

BLUEFLAG PROJECT

***Enhance cooperation between private and public institution for
an efficient management to raise criteria standards for Blue
Flag award in the region.***

Activity 1.4 Action Plan: Joint Model of management on Blue Flag Criteria

Deliverable 1.4.5: Jointly action to develop the action plan, led by LP

Version n.1

09/2025

**Project Partners: Municipality of Ugento, Municipality of Lezhe and Tourism
Organisation of Ulcjni**

Table of contents

1	<i>Introduction</i>	3
1.1	Objective of the activity	5
2	<i>Methodology</i>	5
2.1	Desk Research	5
2.2	Stakeholder Engagement	6
2.3	Data Collection and analysis	7
2.4	Gap Identification and categorization	7
2.5	Reporting and recommendations	7
3	<i>STEP 1: A Gap Analysis Report including partners reports</i>	8
4	<i>STEP 2: Action Plan Model</i>	11
5	<i>STEP 3 Testing Phase</i>	13
6	<i>STEP 4 Memorandum of Understanding</i>	18
7	<i>Conclusion</i>	20

1 Introduction

The BLUE FLAG project is a cross-border small initiative designed to enhance the capacity of local authorities and stakeholders in Italy, Montenegro, and Albania to capitalize and to meet the environmental standards required for the Blue Flag certification. This internationally recognized eco-label is awarded by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), a non-governmental organization that promotes sustainable development through environmental education. The Blue Flag programme, launched in 1985, has become a global symbol of high environmental and quality standards in tourism-related coastal areas, including beaches, marinas, and boating tourism operators. The label is present in 48 countries, making it a prestigious and globally trusted symbol of eco-friendly and sustainable tourism management.

The certification is based on the fulfillment of the following criteria that fall under six main categories:

1. Education, Information and Stakeholder Engagement

Blue Flag sites play an active role in raising awareness and educating about environmental protection and sustainability. Certified sites must:

- Display educational information on local ecosystems, sustainability practices, and responsible conducts that users need to adopt to keep safe and protect nature.
- Organize environmental activities for visitors, staff, and local communities.
- Engage stakeholders, including local businesses, authorities, and residents, in coastal management efforts.

2. Climate Action

Sites must take on measures to reduce their carbon footprint and adapt to climate challenges. This includes:

- Implementing energy-efficient infrastructure and promoting transportation with lower greenhouse gas emissions.
- Mapping greenhouse gas emissions and identifying key emission hotspots.
- Implementing climate adaptation strategies to address coastal erosion, extreme weather events, and sea-level rise.

3. Biodiversity Management

Certified sites must protect and restore biodiversity in coastal and marine environments by:

- Implementing measures to safeguard local wildlife and habitats.
- Managing coastal vegetation and sand dunes responsibly to prevent erosion.
- Collaborating with the relevant authorities for adequate information and management of sensitive natural areas and protected areas.

4. Pollution Management and Water Quality

Maintaining clean and healthy environments is a cornerstone of the Blue Flag programme. Sites must:

- Maintain excellent water quality through regular testing and public reporting.
- Ensure proper waste management, including recycling, safe handling of hazardous waste, and reduction of plastic pollution.
- Prevent oil spills, chemical contamination, and sewage discharge in marine and coastal areas.

5. Accessibility

Blue Flag sites must be welcoming and inclusive for visitors by:

- Providing wherever possible facilities for people with disabilities, such as ramps, adapted pathways, and accessible restrooms.
- Offering clear and visible information online and on-site to help all visitors prepare their visits and navigate the site.
- Promoting access to information, recreational services, and natural areas for a wide range of people, including those with temporary impairments or disabilities.

6. Safety and Services

To ensure a safe and enjoyable experience for all visitors, certified sites must:

- Have lifeguards and/or safety equipment available, depending on the result of specific, independent risk assessments.
- Provide emergency response plans for accidents, natural hazards, or environmental risks.
- Ensure proper sanitation, drinking water availability, and first aid facilities.

Achieving Blue Flag status requires not only meeting these criteria but also maintaining them through continuous monitoring and management. The certification is awarded on an annual basis, meaning that local authorities and operators must demonstrate sustained commitment to high standards.

1.1 Objective of the activity

The purpose of Activity 1.4, focused on the development and implementation of a Joint Model of Management (JMM) for the Blue Flag criteria, is to address governance and administrative gaps in the partner regions. Each partner, Municipality of Ugento in Italy, Tourism Organization of Ulcinj in Montenegro, and Municipality of Lezha in Albania, implemented this activity within their territory, with the goal of harmonizing the application of Blue Flag standards.

The JMM will serve as an action plan that outlines the necessary steps and governance structures for meeting Blue Flag certification requirements. The model will support local authorities in managing coastal areas according to Blue Flag standards, ensuring consistent implementation across the regions. Each partner will conduct a detailed analysis of their current legal and administrative frameworks, gather feedback from stakeholders, and develop targeted strategies to close identified gaps.

2 Methodology

The methodology for conducting the Gap Analysis within the framework of Activity 1.4 of the **BLUE FLAG** project is designed to ensure a comprehensive and structured approach. This section outlines the steps taken to gather and analyze data across the three participating countries: Ugento (Italy), Ulcinj (Montenegro), and Lezha (Albania). The methodology combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods to capture the current administrative, legal, and operational conditions related to the implementation of Blue Flag criteria.

2.1 Desk Research

The first step of the analysis involved **desk research** to review the existing administrative and legal frameworks that govern coastal and marine area management in each partner region. This included:

- **Legal Documents and Regulations:** A thorough review of national and regional policies, laws, and regulations related to environmental management, tourism, and coastal protection.
- **Blue Flag Guidelines:** Examination of the official Blue Flag criteria and the alignment (or misalignment) of the current legal frameworks with these standards.
- **Best Practices Documentation:** Identification of best practices in Blue Flag management from regions with established certification, particularly within Italy, as a reference point for Albania and Montenegro.

This desk research provided a foundational understanding of the institutional and regulatory landscape in each territory and highlighted potential gaps or barriers to achieving Blue Flag certification.

2.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Qualitative research was conducted through stakeholder engagement, involving key actors in the coastal and tourism sectors in each region. The objective was to gather insights into the practical challenges, opportunities, and levels of awareness regarding the Blue Flag criteria.

The following steps were taken:

- **Questionnaires and Surveys:** Tailored questionnaires were developed to assess the awareness and preparedness of local stakeholders, including municipal authorities, tourism operators, environmental NGOs, and community organizations. The questionnaires focused on:
 - Knowledge of the Blue Flag criteria.
 - Current environmental practices in coastal management.
 - Challenges in meeting the required standards.
 - Suggestions for improving governance and management structures.
- **Target Groups:** Stakeholders were selected based on their involvement in the management of beaches, marinas, and eco-tourism. Each region identified a mix of public and private sector representatives to ensure a balanced perspective.

2.3 Data Collection and analysis

The data collected from desk research and stakeholder engagement was then systematically analyzed to identify the gaps between the current situation in each region and the requirements of the Blue Flag certification. The analysis focused on:

- **Administrative and Legal Gaps:** Identifying discrepancies between local regulations and Blue Flag standards.
- **Operational Gaps:** Highlighting deficiencies in the implementation of environmental management, water quality monitoring, safety measures, and stakeholder engagement in coastal areas.
- **Perception Gaps:** Understanding the level of awareness and readiness of local stakeholders to meet Blue Flag standards.

The analysis was structured to provide a comparative overview of the three regions, pinpointing common challenges and region-specific issues.

2.4 Gap Identification and categorization

Once the data was analyzed, the gaps were categorized into the following areas:

1. **Policy and Regulatory Gaps:** Identifying legal and administrative shortcomings that need to be addressed to align with Blue Flag criteria.
2. **Institutional Capacity Gaps:** Assessing the capability of local authorities and institutions to manage and implement the required standards.
3. **Stakeholder Engagement Gaps:** Evaluating the level of stakeholder involvement and their understanding of sustainable tourism and environmental management practices.
4. **Resource Gaps:** Identifying the lack of financial, technical, or human resources that could hinder the implementation of Blue Flag standards.

2.5 Reporting and recommendations

The findings from the gap analysis were compiled into a detailed report, including specific recommendations for each region. The report is structured to guide the development of the **Joint Model of Management (JMM)**, which will address the identified gaps and propose concrete steps to harmonize the application of Blue Flag standards across the three partner regions.

These recommendations are designed to be practical, taking into account the unique legal, administrative, and environmental contexts of each region, and to be implemented as part of the broader project activities. The gap analysis report will serve as the foundation for the subsequent phases of the project, including the development of the action plan and the testing phase.

The joint action to develop the Action Plan under Activity 1.4 was conceived as a structured and coordinated process led by the Lead Partner, the Municipality of Ugento, and implemented in close cooperation with the Tourism Organization of Ulcinj and the Municipality of Lezhë. The process was articulated through three sequential and interdependent deliverables, each building on the results of the previous one and progressively translating analysis into governance models and concrete operational planning.

3 STEP 1: A Gap Analysis Report including partners reports

The first phase, corresponding to Deliverable D.1.4.1, focused on a comprehensive and

The gap analysis carried out by the three project partners – Ugento, Ulcinj, and Lezha – represents a comprehensive and comparative assessment of the degree of alignment of their respective coastal management systems with the requirements for obtaining and maintaining the Blue Flag certification. The analysis was based on a review of existing regulatory frameworks, administrative and operational practices, and field verifications, with the aim of clearly identifying the discrepancies between the current situation and the international standards established by the Foundation for Environmental Education.

In the case of Ugento, the analysis highlights a regulatory and administrative context that is already well structured and largely consistent with European directives concerning bathing water quality, environmental management, and coastal safety. The Italian system transposes Directive 2006/7/EC through Legislative Decree 116/2008, which provides detailed rules for microbiological monitoring, four-year classification, and public information obligations. At regional level, planning instruments such as the Coastal Plan and bathing ordinances further regulate beach management, including aspects related to safety, services, environmental protection, and accessibility. The gap analysis does not reveal structural legislative shortcomings; rather, it shows that effective compliance with Blue Flag standards depends on the municipality's ability to

integrate planning, monitoring, ecological beach management, safety services, and environmental education into a coordinated governance framework. Any critical aspects are therefore mainly related to operational coordination, continuity of actions, and the formalization of integrated management procedures rather than to the absence of regulatory provisions.

The Tourist Organization of Ulcinj is positioned in an intermediate context. The gap analysis indicates that Montenegro adopted a specific regulation in 2019 for bathing water quality monitoring, aligned with European parameters, and that beaches already certified under the Blue Flag scheme demonstrate excellent microbiological performance. However, the Blue Flag programme is not fully integrated into national tourism and environmental strategies and remains largely voluntary, without being formally embedded in sectoral planning documents. The analysis also highlights fragmented responsibilities between the municipality, the public enterprise responsible for coastal zone management, and private operators, pointing to the need for stronger institutional coordination. Operational gaps are identified in the uneven implementation of separate waste collection, the limited availability of accessible infrastructure for persons with disabilities, and the lack of a systematic approach to environmental education activities. In addition, the integration of climate adaptation and coastal resilience measures into local planning documents appears limited. Therefore, while Ulcinj shows solid technical performance in terms of water quality, it needs to further institutionalize the programme and strengthen governance, coordination, and awareness-raising components.

The situation in Lezha appears more articulated and reflects a transitional phase toward a sustainable coastal management model. The analysis starts from the context of significant tourism growth recorded in recent years, with a marked increase in visitor numbers and an extension of the bathing season. This growth has increased pressure on coastal ecosystems and highlighted the need to shift from mass tourism to a quality-oriented and sustainability-driven approach. The gap analysis was based on visual monitoring at thirteen points between Shengjin and Tale, interviews with operators and residents, infrastructure assessments, and evaluations of accessibility and safety conditions. The results show significant differences among the various beaches. Some areas, such as Rana e Madhe and Rana e Vogël, already have consolidated

infrastructure, services partly managed by private operators, and strong potential for certification, while other areas, including Kune Pishat and parts of Tale, display considerable shortcomings in public sanitary facilities, separate waste collection systems, lifeguard presence, and rescue equipment. Accessibility for persons with disabilities is often limited or absent, and environmental and informational signage is generally insufficient. In several cases, water quality is positively perceived by visitors but requires systematic laboratory confirmation and more structured public communication. The analysis also identifies weaknesses in waste management in less urbanized areas, as well as the need to extend safety services and ensure full coverage of lifeguard and first-aid provisions.

When comparing the three territories, substantial differences emerge. Ugento operates within a mature and consolidated regulatory system, where gaps are mainly related to coordination and integrated governance. Ulcinj demonstrates good technical performance in water quality but requires stronger institutional embedding of the Blue Flag programme and improved coordination among actors. Lezha, on the other hand, is at an earlier stage of structuring its coastal management system, with high potential but significant infrastructural and organizational gaps that require targeted investments, clearer role definition, and strengthened administrative capacity. Overall, the gap analysis does not merely identify deficiencies; it establishes the baseline for building a shared coastal governance model, grounded in the transfer of experience from Ugento, the institutional consolidation of Ulcinj, and the structural transformation pathway undertaken by Lezha.

4 STEP 2: Action Plan Model

Building on this analytical foundation, the Action Plan model developed within the BLUEFLAG project provides a structured and operational framework to support coastal municipalities in implementing and maintaining the Blue Flag standards in a consistent, measurable, and climate-oriented way. Moving from the initial analysis of regulatory frameworks and identified gaps, the model translates the Blue Flag criteria into a local governance system that integrates environmental quality, safety, accessibility, education, and climate action into the ordinary cycle of coastal management.

The plan is aligned with the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) Action Plan and the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism, adopting the five pathways of measure, decarbonize, regenerate, collaborate, and finance as the backbone of municipal action. In this perspective, Blue Flag compliance is no longer treated as a one-off certification effort, but as a continuous improvement process supported by clear objectives, defined roles, performance indicators, and annual reporting. Environmental quality, emission reduction, ecosystem regeneration, stakeholder cooperation, and financial planning are embedded into the seasonal management of beaches, marinas, and tourism boats.

The governance structure assigns clear responsibilities to political leadership, a designated Program Manager, and an intersectoral technical table that coordinates municipal departments and external actors such as ARPA, the Coast Guard, concessionaires, marina managers, education centers, and operators. This architecture ensures that decisions are data-driven, responsibilities are traceable, and corrective measures can be activated promptly in case of non-compliance or environmental risks.

Operationally, the model connects each Blue Flag thematic area—environmental education and information, climate action, environmental management, water quality and pollution control, accessibility, and safety and services—with concrete actions and measurable KPIs. Data collection and monitoring follow the official criteria and explanatory notes, ensuring transparency toward citizens and evaluators through updated noticeboards, digital tools, and structured reporting. Particular attention is given to ecological beach management, water quality monitoring, emergency planning, inclusive access for people with disabilities, and the prevention of pollution from both land-based and maritime activities.

The model also emphasizes resource allocation and sustainability. Financial planning distinguishes between one-off investments and recurring costs, mobilizing municipal budgets, concession fees, co-financing from operators, and external funding opportunities. Human and technical resources are organized through cooperation agreements and clear role definitions, while risk management is formalized through a shared register that anticipates funding shortages, service interruptions, environmental incidents, and communication delays. Stakeholder engagement and capacity building are treated as structural components of the system, ensuring that local businesses, authorities, schools, associations, and citizens actively contribute to maintaining standards over time.

Ultimately, the model positions the Blue Flag not only as a quality label, but as a governance method. By institutionalizing the annual cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring, and review, and by aligning local actions with international climate commitments, the Action Plan ensures that compliance becomes stable, transparent, and replicable. The conclusion of the document reinforces the collective responsibility of the local network and sets the basis for testing the model through pilot sites, measuring performance indicators, and refining procedures season after season.

The Municipality of Ugento played a central role in structuring this model by aligning Blue Flag requirements with the Action Plan of the Foundation for Environmental Education and its Climate Action Plan linked to the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism. The resulting model integrated traditional Blue Flag criteria on water quality, environmental management, safety, accessibility and information with the five climate pathways of measuring, decarbonising, regenerating ecosystems, collaborating across stakeholders and ensuring sustainable financing. The Tourism Organization of Ulcinj adapted this model to the Montenegrin system, formalising the Intersectoral Coordination Table as a permanent governance mechanism involving municipal departments, Morsko Dobro, the Harbour Master, NGOs, concessionaires and educational institutions, and defining clear roles and responsibilities through a RACI approach. The Municipality of Lezhë, drawing on the same model, framed the establishment of new local coordination mechanisms and monitoring processes as a foundational step for entering the Blue Flag system. Across all partners, the Action Plan model clarified how seasonal beach management cycles, from pre-season preparation to in-season operations and post-season evaluation, could become the operational

backbone for continuous compliance and improvement, ensuring consistency, transparency and replicability.

5 STEP 3 Testing Phase

The third step of Activity 1.4 represented the transition from model development to practical implementation, through the testing and operationalization of the Management Model within each partner territory. This phase was essential to verify the applicability, adaptability, and effectiveness of the framework defined in Step 2, translating it into concrete actions, procedures, and coordination mechanisms tailored to local contexts.

Each partner developed a Local Action Plan, conceived as an operational instrument to implement Blue Flag criteria in an integrated manner, combining environmental management, service provision, governance, and climate action. These plans are structured around a seasonal cycle and supported by clear governance arrangements, monitoring tools, and performance indicators, ensuring that the model becomes embedded in daily administrative and operational practices.

In the case of the Municipality of Ugento, the Local Action Plan builds upon an already advanced institutional framework and focuses on improving coordination, standardization, and performance monitoring. The governance structure is clearly defined, with a Program Manager supported by an intersectoral technical table that ensures continuous coordination between municipal offices, ARPA, maritime authorities, educational institutions, and private operators. The plan is organized around a cyclical work structure—preparation, implementation, operation, and improvement—which allows for systematic monitoring and continuous adaptation throughout the bathing season. Particular emphasis is placed on transparency, with mechanisms for timely publication of environmental data, as well as on the definition of KPIs for each thematic area, enabling a performance-oriented approach to coastal management.

The Municipality of Lezha used this phase as an opportunity to build and institutionalize a governance system that was previously fragmented and only partially structured, marking a significant step forward in terms of organizational capacity. The Local Action Plan introduces a comprehensive intersectoral coordination framework that brings together a wide range of actors, including municipal departments, environmental and coastal agencies, port authorities, health services, schools, and tourism operators. This

structure is not only formalized but also operationalized through clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and interaction mechanisms, ensuring that coordination becomes a continuous and systematic process rather than an ad hoc activity.

A key achievement in Lezha is the establishment of a functional Intersectoral Technical Table, which operates as the central decision-making and coordination body throughout the entire seasonal cycle. The plan defines specific meeting phases, including a pre-season kick-off for planning and alignment, regular meetings during the peak season for monitoring and rapid response, and a post-season evaluation phase aimed at identifying improvements for the following year. This structured approach allows the Municipality to progressively strengthen its capacity to manage beaches and tourism services in line with Blue Flag standards.

Moreover, the introduction of a RACI matrix represents an important innovation in the local governance system, as it clearly defines who is responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed for each activity. This tool significantly reduces ambiguity and overlaps, ensuring that all stakeholders—from municipal services to tourism operators and beach managers—have a clear understanding of their roles in areas such as environmental monitoring, safety management, public information, and educational activities. The plan also includes a detailed work programme for the 2026–2027 period, structured into sequential phases of planning, implementation, operation, and improvement, which allows for gradual capacity building and continuous system refinement.

From an operational perspective, the Lezha Action Plan places strong emphasis on progressive implementation and learning-by-doing, recognizing that the local system is still evolving. Activities such as the installation of signage, the organization of environmental education initiatives, the strengthening of monitoring practices, and the improvement of coordination among stakeholders are designed to be implemented incrementally, allowing the Municipality to build experience and consolidate procedures over time. This approach reflects a transition from a situation characterized by partial compliance and limited coordination to a more structured, integrated, and institutionally anchored model of coastal management.

In Ulcinj, the testing phase focused on consolidating and enhancing an already relatively advanced system by introducing a more structured, performance-oriented, and data-driven management approach. The Local Action Plan formalizes governance arrangements by clearly defining the role of the Tourism Organization of Ulcinj as a

central coordinating body and establishing an Intersectoral Coordination Table that brings together key stakeholders, including municipal authorities, Morsko Dobro, concessionaires, the Harbour Master, the Red Cross, environmental NGOs, and educational institutions.

This coordination mechanism is supported by a well-defined operational cycle, which structures activities into four main phases: preparation, implementation, operation, and improvement. Each phase includes specific actions, timelines, and responsibilities, ensuring a high level of clarity and predictability in the management process. For example, during the preparation phase, activities include infrastructure audits, training programmes for lifeguards and staff, procurement of equipment, and preparation of Blue Flag applications. During the operational phase, the plan foresees continuous monitoring of environmental conditions, regular water quality testing with rapid publication of results, daily beach management activities, and the implementation of environmental education programmes.

A distinctive feature of the Ulcinj Action Plan is the strong emphasis on measurable targets and performance monitoring, supported by a detailed system of KPIs. These indicators cover a wide range of aspects, including environmental awareness, number of educational activities, response time for publishing water quality data, levels of resource consumption, and quality of services provided to visitors. This approach allows for continuous tracking of performance and supports evidence-based decision-making, enabling local authorities to quickly identify issues and implement corrective actions.

Furthermore, the plan places particular emphasis on the integration of climate action and sustainability measures into everyday management practices. Actions such as improving energy efficiency, promoting sustainable mobility, reducing waste, and protecting coastal ecosystems are embedded within the operational framework, reflecting a shift towards a more holistic and forward-looking approach to coastal management. The inclusion of structured reporting mechanisms, including end-of-season evaluations and public dissemination of results, further strengthens transparency and accountability.

Overall, the testing phase in Ulcinj demonstrates how an already functioning system can be significantly enhanced through the introduction of clearer governance structures, stronger performance monitoring tools, and a more systematic integration of environmental and climate objectives.

Across all three partner territories, the implementation of Local Action Plans confirms the robustness and adaptability of the Management Model, demonstrating its capacity to be effectively translated into operational practices in diverse contexts. While each partner followed a different pathway depending on its level of maturity, all have succeeded in embedding key elements of the model—such as intersectoral governance, structured planning cycles, clear allocation of responsibilities, and performance monitoring—into their local systems.

Step 3 therefore represents a decisive milestone in the project, as it provides concrete evidence that the Joint Management Model is not only theoretically sound but also operationally viable, capable of strengthening institutional capacity, improving coordination among stakeholders, and supporting a more effective and sustainable implementation of Blue Flag criteria at local level.

The testing phase carried out through the development of Local Action Plans has allowed the identification of a set of common operational actions shared across the three partner territories—Italy (Ugento), Albania (Lezha), and Montenegro (Ulcinj)—despite their different levels of institutional maturity and starting conditions. These common elements demonstrate the effectiveness of the jointly developed Management Model and its capacity to generate a harmonized approach to Blue Flag implementation.

A first common action concerns the **establishment of an intersectoral governance structure**, which is present in all three territories as a central coordination mechanism. In each case, a structured table or coordination body brings together municipal departments, environmental and monitoring authorities, maritime safety institutions, tourism operators, and educational actors. This structure operates throughout the seasonal cycle, ensuring planning before the bathing season, regular monitoring during the operational phase, and evaluation at the end of the season. The introduction of this mechanism represents a shared shift from fragmented management practices to a more integrated and continuous coordination model.

Closely linked to governance, all partners have implemented a **clear definition of roles and responsibilities**, supported by formal tools such as the RACI matrix or equivalent organizational frameworks. This allows each stakeholder involved in coastal management to understand their specific functions in relation to key areas such as water quality monitoring, safety, environmental management, public information, and

educational activities. The clarification of responsibilities emerges as a common priority to reduce overlaps, improve accountability, and enhance operational efficiency.

Another common element is the adoption of a **seasonal operational cycle**, structured into recurring phases, typically preparation, implementation, operation, and improvement. This approach is consistently applied across the three territories and ensures that activities are not carried out on an ad hoc basis but follow a predictable and repeatable management logic. The cycle includes pre-season planning and infrastructure preparation, in-season monitoring and service provision, and post-season evaluation aimed at identifying corrective actions and improvements for the following year.

All partners also include actions related to the **monitoring and publication of environmental data**, particularly water quality. While the level of advancement differs among the territories, the Local Action Plans consistently foresee regular monitoring activities and the dissemination of results to the public, in line with Blue Flag requirements. This reflects a shared commitment to transparency and to improving the accessibility of environmental information for both citizens and visitors.

A further common area of intervention is represented by **environmental education and information activities**, which are systematically included in all Local Action Plans. These activities involve the organization of awareness-raising initiatives, collaboration with schools and local stakeholders, and the provision of information to visitors through signage, communication tools, and public events. The emphasis on education confirms its central role in translating Blue Flag criteria into concrete behaviours and promoting a culture of environmental responsibility.

In addition, all three partners foresee actions related to the **improvement of basic services and infrastructure**, particularly in the areas of safety, accessibility, and beach management. This includes the organization of lifeguard services and emergency procedures, the enhancement of accessibility for persons with disabilities, and the installation or upgrading of essential infrastructure such as signage, waste management systems, and service facilities. Although the level of implementation varies, these interventions represent a common operational priority across all territories.

Another shared element is the introduction of **monitoring and evaluation mechanisms**, often supported by the definition of key performance indicators (KPIs) or

structured reporting processes. All Local Action Plans include provisions for tracking progress, evaluating results at the end of the season, and using this information to improve future planning. This reflects a common move towards a more performance-oriented and evidence-based management approach.

Finally, all partners integrate, to varying degrees, actions related to **climate and environmental sustainability**, in line with the FEE framework. While the depth of implementation differs, each Local Action Plan includes measures aimed at reducing environmental impact, improving resource efficiency, protecting coastal ecosystems, and aligning local management practices with broader climate objectives.

Overall, the comparison of the three Local Action Plans shows that, despite contextual differences, partners have converged towards a **shared set of core actions**, including intersectoral governance, structured planning cycles, clear allocation of responsibilities, environmental monitoring and transparency, education and awareness activities, improvement of services and infrastructure, and the introduction of monitoring and evaluation systems. This convergence demonstrates the successful transfer and adaptation of the Joint Management Model and confirms its potential to support a more harmonized and coordinated implementation of Blue Flag criteria across the Programme area.

6 STEP 4 Memorandum of Understanding

The Memorandum of Understanding represents the final and strategic outcome of Activity 1.4 of the BLUEFLAG project and formalises the long-term commitment of the project partners to sustain and further develop the cross-border cooperation initiated for the improvement of coastal governance and the harmonised application of Blue Flag criteria. The document is grounded in the recognition that significant disparities currently exist between Italy, Albania and Montenegro in terms of standardisation, institutional capacity and operational management of the Blue Flag Programme, and that these differences can only be effectively addressed through structured and continuous cooperation.

The Memorandum is explicitly framed within the main European policy references, including the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, the European Green Deal and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Within this framework, it establishes a shared political and technical commitment to consolidate the results achieved by the BLUEFLAG project, particularly the development of the Joint

Management Model for Blue Flag criteria, and to ensure its implementation beyond the project's lifetime. The MoU therefore acts as a bridge between project-based cooperation and long-term governance, transforming experimental actions into stable institutional practices.

By signing the Memorandum, the partner institutions — namely the Municipality of Ugento as Lead Partner, the Molise Foundation for Tourism and Culture, the Albanian Coast Lifeguards and Water Rescue Federation, the Municipality of Lezhë and the Tourism Organization of Ulcinj — agree to adopt and promote the Joint Management Model within their respective territories and organisational structures. The agreement reinforces the shared intention to apply common procedures, methodologies and governance principles for the sustainable management of beaches, marinas and boating tourism, while at the same time fostering cooperation in the design of future joint projects and initiatives aligned with Blue Flag principles.

A central element of the Memorandum is its emphasis on standardisation and capacity building. Through the MoU, the partners commit to sharing data, tools, methodologies and best practices, facilitating knowledge exchange on marine and coastal governance and supporting the transferability and replication of the Joint Management Model in other coastal territories. Particular importance is given to the involvement of local stakeholders, operators, institutions and citizens, recognising their role in awareness-raising activities, dissemination of results and effective implementation of sustainable environmental measures at local level.

From an institutional perspective, the Memorandum defines a simple but effective coordination framework, requiring each Party to appoint a focal point responsible for promoting cooperation, facilitating information exchange and supporting the implementation of the agreement. At the same time, the MoU clarifies that it does not imply direct financial commitments between the Parties, with each organisation bearing its own costs, while encouraging the joint identification of funding opportunities to ensure continuity and follow-up of the actions initiated under the project.

The agreement enters into force upon signature by all Parties and remains valid for a period of five years after the completion of the BLUEFLAG project, with the possibility of renewal or amendment by mutual consent. Provisions concerning termination and dispute settlement are designed to preserve a cooperative and dialogue-based

approach, consistent with the spirit of cross-border collaboration promoted by the project.

Overall, the Memorandum of Understanding constitutes a key instrument for capitalising on the BLUEFLAG project results. It ensures that the Joint Management Model is not limited to a pilot experience, but is embedded into the long-term strategies of the partner institutions, strengthening cross-border governance, improving the quality and coherence of Blue Flag implementation and contributing to sustainable coastal and tourism development across the South Adriatic area

7 Conclusion

The joint action model resulted in a coherent and evidence-based pathway from analysis to implementation, ensuring that each partner's Action Plan responds to local needs while remaining aligned with a shared governance and management framework. The process strengthened cross-border learning, allowed less experienced partners to benefit from consolidated practices, and ensured that Blue Flag certification is addressed not only as a label to be obtained, but as a structured and continuous process of sustainable coastal governance, fully consistent with European standards and international climate commitments.