



THE NORTH SEA REGION PROGRAMME ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2007

Setting the Scene

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Excerpts

Welcome

Welcome to the 9th North Sea Programme Annual Conference. The purpose of this speech is to set the scene for the new programme so I have some news and some history for you!

We start by looking at the development of the new programme in the context of the IIC and IIIB programmes and then go on to describe some of the background to the changes in the new programme and why changes are being made.

We are just putting the finishing touches to the Operational Programme. Just last week we received the formal comments back from the European Commission. The Programme Preparation Group will meet on the 21 of June to discuss the comments and we hope to send the reply back the following week. We are on track for approval by late August/ September.

A look back at the previous programmes

Looking back to the beginning of the North Sea Programme you can trace the progress that we have made.

In December 1997, the Interreg North Sea Programme was approved. Largely experimental, we started with a clean sheet of paper. The ERDF budget was a mere €15.7 million.

Our first conference in Groningen in 1998 attracted around 100 people and it was there that we had the first project idea book and partner search. The ESDP (the European Spatial Development Perspective) gave the main focus to our work at that time.

Establishing a network

Looking back, one of our main achievements was establishing this incredible North Sea network. Over the years we have learned to work together effectively in transnational partnerships, involving partners from 7 countries and sometimes up to 70 local and regional partners!

The Interreg IIC North Sea programme closed having funded 45 projects. These projects focussed mainly on studies and exchange of experience. And a notable achievement of this programme was the participation of 53 out of 57 eligible regions.

Second generation in 2001

In December 2001, the second generation Interreg (IIIB) North Sea Programme was approved. There were many differences between the programmes.

For a start the budget grew to €145 million, and with a total of 70 projects approved, the average size of project went from €250,000 to €2 million. Projects were encouraged to include infrastructure investment and there was a whole priority devoted to water projects.

More and more organisations in the North Sea region became interested in the programme. Each year the conferences grew, the competition increased as did the complexity and size of the projects.

Measurable outcomes important

The focus of the programme and its ambitions changed. Measurable outputs and impact became a central concern. So we were able to quote in our annual report for last year that to date 6,800 organisations and 34,000 people have been involved in the work of the programme and its projects. 526 training courses have been run by the projects with more than 4,286 participants. And of course, there is still one more year to go before all the projects send in their final reports

Now after 18 months work, we are launching the new programme and gazing into a crystal ball at the future.

1st Monitoring Committee for IVB in September 2007

Naturally, we all have high expectations and many questions about how this programme will turn out. The first Monitoring Committee meeting will take place in September and has many decisions to make and questions to settle.

One of the big questions is: "How will this programme differ from the previous two programmes?" After all, the budget is quite similar, with €140,000,000 to spend on projects between now and 2013.

Transnational programmes always questioned

This is the third generation North Sea programme but we are not expecting the great grandchildren of IIC to emerge from the foothills of the region!

The reason for this is simple. Of all the types of programme in the Interreg family, there seems to be dissatisfaction with the achievements of the transnational programmes in particular.

The cross-border programmes attract a lot of political support locally and the interregional programmes concentrate mainly on studies and networking. The quality of projects and delivery can always be improved, but the need for their existence is not questioned apparently.

High profile and high impact projects wanted

The demands and criticism of the transnational programme are much more exacting. As far as I can see the only remedy for this is to deliver the kind of high profile, high impact projects that we know we can do when we are at our best. This means:

1. We have to encourage an awareness that projects must be genuinely transnational as opposed to cross border or interregional.

That means: the project would not be able to take place without its transnational partners. It must aim to have transnational impacts. You can see that a motorway of the sea project or one dealing with pollution in the North Sea basin could probably demonstrate this concept quite clearly. It doesn't work anymore to have a partnership made up of local investment projects that meets once or twice a year to discuss common problems.

One of the comments we have received back from the commission is that some of the programme's

proposed activities are more suited to the Interregional programmes – in other words just having a good idea or a common problem to solve may not quite fit the bill.

2. The projects have to demonstrate how they fit the aim and objectives of the programme, demonstrating clearly how our work contributes to the Lisbon and Gothenburg agendas. There are many issues we are still dealing with in the programme and how we can work with this “Innovation” concept transnationally is one of them.
3. The impact of the programme is a big issue. This is the long term result of the work of the programme, so we have to work with the projects of the future on strong, measurable outputs that will contribute to the programme’s eventual impact.
4. Projects of the future will demonstrate that they have top down and bottom up links. Ideally linking to national policy such as the National Strategic Reference Frameworks. How projects will link to these National Strategic Reference Frameworks is another of the commission’s questions for us! Be aware that you need to know about them even if you don’t see the direct link to your project idea!
5. Projects need to demonstrate how they link to other programme funds both European and National and have a plan regarding how the work of the project will continue after the programme finishes. In other words we need to try and main stream what we do.
6. Projects should be ambitious – you can see the scale of things listed under the so called strategic projects, listed under each priority in the Operational Programme - Addressing the effects of global warming, SME support around the North Sea Basin, a North Europe high speed rail, a motorway for the North Sea. Sometimes an idea may work as part of a bigger project, where in the past it may have been ok as a small project.
7. Private sector involvement is very much encouraged - we started to do this already under the IIIB programme. I am thinking of examples such as the NMCII project which successfully involved a number of private companies in their work.
8. It will be possible to involve partners from countries outside the eligible area this time and even from outside the EU but remember you will have to be able to give some superb justification for doing so!

Interreg V already in the making - what this implies for you

The negotiations for Interreg V programmes will soon begin - in another year - and, if we do now what we know that we can do very well, then the future after this funding period will be secure.

So my strong recommendations to you are:

Once you have identified your truly transnational and visionary project idea and put together your top down, bottom up partnership:

- Make sure you carry out some research so that you know what other projects are working on or planning that cover the same ground. Find out how the idea links national and European programmes as well as the other A,B and C strand programmes.
- Think carefully how to promote this idea to local, national and European stakeholders? Who will be part of the ERDF negotiation team from your home country? Have they heard of Interreg? Of the North Sea Programme? Of your previous projects? Can you show a track record of achievement? Will your project make a difference? Does the message that the projects were transnational North Sea programme projects get through to the public to the politicians at all levels and to the people working in your administration and beyond?

A good project takes at least one year to put together

In the IIIB programme, €140million, a similar amount of funding was allocated in 3 years, or after 6 Steering Committee meetings, which implies an average allocation level per meeting of about €23 million. We should be

prepared for this and take into consideration that it takes about a year to put a strong project application together.

Once you start to get your idea together, let your national contact point and the secretariat know so that it can be added to the projects in the pipeline list.

The timetable for the next months is as follows:

- The final approval of the OP by the end of August or beginning of September,
- The first Monitoring Committee meeting is scheduled for the 13 and 14 September,
- The first call planned for Monday 17 September to close on Monday 15 October.
- The first Steering Committee will take place on the 6 and 7 December.

We will start our programme of thematic seminars in the late autumn

- 20 and 21 August Sola Strand hotel, Norway Marine transport and Maritime safety project seminar
- 19 and 20 November Innovation seminar at the Smartlife Centre in Cambridge.
- We are still planning the spring seminars but you can rely on the fact that the first Lead partners seminar will be scheduled in before Easter 2008.

Finally, just imagine the great things we could achieve together with these funds to make the North Sea Region a Better place to live work and invest in!

Good luck with your preparations!