will take place during their implementation period. These may include any attendance at the European Ocean Days and associated Mission Ocean events or BlueActionAA events to present the project during the implementation of the project as well as after the end of the project. These coordination activities will take place approximately every six months. Participation in the relevant meetings during the project's implementation period is required and will be facilitated (but not financed) by the BlueActionAA clustering and networking team. *Estimated budget needed: at least 1 meeting/ 6 months.*

2.3.4 Consequences of underperformance

Underperformance or no delivery on proposed and agreed results, KPI's and outputs will result in reduction of the total amount to be paid. Evaluation of the state of play for the outputs will take place during the mid-term reporting of the project (if applicable) and the final report and review. The timing of the reviews per project duration can be seen in the next section.

2.3.5 Indicative distributions of the funds

The following tables identify the standard payment milestones and necessary output to achieve them, linked to the payment milestones. Project payments will be disbursed in various stages depending on the project's duration, contingent upon meeting designated milestones or KPIs and delivering specific outputs.

6 Months Project	Deliverables	When	Funding (% of total)
<i>Milestone 1</i>	Implementation plan & KPIs definition, initiation meeting	M1	20%
<i>Milestone 2</i>	Final review Impact analysis Communication plan delivered	M6	80%

12 Months Project	Deliverables	When	Funding (% of total)
<i>Milestone 1</i>	Implementation plan & KPIs definition, initiation meeting	M1	25%
<i>Milestone 2</i>	Mid-term review	M6	50%
<i>Milestone 3</i>	Final review Impact analysis Communication plan delivered	M12	25%

18 Months Project	Deliverables	When	Funding (% of total)
<i>Milestone 1</i>	Implementation plan & KPIs definition, initiation meeting	M1	30%
<i>Milestone 2</i>	Mid-term review	M9	40%
<i>Milestone 3</i>	Final review Impact analysis Communication plan delivered	M18	30%

24 Months Project	Deliverables	When	Funding (% of total)
<i>Milestone 1</i>	Implementation plan & KPIs definition, initiation meeting	M1	35%
<i>Milestone 2</i>	First review	M8	20%
<i>Milestone 3</i>	Second review	M16	20%
<i>Milestone 4</i>	Final review Impact analysis Communication plan delivered	M24	25%

In case there is an exceptional need for different payment milestones, applicants need to state the rational and provide alternative payment milestones in the proposal to justify a variation. This will be considered during evaluation, and the reviewers will assess necessity and feasibility.

2.4 Signing the Sub-Grantee Agreement

Once a project has been selected for funding, the Project Coordinator will be required to sign a dedicated Sub-Grantee Agreement with the BlueActionAA Consortium, represented by the European Science Foundation. This Agreement will clearly state the amount granted to the project and the payment conditions.

It is important to note that the funds attached to the Sub-Grantee Agreement come directly from the funds of the Horizon Europe Project BlueActionAA, which has been funded by the European Commission with the Grant Agreement Number 101215504.

The Sub-Grantee Agreement represents a significant commitment from both the BlueActionAA project and the sub-grantees who will receive funding. The relationship between sub-grantees and the European Commission through the BlueActionAA project carries a **set of obligations for the sub-grantees** with the European Commission. These obligations will be outlined in the Sub-Grantee Agreement, which the selected applicants will need to review and agree to. It is the responsibility of the sub-grantees to ensure that they fulfil these obligations, and the BlueActionAA consortium partners will provide guidance and support as needed.

All applicants are advised to carefully review the sub-grantee agreement template (Annex 3) to ensure that they can meet their obligations in order to receive the funding and successfully carry out their project.

2.5 Technical Assistance

BlueActionAA offers successful FSTP grant recipients targeted technical assistance based on individually requested and pre-agreed support. The details of the technical assistance will be developed through bespoke technical assistance plans developed between the recipients and the BlueActionAA Consortium.

Technical assistance will be primarily facilitatory in nature, the intention being that the Consortium, based on its expertise and networks, can ensure that successful FSTP grant recipients have the support, advice and guidance to meet the aspirations and goals of the project and the BlueActionAA overarching vision.

The specifics of individual technical assistance and mentoring needs will be determined through an iterative approach conducted during the application process. BlueActionAA’s technical assistance thematic range covers the areas shown in Figure 1 and may include both social and natural science domains in line with the Mission objectives in the Atlantic and Arctic lighthouse area (e.g., training in monitoring methodology, stakeholder engagement, cost-benefit assessments etc.).



FIGURE 1: BLUEACTIONAA’S TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AREAS

To facilitate a needs-based approach, applicants must outline the barriers and challenges they foresee in their proposals. Applicants must identify expertise gaps in their application and address those either by:

1. Engaging relevant external experts that cover specific needs of the project (partnerships and/or subcontracting).
2. Specifying the needs for assistance from BlueActionAA, noting that assistance from BlueActionAA will be limited and targeted on specific items.
3. Expressing a desire to join the BlueActionAA technical assistance mentoring programme.

The BlueActionAA Technical Assistance Mentoring Programme is designed to connect experienced technical experts with community-led action project members in a structured, ethical, and empowering way. Mentors act as guides, role models, and collaborators, helping communities strengthen both their technical capacity (e.g., ecological monitoring, project management, stakeholder engagement) and their inner development capacities (Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating, Acting), which are essential for systemic change. Opportunities within this framework may include structured learning dialogues, experimentation to test readiness, and knowledge transfer from research and practice into community contexts.

A clear indication of the need for technical assistance will allow BlueActionAA to outline tailored assistance programs for each successful project to be formally agreed upon in a dialogue meeting before the grant contract signature.

Technical assistance will be allocated based on the total number of projects funded, their complexity, scale, scope, and duration.

2.6 Language

English is the official language for the BlueActionAA.

Submissions done in any other language will not be eligible and will not be evaluated. English is also the official language during the whole execution of the BlueActionAA funded projects. This means that all the communication and materials will be in English, and all documents and deliverables will only be accepted if in English.

2.7 Documents Format

Unless otherwise stated in specific questions of the application form (**see Annex 1**), any document requested in any of the project phases must be submitted electronically in **PDF format without restrictions for printing**.

2.8 Funding limits (*this section has been updated in January 2026*)

Applicants can only receive funding once from BlueActionAA.

Where an entity participates, and is approved for funding, in more than one submission under the BlueActionAA calls, the applicant will be required to choose the submission under which they wish to receive funding. Once an applicant commits to a winning project, they are no longer eligible to receive funding under any subsequent or other BlueActionAA call.

An applicant cannot receive financial support of more than EUR 500 000 under the Community Led Pilot Action call (funding restrictions per applicant also apply to the Transition Agenda calls).

2.9 Absence of conflict of interest

It is important to note that BlueActionAA consortium partners, their affiliated entities, employees, and permanent co-operators are not allowed to submit a proposal and therefore to receive any financial support through the open calls, as this would violate the European Commission's regulations.

Applicants will be asked to declare that they are not receiving other EU grants to perform work included in their proposal and that they are not submitting or intending to submit a proposal to other EU grants that contain whole or partial work included in their BAAC-01 application (see Application Template).

2.10 Ethical Issues

BlueActionAA strictly adheres to the fundamental ethical principles outlined in the "[European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#)." To ensure compliance, all applicants are required to acknowledge and accept our privacy policy and declaration of honour (ethics) during the submission process. This acknowledgment confirms that, by submitting the form, they accept the terms described in the text provided. No additional documents need to be uploaded; applicants are solely required to read and agree to the terms outlined when submitting the form.

All applicants must thoroughly review and assess their applications for any potential ethical issues before submission. Failure to comply with the ethical guidelines outlined in the "European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity" could lead to disqualification of the application. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that all applicants take the necessary steps to ensure that their proposals meet the highest ethical standards.

During the evaluation process, **the BlueActionAA may verify whether the self-assessment declaration aligns with the contents of the application.** In cases where clarification is needed, the BlueActionAA consortium reserves the right to contact the beneficiaries.

If an applicant indicates that their application may have **ethical issues**, an ethics review will be conducted, in addition to the technical evaluation (see section 4.3). Applications that fail to adequately address ethical concerns or privacy aspects will be rejected. Applicants will be able to expand on possible ethical issues of their project in the Application Form (for example: working with vulnerable communities, collecting personal data etc.). See the Application Form Template, "Ethics and Compliance" section.

In case an additional ethics review is needed, for projects that may require so, an additional evaluator, specialising in ethics, will be contacted to perform an ethics review that will be submitted together with the technical evaluation to the Review Panel (section 3.3). Applications that fail to adequately address ethical concerns or privacy aspects will be rejected.

Tools created through BlueMissionAA such as the [Responsible and Sustainable Research Reflection Tool](#), the [Market readiness and societal value evaluation frameworks, Recommendations for future development of Smart Specialisation Strategies](#) and [Roadmap and recommendations for training and transfer activities to market](#) are available to support applicants during the application process.

2.11 Data Protection

BlueActionAA requires access to Personal and Entity Data to process and evaluate applications. As open call coordinator, ESF will act as the Data Controller for all data submitted through its SmartSimple platform for this purpose. To ensure the safety and security of this data, the SmartSimple

platform has been designed and operates under strict compliance with The General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR). Therefore, all applicants are required to accept the SmartSimple Platform terms to ensure full coverage. For more information regarding the data privacy policy and security measures implemented by SmartSimple, please refer to the [website](#).

Data submitted and collected by ESF, as the data controller, will be retained for up to 5 years after the end of BlueActionAA project, to comply with obligations for possible audits and checks. For more information regarding the data privacy policy and security measures implemented by SmartSimple, please refer to the [website](#). For data protection questions, please contact: database@esf.org. ESF's own privacy and data protection policy can be consulted [here](#). BlueActionAA Privacy Policy is available here: <https://blueactionaa.eu/privacy-policy/>

2.11.1 Data Sharing

Applicant and Application data will be shared with the BlueActionAA consortium, the proposal evaluators, the ethics advisor (if applicable) and potentially the European Commission officers responsible for the BlueActionAA project.

3 Application submission process

The submission must be done through SmartSimple, the official online submission platform of BlueActionAA: for a first connection: [ESF platform](#) (for the first connection and creation of profile).

For subsequent connections: <https://esf.smartsimple.ie>

Only applications received through this platform will be considered eligible.

Explanations on how to submit an application via SmartSimple are available in Annex 2.

An editable template of the application form is available on Annex 1 to allow offline preparation.

The application deadline is **29/05/2026, 14:00h Brussels Time (CET)**

3.1 Application preparation

For the successful submission, applicants are strongly advised to follow these steps:

- Read these guidelines to get familiar with the call conditions and process and to determine if your organisation is eligible for the programme.
- Only apply via the official submission platform.
- Make sure to answer all the questions in the application and submit all required documents as specified in the Application Template.
- Only use the provided templates for the documents that need to be submitted (namely the Application Template (Annex 1))

The lack of any of the documents or their presence in different format from the ones specified may result in an ineligible proposal.

In addition, note that certain documents - which will be required for each applicant selected for the programme and signing a sub-grantee agreement - may take time to acquire. It is highly advisable that you read the Section: *Sub-grantee agreement preparation* and take into consideration the time needed

to obtain these documents.

- Be concrete and concise. Open questions have character limitations. Please examine all the open call documents and attend at least one of the various online events promoting the call
- Only the submission within the Open Call duration will be accepted. There will not be any deadline extensions unless there is a Force Majeure situation (i.e., a major problem with the platform caused by the BlueActionAA consortium and not by the applicants, making the system unavailable for a long period).
- It is strongly advised not to wait until the last minute to submit your application, in order to mitigate the risk of unexpected technical issues arising during the submission process.

3.2 Error in a submitted application

3.2.1 Rebuttal only for technical and administrative issues

If the applicant discovers an error in a submitted application or aims to improve the application, and provided the call deadline has not passed, the applicant may submit a new version. For this purpose, the applicant must contact the BlueActionAA helpdesk (technical.support@blueactionaa.eu) to re-open the application. Please be aware that once it is opened, the applicants should submit the form again before the deadline. Failure to resubmit will result in the proposal not being evaluated.

Resubmission requests will be answered up to two hours before the deadline. Resubmission requests submitted after this time will not be considered.

3.3 Proposal Evaluation and Selection Process

The application deadline is **29/05/2026**, 14:00h CET. The application process (see Figure 2 below) is described in the following sections.

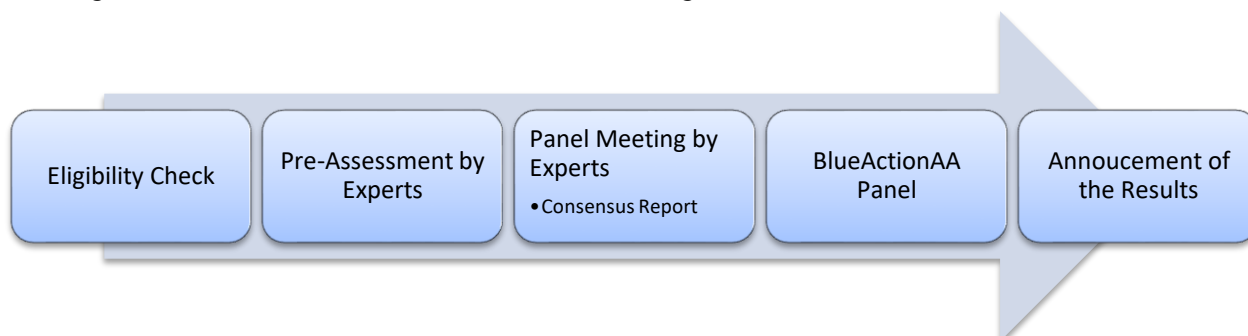


FIGURE 2: EVALUATION PROCESS TIMELINE.

3.3.1 Eligibility check

An automatic filtering to discard non-eligible proposals will follow the shortlist below. Eligibility criteria checks will verify:

- a) Applicants should be a legal entity registered in an EU Member State or a Horizon Europe associated country (section 2.1)
- b) All the required fields in the online application form and all documents uploaded are correctly completed.
- c) The alignment with the BlueActionAA call objectives.
- d) The uniqueness of the proposal (proposal not already funded in the BlueActionAA project and/or any other project to avoid double funding).

At the end of the evaluation process non-eligible applications will receive a rejection email presenting the reasons for rejection. No further feedback on the process will be given.

3.3.2 Pre-assessment

The applications that pass the eligibility check will undergo experts' evaluation by an external evaluation board. The board will review each proposal and score it in evaluation criteria (Excellence, Impact and Implementation). The board will work remotely.

TABLE 1: BLUEACTIONAA PROPOSAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Criterion	Score (max 15)	Evaluation Focus
Excellence	5/15	Clarity and feasibility of objectives; Relevance to the Mission Ocean objectives; Gender and Diversity Dimension; Ethics and Compliance
Impact	5/15	Impact KPI definition and monitoring strategy; Community engagement and empowerment; Scalability, replicability and long-term continuity;
Implementation	5/15	Complementarity and roles of consortium partners; Quality and feasibility of the work plan and timeline; Allocation and justification of resources (budget, personnel, equipment); Risk assessment and mitigation measures; “Value for money” of the proposed actions.

Applications will be evaluated by two external evaluators: one Lead Reviewer and one Secondary Reviewer. The evaluators will be selected by a dedicated call for evaluators. They will be independent of the organisations involved in the consortium and of any third party applying to the open call. Absence of any conflict of interest (CoI) in regard to the proposals to be reviewed, will be checked prior to the assignment of the reviewers, by the BlueActionAA consortium. The check will consist of current or prior affiliations with entities involved in the proposal under examination.

In case of ethical issues present in the proposed project, a separate ethics evaluator will also review the proposal (see section 2.10).

The evaluators will sign a declaration of confidentiality concerning the contents of the proposals they read. The evaluation form includes a declaration of freedom from conflict of interest, which evaluators confirm by signing. All evaluators will receive the evaluation guidelines, templates, and will be duly informed about the timing of the process and conflict of interest issues.

The evaluators will score each criterion on a scale from 0 to 5:

TABLE 2. CRITERIA SCORE DEFINITION

Score	Definition
0	Proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.
1	Poor – criterion is inadequately addressed or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
2	Fair – proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
3	Good – proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
4	Very good- proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
5	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

The total score will be calculated as a sum of the score of the 3 different criteria.

3.3.3 Panel Meeting and Consensus report

Once all projects have been evaluated, all evaluators will meet in a panel meeting to discuss the applications and establish a ranked list. In case of large number of applications, several panel meetings might take place, based on appropriate subgroups of the applications (i.e. focus area etc.).

During the review panel meetings (teleconference), each application will be presented by their reviewers and discussed by the full panel. Each application will be presented by the Lead Reviewer who will introduce both pre-assessments (his/her and the Secondary Reviewer). Based on the discussion, the review panel will agree on a final score for each application and produce a ranked list of applications.

Threshold conditions: Excellent, Impact and Implementation criteria must receive at least a mark of 3/5 each, so that the application can pass the overall threshold (9/15).

Proposals that pass the threshold will be considered for funding following the ranking list, within the limits of the available call budget. Other proposals will be rejected.

In case of proposals in the same position priority will be given to proposals that have higher score on the Impact award criterion. If that does not resolve the

issue, the secondary priority criterion will be the score of the Excellence criterion. If this also does not resolve the situation, the panel Chair will call for a panel vote on how to position the two applications relative to each other.

If several review panels are organised due to a large number of applications, a **panel Chair meeting will be organised**. Chairs of the different panels bring results of their respective topical panels together. They will agree on the overall ranking (i.e. rankings from each panel) and make final technical selection decisions.

At the end of the evaluation process all proposals will be ranked based on their scores.

The reviewers assigned for each application will then produce a **consensus report**, summarising the panel discussions. Narrative comments (no scores, no ranking) from the consensus reports will be communicated to the applicants.

3.3.4 BlueActionAA Panel

The BlueActionAA panel will agree on prioritisation of the FSTP fund distribution to proposals based on the ranked list, with the following considerations:

- 1) Ensure a **good geographical balance** of the funded projects based on:
 - geographical representation. No more than 2 projects per eligible country (see section 2.1). This criterion looks at which regions/countries the projects target rather than consortium composition.
 - equitable allocation of funding across Atlantic and Arctic nation states. Minimum threshold: 25%, i.e. each Basin should be allocated a minimum of 25% of the FSTP funds. This considers the countries the consortia partners are based in.
- 2) Ensure **Mission objective coverage**. The three main objectives of Mission Ocean are seen in section 1.2. At minimum, there should be at least one project per Mission Objective.

The Panel will also ensure that Applications are not already funded within another Mission Ocean CSA Open Call. To achieve this, BlueActionAA will coordinate with the other Mission Lighthouse community led cascade calls to:

1. Avoid duplication of projects

2. Avoid double funding
3. Support collaboration between similar projects
4. Initiate signposting and matchmaking between related successful projects in the different Mission Lighthouses

BlueActionAA Panel Process:

1. The ranked list (project and consortium composition) is communicated to the other Mission Ocean CSA open calls evaluation teams. If consortia partners are identified that are part of multiple proposals and with similar scope/tasks, an investigation will be conducted to ensure that duplication of projects and double funding is avoided. If such cases are identified, the project partners may be asked to select only one of the CSA calls and will be removed from the other.
2. The remaining projects in the ranked list are categorized based on their target areas, basin focus, budget, Mission Ocean Objectives. Projects with multiple target areas and/or coverage of objectives are included in all respective categories.
3. Starting with the highest ranked project and moving down the list, the BlueActionAA panel will select as many projects as the available FSTP funding allows.
4. If the criteria of “good geographical balance” and “Mission Objective coverage” are NOT met, the *lowest selected* ranked project in the list will be deselected and the project immediately after that (which was not initially selected) will be selected.
5. Step 4 will continue, moving down the ranked list, until the criteria are fulfilled. Step 4 will not select proposals that have NOT reached the minimum threshold for inclusion.
6. If step 5 does not resolve the issue, the process will repeat from Step 4, but with 2 projects deselected this time and moving down the list by 2 projects at a time.
7. At the end of the above steps, and if there is remaining budget (i.e. the deselection of projects released budget), the ranked list will be revisited to see if allocation of the available funds is possible.

At the end of the process, the BlueActionAA Panel will formally approve a list of

proposals within the limits of the available funding.

The winning proposals will be invited to sign the sub-grantee agreement (**see Annex 3**) and participate in the programme.

3.3.5 Announcement of the results

All applicants will be informed about the evaluation process: non-eligible, under threshold, approved but not selected, selected.

Each applicant will receive via email the decision and the following steps (if applicable).

An Evaluation Summary Report (ESR), which includes the reviewer consensus report and administrative data about the project, will be provided to the coordinator of each proposal.

3.4 Appeal process

The appeal process only concerns technical/administrative matters (i.e. eligibility criteria, submission process etc.). Scientific evaluation results are not open to appeal. If, at any stage of the evaluation process, the applicant considers that the results of the eligibility checks are incorrect and have failed to comply with the rules of the call and/or that their interests have been prejudiced as a result of errors in the submission process, the following appeal procedure will be implemented.

If there is clear evidence of a shortcoming that could affect the eventual funding decision, it is possible that all or part of the proposal will be re-evaluated. Complaints should also be made within five working days since the evaluation results are sent to the applicants.

As a general rule, the BlueActionAA consortium will investigate the complaints with a view to arriving at a decision to issue a formal notice or to close the case within no more than twenty working days from the date of reception of the complaint, provided that all required information has been submitted by the complainant. Where this time limit is exceeded, the BlueActionAA team will inform the complainant by email. If a definitive response cannot be given at that stage, this reply will indicate that a definitive response will be provided within 5 additional working days. The BlueActionAA consortium does not

undertake to engage in any further discussion about the evaluation of the proposal beyond the definitive response.

Only one request for appeal per proposal will be considered by the consortium.

4 Contact information

BlueActionAA offers a dedicated support channel available for applicants. This will provide two functions; (1) A topic helpdesk focused on providing technical expertise support services on specific topic queries, and (2) A technical helpdesk for cascade call grant process questions.

Please contact info@blueactionaa.eu for any questions you might have related to topic specific questions.

In case of technical questions concerning the submission platform SmartSimple (operated by ESF) and/or the cascade call grant process please reach out to: technical.support@blueactionaa.eu

Requests will receive a response within 2 working days of their submission. While all possible effort will be made to respond in a timely manner, the teams should plan their submissions, accordingly, allowing enough time before the deadline (i.e., at least 2 working days prior) if they expect an answer. Please note that any email received outside the designated support channel will not be taken into account.

Lack of receipt of an answer to an inquiry shall not constitute grounds for an extension or re-evaluation of a proposal.

In addition to the support channels above, there is a collection of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) made available on the website. This will be continuously updated from the questions received through the support channels

A series of online information sessions for interested parties will be organised. BlueActionAA will host application workshops/webinars to guide potential applicants on how to prepare and submit strong proposals.

Two webinars will be based on the technical application process and are scheduled for:

- Process information session/webinar 1 – 22nd January 2026¹⁶
- Process information session/webinar 2 – 12th February 2026

In addition, a minimum of 4 topic specific webinars will be hosted. The specific content of these webinars will reflect the information received through the EOI process. The EOI process is scheduled to run for 3 months and the call for EOIs will be open between 28/11 – 27/02. Post the closure of the EOI consultation the following webinars¹⁷ will be held:

- Thematic information session/webinar 1 – 12th March 2026
- Thematic information session/webinar 2 – 19th March 2026
- Thematic information session/webinar 3 – 26th March 2026
- Thematic information session/webinar 4 – 02nd April 2026

The BlueActionAA Consortium working alongside National Contact Points is identifying further opportunities to host nationally focused information events.

¹⁶ This date was changed on the 19th of December 2025

¹⁷ The dates of the thematic webinars was changed on the 22nd of January 2026. Follow our website (<https://blueactionaa.eu/>) to stay tuned and updated on further changes to these dates.

5 Annexes

Annex 1: Template of the application form

Annex 2: Technical Guidelines – Platform Guidelines for Applicants

Annex 3: Sub-Grantee Agreement template

Annex 4: Declaration of COI for reviewers

Annex 5: Reviewer Evaluation Form



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