EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

2026 CALL FOR APPLICATIONS
Affiliated Partner within the European Reference Networks

Reference: ERN-AP-2026-CALL

Publication date: 13 April 2026 – 09:00 CET

Deadline for submission: 01 September 2026 – 23:59 CET

Applications may be submitted from 13 April 2026 until 1 September 2026

SANTE reserves the right to amend, suspend, or cancel this call at any stage of the procedure where duly justified

1. Background

European Reference Networks (ERNs) were established under Article 12 of Directive 2011/24/EU[1] on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, their functioning being based on the Commission Delegated Decision 2014/286/EU[2] and on Commission Implementing Decisions 2014/287/EU[3] and (EU) 2019/1269[4].

[1] Directive 2011/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2011 on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, OJ L 88, 4.4.2011, pp. 45–65. Directive - 2011/24 - EN - EUR-Lex

[2] European Commission, Delegated Decision 2014/286/EU of 10 March 2014 setting out criteria and conditions that European Reference Networks and healthcare providers wishing to join a European Reference Network must fulfil, OJ L 147, 17.5.2014, pp. 71–78. Delegated decision - 2014/286 - EN - EUR-Lex

[3] European Commission, Implementing Decision 2014/287/EU of 10 March 2014 setting out criteria for establishing and evaluating European Reference Networks and their Members and for facilitating the exchange of information and expertise on establishing and evaluating such Networks, OJ L 147, 17.05.2014, pp. 79–87. Implementing decision - 2014/287 - EN - EUR-Lex

[4] European Commission, Implementing Decision (EU) 2019/1269 of 26 July 2019 amending Implementing Decision 2014/287/EU setting out criteria for establishing and evaluating European Reference Networks and their Members and for facilitating the exchange of information and expertise on establishing and evaluating such Networks, OJ L 147, 17.05.2014, pp. 79–87. Implementing Decision (EU) 2019/1269 - EN - EUR-Lex

ERNs connect healthcare providers and centres of expertise across the European Union and Norway to improve access to highly specialised care for patients with rare, low-prevalence and complex diseases.

For Member States that do not have any member within an ERN, Affiliated Partners allow the Member State to participate in the ERN activities. Affiliated Partners are healthcare providers designated at national level to collaborate with one or more European Reference Networks. Affiliated Partners may take the form of:

- **Associated National Centres**: healthcare provider, with some special expertise matching the global thematic domain of a given reference network, that concentrates primarily on the provision of healthcare directly related to the activities and services of this specific network, including any type of diagnostic contribution supporting this provision of healthcare[5].
- **National Coordination Hubs**: any type of institution with the appropriate knowledge and the legal and organizational capacity to link the national healthcare system to a number or all European Reference Networks. National Coordination Hubs function as interfaces between the national healthcare system and those networks where a given Member State is neither represented by a full member nor by an Associated National Centre. National Coordination Hubs do not need any specific medical expertise or knowledge[6] in rare diseases.

2. Objective of the Call

The call aims to:

- Improve geographical coverage of ERN expertise across Member States and Norway
- Facilitate access to specialised care in countries or disease areas where full ERN membership is not yet established
- Strengthen the integration of ERNs into national healthcare systems
- Support cross-border knowledge exchange and clinical collaboration

3. Minimum recommended criteria

For **Associated National Centres**, the minimum recommended criteria[7] are:

- General:
    - evidence of a clear and well-defined organisation
    - measures in place related to respect patients' rights and to ensure patient-centred quality care
    - measures in place related to patient safety.

[5] Statement adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria […], Nov 2017, p. 7.

[6] Statement adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria […], Nov 2017, p. 12.

[7] Statement adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria […], Nov 2017, pp. 8-11.

- Specific:
    - dedication, general knowledge of and some special expertise in the thematic area of the ERN
    - availability of human resources and organization of care
    - equipment and facilities
    - processing of patient data, coding and participation in patient registries.

For **National Coordination Hubs**, the minimum recommended criteria[8] are:

- General:
    - evidence of a clear and well-defined organisation
    - listing of the different ERNs the coordination hub should be linked to
    - description of the capacity and the ways to link the different ERNs with the national healthcare system, in particular to centres dealing with rare diseases.

4. Scope

This call for Affiliated Partners is directed at countries that do not yet have coverage across all European Reference Networks (ERNs), either as full members or affiliated partners. For this call, the following countries are eligible to apply:

Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia.

As an indicative maximum, eligible countries may submit up to three Affiliated Partner applications for each missing ERN.

5. Tasks, rights and obligation of Affiliated Partners[9]

- Support the ERN objectives established in Article 12 of Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare.
- Fulfil the Minimum Recommended Criteria.
- Respect the rules of the Network to which the Affiliated Partner will be linked and participate and share the tasks and work related with the cooperation activities of the Network.
- Act as a hub-node at national level in the area of expertise of the ERN to which the Affiliated partner is linked, including the referral of patients to the ERN Clinical Patient Management System.
- Contribute through their relationship with the ERNs to pool and disseminate expertise for the benefit of patients and Member States.

[8] Statement adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria […], Nov 2017, p. 12.

[9] Statement adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria […], Nov 2017, pp. 12-13.

- Follow the rules and strategies established in an ERN-Affiliated partner bilateral cooperation agreement that should describe how the affiliated partner will interact, participate and contribute to the specific ERN.

6. Application Procedure

Interested applicants are responsible for:

1. filling in the technical annex, using either Annex 1 (for Associated National Centres), or Annex 2 (for National Coordination Hubs).
2. sending the technical annex to their respective National Competent Authorities.

The National Competent Authority is responsible for:

1. coordinating at national level the identification of candidates for Affiliated Partner membership, considering the national situation and planning[10]
2. consolidating the applications received from the interested applicants
3. selecting the applications received
4. issuing a designation letter for each application, using Annex 3 for Associated National Centre or Annex 4, for National Coordination Hub
5. submitting electronically the applications selected and the corresponding designation letters using the dedicated IT application platform supporting the Call. [please note that the link to the IT application platform is not yet available, and it will be provided when the call opens].

To be considered completed, the submission by the National Competent Authority will entail:

1. uploading the applications selected (either Annex 1 or 2)
2. uploading the corresponding designation letters (either Annex 3 or 4)
3. filling in the administrative information requested by the IT application platform, regarding the applicant and the ERN targeted by the applicant (see screenshots at the following page)
4. clicking on the button 'submit'.

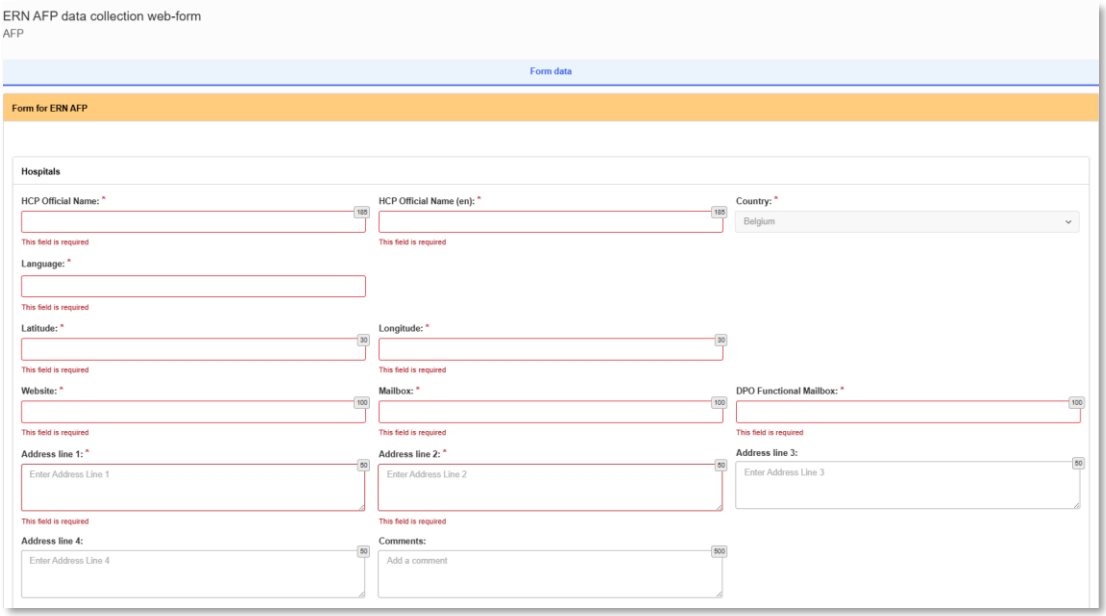
Please note that, once submitted, applications cannot be modified. Applications submitted twice (in respect to the same healthcare provider) will be considered as a single application.

DG SANTE reserves the right to request additional information during the selection phase.

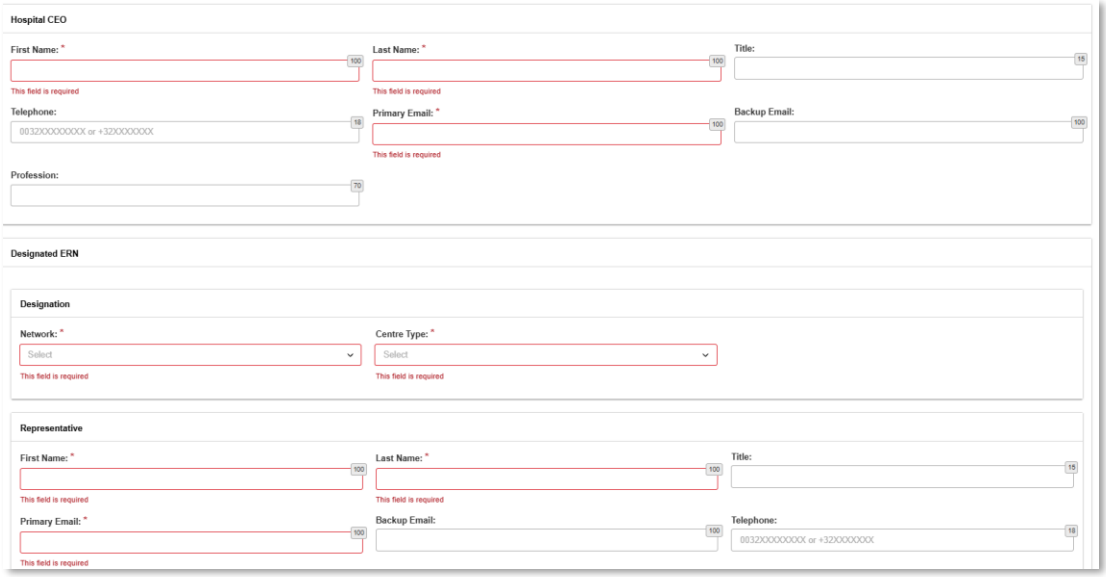
Incomplete applications may be declared inadmissible.

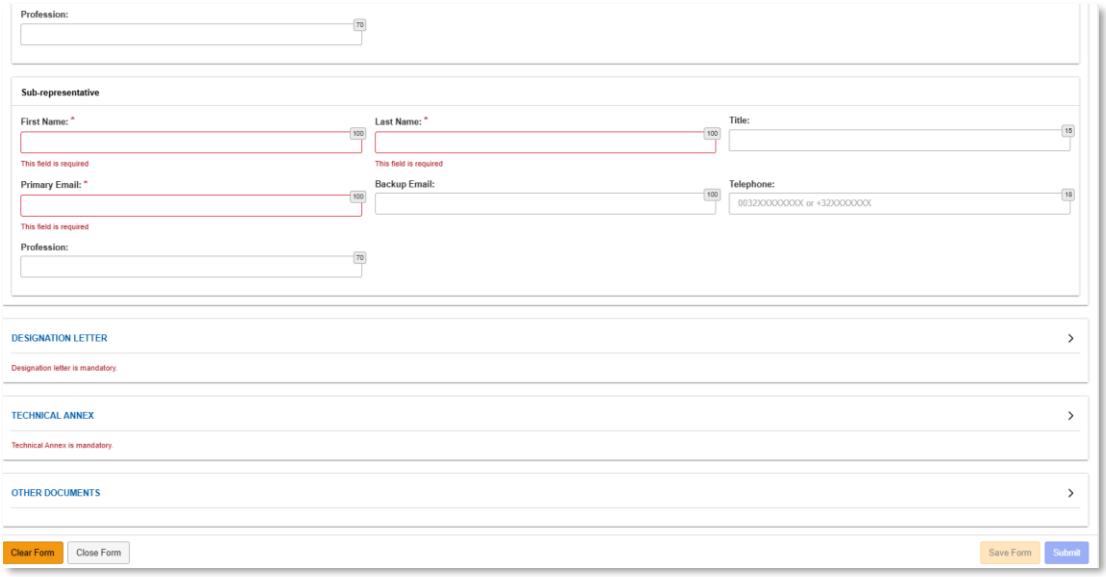
[10] Statement adopted by the ERN BoMS on affiliated partners, 20 May 2016

Administrative HCP information



Additional administrative HCP information and designated ERN information





DG SANTE will undertake an eligibility check of the documents submitted by the National Competent Authority.

Submission of an application does not guarantee designation as an Affiliated Partner

7. Selection procedure

ERN Coordinators will assess the applications that have been submitted by the National Competent Authorities, following the document eligibility checks performed by DG SANTE. In case of clarifications regarding the applications, the ERN Coordinators are invited to contact the relevant National Competent Authority's representative to clarify the matter.

Following the assessment of applications, **ERN Coordinators** will record a **final evaluation** (positive or negative) in the IT application platform. Optionally they may attach supporting documents to justify their assessment, if deemed necessary.

DG SANTE will submit the assessment performed by the ERN Coordinators to the National Competent Authority.

The **ERN Board of Member States** will meet for final approval of applications, considering the assessment of the ERN Coordinators.

In the event of a disagreement between the National Competent Authority of a Member State that endorsed an Affiliated Partner application and the ERN assessment, the Board

of Member States will take the final decision on the approval of this candidate Affiliated Partner into the concerned network[11].

DG SANTE will publish the outcome of the Board of Member States approval on the DG SANTE rare diseases and ERNs website, at the following link:

https://health.ec.europa.eu/rare-diseases-and-european-reference-networks_en

ERNs Coordinator's will then be required to[12]:

- sign a Bilateral Cooperation Agreement with the approved Affiliated Partner, once the outcome of the Board of Member States approval has been published by DG SANTE. The Bilateral Cooperation Agreement (Annex 5) will be signed between the Chief Executive Officer/representatives of the Healthcare Provider and the concerned ERN Coordinator.
- upload the signed Bilateral Cooperation Agreement in the dedicated IT application platform, once signed.

8. Indicative Timeline

Information sessions	30 March, 9 April, 20 April (if necessary)
Publication of the Call	13 April 2026
Deadline for submission of applications	1 September 2026 – 23:59 CET
Eligibility check	September 2026
ERNs assessment/review	October 2026 – January 2027
BOMS meeting to vote on outcome	March 2027
Submission of signed bilateral cooperation agreements	April 2027

These dates are indicative and may be subject to change.

9. Termination of the Affiliated Partner[13]

The membership of an Affiliated Partner is terminated if a healthcare provider from the same Member State is approved as a member in the same ERN. In such a case, the Affiliated Partner might liaise with the newly approved member.

In addition, Affiliated Partners may also be terminated in the following cases:

- voluntary withdrawal
- decision of the national authority of the Affiliated Partner
- termination of the ERN to which the centre is affiliated

[11] Statement adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria […], Nov 2017, p. 13.

[12] Statement adopted by the ERN BoMS on affiliated partners, 20 May 2016.

[13] Statement adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria […], Nov 2017, p. 14

- decision of the ERN to which the centre is affiliated for lack of fulfilment of essential parts of the work plan-agreement.

10. Data Protection

Personal data submitted in the context of this call will be processed in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 on the protection of natural persons regarding the processing of personal data by the Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies.[14]

Applicants must also ensure compliance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR) on the protection of natural persons regarding the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data.[15]

11. Conflict of interest and transparency

Applicants, evaluators and all parties involved in the assessment and designation process must ensure that the application and evaluation of Affiliated Partner are conducted in a transparent, impartial and objective manner.

Applicants shall disclose any situation that could give rise to a real, potential or perceived conflict of interest that may influence or appear to influence the preparation or submission of their application.

Experts, members of ERN coordination teams, and any individuals involved in the technical assessment or review of applications must declare any conflict of interest related to the applicant institution or its personnel. Where such a conflict exists, the individual concerned shall refrain from participating in the evaluation or decision-making process for the relevant application.

The European Commission reserves the right to take appropriate measures to prevent or remedy any conflict of interest identified during the procedure, including requesting additional information, excluding a conflicted evaluator from the assessment, or rejecting an application where the conflict of interest compromises the integrity of the process.

All information provided in the context of the call will be handled in accordance with applicable EU rules on transparency, integrity and data protection.

12. Contact Information

For technical assistance regarding IT application platform, please contact the functional mailbox: SANTE-ERNSD-ITSUPPORT@ec.europa.eu

For any other type of questions related to the Call text or to the application procedure please contact the functional mailbox: SANTE-ERNCALL2026@ec.europa.eu

[14] Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2018 on the protection of natural persons regarding the processing of personal data by the Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies and on the free movement of such data and repealing Regulation (EC) No 45/2001 and Decision No 1247/2002/EC (*OJ L 295, 21.11.2018, p. 39*).

[15] Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons regarding the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (*OJ L 119, 4.5.2016, p. 1*).

13. Supporting material

The Call is supported by the following documents. Please note that all of them will be made available on a dedicated webpage on the DG SANTE website as from 13 April, at the following link (see under the 'latest updates' section):

https://health.ec.europa.eu/rare-diseases-and-european-reference-networks_en

Please also note that annexes 1-4 will be uploaded on the IT application platform as they need to be properly filled in and submitted during the application process (either Annex 1 and 3 or Annex 2 and 4).

Annexes

Annex 1	Technical Annex: Associated National Centres
Annex 2	Technical Annex: National Coordination Hubs
Annex 3	Template: National designation letter - Associated National Centre
Annex 4	Template: National designation letter - National Coordination Hub
Annex 5	Bilateral cooperation agreement ERN-Associated Partner
Annex 6	ERN Strategy for the Integration of Affiliated Partners
Annex 7	One-pager: key information regarding the application to the 2026 Call
Annex 8	Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)