Background Paper
Submission of initial cluster project ideas

Aim

The aim of project clustering in the Interreg IVB North Sea Region Programme is to provide a structure and funding for partners in different projects within and across priorities to work together on common issues. The work carried out in the cluster should allow to address individual challenges and opportunities as well as new joint activities. All activities should reflect the strategic concerns of the North Sea Region Programme.

Following the launch of the project clustering idea at this year's Annual Conference in Norway, the Programme is now launching an opportunity to submit the first cluster ideas. The Programme is therefore inviting actors from national, regional and local public bodies, the business sector, trade and industry federations, innovation institutes, research institutions, universities, NGOs and other relevant organisations to submit their ideas for project clustering. These ideas will be used to:

- Help you identify other cluster members
- To share good ideas from others on how to manage and implement the clusters
- Guide you in the development of the idea and ensure that your proposal is in line with Programme expectations
- Assess the potential for the cluster initiative and secure approval from the Programme's Monitoring Committee

We understand of course that many of your ideas are still at an early stage and need further development but please try to provide the fullest possible picture when submitting your idea. This will allow the Programme to improve the guidance it can provide and will ensure that we can make continued progress in the tight timetable provided.

Background

The clustering approach arose from the recommendations of the stakeholder workshop on strategic projects held in Durham in September 2009. The Programme's Monitoring Committee subsequently approved a two-step approach with a first phase to "test the waters" and, depending on the level of support among the projects, a second implementation phase including a call for cluster projects. Project reactions to the idea were collected during a session at the Annual Conference 2010 (see the enclosed summary of the cluster session/project comments for project views). Phase two will be initiated after the Monitoring Committee has given its formal consent based on an evaluation of the results of phase one. The cluster ideas submitted will be one of the inputs for the Monitoring Committee's evaluation of phase one, and will allow the committee to assess whether the clusters have a good potential for developing important new results.

Provisionally the main elements of the cluster proposal are:

- Clusters will be created around the proposed mega themes (climate, sustainable communities, innovation, managing marine resources and transport). There does not need to be a cluster for every theme and there could be more than one cluster for each mega theme allowing some projects to form smaller, more specialist groups. The Programme is also still open to proposals on additional themes.
- The total budget should not exceed 250,000 Euro.
- The funding lifetime should not exceed a total of 18 months.
- Project clusters are open to all beneficiaries, including the possibility to include new partners who are not yet involved in any project activities but who can make a clear contribution to the cluster.

A cluster facilitator has been appointed for two years and will start beginning of October. The facilitator will help the clusters during the development and implementation of the clusters and represent the Programme's views during this process. The cluster facilitator will be introduced during the cluster development event in Bremen in October.

Clustering in practice

A cluster can be considered as being committed to joint development and action. Unlike normal networks, a cluster cannot succeed with 'passive members' because exchange of information is only the first step of cluster activity and all members also have to be willing to play an active role in later activities. It is very important therefore that all cluster members are committed to the cluster objectives and willing to openly exchange information and develop joint actions. Some features of successful clusters that you might want to consider:

- **'Talking the same language'**. It is important that the members of the cluster have similar interests and knowledge to allow information exchange and increase the chances of identifying successful joint initiatives. All partners should be able to identify the challenges and opportunities they want to tackle through the cluster – and explain how they see the cluster helping with these. At the same time, just as in any project partnership, new ideas tend to be created from the differences between partners – so make sure that they are not *too* similar. The idea of the mega themes is that they will help to identify groups of projects sharing a common theme but with different approaches for addressing the challenges associated with this theme.
- **Need for management**. The cluster will have to be actively managed if it is to achieve anything. Standard project administration is of course part of this but much more important is the need to establish and build contacts between people, maintain active communication between all members, identify joint actions and ensure the delivery of real results.
- **The social dimension**. Just as in any partnership some thought needs to be given to trust-building and establishing relaxed, cooperative relationships between cluster members. How often will they meet and why? How will they communicate between meetings? Do all members agree about what the cluster is trying to achieve?
- **The strategic/political dimension**. One of the main aims of clustering is to raise the profile of Interreg project activities at the national and European levels. How will your activities feed into policy interests at these levels? What opportunities can you create to promote cluster members' work? What knowledge and ideas can you contribute to the debate? The exact activities of each cluster will depend on its members but all clusters should incorporate a strong communication element.
- **Reflect Programme objectives**. Clusters should jointly identify strategic elements where there seems to be a real and interesting potential for them to work together in order to take advantage of each other's results, knowledge and contacts. The elements for a strategic project as described in the Operational Programme should therefore be considered. Clusters should have a strong focus on added value and should contribute towards the Programme's overall aims and objectives.

The Secretariat, the National Contact Points and especially the cluster facilitator will be available to help with these issues but it is important that each cluster agrees on a final approach that suits all members.

By supporting each other in delivery and drawing on the latest information available from a wide range of partners, individual projects should gain access to a much greater range of resources and knowledge, allowing them to take work on the strategic elements much further than it would be possible in single projects. In effect, the clustering idea takes the value of working together in project partnerships and aims to apply the same methods and draw the same benefits from cooperation between projects.

Exact details on criteria will be presented well in advance of any Calls for Applications for Clustering Initiatives.

Results of consultation and next steps

Projects are being invited to submit ideas for clusters in order not to lose momentum from this year's Annual Conference and even though the final formal framework for project clusters has not been confirmed yet. The submitted information will be available on the Programme's webpage (unless you request otherwise). In addition, the submitted ideas will be discussed at the next Monitoring Committee meeting in Haarlem, the Netherlands on 29-30 September 2010. These ideas will also be the basis for a thematic event which will run back-to-back with the next Lead Beneficiary Seminar in October 2010. At this event the final framework will be introduced, following the decisions of the Monitoring Committee meeting. There will also be possibilities for partner search and individual meetings between the Secretariat and idea promoters. Please, check our website for more information concerning this event.

Deadline for submission

There are two deadlines to consider:
1) Please submit your idea for the cluster development event until Friday, 1st of October 2010
2) If you want your idea to be considered for the discussions at the Monitoring Committee meeting please submit your idea until Wednesday, 22nd of September 2010.

How to submit your contribution

Please send the idea form for your project cluster either by mail or in electronic form to:
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Enclosures

- Idea form for project clusters.
- Outcomes of the presentation and discussion on project clustering (Annual Conference, 2010)