



Horizon Europe - The EU Framework Programme  
for Research and Innovation  
running from 2021 to 2027

# **Minimum standards and Guiding principles**

for setting up systems of

## **National Contact Points** (NCP systems)

under Horizon Europe

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# **Minimum standards and guiding principles**

## **1. Context**

National Contact Points (NCPs) are support structures that have become an essential component in the implementation of successive Framework Programmes. They provide information and on-the ground advice to potential applicants and beneficiaries, through the project life cycle, in their own language, in a manner that would be impossible for the Commission and its Agencies acting alone.

A system of NCPs will be established for Horizon Europe, building on the experience of previous Framework Programmes. To promote equal and consistent support, this document provides a common reference for all participating countries.

## **2. Mission**

As highly professional support services, NCPs operating nationally will form an essential component of Horizon Europe implementation. They will have a key role in delivering the programme's objectives and impacts ensuring that it becomes known and readily accessible to all potential applicants, irrespective of sector or discipline.

## **3. Key principles and minimum standards**

For the national NCP systems:

- a. The system of NCPs will be established, operated and financed under the responsibility of the Member States and Associated Countries. While acknowledging different national circumstances, the relevant national authorities will ensure compliance with these minimum standards and guiding principles, including sufficient administrative capacity and performance monitoring. Member States and Associated Countries can designate more than one individual per NCP.
- b. Member States and Associated Countries may adapt and extend the NCP structure to national/regional<sup>1</sup> circumstances, but any such modifications will not form part of the commonly recognised system.
- c. Robust rules for ensuring confidentiality and for avoiding conflicts of interest should be established, in accordance with national law. In accordance with national law, systems should be in place to ensure that confidential information that comes into the possession of NCPs is treated accordingly.
- d. A national NCP Coordinator will collaborate with the national authority in the operational management of that country's NCP system. In doing so the

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<sup>1</sup> Including outermost regions, if applicable.

Coordinator will maintain an overview of the national system, to ensure overall operational consistency. The Coordinator will also liaise with the Commission coordinating services on cross-cutting questions that are not covered by other NCPs (See Annex 1). The Coordinator is also the contact person for general questions on partnerships and missions that are not covered by other NCPs.

- e. A Horizon Europe dedicated web portal will be established by the relevant national authority in every country, building on existing web portals as appropriate. The portal will include relevant EU visual identity, essential references, and clear links to all the relevant national support services (which may themselves be subject to distinct web sites). The portal will provide a single entry point for all participants, including SMEs, and particularly those new to EU programmes. The Commission will ensure that EUROPA (Funding & tender opportunities Portal) provides direct links to the national portals.
- f. The Commission will facilitate the organisation and operation of the NCPs, provide coordination and training where necessary, and help ensure compliance with the minimum standards and guiding principles.
- g. The Commission will ensure support for NCPs inter alia through regular meetings before calls, training and coaching. The Commission will also strengthen dedicated support structures and facilitate trans-national cooperation among them, as indicated in the Horizon Europe Specific Programme.
- h. Cooperation with the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) will be set up in each country, taking into account national circumstances. This will include provisions for a one-stop-shop service for SMEs, particularly newcomers, directing potential applicants to the most appropriate service.
- i. Third Countries are also invited to nominate NCPs in line with the common structure.

For each NCP<sup>2</sup>:

- j. The work of NCPs will be guided by the principles of transparency and equal access to calls under Horizon Europe.
- k. The work of NCPs should be independent and not be partial to the interests of individual stakeholders.
- l. NCPs should be supported within their respective host organisations or by their national authorities in terms of staff and equipment (e.g. IT) to a level commensurate with the scope of the mandate, and the size of the potential constituency.
- m. The NCP service should be accessible by e-mail and phone during working hours, with appropriate back-up arrangements in the case of absences (e.g. functional mailbox).

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<sup>2</sup> Because of their specific role, not all of the provisions of this document apply to the NCPs for the Joint Research Centre (See Annex I for more details).

- n. Every NCP should be fully conversant with the objectives, principles and content of that programme part for which they are the nominated specialist. NCPs should at least be aware of opportunities provided by related programmes (see Annex III), and be familiar with the relevant sources of advice in the country concerned (e.g. Managing Authorities).
- o. NCPs should be knowledgeable about all aspects of Horizon Europe beyond their specialist area, thereby allowing effective signposting in line with the principle of 'no wrong door' (effective communication channels and cooperation activities within the national NCP networks and the relevant services of the Commission should be established).
- p. In line with the collaborative nature of EU programmes and with the goals of the European Research Area, NCPs should be ready to participate actively in transnational networks. They may act as trainers or as trainees as appropriate.
- q. All NCPs will establish mutually supporting relationships with the EEN in their country, in accordance with the national arrangements.
- r. NCPs should be good communicators, and be able to adapt methods as necessary, taking into account the diversity of actors that make up their constituency.

#### **4. Core functions of a NCP**

##### *Informing and awareness raising*

- a) Circulate general and specific documentation on the Horizon Europe, including on conditions for participation, on possibilities and conditions for submission of proposals, and on project budgeting and reporting.
- b) Organise information and promotional activities – in liaison with the Commission services when appropriate - e.g. info-days, seminars, conferences, newsletters, web sites, brokerage events, fairs, etc.
- c) Raise awareness of:
  - Horizon Europe funding opportunities offered through the pillars of the programme and the specific parts such as Clusters, Missions, Partnerships, and EIT KICs, newly established activities of the European Innovation Council in Horizon Europe, especially the equity funding mechanism of the Accelerator;
  - The objectives to ensure gender balance in Horizon Europe and of strengthening the link between science and civil society;
  - The activities of the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the in-house science service of the Commission, to relevant national stakeholders from the scientific community, industry and public authorities.

##### *Assisting, advising and training*

- d) Assist researchers and organisations, in particular new actors and SMEs, with a view to increasing and improving their participation in Horizon Europe.

- e) Assist in partner search activities notably by using internet based tools, co-operation networks, EEN partnership services for SMES, etc.
- f) Advise on administrative procedures, rules and issues (e.g. role and responsibilities of participants in a consortium, costs, rights and obligations of participants, ethical rules and for the principles laid down in the Commission Recommendation C(2005)576 on the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for their Recruitment).
- g) Advise participants, in particular smaller organisations and SMEs, on the setting up of appropriate management and legal structures in projects with large budgets or numerous participants.
- h) Explain the scope and the modalities of types of action foreseen in Horizon Europe.
- i) Organise courses and training sessions (both physical and virtual) on Horizon Europe where appropriate, for intermediaries and information multipliers to ensure high quality of advice.
- j) Where appropriate, organise courses and training seminars for specific target groups on specific topics (legal aspects, modalities for participation, research and innovation areas, financial rules, Open Science practices and FAIR<sup>3</sup> management of digital research outputs, etc.).

#### Signposting and cooperation

- k) Signpost to other business support network services those potential participants who require assistance, for example on general EU matters or matters relating to internal market, technology transfer, intellectual property rights (IPR), standardization bodies, or regional development (see Annex III).
- l) Strengthen cooperation between NCPs within the network by promoting joint activities (see Annex IV).
- m) Signpost to national/regional funding services and programmes and to Missions, European Partnerships and programme level collaboration among research funders.

### **5. Cooperation between NCPs and Commission services**

The Commission considers NCPs to be important partners in the implementation of Horizon Europe and the main structure for providing practical information and assistance to potential participants. NCPs are ambassadors for Horizon Europe, perceived as true and impartial partners of the Commission Services and its Agencies. The NCPs shall be the main interface between the Commission, its Agencies and the applicants. The direct contact between the Commission, its Agencies and the NCPs shall be ensured to facilitate a good communication and ensure standard high level of support to NCPs.

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<sup>3</sup> Fair, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable

## Main interactions

The Commission will:

- a) Establish an efficient, up-to-date information channel (meetings, mailing lists, newsletters, webinars, alerts, newsfeed, CIRCABC) between the Commission, its Agencies and the NCPs.
- b) Provide in-time general and specialist in-depth information for the appropriate performance of the NCPs at the earliest<sup>4</sup> on:
  - a. Relevant changes in the Funding & tender opportunities Portal,
  - b. Roadmaps, work programmes and upcoming calls,
  - c. Changes in priorities or administrative procedures, particular provisions related to externalised bodies,
  - d. Statistics of calls and evaluations (including the externalised measures) and other relevant information on funded projects, striving for equally high quality of information flow throughout,
  - e. Instruments and tools for promoting the calls (brokerage, proposal templates, guide for applicants),
  - f. Other European R&I - programmes in all areas of the programme in the field of research and innovation (see Annex III).

In particular, after the applicants' information of their evaluation results, the Member States and Associated Country NCP Coordinators will receive, information on the proposals and their outcome; NCPs in third countries will receive aggregated data.

- c) Invite NCPs to:
  - a. Regular NCP meetings at least once a year<sup>5</sup> (mixture of physical and on-line<sup>6</sup> meetings to provide information and specific trainings if needed),
  - b. Information and awareness actions related to the activities that are organised by the Commission services and its Agencies,,
  - c. Thematic conferences and seminars which the programme directorates organise,
  - d. Specific actions related to the implementation of missions and partnerships.

The Commission will reimburse their travel and subsistence costs, according to the Commission rules and policy. NCPs from third countries will not be reimbursed.

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<sup>4</sup> Before the release to the general public when possible.

<sup>5</sup> Depending on the foreseen calls and related needs.

<sup>6</sup> Use of digital media (streaming of meetings and webinars).

- d) Provide leaflets, brochures and other relevant information for further distribution by NCPs.
- e) Support NCP structures during national info-days and events when possible.

#### Practical modalities

The Commission will:

- f) Nominate contact persons for NCPs in the Commission services mirroring the NCP structure.
- g) Identify a contact point for encouraging mutually supporting relationships between NCPs and EEN on the basis of mutually binding guidelines.
- h) Establish and operate a NCP web area for supplying information and as a discussion forum.
- i) Support collaboration through specific NCP networking projects in the different Horizon Europe programme areas to address and advise the respective communities better/more specifically.
- j) Ensure that NCPs are fully informed about the reimbursement rules applicable for their participation to meetings, and any relevant updates. These rules will be available with invitations.
- k) Where practicable, NCPs in third countries will be invited to participate in the activities and events mentioned above, but should not receive any financial support from the European Commission unless specifically agreed otherwise.

#### Maintaining and improving quality

- l) The transnational networks mentioned above will, among other objectives, foster the minimum standards and enhance the competence of NCPs where needed.
- m) For the NCP system as a whole, the Commission will convene regularly meetings of the national NCP Coordinators to provide an opportunity to discuss the collaboration based on the minimum standards, share experience, identify good practices and address problems including pre-meetings and interactive sessions for internal exchange and possibility for peer learning. The training programme mentioned above will be developed in this context.

#### Widening participation

The Commission will:

- n) Provide specific training regarding the different widening instruments (e.g. TEAMING, TWINNING, ERA-CHAIRS, COST and widening fellowships).
- o) Inform about the practicalities, legal & financial aspects and administrative needs.



- p) Provide professional training on pre-proposal check regarding the different widening instruments.
- q) Disseminate statistics and best-practices regarding the widening instruments.
- r) Promote information and training events for stakeholders in the widening countries.

## **6. Nomination and recognition process**

In appointing NCPs, it is important to avoid situations that could later give rise to potential conflicts of interest, particularly where the host organisation of a NCP may itself become an applicant in a proposal, or use its NCP status to gain or grant undue advantage. Confirmation in writing that the NCPs have read and accepted these minimum standards, and in particular the sections on confidentiality and conflict of interest, must be included in their appointment letter and transmitted to the Commission by electronic means.

On behalf of the relevant national authorities, the Permanent Representations should send (only electronically) the appointment letter of the NCPs to the Director-General of DG Research and Innovation (with the template filled in appropriately), via the FMB RTD-NCP-NOMINATIONS@ec.europa.eu. This letter will include the names and contact details (address, telephone, organisation, email coordinates, ) of the appointed NCPs.

Any subsequent changes of the appointed NCPs should be communicated in the same way. However, changes of contact details ( can just be sent to the relevant DG R&I service for RTD NCP NOMINATIONS (FMB [RTD-NCP-NOMINATIONS@ec.europa.eu](mailto:RTD-NCP-NOMINATIONS@ec.europa.eu)).

The Commission will publish and regularly update the appointed NCPs on the Funding & tenders opportunities portal, and refer to it in the guides for applicants and in other information material.

This appointment procedure could nevertheless be adapted subject to possible future IT developments aiming at its full electronic management.

If it becomes apparent that a NCP, or group of NCPs, is failing to comply with these minimum standards, the Commission services will raise the matter with the national authority, as appropriate. The aim will be to identify how best to improve the services, and to propose remedial actions.

If the problem persists, or in the case of grave misconduct, the Commission will inform the national authority or Permanent Representation. If necessary, having first consulted the national authority, the NCP(s) in question will be "de-recognised" and the national authority concerned will be invited to nominate a replacement NCP.

This will mean that the Commission will remove the NCP from the mailing lists, and will no longer send it information, including any confidential one. The NCP will no longer be listed on the relevant EU web site.

Further consequences due to the non-compliance to these minimum standards may apply to the NCP and the NCP host organisation, based on the Financial Regulation<sup>7</sup>.

## **7. Confidentiality**

A written declaration from the relevant national authority will be required by the Commission, confirming that the measures in accordance with national law are in place with regard to the handling of any confidential information, (e.g. the outcome of the evaluations).

## **8. Conflict of interest**

- a. NCPs must be free from conflicts of interest between their NCPs activities and the rest of their professional activities. In all circumstances, NCPs must act to avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest and ensure that they provide equal treatment to all participants.
- b. NCPs will not be appointed as proposal evaluators or 'observers' in Horizon Europe proposal evaluations in relation to a work programme where it provides NCP services.
- c. Special rules apply for the participation of a NCP in a proposal or in a project. In this context "participation in a proposal or in a project" means a named NCP identified as either carrying out the R&I activities, or in an advisory or supporting role (e.g. project advisory board). NCPs, acting in that capacity, shall not provide letters of support or similar documents in relation to specific proposals.
- d. A NCP must not participate in a proposal or in a project in relation to the work programme part where it provides NCP services, unless, in exceptional circumstances, the Commission allows such participation, due to the specific nature of a given call (e.g. , European Partnerships, dedicated CSAs for transnational cooperation between NCPs or collaboration between research funders). .
- e. If a host organisation does act as an applicant, mitigating measures should be established within the institution if necessary (e.g. "firewalls" between the departments involved in submitting proposals, and those responsible for the NCP function)<sup>8</sup>. In practice, if a NCP participates in a proposal or in a project in relation to a work programme part other than the one where he or she provides NCP services, the host organisation must:

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<sup>7</sup> Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, amending Regulations (EU) No 1296/2013, (EU) No 1301/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1304/2013, (EU) No 1309/2013, (EU) No 1316/2013, (EU) No 223/2014, (EU) No 283/2014 (art.136 and art.141), and Decision No 541/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012.OJ L193, 30.7.2018, p.1.

<sup>8</sup> This is not applicable to calls for proposals targeted at NCPs themselves (e.g. transnational networks).

- put in place measures to ensure that the NCP concerned does not receive confidential and privileged information from other NCPs,
  - inform the Commission as soon as they start preparing the proposal (via written declaration) and the national Coordinator of the intended involvement of the NCP, describing the mitigating measures within the institution, and confirming that the necessary measures are in place.
- f. A NCP may participate in an advisory or supporting role in a project, once grant preparation has started.

In case a NCP or a host organisation does not comply with the provisions of this section, it will be requested to withdraw from the proposal/action. Non-compliance may also lead to the consequences set in Articles 136 and 141 of the Financial Regulation (e.g. exclusion or rejection of a person or entity from participating in an award procedure or in an application/action).

## **Annex I: NCP Structure**

1. NCP Coordinator
2. Legal and Financial aspects<sup>9</sup>
3. European Research Council (ERC)
4. Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)
5. Research Infrastructures
6. Health (including related missions and partnerships)
7. Culture, creativity and Inclusive Society (including related missions and partnerships)
8. Civil Security for Society (including related missions and partnerships)
9. Digital, Industry and Space (including related missions and partnerships)
10. Climate, Energy and Mobility (including related missions and partnerships)
11. Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment (including related missions and partnerships)
12. The European Innovation Council (EIC) and European Innovation ecosystems
13. Widening Participation and ERA<sup>10</sup>
14. Fission
15. Fusion
16. Joint Research Centre
17. European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)

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<sup>9</sup> Including legal and financial aspects related to gender equality, open access and open science, R&I integrity and ethics

<sup>10</sup> Including funding opportunities related to gender equality, open access and open science, R&I integrity and ethics.

## **Annex II: Terminology**

**Client:** Any potential applicant or other participant in Horizon Europe seeking assistance from a NCP (the term does not imply payment for services rendered.)

**Commission coordinating service:** Official in charge of coordination of the network as a whole. Liaises primarily with the national NCP coordinators.

**Commission NCP Correspondent:** Officials in charge of exchanges with the individual NCP functions.

**Commission services:** European Commission including their executive agencies.

**Host organisation:** The legal entity (ministry, agency, research body, company etc.) to which a NCP is affiliated.

**National authority:** The relevant government department responsible for the Horizon Europe NCP system. NCP nominations are made officially on behalf of the national authority.

**National Contact Point (NCP):** Individual(s) officially nominated by the national authority to perform one or more of the NCP functions in line with the common structure.

**National NCP Coordinator:** NCP in charge of coordinating the national system, and other horizontal tasks, and the main interlocutor with the Commission on operational policy questions.

**Annex III: Non-exhaustive list of potential related Horizon Europe programmes and services**

**(to be updated according to MFF)**

COSME

ESIF

Erasmus +

ICT Knowledge

Digital Europe

European Defence Fund

LIFE

Invest EU

EIB

Structural Funds

YourEurope

Solvit

## **Annex IV: Examples of potential best practices between NCPs and other networks**

### **Enterprise Europe Network:**

There are many good practices for NCP-EEN collaboration that started during the previous Framework Programmes and that need to be reinforced. These are enabled by the Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) signed between different EEN Sector Groups and NCP CSAs. Within these MoUs following actions could be strengthened:

- Co-organisation of info-days to promote HE calls
- Co-organisation of brokerage events including at trade fairs
- Exchange of partner search profiles to enhance participation of SMEs in HE calls
- Co-organisation of training sessions
- on “how to prepare a successful proposal” addressed to potential applicants
- on pitching in front of jury panels
- Co-organisation of NCP-EEN workshops to exchange experience and good practices

For a more effective continuation of these existing good practices:

- The implementation of the MoUs must be strictly monitored
- Focus should be put on the joint elaboration of annual cooperation plans/activities
- Better coordination should be ensured for the partner search profiles between NCPs and EENs, where relevant

Joint NCP-EEN cooperation could also:

- aim at the involvement of associated/third countries
- explore common activities with the Digital Innovation Hubs
- explore the exploitation possibilities offered by the Innovation Radar

In order to further enhance the NCP-EEN collaboration in the future:

- cooperation at national and regional level could be envisaged in form of regular meetings between NCP Coordinators and thematic NCPs and the EEN national/regional consortia which could also facilitate mutual learning
- NCPs could rely on EEN advisors’ expertise in access-to-funding consultation when it comes to the assistance for the Seal-of-Excellence holders