European Capitals of Small Retail

Small Retail BIG IMPACT

Competition for the European Capitals of Small Retail Awards (ECoSR) 2026

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. General questions about the competition

1.1 Q: What is the European Capitals of Small Retail initiative?

A: **The European Capitals of Small Retail** is a European Union initiative proposed as a Preparatory Action by the European Parliament and implemented by the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA) on behalf of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW). It aims to recognise cities that have demonstrated exceptional support for small retailers and vibrant city centres.

1.2 Q: Who can apply for the competition?

A: The competition is open to **cities** from the European Union and countries participating in the Single Market Programme[1]**.**

1.3 Q: How many cities are awarded each year?

A: **For the first two editions planned,** three cities will be awarded the European Capitals of Small Retail 2026 title and three cities – the European Capitals of Small Retail 2027 title, one in each of the following categories:

- Vanguard City (small-sized cities: 5 000 - 50 000 inhabitants)
- Vibrant City (medium-sized cities: 50 000 - 250 000 inhabitants)
- Visionary City (large-sized cities: 250 000 inhabitants or above)

The first edition of the competition, launched in 2025, will award 3 European Capitals of Small Retail 2026.

The second edition of the competition, to be launched in 2026, will award 3 European Capitals of Small Retail 2027.

---

[1] The SMP countries are Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Türkiye, and Ukraine

1.4 Q: What are the benefits of being awarded as one of the three winners?

A: Cities awarded the European Capital of Small Retail title will benefit from:

- European recognition and increased visibility;
- promotional activities throughout their title year;
- participation in networking events with other European cities;
- participation in the Small Retail Exchange Programme alongside other winning/shortlisted cities to learn from each other and share good practices;
- assistance with organising workshops and webinars;
- media coverage and promotional videos;
- enhanced city branding and tourism visibility.

1.5 Q: What are the benefits for shortlisted applicants who are not awarded the title?

A: Shortlisted cities remain valued members of the growing European small retail community.

Cities that are shortlisted but not awarded the title will still benefit from:

- Recognition of their efforts through official communication and visibility on EU platforms**;**
- Opportunities to showcase their initiatives in European-level events and publications**;**
- Invitations to networking and learning activities throughout the initiative.
- Shortlisted cities will be able to take part in an exchange programme within their award category (small, medium, or large). For example, a shortlisted city in the small category will visit another shortlisted or awarded small city, and vice versa.

1.6 Q: Is it free of charge to participate in the European Capitals of Small Retail initiative?

A: Yes, participation is completely **free of charge**. There are no fees for applying or being selected. However, if the city wins the title, it is expected to implement its programme of activities throughout the year, with the support of the European Commission.

1.7 Q: Is the visual identity (logo and branding materials) for the European Capitals of Small Retail available in multiple languages?

A: The official visual identity, including the logo and branding materials, is only available in English.

1.8 Q: How will the results be announced?

A: The winning cities will be officially announced during the award ceremony in Brussels

(on 28 January 2026, for the first edition) and through the project's communication channels. All candidates will be informed by email.

1.9 Q: Will the European Capitals of Small Retail awards also be organised in future years? If so, will the same four key criteria (Sustainability, Entrepreneurship Support & Community Engagement, Digitalisation, and City Attractiveness & Vitality) continue to be used?

A: A second edition of the initiative is confirmed for 2026/2027. Continuation beyond this second edition will depend on the availability of funds and the overall success of the initiative.

Regarding the award criteria, while the current four —Sustainability, Entrepreneurship Support and Community Engagement, Digitalisation, and City Attractiveness and Vitality —are still expected to feature prominently, they may be modified or complemented in future editions based on policy developments and feedback received.

2. Application process

2.1 Q: Where can I find the application guidelines?

A: The official guidelines are available on the initiative's website. They provide detailed information on eligibility, evaluation criteria, and the application process.

2.2 Q: Can we apply in our national language?

A: Yes, applications can be submitted in any official EU language[2] and official Single Market Programme (SMP) language[3], but English is preferred. Applications submitted in languages other than English will be translated for evaluation purposes, provided they are official EU or SMP languages.

2.3 Q: Are the city programmes for ECoSR proposed by the cities themselves, or are they defined by the European Commission?

A: The city programmes under the ECoSR initiative are proposed by the applicant cities themselves. While the European Commission provides a general framework and

[2] The list is available here: https://commission.europa.eu/about/service-standards-and-principles/commissions-use-languages_en

[3] Albanian (Albania and Kosovo), Armenian (Armenia), Bosnian (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Icelandic (Iceland), Macedonian (North Macedonia), Romanian (Moldova), Montenegrin (Montenegro), Norwegian (Norway), Serbian (Serbia), Turkish (Turkey), Ukrainian (Ukraine)

evaluation criteria, it is up to each city to design and submit its own programme aligned with the objectives of the ECoSR.

2.4 Q: Are cities selected based on their existing status or on the programme they propose to implement?

A: The selection process considers both the city's current profile and achievements, as well as the strength, relevance, and ambition of the proposed programme for supporting small retail ecosystems.

2.5 Q: Can our city apply for multiple categories?

A: No, cities must apply for the category corresponding to their population size.

2.6 Q: Could you clarify what exactly is expected in the 1 000-word submission? What specific information or elements should be included?

A: The Application Form includes four open-text fields, each with a maximum word count of 1 000, corresponding to the following evaluation criteria:
• Sustainability (Section 3.1)
• Entrepreneurship Support and Community Engagement (Section 3.2)
• Digitalisation (Section 3.3)
• City Attractiveness and Vitality (Section 3.4)

Each section invites applicants to present concrete and exemplary initiatives led by their city in relation to small retail development. While guidance is provided under each section, cities are encouraged to submit content that reflects their unique context, innovative approaches, and strategic vision. The goal is to offer an in-depth narrative that not only addresses the thematic area but also showcases the city's potential to serve as a model for others across Europe.

Further details on the evaluation criteria, as well as more in-depth guidance on how the 1 000-word submissions will be assessed, can be found in Section 5.3 of the Guide for Applicants.

2.7 Q: Should cities include both retail and distribution businesses when describing their local policies to support the sector, even though the application form focuses on small retail enterprises?

A: Concerning the definition of small retail enterprises, the initiative indeed draws on the EU's SME definition as set out in Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC, with a particular focus on enterprises active in the retail sector. However, as noted in the Guide for Applicants, cities are encouraged to adopt an inclusive approach to their local

ecosystem. This may include distribution companies where relevant, especially if they form part of the local value chain for small retail. Therefore, you may include both retail and distribution businesses in your narrative if they are integral to your city's strategy.

2.8 Q: Do all the initiatives described in the application form need to be launched by the city council, or can they also be promoted by other stakeholders in the local ecosystem?

A: Applications must be submitted by the city council, although the endorsements and/or active involvement of other retail-oriented stakeholders is most welcome. Applications may indeed include actions promoted by other stakeholders such as chambers of commerce, local development agencies, business associations, or civil society actors, as long as these initiatives are known, supported, or monitored by the city council. The goal is to highlight a collaborative and coherent strategy to support small retail.

2.9 Q: Does the contact person listed in the application form need to be the same person who submits the proposal via the EU Survey platform?

A: The contact person listed in the application form does not necessarily need to be the person who formally submits to the EU Survey platform. However, the contact person should be the one who can best coordinate any questions the evaluation committee may have concerning the application's content.

2.10 Q: Can someone working for a local development agency submit the application, even if the agency has a different PIC or VAT number than the city council?

A: Yes, a representative of the local development agency may submit the application, if it is also officially endorsed by the Mayor or a duly delegated person in line with Section 4.3 of the Guide for Applicants. The PIC and VAT numbers of the agency and city council being different is not an issue for submission, provided the city council is the official applicant and endorses the candidacy. Feel free to include relevant excerpts as evidence of your agency status too in the application form, as a complementary document.

2.11 Q: Can we update our application after submission?

A: Once the application is submitted before the deadline for submission, no changes are possible for equal treatment reasons.

2.12 Q: What is the application deadline?

A: The application deadline for the first edition, to award European Capitals of Small Retail 2026, is 9 October 2025 at 14:00 CET.

2.13 Q: Where can I find more information and apply?

A: Detailed information and the application form are available on EUSurvey.
Please note that only applications submitted via the EU Survey platform will be accepted**.** Applications sent by email or any other means will not be considered eligible**.**

2.14 Q: Does the definition of "retail" include the hospitality sector? For example, would a small family-owned restaurant in a small town be considered?

A: Under the *City Attractiveness and Vitality* criterion, applications are encouraged to highlight actions that contribute to attractive retail environments, cultural integration, and tourism appeal. While restaurants, cafés, and similar establishments are not formally classified under "retail trade", a small, family-owned restaurant situated in the town centre can still form an integral part of the broader commercial and social fabric of towns and cities. By offering (for instance) distinctive culinary experiences, hosting cultural events, or sourcing from local producers, such an establishment can attract visitors, encourage footfall in the surrounding retail area, and enhance the overall visitor experience. Therefore, its inclusion within a particular city`s application can indeed be relevant and justifiable, especially as part of the local ecosystem that sustains small retail through increased attractiveness, tourism, and community engagement. This approach is consistent with the competition's objectives to showcase cities that support vibrant city centres and foster a thriving local economy.

2.15 Q: When providing references in the proposal, from which year should information be included? Should past initiatives be covered, or only those implemented from 2025 onwards?

A: Applicant cities may include references to initiatives from any relevant year, where this helps to illustrate the municipality's long-term commitment and strategic approach to supporting small retail. However, the proposal should place particular emphasis on current and planned actions, especially those from 2025 onwards, in line with the forward-looking objectives of the 2026 edition of the European Capitals of Small Retail initiative.

2.16 Q: For official data sources, is it acceptable to use an organisation's own databases or other platforms?

A: Yes, applicant cities are welcome to use data from internal sources or other platforms as long as the data is clearly referenced and the source is reliable. If possible, complementing it with public or EU-level statistics will further strengthen your proposal.

3. Eligibility

3.1 Q: Our city's population is very close to the category threshold. Which category should we apply for?

A: Use the most recent official population figures. If your city is on the borderline, you should apply for the category that reflects your current official population. Preferably use Eurostat - if your city is not included, use easily accessible national statistics.

3.2 Q: Can two cities from the same country be selected as European Capitals of Small Retail in the same year?

A: There are no such constraints. Each applicant city is evaluated by the expert panel first based on its merits according to the selection criteria. Secondly, shortlisted cities are evaluated by the jury based on the programmes they intend to implement during the year of the title.

3.3 Q: Are digital platforms that are created to boost small retail eligible to apply for the ECoSR?

A: No, the ECoSR title is awarded exclusively to cities**.** While digital platforms and other supporting organisations may play an important role in the development and implementation of a city's application, only local authorities (cities) are eligible to submit applications and be officially designated as European Capital of Small Retail. However, cities are encouraged to include partnerships with such platforms in their proposed programmes.

4. Evaluation

4.1 Q: Who will be on the jury?

A: The evaluations will be carried out first by independent experts, who will shortlist nine applicant cities – three per category.
The experts will assess both the strengths of each application across the four competition criteria and the proposed programme of activities that shortlisted cities will be expected to develop. The nine shortlisted will thereafter be invited to present their applications in front of a competent Jury in Brussels, and the Jury will evaluate the proposals and award cities accordingly. All these steps will take place throughout the same day as the Award Ceremony in January 2026.

4.2 Q: How are the expert panel members selected?

A: The European Commission selects expert panel members based on their expertise in urban development, retail, entrepreneurial support, sustainability, and digitalisation.

4.3 Q: What happens if two cities receive the same score?

A: In case of a tie, the expert panel will determine which city advances to the shortlist based on the sum of the scores obtained in the innovation sub-criterion across all four main criteria (sustainability, entrepreneurship support and community engagement, digitalisation, and city attractiveness & vitality). Priority will be given to cities demonstrating innovative or distinctive methods that could provide valuable learning opportunities for other European cities. The panel will specifically look for unique approaches to addressing small retail challenges that show originality, creativity, and potential for replication across Europe.

5. Implementation

5.1 Q: Is there funding available to implement the programme of activities?

A: There is no monetary prize, but winning cities receive assistance through promotional activities and events in close collaboration with the European Commission. Consult the Guide for Applicants and the question/answer on ***Q: What are the benefits of being awarded as one of the three winners ?*** for more details.

5.2 Q: What happens if our city is awarded and we cannot implement all the activities in our proposed programme?

A: The proposed programme must be realistic and feasible. However, if circumstances change, some minor adjustments to the programme could be considered although in principle the city should be ready to implement whatever it proposes.

5.3 Q: Will travel and accommodation costs be covered for the Awards Ceremony?

A**:** Yes, travel and accommodation costs will be covered for a maximum of 2 representatives per shortlisted city who will present their applications at the Awards Ceremony and for one representative of local media from each shortlisted city so that he/she can cover the Awards Ceremony.

5.4 Q: How does the initiative recommend translating the title "European Capitals of Small Retail" into other languages?

A: Cities are encouraged to use the translation of the title as it appears in the official translated versions of the Guide for Applicants. This helps ensure consistency and clarity across different languages. All official competition documents, including

translated guides, are available on our website under 'How to Apply' → 'Resources for Applicants'.