Open Call Guidelines

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Abstract

This document provides the official guidelines for participation in the NASCHA Open Call for cascade funding under the Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument. The Open Call is designed to engage Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), including those in the starting up phase (referred as start-ups), in the development, experimentation, validation and demonstration of innovative solutions that can strengthen and complement the NASCHA hydrogen value chains. In particular, applicants are expected to propose solutions addressing identified value-chain gaps, supporting the demonstration and future uptake of NASCHA innovations, and exploring applications in sectors and use cases not already covered by the project's pilot activities. The Open Call will also support high TRL technologies with the potential to contribute to the further market uptake and scale-up of the NASCHA Demo Cases.

The Open Call Text defines the scope and specific challenges to be addressed, expected impacts, participation and eligibility conditions, funding arrangements, and the procedures governing proposal submission and evaluation. The document is complemented by the Guidelines for Applicants, proposal templates, Guidelines for Evaluators, relevant technical annexes and templates for the Sub-Grant Agreement, Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) and declaration of absence of conflict of interest.

The evaluation process is designed to ensure an objective, transparent and **fair** selection of projects through predefined eligibility and evaluation criteria. Selected beneficiaries will subsequently enter into a negotiation and contracting phase covering funding, payments, reporting, review, collaboration with NASCHA partners and IPR-related provisions. Financial support will be provided in the form of lump-sum grants, in accordance with the cascade-funding arrangements established for the Open Call.

Through the two Open Calls, NASCHA will make available a total cascade-funding budget of EUR 1.2 million, with the objective of supporting up to 20 SMEs, each of which may receive a maximum financial contribution of EUR 60,000. SMEs may also participate in consortia of up to three SMEs, for a maximum total contribution of EUR 180,000 per project. Supported projects, during this first call, are expected to run for between six and nine months and will be accompanied by technical and business mentoring, dedicated capacity-building and acceleration activities, and continuous monitoring of progress against defined technical and business KPIs. The support is intended to strengthen beneficiaries' technical, business and investment readiness, including competences related to hydrogen technologies, business model development, IP management, standardisation and certification, sustainability and circularity, and preparation for investment and market scale-up. Particular attention will be given to strengthening innovation capacity in the less developed regions and to reinforcing cross-regional hydrogen value chains across the NASCHA territories.

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1 About the Project

NASCHA – North Adriatic Smart Communities Hydrogen Accelerator is an Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) project funded under the I3-2024-INV2a call. Building on the experience and results of the North Adriatic Hydrogen Valley (NAHV) and NACHIP (North Adriatic Clean Hydrogen Investment Platform) initiatives, NASCHA seeks to accelerate the validation, demonstration and market uptake of renewable hydrogen technologies across Croatia, Slovenia and Friuli Venezia Giulia (Italy). Rather than focusing on isolated technological demonstrations, the project combines territorial experimentation, cross-regional technology development and ecosystem-building activities to advance hydrogen solutions towards industrial deployment and investment readiness.

The project focuses on three interconnected value chains — **transportation and mobility, urban areas, and sustainable irrigation** — and implements five complementary pilot actions. Three pilots are embedded in **Smart Communities of Practice**, bringing together public authorities, industry, research organisations and other local actors around concrete territorial needs in Ajdovščina, Celje and Cres. The other two pilots develop cross-cutting technologies for hydrogen distribution and storage that can subsequently be transferred and replicated across different applications and territories.

1. **Hydrogen for sustainable irrigation – Ajdovščina, Slovenia**
   The Ajdovščina pilot addresses the energy and resource challenges associated with agricultural irrigation in the Vipava Valley. It combines solar generation with a hybrid energy-storage and energy preproduction via fuel cell application, thus coupling hydrogen technologies and precision irrigation systems. The demonstration is intended to reduce dependence on diesel-based power generation, improve the efficiency of water and energy use and establish a model that can be replicated in other agricultural and potentially industrial contexts.

2. **Water-based hydrogen energy storage for urban applications – Celje, Slovenia**
   In Celje, NASCHA explores how hydrogen can contribute to energy storage and clean mobility in an urban environment, including areas where architectural and spatial constraints make conventional infrastructure more difficult to deploy. The pilot introduces a **Water-Based Liquid Energy Storage (WaBaLES)** system integrating electrolysis, hydrogen storage and mobility applications. It also addresses the challenge of making better use of excess photovoltaic generation by converting renewable electricity into hydrogen when direct injection into the electricity grid is constrained.

3. **Hydrogen-based energy resilience for islands – Cres, Croatia**
   The Cres Smart Community of Practice addresses the specific energy-security challenges of island territories, which often remain dependent on imported fossil fuels and have limited options for long-term renewable-energy storage. NASCHA will demonstrate a containerised hydrogen-energy system integrating renewable electricity, hydrogen production, storage and fuel cells. The solution is designed to provide more stable year-round energy availability while also supporting local transport and emergency applications. Cres is therefore intended to become a replicable example of how hydrogen can contribute to greater energy resilience and autonomy in European island communities.

4. **Flexible hydrogen distribution and refuelling – CTS H2 HydroHub**
   The **HydroHub** pilot develops a modular and relocatable hydrogen refuelling and distribution solution capable of adapting to different levels and types of demand. The system combines high-pressure hydrogen storage, pressure-management solutions and flexible supply options, including locally produced renewable hydrogen through electrolysis or hydrogen delivered by tanker. It is designed to serve both heavy-duty vehicles and lighter mobility applications and can incorporate swappable Type IV hydrogen cylinders. Unlike a conventional fixed refuelling station, the HydroHub is conceived as a scalable infrastructure solution that can be transferred to different sites as hydrogen demand develops. The final demonstration site is to be defined according to renewable-energy availability and site-specific requirements rather than being fixed a priori.

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5. **Smart composite hydrogen storage – PATRIA Composite, Samobor, Croatia**
   The PATRIA pilot focuses on the development and industrialisation of advanced composite pressure vessels for hydrogen storage. The solution combines lightweight and corrosion-resistant composite materials with embedded optical-fibre sensing for real-time condition monitoring and early fault detection. The production system will also integrate machine-learning-based monitoring and IoT-enabled valves, enabling data to be collected throughout the vessel lifecycle and used to improve safety, performance and maintenance. The pilot includes the establishment of a dedicated production facility in **Samobor, Croatia**, followed by testing and certification against relevant European requirements.

Together, these five pilots provide NASCHA with a common technological and market-validation base from which additional solutions can be developed and scaled. In the context of the Open Calls, they should therefore be understood not as a closed list of applications to be replicated, but as a **starting portfolio that third-party SMEs can complement and extend** through new experimentation, validation and demonstration activities, particularly in sectors and applications not already covered by the consortium pilots.

1.1 Objectives of financial support to third parties (FSTP) in the project

Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP), also referred to as cascade funding, is used within NASCHA as a targeted mechanism to involve external SMEs and start-ups in the development and strengthening of the North Adriatic hydrogen ecosystem. Through two competitive Open Calls, NASCHA will provide financial support to external companies capable of contributing technologies, components and services that complement the project's existing capabilities and address identified gaps within its strategic hydrogen value chains.

Within NASCHA, FSTP is not conceived simply as an extension of the five pilot activities. Its purpose is broader: supported SMEs are expected to carry out new experimentation, validation and demonstration activities based on NASCHA cross-regional technological solutions, with particular attention to sectors and applications not already covered by the consortium pilots. The Open Calls will therefore enable NASCHA to enlarge the range of applications addressed by the project, involve additional technology providers and adopters, and support also high TRL solutions with the potential to contribute to the market scale-up of the NASCHA Demo Cases.

The FSTP scheme is also an instrument for filling the gap in the hydrogen value and supply chain, and for integration of NASCHA's hydrogen value chains. The technological and market gaps to be addressed through cascade funding are identified through the project's value-chain analysis and will be translated into specific challenges within the Open Calls. The intention is to mobilise external capabilities where they can complement those already available within the consortium and facilitate the introduction of new components, services, applications and business models for renewable hydrogen. The Grant Agreement specifically identifies FSTP as a means to fill the gaps in the hydrogen value chain, including those further identified through WP2 and WP3.

More specifically, FSTP under NASCHA aims to:

1. **Extend the experimentation, validation and demonstration of NASCHA technological solutions**, including through new applications and sectors not already addressed by the five consortium pilots.

2. **Support the advancement and market scale-up of high TRL hydrogen solutions**, strengthening their technological maturity and potential for further deployment.

3. **Fill identified technological and integration gaps in NASCHA's strategic value chains**, by bringing in complementary components, services, technologies and capabilities from external SMEs and start-ups.

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4. **Facilitate the uptake of NASCHA innovations and the development of new renewable-hydrogen business models**, involving both technology providers and potential adopters.
5. **Strengthen cross-regional value-chain integration**, enabling solutions and capabilities developed in different NASCHA territories to be combined, transferred and applied across the North Adriatic hydrogen ecosystem.
6. **Promote cross-sectoral application and replication**, encouraging SMEs to explore hydrogen applications beyond those already demonstrated within the NASCHA pilots.
7. **Increase the participation and innovation capacity of SMEs in Less Developed Regions**, ensuring that cascade funding contributes directly to reducing regional innovation disparities. NASCHA foresees that two thirds of the FSTP funding will be allocated to beneficiaries from Less Developed Regions, while the selection process will also consider the share of activities and costs implemented in these regions.
8. **Generate measurable technical and business outcomes** from the supported projects through a dedicated KPI framework, providing evidence of their contribution to the NASCHA ecosystem and creating a basis for subsequent acceleration, investment-readiness and scaling activities. The Grant Agreement explicitly foresees the development of relevant KPIs to assess Open Call project outcomes.

Through the two Open Calls, NASCHA aims to engage **up to 20 SMEs, including start-ups**, with a total FSTP budget of **EUR 1.2 million**. Each SME may receive up to **EUR 60,000**, while SMEs may also participate as consortia of up to three companies, allowing a maximum contribution of EUR 180,000 per project.

2 General Information

2.1 Who can apply?

The NASCHA Open Call targets **Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), including start-ups**, with the capacity to contribute with innovative technologies, components, services and applications to the development and strengthening of the NASCHA hydrogen value chains. The Open Call seeks in particular to involve external technology providers and adopters able to support experimentation, validation and demonstration activities, address identified value-chain gaps and contribute to the development of new business models for renewable hydrogen.

SMEs may apply individually or as part of a consortium, according to the conditions specified in this Open Call. Applying SME can be funded only once, therefore in case of multiple applications (e.g., as a single applicant or through a consortium) only one will be granted.

Applications are particularly encouraged from SMEs active in areas such as:

- technology development and component supply;
- hydrogen production, storage, distribution and end-use solutions;
- safety, monitoring, control and certification-related solutions;
- digital and data technologies supporting hydrogen-system optimisation;
- engineering, integration and industrial services;
- market analysis and other services supporting hydrogen deployment and market development;

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- technologies and services enabling new experimentation, validation and demonstration activities, particularly in sectors and applications not already covered by the NASCHA pilots;
- high TRL solutions with the potential to contribute to the market scale-up of the NASCHA Demo Cases.

These categories are indicative and non-exhaustive. The relevance of the proposed solution to the specific challenges and value-chain gaps defined in the Open Call will be a key consideration in the evaluation process.

SMEs may apply individually or as part of a consortium of up to **three SMEs**. In the case of a consortium, all participating entities must qualify as SMEs. Each SME may receive a maximum financial contribution of **EUR 60,000**, allowing a consortium of three SMEs to receive up to **EUR 180,000 per project**.

Legal entities applying to the Open Call must be officially established in the regions participating in the NASCHA project (partner regions) or in the **less developed regions** of other EU countries. The eligible regions are the following:

PARTNER COUNTRIES:

- **Slovenia**: Vzhodna Slovenija; Zahodna Slovenija;
- **Croatia**: Jadranska Hrvatska; Panonska Hrvatska; Sjeverna Hrvatska;
- **Italy**: Friuli Venezia Giulia; Lazio; Lombardia; Umbria; Sardegna; Sicilia; Calabria; Basilicata; Puglia; Campania; Molise;

ADDITIONAL COUNTRIES:

- **Portugal:** Norte; Centro; Oeste e Vale do Tejo; Alentejo; Açores; Madeira;
- **Spain:** Andalucía; Extremadura; Castilla-La Mancha;
- **Belgium:** Wallonie;
- **France:** Guyane; Mayotte; Réunion; Guadeloupe; Martinique;
- **Greece:** Kriti; Peloponnisos; Dytiki Ellada; Ionia Nisia; Sterea Ellada; Thessalia; Ipeiros; Dytiki Makedonia; Kentriki Makedonia; Anatoliki Makedonia-Thraki; Voreio Aigaio;
- **Bulgaria:** Yuzhen tsentralen; Yugoiztochen; Severoiztochen; Severen tsentralen; Severozapaden;
- **Romania:** Sud-Vest Oltenia; Sud-Muntenia; Sud-Est; Centru; Vest; Nord-Vest; Nord-Est;
- **Hungary:** Dél-Dunántúl; Dél-Alföld; Észak-Alföld; Észak-Magyarország; Pest; Budapest; Közép-Dunántúl; Nyugat-Dunántúl;
- **Slovakia:** Východné Slovensko; Stredné Slovensko; Západné Slovensko;
- **Poland:** Podkarpackie; Małopolskie; Śląskie; Opolskie; Lubelskie; Mazowiecki regionalny; Podlaskie; Warmińsko-Mazurskie; Kujawsko-Pomorskie; Pomorskie; Zachodniopomorskie; Lubuskie; Łódzkie;
- **Czechia:** Moravskoslezsko; Střední Morava; Severovýchod; Severozápad;
- **Lithuania:** Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas;
- **Latvia:** Latvia;

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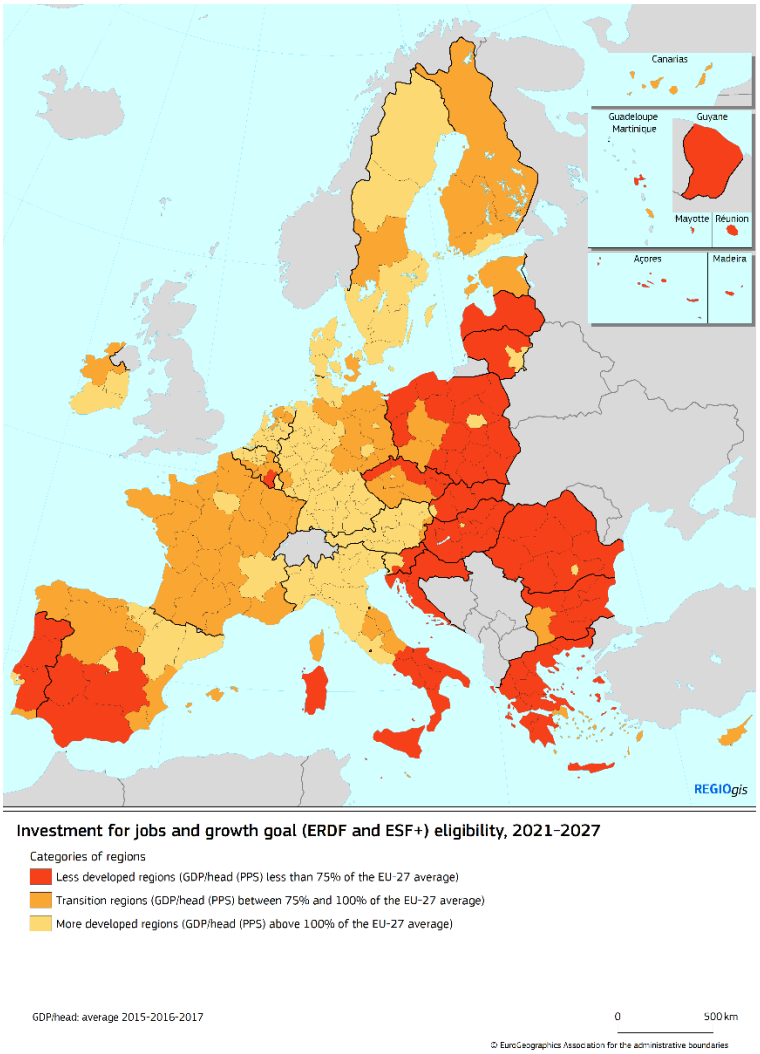


Figure 1: Map of Less Developed Regions (in red). The LDRs are NUTS level 2 regions where the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is less than 75% of the EU average.

Legal entities willing to participate in the Open Call must be officially established in one of the eligible regions **at the time of submission of the application**. Applicants will be required to provide appropriate documental evidence of their legal establishment before the interview evaluation.

The NASCHA FSTP scheme has a strong cohesion dimension. NASCHA Consortium foresees that **two thirds of the overall FSTP funding will be allocated to beneficiaries from Less Developed Regions**, while the application and selection process will also consider the share of activities and costs implemented in those regions.

In order to promote synergies, cross-fertilisation and exploitation opportunities, participation by SMEs involved in other **I3 projects** is also encouraged, provided that all eligibility requirements of the present Open Call are met.

Applicants must not be in a situation of **conflict of interest** that could compromise the impartial and objective implementation of the funded activities. This includes situations involving family or personal relationships, political or national affinity, economic interests or any other direct or indirect interest.

Applicants will also be required to demonstrate their **SME status** through the supporting documentation specified in the Guidelines for Applicants https://shorturl.at/bPh5c.

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2.2 Activities that can be funded:

Activities funded under the NASCHA Open Call must be consistent with the objectives of the I3 Instrument and contribute to the project objectives.

The FSTP will support SME-led experimentation, validation and demonstration of innovative hydrogen-related solutions, with particular attention to high-TRL technologies, new sectors and applications not already covered by the NASCHA pilots, as well as solutions capable of addressing identified gaps in the project's strategic hydrogen value chains.

Three main areas have been identified for the sub-projects funded through FSTP:

- **Experimentation, validation and demonstration:** testing and validating innovative hydrogen-related technologies, components, services or integrated solutions in relevant or operational environments.
- **Value-chain integration and gap filling:** developing, adapting or integrating technologies, components, services or processes that could help filling specific technological, operational or integration gaps in NASCHA's hydrogen value chains. Those gaps are described in detail in the Annex 1 – Technical Specifications.
- **Market scale-up, replication and new applications:** adapting and demonstrating high TRL solutions in new sectors or contexts, supporting their replicability and future market uptake.

A non-exhaustive list of potential activities includes:

- testing, trials and validation activities;
- demonstration in relevant or operational environments;
- prototyping and adaptation of technologies and components;
- integration of complementary technologies, components or services;
- testing of materials, equipment, control systems and enabling technologies;
- technical optimisation, monitoring and system integration;
- application of solutions in new sectors and use cases;
- safety, standardisation and certification-related activities where necessary for deployment;
- technical-economic and market validation, including cost and pricing analysis;
- development and validation of new business models for renewable hydrogen;
- specialised technical and engineering services required for project implementation.

More detailed information on the innovative solutions sought, the specific challenges to be addressed and the applicable technical requirements under the 1st Open Call is provided in Annex 1 – Technical Specifications.

2.3 Open Call structure

NASCHA will implement a cascade funding scheme consisting of two Open Calls, with a total FSTP budget of EUR 1.2 million. The two calls are designed to support SME-led experimentation, validation and demonstration of NASCHA cross-regional technological solutions, particularly in new sectors and applications, and to promote the market scale-up of high-TRL technologies.

- **Open Call 1** – The first Open Call will be launched on **12 November 2026** and will remain open for at least **two months till 18 January 2027**. It is the subject of the present document and will

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support experimentation, validation and demonstration activities addressing the challenges and technical specifications defined for the first call.

- **Open Call 2** – The second Open Call is expected to be launched approximately six months after the launch of the first Open Call. Its specific challenges, technical requirements and implementation details will be provided in the dedicated call documentation.

The present document sets out the common framework, rules and conditions of the NASCHA FSTP scheme, together with the specific conditions applicable to the 1st Open Call. Call-specific requirements may be further detailed in the relevant technical annexes and supporting documentation.

The total budget available for the 1st Open Call is EUR 600,000.

2.4 Duration of the sub-projects

The duration of funded sub-projects may vary depending on the specific Open Call.

For the **first Open Call**, each funded sub-project will have a maximum duration between **6 and 9 months**. Applications proposing a shorter implementation period will be considered eligible. Applications proposing a longer implementation period will be considered non-eligible.

For the **second Open Call**, each funded sub-project will have a maximum duration of **6 months**. Applications proposing a shorter implementation period will be considered eligible. Applications proposing a longer implementation period will be considered non-eligible.

The proposed implementation period must be clearly indicated in the application and aligned with the activities, milestones and expected results described in the action plan.

3 Submission of applications

The NASCHA Open Call is publicly announced and promoted through the project communication channels and relevant stakeholder networks. The submission and evaluation process follows the principles of transparency, fair treatment, confidentiality and prevention of conflicts of interest.

Applications shall be submitted exclusively through the dedicated NASCHA submission platform/webpage (https://nascha.meta-group.com/) within the following application period:

- from **12/11/2026 (opening of the call) to 18/01/2027 (deadline of the call)**

To submit their sub-projects, applicants shall use the **templates** available on the website (Annex 2 – Proposal template).

All applications shall be submitted in English.

Applicants shall provide the documentation required to demonstrate compliance with the eligibility criteria, including evidence of:

- self-declaration of SME status and legal establishment [1];
- fulfilment of the geographical eligibility requirements.

Documents proving legal establishment may be submitted in the original language.

In case of technical issues affecting the submission procedure, applicants may contact the dedicated **IT helpdesk** at: **nascha@meta-group.com**.

[1] At the time of submission, the platform will ask the applicant to self-declare their SMES status and legal establishment by checking a box, this will be recorded in the application form and will be valid as a self-declaration.

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Applications submitted after the deadline or through channels different from those indicated in the present document will be considered **ineligible**. Application which will not use the official template will be declared ineligible.

Applicants are strongly advised not to wait until the submission deadline. Technical problems attributable to the applicant will not justify late submission**.**

3.1 Maximum Grant Amount per Project:

Each eligible SME participating in the NASCHA Open Call may receive a maximum financial contribution of EUR 60,000. Applicants shall request a grant amount within the maximum funding limits established in this Open Call. The final amount awarded will be determined during the evaluation and contracting process, taking into account the proposed activities, the requested budget and the applicable funding thresholds.

The financial support may cover eligible activities necessary for the implementation of the proposed sub-project, including, where relevant, technology development, prototyping, testing, validation, demonstration activities, technical studies, specialised services and other activities directly contributing to the objectives of the Open Call.

In case of applications submitted by a consortium of SMEs, the maximum total grant amount awarded to the sub-project may reach EUR 180,000, provided that the maximum contribution allocated to each individual consortium member does not exceed EUR 60,000. A consortium shall be composed of a minimum of two and a maximum of three eligible SMEs. The application shall clearly indicate the allocation of the requested amount amongst the consortium members.

The grant will be paid in three instalments, according to the following payment scheme:

- **First payment:** 20% of the total awarded grant, following the signature of the Sub-Grant Agreement and fulfilment of the conditions specified therein and following the submission and approval of the inception report covering the period from M0 to M1;
- **Second payment:** 50% of the total awarded grant, following the verification of the implementation of the intermediate activities and achievement of the relevant milestones defined in the Sub-Grant Agreement and following the submission and approval of the intermediate progress report at M3;
- **Third and final payment**: 30% of the total awarded grant, following the submission and approval of the final report and verification of the successful completion of the funded activities.

The approval procedure, verification criteria, payment deadlines and consequences of incomplete or partially accepted outputs will be specified in the Sub-Grant Agreement.

A maximum budget of EUR 600,000 will be allocated to the 1st Open Call. In case of budgets not assigned under the 1st Open Call a reallocation to the total available budget for the 2nd Open Call will be pursued, in accordance with the NASCHA cascade funding rules.

3.2 Funding rate

The FSTP support provided under the NASCHA Open Call will cover 100% of the approved grant amount awarded to the selected beneficiaries, within the maximum funding limits established in this document (being the latter also valid for consortia up to three SMEs).

Applicants shall request a grant amount corresponding to the resources needed to implement their proposed sub-project, within the maximum contribution thresholds defined for individual applicants and consortia. The final grant amount awarded will be determined during the evaluation and selection process, based on the scope, objectives and activities of the approved sub-project.

The same activities, costs or outputs may not receive funding from another EU, national, regional or local funding source. Applicants must declare any other funding received or requested for the proposed activities.

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3.3 Funding Scheme

The NASCHA FSTP is implemented in the form of lump sum funding, providing a simplified approach to financial support and reducing the administrative burden related to the management of the funded sub-projects.

Under this approach, beneficiaries are not required to report detailed costs actually incurred during the development of their sub-projects. Monitoring activities will instead focus on the achievement of the expected results, fulfilment of the planned activities and successful implementation of the proposed work plan.

The beneficiaries must describe in their application the resources, activities and implementation approach associated with the fixed lump sum requested, demonstrating how the financial contribution will support the achievement of the objectives of the NASCHA Open Call.

The respective instalments will be paid following the assessment and formal acceptance of the relevant milestones, and reporting, in accordance with the conditions set in the Sub-Grant Agreement.

3.3.1 Eligible costs

There is no particular cost category restriction for the implementation of activities as described in the proposed sub-projects (eligible costs are detailed in the Annex 3).

Payments under the **Lump-Sum Funding** depend on the **completion of activities as planned in the approved action plan**. For the purpose of this call no financial accounting and reporting are to be provided from beneficiaries.

Nevertheless, beneficiaries are required to produce **documents proving that the work was done as detailed in their action plans**.

Furthermore, contractual obligations foreseen by the NASCHA Grant Agreement also apply to third parties receiving this support (see section "6 Obligation of the beneficiaries" in this document). Beneficiaries of the FSTP need to keep records and, in case of an audit, must provide information to the granting authority and access to the relevant documentation from auditors.[2]

At the application stage, beneficiaries shall present a **detailed budget** associated to their **action plan to define and justify the requested amount.**

The proposed **costs estimation in the budget**:

- must be in line with applicants' ordinary practices;
- must be reasonable / not excessive;
- must be in line with the proposed activities;
- are subject to the basic eligibility rules of I3[3].

These **costs and categories of costs** may be the following:

- direct personnel costs: employees or equivalent (resolved by staff category); natural persons under direct contract; seconded persons; SME owners and natural person beneficiaries;
- direct subcontracting costs;
- direct purchase costs: travel and subsistence; equipment; other goods, works and services;

[2] FSTP beneficiaries shall also comply with the provisions set out in Article 6 of the Annotated Grant Agreement for eligible and ineligible costs and contributions.

[3] https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/interregional-innovation-investments-i3-instrument_en#i3-instrument-under-the-european-regional-development-fund-erdf

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- purchase of equipment (considering only its depreciation);

Double funding (e.g., in case of SMEs involved in other I3 projects) for the same activities will not be eligible.

3.4 Expected Results from Applicants:

Applicants are expected to demonstrate how their proposed activities will contribute to the objectives of the NASCHA Open Call and generate measurable technical and business outcomes.

Expected results may include, but are not limited to:

- Technology validation and demonstration: proving the technical feasibility, performance and applicability of hydrogen-related technologies, components or services in relevant or operational environments.
- Prototype development and technology improvement: developing, adapting or optimising innovative solutions to address specific technical challenges and support their further deployment.
- Integration of complementary solutions: demonstrating the integration of technologies, components or services that contribute to strengthening NASCHA hydrogen value chains and addressing identified technological gaps.
- Innovation and new applications: introducing innovative solutions, applications or business models related to hydrogen production, storage, distribution, mobility, urban applications or other relevant sectors.
- Market readiness and replication potential: generating evidence on the scalability, replicability and potential market uptake of the proposed solution, including opportunities for deployment beyond the initial demonstration context.

4 Evaluation Criteria

The selection of SMEs receiving financial support through the NASCHA FSTP scheme will be carried out through a transparent, fair and competitive evaluation process.

Applications will be assessed according to predefined eligibility and evaluation criteria, ensuring fair treatment and a consistent selection of the proposals with the highest potential to contribute to NASCHA objectives, including technical feasibility, innovation potential, economic viability and relevance to the project's hydrogen value chains.

4.1 Eligibility

As a first step, applications will be assessed against the following eligibility criteria:

- Official template submitted before the deadline through the official platform.
- SME status: applicants shall qualify as Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), including start-ups, according to the applicable European definition.
- Eligible geographical location: applicants shall be legally established in one of the eligible regions listed in Section 2.1 of this document at the moment of submission of the application.
- Timely submission: applications shall be submitted within the official opening and closing dates of the Open Call and through the dedicated submission channel.
- Completeness of the application: applicants shall provide all mandatory information and supporting documents required by the Open Call documentation.
- Double funding issue: applicants shall ensure that the activities proposed under the NASCHA Open Call are not subject to double funding from other EU, national, regional or public funding sources. Participation in other funded projects, including other I3 projects, is allowed provided that the same activities, costs or results are not financed twice.

SMEs that are members of the NASCHA consortium of the project are not eligible to receive FSTP support.

Applications that do not comply with the eligibility criteria will not be further evaluated.

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Applicants shall declare also their financial stability. SMEs that are "in difficulty" as defined at 2.1 of the Community Guidelines and State Aid for Rescuing and Restructuring Firms in Difficulty (2004/C22/02) will not be considered as eligible.

4.2 Evaluation

When the application period is closed, all eligible applications will be evaluated by a pool of at least three independent experts. Evaluators will sign a declaration of confidentiality and absence of conflict of interest before accessing the proposals.

The evaluation process will be based on two evaluation rounds. The first round will be based on predefined criteria and will include an eligibility check, expert technical and business assessments, and result in a ranking of proposals. The second round, will be based on an interview with the highest-ranked applicants and will include a feasibility and compatibility assessment.

The resulting selection of funded projects will aim to ensure an overall **balanced portfolio**, considering the distribution of supported projects across the NASCHA pilots, technological areas, value chains and geographical areas. In particular, the selection will ensure that **at least 2/3 of the available FSTP budget is allocated to beneficiaries established in Less Developed Regions**, in line with the territorial objectives of the I3 Instrument and based on the awarded score.

The evaluation criteria are structured around the following categories:

First evaluation round	**Score**	**Weight**	**Maximum Final score**
Relevance (max 20 points)			
A1. Alignment with the proposed project with the NASCHA objectives and NASCHA partners' business objectives including progress beyond the state of the art	1-5	2	10
A2. Consistency with the value chains of the pilots	1-5	1.5	7.5
A3. Complementarity with other innovation actions and I3 projects	1-5	0.5	2.5
Quality (max 20 points):			
B1. Technical-financial feasibility of the action plan	1-5	2	10
B2. Soundness and credibility of the marketing plan	1-5	1	5
B3. Credibility (technical/operational capacity and experience) of the applicant	1-5	1	5
Potential Impact (max 20 points)			
C1. Market potential	1-5	2	10
C2. Social, territorial and environmental impact	1-5	1	5
C3. Transnational impact	1-5	0.5	2.5
C4. Impact on "Less Developed Regions"[4]	1-5	0.5	2.5

In the first evaluation round the maximum score that can be awarded to each proposal is 60 points.

Proposals receiving a score below the minimum quality threshold of 35 points will not be considered for the second evaluation round.

In case of significant differences between evaluators' assessments or where clarification of the evaluation outcome is required, a consensus meeting may be organised to discuss and harmonise the evaluation results. The consensus process will also consider the overall balance of the selected portfolio, including the distribution of supported projects across the NASCHA pilots, technological areas and relevant value chains.

Eligible proposals reaching the minimum quality threshold will be ranked according to their first evaluation score. Only the highest-ranked applicants will be invited to the interview, starting from the top of the ranking list and proceeding until 150% available budget is allocated. The interview is a second evaluation round and will represent an additional compatibility and feasibility assessment. Applicants invited to the

[4] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/1058/oj

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interview will be requested to provide a short pitch (maximum 10 minutes) presenting their proposal, expected results and contribution to NASCHA objectives. The pitch will be presented to an evaluation panel. Following the presentation, the evaluators may ask additional questions and will assign a score based on the following criteria:

Second Evaluation Round	**Score**
D1. Feasibility and achievement of expected outcomes and delivery of the solution	1-5
D2. Compatibility with the value chain	1-5

The maximum score that can be awarded to each proposal is 10 points.

Proposals receiving a score below the minimum quality threshold of 6 points will not be considered for funding.

Only those applicants that will pass both the first and second evaluation rounds will be considered for funding. Applicants passing the first evaluation round but not passing the second will not be considered for funding.

Following a positive evaluation outcome, selected applicants will be invited to sign the Sub-Grant Agreement and will be requested to provide the documentation necessary to confirm eligibility requirements, including SME status and other declarations required by the Open Call.

Projects positively evaluated but not funded due to budget limitations will be included in a reserve list. In case additional budget becomes available, or according to the conditions of the second Open Call, reserve-list applicants may be contacted, by following the evaluation ranking, and invited to confirm their interest in receiving support or updating their application. The eventual reserve list will decay after 120 days. Being ranked in the reserve list does not preclude the SME to apply to the Second Open Call.

The results of the evaluation procedure will be communicated to applicants through the contact details provided in their application within 60 working days from the call deadline.

If the applicant believes that the rejection of the proposal was based on an error in the selection procedure, it will be possible to submit a complaint (following the formal deadlines and procedures), within 10 working days from the communication.

The applicant may decide to follow the simplified administrative procedure, by filing a complaint by sending a written complaint via email to: nascha@meta-group.com

The complaint shall clearly state:

- In the email subject: "Formal complaint for proposal [Reference number]",
- the formal objection,
- the reason for filing,
- the request for a formal explanation for the rejection, and
- the full proposal (as PDF attachment).

An official reply will be provided within 15 days from the receipt of the formal complaint.

It is possible to follow a more formal procedure of redress, by requesting for admissibility/eligibility or evaluation review (redress review), within 30 days of receiving the letter. The applicant may decide to follow this formal procedure of redress, by sending the letter to the following address:

Viale Umberto Tupini 116, 00144 Roma

The redress review letter shall clearly state:

- Object: "Redress review for proposal [Proposal's ID and reference number]",
- who is filing the complaint,

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- the formal objection,
- the reason for filing the redress review,
- the request for a formal explanation for the rejection, and
- the full proposal (as attachment).

The letter shall be signed and dated from the official submitter of the complaint.

You are free to choose any of the above means of redress. However, in the interest of good administration and procedural efficiency, it is recommended to use first the available administrative review procedures (if any). The objective of these procedures is to reexamine the circumstances of the selection procedure and to reach a final decision on your application. Deadlines for further redress will therefore run as from when you receive our reply with the final position.

4.3 Gender policy

NASCHA partners promote gender equality at different levels. This includes also the FSTP mechanism.

In particular, in case of applications receiving the same score during the evaluation procedure, those including the highest rate of women within their teams will be preferred, therefore a gender balance within the sub-project is strongly encouraged.

5 Roles and Expectations

Applicants are expected to:

- Implement the proposed sub-project: carry out the activities described in the approved proposal, contributing to the experimentation, validation and demonstration of innovative hydrogen-related technologies, components, services or applications.
- Contribute to NASCHA value chains: develop or test solutions that address the challenges identified in the Open Call and contribute to strengthening, complementing or extending the NASCHA hydrogen ecosystem.
- Provide evidence of results achieved: document the implementation of the funded activities and the achievement of the expected outputs, milestones and results defined in the approved action plan.

Selected beneficiaries will be invited to:

- **Engage with the NASCHA ecosystem**: participate in relevant project activities, networking opportunities and knowledge-exchange initiatives organised within NASCHA, where relevant for the implementation and exploitation of their solutions.
- **Collaborate with NASCHA partners**: interact with project partners and relevant stakeholders to support technology validation, knowledge exchange and the identification of opportunities for further deployment and replication.
- **Cooperate with the assigned NASCHA mentor** and the requested monitoring activities, and promptly report any delays, risks or deviations affecting the implementation of the sub-project.
- **NASCHA Informative Sessions:** participate in dedicated online kickoff InfoSessions where the key aspects of the subgrants will be explained and the NASCHA project activities for FSTP beneficiaries will be presented.
- **Strengthen market readiness and exploitation potential**: develop insights on the scalability, business potential and future uptake opportunities of their solutions, including possible applications beyond the initial demonstration context.
- **Capacity Building and Acceleration Support**: participate in NASCHA capacity-building and acceleration activities aimed at strengthening the technical, business, market and investment readiness of the supported solutions. These activities may cover hydrogen technologies and their integration into different sectors, business model development, IP management, standardisation and certification, environmental sustainability and circularity, as well as investor readiness and preparation for market scale-up.

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The above-mentioned activities are part of the funding programme. No compliance to or unattendance of those activities may result in a breach of the future agreement and the termination of the grant. The overall purpose of the NASCHA acceleration support is to help beneficiaries progress towards successful market deployment, investment and scale-up within and beyond the NASCHA hydrogen value chains.

NASCHA partners may support beneficiaries through:

- access to relevant technical expertise and knowledge related to hydrogen technologies, value chains, market trends and regulatory aspects;
- opportunities for knowledge exchange, networking and ecosystem connections;
- where available and relevant, access to testing facilities, laboratories or other infrastructures supporting the validation and demonstration of proposed solutions.

6 Obligations of the beneficiaries

By signing the Sub-Grant Agreement, beneficiaries receiving FSTP support under the NASCHA Open Call accept the contractual obligations applicable to recipients of EU funding, including obligations related to:

- conflict of interest;
- confidentiality and security;
- ethics;
- visibility and communication requirements;
- proper implementation of the funded action;
- information obligations;
- record-keeping and documentation requirements.

Beneficiaries shall implement the funded activities in accordance with the approved proposal, the agreed action plan and the provisions established in the Sub-Grant Agreement.

FSTP beneficiaries shall also comply with all contractual obligations set out in Articles 12 (conflict of interest), 13 (confidentiality and security), 14 (ethics), 17.2 (visibility), 18 (specific rules for carrying out the action), 19 (information) and 20 (record-keeping) of the Sub-Grant Agreement.
(aga_en.pdf)

Beneficiaries will be required to provide information on the progress and results of their sub-project during the implementation period. In particular, beneficiaries shall submit:

- an initial report, describing the planned activities, timeline, resources and expected results;
- an intermediate progress report, describing the activities carried out, progress achieved, possible deviations from the approved plan and corrective actions where relevant;
- a final technical report, describing the completed activities, achieved results, deliverables and the contribution of the supported action to NASCHA objectives and hydrogen value chains.

The reports will proof that the activities were performed according to the plan and will be serving to receive the next instalment according to the article 3.1 of this document.

A technical mentor will be assigned to each funded sub-project to support beneficiaries during the implementation phase, facilitate collaboration with NASCHA partners and monitor progress towards the technical objectives defined in the approved proposal. The technical mentor will be responsible for assessing the project progress (and relevant reports). In case of negative assessment what stated in the article 3.3 will apply.

Technical mentors will **help in assessing** the achievement of planned activities, milestones and expected results. META Group will coordinate the monitoring process and support the technical mentors in following the progress of funded projects.

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The implementation and progress of the activities supported by NASCHA partners will be monitored within the FSTP monitoring process coordinated by META Group.

A deviation from the approved action plan or failure to obtain the expected results may lead to contractual consequences, including the beneficiary becoming ineligible to receive the respective instalment payment.

Moreover, in case of serious breach of obligations by beneficiaries, META Group may claim back part of or the entire already paid amount(s), in accordance with the provisions established in the Sub-Grant Agreement.

FSTP beneficiaries will be subject to **monitoring and assessment activities** carried out within the NASCHA project, including by the mentors appointed under T5.3 and coordinated by META Group. Moreover, the granting authority, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and the European Court of Auditors (ECA) may exercise their rights of checks, reviews, audits and investigations towards recipients of FSTP support, in accordance with the applicable contractual provisions.

Beneficiaries will also commit to contributing to NASCHA communication and dissemination activities, including participation in relevant project events or networking activities organised by the project. Costs related to such participation will not be reimbursed separately by NASCHA but may be included in the budget of the funded sub-project.

Beneficiaries shall ensure to have a registered PIC before the signature of the Sub-Grant Agreement (see step-by-step guide for beneficiaries: *Completing the Financial Support for 3rd Parties Questionnaire and as a next step*). A registered PIC should be available for your submission, in case the procedure is not completed before the time of submission, it shall be available before the signature of the sub-grant agreement.

7 Administrative support to applicants

The project partner responsible for the management of the NASCHA FSTP Open Call administrative procedures is META Group.

All the information provided by the applicant will be treated as confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties (i.e., outside of the NASCHA consortium), unless publicly available or following an explicit request of the European Commission and related bodies. Evaluators and partners involved in NASCHA project are bound to confidentiality obligations.

Applicants may contact META Group for any clarification, administrative support or additional information related to the Open Call procedure at the following e-mail address **nascha@meta-group.com**

8 IPR

The beneficiary of the sub-grant will retain the ownership of its background knowledge, data, technologies and other intellectual assets made available for the implementation of the funded sub-project.

NASCHA project partners involved in the implementation of the funded activities will retain ownership of their respective background knowledge and intellectual property rights made available to the beneficiary, as identified in the relevant Sub-Grant Agreement or collaboration arrangements.

Where background knowledge is subject to rights held by third parties, the beneficiary and/or NASCHA project partners shall ensure that they have the necessary rights and authorisations to use such background for the implementation of the funded activities and to comply with their contractual obligations.

The ownership of results generated through the funded activities shall belong to the entity, or entities, that generate such results, considering their respective contributions to the development of those results.

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Where results are generated jointly and it is not possible to establish the respective contributions of the parties, the beneficiary and the relevant NASCHA project partners shall agree on appropriate arrangements for joint ownership, including the conditions for protection, use and exploitation of the jointly generated results.

Failure to reach an appropriate agreement on ownership and access rights before the start of the collaboration may result in the termination of the collaboration and/or the grant not being awarded.

The beneficiary and NASCHA project partners shall **consider appropriate measures for the protection of results**, where relevant and justified, taking into account the nature of the results, their potential for exploitation and the appropriate duration and territorial scope of any protection.

The beneficiary and NASCHA project partners shall ensure that the management, protection, use and exploitation of results comply with the applicable provisions of the Grant Agreement and the Sub-Grant Agreement, including any applicable requirements concerning ownership, control, transfer and licensing of results.

The beneficiary and NASCHA project partners shall grant access to their results, on a royalty-free basis, to the granting authority and other EU institutions, bodies, offices or agencies for non-commercial and non-competitive purposes, in accordance with the applicable EU funding rules.

9 GDPR

Pursuant to Article 15.2 of the project Grant Agreement and in compliance with the applicable EU, international and national law on data protection, in particular Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation – GDPR), FSTP beneficiaries must ensure that personal data processed in the context of the funded sub-projects are:

- processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subjects;
- collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes and not further processed in a manner that is incompatible with those purposes;
- adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed;
- accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date;
- kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than necessary for the purposes for which the data are processed;
- processed in a manner that ensures appropriate security of the data.

FSTP beneficiaries may grant their personnel access to personal data only where such access is strictly necessary for implementing, managing and monitoring the funded sub-project. Beneficiaries must ensure that the personnel authorised to access personal data are subject to appropriate confidentiality obligations.

For further support and guidance on data protection requirements applicable to Financial Support to Third Parties, beneficiaries may consult:

Guidance on Financial Support to Third Parties – Good Practices:

guidance_fstp-good-practices_en.pdf

10 Contact Details

For any information, clarification or support related to the application process or Open Call in general, applicants may contact the NASCHA project team at:

nascha@meta-group.com

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Applicants are also encouraged to consult the official EU Funding & Tenders Portal for additional information related to project submission procedures, funding opportunities and relevant updates.

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