GUIDANCE NOTE

CALL 4







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General Guidance for project applicants	Final version – 23.11.2023
How to use this document?	• This guidance is meant as an introduction to the programme and the most important rules and requirements for applicants. It is not intended as a replacement for the official documents and rules; all applicants should refer to the official documents before they apply. Please note that there is also information specific to each call for applications, which sets out any special conditions that apply to that call. You can find this information for Call 4 at the end of this document. It is important to note that due to severely limited funds in the programme after Call 3, Call 4 is limited. Please see pages 16-17 for further details. Please note that Call 4 is open to neither small-scale projects nor expressions of interest.
Who can apply?	 The North Sea Programme is open to applications from anyone in the programme area, which is the whole of Denmark and the Netherlands, the Flemish region of Belgium, northwest Germany, northwest France, the south western area of Sweden and all but the northern-most regions of Norway. There is a detailed list of regions on NUTS 3 level on pages 1-5 of the <i>Interreg North Sea 2021-2027 Approved Programme</i> document on the programme website. Organisations apply as part of a partnership. Every partnership in a project must include at least three partners from three different countries. However, projects should have a positive effect on large parts of the programme area so only meeting the minimum requirements will be a considerable weakness. You need to be a legal entity (organization or enterprise) based in the programme area in order to apply. Partners from outside the programme area can be part of a partnership under special conditions (see Fact Sheet 17).

Two-stage application process for regular projects

• Guidelines on the two-stage application process do not apply to Call 4.

What kind of issues does the programme work with?

- The programme has four priority themes and each theme includes between one and five specific objectives. Please consult the Interreg North Sea Thematic Framework 2021-2027 document on the programme website for more information. Every project has to select one specific objective that it will work towards. (Please see pages 16-17 for more information about types of applications and priorities under which applications will be accepted in Call 4.) Projects are also encouraged to incorporate one or more of the programme's spotlight themes in their project proposal. We encourage you to read more about them in the above document.
- The descriptions of the specific objectives in the document on the website also include examples of the types of activities and impact expected. Please note that these are only examples!
 Any relevant activity that clearly requires transnational cooperation and will contribute strongly to a specific objective can be considered for funding. Likewise, the fact that an activity is mentioned in the Interreg Programme does not guarantee success for projects if the overall contribution to the specific objective is weak.
- In addition to specific themes, all projects granted funding under the programme also have to comply with a number of horizontal principles, like the need to promote equal opportunities and sustainable development. These are covered separately below.
- There is a focus on outputs and results in the programme. Fact
 Sheet 22 tells you exactly what you need to do when deciding
 which fit your project, but as a general rule please make sure
 that the targets you set are realistic and really capture what
 you are trying to achieve.

Are there special rules for Norway?

- Norwegian partners and lead partners are treated the same as EU partners in the North Sea Programme and are for the most part subject to the same rules.
- The most important difference is that Norwegian partners are funded from their own separate reserve of Norwegian funding. As a result, Norwegian money is kept separate from ERDF funding in the application and reporting systems. The most important practical implication of this is that the Norwegian funds are more limited. This is also true for Call 4. Please see pages 17 for special rules pertaining to Norwegian participation in Call 4.
- The grant rate for Norwegian partners is set at 50%, whilst Member State partners operate with a grant rate of 60%.

Can private companies get involved?

- Private companies, and in particular SMEs, are welcome in projects but cannot take on the role as lead partner (see <u>Fact</u> <u>Sheet 14</u> on roles and responsibilities for information about private organisations that act in a non-profit capacity and their eligibility to fulfil the lead partner role in a project). They must demonstrate that their work contributes to wider programme goals.
- There are specific requirements for how companies operate in the programme and all participating enterprises must agree to respect these rules. These often differ from standard private sector operating procedures. These rules cover issues like State aid, real cost principles, public procurement, record keeping, and sharing of results. It is essential that all private sector partners consult these rules carefully before committing to the programme to avoid problems during implementation. For more information, please consult especially <u>Fact Sheets 12 on Tender Procedures</u> and <u>26 on</u> <u>Intellectual Property Rights</u>.
- There are specific requirements for how organisations carrying out State aid relevant activities as part of a project operate in the programme. It should be noted that this can apply both to private and public sector actors, as the determination of whether an organisation must go under a State aid scheme comes down to the project-related activities they plan to

undertake. For more information, please consult Fact Sheet 16 on State aid (version 2). All partners must cooperate on joint development and joint How should implementation of the project. As such, they must each state partners work in the application how they will be involved, what they will together? deliver, and what they expect to gain from the project. Partners must also cooperate in the staffing and/or financing of the project. When filling in the application form, projects are asked to explain how staff will work together on delivering the project. The need for transnational cooperation needs to be reflected in the way that project activities are planned and implemented. It is not enough for each partner to act independently and then exchange results. Partners must help each other to design, implement and communicate new solutions. It is also important to involve the 'right' partners, meaning those with the required expertise and contacts in each country. The partnership will be assessed on whether it has the right skills and knowledge in place as well as the capacity and ability to create impact in each participating country, and, ideally, beyond. The partnership also needs to be viable, which means that all partners should have a clear role in the project, be committed for the entire lifetime of the project, and be prepared to support activities (especially those related to capitalizing on results and outcomes) after the lifetime of the project. It is also important to demonstrate the involvement and support of the main users of project results. For example, a project aiming to develop new ways of encouraging SME innovation must involve effective feedback from SMEs if the results are to be credible. What is the role The lead partner leads the project, ensures that all partners of the lead deliver what has been promised and is the contact point between the project and programme management. Every partner? project must have a lead partner agreed by the partnership. In particular, the lead partner will:

- Prepare and submit the application (in cooperation with the rest of the partnership);
- Prepare and submit all progress reports and requests for payment based on inputs from the other partners;
- Ensure that information from or to the programme is communicated on time and in full;
- Receive all payments from the programme and distribute the amounts owed to all partners;
- o Draw up a Partnership Agreement regulating the cooperation within the partnership. It is important that the Partnership Agreement clarifies how common costs (also known as shared costs) for, e.g. administrating the project partnership (the lead partner role), are covered. It also regulates what happens if one or more partners do not fulfil their obligations within the partnership. The Partnership Agreement must be signed by all partners. Fact Sheet 15 on the Partnership Agreement can be found here. A template can be found in the annex to the document.
- <u>Fact Sheet 14</u> provides more detail on the lead partner role and explains the different roles and responsibilities within partnerships.

Help for small organisations

- It can be a lot of work to understand all of the programme rules, forms and procedures especially for small organizations with limited resources or organisations with only a small role in the project. Such organisations fulfil an important but limited role in the partnership but may feel that the budgets available are not worth the administrative effort of future participation. These partners may, therefore, participate as 'sub-partners'.
- Sub-partners can be grouped together under one project partner (generally a public authority of some kind). The advantage of forming this arrangement is that the partner can submit finance and activity reports for the sub-partners (less paperwork for the sub-partners). This also means that the partner and sub-partners can use the same controller and get their expenditure checked at the same time (thereby reducing control costs).

- The following points must be kept in mind (see <u>Fact Sheet 14</u> for more information):
 - The partner and its sub-partners must be based in the same country;
 - All sub-partners are subject to all programme rules about the eligibility of funding;
 - All sub-partners must keep fully separate records of their expenditure;
 - It is the responsibility of the partner to ensure that there is real and effective control of all sub-partner expenditure;
 - Sub-partners are still liable for any irregularities in their expenditure and are covered by the standard programme rules for repaying any amounts incorrectly paid out.

Funding rates and project budgets

• All partners in EU Member States can claim reimbursement of 60% of costs for all project activities (Norwegian organisations are reimbursed at a rate of 50%). Applicants should always check the specific conditions for each call for proposals for information on the total funds still available and any special funding terms that may apply. There is no formal minimum or maximum budget for regular projects, but projects will be assessed on value for money and larger projects will be expected to deliver significant and tangible benefits to the programme area. Budget sizes for North Sea Programme projects during the previous funding period (VB) ranged from roughly €2 to 6 million.

Calls for proposals

 All project applications correctly submitted through the programme's Online Monitoring System with all relevant supporting documents by the end of a call will be assessed. Given the limited amount of available funding, it is unclear how many calls for proposals will be held after Call 4. Applicants should regularly consult the programme website at www.interregnorthsea.eu for announcements about new calls.

Important links to policy and North Sea

 You have to make sure that your idea fits with the programme, that it is demand-driven, and that it clearly addresses common challenges in the North Sea Region. Regardless of thematic strengths, applications can only be approved if they link with

region interests and needs

European policy goals and the interests and needs of the wider programme area. The programme strategy and expectations for projects under each priority theme are set out in the Interreg. A shorter, more concise version of this document is the Interreg North Sea Thematic Framework 2021-2027.

Additional points to consider

- Cooperation: This should be reflected in a work plan based on joint efforts to develop and implement new solutions. Cooperation should also be understood as bringing together different sectors (sometimes called 'horizontal' cooperation) and different levels of administration from local to international (sometimes called 'vertical' cooperation). The aim of these multilevel and multi-disciplinary approaches is to develop durable solutions based on winning the support of all main stakeholder groups. This need for cooperation should be balanced against the need to ensure that the partnership remains manageable and focused on core stakeholders. The wider stakeholder network will often not be part of the partnership but will be involved in other ways, which should be described in the application.
- Innovativeness: Some parts of the programme focus on 'innovation' in the sense of developing new products and services for the market. All parts of the programme should be 'innovative' in the sense of developing and spreading new and improved solutions throughout the partnership and the wider programme area. Some projects will try to develop completely new approaches to the challenges they are addressing. Others will try to introduce existing technologies and methods into areas or organizations where they have not been used before. The priority descriptions in the Interreg Programme contain information on the preferred approach for some specific objectives. Applications should clearly set out the innovative aspects of the projects and how they differ from existing norms and practices in target regions / organisations.
- Explain links to other policies, funds and initiatives: Projects must demonstrate an awareness of the main actions and results under related programmes and applications should reflect how the North Sea project fits into this wider picture. In particular, projects should highlight specific results from earlier projects that can be used in the new project, and explain how the expected results of the new project will feed back into other programmes

and funds. The Interreg Programme contains an overview of the most relevant policies and funds but the application should also address national and regional actions.

- Additionality: Project funds cannot be used to fund the already financed activities of partner organisations. The activities carried out in the project should represent an addition to the normal work of the partners, and programme funds will only cover the costs for this additional work.
- Integrated approach to territorial development: All activities should be considered in terms of their likely effect on the wider programme area. Project activities should promote balanced development across the region and should especially aim to support regions facing particular geographical, structural or economic challenges.
- **Sustainable development:** Interreg North Sea 2021-2027 works for an on-going improvement of sustainability. During project development, projects should consider how to ensure net social, environmental and climate benefits (where possible), in particular when making investments and travel plans.
- Equal opportunities and non-discrimination: All organisations involved in the North Sea Programme must contribute to a positive environment for the active pursuit of equal opportunities and the prevention of deprivation, exclusion and discrimination in all forms.
- Below is a list of some of the online databases you should have a look at when exploring what your project contributes to the wider EU and where synergies might lie. (Please note – this is not an exhaustive list; other, more targeted EU funding programmes might be more relevant for your search.)
 - Keep.eu: https://keep.eu/programmes/ (database of Interreg projects)
 - o LIFE:
 - https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/life/publicWebsite/index.cfm
 - CORDIS: https://cordis.europa.eu/projects/en (database of Horizon2020 and FP7 projects)
 - ERASMUS: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects en

How to find partners

- A <u>partner search platform</u> has been included on the programme website. Here you can browse published project ideas to find interesting projects for you to team up with or publish your own idea to enable potential partners to get in touch.
- National Contact Points (NCPs) can also assist you with finding partners in their respective countries. Information about the NCPs and their role in the programme can be found here on the programme website.
- Check online discussion groups and social media for partner search features.

How to apply

- A description of the application procedure can be found in <u>Fact</u> <u>Sheet 18</u>.
- Applications must be submitted through the Online Monitoring System, which also has technical information about how to fill in the different parts of the respective form. All documentation is electronic so there is no need to send any paper copies.
- If you have a visual item (e.g. a flowchart, map, a list of items referred to in the application form, a picture, etc.), which can enhance the readers' overall understanding of your project, you are allowed to upload the related file as an annex to the application. The uploaded file cannot be text based, must be in jpg or in pdf format, and cannot be more than 10 pages. Please note that any text included in the annex to extend any text fields in the application will be disregarded during the assessment, and that each section of the uploaded file must include a clear reference to the text field to which it is linked in the application form.
- All partners need to submit a signed Letter of Intent with the full application form.

How to prepare a good application

 Assessments are based on the information provided in the application only. You should not rely on assumed knowledge or arguments about, for example, the general need for innovation support or sustainable public transport but must instead relate these to the specific circumstances of the partners and the programme area. In particular, you must make sure that you clearly explain:

- The need for your project and how it differs from current norms and practices
- The need for transnational cooperation
- o The role of each partner
- o The outputs and results that will be delivered
- How you will ensure that the project has an impact beyond the project lifetime
- Avoid quoting programme documents and focus on clearly explaining what your project will deliver.
- Avoid jargon and abbreviations

What is the Monitoring Committee really looking for?

The programme uses a set of assessment criteria and it is against these that every project proposal is checked. In addition, however, representatives of the countries in the programme have provided an informal list of key points that can influence how positively they look at an application. These are:

- Plain English (answering the right questions concisely but clearly and explicitly)
- Explain the clear need for the project. Why has the partnership decided that this project is the solution?
- Describe what you want to change and where (geographically)
- Being very clear about the assumptions behind the project
 - o Is it clear why all of the actions are included?
 - Is there a clear logic for moving from one action to the next?
 - What would happen if one activity needed to be changed? Are they all necessary?
- Show the added value of each result / output for each partner and for the North Sea region
- Show how you will focus your communication efforts. In particular, have you selected the right target groups and appropriate channels / means for reaching them?
- What could go wrong? Show you are aware of the main risks and how you will manage if things do not go according to plan.
- How will you test whether the desired change has been delivered?
- Embed your project in the context of regional strategies and other programmes

There is no 'golden rule' for getting a project approved. Following the advice here and using the support available will, however, give you a good chance. Assistance with The Monitoring Committee **strongly recommends** that preparing an applicants seek advice and assistance on their applications application from the National Contact Points (NCPs) and staff members of the Joint Secretariat (JS). Applicants are welcome to get in touch to schedule online consultations with NCPs and/or JS staff, whose contact information can be found here on the programme website. General support includes: o Workshops and conferences at which you can hear the latest news and ask questions. o Written guidance and video tutorials on specific parts of the application process o Fact sheets, which contain information on the programme rules and procedures and can be found here on the website An overview of projects funded during the VB programme and in Calls 1, 2, and 3 of this programme period can be found on www.interregnorthsea.eu. These can serve as inspiration and give applicants an idea of what type and scope of projects the programme has approved the past several years. Assessment of You will only be able to submit your application if you have full applications completed all sections. Once your application is received, it will go through an eligibility check. The purpose of this brief check is to ensure that the partnership and project meet the minimum requirements, that there are no obvious errors with the budget or eligibility rules, and that any attached documents have been completed correctly. When your project passes the eligibility check, you will be notified. Next, the application will go through quality assessment by the staff of the Joint Secretariat. The purpose of this assessment is to evaluate how far your proposal meets the strategic and operational requirements of the programme and its detailed rules.

- All project partners are subject to a capacity check, which will be carried out by the respective national authorities in parallel to the quality assessment procedure. As part of the capacity check, the organisation may be asked to submit additional documentation to help the national authority evaluate their capacity to participate as a partner in the project.
- The assessment of a regular project full application is based on the programme's selection criteria and focuses on how the project will be delivered. It also addresses technical questions concerning eligibility and coordination. Assessment ends with a recommendation to the Monitoring Committee on whether the project should be approved or rejected. You can find the assessment criteria in Fact Sheet 18.
- Assessment of the full application will also consider whether
 the application corresponds to the proposal made in the
 expression of interest and whether comments included in the
 decision letter were taken on board. If there are significant
 differences, this will be highlighted in the assessment and will
 be considered when the Monitoring Committee makes its
 funding decision.

How is the funding decision made?

- Project applications and assessments, together with a recommendation to fund or reject the project, are provided to the programme's Monitoring Committee made up of national and regional representatives from all of the countries in the programme.
- The funding decision is primarily based on the assessment of the application made by the staff of the Joint Secretariat. Other factors may, however, also play a role, especially limits on the funding available. The Monitoring Committee sets any conditions that need to be met before contracting, and their decision is final.
- All applicants will be informed about the committee's decision in a written decision sent through the Online Monitoring System. You can complain if your project is rejected. Complaints can only address the assessment procedure and will be expected to demonstrate that there has been a clear and significant breech of the published procedures and criteria. If a

complaint is upheld, your project will be considered at the next meeting.

What happens after approval?

- Project contracts are prepared by the Joint Secretariat.
- Project expenditure is eligible from the date of approval of the application. It is not necessary to wait for the signed project contract to start the project.
- All partners in the project must sign a Partnership Agreement no later than by the time of submission of the first progress report. The Partnership Agreement must describe the most important working processes in the project and confirm the deliverables to which each partner has committed. It should also set out arrangements for sharing costs for any activities implemented on behalf of the whole partnership, and for recovering any funds incorrectly paid to a partner for ineligible expenditure. There is an outline agreement in an annex to Fact Sheet 15.
- All partners in the project must appoint a controller to check all expenditure. This must be done no later than by the time of submission of the first progress report. Arrangements for appointing controllers vary between countries. In most cases projects will have to remember to set aside a budget for control work and will have to run a public procurement procedure to select the controller. Please note that Sweden has a centralised system for control and that there are specific rules for Swedish partners to follow, and in Flanders and France pre-tendering is undertaken at the national level and a provider/list of providers is made available to project partners. No payment will be made to any project that has not appointed controllers for all partners.

Running your project

- All projects must be implemented in accordance with the approved application.
- All regular projects must submit a progress report every six months. Regular projects must submit a claim for payment at least once every year, and the first must be no later than one year after approval of the project. Details of timing and the different types of reports can be found in <u>Fact Sheet 20</u>.

- All reports must be submitted through the programme's Online Monitoring System.
- Some projects appoint a consultant or company for project administration and management tasks. It is important to remember that this kind of contract needs to be awarded through a public procurement procedure.
- All claims for payment must be checked and approved by each partner's appointed controller.
- An overview of detailed rules and procedures for project implementation can be found in the <u>fact sheets</u>.

What kind of assistance is available during implementation?

- Every approved project is assigned to a project advisor. As far as possible the same advisor will stay with your project for the whole project implementation period. Your advisor can clarify programme rules and procedures for you, as well as advise on general project implementation issues.
- The Joint Secretariat runs regular events for approved projects to explain issues that seem to be causing problems, provide information and guidance on the latest developments in the programme, and allow you to meet and exchange views with other projects.
- Whenever a new progress report is due, you will be provided with an overview of any changes or issues you need to be aware of. However, programme rules in place when your project was approved will be applicable to your project throughout the duration.
- National Contact Points are the starting point for information on national rules and regulations.

Changes to your projects

You must implement the project as described in the approved application. This means that if there are important changes to any part of your project, you will need to get approval from the programme before going ahead. Your changes will need to be assessed, which takes time. Therefore, requests for changes should only be made when there are unavoidable and unforeseeable changes in the project's operating environment.

Agreeing to be part of a project should be seen as a commitment until the end of the project. If partners leave, the project may be terminated. Funds already paid to the partner leaving may have to be repaid to the programme if the partner has not delivered on its commitments in the application form. Keeping records It is very important for all partners to keep good records of the project's work and for lead partners to ensure that partner record-keeping is up to date and adequate. There is a list of essential documents for the audit trail, but as a general rule you should be able to document exactly why you claimed every amount (invoices, staff salary documents etc.), why it was necessary for the project, and what steps you took to live up to other rules like the providing value for money. In the event of an audit, failure to keep good records may result in a demand to pay back some or all of the grant. Please see Fact Sheet 13 for more information. The lead partner must ensure that every partner's claim for Control and payment has been checked and approved by the appointed audit controller. Communication Communication is essential to ensuring that the most relevant stakeholders are aware of what the project is doing and how & capitalisation they can become involved. Communication of final results is essential if the benefit from each project is to spread beyond the partnership. There are several programme rules on publicity. These can be found in Fact Sheet 24. The most important rule is the requirement to display clearly on all publications and products that the project has been funded by the European Union. This also applies to digital publications. Each work package must include activities related to communications and how well these are reflected in the project as a whole is part of the assessment of the full application. Even good project proposals can be rejected if communication

activities appear too weak to achieve communication objectives. Approved projects will be strongly encouraged to work toward one to three impacts during their implementation. The process of developing and achieving these impacts is described in the programme's capitalisation strategy and explained in more depth during hands-on, practical 'TakeUP' events held by the programme. Applicants that are interested in learning more will be able to download the strategy from the programme's website from the week of 26 November 2023. Open access to It is a requirement that every project partner disseminates the all results results it produces as early as possible. Due to limited funding remaining after Call 3, only the following Special categories of full application are welcome in this call: information for Those based on an approved Call 3 expression of interest Call 4 o Those based on a Priority 1 full application rejected in Call 3 that were based on an approved Call 2 expression of interest. The deadline for all applications is 17:00 CET, Friday, 8 March **2024.** The Monitoring Committee meeting at which decisions on these applications will be made will be held in May 2024. The programme has a total of €16.876.539 in ERDF available after Call 3 and €1.021.048 in Norwegian equivalent funding. A few special rules pertain to Norwegian participation in Call 4 applications o Norwegian organisations are welcome as partners in all <u>Call 4 applications</u>. This means that: applications based on Call 3 expressions of interest that included Norwegian partners may add more Norwegian partners, within the budgetary constraints - please see below; applications based on Call 3 expressions of interest that did not include Norwegian partners may add Norwegian partners;

- applications based on Priority 1 full applications rejected in Call 3 that were based on an approved Call 2 expression of interest may add Norwegian partners.
- o Total funding for Norwegian participation in any given application will be limited to a maximum of €200.000 in Norwegian equivalent funding (€400.000 total budget). This means that if there is more than one Norwegian partner listed in the application, the €200.000 Norwegian funding must be split among those partners. Norwegian project partnerships that do not adhere to this restriction will not be eligible for funding.
- Project developers who would like Norwegian partners in their project are recommended to use the national contact point (NCP) network and their own existing contacts and networks to find Norwegian partners.
- Quality is the focus of the assessors and Monitoring Committee members. All potential lead partners, even those with experience in the North Sea Programme, are <u>strongly recommended</u> to seek advice and assistance from the Joint Secretariat staff and National Contact Points to increase their chances of a successful application.
- Programme rules and procedures are described in the fact sheets, which you can find on the <u>programme website</u>.
 Registration for and access to the programme's Online Monitoring System is also available through the website.



