

# Peer Review Guidelines

## Innovating Communication Targeted to SMEs (InnoCom)

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**Table 1.** List of abbreviations used in the text.

<b>AF</b>	Application form
<b>AP</b>	Advisory partner
<b>BL</b>	Budget line
<b>CV</b>	Curriculum Vitae
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FR</b>	France
<b>GP</b>	Good Practice
<b>HP</b>	Hosting partner
<b>IE</b>	Interreg Europe
<b>IR</b>	IRL
<b>IT</b>	Italy
<b>JS</b>	Joint Secretariat
<b>LV</b>	Latvia
<b>UL</b>	University of Latvia
<b>LP</b>	Leading partner
<b>PP</b>	Project partner
<b>PR</b>	Peer Review
<b>PRM Guidelines</b>	Peer Review Methodology Guidelines
<b>PRR</b>	Peer Review Report
<b>RO</b>	Romania
<b>S</b>	Semester
<b>SH</b>	Stakeholder
<b>SI</b>	Slovenia
<b>SG</b>	Steering Group
<b>SP</b>	Sending partner

This PR methodology is using specific terms, such as:

- **PR expert** – the expert hired by the project sending partner;
- **Hosting partner** – the project partner responsible for organizing the PR event;
- **Hosting region or country** – the region or country, where the PR event takes place;
- **Sending partner** – the project partner responsible for hiring and sending the PR expert.

## 1. Introduction

The objective of the PR is to give an advice, recommendations, and an action plan to resolve existing challenge and give recommendation for policy improvement of the host partner. It involves project partners and also their stakeholders.

During the PR, partners will get:

- **In-depth analysis** of their policy challenge
- **Exchange of experience** with relevant policymakers
- Presentation of **potential solutions**
- **Recommendations for policy improvements.**

PP will benefit from specific recommendations and knowledge to make better-informed decisions for policy improvement.

PR is a **two-day meeting** in which PP looks at the **regional policy challenge** together with a group of **carefully selected peers** with relevant experience.<sup>1</sup>

**PR process** includes evaluation carried out by professionals – external experts working on the issues related to improved governance, process innovation, provision of public services, SMEs development, regional development, etc., such as policy experts or practitioners, researchers or consultants, or other skilled professionals depending on their professional experience and capability to carry out tasks assigned by project partners. PR does not follow a specific scientific approach but rather encourages mutual learning and transfer of GP.

The **PRM Guidelines** are designed to **guide the InnoCom partners**, how to carry out the PR process foreseen by the AF in a coordinated and comparative manner. Please, note that this document only provides recommendations on how to carry out the PR in an effective way to ensure a quality result, but they are not mandatory for partners. This is still up to partners to decide, how to do this in order to achieve the desired result.

These PRM Guidelines have been provided during the Semester 2 (September 2023 – February 2024) and the PR process is expected to start from the Semester 3 to the Semester 5. These procedures are intended for organizing PR on the site on PP territories and preparing the ground for policy improvement.

The PR process is **directly related to the InnoCom project**, its objectives, and achievable results. Also, the **PR is a part of the InnoCom interregional learning process**.

According to the **InnoCom project approach** (AF) The IEMs will be supplemented by PR activities to evaluate and discuss issues tackled by each policy and indicate possible improvements and integrations to be introduced. **The main objective of the PR process** is to provide an external assessment of local policies and contribute to interregional learning. PRs will be conducted by partners and experts according to methodological guidelines from the AP, and informed by the RA, local practices, and participation in the IEMs, plus input of local stakeholders. At the end of each PR process, the PR external experts should provide recommendations for improving partners' policy instruments stated in the InnoCom Application form (see Table 2) and send it to the Project partner and its stakeholders.

**Table 2.** Policy instruments of InnoCom partners.

Policy Instrument No	Policy Instrument Title	Partner
1	Region Umbria ERDF ROP 2021-27, Obj 1,1 To reinforce research and innovation capacity of SMEs and the introduction of advanced technologies.	LP01 Sviluppumbria, Italy
2	Regional Operational Programme Investment in Growth and Jobs ERDF 2021 – 2027.	PP02 Bucharest Ilfov Regional Development Agency, Romania
3	Local Development Programme 2023-30.	PP08 Municipality of Ivančna Gorica, Slovenia
4	Operational Program of the HdF Region: strategic objective: “A smarter Europe”, specific objective: “Sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs”.	PP05 Hauts de France Regional Council, France
5	Carlow County Development Plan 2022-2028; Sect 4 Enterprise & Employment; Sect 8 Community Dev.; Sect 11 Tourism & Recreation; Sect 14 Rural Dev.	PP06 Carlow County Council, Ireland
6	Regional Development Programme (2021-2027) of Zemgale region. (not EU structural funds programme).	PP07 Zemgale Planning Region, Latvia

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.interregeurope.eu/peer-review>

Source: InnoCom Application form.

**Each partner**, except the AP, **is responsible** for selecting two PR experts<sup>2</sup>, who will perform PR evaluations and prepare PR reports, as well as other related documents. The HP will send to both SPs the InnoCom partner Regional Analysis in order to select PR experts with corresponding competences and knowledge.

The **funding** for supporting PR experts and organizing PR events is included in each partner's budget and can be used according to the AF.

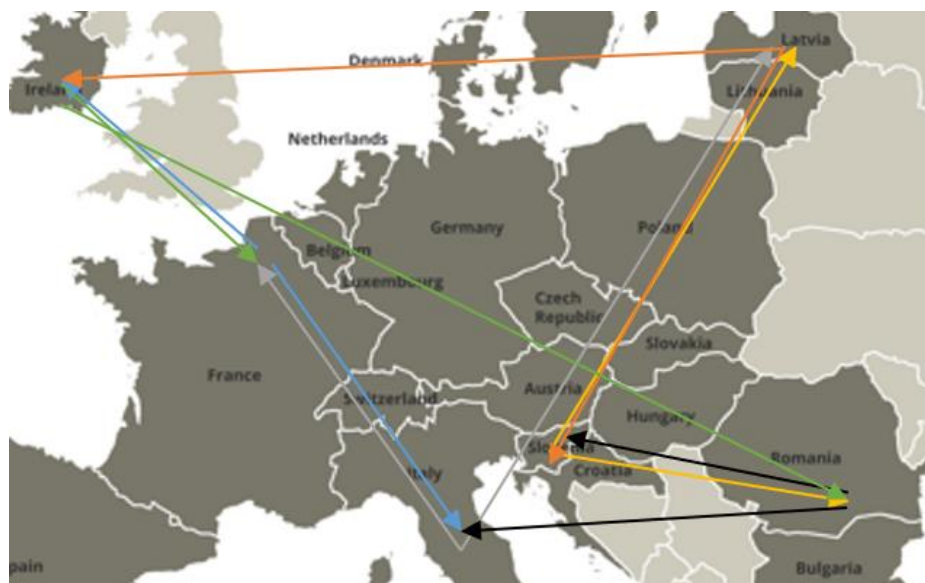
## 2. Selection of the Peer Review Destination and Calendar

According to the Application the intensive work of PRs will begin in semester 3 and continue into semesters 4 and 5 according to the PR schedule defined and agreed between partners during the IEM in semester 2. Each partner will participate as Sending partner and a reviewer in 2 PR. One or 2 experts from the 2 partner organizations performing the PR and/or stakeholder groups will take part in the PR session. In-person PR visits may be scheduled concurrently with IEM if possible. The PR visit will involve interviews with main stakeholders, learning about needs, challenges, and local practices according to the agenda provided by the Hosting partner. At least 2 PR will take place each semester (Semesters 3, 4 and 5), aimed at providing a detailed analysis of the policy and tools/actions used for communication to SMEs, and presented a PR report that will be part of the improvement and integration proposed for the policy.

The PR process: methods and tools were presented by the AP in the Semester 1 and agreed within the partnership. Also, the HP and SP roles were allocated to all partners.

Depending on the format (onsite, online, hybrid, etc.) PRs will be planned for 2-2.5 days including meetings and interview sessions with local SH and a final workshop with presentation of PR findings and results to local SH, as well as discussing them.

**Figure 1.** InnoCom Peer review mapping



Source: Sviluppumbria

<sup>2</sup> If partners want to hire only one expert who has enough knowledge and experience to conduct PR in two different partner regions, then this is also possible.

Project partners during the meeting in Riga, Latvia on 9 June 2023 agreed that Peer reviews will be organized according to the Peer review map shown in the Figure 1. Please, also see the Table 3 providing an additional information on SP and HP.

**Table 3.** Peer review composition

Hosting partner	Sending partners	Timing (tbc)
Sviluppumbria	SP1: HFRC SP2: BIRDA	
Bucharest Ilfov Regional Development Agency (BIRDA)	SP1: MIG SP2: CCC	
Municipality of Ivančna Gorica (MIG)	SP1: BIRDA SP2: ZPR	
Hauts de France Regional Council (HFRC)	SP1: Sviluppumbria SP2: CCC	
Carlow County Council (CCC)	SP1: HFRC SP2: ZPR	
Zemgale Planning Region (ZPR)	SP1: Sviluppumbria SP2: MIG	

### 3. Organization of Peer Reviews and Expected Results

According to InnoCom project planning the PR should involve PR experts from at least two countries, other than the country of the host to ensure good quality results for project partners.

In the framework of the InnoCom project, it is planned that 6 PRs will be carried out involving participation of at least 12 external experts, SHs, as well as the AP if possible. Each InnoCom partner, except AP is selecting two experts to participate in two different PR events.

#### Theoretical basis of the PR:

- 1) Documents and information that aren't publicly available: Regional analysis, national/regional level policy documents, studies, results of surveys, policy documents and documents or summaries that are important, but not publicly available in English;
- 2) Relevant documents and information that are publicly available on national/regional websites (HP should please, provide a list of websites.);
- 3) IE website and IE Policy Learning Platform (GP database);
- 4) Relevant EC studies and documents, especially EU studies, Directives, Regulations and other relevant normative acts;
- 5) Internet search;
- 6) Other relevant information and projects identified by partners.

It is important to ensure that all documents or most of them, or their summaries for experts are available in English. In a case if the document is not available in English this is important for the HP and SP could prepare a basic information for the PR experts about the necessary document or organize an interview with a responsible authority.

The preparation for PR should take place before the PR visit and could also include online meetings between involved parties.

### 3.1. Tasks and Responsibilities of Project Partners

According to the AF each PP, except the Advisory Partner, acts in two different roles – as Sending partner and Hosting partner. Therefore, partners are responsible for a successful implementation of PR in their countries, as well as in those partner countries, where they are sending their PR experts. Also, both partners share responsibilities for timely and quality outputs (See Figure 1 and Table 4.)

**Table 4.** Tasks and responsibilities of partners.

Steps	Sending partner (SP)	Hosting partner (HP)	Advisory partner
Methodology and planning	Participates in the process of preparation of PRM Guidelines with their comments and proposals, approves the PRM Guidelines. Responsible for conducting PR according to the agreed PRM Guidelines.	Participates in the process of preparation of PRM Guidelines with their comments and proposals, approves the PRM Guidelines. Responsible for conducting PR according to the agreed PRM Guidelines.	Provides PRM Guidelines and related templates for PR Report and its attachments.
Selecting experts	SP is responsible for selecting PR experts.  SP should cooperate with the HP to find appropriate experts to carry out PR.	To ensure that the PR experts corresponds to needs and requirements of the HP, this is recommended that the communication and exchange between HP and SP starts as soon as possible.	Advises PP if necessary.
Preparation of PR	SP undertake a responsibility for coordinating cooperation and communication between the HP and PR experts if necessary.	Sends Regional analysis describing the state of the art, national/regional level policy documents that aren't available online or translated in English, as well as a list of other documents and useful websites to be studied PR experts one month before the PR event. <sup>3</sup>	Advises PP if necessary.
		Organizes PR event and its Agenda, ensures that tasks of PR experts can be fulfilled; <b>Agenda must be ready two weeks before the PR event.</b>  Prepares a list of PR members with their short bios and photos and sends to all involved parties, as well as local stakeholders together with the PR Agenda <b>two weeks before the PR event.</b>	

<sup>3</sup> HP should provide information on the public policy they want to improve, which concrete objectives they want to achieve in relation to it and what concrete aspects they want to achieve with the implementation of the PR.

Steps	Sending partner (SP)	Hosting partner (HP)	Advisory partner
Implementing PR	Takes part in PR visits if feasible and possible, follows the process and facilitates communication and logistics if necessary.	Coordinates the PR event on its territory or online and cooperation between all involved parties – SP, AP, PR experts, as well as local stakeholders.  Responsible for organizing one PR event (Agenda, including meetings, interviews, workshops, social gatherings, and PR logistics), as well as completing provided templates, collecting evidence (lists of signatures, photos, videos, etc.), following PR experts work, revising, and approving outputs.	Participates in PR events and monitors the PR process and its correspondence to the PRM Guidelines, advises and supports partners is necessary.
Output of PR	Coordinates timely and quality delivery of final outputs with PR experts and HP.  Checks if the outputs provided by PR experts suits interests of both parties – SP and HP.	Checks and approves the PRR and its attachments and approves them from HP side.	Helps to facilitate the preparation of outputs, advises PP if necessary.

#### Usability of the PR outcomes and further steps:

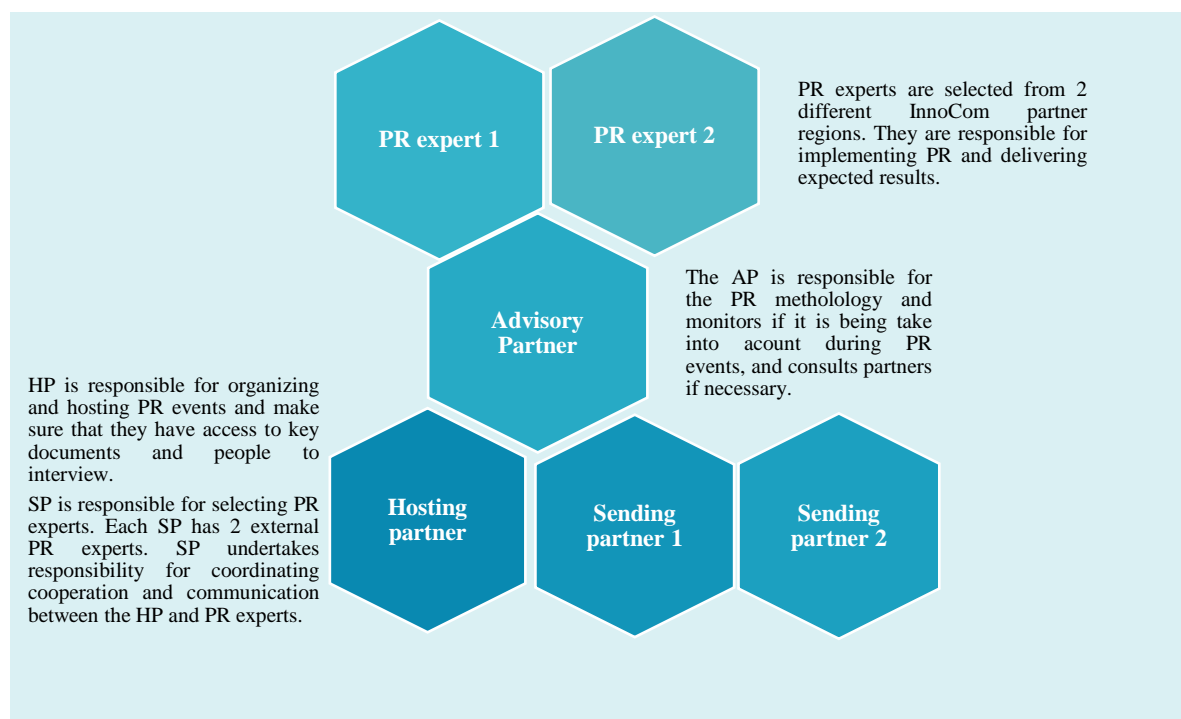
- Results of the PR research should produce findings on the problems and possible solutions in partner regions and recommendations with an aim to identify policy solutions, learning and transfers of GP resulting in recommendations and solutions to provide a relevant input to improve the policy identified by the HP.
- Initial results of the PR desk and field research will be presented to SHs during the workshop on the last day of the PR event and later submitted to the PPs.
- In addition, elaborated conclusions and recommendations related to tackle policy instruments will be presented in one final document – PR Report (Attachment 1).

### 3.2. Structure of the Peer Review Team

Each PR team is composed according to the structure reflected in the Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Structure of the Peer Review team.



After both PR experts performing a joint PR in one PP territory are acquainted with each other, they should divide their tasks and agree who will be the main coordinator during the PR to make sure that other involved partners (HP and SP, and AP) are timely informed about PR activities, their tasks, and responsibilities. The team of partners and PR experts are responsible for dividing their tasks for preparing the PRR and other materials requested by both, SP and HP in a good quality and timely manner to get them approved

#### 4. Selecting External Experts and Their Tasks

Each partner selects **two** external experts to participate in PRs, actively contributes to PR processes and participates in PR events.<sup>4</sup> PR experts can be partners themselves, their colleagues and/or external experts, such as policy experts or practitioners, researchers or consultants, or other skilled professionals depending on their professional experience and capability to carry out assigned tasks.

The InnoCom partners can select their PR experts based on their considerations and needs of the HP. In this case one solution doesn't fit all. For example, policy making partner organizations might be interested to have PR experts with an experience in working with policy documents, while others might consider that PR experts with experience and skills in NGO or business sector are more suitable. Therefore, this is preferred that the SP, who selects PR experts, and the HP agree on common requirements for PR experts beforehand in order to suit interests of both sides.

##### 4.1. Requirements for Hiring Experts

This is recommended that HP and responsible SPs start communicating before hiring the PR experts. Also, HP can send to both SPs the InnoCom Regional Analysis and/or information about the targeted policy instrument to ensure that PR experts correspond to HP's needs and have necessary competences.

In addition, there should be following requirements considered for hiring PR experts:

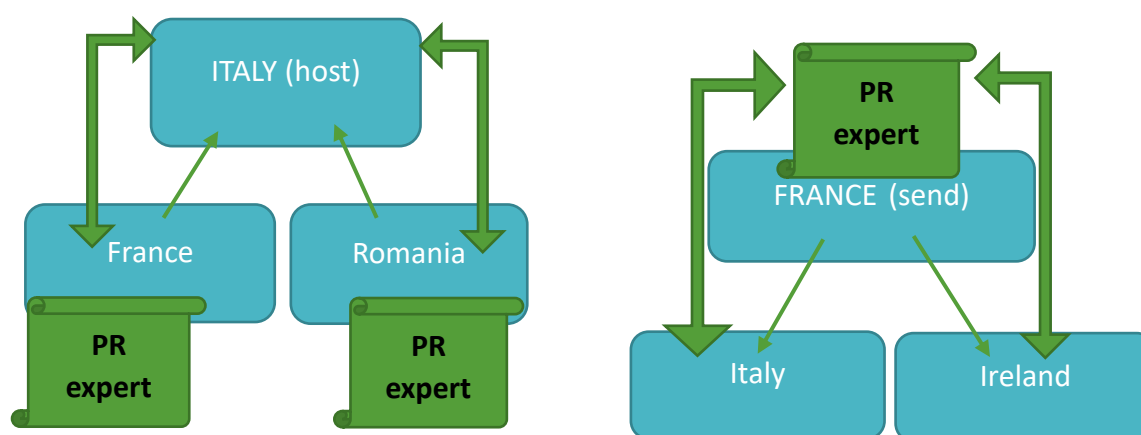
<sup>4</sup> It can also be one expert if his/her skills and experience correspond to needs and requirements of a specific PR.

- excellent English communications and writing skills;
- higher academic or higher professional education relevant to the PR topic;
- at least five years' experience working in the respective sector (public or private) or having experience working on relevant issues would be recommendable;
- understanding of policies regulating public administration and governance and/or SME support could be an advantage;
- understanding and knowledge about relevant European Union (EU) studies, especially, with respect to digitalization;
- specific requirements based on interests identified by the hosting partner.

#### 4.2. Process of Selecting and Approving PR Experts

This is planned that each PR team (See Figure 3) will have **two PR experts from two different partner regions**. For example, one PR expert selected by the Netherlands and one PR expert selected by Spain will conduct the PR in Sweden.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 3.** Coordinated process of selecting PR experts.



The process of selecting and approving PR experts, as well as roles of SP and HP are described in the Table 5.

#### 4.3. Responsibilities and Tasks of PR Experts

Selecting PR experts, it is important to acknowledge their responsibilities and tasks. Please, see the detailed description of PR experts' responsibilities and tasks in the Table 5.

**Table 5.** Responsibilities and tasks of PR experts

Steps	Description
Preparation	Both experts conducting PR in the PP country/region depending on their knowledge and competences should agree, how they will divide their tasks to deliver one PRR for the HP. Both experts are equally responsible for achieving timely and quality delivery of the PRR.
	After the PR experts are selected, <b>they conduct the desk research</b> prior to the participation in the PR event. <sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Partners can also decide to contract only one expert to participate in 2 different Peer Reviews if the expert has sufficient knowledge and background that corresponds to different HPs requirements.

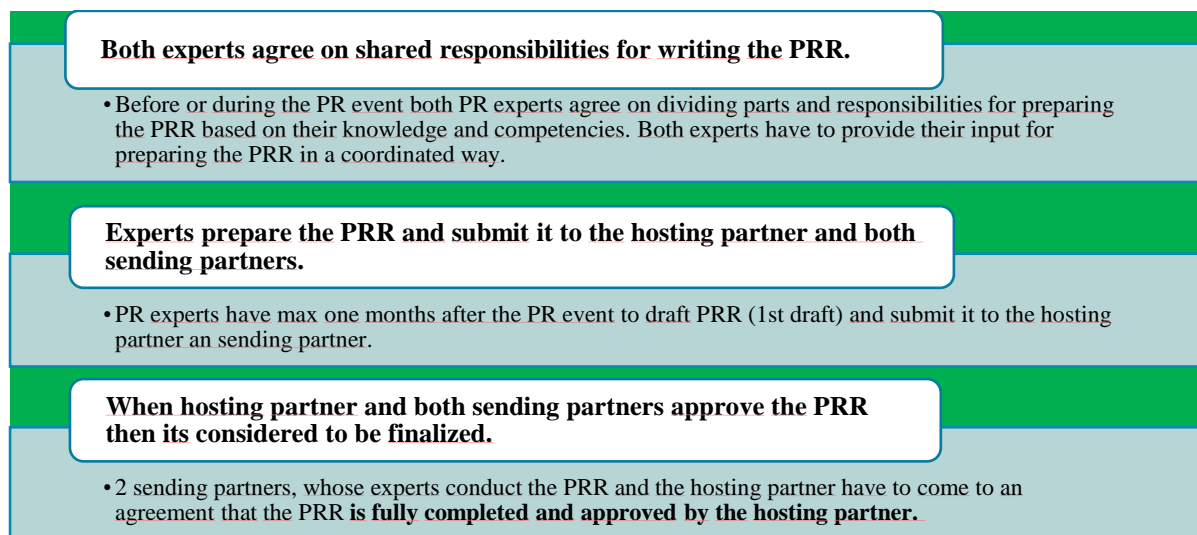
<sup>6</sup> **Theoretical basis** of the Peer Review: 1) Documents and information that aren't publicly available: Regional analysis, results of surveys, policy documents and documents or summaries that are important, but not publicly available in English; 2) Relevant documents and information that are publicly available on national/regional websites (HP must provide a list of relevant websites.); 3) IE website and IE Policy Learning Platform (GP database); 4) Relevant EC studies and documents, especially EU studies, Directives, Regulations and other relevant normative acts; 5) Other relevant information and projects identified by partners; 6) Internet search.

Implementing	<p>The other part (field work) of PR experts' work is done during and after the PR event. During the PR event the PR experts gather the necessary information through meetings, interviews and discussions which are organized by the HP, who organizes the PR event according to the Agenda.</p> <p>After the PR event – PR experts continue analysing the information and additional documents to finalize the PRR and related attachments to be submitted to HP and SP.</p>
Result	<p>PR experts have one months after the PR event to draft the first version of the PRR and submit it to the HP and SP.<sup>7</sup></p> <p>PR experts should cooperate, and they are equally responsible for preparing the PR Report (PRR) based on the evaluation of the situation in the assigned InnoCom partners' regions or countries and based on the desk and field research. The PRR should provide elaborated conclusions and recommendations on how to facilitate the promotion of the relevant policies by improving partners' policy instruments stated in the InnoCom Application form and according the PRR template, which can be found in the Attachment 1.</p> <p>PR experts should be capable of also identifying the potential of the transferring the GPs from other regions to HP region/country and provide an input in the final PR Report.</p> <p>PR experts are responsible for good quality timely provided outputs approved by HP and SP.</p>

## 5. Preparation of the Peer Review Report

When the PR process is accomplished the most important outcome – PRR should be prepared and submitted to both, HP, and SP, which are all important and integral parts of the process. The process of PRR report preparation and approval is further described in the Figure 3.

**Figure 4.** Cooperation between PR experts, SP and HP to achieve expected results.

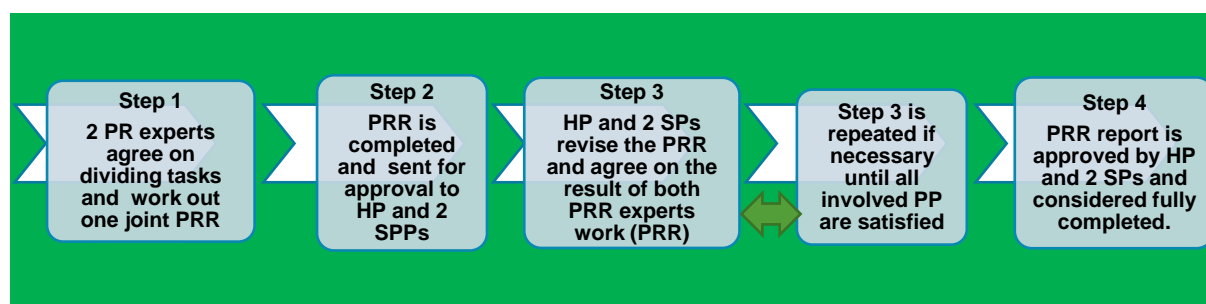


Further information about the content of the PRR is provided in the PRR template (Attachment 1).

The process of executing tasks of PR experts until the approval of the PR Report by SP and HP is also reflected by steps in the Figure 5.

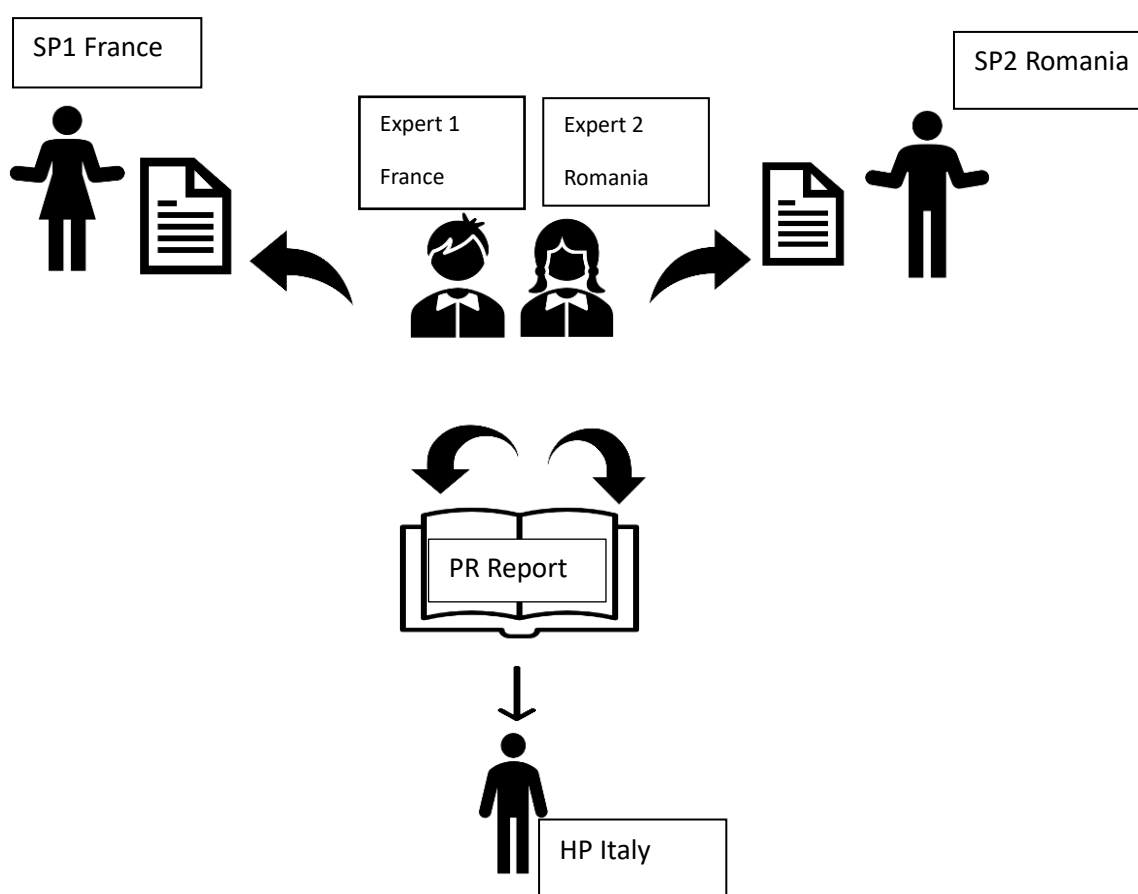
<sup>7</sup> This also depends on conditions foreseen by contracts with PR experts.

**Figure 5.** The process of approving PRR between SPs, HP, and PR experts.



After the PR visit is finished, the PR experts work on the Peer Review Report (PRR) and they should submit the first version of the PRR **one month after the PR visit or as agreed between HP and SP, and stipulated in the contract.**

**Figure 6.** Cooperation between the PR experts, HP, and SP – example



After the PRR is reviewed by the sending partners it must be sent to the InnoCom partner (HP), where the PR was performed for reviewing and approval. If necessary, the PRR is being elaborated according to comments of all involved parties (Please, see the PRR template – Attachment 2.).

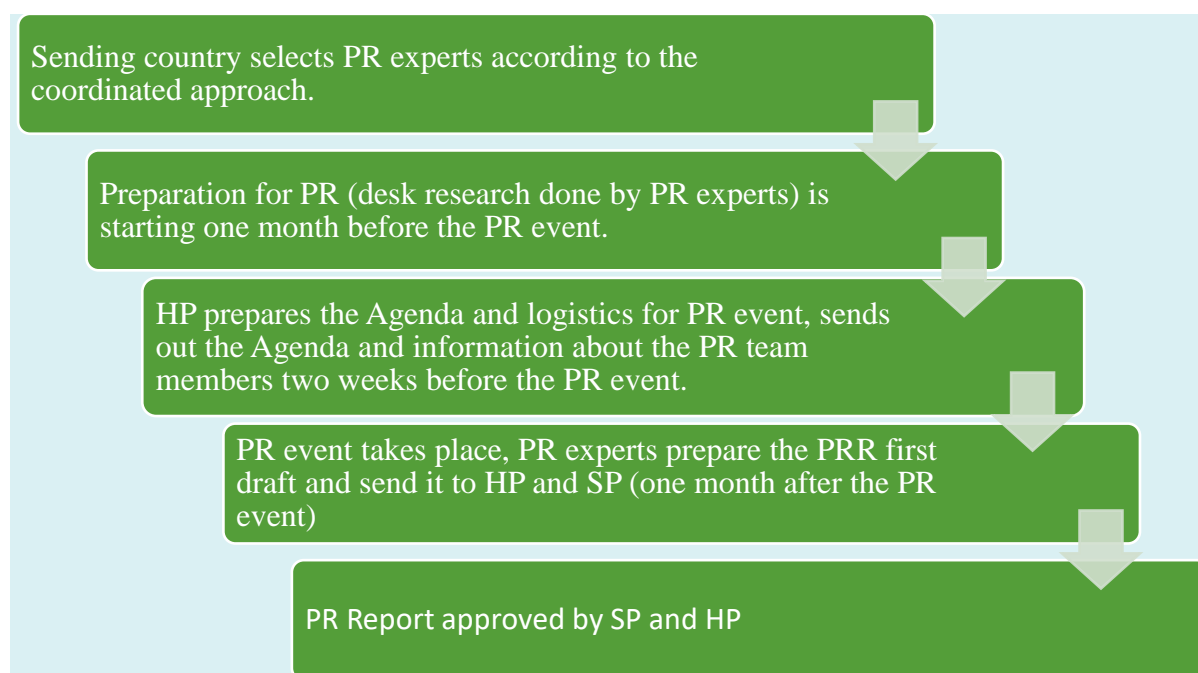
**The PRR has the following parts:**

- Attachment 1. InnoCom Peer Review Report;
- Attachment 2. InnoCom Peer Review Event Feedback for Peer Review Team;
- Attachment 3. InnoCom Peer Review Feedback for the Hosting Partner;
- Attachment 4. InnoCom Peer Review Key Details.

## 6. Implementation of the Peer Review Event

The implementation of the PR event is a very significant part of the PR process. It provides the main information and sources for PR experts to be able to conduct PR Reports, identify findings and conclusions for the InnoCom partners. (See Figure 7)

**Figure 7.** The procedure of implementing Peer Review



### 6.1. Preparatory Work

**At least one month before the PR event** takes place the HP provides PR experts with the InnoCom Regional analysis, as well as other informative and official documents, and useful websites upon the request of external expert. These are the key documents for PR experts' preparation ahead of their visit and field work, and must, therefore, be carefully elaborated. The PR experts should also consider the relevant EU surveys, documents, and studies.

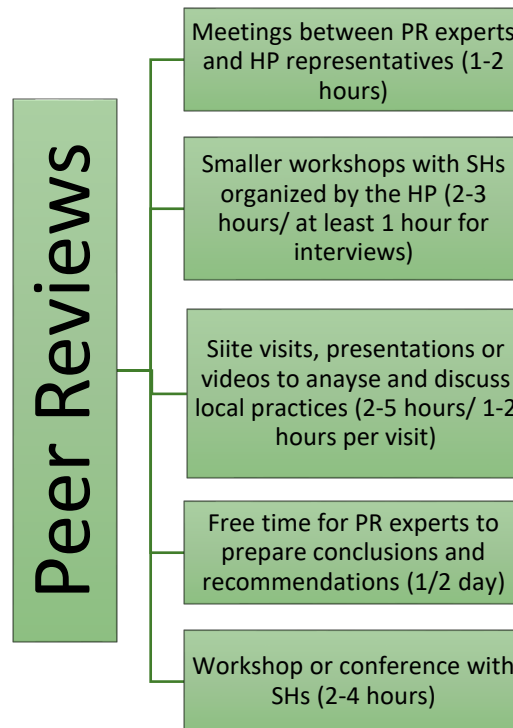
**At least two weeks before** the PR event takes place the HP has to prepare an Agenda of meetings and interviews, as well as a list of PR team members, their short bios and photos and send these documents to the PR Team members, as well as local stakeholders.

### 6.2. Work Plan for the PR Event

Preparing for the PR event<sup>8</sup> this is important to include all necessary elements to ensure that PR experts will get a full information from local authorities and experts (stakeholders) and receive answers to their questions. The quality of PR experts' work and its' results is very much related to quality and completeness of PR event and its elements (See Figure 8 and Table 6).

<sup>8</sup> Please, note that the PR event can be onsite, online or in a hybrid form. This is fully up to the HP to decide how to organize the PR visit.

**Figure 8.** Recommended elements for the Peer Review event.<sup>9</sup>

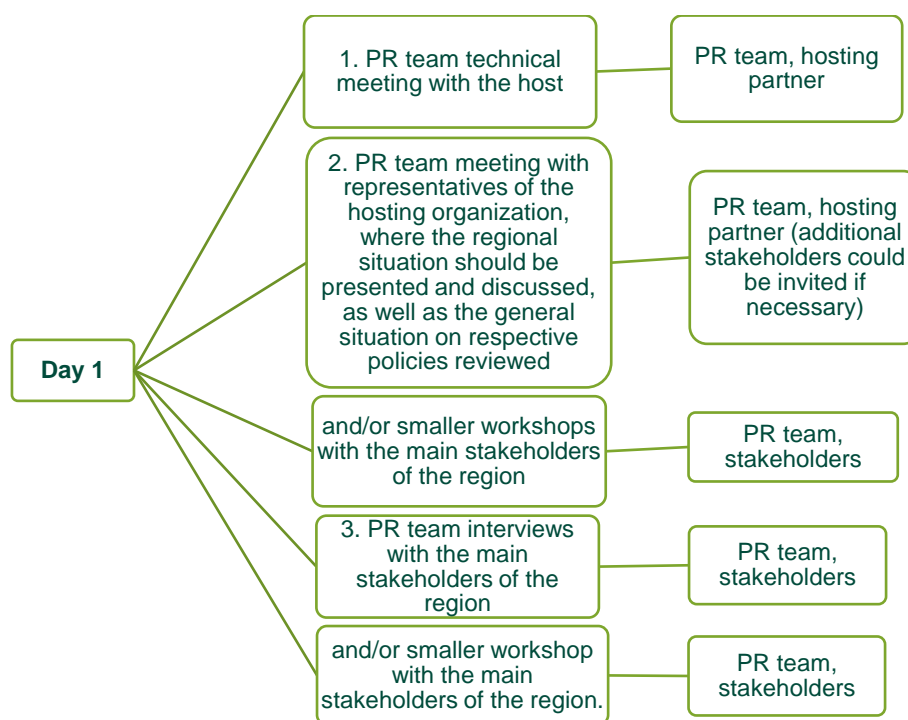


**First day:**

- The first meeting of the PR should be the technical meeting with the HP to clarify unclear questions about PR event, scheduled meeting, involved participants, materials provided, etc.
- The next meeting should provide an overview of the targeted policy of the hosting region and existing support measures.
- In one of the meetings the regional situation should be presented and discussed between PR experts and local participants. The hosting partner should be prepared to provide background information such as the national institutional setting, political landscape, and key actors' openness for policy improvements.
- The meetings could be organized as a discussion between the PR experts and representatives of the hosting partner, and as small workshops involving representatives of organizations responsible for related policies, as well as with different stakeholders' groups.
- If there is still some time left, then the PR can continue with individual interviews with the main stakeholders. (See Figure 9 and Table 6.)

<sup>9</sup> Please, note that this is optional for partners to follow the proposed structure.

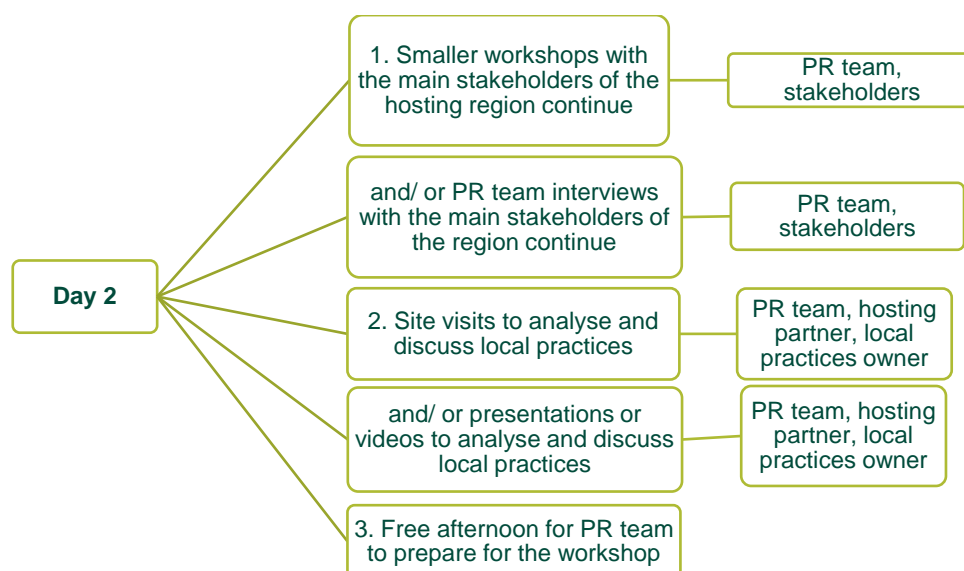
**Figure 9.** Recommended logistics for the first day of PR event.



**Second day** – PR events can be continued with individual interviews with the main stakeholders. Also, during the second day the PR experts should be introduced with the region's local practices, including discussing and analysing these practices. The presentation of local practices can be organized as visits or online presentations or videos followed by discussions with local practices owners. (See Figure 10 and Table 6.)

During the second half of the day, the PR team members prepare conclusions and presentations for the 3<sup>rd</sup> day.

**Figure 10.** Recommended logistics for the second day of PR event.



**Third day**<sup>10</sup>– during the first half of the day a public session takes place, where the PR team shares its initial findings, conclusions, and draft recommendations in the ppt presentation with a larger group of

<sup>10</sup> This would be recommendable to do the PR in two days, however, it also depends on the duration of the study visit and organization of each PR in different region.

stakeholders and interested persons. In a case of organizing bigger event the assistance of a moderator could also be useful. The feedback received during discussions following the main presentation of PR team will help team members to re-evaluate their conclusions for the final Peer Review Report to be submitted one months after the PR event. (See Figure 11 and Table 6.)

Figure 11. Recommended logistics for the third day of PR event.



If this is still possible then HP can organize local events, i.e., meetings, workshops and/or conference, working lunches or the social gathering - working dinner for local stakeholders with their direct participation.

Please, see additional guidelines how to structure the PR visit in the Table 6.

**Table 6.** Structure of the Peer Review visit

Day	Element	Timing	Participants
1-2	PR team meeting with representatives of the hosting organization, where the regional situation should be presented and discussed, as well as the general situation on respective policies reviewed, and/ or	1-2 hours	PR experts, HP, AP. This session would include the hosting partner's presentation, that of the experts, and then the intervention and debate, also open to stakeholders (present and online). Online participants could also be stakeholders of the sending partners.
	Smaller workshop and interviews with the main SHs of the region.	2-3 hours/ at least 1 hour for each interview	PR experts, SH, AP.
1-2	Site visits or presentations <sup>11</sup> to analyse and discuss local practices, and/ or	2-5 hours (1-2 hours per visit)	PR experts, HP, local practices owners, AP.
2	Free time for PR experts to prepare conclusions and recommendations to be presented on the 3 <sup>rd</sup> day.	½ day	PR experts, with the possibility to involve the AP for consultancy, support, if necessary.
3	Workshop or conference with SHs.	2-4 hours	PR experts, HP, SH, AP.

The PR can also take part online or as a hybrid format. Depending on the situation, partners can agree on the form of the PR and have online sessions before and during the PR visit or to organize PR fully online. It should be taken into account that in the case of online PR this can be challenging to present local practices to PR experts. It can be a good idea to combine PR visits with IEM, where the PR experts can also participate and explore local practices. In this case, it would require 1 to 1.5 more days for the

<sup>11</sup> These could also be simultaneous online presentation or additional activities consecutive to the visit itself.



PR visit after the IEM is completed. This is fully up to the HP to decide how they would like to organize the PR process.

After the PR visit is completed, responsible partners (SP, HP, AP) within one month provide their inputs (Attachments 2, 3, 4 and other documents providing evidence of the PR visit.