



MAST

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1 Executive Summary

The **MAST project** (Mediterranean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism) aims to accelerate the transition of accommodation SMEs in the Mediterranean towards **resilient, circular, and sustainable management systems**, guided by **ISO 21401:2018**. This international standard provides a comprehensive framework covering **environmental, social, and economic dimensions** of sustainability for accommodation providers and contribute to the **fight against climate change**.

MAST has developed two complementary instruments — a **Sustainability Protocol** and an **Online Self-Evaluation Tool** — designed to make ISO 21401 practical, accessible, and measurable for tourism SMEs. Together, they simplify implementation, enable self-assessment and benchmarking, and provide policymakers with aggregated data to monitor sectoral progress.

By integrating ISO 21401 into policy frameworks, public authorities can drive a coherent transition toward a **greener, fairer, and more competitive tourism ecosystem**, aligned with the **EU Green Deal, Circular Economy Action Plan, and Transition Pathway for Tourism**.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Integration into Policy Frameworks

Embed ISO 21401 and the MAST tools in national tourism strategies, eco-label schemes, and **Green Public Procurement** criteria; align regional **Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)** with its uptake.

2. Support for SMEs and Local Actors

Fund **training programmes**, set up **regional advisory services**, and provide **financial incentives** (grants, tax deductions, vouchers) to help SMEs adopt sustainable practices and pursue certification.

3. Incentives and Recognition

Create **award schemes**, preferential access to **promotion campaigns**, and integrate ISO compliance into **classification systems** to reward responsible operators.

4. Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing

Incorporate sustainability training into **VET and higher education**, promote **cluster partnerships**, and support **digitalisation** and data literacy among SMEs.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

Use data from the self-evaluation tool to track progress, benchmark destinations, and inform evidence-based policymaking.

Implementation Roadmap

A **phased, multi-level governance approach** is proposed:

- **Short-term (1–2 years):** integrate ISO 21401 references into policies, launch awareness campaigns and training, provide initial incentives, and collect baseline data.
- **Medium-term (3–5 years):** scale up adoption, embed ISO criteria into national frameworks, and strengthen partnerships and monitoring.
- **Long-term (5+ years):** achieve harmonisation across Member States, institutionalise capacity building, and position the EU as a **global leader in sustainable tourism**.



MAST demonstrates that sustainability can be a **driver of competitiveness**, not a cost. Its policy recommendations offer a concrete pathway for public authorities to mainstream sustainability, empower SMEs, and ensure that Europe's tourism sector contributes to the **twin green and digital transitions** while preserving its natural and cultural heritage.

2 Introduction

The **MAST project** aims to lead Mediterranean SMEs accommodations towards more resilient, circular, and sustainable management systems. This initiative is guided by the ISO 21401 standard and focuses on developing a sustainability protocol and self-assessment tool tailored for easy implementation in accommodation enterprises.

The project introduces innovative solutions that balance all dimensions of sustainability—environmental, social, and economic. This holistic approach goes beyond current practices in the accommodation sector, promoting a sustainable organizational culture.

The project seeks to inspire a paradigm shift towards sustainable tourism, safeguarding the region's natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

The **tourism sector** contributes significantly to the European economy, accounting for millions of jobs and a substantial share of GDP. However, the sector also exerts environmental and social pressures, particularly through energy consumption, waste generation, and seasonal labour. The green and digital transitions, embedded in EU strategies, demand that the tourism sector evolves towards sustainability, resilience, and inclusiveness and clearly support the EU fight against climate change.

Accommodation establishments are at the centre of this transformation and they face an **important challenge**. Yet, many of them, especially SMEs, lack the resources and technical knowledge to implement structured sustainability measures. The adoption of ISO 21401 offers an opportunity to address these challenges. The standard sets out requirements for sustainable management systems in accommodation, covering environmental, social, and economic dimensions. They also need practical, simple tools to align with sustainability requirements, tools that MAST project strived to produce.

The **aim of this document** is to provide policymakers with actionable recommendations on how to support the sector to tackle these challenges while continuing contributing to the economic and social development of European Union society and economy. Specifically, this document will provide policymakers with suggestions on how successfully exploit the dedicated protocol and online self-evaluation tool produced by MAST project to streamline adoption and implementation of ISO 21401. By embedding these instruments into policy frameworks, authorities can accelerate uptake and create a coherent regulatory environment.

Target audiences of this recommendations include municipalities, regional and national authorities dealing with tourism legislation and promotion, EU institutions, and tourism development agencies.



3 The relevance of ISO 21401:2018 for Tourism Policies

The norm **ISO 21401** establishes a **comprehensive sustainability management system** specifically tailored for accommodation providers. Beyond general environmental certifications, ISO 21401 focuses on the operational realities of tourism establishments, offering a practical and internationally recognised framework for responsible and efficient management. Its requirements encompass three interlinked pillars:

- **Environmental efficiency** (energy performance, water conservation, waste prevention and recycling, pollution control, carbon footprint reduction), promoting a systematic approach to resource optimisation and climate mitigation.
- **Social responsibility** (fair and safe labour conditions, respect for human rights, local community involvement, guest and staff wellbeing, accessibility for persons with disabilities), reflecting the increasing emphasis on social sustainability within EU tourism policies.
- **Economic sustainability** (long-term financial viability, improved customer satisfaction, risk prevention, continuous improvement and innovation), ensuring that sustainability becomes a driver—not a cost—for business performance. ISO sets recommendations/requirements for integrating sustainability into organisational structure; thus, creating sustainable organisational culture and climate

These norms, supposed to help tourism industry in contributing EU in sustainable transition, are designed to be applied to **all establishments providing tourist accommodation**, including hotels, resorts, bed & breakfast structures, rural houses, hostels, and camping sites, making the framework **flexible and scalable** across diverse tourism contexts and sizes of operation.

The benefits for accommodation establishments successfully applying the norm are multiple:

Reduced operational costs through improved resource efficiency, preventive maintenance, and optimised procurement procedures.

Enhanced competitiveness by responding to the fast-growing consumer demand for authentic, responsible, and environmentally sound tourism services.

Improved compliance with current and upcoming regulatory frameworks (e.g., energy performance, waste management, accessibility) and alignment with recognised eco-label schemes, easing the burden of meeting multiple requirements.

Strengthened reputation and destination branding, increasing trust among travellers, tour operators, and local communities, sets the necessary requirements for the accommodation sector to follow the existing ECSR and ESG reporting and contributing to the positioning of sustainable tourism destinations.

Moreover, **ISO 21401 aligns with key EU and national strategies**, including the **European Green Deal**, the **EU Circular Economy Action Plan**, the **Sustainable Product Initiative**, the **Transition Pathway for Tourism**, and **Green Public Procurement** frameworks. Its operational nature makes it an effective instrument for translating high-level policy ambitions into measurable actions at facility level.



4 The Protocol and Online Self-Evaluation Tool

To overcome the complexity of standards, a protocol and online self-evaluation tool have been developed by the MAST project. These instruments aim to simplify, standardise, and digitalise the implementation of ISO 21401.

The Protocol

The **Sustainability Protocol for SME Accommodation** is a practical framework to guide small and medium-sized accommodation establishments in their transition toward sustainable and circular business models. Based on the international standard **ISO 21401**, the protocol translates its environmental, social, and economic requirements into concrete, easy-to-implement actions tailored to the realities of SMEs operating in the Mediterranean tourism context.

Structured around the three sustainability pillars, the protocol identifies **specific areas of intervention**—from energy efficiency, waste management, and water conservation to fair working conditions, community engagement, cultural preservation, and long-term economic viability (that is across the entire TBL sustainability framework). For each area, it provides **operational objectives, step-by-step activities, responsible actors, and indicative time frames**. Providing step-by-step guidance for accommodation providers, it translates technical requirements into practical procedures.

Beyond compliance, the protocol promotes a **continuous improvement approach**, encouraging establishments to adopt participatory management, collaborate with local stakeholders, and enhance guest awareness of sustainability. Overall, the protocol represents a key instrument to foster measurable, inclusive, and long-term sustainability within the tourism accommodation sector.

The Online Self-Evaluation Tool

Another key outcome of the project is the MAST self-assessment tool, which is designed to help accommodation providers and sustainability consultants to **evaluate their current level of sustainability** against the ISO 21401 criteria and requirements. The tool is aligned with the Sustainability Protocol and the norms. The analysis implemented through the tool **identifies the strengths and weaknesses** of establishments in meeting the certification requirements. After answering questions covering different areas of the norms and standards, respondents will receive a **written and graphical report** to help them better understand their establishment's level of sustainability maturity and which aspects they should focus on to increase their chances of certification. This exercise can be repeated over time, enabling continuous monitoring and benchmarking. Comparing results over time will allow establishments to understand the areas in which they have made relevant improvements and where they need to improve their performance further, supporting the **preparation of customised action plans**.

Using these two products together **greatly simplifies the design and implementation of ISO standard requirements**, as well as facilitating the definition of user-friendly procedures. It establishes a structured pathway from initial assessment to certification readiness. The collection of results of the online tool is also a **scalable mechanism for tracking sectoral progress**, a source of data for evidence-based decisions for sector stakeholders and policy makers.



5 Policy Recommendations

Policymakers at all levels can play a decisive role in **mainstreaming ISO 21401** and its supporting instruments into sustainable tourism agendas. Effective integration not only improves sustainable performance but also strengthens destination competitiveness, resilience, and alignment with EU expectations under the **Transition Pathway for Tourism**, the **Green Deal**, and national sustainability commitments.

For this purpose, the following recommendations are proposed:

Integration into Policy Frameworks

- **Reference ISO 21401 in national tourism strategies, climate adaptation plans, and circular economy roadmaps**, ensuring consistency with EU-level priorities and regulatory developments.
- **Promote MAST protocol and the self-evaluation tool as validated instruments** within national and regional environmental schemes, destination certification programmes, and quality assurance systems.
- **Embed ISO 21401 compliance into Green Public Procurement (GPP) criteria** for accommodation services procured by public administrations, tourism boards, or publicly funded events, thus generating demand-side incentives.
- **Align regional Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)** with ISO 21401 uptake, facilitating coordinated innovation and investment support for more sustainable hospitality.

Support for SMEs and Local Actors

- **Fund structured training programmes** to build managerial, operational, and technical capacity within SMEs, helping them interpret requirements and implement actions cost-effectively.
- **Establish regional and local advisory services**, including helpdesks, on-site coaching, and specialised consultancies to accompany businesses in the certification process.
- **Provide financial incentives** such as subsidies, tax deductions, grants, or green vouchers for establishments adopting ISO 21401 procedures, investing in energy-efficient technologies, or upgrading their management systems.
- **Facilitate access to EU funding** (LIFE, ERDF, Rural Development, Horizon Europe) for pilot actions supporting ISO 21401 implementation in tourism destinations.
- Strengthen the role of DMOs by developing local sustainability advisors who can guide SMEs, coordinate training, ensure consistent interpretation of ISO 21401, and act as ongoing reference points for businesses during implementation.

Incentives and Recognition Schemes

- **Launch national or regional award programmes** rewarding compliant or high-performing establishments, increasing visibility, trust, and market differentiation.
- **Offer preferential access to tourism promotion campaigns**, public tenders, or destination marketing initiatives for certified or tool-registered businesses.



- **Integrate ISO 21401 compliance into accommodation classification systems**, adding value to star rating schemes and national quality labels.
- **Integrate ISO, as recognizable and valid scheme into existing national sustainability schemes for tourism**

Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing

- **Embed sustainability and ISO 21401 principles in vocational education and training, higher education, and continuous professional development curricula** for tourism managers, technicians, and hospitality staff.
- **Promote cluster initiatives and multi-stakeholder partnerships** that bring together SMEs, industry associations, local authorities, technology providers, and training centres to accelerate collective learning.
- **Organise thematic workshops, peer-learning exchanges, and cross-country study visits** to disseminate best practices and share case studies from early adopters.
- **Encourage digitalisation and data literacy**, enabling SMEs to use monitoring tools effectively and integrate sustainability KPIs into daily management.
- Support activities that promote ISO 21401 as a recognised sustainability marker to tourists, improving their awareness, knowledge, and behaviour when choosing and experiencing accommodation services. This includes clear communication materials, visitor-facing explanations of sustainability measures, and simple behavioural cues that help guests participate in responsible practices.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- **Promote regular use of the self-evaluation tool** to support continuous improvements and strengthen the reliability of sustainability commitments.
- **Aggregate anonymised data** from the MAST online tool to monitor sectoral progress, identify gaps, and inform policy adjustments or targeted support measures.
- **Integrate the resulting insights into national and regional sustainability reporting**, ensuring evidence-based decision-making and transparent communication with stakeholders.
- **Use monitoring outcomes to benchmark destinations**, strengthen certification schemes, and inform long-term planning for green and resilient tourism ecosystems.



6 Proposals for an implementation action plan

The following suggestions represent a reference scheme of a possible effective action plan that government and policy authorities can adopt to promote the use of the the ISO 21401 and to support an effective exploitation of MAST protocol and tool, which requires a multi-level governance commitment. Stakeholder engagement is essential. Industry associations, chambers of commerce, NGOs, and consumer organisations should be mobilised to create ownership, enhance legitimacy, and accelerate uptake. A roadmap for implementation should be properly designed and be adapted to the specific characteristics of the target area or region and it should include:

1. Short-Term Actions (1–2 years)

Foundation-building and early adoption

Policy Integration

- References to ISO 21401 in national and regional tourism strategies and sustainability action plans.
- Publicly recognise the effectiveness of the protocol and self-assessment tool within eco-label schemes and destination certification programmes.
- Begin aligning Green Public Procurement (GPP) criteria with ISO 21401 requirements for accommodation services.

Capacity Building & Awareness

- Launch awareness campaigns targeting accommodation providers and their associations, local authorities, and other tourism associations.
- Implement initial training programmes for SMEs on understanding the standard and using the protocol/tool.
- Establish regional advisory services or helpdesks to support early adopters.

Early Incentives & Support Measures

- Provide introductory grants or vouchers for SMEs to conduct sustainability diagnostics using the tool.
- Offer tax deductions or subsidies for investments in energy-efficient and water-saving technologies aligned with ISO 21401 requirements.

Data Collection & Baseline Assessment

- Encourage accommodation establishments to conduct their first self-evaluation using the tool.
- Begin collecting anonymised baseline data on sustainability performance across regions.
- Support mechanisms for regular update of the self-evaluation tool to improve and adapt functionalities of the tool.

2. Medium-Term Actions (3–5 years)

Scaling up adoption and integrating sustainability into mainstream practice

Policy & Regulatory Consolidation

- Embed ISO 21401 compliance in updated national tourism regulations, quality labels, and destination management systems.
- Adopt ISO-aligned criteria within public tenders and tourism promotion contracts linked to publicly funded events and programmes.

Strengthening SME Support & Partnerships



- Expand SME training programmes into structured curricula for hospitality VET centres, universities, and professional academies.
- Promote cluster-led initiatives and multi-stakeholder partnerships to foster shared learning and joint investments.
- Provide targeted financial schemes (e.g., green transition funds, ERDF-backed programmes) for establishments implementing ISO 21401 improvements.

Recognition & Market Incentives

- Launch national or regional sustainable tourism awards for ISO 21401-compliant establishments.
- Prioritise certified or tool-registered businesses in destination marketing campaigns and international promotion.

Enhanced Monitoring & Reporting

- Develop region-specific dashboards aggregating anonymised data from the self-evaluation tool.
- Use monitoring insights to design tailored support programmes and identify areas requiring regulatory adjustments.
- Integrate results into national tourism sustainability reporting mechanisms.

3. Long-Term Actions (5+ years)

Consolidation, harmonisation, and international leadership

Regulatory Harmonisation & Long-Term Governance

- Fully integrate ISO 21401 into long-term tourism governance frameworks, including national sustainability roadmaps, climate plans, and circular economy strategies.
- Harmonise sustainability certification requirements across Member States, reducing fragmentation and facilitating cross-border tourism transparency.

Sustainable Tourism Market Transformation

- Establish ISO 21401 as a reference standard for accommodation classification and national quality rating systems.
- Incentivise continual improvement by linking long-term financial support or preferential loans to measured sustainability performance.

Institutionalised Capacity Building

- Embed ISO 21401 principles and best practices permanently into tourism education and continuous professional development at all levels.
- Create permanent centres of excellence or observatories dedicated to sustainable accommodation and tourism innovation.

Advanced Monitoring, Benchmarking & Impact Measurement

- Use cumulative data to benchmark destinations, measure long-term environmental and social impacts, and evaluate national progress towards EU Green Deal and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Publish annual or biennial national reports on sustainable tourism performance, reinforcing transparency and accountability.
- Promote European leadership by sharing models, guidelines, and lessons learned with international partners.



7 Conclusions

The MAST project shows that sustainability in tourism is achievable, practical, and beneficial when clear guidance and simple tools are available. ISO 21401 offers exactly that: a concrete way for accommodation establishments to improve their environmental performance, strengthen social responsibility, and operate more efficiently. But its real value emerges when public authorities and industry stakeholders actively support its adoption.

The protocol and self-evaluation tool developed by MAST demonstrate that even small establishments can embrace structured sustainability practices without excessive cost or complexity. By translating the standard into practical steps and offering an easy digital assessment process, these instruments remove the barriers that often prevent SMEs from engaging in long-term sustainability management. They also produce useful data that can help policy makers understand where support is most needed and how destinations are progressing.

For tourism authorities, ISO 21401 represents more than a certification pathway—it is an opportunity to bring coherence to sustainability initiatives. At local and regional levels, it can reinforce destination branding and help coordinate support services; at national level, it can strengthen regulatory consistency, training schemes, and incentive programmes; at the European level, it aligns naturally with major policy priorities such as the Green Deal, the Circular Economy Action Plan, the Transition Pathway for Tourism; contribute to the fight against climate change.

Stakeholders across the sector stand to gain. Accommodation providers can reduce costs, improve competitiveness, and meet growing expectations from travellers. Destination managers can rely on comparable, verifiable criteria. Training providers and consultants can help build the skills and advisory ecosystem needed to sustain long-term change.

The broader message of MAST is clear: sustainability becomes a driver of competitiveness when it is supported by the right tools, policies, and partnerships. By embedding ISO 21401 into their tourism strategies, investing in skills, and using data to guide decisions, policy makers can accelerate the transition to a tourism model that is resilient, responsible, and aligned with Europe's long-term vision and contribute to the EU fight against climate change.

Ultimately, MAST offers a realistic pathway for Mediterranean destinations to lead by example—showing that sustainability is not just an obligation, but an opportunity to enhance quality, reputation, and long-term prosperity for the entire tourism ecosystem.