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D1.7 TCLF SkillBridge

Sustainability and Funding Planning Guide

Single Market Programme

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Introduction

Purpose of this Guide

This toolkit is designed to support Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) in the Textile, Clothing, Leather and Footwear (TCLF) sectors to design **sustainable, financially viable, and long-lasting partnerships** that continue beyond TCLF SkillBridge project funding.

What this guide covers

- Section 1: What sustainability really means for an RSP
- Section 2: Governance and organisational tools to make the partnership work
- Section 3: Financial sustainability: from grant dependency to mixed funding
- Section 4: SME-focused support: the core of TCLF RSP value
- Section 5: National & regional funding maps by country
- Section 6: Templates

This guide was developed within the TCLF SkillBridge project (SI2.912307) and draws on EU-level policy intelligence, analysis of existing RSP partnership agreements, and direct field research conducted between April and May 2026. The field research consisted of six structured interviews with RSP coordinators from Attica (Greece), Campania (Italy), Catalonia (Spain), Valencian Community (Spain), Emilia-Romagna (Italy), and Flanders (Belgium). Coordinators were invited to book a 30-minute call via an open scheduling link (Calendly). Each session was structured around core questions: *what are the main challenges and bottlenecks you face in building your RSP; what do you expect/what is lacking from umbrella organisations and from the European Commission to help sustain your partnership; and what regional and national funding opportunities are available in your country or region to support RSPs*. While these questions provided a common template, each interview proved to be unique: conversations evolved organically into frank discussions shaped by regional context, institutional environment, and personal experience of building a partnership. Their responses directly shaped these guidelines.

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1. What does “Sustainability” Mean for an RSP?

Sustainability of Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) goes beyond securing funding or delivering project results. It is about ensuring **continuity, long-term value, and shared ownership** among partners.

In the TCLF ecosystem, alongside TCLF SkillBridge project, RSPs are also being developed and structured across Europe within [Metaskills4TCLF](#) (September 2023 - August 2027) and [AEQUALIS4TCLF](#) (February 2024 - January 2028) Erasmus+ Blueprint projects, reflecting a coordinated and growing effort to build lasting regional cooperation mechanisms.

The [OECD Skills Strategy](#), [EU TCLF Skills Strategy \(2025\)](#), [CEDEFOP work on skills governance](#), and the [Pact for Skills guidance](#) for partnerships show that successful and lasting partnerships are built on a common set of principles: clear strategic objectives, inclusive and active stakeholder engagement, stable governance structures, strong links to existing regional systems, and diversified resources.

RSPs should therefore be understood not as temporary project consortia, but as permanent, multi-stakeholder platforms for cooperation. Their role is to pool resources, foster communities of practice, connect industry, education and policy actors, and deliver measurable impact over time.

The purpose of this guidance is to support RSPs in making this transition from project-based collaboration to sustainable regional skills ecosystems that remain relevant, trusted and operational well beyond initial funding cycles.

1.1. Regional Skills Partnerships as Part of the Pact for Skills: Proven Results

All TCLF Regional Skills Partnerships are part of the TCLF Large-Scale Skills Partnership under the EU Pact for Skills - a partnership already delivering results. **Since the EU TCLF Pact for Skills launch in 2020**, the Pact has grown significantly. At the time of writing (June 2026), it [encompasses](#) 20 Large-Scale Partnerships (LSPs), 28 Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs), and around 75 partnerships in other areas.

Recent results from the EU Pact for Skills [2025 survey](#) confirm the strong impact and relevance of Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) and Large-Scale Partnerships (LSPs) as key instruments for skills development across Europe. With nearly half of all members responding, the data shows that partnerships are delivering at scale, with 3.9 million people trained, 46,500 training programmes developed or updated, and €1.2 billion invested in upskilling and reskilling activities.

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The survey also highlights deep integration into industry, with LSP members training on average 26% of their workforce, demonstrating that skills partnerships are increasingly embedded in company strategies.

Importantly, 90% of members report clear benefits from participation, particularly in terms of collaboration, knowledge sharing, and cross-sector engagement, while feedback from coordinators confirms that both LSPs and RSPs play a central role in enabling networking, mutual learning, and joint action.

For the TCLF sectors: *“Recent survey data report 178,194 training participants, the development or updating of over 3,000 programmes, and more than €300 million mobilised for upskilling and reskilling among partners. These efforts provide a strong base to scale through 2030”.*

These results demonstrate that skills partnerships are not theoretical, but operational and impactful.

1.2. Analysing existing RSP’s Partnership Agreements in the TCLF Ecosystem

The TCLF SkillBridge project aims to establish at least 8 TCLF Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs). Each partnership is expected to formally conclude a Regional Skills Partnership Agreement, which If we consider the 3 initiatives, i.e. the two Blueprints and the SkillBridge, there are **28 RSP in 15 countries** being developed at different stages with Italy having the highest concentration with 6 RSPs. Some regions appear twice in the landscape such as Catalonia and Comunidad Valenciana (Spain), and Veneto/Prato (Italy), each covering different sectors (Textiles & Clothing and Leather & Footwear separately). This reflects the reality that, in some regions, a sector-specific partnership had already been established under a previous project, while in others some of the sectors identified the opportunity earlier, but kept the door open for a broader TCLF partnership in the future.

For the latest updates on Regional Skills Partnerships, please refer to: https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/about/regional-skills-partnerships_en

Table 1: TCLF Regional Skills Partnerships developed under TCLF SkillBridge, and Erasmus+ Blueprint AEQUALIS4TCLF & Metaskills4TCLF EU co-funded projects

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TCLFSkillBridge			EQUALS4TCLF			META SKILLS 4TCLF		
Country	Region	Sector	Country	Region	Sector	Country	Region	Sector
Belgium	Flanders	T&C	Germany	All country	TCLF	Croatia	North-West	TCLF
France	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	T&C	Greece	Central Macedonia	TCLF	Czechia	Zlin	F&L
	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	TCL	Italy	Prato	T&C	Finland	Pirkanmaa	TCLF
Germany	Baden-Württemberg	L	Portugal	Norte	TCF	Lithuania	Klaipeda	T&C
Greece	Attica	TCF	Romania	Nord-Est	TCLF	Netherlands	All country	TCL
Italy	Campania	TCLF	Spain	Catalonia	Leather	Serbia	Southern and Western regions	T&C
	Tuscany	L&F	Spain	Valencian Community	F&L	Slovenia	Central Slovenia	T&C
	Emilia-Romagna	TCLF						
	Piemonte	T&C						
Poland	Łódzkie	TCLF						
Portugal	Central Portugal	TCLF						
Spain	Catalonia	T&C						
	Valencian Community	T&C						

Every RSP is unique. Each faces its own regional context, political landscape, industrial composition, and institutional culture. And yet, when the working programmes and formal agreements of the established partnerships were analysed together, followed by the one-to-one interviews - a consistent pattern emerges. The RSPs that are building towards sustainability share three structural characteristics.

Embeddedness in regional economic structures

The most durable RSPs are not built by projects only. In the strongest cases, formal agreements are reached after years of accumulated trust: joint initiatives, regional roundtables and shared history with public authorities. As one of the RSP coordinators said in the interview: *"The project just formalised the cooperation - the relationships were already there."*

Sustainability is a path

Building a functional Regional Skills Partnership takes years: relationships must be established, governance structures tested, services validated, and trust earned with companies and public authorities as well as with research and education providers.

The partnerships that are still standing and still growing are not the ones with the best vision or structure, but those that never stopped functioning. They kept meeting, kept sharing information, kept cooperating and in doing so, built the one thing that no project budget can guarantee: trust. And trust, once built, is what makes everything else possible.

Skills intelligence: evidence that makes everything else credible

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Continuous skills intelligence that goes beyond one-off surveys was identified across all interviews as the most strategically powerful investment an RSP can make.

It is also the sharpest answer to the differentiation problem. In regions where chambers of commerce, universities, clusters, and sector associations all offer training, *"the competition is high - it is difficult to stand out."*

However, training alone is not expected to distinguish an RSP. What no competitor can replicate is the combination of cross-sector intelligence, convening authority, and the legitimacy to speak for an entire regional TCLF ecosystem.

Key challenges identified by RSP coordinators

Funding gaps and project dependency - EU and national funds are largely allocated under the 2021–2027 MFF, running to 2030. Missing this cycle means waiting years. Where funding exists, calls are often regional in scope or for the entire industry rather than sector specific. Between cycles, RSPs mostly operate on a project-to-project basis: losing staff, relationships, and momentum in the gaps. There is no structural continuity between funding rounds.

The gap between signing and sustaining - even with a work programme in place and stakeholders aligned, coordinators across all regions were clear that the first three years of independent operation are the most fragile. The structures are there on paper, but the coordination capacity, institutional momentum, and financial continuity needed to sustain results take time to consolidate. Targeted funding opportunities that support capacity building and the long-term sustainability of partnerships would help bridge this critical transition.

Centralisation & limited regional autonomy - in several countries, national ministries control the skills agenda and regional actors follow. This makes co-ownership structurally difficult and limits the RSP's room to act. More efforts are needed to attract the authorities' attention to these specific sectors.

Low industry engagement & fee resistance - some SMEs can be reluctant to commit time, data, or resources and are accustomed to free or subsidised training through projects and programmes. Converting attendance into co-ownership, and goodwill into financial contribution, remains the central operational challenge for most RSPs.

Differentiation & visibility - in regions with active training ecosystems, RSPs compete with chambers of commerce, universities, clusters, and sector associations - all offering training to the same



companies. Without a clear, distinctive value proposition and the communications resources to articulate it, RSPs remain invisible to the stakeholders they could most benefit from.

The collective evidence from European TCLF regions clearly demonstrates that sustainability is achieved not through a single intervention, but through the systemic combination of governance, funding, services, and intelligence, all of which must be designed to reinforce each other over time, enabling Regional Skills Partnerships to evolve from temporary collaborations into permanent infrastructures for skills, innovation, and industrial transformation.

1.3 Sustainability Narrative from the [Blueprint Alliances Report \(2024\)](#)

Not only are TCLF industries developing their Regional Skills Partnerships, but industries across Europe - [from tourism to construction, and from aerospace and defence to the creative and cultural sectors](#) - are joining forces to address the challenges of the green and digital transitions and the wide-ranging impacts they bring.

In general, the EU [Pact for Skills](#) tracks this work through its Blueprint Projects for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills, funded under Erasmus+. In the TCLF ecosystem, this effort runs from [Skills4Smart TCLF 2030](#) (2018-2022) through to [METASKILLS4TCLF](#) and [AEQUALIS4TCLF](#) today.

The 2024 [Blueprint Alliances report](#) - covering 28 alliances across 40 Blueprint projects since 2018 — delivers one central finding: **sustainability is achieved when partnerships transition from time-bound projects into system-level infrastructures**, where results are continuously used, updated, and embedded into policy, industry practice, and education not abandoned when funding ends.

The practices that make this transition possible are consistent across sectors:

- Long-term governance structures that outlast the founding project.
- Permanent skills intelligence tools that provide ongoing value.
- Diversified funding - membership models, industry contributions, regional authority support, follow-on EU instruments.
- Integration into existing regional and sectoral structures and policy frameworks
- Sustained stakeholder engagement through working groups, events, and shared platforms.

Conclusions and recommendations

The system that makes sustainability possible

The collective evidence from partnership agreement analysis, coordinator interviews, and the broader European RSP landscape points consistently to the same conclusion: sustainability is not

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achieved through any single intervention, but emerges from the systemic combination of four interdependent elements, each reinforcing the others:

Governance → enables coordination and trust. **Funding** → sustains activities beyond project cycles. **Services** → deliver concrete value to stakeholders. **Skills Intelligence** → guides strategic direction and justifies investment.

When these four elements are designed to work together, Regional Skills Partnerships evolve from temporary project collaborations into permanent regional infrastructures for skills, innovation, and industrial transformation.

Table 2: The combined evidence summarised: Governance / Funding / Skills Intelligence / Services / Policy Alignment / Engagement

Pillar	Regional Evidence	Blueprint Evidence	Integrated Outcome
Governance	Clusters, councils, public-private models	Formal boards, sustainability planning	Long-term institutional stability
Funding	EU + regional + industry mix	Hybrid + service-based models	Financial resilience
Skills Intelligence	Observatories, surveys	Forecasting, ESCO alignment	Strategic decision-making
Services	Pilots, Training, SME support, labs	Curricula, platforms, certifications	Continuous value creation
Policy Alignment	S3	Pact for Skills integration	System embedding

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Engagement	SME-focused approaches	Co-creation ecosystems	Stakeholder ownership
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2. Governance: Making the Partnership Work

No funding model can compensate for weak governance. Stable, shared governance is one of the most important predictors of RSP longevity: it creates the trust, accountability, and coordination that allow everything else to function.

2.1 Define your long-term value before anything else

Before designing governance structures or funding models, every RSP should answer four questions:

What problem do we regularly address ?	Not “ <i>we deliver training</i> ” but “ <i>we are the only actor that connects industry demand, VET provision, and regional policy in real time</i> ”
Who benefits economically?	Identify the 2-3 stakeholder groups for whom the RSP creates measurable economic value
What services can we sustain?	Only services that partners would be interested to pay for (in time, money or support) are sustainable
Where do we fit in policy systems?	RSPs aligned with Smart Specialisation Strategies and national VET frameworks survive longer

2.2 Recommended governance structure

There is no single model that works everywhere. However, the analysis¹ of the most durable RSPs in Europe reveals a consistent architecture:

Body	Function	Meets
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¹ Analysis of TCLF RSP working programmes and partnership agreements (TCLF SkillBridge, 2025–2026); [Blueprint Alliances Report, 2024](#); [CEDEFOP — Skills Governance and VET Systems](#); [OECD — Governing Skills Strategies at Regional Level, 2019](#).

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Steering Committee	Strategic direction, approves annual workplan, resolves conflicts	2x per year
Industry Advisory Board	Market alignment, validates training relevance, signals skills gaps	3x per year
Skills & Training Working Group	Programme design, delivery oversight, quality assurance	Quarterly
Regional Authority Liaison	Policy alignment, access to structural funds, political visibility	Quarterly
SME Engagement Desk	Direct support to small companies, low-barrier entry point (see Section 4)	On demand

Practical tips

Keep structures lean and decision-oriented and avoid governance for the sake of governance.
 Rotate leadership positions to reinforce real ownership.
 Integrate with existing cluster or VET governance rather than creating parallel bodies.
 Document decisions and share them. Transparency builds trust with SMEs and public authorities

2.3 Embedding the RSP: become the connector

Sustainability is stronger when RSPs are embedded in existing regional structures. The critical word here is **embedded**. An RSP that sits alongside existing initiatives will always be seen as a "project", while the RSP that acts as the hub connecting those initiatives becomes indispensable.

Step 1: we recommend mapping what already exists in your region:

- Cluster organisations
- Chambers of Commerce
- Vocational education and training ecosystems
- Labour market observatories

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- Regional development agencies

Step 2: we recommend positioning the RSP as the place where these actors connect, coordinate, and align. This should not be perceived as a new layer, but just the coordination that was missing.

Step 3: we recommend starting with 1-2 strong partnerships where quick results would be visible (joint training, skills mapping, SME support). This can be used as the proof of concept to expand.

2.4 Skills intelligence as a core & permanent service

As discussed above, the most durable RSPs in Europe are those that developed continuous skills intelligence systems that go beyond surveys towards ongoing mechanisms that provide the region with reliable, up-to-date insight into workforce needs.

In practice, this includes:

- Sector skills dashboards updated annually.
- Labour market mapping aligned with regional economic data.
- Training needs forecasting linked to industry transformation (green/digital).
- ESCO-aligned competence gap analysis.

This service attracts companies (who need the data), supports policymakers (who need evidence), and justifies continued funding (by demonstrating ongoing value). The TCLF Skills Observatory being developed under the Erasmus+ [Skills4Circularity](#) project is a reference model.

3. Financial Sustainability: From Grant Dependency to Mixed Funding

The most common failure mode for any organisation including RSPs is over-reliance on a single funding source. When that source ends, the partnership becomes difficult to sustain. Therefore, sustainable RSP is the partnership which builds a blended funding model where multiple revenue streams collectively support operations.

Practical benchmark: over time, a sustainable RSP should try to rely on more than 50% non-project funding. This is just practical advice, not the requirement. The journey starts with the first in-kind financial support or first project secured.

3.1 The diversified funding model

Funding opportunities for RSPs are more numerous than they may appear at first glance. The instruments listed below are illustrative examples and the full landscape is broader and varies

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significantly by country and region. The practical task for each RSP is to identify which combination of available streams is most relevant to their context, and to build their funding strategy from there.

Funding Stream	Strategic Role	Time Horizon
EU Funding (Erasmus+, ESF+, Interreg)	Innovation, scaling, experimentation	Project cycles (2-4 years)
Regional / National Structural Funds	Operational stability, VET infrastructure	Medium term (3-7 years)
Industry Contributions (in-kind)	Ownership, commitment signal, co-investment	Ongoing
Membership Fees	Predictable income, accountability, governance rights	Annual
Paid Training Services	Self-generated revenue, market validation	From year 2-3
SME Support Programmes	Targeted income + public funding leverage	Linked to ESF+/ERDF
Public Authority Hosting/Secondment	In-kind operational support	Ongoing

Even small industry contributions matter enormously, because they signal commitment, increase accountability, and change the dynamic from “beneficiary” to “co-owner”.

3.2 Moving from project budget to operational budget

The practical shift requires developing services that stakeholders will support over time, not just activities that fill a workplan.

The honest starting point is to ask not what services could theoretically generate revenue, but which activities partners already value enough to support through their own time, resources, or political backing even without a project obligation to do so.

In the near term, the most realistic foundations are:

- **ESF+ and regional structural funds:** the most immediately accessible route for funding RSP coordination and training activities, highly compatible with what RSPs do.

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- **National training funds** (Fondimpresa, FUNDAE, OPCO 2i, KFS, etc): company-level contributions via payroll redirected to RSP-facilitated training, without asking companies to pay the RSP directly.
- **EU project participation as a partner:** joining Erasmus+ or Interreg projects generates coordination budgets without the burden of leading the application.
- **In-kind contributions from partners:** meeting rooms, staff time, laboratory access, communication support; these reduce operational costs meaningfully.
- **Regional authority hosting or secondment:** a regional authority co-funds or seconds a staff member to the RSP; where this is achievable, it is one of the most stabilising forms of support available
- **A small percentage of project funding secured for partners:** where the RSP facilitates access to a funded opportunity for a member organisation, a modest agreed contribution is reinvested in RSP operations; contribution follows demonstrated value, not the other way around

The shift to a self-sustaining operational budget is a medium to long-term ambition. What matters in the short term is reducing dependency on any single source and building the track record that makes deeper stakeholders.

3.3 EU-level support for RSP sustainability

3.3.1 Policy support

Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs), as integral components of the [TCLF Large-Scale Partnership](#) under the EU [Pact for Skills](#), are increasingly supported through a strengthened and more coherent European framework defined by the [Union of Skills](#) (2025), which positions the Pact for Skills as the central platform for coordinating skills development efforts across sectors and countries. This marks a clear shift from fragmented, project-based interventions towards a more integrated system in which partnerships are expected to operate as long-term actors embedded in both regional and European ecosystems.

In practical terms, this means that the European Commission is placing stronger emphasis on **reinforcing Large-Scale Partnerships as strategic delivery mechanisms**, ensuring that RSPs are not only created but also supported in their evolution into stable, operational structures that contribute directly to workforce development, industrial transformation, and policy implementation. At the same time, greater effort is being made to connect previously fragmented EU initiatives, such as [Blueprint Alliances](#), [Centres of Vocational Excellence \(CoVEs\)](#), [Skills Academies](#), [Alliances for Apprenticeships](#) and future VET-business partnerships, allowing RSPs to benefit from stronger synergies, shared resources, and coordinated actions across programmes and sectors.

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New Support Tools for RSPs

- **Integrated Support Services (from mid-2026)**

Merger of Pact for Skills + European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAFP) services:

- One access point for networking, guidance, and knowledge
- Stronger link between lifelong learning and apprenticeships

- **EU Skills Observatory**

- Central hub for skills intelligence
- Two-way system: EU data - RSPs input - EU
- Reduces fragmentation and strengthens evidence-based planning

If your entity is a member of a regional Pact for Skills, you can also join the EU Pact for Skills by registering here: https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/Pact_for_Skills_FORM

Looking ahead, several upcoming policy instruments will further reinforce this support framework, including the new [EU VET Strategy \(2026\)](#), which will define the future direction of vocational education and training cooperation, the review of EU Skills Academies, which will clarify their role and improve their effectiveness, and the introduction of VET-business partnerships, co-funded by industry, which aim to support companies in developing training infrastructure and delivering high-quality vocational education. In addition, the [Skills Portability Initiative](#) will improve the recognition of qualifications across borders, facilitating labour mobility and strengthening the Single Market.

Overall, these developments confirm that RSPs are increasingly positioned as **key operational nodes within a connected European skills ecosystem**, where policy alignment, shared services, funding incentives, and integrated intelligence systems work together to support their long-term sustainability, scalability, and impact.

3.3.2 Erasmus+ Policy Support Calls

European-level funding continues to play an important role in supporting the development and scaling of Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs). In particular, [Erasmus+ policy support calls](#), such as the [Erasmus+ Support to RSPs Call \(2026\)](#), provide targeted opportunities for partnerships to strengthen and expand their activities.

A key example is [ERASMUS-EDU-2026-POL-EXP-T09-ADULT-PS \(ERASMUS-LS – Lump Sum Grants\)](#), which directly supports the implementation of RSP work programmes. This call enables partnerships to operationalise their activities, including training delivery, stakeholder engagement, skills intelligence actions, and coordination mechanisms, facilitating the transition from pilot initiatives to structured and long-term cooperation.

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Such calls are expected to be recurrent, providing continued EU-level support for the implementation and scaling of RSPs across regions.

3.3.3 Pact for Skills Funding Portal

The EU Pact for Skills provides a dedicated gateway to funding opportunities relevant to skills partnerships. Through its funding portal, RSPs can access information on **EU funding programmes, identify opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, and develop follow-up on projects** that build on existing initiatives.

Funding Opportunities Portal

https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/stakeholders-and-business/funding-opportunities_en

3.3.4. Targeted Sustainability Support to RSPs

[Metaskills4TCLF](#), [AEQUALIS4TCLF](#), and [TCLF SkillBridge](#) EU co-funded projects are the perfect example of the practical tools to deliver targeted support to RSPs. Through these projects, partnerships received tailored mentoring and coaching, including hands-on support in refining work programmes, identifying funding opportunities, and developing follow-up project ideas, particularly in the context of Erasmus+ and other EU programmes.

Special attention was given to SMEs through the TCLF SkillBridge project, notably via the implementation of targeted call for services. A total of **10 tenders** were awarded, enabling RSP to support SMEs in upskilling & reskilling their workforce, thus bringing all relevant regional stakeholders together to actively participate in training, pilot actions, and the development of practical solutions.

Overall, the TCLF SkillBridge project has proven to be a highly effective and well-targeted instrument for supporting the development and sustainability of Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs). Its tailored approach, closely aligned with regional needs and stakeholder realities, has demonstrated clear added value in strengthening partnerships and enabling practical implementation on the ground.

Building on these positive results, and on the direct feedback gathered through interviews with RSP coordinators conducted for this guide, it would be positively seen for the European Commission to continue to support and scale up similar targeted initiatives, as they provide a flexible and impactful mechanism to reinforce the long-term sustainability of RSPs across Europe.

Building a functional Regional Skills Partnership takes years: relationships must be established, governance structures tested, services validated, and trust earned with companies and public authorities. Coordinators across all regions interviewed for this guide described the gap between

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projects as one of the most damaging and recurring challenges they face - one that costs staff, momentum, and stakeholder confidence every time it occurs.

On the other hand, a dedicated post-project sustainability budget line in the traditional sense is not how EU projects are structured, and it is unlikely to be feasible within current funding frameworks. However, a practical alternative exists: future Erasmus+ and similar EU project calls - particularly those in the skills and sectoral cooperation space - could advisably include RSP support and sustainability as a dedicated task with its own allocated budget within the project workplan. Over time, if RSP support becomes a standard, encouraged component across relevant Erasmus+ and sectoral cooperation projects, the cumulative effect would be significant: a distributed, self-reinforcing support system built not from a single initiative but from many with each project adding a layer of credibility, continuity, and stakeholder confidence to the RSP model. RSPs would no longer be seen as the output of one project, but as a permanent feature of the European skills landscape, continuously nourished by the broader EU-funded ecosystem. This consistency would inspire deeper cooperation between regions, stronger commitment from national and regional authorities, and greater trust from the companies and workers that RSPs ultimately exist to serve.

4. Supporting SMEs: The Core of TCLF RSP Value

The vast majority of TCLF employers are SMEs, often micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, no HR department, no training budget, and no time to navigate EU bureaucracy. If an RSP cannot demonstrate clear, direct value to SMEs, it will not survive.

And as coordinators across every region consistently noted: that value must be framed in terms of company profitability. The question companies ask is not *"how does this help the sector?"* but *"how does this help my business?"*

This section sets out a concrete SME engagement model which is the most important differentiator between RSPs that become indispensable and those that remain invisible to the companies they serve.

4.1 Why SMEs and RSPs disengage and what to do about it

Why SMEs disengage	What RSPs can do about it
No time to attend meetings or workshops	Try to bring the service to them: on-site skills audits, digital tools, short formats
Don't understand EU funding	Try to act as the application navigator: fill forms on their behalf or with them. Leverage EU industry umbrellas associations such as EURATEX, CEC & COTANCE

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Companies don't see direct business benefit	Try to frame every service in terms of company profitability: cost reduction, compliance readiness, talent retention, access to new customers. Skills language is for the RSP team, while with the companies - business language should be used
Training feels generic and irrelevant	Try to co-design training content with SMEs around real needs; keep formats short and results-oriented. Every touchpoint must deliver visible, immediate value: survey fatigue is real and deep for the SMEs
Training provision feels outdated: not using digital tools or AI	Try to integrate AI-assisted learning tools and digital formats into RSP-delivered training; position the RSP as the actor that brings modern learning methods to the TCLF sectors
Membership fees feel like yet another charge on top of existing cluster and association fees	Try to introduce in-kind models; consider a value-share approach: once the RSP secures a project or funding - a small % is reinvested in the RSP
Fear of losing skilled workers after training	Frame training as retention and competitiveness tool

4.2 The SME Engagement Ladder

SME engagement must be designed as a progression. The goal is to move companies from passive awareness to active co-investment:

Step 1 - Awareness	Events, newsletters, short videos. Goal: make the RSP known and trusted.
Step 2 - First Contact	Free skills audit or training needs assessment. Goal: demonstrate immediate value.
Step 3 - First Participation	One subsidised training module or pilot action. Goal: create a positive experience.
Step 4 - Regular Engagement	Membership or repeat service use. Company sends staff, contributes to skills intelligence. Goal: integration.
Step 5 - Co-ownership	Company representative on Industry Advisory Board. Co-designs training content. Goal: ownership and advocacy.

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4.3 Concrete SME support services: actionable models

Free or low-cost skills audit

A 2-4 hour on-site visit (or digital questionnaire) that assesses current workforce competences against future needs (digital, green, circular economy). The RSP facilitates; the output is a one-page action plan with funded training options.

- Funding: subsidised via one of the previously mentioned funds like ESF+ or charged as a tiered service.
- Delivered by: VET provider partner or RSP coordinator.
- Output: personalised training roadmap + funding pathway.

Training navigation service

Most SMEs are unaware of available funded training schemes (ESF+, OPCO, FUNDAE, Fondimpresa, etc). The RSP can act as the first point of contact: identifying eligibility, preparing documentation, and connecting companies to providers.

Evidence from the TCLF SkillBridge project: 10 targeted tenders were awarded specifically to support SME upskilling through RSPs demonstrating the model's effectiveness and replicability.

Consortium participation pathway

Small companies usually do not have the capacity to lead and benefit from the EU projects and in practice, neither can most RSPs at early stages of development. The administrative and legal complexity of managing a European consortium requires capacity that many regional partnerships do not tend to have yet. In these cases, RSPs can consider working with the European umbrella organisations - such as COTANCE, CEC, and EURATEX - which have the institutional capacity, legal structures, and EU project management experience to act as lead applicants or coordinators. The RSP and its member companies could then participate as partners: contributing sector expertise, hosting pilot actions, and providing trainees and industry knowledge, without needing to carry the administrative burden of consortium management. As RSPs mature and build their own capacity, this role can progressively shift, but in the short to medium term, the umbrella-led model is the most realistic and effective pathway for TCLF companies and regional partnerships to access European funding.

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Shared infrastructure: digital and circular labs

Another idea to ease the burden for RSP while increasing value and regional ownership is to negotiate access to shared testing facilities, digital equipment, and circular economy labs for SMEs that cannot afford individual investment. This is especially relevant for the leather and footwear sectors, where sustainability certification is increasingly required by buyers and where the [Polo Tecnologico Conciario in Tuscany](#) already provides a working model of what shared sectoral infrastructure can look like in practice.

Sector-specific micro-credentials

Working with VET providers, RSPs can develop short, stackable credentials in TCLF-specific competences (sustainable tanning, digital pattern making, circular design). These are more accessible than full qualifications and respond to SME schedules. AI-assisted learning tools and digital delivery formats should be integrated where possible: uptake of AI in TCLF training provision remains very low, but awareness of its potential is growing fast. RSPs that lead on this will differentiate themselves significantly.

5. National & Regional Funding Maps

This section provides a country-by-country mapping of the most relevant funding sources for RSP activities, based on the conversations with regional skills partnerships coordinators & desk-based research.

It is a quick-reference tool for RSP coordinators and external stakeholders - mapping the most relevant funding instruments by country. It is not exhaustive: for every instrument listed, there are likely others at regional or local level that coordinators have already identified and are actively using. The goal of this section is to demonstrate that the resources exist and that navigating them strategically, rather than waiting for a perfect dedicated call, is both possible and necessary.

The most sustainable funding pattern across all countries is a blend of ESF+ or equivalent regional labour-market funding, national public training schemes, and project-based cooperation funding (Erasmus+, Interreg). Use TCLF SkillBridge and Metaskills4TCLF to build the partnership and methods, then connect to national and regional budgets for ongoing delivery.



5.1 Spain

Spain combines strong national coordination with extensive regional implementation. ESF+ is delivered through four national and nineteen regional programmes, making regional employment services the central gateway for RSP-funded actions.

Instrument / Programme	Relevance for RSPs	Access
LABORA (Valencian Community Region)	Training for unemployed and employed workers; sector-specific upskilling and reskilling	labora.gva.es
FUNDAE	Continuous training for employees through company-led schemes across all regions and industries	fundae.es
SOC (Catalonia)	Training programmes, reskilling pathways, labour market integration	soc.cat
Dual VET (FP Dual)	Work-based learning co-financed by national and regional authorities. This is part of the formal education.	Via regional education ministries
ESF+ Spain	Employment, training, education, youth employment and social inclusion across national and regional programmes	fondoseuropeos.gob.es

5.2 Italy

Italy uses both national and regional ESF+ programmes across six national and twenty-one regional programmes. Regional programme authorities are the key entry point: combine them with ITS Academies and bipartite training funds for maximum impact.

Instrument / Programme	Relevance for RSPs	Access
Giovanisi+ (Tuscany)	Regional framework for youth, training, employability and entrepreneurship	giovanisi.it

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ESF+ Regional Programmes (ROP)	Vocational training, lifelong learning, labour market integration; 21 regional programmes	Via regional managing authorities
ITS Academy	Specialised technical education linked to industry needs	itsnatta.it
Fondimpresa / Fondirigenti	Bipartite training funds: companies accumulate training credits via payroll	fondimpresa.it
ESF+ Veneto (example)	Regional ESF+ supporting employment, skills and education system improvement	Via regional authority

5.3 Germany

Germany operates a mixed federal-Länder model. ESF+ includes one federal, fifteen regional and one multi-fund programme. Chambers of Commerce (IHK) & Crafts (HWK) are essential delivery partners.

Instrument / Programme	Relevance for RSPs	Access
Federal Employment Agency (BA)	Upskilling and reskilling of workers and unemployed individuals	arbeitsagentur.de
Bildungsschecks (Training Vouchers)	Länder-level co-financing for SME vocational training (NRW, Saxony-Anhalt, Hamburg, Bremen)	Via Land ministries
AFBG (Meister-BaföG)	Advanced qualifications: master craftspeople, technicians - 78% federal + 22% Land	bmas.de
IHK / HWK (Chambers)	Certification, quality assurance, co-financing of training	ihk.de
ESF+ Federal (continuing education)	Social-partner-led and innovative lifelong learning approaches	esf.de

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5.4 France

France's funding landscape rests on strong regional responsibility for VET, backed by national regulation. Regional Councils finance initial and continuing VET; OPCOs are the most direct sectoral lever for RSP action with SMEs.

Instrument / Programme	Relevance for RSPs	Access
Conseils Régionaux (VET funding)	Initial and continuing VET aligned with regional priorities	Via regional councils
France Compétences	National body regulating VET and apprenticeships	francecompetences.fr
OPCOs (OPCO 2i for TCLF)	Sector-based bodies financed by companies	opco2i.fr
CPF (Personal Training Account)	Individual training rights allowing workers to co-finance certified training throughout their career	moncompteformati on.gouv.fr

5.5 Portugal

Portugal combines national coordination with regional implementation under Portugal 2030. IEFP and Qualifica are natural RSP implementation partners; the PRR provides additional capacity for digital and green transition training.

Instrument / Programme	Relevance for RSPs	Access
IEFP	Main public delivery route for training for unemployed and employed workers	iefp.pt
Portugal 2030 / ESF+	Major support for VET, adult learning, inclusion and labour-market alignment	portugal2030.pt
Qualifica Programme	Adult learning, recognition of prior learning and upskilling; accessible to TCLF workers	qualifica.gov.pt

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<u>Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR)</u>	Digital skills, green transition and training system modernisation investments	recuperarportugal.gov.pt
<u>Sectoral training (CTIC and clusters)</u>	RSP-aligned delivery via established sector bodies; CTIC (leather technology) is the reference model for public-private RSP structure	ctic.pt

5.6 Poland

Poland combines national coordination with strong regional implementation at voivodeship level. Sectoral Skills Councils and PARP instruments are particularly relevant for connecting RSP intelligence to SME training delivery.

Instrument / Programme	Relevance for RSPs	Access
ESF+ Regional Operational Programmes (RPOs)	VET, upskilling and labour-market integration at regional level	Via voivodeship managing authorities
<u>Sectoral Skills Councils</u>	Identify skills needs and support alignment between industry and training	sektorowe-rady.pl
<u>PARP (Polish Agency for Enterprise Development)</u>	SME training, innovation and workforce development grants	parp.gov.pl
<u>National Training Fund (KFS)</u>	Co-financing of continuing training for employees and employers	praca.gov.pl
<u>Recovery Plan (KPO)</u>	Digital and green skills investments	kpo.gov.pl

5.7 Greece

Greece presents specific structural challenges: high centralisation, limited regional autonomy over skills policy, and an agenda largely determined at Ministry level. RSPs in Attica and Central Macedonia are the most active. The 2021–2027 funding window runs effectively to 2030, which means acting now is the single most important strategic priority.

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Instrument / Programme	Relevance for RSPs	Access
DYPA (Public Employment Service)	Vocational training, apprenticeships and reskilling programmes	dypa.gov.gr
<u>Greece 2.0 / Recovery & Resilience Facility</u>	Large-scale reskilling, digital skills and green transition programmes	greece20.gov.gr
ESF+ Operational Programmes (Attica, Central Macedonia)	Human capital, VET, employment	espa.gr
Interreg VI-A Greece–Italy	Cross-border cooperation on skills, innovation and SME transition	greece-italy.eu
SKYLA (Interreg Europe)	Ongoing European project on skills and learning in regions	interregeurope.eu/skyla

5.8 Belgium

Belgium has a highly regionalised funding system: instruments differ between Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia. For TCLF RSPs, Flanders is the most developed context, combining an active ESF+ programme with a strong SME and innovation support agency.

Instrument / Programme	Relevance for RSPs	Access
<u>ESF+ Belgium (national framework)</u>	Employment, social inclusion, upskilling and training through national and regional programmes	esf.be
<u>ESF Vlaanderen (Flemish ESF+)</u>	Employment, VET, lifelong learning and inclusion managed by the Department of Work and Social Economy	esf-vlaanderen.be
<u>VLAIO (Flemish Agency for Innovation)</u>	Grants and instruments for SMEs: innovation, growth, training support, complements ESF+ with company-centred tools	vlaio.be
Sectoral Training Funds (Cefora etc)	Sector-specific funds co-financed by employers; support SME access to training in TCLF and adjacent sectors	Via sector funds

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Conclusion

A sustainable TCLF Regional Skills Partnership is not defined by its ability to secure projects. It is defined by its transformation into a permanent regional platform - one that stakeholders trust, invest in, and depend on because it solves real problems that no other actor solves alone.

This guide has set out the pathway in practical terms:

- Governance creates the trust and coordination that everything else depends on.
- SME engagement is the core and SMEs should firsthand benefit from RSP.
- Financial diversification is a journey, and it starts with demonstrating value first, and building contribution models around that value: a percentage of a project secured, a service that saves time, an intelligence report that no one else provides.
- EU funding should be perceived as the catalyst, not the foundation. Structural continuity comes from stakeholder co-investment and from the political commitment of regional authorities who see the RSP not as a European project passing through their region, but as a permanent part of how their economy develops its people.

The moment stakeholders stop saying "the project's partnership" and start saying "our platform" is the moment sustainability becomes real. It does not happen overnight, and it cannot be planned into existence: it is earned, through consistent presence, useful services, and the patience to build trust before asking for commitment.

Finally, two commitments frame the path forward: one from the partnerships' closest supporters, one directed at the European Commission.

From the side of the TCLF umbrella organisations - COTANCE, CEC, and EURATEX - the commitment is to remain present and engaged alongside RSPs as they develop. This means continuing to share relevant funding opportunities, facilitating connections between stakeholders and supporting consortium participation where resources and capacity allow it. Umbrella organisations are not able to manage RSP sustainability on behalf of regional stakeholders - not should they - but they can and will continue to act as a bridge between regional realities and European opportunities, and as a first point of contact when coordinators need guidance on where to look and who to talk to.

And when projects end, the work must not stop. What can be achieved, more realistically, is a deliberate shift in how RSPs plan for the period after any single project ends, drawing on the full mix of regional structural funds, national training schemes, in-kind institutional support, and stakeholder co-investment outlined in this guide, rather than waiting for the next EU call to keep

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the lights on. Where EU projects remain part of the picture, RSP sustainability should be treated as an explicit, budgeted component from the outset, but it is the combination of sources, not any one of them, that makes the difference.

RSPs take years to build, and the first three years of independent operation are the most fragile. The partnerships that survive that period are not the ones that found another EU project in time: they are the ones that had already built enough regional roots, stakeholder commitment, and diversified support to keep going regardless. The transition out of project funding is not a problem to be solved by better project design. It is a test of whether the partnership was built to last in the first place.

6. Annexes: Working Templates for RSP Coordinators

The following templates are practical tools. Fill them in, adapt them to your regional context, and use them in steering committee meetings, funding conversations, and stakeholders' sessions.

Annex 1: Project & Funding Opportunity Tracker

Purpose: To keep a live map of all active, pipeline and potential funding routes in one place. Review quarterly with the coordination team.

Practical rule: never track more than 10 items at once. If the list grows beyond 10, remove the lowest-priority items. Chasing everything means delivering nothing.

Project / Call	Funding Source	Why it matters for our RSP	Region	Status	Owner	Next Step	Deadline
TCLF SkillBridge	EU / SMP	Methods, contacts, RSP model - foundational	EU-wide	Active	<i>name</i>	Use outputs; explore follow-on options	<i>date</i>
Metaskills4TCLF	Erasmus+ Blueprint	Training content and future bid opportunities	EU-wide	Active	<i>name</i>	Contact partners; map local use	<i>date</i>

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Erasmus+ RSP Call 2026	Erasmus+	Direct RSP work programme funding; recurrent call	EU-wide	Pipeline	<i>name</i>	Check call text; confirm eligibility	<i>date</i>
<i>Regional ESF+ scheme</i>	<i>ESF+ / Regional</i>	<i>Describe relevance</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>name</i>	<i>Next step</i>	<i>date</i>
<i>Interreg project idea</i>	Interreg Europe	Cross-border TCLF cooperation	<i>Region / EU</i>	Pipeline	<i>name</i>	Identify 2-3 partners; shape concept	<i>date</i>

Annex 2: RSP Budget & Funding Mix Template

Purpose: To plan and track operational finances. Keep it simple. The goal is to see clearly where money comes from and whether the mix is becoming more resilient over time.

Part A: Operational Budget

Include only what is necessary for the RSP to function.

Budget Item	2027 Target (€)	2028 Target (€)	Who will help cover it?	Notes
Basic coordination	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	Keep lean: 1 part-time coordinator minimum
Funding & proposal work	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	Essential: no funding work, no future money
Activities (workshops, training, events)	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	Often project-fundable

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Monitoring & KPI tracking	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	Keep very light
Reserve (co-funding / emergencies)	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	Even a small reserve helps
TOTAL	insert	insert		

Part B: Funding Mix

Track how balanced the funding base is becoming. The benchmark below is a practical target, not a rigorous rule. The direction of travel matters more than any single year's numbers.

Recommended benchmark mix for 2027-2030:

40-50% EU project funding (Erasmus+, SMP, Interreg Europe)

20-30% Regional / national public funding (ESF+, structural funds, authority support)

10-20% Sponsorship and industry co-investment

5-15% Paid services and membership income

Additional in-kind support as a stabiliser

Funding Source	2027 Target (€)	2027 %	2028 Target (€)	2028 %	2030 Ambition %	Owner	Risk Level
EU project funding	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>name</i>	Medium
Regional / national public funding	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>name</i>	Medium
Member contributions	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>name</i>	Low/Medium
Paid services	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>name</i>	Medium

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Sponsorship / co-investment	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>name</i>	High
In-kind support (valued)	<i>insert</i>	—	<i>insert</i>	—	<i>insert</i>	<i>name</i>	Low

Part C: 5 KPIs to Track

What to track	Current figure	Target / benchmark
Target annual budget (total needed)	€ <i>insert</i>	Set at start of year
Funding already secured	€ <i>insert</i>	> 60% of target by mid-year
Number of distinct funding sources	<i>insert</i>	Minimum 3 - aim for 5+
Share from single largest source	<i>insert</i> %	< 50% - reduce dependency
Pipeline funding (expected)	€ <i>insert</i>	At least 1 year of operations covered

Annex 3: Funding Instruments Action Table

Purpose: To select the 3-4 instruments most realistic for your RSP and pursue them properly.

Assign a named owner to each instrument. If no one owns it, it will not happen.

Instrument	What we want from it	Who leads	Next concrete step	Deadline	Status
Erasmus+ RSP Call	<i>e.g. fund annual work programme, training delivery</i>	<i>name</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>date</i>	<i>Pipeline</i>
ESF+ / Regional	<i>e.g. co-fund coordinator post, training activities</i>	<i>name</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>date</i>	<i>Exploring</i>

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National upskilling scheme	<i>e.g. route TCLF workers into subsidised training</i>	<i>name</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>date</i>	<i>Exploring</i>
Interreg Europe	<i>e.g. cross-border TCLF skills project with 2-3 partners</i>	<i>name</i>	<i>insert</i>	<i>date</i>	<i>Pipeline</i>

Annex 4: Stakeholder Engagement Tracker

Purpose: To keep a live view (or an update?) of who the RSP's key stakeholders are, what they need, what they can contribute with, and whether the relationship is healthy. Review at every steering committee.

Flag any stakeholder whose status is "At risk" or "Dormant" for immediate discussion. A disengaged stakeholder is easier to re-engage early than after a long silence.

Stakeholder	Type	Region	Interest in RSP	Influence	What they can contribute	What they need from us	Engagement owner	Status
<i>Name / organisation</i>	<i>Regional authority / company / VET / ministry / cluster</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>High / Medium / Low</i>	<i>High / Medium / Low</i>	<i>Funding, trainers, policy leverage, outreach, facilities</i>	<i>Skills data, project access, talent pipeline, visibility</i>	<i>name</i>	Active

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Name / organisation	Type	Region	insert	insert	insert	insert	name	At risk
Name / organisation	Type	Region	insert	insert	insert	insert	name	Dormant
Name / organisation	Type	Region	insert	insert	insert	insert	name	insert

Annex 5: Annual Sustainability Progress Checklist

Purpose: A one-page self-assessment for the RSP coordination team and steering committee to complete once a year. Use it to identify what is working, what needs attention, and what to prioritise in the next 12 months.

Action / milestone	Status	Owner	Priority
GOVERNANCE			
RSP Agreement in place and operational	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	name	High
Post-agreement operational framework defined (workplan, coordination body, budget)	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	name	High
Steering committee meets on schedule with decision authority	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	name	High
Industry advisory board includes at least 3 active SME voices	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	name	Medium
RSP embedded in at least one regional structure beyond the founding project	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	name	Medium
FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY			

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At least 3 distinct funding sources active or confirmed	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	High
No single source exceeds 50% of total budget	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	High
At least one revenue-generating service in delivery	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	High
Next year's funding at least 60% secured before year-end	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	High
SME ENGAGEMENT			
Skills audit or training navigation service available to SMEs	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	High
At least 5 SMEs actively engaged (beyond project beneficiaries)	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	Medium
At least 1 SME co-designing or co-funding an RSP service	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	High
SME-specific communication channel operational	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	Medium
SKILLS INTELLIGENCE			
Skills intelligence system operational (ongoing, not one-off)	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	High
Regional skills data published or shared with at least 1 public authority	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	Medium

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Connected to or contributing to TCLF Skills Observatory (Skills4Circularity)	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	Medium
EUROPEAN DIMENSION			
RSP stakeholders are registered in the Pact for Skills database	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	High
At least 1 active connection with another TCLF RSP in another country	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	Medium
One cross-regional cooperation opportunity identified and being developed	☐ Done ☐ In progress ☐ Not started	<i>name</i>	Medium

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