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# Joint Policy Recommendations

*Brief*

Co-funded by the European Union

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Six EU-funded tourism projects - Cross-Re-Tour, TASTE, PHOENIX 4.0, CE4RT, TIB and VERNE - representing direct engagement with over 200 tourism SMEs and stakeholders across more than ten European countries, jointly submit the following policy recommendations to the European Commission.

The participating projects span a range of focuses - twin transition, regenerative tourism, circular economy, resilience, tourism balance and accessibility - but converge on the same structural barriers. Together they constitute a strong evidence base for joint recommendations.

Across all six projects, four structural attention points recur with remarkable consistency: capacity building efforts reach only the most capable businesses; community networks collapse when funding ends; funding instruments remain too complex for the smallest enterprises; and there is no shared evidence base to measure what works.

This brief has been prepared following a joint policy recommendation session convened by Cross-Re-Tour on 12 June 2026. It synthesizes findings and translates shared evidence into a set of recommendations addressed to the European Commission.

# PARTICIPATING PROJECTS

| CROSS-RE-TOUR | |
|---|---|
| **Full name** | Scaling up the twin tourism transition by adaptation and replication of cross-domain solutions |
| **Funding** | Single Market Programme (SMP) |
| | SMP-COSME-2022-TOURSME |
| **Duration** | 36 months (September 2023 – September 2026) |
| **Lead partner** | Breda University of Applied Sciences |
| **Contact** | Elisa van den Heuvel, droll.e@buas.nl |

| TASTE | |
|---|---|
| **Full name** | Transformative approaches for sustainable food in tourism |
| **Funding** | Single Market Programme (SMP) |
| | SMP TOURSME-01 2023 |
| **Duration** | 30 months |
| **Lead partner** | Barcelona Chamber of Commerce |
| **Contact** | Cristina Martin, cristina.martin@cambrabcn.cat |

| PHOENIX 4.0 | |
|---|---|
| **Full name** | Resilient Ecosystem for Empowering SMEs |
| **Funding** | Single Market Programme (SMP) |
| | SMP TOURSME-01 2023 |
| **Duration** | 34 months (November 2024 – August 2027) |
| **Lead partner** | Arctur d.o.o. |
| **Contact** | Lucija Barisic, lucija.barisic@arctur.si |

| CE4RT | |
|---|---|
| **Full name** | Circular Economy for Regnerative Tourism |
| **Funding** | Single Market Programme (SMP) |
| | SMP – COSME – 2021 – TOURSME |
| **Duration** | 24 months (January 2023 – January 2025) |
| **Lead partner** | Munster Technological University |
| **Contact** | Aisling Ward, aisling.ward@mty.ie |

| TIB | |
|---|---|
| **Full name** | Tourism in Balance |
| **Funding** | Interreg Europe |
| **Duration** | 48 months (January 2023 – January 2025) |
| **Lead partner** | Breda University of Applied Sciences |
| **Contact** | Simone Moretti, moretti.s@buas.nl |

| VERNE | |
|---|---|
| **Full name** | One-Stop-Shop for Accessible Circular Solutions for Sustainable Tourism |
| **Funding** | Horizon Europe |
| **Duration** | 36 months (November 2024 – October 2027) |
| **Lead partner** | PNO INNOVATION SL |
| **Contact** | Edgar Valverde, edgar.valverde@pnoinnovation.com |

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Shift capacity building evaluation from quantity to quality

Current project evaluations for capacity building initiatives reward the number of SMEs trained, not the depth of impact achieved. This incentive structure drives applicants to over-promise and under-deliver: training more businesses shallowly rather than fewer businesses with genuine, lasting effect. The result is that evaluation metrics become a selling point rather than a measure of real change. Projects report covering 150 SMEs where 50 deeply engaged would have been far more valuable.

**What the experience shows**

- TASTE, VERNE, PHOENIX 4.0, Cross-Re-Tour and CE4RT all find that peer-learning, combined with practical experimentation and coaching models generate deeper change than volume-based training. Impact is correlated with engagement depth, not headcount.
- Training-of-Trainers and multiplier approaches consistently outperform direct SME training in terms of long-term reach and cost-effectiveness.
- Capacity building initiatives naturally reach 'front runners' - already-engaged, digitally-literate businesses. The majority of European tourism businesses by number (micro-enterprises with high seasonality and limited staff) should be also targeted.

**Concrete recommendations**

- Support capacity building that enables implementation, not only awareness, by encouraging projects to combine training with practical experimentation, peer learning and follow-up support adapted to SMEs' operational realities.
- Define community champions within the CoP to ensure that, after the CoPs are concluded, there is a facilitator responsible for keeping the community active and engaged. The pilots should designate and train this facilitator from within the local community during the project's final year.
- Reframe evaluation criteria for capacity building projects to assess pathways towards impact: depth of engagement, early evidence of behaviour change, and potential business-level outcomes - not training headcounts or number of SMEs reached.
- Allow quality to be evidenced through qualitative measures, for example but not limited to staff CVs, partnerships and concrete outcome reflections rather than numeric output targets alone.
- Explicitly require projects to state how they will reach lower-capacity enterprises, not just front runners (through front-runner ambassadors or capacity building tailored to reaching lower-capacity enterprises).

- Fund Training-of-Trainers infrastructure, including the ongoing maintenance of trainer networks and toolkits after project closure - not just the initial training launch.

## 2. Institutionalise communities of practice with structural continuity

Community networks - regional SME clusters, ambassador models, communities of practice, peer-learning circles - are among the most effective outputs that tourism projects generate. They are also the first to collapse when project funding ends. Because these networks are created as project activities and funded as project outputs, they have no institutional home, no ongoing budget, and no mandate beyond the project lifecycle. Continuation depends entirely on volunteers, and volunteer motivation wanes under time and seasonal pressures.

This is not a failure of project ambition. It is a structural gap in the funding architecture: projects are resourced to create communities but not to sustain them.

**What the experience shows**

- TASTE's transnational community of practice, CE4RT's Leaders and Learners workshops, PHOENIX 4.0's coaching networks and VERNE's Communities of Practice all demonstrate that peer exchange accelerates learning and uptake faster than formal training alone.
- CE4RT successfully developed regional ambassador models in Ireland and Poland, where funded businesses became advocates within their communities - but sustainability of these networks requires top-down structural support.
- The decentralised approach - EU direction, national coordination, local delivery - has proven more sustainable than centralised models in comparable policy areas. Local municipalities and authorities are the right owners of these networks.

**Concrete recommendations**

- CoPs should be treated as destination-level infrastructure, not only as temporary project activities. Funding calls should require a sustainability plan for community networks that goes beyond the project lifecycle - including identification of a host institution and a post-project funding pathway, even if modest. Sustainability plans of such communities should be explored early enough so to allow intervention during a project's lifetime. An example could be an open-source directory where knowledge from the websites can be transferred to national tourism boards or regional councils, enabling them to take ownership after project ending.
- Alignment with existing national instruments - such as destination development plans or regional innovation strategies - should be a required element of project design, to embed networks within structures that outlast individual funding rounds.

- EU-funded tourism projects should be recognised as implementation instruments for sustainable destination development strategies, translating strategic priorities into concrete actions and long-term governance capacity rather than being treated as stand-alone initiatives. This reinforces policy coherence, increases the long-term impact of public investment, and helps ensure that project results become an integral part of destination development beyond the funding period
- Project calls should incentivise consortia that include both experienced partners (with track records across project cycles, who carry forward tools, knowledge and communities) and institutions that are new to EU project work - ensuring renewal without reinvention.

# 3. Maintain and extend simplified funding mechanisms for third parties

Administrative complexity in funding is not a neutral design feature. It is a selection mechanism that systematically excludes the enterprises most in need of support. Application processes requiring specialist grant-writing expertise, complex partnership structures and multi-stage reporting effectively act as filters that let through only the best-resourced and most administratively experienced businesses.

Multiple actors share responsibility: Commission calls sometimes introduce unnecessary complexity through overprescribed eligibility criteria, while applicants compound this by over-promising in proposals to appear competitive. The result, reported across multiple projects, is FSTP calls are so complex that projects risk not attracting enough (and the right) SMEs to apply and succeed.

**What the experience shows**

- FSTP lump sum mechanisms are consistently identified as the most effective instrument for reaching tourism micro-enterprises. SME feedback is positive; the model reduces admin burden and triggers experimentation.
- The concerns about lump sum accountability (absence of invoice trails, audit risk, fund misuse) are legitimate and must be addressed - not dismissed. The recommendation is to develop proportionate safeguards, not to remove the mechanism.
- Awareness barriers are as significant as application barriers: CE4RT finds that many SMEs simply do not know what support exists, let alone how to access it.

**Concrete Recommendations**

- Maintain and expand FSTP lump sum models as the default for tourism SME transition support - not the exception. Condensed single-stage applications, plain-language formats and standardised budget templates should replace multi-stage procedures.
- Develop proportionate accountability safeguards for lump sum instruments - such as outcome reporting requirements, spot-check verification and minimum self-assessment - that address audit concerns without reinstating the complexity that excludes micro-enterprises.

- Require intermediaries (DMOs, chambers of commerce, regional agencies) to be funded to provide light-touch application support to SMEs that cannot navigate even simplified procedures alone.
- Establish a dedicated funding navigation platform for tourism SMEs - covering available grants, certification schemes, digital tools and advisory services - in local languages. This directly addresses the awareness gap identified by CE4RT and PHOENIX 4.0.
- Systematically embed grant writing support into calls as a funded activity, not an afterthought.

# 4. Establish shared indicators - defined before projects begin

No shared, validated indicator set exists for measuring tourism transition impact across EU-funded projects. While we acknowledge the existing Commission initiatives, such as the EU Tourism Dashboard,each project develops its own metrics, often mid-stream, making cross-project outcome and impact comparison impossible, baselines absent and cumulative EU-level evidence unattainable.

Attempts to agree on shared indicators between projects after they begin have consistently failed. Once projects are underway, partners have divergent approaches, different interpretations of objectives, and no mandate to align. The lesson from multiple projects is unambiguous: shared indicators only work if the Commission defines them before projects are awarded.

**What the experience shows**

- Across the projects, the absence of a shared indicator framework created the same problem independently: projects developed their own metrics mid-stream, often under pressure to demonstrate output rather than impact. When Cross-Re-Tour later attempted to measure comparable effect across 87 related EU tourism projects, the diversity of frameworks made meaningful comparison difficult - not because projects were poorly designed, but because no common starting point had been set.
- Where projects did establish indicator frameworks at the outset - as PHOENIX 4.0 did, requiring SMEs to select and agree to a set of obligatory and selective indicators before work began - the end-of-project assessment was substantially more tractable. The approach demonstrated that early alignment is feasible and that SMEs can engage with it when asked clearly and simply.
- The common thread is that measurement gaps are not a technical problem individual projects can solve. Each project working in isolation will continue to produce valuable, yet incomparable data.

**Concrete recommendations**

- The Commission should define a mandatory core indicator set that all tourism transition projects must collect from project start, with a baseline measurement required as an early deliverable. The Commission should consider to launch a Circular Tourism Action Plan, wherein the Commission define the vision, objectives and targets with the accompanying KPI Framework. Such framework

will provide guidance to projects when collecting data and ensure consistency and quality of data across EU funded projects.

- The indicator framework should distinguish between implementation outputs, short-term outcomes, medium-term destination transformation, and long-term systemic impacts, recognising that meaningful change in tourism systems unfolds across different timescales. This would allow projects to demonstrate immediate progress while also contributing evidence on longer-term transition objectives that extend beyond individual project lifecycles.
- A limited set of optional supplementary indicators should be available for project-specific dimensions, but the core must be non-negotiable and pre-defined.

# 5. Create an umbrella structure for cross-project exploitation

EU-funded tourism projects consistently produce validated tools, trained networks, replication-ready frameworks and community of practice models. These outputs disappear from active use within months of project closure. This is not a failure of project quality. The result is a recurring cycle of reinvention: each new project rebuilds what the previous one already demonstrated

**What the experience shows**

- CE4RT developed a regenerative tourism framework for SMEs that has since been adopted and advanced across multiple follow-on projects - but only because the originating institution remained involved. This is the exception, not the rule.
- EU tourism projects reveal a large, growing body of compatible and complementary outputs - toolkits, CoP models, training curricula - developed in isolation and currently inaccessible to each other.
- Transnational collaboration and physical cross-border exchange are identified as the most effective learning mechanisms for tourism destination transition - yet these remain project add-ons rather than standing features of project instruments.
- Permanent hosting infrastructure for project outputs is the precondition for any return on the EU's cumulative investment in tourism transition. Without it, even the most rigorously tested tool cannot achieve scale.

**Concrete recommendations**

- Establish a permanent umbrella structure - hosted by an existing EU-level body or a mandated consortium - that aggregates, quality-assures and makes jointly accessible the outputs of EU-funded tourism transition projects after individual projects close. This structure should function as a shared exploitation and continuation vehicle: preventing duplication, enabling cross-referencing between projects, and giving SMEs and intermediaries a single point of access to EU-validated transition tools.
- Build transnational collaboration - including physical exchange programmes, joint testing environments and cross-border replication partnerships - into the standing architecture of EU tourism support instruments, not as optional project activities.

# Closing Statement

The six projects signing this brief represent a combined body of direct, field-tested experience involving over 200 tourism SMEs across more than ten European countries. We are not proposing new policy areas - we are identifying where existing instruments are structurally facing barriers of their stated objectives.