INNOVASPHERE
Powering the Future

EIC PATHFINDER

GUIDE FOR BUILDING A WINNING BUDGET

A practical guide to understanding how a winning Pathfinder budget is built

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is written for consortium members who need to contribute to an **EIC Pathfinder budget** but are not expected to know the programme in depth. Its purpose is simple: help you understand **how a strong Pathfinder budget is built, what information we need from you, and what evaluators usually like or dislike**.

Pathfinder funds **early-stage, high-risk/high-gain proof-of-principle work**, typically up to **EUR 4 million**, under a **lump-sum logic based on estimated project costs**. The budget is not a side document: it is part of what evaluators use to judge whether the project is executable and whether resources are allocated appropriately.

01 WHAT EVALUATORS EXPECT FROM A PATHFINDER BUDGET

Evaluators do not expect a cheap budget. They expect a **credible budget**.

A good Pathfinder budget shows five things clearly:

- the money is concentrated where the proof of principle is won or lost;
- the budget follows the technical work, not politics or prestige;
- the people, facilities, validation steps, and cost items are proportionate to the ambition;
- the budget is consistent across Part A, Part B, and the detailed lump-sum table;
- management, impact, and transfer work are present, but they do not outweigh the technical core without a strong reason.

In practice, evaluators react badly when cost items are vague, person-months look unrealistic, travel is inflated, management absorbs too much money, or the Excel budget and the narrative do not match. Those patterns appear repeatedly in real ESRs.

02 THE GOLDEN RULE

Core principle

> A winning Pathfinder budget is built from the technical logic of the project, not from a wish to distribute money evenly across partners.
>
> This matters because Pathfinder does not want a consortium where one partner simply "owns" one work package and stays isolated. Strong Pathfinder implementation logic is based on real cross-work-package interaction.
>
> The correct question is: "What technical responsibility does each partner carry, and what does it cost to execute it properly?"

03 THE BUDGET DIFFICULTY YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND

The problem

The project is described in different ways in different places:

- Part A asks for budget by beneficiary / consortium member.
- The detailed lump-sum budget table asks for budget by work package.
- But in a strong Pathfinder project, a partner contributes across several work packages — not just one.

This means the budget cannot be built with a simplistic formula such as: **one partner = one work package = one budget line**. That is exactly the kind of logic evaluators dislike.

Our solution — Blocks of responsibility

At InnovaSphere, we solve this problem through **blocks of responsibility**. A block is the real technical scope of a consortium member. It groups together: the tasks that member is responsible for, the deliverables they help generate, and the work they perform across different work packages.

The budget is built in three steps:

01 **Define work packages and tasks**

- Objectives, WPs, tasks, deliverables, milestones, risks, and PoP evidence.

02 **Define responsibility blocks**

- Identify which technical responsibilities belong to your organisation across the project, drawing from multiple WPs.

03 **Calculate and reconcile**

- Build the beneficiary budget from the block, then reconcile it back into the work-package budget required by the lump-sum template.

04 WHAT WE NEED FROM EACH CONSORTIUM MEMBER

To build a strong and defensible budget, we need practical information from you. Not a long essay. Not generic institutional text. We need concrete execution information.

✓ We need from you	✗ We do NOT need from you
• The tasks you can realistically execute • The deliverables you can contribute to • Approximate team composition • Approximate person-month effort • Facilities, equipment, or infrastructure you already have • New equipment, consumables, services, travel, audits, or external support you genuinely need • Validation, testing, data curation, certification, biosafety, standards, or regulatory costs • Major execution bottlenecks or dependencies	• Inflated wish-lists • Symbolic budget requests • Generic claims such as "we need a substantial budget to support research excellence" • Costs for equipment or software you already own, unless there is a real additional cost • Vague "other costs" with no explanation

05 WHAT A GOOD PATHFINDER BUDGET LOOKS LIKE

A. The technical core carries most of the money

The core PoP work packages — where the breakthrough is created, tested, integrated, and validated — should normally receive the largest share of effort and cost. Evaluators repeatedly criticise proposals where management or market-transfer packages absorb more than core technical validation.

B. Person-months look credible

The number of people and person-months must fit the real difficulty of the work: complex experimental or integration-heavy work needs real staffing; high-risk work needs room for iterations and rework; small teams with very large promises are not credible.

C. Cost items are visible and traceable

If the project promises multi-site validation, field-mimicking tests, LCA/LCC, FTO or IP work, biosafety review, data curation, advanced analytics, external audits, or dissemination materials — those costs must appear somewhere in the budget. Evaluators notice quickly when a proposal promises activities the budget does not make possible.

D. Travel is purposeful

Travel should be linked to portfolio activities, project meetings, benchmarking, validation visits, second-site replication, stakeholder workshops, or dissemination actions already described in the plan.

E. The budget tells the same story as the implementation plan

The strongest budgets are the ones where work packages, blocks, partner roles, person-months, and cost items all reinforce the same execution logic.

06 WHAT USUALLY WEAKENS A BUDGET

- **Too much budget in management or impact,** not enough in technical validation.
- **Unclear person-month logic,** especially when the team looks too small for the work promised.
- **High travel budgets** with no clear event or validation logic.
- **Large "other goods/services" categories** with no breakdown.
- **Subcontracting that looks convenient** rather than necessary.
- **Equipment purchases with no explanation** of why they are needed or why they are not already available.
- **Different numbers in different documents,** especially Part B versus the detailed budget table.
- **Overly equal budget distribution across partners,** even when their responsibilities are very different.
- **No visible cost for critical evidence generation,** such as testing, replication, field-mimicking trials, data work, or regulatory preparation.
- **A beneficiary budget that does not match** the real block of work assigned to that partner.

07 HOW INNOVASPHERE WILL BUILD THE BUDGET

Our process is straightforward and follows four steps:

01

Define the project logic

- Objectives, work packages, tasks, deliverables, milestones, risks, and proof-of-principle evidence.

02

Define your block

- Identify exactly which technical responsibilities belong to your organisation across the project.

03

Estimate your real execution cost

- People, effort, facilities, equipment, travel, services, consumables, validation, and any justified external need.

04

Reconcile everything

- Align your beneficiary budget, the work-package budget, and the final lump-sum table. This step prevents contradictions and makes the budget evaluator-proof.

08 WHAT YOU SHOULD DO AS A CONSORTIUM MEMBER

If you want to help us build a strong Pathfinder budget, your best contribution is simple:

- be honest about what you can really execute;
- describe your scope through tasks and deliverables, not generic ambition;
- give us realistic effort estimates;
- tell us what you already have and what you actually still need;
- flag any hidden cost driver early;
- do not assume that "more budget is safer."

In Pathfinder, unrealistic inflation is not safer. It is often a red flag.

09 FINAL CHECKLIST

Before a Pathfinder budget is ready, we should be able to answer **yes** to these questions:

- ☐ Is the budget clearly driven by the technical logic of the project?
- ☐ Does each consortium member have a real block of responsibility?
- ☐ Is the technical core better funded than support functions?
- ☐ Do the person-months look sufficient and realistic?
- ☐ Are critical validation costs visible?
- ☐ Are all major cost items justified?
- ☐ Does the beneficiary view reconcile with the work-package view?
- ☐ Does the budget match the implementation plan?
- ☐ Would a skeptical evaluator understand why each partner gets what it gets?

Final recommendation

> A winning Pathfinder budget is not a financial spreadsheet with good formatting. It is a credible execution model.
>
> If a consortium member understands that their budget must reflect their real responsibility block across the project — and not an artificial one-partner-one-WP logic — they already understand the single most important rule behind a strong Pathfinder budget.

Building a Pathfinder budget is not about distributing money.

It is about making an execution model that evaluators trust.

contact@innovasphere.io | Madrid · Yerevan · Dubai