Guidelines for Tourism SMEs: How to Navigate Sustainability Systems and Certification Pathways

(WP5 – T5.1)

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fuTOURiSME

Digital and Sustainable Transition

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Introduction

Sustainability certifications, labels, standards, schemes and frameworks—referred to in these guidelines as "sustainability systems"—are becoming increasingly important for tourism SMEs seeking to remain competitive, improve resource efficiency, attract and engage customers, and respond to evolving sustainability expectations and policy developments at EU level (e.g. EU Green Deal objectives and sustainability-related supply-chain requirements).

In practice, however, tourism SMEs often face significant challenges when engaging with sustainability systems. These include:

- navigating a fragmented landscape with dozens of different systems across Europe,
- understanding the scope, requirements and level of effort involved,
- preparing documentation, reports and audits,
- integrating sustainability practices into daily operations,
- and translating sustainability efforts into tangible market, branding and commercial benefits.

These guidelines are designed as a practical, SME-oriented resource to address these challenges. They provide a clear, step-by-step pathway to help tourism SMEs:

- understand the different types of sustainability systems encountered in the tourism sector,
- identify options that best fit their size, activities and markets,
- prepare progressively for certification or other forms of formal sustainability recognition,
- engage effectively with audit or verification processes where applicable,
- and maximise the business value of sustainability efforts in their communication and positioning.

The guidelines are grounded in the partner-based mapping and comparative analysis carried out under Task 5.1 of fuTOURiSME. They build on the sustainability systems identified by project partners in six countries (Greece, Spain, Cyprus, France, Germany and Italy), as well as on the qualitative insights derived from national reports and cross-country analysis. As such, they translate the findings of the T5.1 research into an accessible and action-oriented format tailored to the needs of tourism SMEs.

What types of sustainability systems do tourism SMEs encounter in practice?

Tourism SMEs are exposed to a wide range of sustainability systems that differ in scope, governance models and levels of formalisation. These systems include formal third-party certifications, ecolabels, management standards or schemes, verification-based schemes, destination frameworks and sector-specific programmes.

In light of evolving EU consumer protection rules, including the Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition Directive (EU) 2024/825, it is important to distinguish between different types of sustainability systems and the way sustainability claims are substantiated.

The categories presented below reflect how sustainability systems are encountered and used by tourism SMEs in practice and do not constitute a legal or regulatory classification.

Integrated sustainability certifications schemes (environmental + social + economic)

These systems provide a holistic assessment covering environmental, social and economic dimensions and rely on structured third-party verification.

Best for: hotels, rural accommodation, attractions, activity providers, destinations.

Examples:

- Travelife
- EarthCheck
- Green Globe
- Biosphere
- GSTC Standards / Scheme

Environmental ecolabels and management standards

Systems primarily focused on environmental management, resource efficiency and environmental performance.

Best for: accommodation providers, campsites, transport-related services.

Examples:

- EU Ecolabel
- Green Key
- EMAS
- ISO 21401
- GSTC Standards / Scheme

Social and accessibility-focused sustainability systems

These systems focus on inclusion, accessibility and social responsibility aspects within tourism services. While not always structured as certification schemes, they play an important role in addressing social sustainability objectives relevant for tourism SMEs.

Best for: museums, attractions, accommodation providers, destinations.

Examples:

- Tourisme & Handicap (FR)
- Reisen für Alle (DE)
- Ospitalità Italiana (IT)
- FairHotels (ES)
- GSTC Standards / Scheme

Destination or territorial sustainability frameworks

These systems address sustainability at territorial level, supporting governance, coordination and sustainability strategies across destinations.

Best for: destinations, DMOs, municipalities.

Examples:

- GSTC Standards / Scheme
- CETS (European Charter for Sustainable Tourism)
- Valeurs Parc (FR)
- Blue Flag

Sector-specific sustainability labels and programmes

These systems are typically sector-specific programmes or labels that promote sustainability practices within particular tourism subsectors. They may not always constitute formal certification schemes but are widely used by SMEs for positioning, benchmarking and communication purposes.

Best for: restaurants, wineries, cycling tourism providers, event organisers.

Examples:

- Bike Friendly (IT)
- Eventsost (ES)
- GEOfood (IT)
- Vignobles & Découvertes (FR)
- Cyprus Breakfast (CY)

Digital ESG-based sustainability systems (emerging trend)

These systems rely on digital tools to support data collection, monitoring and reporting of sustainability performance. They often reduce administrative burden and support continuous improvement, particularly for urban or high-volume accommodation providers.

Best for: hotels, urban accommodation, SMEs wishing to reduce administrative burden.

Examples:

- Ecostars (ES)
- Bioscore (ES)
- GreenSign tools (DE)

Why sustainability systems matters for tourism SMEs

Engaging with sustainability systems—such as certifications, ecolabels, standards or recognised schemes—can deliver tangible benefits for tourism SMEs when chosen and implemented appropriately. Key benefits include:

1. Market recognition and customer positioning

Sustainability systems can enhance visibility and credibility among increasingly sustainability-aware customers. In many tourism segments (transport, accommodation, destinations, food services and on-site activities), sustainability labels or certifications serve as recognisable signals that support informed consumer choice. Several systems are also acknowledged by tourism intermediaries and platforms (e.g. OTAs or tour operators), contributing to improved market positioning.

2. Operational improvements and cost efficiency

Many sustainability systems encourage more efficient use of resources, leading to:

- reduced energy, water and waste-related costs,
- improved internal processes,
- better monitoring and management of sustainability performance.

3. Strengthened competitiveness and B2B opportunities

Participation in recognised sustainability systems can support SMEs in:

- accessing B2B contracts,
- collaborating with tour operators and destinations,
- participating in tenders or public–private initiatives where sustainability criteria are increasingly relevant.

4. Readiness for evolving sustainability expectations

While sustainability systems do not replace legal or regulatory compliance, they can help SMEs build internal structures, data collection practices and management approaches that support preparedness for evolving sustainability-related expectations, including those emerging from EU-level policy developments and supply-chain requirements.

5. Credibility and trust through external validation

Where third-party verification or independent assessment is involved, sustainability systems can enhance trust and credibility with customers, partners and stakeholders by providing an external reference point for sustainability-related claims.

A practical step-by-step pathway for SMEs

This section outlines a practical, non-technical pathway designed to support tourism SMEs in navigating sustainability systems progressively, from initial self-reflection to communication and market use.

Please note that the steps and considerations presented below are indicative and based on the practical experience of project partners, the national fiches and the comparative analysis carried out under Task 5.1. They do not constitute an exhaustive or prescriptive assessment of certification requirements, costs or market performance, which vary significantly across systems and countries.

STEP 1 – Self-assess your starting point

Before engaging with any sustainability system, SMEs are encouraged to reflect on their current situation, including:

- existing sustainability practices,
- gaps across environmental, social and economic dimensions,
- staff capacity and available resources,
- level of digital maturity (particularly relevant for digital or ESG-based systems),
- market positioning (e.g. domestic vs. international clientele).

fuTOURiSME will provide a dedicated Self-Assessment Tool under Task 5.3 to support SMEs in this initial step.

STEP 2 – Identify sustainability systems that fit your business

Rather than searching for a "best" certification, SMEs should focus on identifying sustainability systems that best fit their specific context. Key aspects to consider include:

- *Business profile and activities*: accommodation, restaurant, travel agency, cultural site, activity provider, PCO, etc.

- *Motivation for engagement*:
  - o improving environmental or social performance,
  - o increasing market visibility and positioning,
  - o meeting destination or intermediary requirements,
  - o accessing new customer segments interested in responsible tourism.
- *Effort and resource implications* (indicative):
  - o some management standards or schemes (e.g. ISO-based systems, EMAS) typically require more structured processes and documentation,
  - o integrated sustainability labels may offer more flexible or phased approaches,
  - o digital sustainability systems can reduce paperwork but require basic digital skills and data availability.
- *Market recognition* (context-dependent):
  - o some systems are widely encountered across multiple European countries,
  - o others have stronger recognition in specific national or sectoral markets,
  - o sector- or destination-based systems may be particularly valuable locally, even if less visible internationally.
- *Technology and data requirements*:
  - o digital platforms may automate data collection and reporting,
  - o other systems rely more on manual documentation and periodic audits.

STEP 3 – Prepare for engagement or certification

Preparation typically involves strengthening internal practices and documentation, such as:

- *Data collection and basic monitoring*, including:
  - o energy and water consumption,
  - o waste generation,
  - o supplier and supply-chain information,
  - o staff training activities,
  - o health, safety and accessibility measures.
- *Implementation of improvements*, prioritising low-cost or high-impact actions:
  - o energy-efficient lighting, water-saving devices, waste separation,
  - o local sourcing policies,
  - o social responsibility and inclusion practices,
  - o accessibility improvements where relevant.
- *Team engagement*:
  - o assigning a sustainability focal point or coordinator, even on a part-time basis.
- Documentation:
  - o sustainability commitments or policies,

- o internal procedures,
- o staff guidelines,
- o supplier criteria.

STEP 4 – Undergo assessment or certification

Depending on the system chosen, engagement may involve:

- submission of an application,
- documentation review,
- on-site or remote assessment or audit,
- corrective actions where applicable,
- formal recognition, certification or inclusion in a programme,
- authorisation to communicate participation or use logos.

Validity periods and renewal requirements vary significantly across systems, typically ranging from one to three years. Some digital systems rely on continuous data updates rather than full audits every year.

STEP 5 – Communicate and leverage sustainability efforts

To maximise benefits, SMEs are encouraged to actively communicate and leverage their sustainability engagement by:

- displaying logos or recognition marks where authorised,
- sharing sustainability actions and progress online,
- informing tour operators, platforms and destination bodies,
- using sustainability engagement to differentiate from competitors,
- participating in local or sectoral sustainability networks.

Tips for SMEs choosing a sustainability system

- Start with a sustainability system that matches your current level of maturity and available resources. Not all SMEs need to begin with the most demanding schemes.
- If the landscape feels complex or overwhelming, consider integrated sustainability systems that offer phased or progressive improvement pathways, allowing you to advance step by step.
- If digitalisation and simplified reporting are priorities, explore sustainability systems that rely on digital tools or ESG-based platforms, keeping in mind the level of digital skills required.
- Where relevant, consider combining one main sustainability system with complementary sectoral or destination-based schemes to enhance local recognition and alignment with territorial strategies.
- Anticipate long-term commitments by planning and budgeting not only for initial engagement but also for renewals, updates and ongoing data collection.

- Use engagement with sustainability systems as a continuous improvement opportunity—to strengthen operations, enhance credibility, improve market access and build long-term value—rather than focusing solely on obtaining a logo.

fuTOURiSME resources for SMEs

fuTOURiSME will soon provide a set of progressive resources to support tourism SMEs throughout their sustainability pathway.

1. Compendium and mapping of sustainability systems, including certification schemes, labels and frameworks relevant for tourism SMEs : [insert link to the document available on the project website]
2. Guidelines for tourism SMEs on sustainability systems and certification pathways (this document)
3. A self-assessment tool to help SMEs evaluate their starting point and identify priorities
4. The Sustainable Tourism Toolkit, integrating practical tools and guidance
5. Training modules on environmental, social and economic sustainability aspects
6. Case studies illustrating concrete SME pathways and practices

These resources are designed to be used sequentially, allowing SMEs to progress step by step according to their capacities and needs.

Next steps for tourism SMEs

Sustainability engagement is a journey, not a one-off action. Tourism SMEs are encouraged to use these guidelines as a starting point to better understand the sustainability systems available to them and to reflect on which pathways best fit their business context.

As a next step, SMEs are invited to:

- explore the mapped sustainability systems relevant to their sector and market,
- carry out a self-assessment of their current sustainability practices,
- identify realistic and phased improvement priorities,
- engage with support and capacity-building activities offered under WP5.

fuTOURiSME will accompany SMEs throughout this process through training activities, self-assessment tools, coaching actions and the forthcoming Sustainable Tourism Toolkit, supporting a structured and credible transition towards more sustainable tourism practices.