

**Interreg**  
North Sea



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# **Stakeholder consultation**

## **Shaping the future Interreg together**





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# Table of contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Stakeholders consulted</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Consultation and analysis methods</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Stakeholder consultation findings</b>	<b>13</b>
High-priority topics requiring cooperation	13
What works well in the cooperation	19
What does not work well in the cooperation	19
Obstacles to cooperation	21
Experience with Interreg funding	23
Unmet Interreg project ambitions	23
Envisioning future novelties	25
Needed infrastructure projects	26
Ways to facilitate the work with the counterparts	27
Dream cooperation projects	29
<b>Recommendations for post-2027</b>	<b>32</b>

# 1. Executive Summary

The future of Interreg should be green, climate-friendly, focused on impacts, and streamlined so projects can focus more on the challenge they address and less on administration. That is the verdict of 340 stakeholders across the North Sea Region.

What should the future Cohesion Policy and Interreg look like? Responding to a request from the European Commission, we asked the stakeholders in the North Sea Region to share their opinions.

From April through October 2024, the Interreg North Sea Programme conducted online surveys and focus group meetings. In total, 340 respondents, representing all seven countries in the North Sea Region and a wide range of stakeholder groups, provided their feedback.

## Main recommendations

Summarising their inputs, the following recommendations emerge for the next funding period.

Stakeholders see the following topics as top priority for North Sea projects to address:

- Environmental and climate action, including water management and ecosystem protection.
- Energy and resource management.
- Low-carbon transport including railway and modal shifts in passenger and freight transport.
- Frameworks enabling innovation and building SMEs' capacity to innovate.

From the above, the three first topics – and often the last one – are strongly linked to climate change.

With regard to project implementation, stakeholders would like to see the following:

- Enhanced support to less experienced actors on drafting their application and with reporting.
- Higher co-financing rates and pre-financing.
- A stronger focus on capitalisation and synergies within and among projects, including institutionalised cooperation among programmes.
- Funding support in the early stages to assess partnership fit and idea viability.
- Greater inclusion of rural areas within Interreg – essential for a cohesive region.
- Support for smaller actors, including higher subsidy rates and assistance with application writing and reporting.
- Enhanced flexibility to adjust the trajectory according to emerging insights and project developments.
- Harmonisation of regulations and legal frameworks across countries.

In terms of geography, stakeholders recommend the following:

- Reintegration of the UK in the future Interreg programme.

On the positive side, stakeholders strongly valued Interreg's role in bringing people together and facilitating knowledge exchange on critical challenges faced by the region. By addressing barriers to cooperation, Interreg can further unlock the region's potential to become greener, more resilient, and more cohesive.

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# Stakeholders consulted

## Countries and organisation types represented



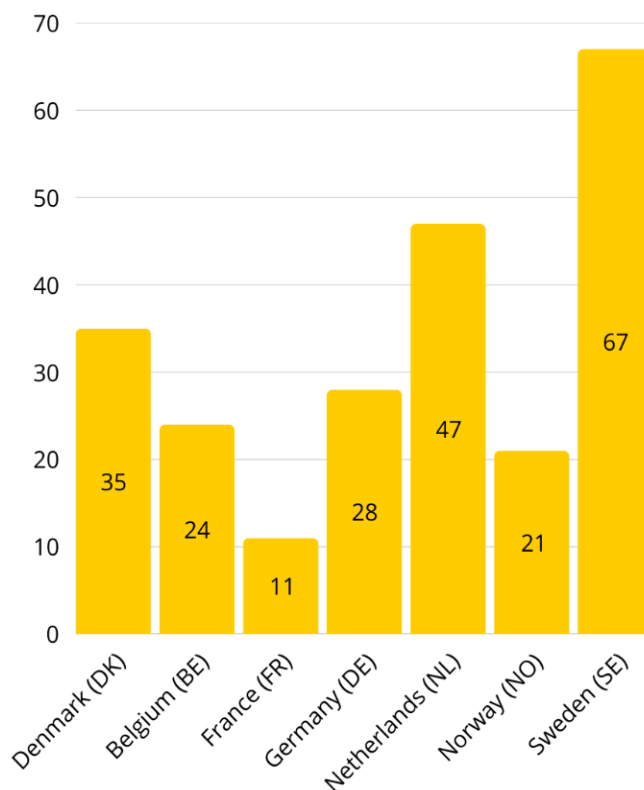
## 2. Stakeholder groups consulted

We consulted 340 stakeholders in total, collecting responses via an online survey completed by 233 people and 10 focus groups involving 107 participants. Annex I lists all participating organisations.

Note: We did not opt for consulting citizens, since we are not directly engaging with citizens at programme level.

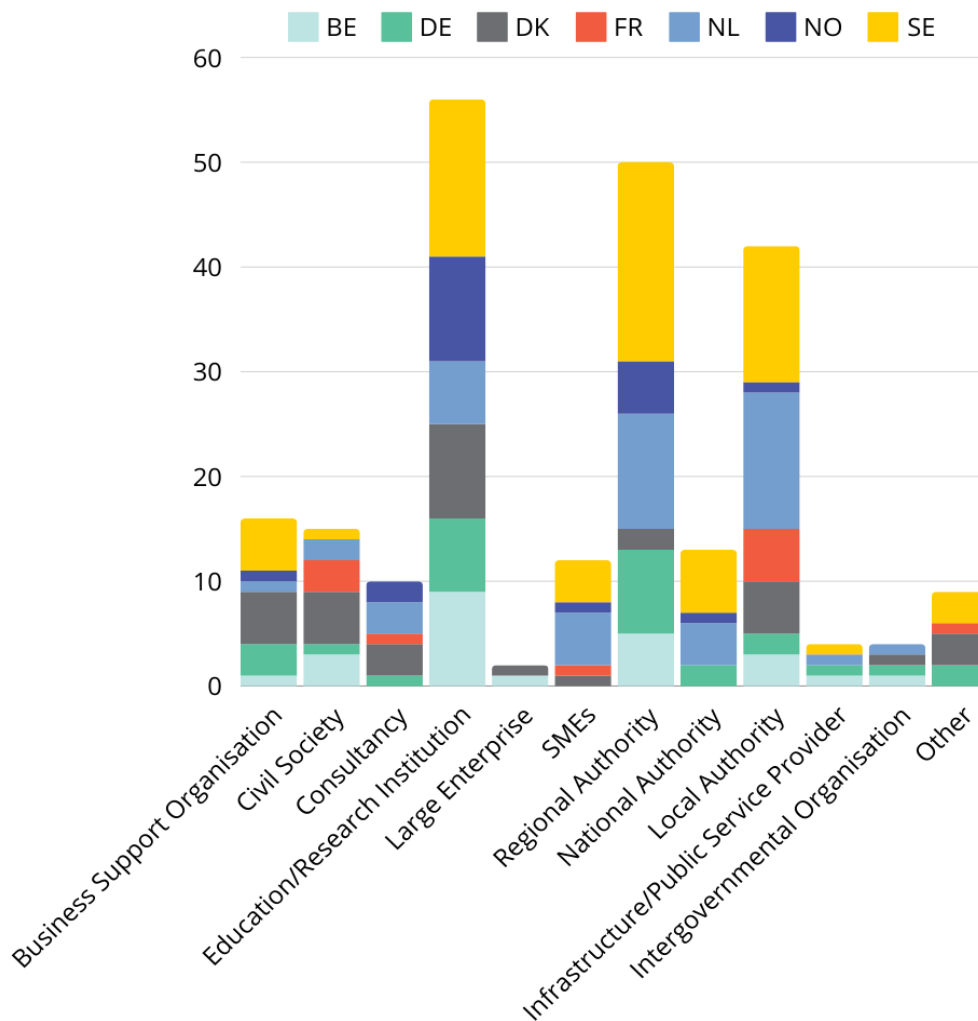
### ONLINE SURVEY

Stakeholders located across the entire North Sea Region responded to the survey.



**Distribution of respondents across North Sea countries**

The respondents comprised 11 organisation types: Business support organisations (16), consultancies (10), large enterprises (2), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (12), regional authorities (50), national authorities (13), local authorities (42), infrastructure/public service providers (4), intergovernmental organisations (4), education/research institutions (56), civil society organisations (15), and other (9).

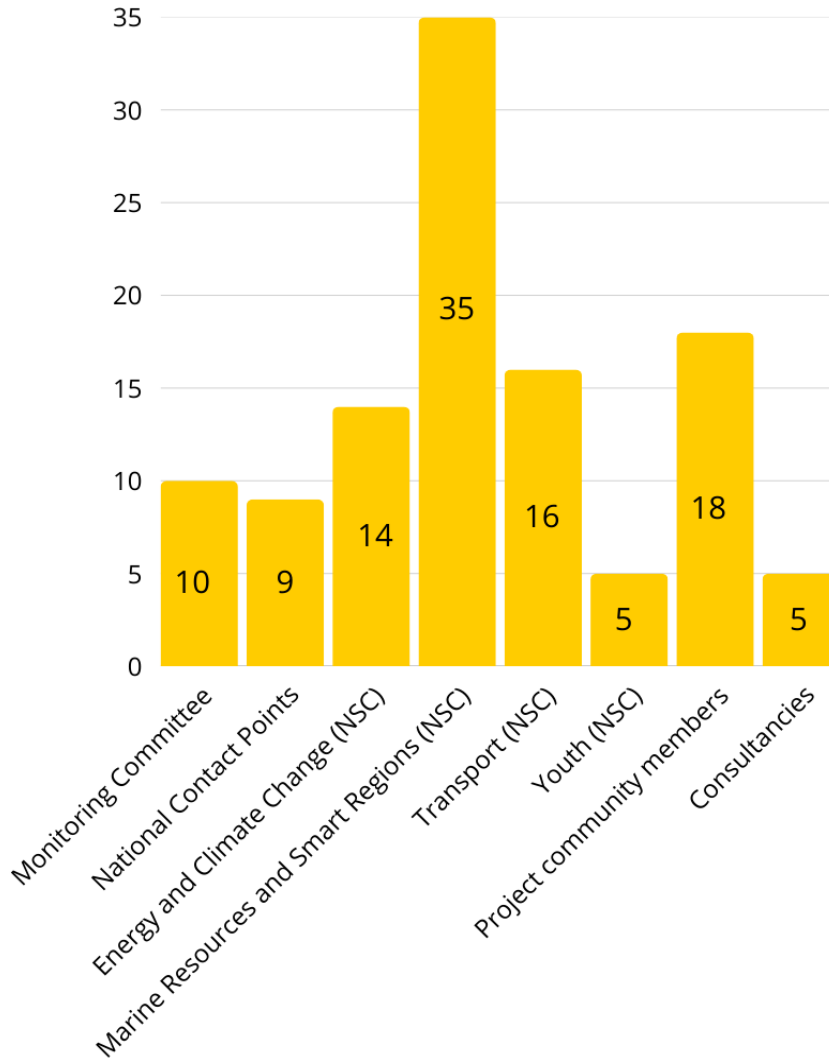


**Distribution of respondents by type of organization and country**

## FOCUS GROUPS

In addition to the survey, we conducted ten focus group discussions involving 107 stakeholders. The participants comprised 10 representatives from the North Sea Programme’s Monitoring Committee, 9 National Contact Points, and 65 stakeholders who attended the North Sea Commission Annual Business Meeting in June 2024. At this meeting, discussions were divided into four focus groups corresponding to the Commission’s working groups: Energy and Climate Change, Marine Resources and Smart Regions, Transport, and the Youth Committee.

In addition, 18 project community members and 5 consultants provided their input at focus group sessions held at the end of a project implementation event (Build UP) in October 2024.



Affiliation of focus group participants



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# Consultation and analysis methods

### 3. Consultation and analysis methods

The online survey provided a broad reach and cost-effective data collection, while the focus groups gave deeper insights into the way stakeholders envision the upcoming programme period.

#### **ONLINE SURVEY**

We ran an English-language survey in the period 3 April – 31 May 2024. With the help of our close stakeholders and their networks, we also distributed translated versions of the survey to reach additional stakeholders in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway and Sweden.

The survey consisted of 10 questions, nine of which were provided by DG REGIO. Please see Annex II for a comparison between DG REGIO's questions and the adopted survey questions.

#### **FOCUS GROUPS**

Two focus group meetings took place on 14-15 May 2024, involving our Monitoring Committee and National Contact Points. Also, on June 27 we conducted four focus group meetings with members of the North Sea Commission. Finally, on 23 October 2024, we held four focus group meetings including project representatives and a few consultancies.

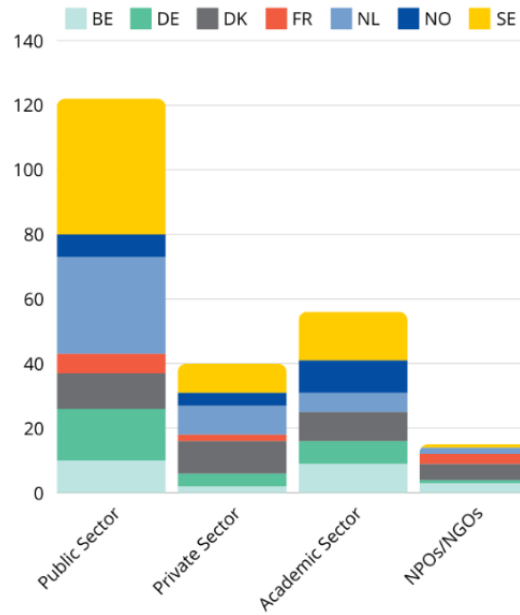
The survey responses and feedback from the first six meetings clearly highlighted the shared challenges, obstacles, and desired changes in transnational cooperation. Based on these insights, we shifted our approach for the final three focus groups. Instead of using the survey questions, we asked participants to think about solutions to the identified challenges, recognising that project members were uniquely positioned to address these issues given their direct experience in project work. For a detailed list of questions addressed in the final three focus groups, please refer to Annex II.

#### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Responses submitted in local languages were translated to English using ChatGPT. The translated text for each language group was checked by a native speaker at the Joint Secretariat. All responses were then entered in a single spreadsheet.

To analyse the large amount of qualitative data, we first employed an artificial intelligence (AI) platform called Claude 3.5 Sonnet to identify key themes and topics across all questions for each sector. Focus group data, on the other hand, was analysed without the use of AI. We then manually reviewed all responses to verify and enhance the AI-generated summaries, which served as a basis for writing the harvesting report.

To enable better comparison of responses and gain clearer insights, we grouped organisation types into four sectors:



**Distribution of respondents by sector and country**

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# Stakeholder consultation findings



## SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 1



Key areas for development in a transnational context include applied innovation to strengthen regional and European competitiveness, joint efforts to ensure a secure digital transition, and questions about how to best use data to foster innovation and interoperability within and between different public digital systems. [...] Our environment (including water management) and the shift to a circular economy are also critical areas where cooperation in the North Sea region is important. The significance of energy-related issues on the European stage has grown considerably due to the ongoing transition to a climate-neutral society, as defined by the Green Deal. This transition entails a drastic shift in the production and use of electricity, heat, and fuels from fossil-based to renewable and sustainable alternatives, along with increased demands for energy efficiency. – Josefine Wilhelmsson, Region Kronoberg

### Environmental sustainability and climate action

Stakeholders in all sectors identify environmental sustainability and climate action as a key area requiring transnational cooperation. They call for joint efforts to reduce carbon emissions and cope with the consequences of global warming, such as sea level rise, coastal erosion, floods, etc.

*Water management* is a dominant topic that emerges in all its facets: cross-border management of water sources, freshwater availability and distribution, circular water solutions, groundwater protection, harmful substances and microplastics, marine pollution, joint flood protection strategies, water retention strategies, etc.

*Biodiversity and ecosystem protection* also stand out prominently. Stakeholders emphasise the need to restore marine and estuarine areas, protect underwater sea life, create green corridors for animal and plants, protect biodiversity in soil, manage invasive species across borders, etc.

**Private sector** respondents stress the importance of reaching a sustainable co-existence between industries and environment, strengthening the blue bioeconomy, and taking a cross-border approach to achieve coastal protection, among others. **Public organisations** emphasise the need for coastal protection measures, adaptation to extreme weather events like floods, tackling environmental pollutants, and preserving ecosystems and biodiversity. **Academic institutions** highlight the

importance of research-based approaches to environmental challenges like plastic waste and its reduction. **NPO/NGO sector** participants underscore the importance of achieving a "climate-resilient region without leaving behind the socially and financially disadvantaged groups."

“ Collaborative initiatives aimed at transitioning to a regenerative society that respects planetary boundaries. A network of cities and landscapes working together for climate adaptation through biodiversity and nature conservation. Contribute to cultural change that strengthens nature's rights and allows humanity to regain its place in the ecosystem. Create a future to look forward to through visions of the future, inner transformation, active hope, and action. Projects supporting a circular economy and circular services promote sustainable lifestyles, where community and trust are built through lending, exchanging, and sharing resources. – Sara Lehmann Svensson, Falköping Municipality

### Energy and resource management

*The green transition* towards renewable energy sources is a key topic for the respondents, especially wind energy, energy efficiency, and the advancement of smart grids and energy storage.

*Resource management* is a related major topic. There are calls for a greater circular economy and better waste processing, flexible and innovative approaches to production, and the promotion of sustainable consumption such as plant-based diet, greater food security and shorter food supply chains.

**Private sector** respondents stress the importance of the green transition in companies/ business clusters, and broad circular solution implementation. **Public** institutions emphasize the strategic development of offshore wind infrastructure and energy storage solutions, as well as promotion of sustainable food chains. **Academic** institutions call for research-driven approaches to explore how waste streams can be valorised. **NPO/NGO sector** responses highlight the need for district heating/cooling and industry to co-plan their energy transition.

### Mobility and transport infrastructure

Mobility and transport infrastructure represent another crucial area for cooperation, with stakeholders emphasizing the need for sustainable transport solutions and better cross-border connectivity. Several responses criticise the poor integration of cross-border public transport services, citing issues with uncoordinated schedules and lack of ticket integration. Modernizing the railway system and developing eco-efficient maritime transport stand out as critical needs. A further concern is maintaining

connectivity between urban and rural areas, with several stakeholders highlighting the challenges of providing sustainable mobility solutions in less densely populated regions.

**Private** organisations mention the need to improve cross-border integration among transportation modes to enable the transfer of goods from road to rail and short sea shipping as well as mapping logistic activities. **Public** authorities point out the necessity of strengthening connectivity between city and countryside as well as ensuring an efficient and functioning railway system. Besides calling for sustainable mobility networks, **academic** institutions highlight the need for building an analysis tool to compare maritime versus land-based freight transport. **NPOs/NGOs** further emphasize the difficulty of traveling across the border in a sustainable way.

### Economic development and innovation

Economic development and innovation form yet another relevant theme, with *innovation* and *digitalisation* at its core. To enhance competitiveness, stakeholders emphasise the need for innovation across multiple sectors such as technology, environmental protection, social services, transportation, governance, agriculture. Specific suggestions range from developing hyperloop technology and green hydrogen to implementing innovative solutions for marine litter, aging populations, and industrial symbiosis. In the digital realm, stakeholders highlight several priorities: digitalisation of healthcare systems, improving service accessibility, mapping cross-border transport networks, creating integrated booking systems for international travel, establishing shared data spaces, etc. The responses also stress the critical importance of *skills development* to support innovation, with particular attention to ensuring rural areas are not left behind.

**Private sector** respondents call for the publicly developed open-source code to be shared as well as open access to shared data spaces. **Public sector** organisations and **NPOs/NGOs** underscore the urgency of skills development to support innovation and digitalisation. Furthermore, they emphasise the need for digitalisation and innovation in the healthcare system and public service provision to face aging population-related challenges. **Academic institutions** stress the importance of developing and disseminating relevant technologies, like new genomic techniques to increase resilience of the food system.

“ I think there is a suite of projects around innovation, data and so on that should be funded. There is a program of work around digitisation and data that needs to happen - some places are very good at this, but most aren't. Perhaps a bigger focus on capacity development and knowledge transfer rather than the production/development of new approaches or new ways of working? – Dave Fitch, Dere-Street



## FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK ON QUESTION 1

The topics and concerns emerging from the focus group discussions align with the survey responses. Participants in the focus groups held with members of the Monitoring Committee, National Contact Points, and the North Sea Commission working groups identify the following areas as requiring further transnational cooperation: climate change adaptation, environmental protection, and socio-economic challenges.

In terms of **climate adaptation**, focus group members placed a lot of emphasis on coastal management and water management, with growing concerns about sea level increases, floods, groundwater protection, and freshwater availability. To better prepare for such extreme events, participants stressed the importance of risk mitigation and disaster management, emergency planning, and climate governance enhancement to achieve a more resilient region. As one participant from the youth group put it, "Sustainable water management is of great importance to us and other regions in Europe. We hope to see this in the next Interreg period." Another participant from the North Sea Commission energy and climate change group maintained that we already have many good examples of climate change adaptation measures that need to be communicated and capitalised on, preferably at policy level. When it comes to **environment**, more attention should be devoted to biodiversity protection, including sustainable fishing and soil biodiversity.

**Social challenges** that require coordinated solutions include overpopulation of cities, declining population in some areas, digitalisation of public services, greater citizens involvement in the democratic processes, better inclusion and equality, and enhancing development in underserved rural and peri-urban areas. The North Sea Commission youth committee participants stressed the pressing issue of expensive housing and called for housing solutions for people with low incomes (e.g. subsidies). **Mobility** was another frequently mentioned topic with particular attention to the lack of rural-urban connections and accessibility to islands. According to one participant, the concentration of people in urban centres has led to inadequate public transportation networks connecting to rural areas. This forces residents to rely heavily on private vehicles for rural travel, creating an environmentally unsustainable transportation pattern.

“ Social justice is an important aspect – we must remember that the North Sea Region is also part of the bigger world. If we can be good at just transitions and communicate this to the outside world, then we can have a bigger impact. – Eilin Holtan Torgersen, Buskerud Fylkeskommune

On the **economic development** side, participants emphasised the need to advance the green transformation, especially by supporting SMEs in the transition and boosting the circular economy, as

well as developing more innovation with a higher technology readiness level. One participant from the energy and climate change working group of the North Sea Commission raised the issue of underutilized resources: “The core topic is ‘underutilised resources’ – not just food waste but also resources that do not even enter the food chain. For example, apples that are ‘too big’ to be sold in the supermarket. And as many as 100,000 plums go to waste each year because they are too mature. Yet another example is buildings and museums that are unused, cars that are standing still 90% of the time.”

## QUESTION 2: WHAT WORKS WELL IN THE COOPERATION

*Considering the above topic/s, what currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?*

### SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 2

#### Knowledge exchange and collaborative learning

“Rivers flow across borders, the challenges resulting from the transitions are borderless, what needs to be maintained and strengthened is the flow of relevant knowledge across borders, where urban and more rural areas can learn from each other. – Benno Bultink, Rijkswaterstaat

Stakeholders across all four sectors identify knowledge exchange and collaborative learning as the most important outcome of transnational cooperation. Respondents frequently highlight the value of sharing experiences, best practices, and expertise across regions. This includes exchange between researchers, companies, and public authorities. Knowledge exchange is particularly critical as many of the environmental and social challenges affect regions irrespective of national borders; therefore, it avoids the need to reinvent the wheel and at the same time allows people and organisations to learn about different approaches to tackling the same challenge.

“The cooperation works well and should be strengthened because Interreg (and Erasmus) is more focused on creating change in participating organizations than the larger research projects that focus more on journal publishing.” – Jan Frick, University of Stavanger

#### Bringing stakeholders together

Transnational cooperation is a catalyst for bringing stakeholders together, which is highly valued by the respondents across all sectors. Many value the collaboration between public authorities at different

levels of governance, research institutions, and businesses. Academic institutions appreciate the opportunity to conduct joint research work as well as to foster the exchange of young scientists. Several respondents emphasize the importance of strengthening collaboration among professionals in similar roles across regions, such as water managers, coastal managers, agricultural organizations, etc. Furthermore, many stress the importance of expanding networks and involving more actors across the region in order to maximise the benefits of transnational cooperation.

### City-to-city cooperation

Many praise successful city-to-city cooperation, while also emphasising the importance of a greater inclusion of rural areas in cooperation efforts.

## FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK ON QUESTION 2

According to focus group participants, transnational cooperation through Interreg works particularly well in fostering **cross-border learning** and **network building**. They mentioned that cooperation breaks down silos by bringing together diverse stakeholders who would not typically collaborate, enabling mutual learning and knowledge exchange across regions. Participants also stated that transnational cooperation helps to give project partners a “bigger voice.”



In the face of Euroscepticism, Interreg is a perfect way to show that cooperation really works. The obstacle is to reach people who are not involved in this cooperation. There is a need to explain the non-tangible benefits of the relations we build; for example, I can easily call a colleague in Denmark to discuss a specific issue whenever I need to. – *Silke Mollenhauer, Oldenburgisch-Ostfriesischer Wasserverband (OOW)*

## QUESTION 3: WHAT DOES NOT WORK WELL IN THE COOPERATION

*Considering the above topic/s, what does not work well when it comes to this cooperation and should be improved?*

### SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 3

#### Administrative burden

Respondents across all four sectors stress the challenges posed to cooperation by the administrative burden. The most frequently mentioned aspects are the application process, reporting, and project management requirements, which are seen as excessively complex. Many would like to see simplifications with a shift towards a more trust-based approach.

**Public sector** institutions emphasize that the “application forms are so complex that a specialist needs to be hired to complete them,” which ultimately discourages participation – especially by smaller organisations. They also believe that reporting is overly rigid and time-consuming, which results in less time devoted to actual project work. There are calls for the simplification of rules and procedures, e.g. “the justifications for actions.” Third, they think that project management is overwhelming, as it is characterized by “too much administration, planning, and control.” Some respondents - across sectors - highlighted the difficulties that smaller organisations face in participating in a transnational cooperation project, given that they “often lack the capacity for extensive project management.”

“ Limited administrative capacity of the municipality, the idea of sponsorship could address this: larger administrations only receive Interreg funds if they take a smaller brother under their wing.” –  
Stefaan Decrock, Heuvelland Municipality

### Communication barriers: lack of knowledge exchange channels, language differences, lack of awareness about Interreg

Linguistic and cultural differences, on the one hand, and the lack of available and appropriate dissemination channels, on the other, are frequently cited as barriers to effective cooperation. Some respondents highlight the lack of effective communication platforms for sharing experiences and successful practices. At the same time language barriers pose challenges, with some noting that the predominantly English information and application materials discourage participation by staff working for organisations operating at the national level. An additional communication-related barrier to cooperation is the lack of awareness about Interreg and available funding opportunities, which was mentioned multiple times by stakeholders across all sectors.

**Private sector** organisations highlight the challenges of individual projects to navigate dissemination channels and call for centrally established dissemination structures. **Public sector** institutions agree on the difficulty of accessing the necessary information and data generated by other projects to truly grasp an overarching view of a problem. Public authorities also highlight language and cultural barriers, stating that the predominance of English as the official language of the programme might discourage participation; therefore, they recommend providing English training services for involved personnel. Lastly, they maintain that it is crucial to reach as many rural actors as possible and inform them about the Interreg funding opportunities. Some **academic** institutions emphasise the importance of in-person meetings to facilitate good communication.

### Capitalisation: build on existing knowledge and expertise

Many responses across all sectors highlight the challenge of ensuring long-term impact and project legacy. Stakeholders stress the need to improve the sharing of best practices, especially within specific fields, as well as build on existing knowledge and expertise. In the new programme, stakeholders would

like to see more efforts to capitalise on the tools and knowledge developed by the previous projects as well as better leveraging of established networks.

Some **private** organisations argue that projects are of no use without proper dissemination and learning from each other, and that currently there are no concrete efforts towards using the already successful projects to lift the entire region. Therefore, it is suggested to open calls for applications specifically focused on scaling-up projects. **Public** institutions agree on the necessity of strengthening capitalisation, especially by facilitating collaboration among follow-up projects and their predecessors. One specific means to reach this end, which is mentioned frequently, is proper platforms devised for direct take-up, experience sharing, and concrete demonstrations. Equally important for stakeholders is the content-wise accessibility of existing knowledge; it is not enough to have access to the information. In fact, it is maintained that sometimes the models, toolboxes, and knowledge in general are not easy to adopt in practice by the intended target organizations. Second, they ask to prioritize the implementation of previously developed solutions rather than the development of new pilots. Third, they express the need involve the right professionals, such as managers of marine and estuarine areas, at different levels (local, regional, national), who can take up already available best practices and expertise. **Academic** institutions suggest creating simple policy briefs and comprehensible documentation that would facilitate take-up by target organisations. **NPOs/NGOs** emphasise the difficulty of maintaining activities after project completion, which is partly due to the limited involvement of businesses and market actors that can ultimately affect capitalisation.

### FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK ON QUESTION 3

Participants maintain that **administrative burdens** and bureaucracy are major obstacles to transnational cooperation, with partners struggling with excessive reporting requirements and complex rules. A second obstacle to greater transnational cooperation is **limited capacity**, particularly for smaller organizations and local authorities who lack the necessary skills for project management. Third, **different national legislations** and **policies misalignment** create implementation difficulties. Fourth, the sustainability of cooperation is problematic as projects often dissolve after completion despite significant time and resource investment, making it **difficult to scale up** successful initiatives.

### QUESTION 4: OBSTACLES TO COOPERATION

*In your area (of the North Sea Region), what are the major obstacles for good transnational cooperation? How could these be removed?*

### SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 4

#### Financial challenges

The financial aspects of participating in projects are frequently mentioned as an obstacle to transnational cooperation. Many organizations, especially smaller ones and those located in rural areas, struggle with the co-financing requirements. Another financial aspect that poses significant challenges is the need to cover expenses upfront, i.e. only paid activities and costs can be reimbursed.

Furthermore, it is mentioned that the long waiting period to receive reimbursement can lead to cash flow issues.

**Private sector** organisations focus on the resource constraints faced by SMEs. Covering costs in advance can be particularly challenging for these organisations. They also point out that partnerships are unstable when some partners find it difficult to secure the required co-financing. Besides this, **public** institutions call for the simplification of financial reporting, which, in their view, demands high capacity that smaller public authorities do not have. Furthermore, they wish to see a standardisation of financial monitoring rules across the different Interreg programmes. **Academic** institutions emphasise that the low funding rate excludes many research organisations from participating in Interreg projects. Furthermore, they call for increased coverage of overhead costs. **NPOs/NGOs** suggest that a longer project timeframe and longer financing period would help build sustainable relationships and ensure long-term impact.

### Different legal frameworks & regulations

Stakeholders identify differences in regulations and legal frameworks across jurisdictions as a significant barrier to effective cross-border cooperation. Many point out how solutions that work in one country may not be implementable in others due to incompatible legal frameworks, particularly in the areas of climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation. Additionally, some respondents note inconsistent implementation of EU regulations among member states, further complicating collaborative efforts.

The **private sector** organisations emphasise the differing rules on nature protection and environmental permits. There are calls for harmonisation of waste/residual/raw materials classification among countries. Another example of cross-border regulatory differences concerns aquathermal energy, which make it difficult to create a clear framework for aquathermy. Some also raise the issue of inconsistent implementation of EU regulations across countries. **Public** authorities acknowledge that differences in nature protection laws create obstacles for climate adaptation projects. Furthermore, some public sector respondents highlight the need to harmonise public policies to achieve equality of treatment across countries with regards to standards, rules, taxes, etc. An **academic** institution notes that while fisheries are managed internationally through ICES (International Council for the Exploration of the Sea), the oil industry is primarily regulated at national level. This disparity requires companies to adopt different mitigation measures when operating across borders. Furthermore, academic institutions note a difference in the way national governments prioritize climate change mitigation measures and biodiversity conservation.

### Partnership and coordination problems

Finding suitable partners and forming a partnership represents one of the most frequently mentioned challenge to transnational cooperation. Stakeholders point out several aspects that need to be improved in this area, including awareness about Interreg funding opportunities, involvement of new partners in addition to more experienced ones that tend to work together repeatedly, facilitated encounters between potential partners at events, a dedicated partner search section on the programme website, etc.

**Private** organisations emphasise the importance of cooperation among similar organisations from different regions to enable mutual learning, as big differences might inhibit transnational learning. However, there is uneven knowledge and experience in participating in Interreg projects, which could be partly addressed through raising awareness of Interreg funding opportunities and benefits. In addition, one private organisation points out how difficult it can be to establish a partnership with government agencies: "*We have tried in a project to engage the Danish Environmental Protection Agency, but it has proved very difficult.*" **Public** authorities call for an intelligent matching system to find suitable partners. One suggestion made in this regard is, for instance, to open calls for projects on very specific themes whereby any organisation can register individually and subsequently be connected with all the candidates to facilitate partnership formations. An additional idea made by one respondent consists of organising "market fairs" where ideas can be pitched and potential project partners can initiate partnerships. Second, some public authorities observe a pattern of consortia that continue across programme periods. They suggest implementing evaluation criteria that would give an advantage to new partnerships in the application assessment process, such as allocating additional points to proposals involving first-time participants. Third, some argue that a more predictable schedule of application calls is essential, as developing strong partnerships at the regional level requires time. Fourth, they observe that partners in a project are sometimes completely unrelated and that they overlook the global perspective while focusing on their own interests, which might be a symptom of inefficient partner-finding mechanisms. Lastly, public authorities highlight the need to involve more rural area partners, which could ultimately strengthen rural-urban linkages. Some **academic** institutions observe that the low funding rate excludes many research organisations from participating in the programme, which limits the partnership formation possibilities.

## QUESTION 5: EXPERIENCE WITH INTERREG FUNDING

*Do you have experience with Interreg funding? For example, through working with/within an Interreg project or programme.*

209 out of 233 respondents (89.7%) reported having previous experience with Interreg funding. The remaining 24 respondents (10.3%) had no previous experience.

## QUESTION 6: UNMET INTERREG PROJECT AMBITIONS

*Are there any activities or projects you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? What would enable you to do that?*

### SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 6

Stakeholders expressed interest in a multitude of activities and projects they would like to undertake. However, many of these activities are already possible under Interreg, suggesting that respondents may be unaware of existing opportunities. This section consists of two parts: the activities and projects stakeholders hope to implement, and the changes needed to realise these initiatives.

## Activities and projects

“ It works well that the categories are relatively broadly formulated within relevant themes. This means that ideas can develop bottom-up and activities are formulated by those who have to implement them. – Xenia Ramirez Lauritsen, Central Denmark EU Office

Some **private sector** organisations expressed appreciation of the existing priorities, which accommodate many different types of projects and allow for important topics to be addressed. However, private stakeholders identified several topics that require greater emphasis. These include decarbonisation of offshore logistical means (boats, helicopters, planes), enhanced capacity building and knowledge transfer in digitalization and innovation to reduce disparities between leading and lagging regions, skills development in new production technologies (robotics, 3D printing, scanning technologies), skills training in emergency services, innovative methods in management and governance. Also, there are calls for an application call specifically focused on the topic of renewable energy. **Public** authorities call for health-promoting measures, which currently may be overlooked because healthcare is seen as a national prerogative. One respondent specifically stresses the necessity of a project on "*respiratory support for children and adolescents.*" Another respondent emphasises the need for greater focus on young people's mental health. Many public authorities also highlight the need to prioritize transportation issues, and specifically, enhance railway transportation and rural areas accessibility. Some call for larger infrastructure investments for climate adaptation and coastal protection, crisis preparedness prioritisation, and biodiversity protection. An additional topic mentioned is education and skills development needed to support the green transition and innovation. **Academic** institutions emphasized the importance of social innovation to foster democratic coexistence, inclusion, and joint growth – particularly crucial in a time of radicalisation and right-wing extremism. In addition, there are calls for projects addressing the impact of sea level rise on cultivated land and developing products to combat emerging infectious diseases. **NPOs/NGOs** would like to undertake projects strengthening sustainable mobility, social innovation, and EU biodiversity.

“ Social innovation in the broader sense: promoting democratic coexistence focused on inclusion and joint growth, so that we do not drift further apart (think of exclusion, radicalization, right-wing extremism, etc.). Europe has ensured peace in our time. This is now under pressure. More collaboration on coexistence is urgently needed. – Tim Vanhove, Artevelde University of Applied Sciences



## Enabling factors

When it comes to the factors that would enable stakeholders to implement their proposed activities and projects, many of the previously identified obstacles resurface. First, respondents maintain that *pre-financing and a lower co-financing requirement* would make it easier for partners to participate in Interreg projects. Second, bureaucratic complexity is considered to be a major drawback discouraging participation, with one respondent stating, "*administration associated with Interreg projects is very extensive and is therefore holding many back to engage in the creation of this transnational community.*" Thus, there are calls for *simplification of the application and reporting procedures*, as well as the suggestion to set up a "*mentor group*" consisting of experts who are no longer active in Interreg and can assist project partners.

Training emerges as another crucial factor. Several respondents emphasized the need for *training in European project development and management*, which would also help level the playing field for the benefit of smaller organisations and rural actors, in particular. They also called for specialized *training in leadership approaches and conflict resolution* for lead partners, which can be particularly beneficial for managing larger partnerships. Additionally, while stakeholders point out how important it is to *meet partners in person* as opposed to online, they note that sustainable mobility remains challenging both in terms of availability and cost. One specific suggestion made to address this issue is to provide Interrail passes to incentivize travelling by train.

Partnership formation and business involvement represent key areas for improvement. Stakeholders consistently call for better *partnership formation mechanisms* and *greater involvement of the private sector* within projects to facilitate the take up of previously developed solutions, with one respondent stating that "pilot projects with business enterprises remain difficult." While some stakeholders praise the North Sea Programme's initiatives for promoting take-up and communication, and they call for similar initiatives from other programmes. SMEs are particularly highlighted as "as key players in the development of cities and regions", with stakeholders calling for enhanced support through educational programs, pre-financing, and networking platforms. Lastly, respondents express a desire for *greater uniformity* in how different transnational cooperation programmes operate.

## QUESTION 7: ENVISIONING FUTURE NOVELTIES

*What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg programme? Please be creative!*

### SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 7

The key novelties that stakeholders would like to see in future Interreg Programmes centre around more **flexible and innovation-friendly approaches**. Other prominent desires include **better support for smaller organisations, enhanced partnership mechanisms**, with many calling for better partner-search tools, databases for project ideas, and opportunities for people-to-people exchanges.

Many stakeholders from all four sectors call for a greater acceptance of failure in **innovation projects** suggesting implementing a “test fast, fail fast” approach, and support for more radical solutions and higher-level innovations, arguing that current project planning requirements are too rigid with one respondent noting “when you enter into collaboration where you genuinely want to innovate, it is difficult to work with a tightly predefined project plan.” Many stakeholders call for more **flexibility** to adjust project goals and methods based on changing circumstances during implementation, including the possibility of adding more partners during project implementation, as one respondent mentions the call for “[...] some facility to expand partnership once you've built a successful solution, or have a follow-on project type that rolls out innovations to new partners/regions.”

In addition to the plea for more flexibility stakeholders from all sectors call for more support in **finding partners** and building long- lasting **collaborations** rather than short-term partnerships. There is a general wish for opportunities to network before and during application calls as well as seed money for partnership development. One respondent even suggests “random partner selection to avoid always having the same consortia,” which is supported by respondents in the **academic sector** suggesting random selections of institutions for certain projects to encourage new partnerships. There is also a request to support new and inexperienced partners, including writing workshops and smaller funding amounts to facilitate collaborative writing and meetings, as well as AI-tools for application writing or “translation button within the application tool - where it clearly describes what is meant by, for example, 'deliverable.' This way, even if you write the application in English, you can be reminded of what should be included under each heading.”

## FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK ON QUESTION 7

At their focus group sessions, the National Contact Points mentioned the possibility of using AI at different stages of an Interreg project, e.g. to write an application, and to be used for different activities during the project. Furthermore, the National Contact Points stressed that AI should not necessarily be considered a threat but more an opportunity that is accessible to all.

## QUESTION 8: NEEDED INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

*Do you think there is a need for infrastructure projects with a transnational angle?*

### SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 8

The responses predominantly centred around the themes of sustainable transportation infrastructure, climate adaption and environmental protection, and energy, digital, and social infrastructure.

**Transportation infrastructure** is the most frequently cited category, with particular emphasis on rail networks and sustainable mobility solutions and calls for cross-border alignment of road and railway infrastructure. The need for better cross-border train connections is often mentioned, with the **academic sector** putting emphasis on the need for night train connections, and rail and public

transportation expansion into rural areas. Next to this, there is a high interest in developing integrated mobility solutions that combine different transport modes.

**Climate adaption** is also mentioned frequently among respondents across all sectors, especially with a focus on transnational **coastal protection** such as dikes, and common standards and guidelines for environmental protection, as there is a general acceptance of the fact that climate change is a border-crossing phenomenon. Besides coastal protection, public sector institutions call for flood prevention infrastructure. And both the **private** and **NPO/NGO sector** highlight the need for more water management infrastructure projects that can address transnationally reduced summer water supplies.

In addition to the need for more climate adaptation efforts, all sectors agree that there is a need for transnational cooperation on **energy infrastructure** projects to create a more resilient energy network that can stand up to the challenges of climate change. There are calls for more cross-border energy infrastructure, more off-shore wind power infrastructure, and construction of infrastructure to accelerate the energy transition. Projects regarding infrastructure adjustments for the electrification of society are also suggested, as well as local energy systems at regional and sub-regional levels.

Mentioned by a few survey respondents are calls for **healthcare infrastructure projects** centred on the vicinity of cross-border hospitals to make it easier for patients to reach than national hospitals. Infrastructure/network for research on Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases, which are an example of infectious diseases threatening the North Sea Region due to climate change, is also mentioned.

## QUESTION 9: WAYS TO FACILITATE WORK WITH COUNTERPARTS

*What could facilitate work with your counterparts in other North Sea Region countries?*

### SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 9

The survey responses to this question primarily revolve around the themes of enhanced **meeting and networking** opportunities, **financial and resource support in the preliminary phases of a project** and improved **digital infrastructure**.

The importance of physical **meetings and networking** was mentioned as a crucial factor, with respondents consistently emphasising the irreplaceable value of face-to-face meetings, with one academic sector respondent stating, "meetings face to face are important to understand fellow researchers [...]" Several respondents expressed a wish for preliminary visits to discover potential synergies. One **academic sector** respondent noted the importance of getting better platforms for sharing ideas and brainstorming. Furthermore, there is a call for guidance to find potential project partners, and, specifically, *how* to find them and *where* to find them.

Many respondents across all sectors call for **preliminary support**, e.g. seed money for networking and finding partners in the preliminary project phases. In addition to seed money for project initiation, respondents called for training in preparation for Interreg projects, including training in European

project development and training in the Interreg logic for beginner and advanced partners. Furthermore, respondents called for better digital platforms for partner searches, idea sharing, and communication. Another suggestion for the preliminary phase of a project came from a public sector respondent who suggested turning the application phase around by “start[ing] from a common challenge, a common goal, and build a project that way” rather than finding partners and making an application first.

“ Start from a common challenge, a common goal, and build a project that way. Now it goes differently: someone has a project idea and looks for other partners to join and meet the requirements. You piece together a project and submit it. Within Interreg, there is often insufficient attention to the process that is actually needed beforehand (and from then on already requires resources/people to write it) to come to a good project dossier. Maybe funding for the preliminary phase? – Lien de Vos, Dienstverlenende Vereniging Westhoek (DVV)

All sectors call for more uniform **digital infrastructure** for better communication, data sharing, and finding partners. Furthermore, the **private sector** calls for the creation of accessible exchange platforms with video meeting capabilities, while the **public** and **NPO/NGO sectors** want AI-supported translation to overcome the language barriers that occur, including better translation programs during live meetings.

### FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK ON QUESTION 9

During the focus group sessions after the BuildUP event, a private consultant mentioned the importance of identifying the gatekeepers in the different regions and countries, making it easier to find partners in other countries in geographical areas or within fields, where you would never look or know how to look yourself. As an example, the consultant mentioned that North Denmark’s EU office had turned out to be a perfect gatekeeper for Northern Denmark, since they were able to provide lists of potential partners for specific projects.

## QUESTION 10: DREAM COOPERATION PROJECTS

*What would be the transnational cooperation project of your dreams in the North Sea Region?*

### SURVEY ANSWERS TO QUESTION 10

The dominant themes that emerge from the responses centre around **climate adaption, energy transition, cross-border networks, digital innovation, and, to a lesser degree, social inclusion, healthcare, and education.**

“ I would like to see more projects focused on mobilizing and involving society. After all, significant change does not start only with innovation behind the lab table or with scientific reports. Much of it bypasses society. This is somewhat included in the projects themselves, but more could be done broadly. For example, targeting education, co-creation, communication. Themes? For example, sustainability, behavioural change. And why doesn't Interreg publish its own Quest-like popular science magazine on all the beautiful themes being worked on? Building with Nature, underwater noise, etc. Wonderful topics to work with and share broadly in society. – Wim Tyesberinga, Keijzer BV

**Climate adaption and environmental protection** is the most frequently mentioned theme among respondents. The respondents envision projects ranging from biodiversity conservation to coastal protection. Many respondents dream of projects focusing on creating networks of cities adapting to climate change, and networks of rural regions that promote sustainable agriculture and sustainable tourism concepts for the North Sea islands, urban-rural partnerships in multiple countries, as well as cross-border climate adaption in agriculture projects with a focus on water management. Across all sectors there is an interest in biodiversity projects, and projects focused on marine environment protection and action against pollution, with the **NPO/NGO sector** advocating for projects such as cross-border nature parks and common efforts to protect and create wild nature.

**Energy transition** is also high on the agenda among respondents, with particular attention to projects on offshore energy, and hydrogen networks. Respondents envision projects that combine different renewable energy sources in the North Sea, e.g. a project on a multi-source offshore energy park combining wind, solar, marine, and hydrogen energy with battery storage that is designed to be nature inclusive and circular. Furthermore, there is a desire for projects regarding fossil fuels elimination, projects revolving around reducing CO<sub>2</sub> through innovative energy solutions, and enhanced cross-border energy infrastructure.



**Cross-border networks of governance and cooperation** appears as a recurring theme, both independently and as part of other projects. Respondents envision networks of municipalities, regions, and institutions working together on shared challenges. Respondents emphasise the need for harmonised approaches to common issues. The **public sector** dreams of projects on cross-border administration cooperation and public transport connectivity. Across all sectors there are dreams of projects regarding cross-border harmonisation of regulations, cross-border educational programs, and disease surveillance and prevention, as well as projects on cross-border logistics and mobility solutions, cross-border business networks, and cross-border integration of rural networks.

The theme of **digital innovation** cuts across all sectors. Respondents emphasise the potentials of AI, data sharing, and digital twins to address regional challenges. Many proposals focus on ensuring digital inclusion and using technology to enhance public services. The **public sector**, in particular, calls for digital innovation projects such as AI implementation projects, digital healthcare systems, and cross-border data sharing. The **private sector** advocates for projects regarding digital twins and an open simulator platform for ocean-based activities, while the **academic sector** wants projects implementing AI applications in healthcare and innovation in rural areas.



"I have primarily worked on the digitalization of healthcare, medical care, and social care. In these fields, the need for cooperation is significant—both within each country and region, as well as between countries. A seamless healthcare system, where patient data follows the patient instead of being confined to a specific hospital, municipality, or region, remains an aspirational goal. " – Margareta Wallentén, Innovation Skåne

**Interreg  
North Sea**



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# Recommendations for post-2027

## 5. Recommendations for post-2027

Below are our main recommendations based on the stakeholder consultations.

### TOPICS

#### Environmental sustainability and climate action

*Rationale:* The 9<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report highlights the need for significant funding allocated under EU cohesion policy programmes to green transitions to support climate adaptation and disaster risk management, including protection against floods as well as mitigation strategies and investments in climate resilience. This is echoed by the survey respondents who call for more projects on environmental stability and climate action in the form of projects on coastal protection, flood prevention, and common standards and guidelines for environmental protection, as well as mitigation strategies, adaption measures, water management, and protection of ecosystems.

*Recommendation:* To address the current and future challenges of climate change, the programme should support projects focusing on environmental sustainability and climate action. This should stimulate climate change adaption and make the North Sea Region safer, more resilient, and better able to face climate impacts.

#### Energy and resource management

*Rationale:* The importance of future Energy and Resource Management is mentioned in the “More than a market” report by Enrico Letta, in which he recommends supporting technologies aiming for net-zero emissions and renewable energy as well as efforts to enhance the growth of circular economy to obtain more resource efficiency. These views align with the responses from North Sea Region stakeholders, who call for more joint efforts on renewable energy, especially wind, and energy efficiency, as well as the advancement of smart grids and energy storage. Furthermore, respondents called for more efforts within circular economy through better waste processing, flexible and innovative approaches to production, and promotion of sustainable consumption.

*Recommendation:* The future programme should support projects addressing energy and resource management to promote a zero-emissions North Sea Region built on a sustainable, climate, and environmentally friendly economy.

#### Mobility and infrastructure

*Rationale:* The Draghi report “The future of European competitiveness” underlines the critical role of transport in the decarbonisation of Europe, while the 9<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report sets as a goal further development of the trans-European transport network (TEN-T). Stakeholders’ demands align with these priorities, emphasising the critical need for enhanced sustainable cross-border connectivity and improved access to rural areas. Specifically, they call for railway system modernisation, accompanied by



harmonisation of schedules and integration of ticketing systems across borders. They also stress the importance of facilitating modal shifts for both passenger and freight transport.

*Recommendation:* The impact evaluation of the VB North Sea Region Programme showed that the programme contributed to the promotion of low-carbon transport and strengthened regional capacity to support modal shift. Given the unanimous stakeholder demand for continued progress in this direction, the programme should maintain its vital role in funding and supporting projects that develop and implement innovative mobility solutions in the region.

### Economic development and innovation

*Rationale:* Both the *Draghi report* and the *9th Cohesion Report* emphasise the vital importance of innovation in driving productivity growth and determining people's well-being. Stakeholders in the North Sea Region recognise the strategic importance of innovation and digitalisation in maintaining and strengthening the region's economic competitiveness. Central for them is the development of skills in emerging technologies like AI and robotics, as well as the dissemination of relevant technologies. There are also calls for creating shared data platforms and advancing digitalisation across all sectors, especially in healthcare and public services provision.

*Recommendation:* From the impact evaluation of the VB North Sea Region Programme emerged that the programme clearly contributed to creating better framework conditions to enable innovation activities and building SMEs' capacity to increase innovation. In response to stakeholders' calls for continued innovation and economic development, the programme should continue supporting and facilitating relevant initiatives.

## IMPLEMENTATION

### Simplify bureaucracy and financial procedures

*Rationale:* The *Draghi report* highlights the need to streamline bureaucracy if breakthrough innovations are to be fostered, particularly with regards to the application processes of programmes for research and innovation. At the same time, the *9th Cohesion Report* emphasises that reducing bureaucratic hurdles is necessary for a better allocation of resources. Stakeholders unanimously call for bureaucratic simplifications, noting that the current complexity forces many to rely on external consultants to draft applications and that reporting requirements strain their internal resources while diverting attention from project activities. Furthermore, stakeholders experience difficulties with co-financing and the requirement of covering expenses upfront.

*Recommendation:* While the North Sea Programme has taken steps to reduce bureaucratic complexity, it should continue its efforts and reduce unnecessary administrative burdens. At the same time, it is crucial to provide enhanced support to the projects in navigating the existing complexities. This could be achieved, for instance, by providing proper training and assistance with application drafting and reporting. Also, the viability of higher co-financing rates and pre-financing could be considered, which would encourage greater participation, especially of less advantaged actors.

## Foster capitalisation and synergies within and among transnational programmes

*Rationale:* Stakeholders emphasise the need to leverage existing solutions, tools, and networks rather than duplicating past efforts and wasting resources. Many highlight the need to focus more on scaling up projects through dedicated calls or by fostering collaboration between projects and their successors, devising platforms for take-up and experience sharing, etc. They also call for stronger collaboration among Interreg programmes to maximise the positive impact of the resources invested.

*Recommendation:* Projects and potential applicants must be enabled to successfully adopt and scale up previously developed solutions. To this end, it is essential to optimize existing resources, such as the keep.eu platform, which serves as a comprehensive repository of valuable information on projects across all Interreg programmes and funding periods. At the same time, it is necessary to raise awareness about the existence of such database. Additional recommendations include capitalisation calls and thematic events to facilitate capitalisation. Furthermore, cooperation among programmes should be institutionalised with a clear framework and standard protocols to ensure efficient and systematic coordination. Finally, resources might be allocated to foster synergies both within individual programmes and across programmes.

## Preliminary support

*Rationale:* Many respondents express a wish for more support at the pre-application stage. This includes support to writing applications, either from the National Contact Points and the Joint Secretariat or through AI, to avoid investing time and money on failed applications. Also, there is a desire for seed money to visit potential partners and for more secretariat-facilitated networking events where organisations can meet potential partners.

*Recommendation:* A future programme should support the preliminary stages of project development and enhance Joint Secretariat assistance in application writing, partner matches, and strong cooperation.

## Rural areas inclusion

*Rationale:* The *Draghi report* notes that 50% of rural households in Europe lack access to advanced digital network infrastructure and that rural areas with low levels of connectivity may experience severe constraints in finding employees with the required skills. The *9th Cohesion Report*, on the other hand, stresses that depopulation, aging, and the shrinking workforce are most predominant in rural regions. The vast majority of stakeholders recognise the vital role played by rural areas in contributing to a uniformly resilient, developed, and cohesive region. Many maintain that rural actors are currently underrepresented and should be reached and informed about Interreg funding opportunities. Furthermore, it is argued that rural actors should be supported in developing their project development and management skills. They should be engaged because the issues experienced by urban areas and the relative solutions are not necessarily applicable to rural areas. There are two main topics mentioned by the stakeholders in relation to rural areas: sustainable transportation networks linking rural and

urban communities, and skills development to ensure rural populations participate in technological innovation and digital transformation.

*Recommendation:* Rural-urban linkages is a spotlight theme in the current programme 2021-2027, but it is premature to assess the impact of this on the programme area. It is clear, however, that stakeholders call for more decisive efforts in engaging more rural actors. Therefore, the programme should be supported in actively expanding rural stakeholder participation.

### Active support for SMEs and smaller actors

*Rationale:* Many respondents stress the importance of SMEs and smaller actors as project partners. Respondents' perception is that the current administrative burdens of the Interreg programme effectively exclude smaller organisations that could bring valuable contributions to the programme; furthermore, smaller organisations cannot necessarily afford to receive funding after activities end. Therefore, respondents advocate for mechanisms to help smaller actors and SMEs participate, e.g. through simplified procedures for small-scale projects, higher subsidy rates for small organisations, and professional support for application writing.

*Recommendation:* It is important that a future programme work to make it easier for SMEs and smaller actors to participate in transnational Interreg projects. Their contributions are valuable and the more diverse actors in a project partnership, the stronger the potential outcome of the project.

### Project and implementation flexibility

*Rationale:* Many stakeholders call for more flexibility during project implementation, especially for adding new partners to successful projects. Also, they ask for more room to fail and to adjust project goals and methods based on changing circumstances. Some stakeholders also desire a more flexible project application approach where potential partners apply by "project themes" and are then assigned to other partners wishing to work on the same themes, rather than finding partners before applying.

*Recommendation:* To remain attractive for future stakeholders it is important that Interreg North Sea creates more flexibility for changes, failure, and adding new partners during project implementation. It could also be good to support a more flexible application form in which partners can apply through themes rather than fully developed project ideas.

### Harmonisation of regulations

*Rationale:* The *Draghi report* claims that legal differences across EU Member States limit the ability of innovative companies to scale-up and "fully leverage the advantages of the EU single market." Stakeholders' feedback confirms that regulatory disparities hinder cooperation between partners from different countries, particularly in the field of climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation.

*Recommendation:* Policymakers should be made aware (or reminded) of the obstacles that regulatory disparities pose to transnational cooperation and work to harmonise national regulations.



## **GEOGRAPHY**

### **The recommencement of UK partnerships**

*Rationale:* The 2014-2020 VB programme period started before the UK Brexit-vote in 2016. Most of the period was completed before the UK left the EU in February 2020. UK partners delivered significant results throughout the programme period and UK organisations were able to give much-valued assistance to other North Sea Region partners. Many respondents regret the lost opportunity to work with their UK counterparts in the VIB period.

*Recommendation:* For enhanced cohesion of the North Sea Region, all stakeholders would benefit from being able to invite and work with UK partners in future Interreg programmes. Excluding the knowledge, experts, institutions, and talent that is hidden behind the coast of one quarter of the North Sea Region is a loss to all.

## Annex I: Respondents' organisations

### Survey respondents' organisations

AIVP  
Agroväst  
Amsterdam University Medical Center  
Amt Hüttener Berge  
Artevelde University of Applied Sciences  
Alfred Wegener Institute  
Bellidée  
Boulogne sur mer Développement Côte d'Opale  
Brest Métropole  
Brittany Aviation  
Business Region Göteborg  
Business Vejle  
Business Viborg  
Central Denmark EU Office  
CEU Lolland-Falster  
Chalmers University  
Christian Albrechts University Kiel  
Cold Cut Systems  
Compare  
County Administrative Board of Skåne  
Danish Board of District Heating  
Den Helder Airport  
Denmark's Hunters society  
Dere-Street  
DTU – Technical University of Denmark  
Dienstverlenende Vereniging Westhoek (DVV)  
Educational Administration Göteborg  
Erhvervsforum Roskilde  
Falköping Municipality  
Floating Power Plant  
Flåttsentret  
Fyrbodal Municipality  
Göteborg Region  
Hamburg Senate  
Hamburg University of Applied Sciences  
Heinrich Böll Stiftung Schleswig Holstein  
Heuvelland Municipality

Hoogheemraadschap Hollands Noorderkwartier  
Högskolan Väst  
Innovation Skåne  
Innovatum Science Park  
Institute of Marine Research Bergen  
Instituut voor Natuurwetenschappen  
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven  
Keijzer BV  
Kristianstad Municipality  
Kronoberg Region  
Landesbetrieb Straßen, Brücken und Gewässer Hamburg  
Landesamt für Bergbau, Energie und Geologie Niedersachsen  
Lindholmen Science Park  
Logistik-Initiative Hamburg  
Lund Municipality  
Lund University  
Lysekil Municipality  
Læsø Turist- og Erhvervsforening  
Malmö Municipality  
Middelburg Municipality  
Ministerium für Landwirtschaft, ländliche Räume, Europa und Verbraucherschutz Schleswig-Holstein  
Nationalpark Vadehavet  
Niedersächsischer Landesbetrieb für Wasserwirtschaft, Küsten- und Naturschutz  
Noord-Overijssel Municipality  
Noordenveld Municipality  
Norwegian University of Life Sciences  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
OV-beureau Groningen Drenthe  
Pas-de-Calais Tourism  
POM West-Vlaanderen  
Province of Flevoland  
Province of Utrecht  
Province of Zeeland  
Region Värmland  
Renewable Energy Hamburg  
Research Institutes of Sweden  
ResilienServices  
Rijkswaterstaat  
Rinagro Smart Farming  
ROC Graafschap College  
Rogaland Municipality  
Roskilde University  
Rotterdam Municipality

Runde Research  
Schieland and Krimpenerwaard Water Board  
Sjöfartsverket  
Skagen Uddannelsescenter  
Skåne Region  
South Denmark EU Office  
Stad Gent  
Stad Mechelen  
Stadtreinigung Hamburg  
SUKW Bremen  
Swedish Forest Agency  
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences  
SYMSAGEB  
Thomas More Assessment Hub  
Tretorget AS  
Varbergs Municipality  
Vlaco vzw  
University in Agder  
University of Antwerpen  
University of Borås  
University of Stavanger  
Utrecht Municipality  
Utrecht University  
Vereniging voor openbaar Groen  
Västra Götaland County  
Västra Götaland Region  
Västvatten AB  
Växjö Municipality  
Aarhus University

### **Focus group participants' organisations**

Aberdeenshire County Council  
Agder Municipality  
Agder Youth  
Amt für regionale Landesentwicklung Weser-Ems  
BAX & Co.  
Buskerud Municipality  
Central Region Denmark  
Danish Business Authority  
Dordrecht Municipality  
Drenthe Youth  
Dutch Marine Energy Center



Gemba  
GGZ Centraal  
Hautes-de-France  
ILVO Vlaanderen  
KIMO International  
Møre and Romsdal County  
Oldenburgisch-Ostfriesischer Wasserverband  
Port of Hamburg Marketing  
Province of Antwerp  
Province of Groningen  
Province of Noord-Holland  
Province of West-Vlaanderen  
Province of Zeeland  
Region Halland  
Region North Denmark  
Region South Denmark  
Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland  
Rijkswaterstaat  
Rogaland County  
Rogaland Municipality  
Samsø Energiakademi  
Senate Chancellery of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg  
Telemark Municipality  
Trøndelag County  
University of Oldenburg  
Vestfold Municipality  
Vestland Higher Vocational College  
Vestland Municipality  
VITO NV  
Vlaamse Milieumaatschappij VMM  
Västra Götaland County  
West Norway Office  
Örebro Region  
Østfold Municipality



## Annex II Survey & focus group questions

### Survey Questions

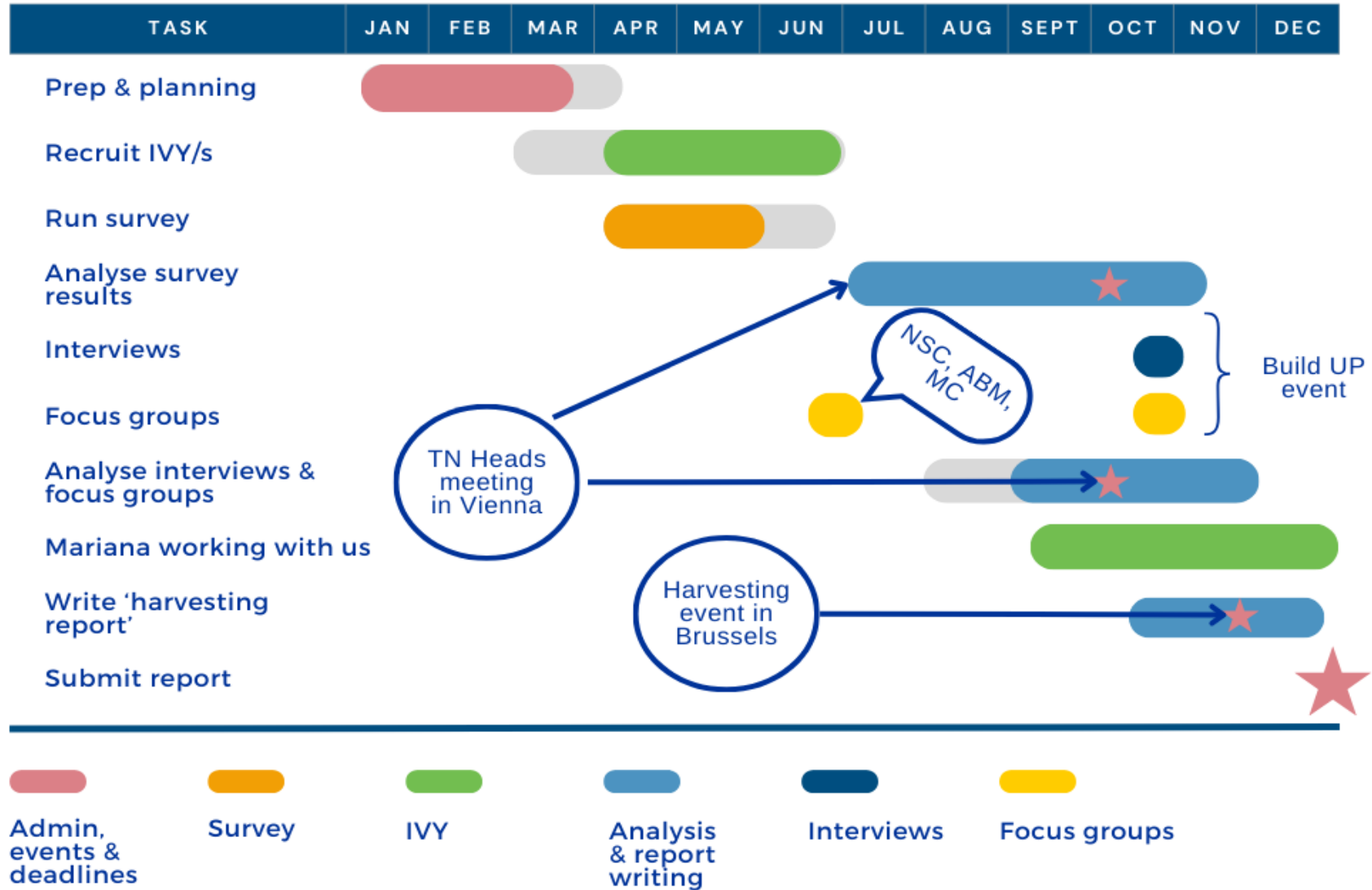
<b>DG REGIO survey questions</b>	<b>Interreg North Sea survey questions</b>
Question 1: Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?	<i>Skipped due to irrelevance for transnational programmes.</i>
Question 2: Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?	Question 1: In which topics in the North Sea Region do you see the biggest need and potential for cooperation across borders (transnational cooperation)?
Question 3: What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?	Question 2: Considering the above topic/s, what currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?
Question 4: What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?	Question 3: Considering the above topic/s, what does not work well when it comes to this cooperation and should be improved?
Question 5: What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?	Question 4: In your area (of the North Sea Region), what are the major obstacles for good transnational cooperation? How could these be removed?
<i>Question not required by the DG REGIO</i>	Question 5: Do you have experience with Interreg funding? For example, through working with/within an Interreg project or programme.
Question 6: Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?	Question 6: Are there any activities or projects you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? What would enable you to do that?
Question 7: What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg?	Question 7: What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg programme? Please be creative!
Question 8: Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?	Question 8: Do you think there is a need for infrastructure projects with a transnational cooperation angle? (An infrastructure project is a government or private project aimed at improving the physical, technical or social infrastructure of a region or place.) If yes, please give an example/s
Question 9: What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country (governance)?	Question 9: What could facilitate work with your counterparts in other North Sea Region countries?
Question 10: What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?	Question 10: What would be the transnational cooperation project of your dreams in the North Sea Region?



## Focus Group Questions

1	How can (we as a programme/you as project community members) ensure the long-term impact of project solutions/strategies? What could we do to promote the uptake and upscaling of solutions/strategies after project end? Could you give examples of past/current success in this respect?
2	How can we support communication and dissemination of channels through which to connect to people working on similar topics, e.g. wind energy, health innovations, shared mobility? How can we create networks of people and organisations working on the same topics?
3	How can we foster better ways for organisations to find potential partners for project applications?
4	How has North Sea funding allowed you to go above and beyond the 'normal' tasks/activities/aims your organisation carries out and do MORE? Please provide concrete examples.
5	What aspects of reporting would you like to see dropped or changed in the future? (And no - 'drop reporting entirely' is not an option.)
6	What simplifications in project administration would you like to see in the future?
7	How could the programme do things differently in the future to help you apply for and implement the best projects possible?

## ANNEX III: INTERREG NORTH SEA STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION TIMELINE



**A big thank you to everyone who responded to our surveys or engaged in our focus groups!**

Do you have thoughts to share about the future of the Interreg North Sea Programme? Your ideas and proposals are always welcome any time! Please send your inputs to us at [info@interregnorthsea.eu](mailto:info@interregnorthsea.eu)

