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DEVELOPING IRISH SEA COOPERATION

**Intergovernmental
Cooperation:
Opportunities and barriers
to cooperation across the
Irish Sea space**

**European Policies Research Centre &
Centre for Cross Border Cooperation**

Irene McMaster, Rona Michie, Anthony Soares, and Aidan Campbell



**Centre for
Cross Border Cooperation**



European Policies Research Centre
School of Government and Public Policy
University of Strathclyde
40 George Street
Glasgow G1 1QE
T +44(0) 141 548 4898
T +44(0) 141 548 3061
E eprc@strath.ac.uk
W <https://eprc-strath.org/>

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39 Abbey Street,
Armagh,
Northern Ireland
BT61 7EB

: [028 3751 1550](tel:02837511550)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: DEVELOPING IRISH SEA COOPERATION



Context: The Developing Irish Sea Cooperation (DISC) project aims to strengthen social and economic collaboration across Northern Ireland, Ireland, Wales and Scotland. In a context of geopolitical change, post-Brexit divergence, climate pressures and rapid technological development, the Irish Sea area faces shared challenges that cross administrative borders. This report for the DISC project focuses on intergovernmental cooperation and involved a literature and policy review of territorial cooperation across the area, followed by interviews with key stakeholders and workshop discussions, to map existing cooperation and identify barriers and opportunities. The report sets out findings and proposed next steps to support and encourage cooperation across the Irish Sea space.



Why Territorial Cooperation Matters: Current collaboration across the Irish Sea is extensive but fragmented. Most links are bilateral or sectoral, leaving a gap in multilateral, territorial cooperation that could better address shared strategic issues. The literature, workshops and interviews underscore that regional development challenges are not confined by borders and that coordinated action improves effectiveness, reduces duplication and builds resilience.



Barriers to collaboration

Stakeholders identified several systemic barriers to cooperation:

- Regulatory and administrative divergence between the UK and Ireland, particularly post-Brexit.
- Loss of EU funding streams and associated institutional memory, reducing capacity for cross-border project development.
- Uncertainty over responsibilities and contact points, leaving actors unsure where to seek advice and support.
- Short-term budgeting cycles, which undermine planning, risk-taking and continuity.
- Perceived imbalances in resources and commitment that can weaken trust and deter engagement.

Despite the challenges, technical barriers are not seen as insurmountable.

Stakeholders consistently emphasised that existing frameworks, such as the multiple bilateral joint statements and frameworks, Shared Island initiatives and the work of the British-Irish Council provide a strong basis to complement and build on.



Opportunities for Collaboration

Stakeholder appetite for collaboration is strong across all jurisdictions, with multiple partners highlighting the value of maintaining momentum and the need for a focal point to “join up the dots”. Several strong opportunities emerged across the DISC themes:

- **Sustainable Blue Economy:** shared seas, offshore energy development, marine planning, ecosystem management and nature-based solutions present natural fields for cooperation.
- **Innovation in Health & Life Sciences:** existing networks demonstrate clear benefits of joint research, digital health solutions, shared service challenges and SME–university collaboration.
- **Communities & Culture:** deep social and cultural connections provide avenues for regenerative tourism, maritime heritage initiatives and community-led development.
- **Emerging Themes:** skills mobility, data infrastructure, climate adaptation, logistics, rural resilience and digital innovation are identified as areas requiring collective foresight and planning.
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Conclusions & Recommendations

1. A coordinating mechanism is needed to connect existing initiatives, support navigation of complex cooperation landscapes, and maintain institutional knowledge.
2. Capacity building is essential to restore skills, relationships and know-how lost after the end of Interreg and other EU programmes.
3. Future cooperation must be pragmatic and additive, complementing rather than duplicating existing frameworks, and enabling light-touch, flexible, low-resource collaboration.

Key recommendations:

- Establish clear government leads
- Improve communication, coordination and visibility
- Rebuild cooperation capacity
- Develop a durable shared Irish Sea knowledge base
- Support a small number of proof-of-concept projects in 'early-win' areas with strong foundations
- Build in horizon scanning to identify emerging strategic needs and cooperation opportunities
- Connect and align existing bilateral agreements into a wider territorial frame
- Ensure flexible, low-resource, scalable arrangements



Sources: Photo by [Neil Mark Thomas](#) on [Unsplash](#) and Photo by [K. Mitch Hodge](#) on [Unsplash](#)

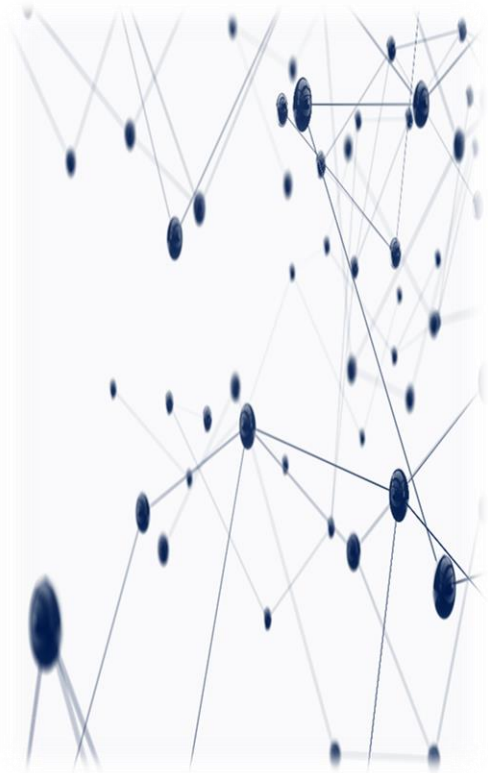
1 INTRODUCTION: FUTURE IRISH SEA COOPERATION

1.1 Context for the study: the DISC project

Launched in 2024, the two-year DISC project is an innovative project aimed at enhancing social and economic co-operation between Northern Ireland, Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Specifically, the project begins a process of strategy development and action planning for future North-South and East-West cooperation. The project is supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), and builds on work led by the Welsh Government exploring the potentials around Irish Sea Cooperation.

The DISC Project focuses on three themes:

- Sustainable Blue Economy
- Innovation through health and life sciences, and
- Communities & Culture.



A core element of the project is to take a proactive approach to future cross-border cooperation by bringing together national, regional and local leaders across a range of sectors, leveraging top-down strategic guidance and bottom-up community engagement to deliver holistic and inclusive cooperation. This report focuses on intergovernmental cooperation and supports the DISC project process by:

1. Identifying and analysing the main opportunities for intergovernmental cooperation across the Irish Sea space, drawing on experience in the area and internationally, with a focus on the three theme areas.
2. Examining and understanding the barriers to intergovernmental cooperation North-South and East-West that can impact cooperation.
3. Exploring sector-specific opportunities and challenges.
4. Providing actionable recommendations to improve intergovernmental cooperation across different sectors and regions with a focus on the three theme areas.

In doing so the report represents a step towards a framework and identification of best practice for leveraging knowledge and expertise from across and around the Irish Sea Space.

1.2 Methodology for the study



A **mixed methodology** was applied involving desk-based policy and literature reviews and interviews with key stakeholders, along with workshop discussions.

An extensive literature and policy review was undertaken providing an 'evidence base' for future action and established a foundation for the interviews and workshops.

Nearly 50 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, based on an initial listing of important organisations and contacts agreed with the DISC project, plus secondary contacts supplied by interviewees.¹ **Workshop discussions** took place in the context of the DISC symposium in Edinburgh in February 2026. The literature and policy review also took into account the outputs of previous DISC symposia (Belfast and Cardiff).

¹ Quotations used throughout this report come from interviews with stakeholders and have been anonymised (unless otherwise indicated).

2 MAPPING INTERGOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION: ENSURING A 'GOOD FIT'

A first step in identifying and analysing the main opportunities for intergovernmental cooperation across the Irish Sea space involved mapping existing high-level strategic cooperation initiatives. This was a key focus of the literature and policy review, and was further deepened during the interview process.

While mapping identifies numerous connections going far beyond the remit and scope of DISC, it **highlights the scale and scope of existing intergovernmental links** on relevant issues.

Previous mapping exercises have listed formal areas of North-South Cooperation on the island of Ireland, many of which also impact on East-West links (see Annex 1). From a more strategic perspective, and specifically in relation to intergovernmental links and DISC objectives, the key reference points are the UK-Ireland Joint Statements that set out shared visions and priorities for UK-Ireland relations (see Table 1).

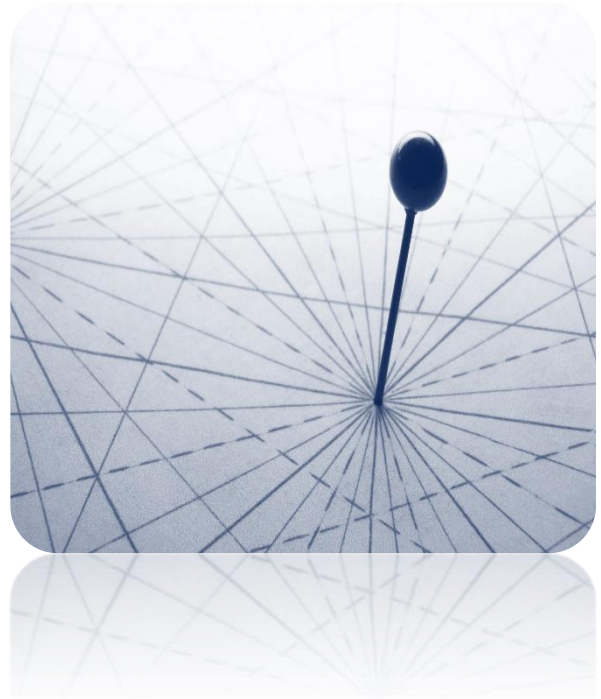


Table 1: Key points from the Joint Statements 2025 and 2026

2025 Renewed UK-Ireland Partnership The statement marks a refreshed commitment to deepen cooperation between the UK and Ireland, with particular emphasis placed on the importance of a stable partnership in a changing global context. Cooperation on Foreign Policy, Security & Defence Joint commitment to strengthen multilateralism, international law, peacebuilding, climate action, and conflict prevention, including increased cooperation on emergency planning, cybersecurity, and maritime security (including critical undersea infrastructure) Shared Maritime Space & Clean Energy Transition Joint work to mobilise investment in the Irish and Celtic Seas and deepen cooperation on offshore energy and interconnection. Co-operation on sea-basin mapping, marine planning, and green maritime corridors. Expansion of energy-transition cooperation, including retrofitting, industrial decarbonisation, and staff exchanges. Agile, open economies, Economic Cooperation, Innovation & Infrastructure Recognises bilateral trade worth ~€100bn annually; commitment to grow this further. Recognition of new investments in digital, AI and technology sectors. A new	2026 Shared Prosperity Deeply intertwined economies and trade and investment partnership, worth c. €2 billion a week. Focus on the industries of the future - in energy, infrastructure, research and tech, high-skills low-carbon economy. New transmission infrastructure to strengthen grid capacity, resilience and enhance energy security. Framework for Cooperation on Infrastructure to share best practice on growing construction sector capacity, skills development, and consent for major projects and critical infrastructure. Housing affordability by sharing knowledge and expertise on spatial planning, innovation in digital planning, modern methods of construction and approaches to housing regulation. Deepening bioeconomy cooperation Links in relation to the Research and Innovation agenda small and medium sized businesses to scale and to maximise commercial opportunities. Shared Seas Enhancing information-sharing, maritime domain awareness and coordinated defence planning. Subsea Infrastructure Emergency preparedness Offshore energy infrastructure, while protecting the marine environment.
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Framework for Co-operation on Infrastructure Delivery across transport, housing, energy and digital sectors. An SME Dialogue to support small businesses. An Economic Security Exchange to share best practice on economic resilience. Continued science and innovation collaboration, including Horizon Europe and new co-centres on climate, biodiversity, water and sustainable food systems. Cultural, Educational & Societal Links Establishment of a strategic cultural partnership to strengthen collaboration between cultural institutions. Creation of an Ireland-UK Youth Forum to engage young people in policy discussions. Increased cooperation between schools and education systems across various areas including inclusion, early years, and curriculum reform. Strong reaffirmation of the Common Travel Area and commitment to minimise barriers to movement. Commitment to Northern Ireland & Good Friday Agreement Ensuring all cooperation benefits Northern Ireland and supports peace, reconciliation and prosperity. Commitment to the 2021–2027 PEACEPLUS programme and agreement in principle to a successor. Governance: UK–Ireland 2030 Steering Group A new steering group will be led by the UK Cabinet Office and the Department of the Taoiseach to oversee delivery of these commitments.	Pathway to share information and cooperate on marine data, and opportunities for engagement in areas such as common data standards in the shared marine space. Ireland and UK Grid System Operators to increase knowledge-sharing and cooperation Maritime decarbonisation Enhanced cooperation, including accelerating the delivery of offshore wind projects. Enhancing the coherence and effectiveness of Marine Protected Area (MPA) networks, sharing best practice from experiences of MPA designation and management New collaboration on marine science research, Shared Ties Partnership built on deep and enduring ties between people, culture, and business Investing in connections between the next generation, and wider public engagement with the contemporary culture and heritage. Announcement of 12 collaborative partnerships between cultural institutions through the 2030 UK-Ireland Cultural Cooperation Ireland-UK Youth Forum Plenary With UK participation in the Erasmus Programme from 2027, National Agencies will work to ensure that Tertiary Education Institutions and schools maximise bi-lateral mobility opportunities for their students.
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Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-between-prime-minister-keir-starmer-and-taoiseach-micheal-martin-in-cork-13-march-2026>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-between-prime-minister-keir-starmer-and-taoiseach-micheal-martin-6-march-2025>

Across these areas, (re) adapting, maintaining, and extending cooperation remains a core and ongoing task, most notably through the work of existing structures such as the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) and British Irish Council (BIC). For example, by providing a forum for the sharing of information and experiences, the BIC also aims to ‘promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands.’ Work of the BIC is currently structured around 11 work sectors across three themes, with priority areas agreed for each work sector (see Table 2).

Table 2: Themes and Work Sectors of the British Irish Council

 Climate & decarbonisation	
Environment	Circular economy
Transport	Modal shift/active travel/public transport, importance of HGV and linkages across these islands, decarbonisation of ports and sustainable transport in rural areas
Invasive species	Monitoring and surveillance technology, priority pathways: exotic pets, awareness raising, alerts and rapid response, Asian hornets
Energy	Decarbonising heat, offshore renewables (including wind, marine, grid and interconnection), new and emerging technologies (including hydrogen), local and community energy



Culture & heritage

Indigenous, minority & lesser-used languages	Social use of indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages, linguistic infrastructure, culture
Creative industries	Initiatives to support growth and resilience of the creative industries, contribution to [addressing] climate change and decarbonisation, creative approaches to societal issues, health and wellbeing within the creative industries, initiatives of common interest with other work sectors



Economic & social inclusion

Social inclusion	Social enterprises
Planning & places	Climate change and the biodiversity emergency, skills and capacity for the public sector planning profession
Housing	Residential retrofit, private rental sector, affordable housing models, attracting private sector investment, homelessness and temporary accommodation
Early years	Early years workforce, childhood experience, child poverty, child development
Drugs & alcohol	Supporting the involvement of people with lived and living experience in drug services. addressing drug use in prison, health-led approaches to sanctions for people in possession of drugs for personal use, community action on alcohol, peer reviews on topical drug and alcohol issues

Sources: <https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/>; <https://www.britishirishcouncil.mtcserver22.com/our-work/>

The **Shared Island Initiative** has the potential to deliver on elements of the Joint Statements' cooperation-focused objectives. Shared Island investment, policy and cooperation commitments are informed by a programme of engagement with people across the island of Ireland through the Shared Island Dialogue series and a comprehensive policy research programme commissioned by the Shared Island unit of the Department of the Taoiseach.¹ Recent Shared Island funding programmes are outlined in Box 1.

Box 1: Shared Island grant funding programmes

All-Island Support Programmes for Women Entrepreneurs
 North South Research Programme
 Co-Centres for Research and Innovation
 Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme
 Shared Island Community Climate Action Programme
 Shared Island Enterprise Scheme
 Shared Island Tourism Coast to Coast Capital Investment Scheme
 All-Island Bioeconomy Demonstrators
 Shared Island Civic Society Fund

Proposals for other all-island investment or cooperation projects, including for Shared Island Fund support, are considered by the relevant Government Department or Agency for the sector or topic addressed. Assessed and approved projects are agreed and implemented in partnership with appropriate stakeholders across both jurisdictions.

Source: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/publications/funding-opportunities-supported-by-the-shared-island-initiative/>

Alongside these initiatives, and in addition to the North-South links between Ireland and Northern Ireland that include the formal structures of the North South Ministerial Council and the implementation bodies under Strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement, there are bilateral agreements with Scotland and Wales (see Table 3) which notably highlight opportunities for officer-level and regional and local level exchanges.

Table 3: Shared Framework and Statement

Ireland-Scotland Bilateral Cooperation Framework 2030	Ireland-Wales Shared Statement 2030
Regular ministerial contacts, with annual high-level Ireland-Scotland meetings, led by the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for External Relation Parliamentary links, recognising the role the British Irish Parliamentary Association (BIPA) plays in this regard, with regular contacts between the Oireachtas and Scottish Parliament Official-level contacts in priority areas to exchange best practice and identify areas for cooperation in areas of mutual interest for Scotland and Ireland Facilitate deeper and more regular engagements between local government authorities. This can be via representative bodies such as the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), or via ad hoc engagements between local authorities Ongoing cooperation through British Irish Council structures to advance areas of common interest • Business and Economic Links • Climate, Energy and Sustainability • Education, Research and Innovation • Communities and Diaspora Engagement • Culture, Language and Sport	Regular ministerial contacts between Ireland and Wales, with the annual Ireland-Wales Forum maintained as the centre point for high-level government engagement Support the strengthening of parliamentary links, including through the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA), and regular contacts between the Oireachtas and Senedd. Deepen official-level contacts in priority areas to enable exchange of experience, best practice and to identify areas for cooperation on issues of mutual interest across Wales and Ireland. Support cooperation at regional and local authority level to share experience and promote links. Ensure active ongoing engagement through British-Irish Council structures to advance areas of common interest. • Political and Official Engagement • Climate, Energy, Environment and Sustainability • Economy and Trade • Education, Research and Innovation • Culture, Language and Heritage, and • Communities, Diaspora and Sport

Sources: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/90c5226f/Ireland_Scotland_Framework_v4-Eng-web_1.pdf; https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/Ireland_Wales_Framework_-_English.pdf

3 OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS TO COOPERATION: EVIDENCE INFORMING NEXT STEPS

3.1 Territorial Coopetition 'Gap': Key Messages from Literature & Policy Review

The literature and policy review underlined that regional development challenges and solutions are not confined by borders and addressing these issues requires partnership, cooperation and collaboration.² Territorial cooperation is widely pursued internationally as a means for areas with shared interests to address joint challenges and opportunities.³

The importance of territorial cooperation in development has been highlighted, e.g., by the OECD⁴ and EU.⁵ Territorial cooperation involves a set of processes, principles and organisational arrangements between two or more entities targeted at the normative goals of mutual territorial development and integration benefits.⁶ Forms of formal cross-border cooperation have taken place between borderland regions in Europe developed gradually from the late 1950s onward.⁷ The review found the following:

There is a clear rationale for exploring 'territorial cooperation':

- as a means for areas with shared interests to address joint challenges and opportunities
- it delivers recognised added value for territories, administrations and stakeholders
- it can be administratively complex and must, therefore, be complementary to existing structures and systems
- territorial cooperation is associated with big ideas and ideals, but it is important to be realistic about what it can do well.

There are a large number and wide range of valued bilateral and sectoral agreements, initiatives and actions connecting N-S and, bilaterally, E-W, but fewer opportunities to link N, S, E, W and work through 'territorial cooperation'.

Grassroots efforts to retain practical, operational cooperation highlight the on-going potential for territorial cooperation in key areas.

There are complementary goals and objectives in key areas in relation to Blue Growth, Innovation in Health and Culture and Communities shared by Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England.

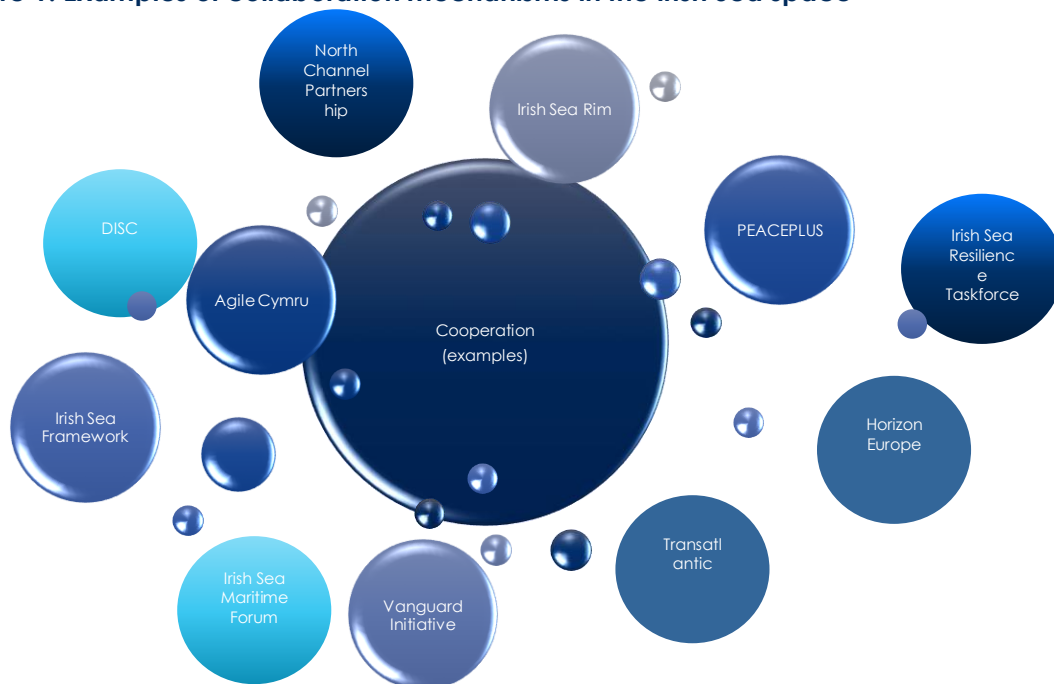
Wider review of international practice in territorial cooperation found:

- there are a range of 'entry points' for territorial cooperation, including associations, formal programmes, and mixed approaches
- cooperation efforts change and evolve, participants come and go, arrangements can become more/less formal/lead to spin off initiatives
- cooperation initiatives can 'co-exist' and work in complementary ways to the benefit of all partners.



Section 2 outlined the key contextual intergovernmental cooperation frameworks which currently exist. The policy and literature review highlighted the **numerous place-based and sectoral collaboration mechanisms** which are also in operation, beyond the formal governmental mechanisms (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Examples of collaboration mechanisms in the Irish Sea space



Together this cooperation covers formal/hard multilateral cooperation, informal/soft multilateral cooperation, bilateral partnerships, multilateral partnerships and regional partnerships. According to respondents to this study, through these structures, agreements and systems, there are opportunities to talk to counterparts, solve problems and progress issues and build coherence and cooperation across government, policy practitioners, priorities and delivery.

There are also strong policy commitments and parallels in line with the key themes outlined for DISC (see Table 4) and for intergovernmental links more widely. For example, Wales-Ireland has eight significant funded joint projects under the bilateral agreement, as well as operating sector-to-sector missions.

“We’re definitely in a better position than we were last year and that was better than the year before.... relationships are stronger than they have been.”

Table 4: Existing policy commitments in relation to DISC themes

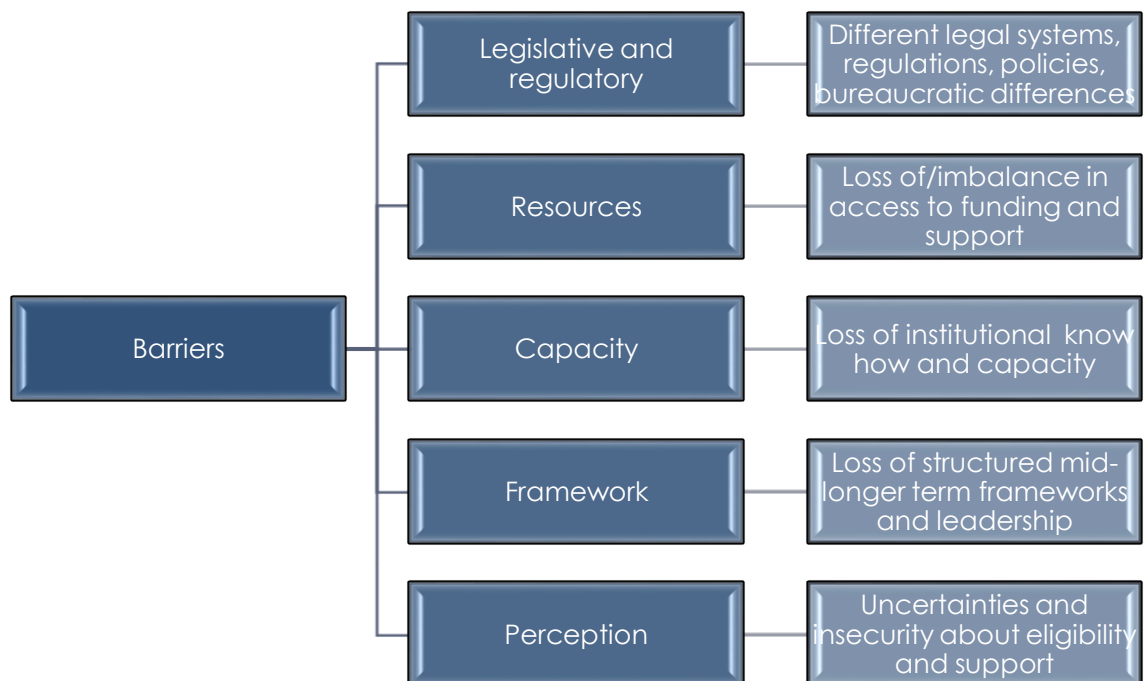
Policy Area	Intergovernmental	Bilateral	Others (examples)
Blue Growth	Shared Maritime Space Offshore energy and interconnection	Deepen economic collab and opportunities in sectors of mutual interest Marine spatial planning Offshore energy and infrastructure Protect and restore environment and planning	Invasive species (BIC) Planning (BIC)
Innovation/ Health	Science and innovation collaboration, including Horizon Europe	Research and Innovation Digital AI Health Facilitate R&I links Social policy health and well being	Research Programmes
Culture/ Communities	Culture and societal links	Rural and Coastal Communities Culture Cooperation between tourism agencies	Culture and creative (BIC) Shared Island Tourism Coast to Coast Capital Investment Scheme

However, it is also noted that the **connections are primarily bilateral or sectoral across the same/similar organisations and levels**. This leaves a gap in terms of territorial cooperation and links that go beyond bilateral connections to include trilateral or multilateral links.

3.2 Barriers and obstacles to cooperation

The interview and workshop results reinforced and developed many of the findings emerging from the literature and policy review stage. In particular, recurring themes are evident in terms of the barriers and opportunities for territorial cooperation (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Barriers and obstacles to territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea



Legislative and regulatory barriers

Workshop and interview evidence, complemented by the policy and literature review findings, highlight the fact that there are regulatory and technical administrative barriers to cooperation and exchange around the Irish Sea. The area around the Irish Sea is bounded by Northern Ireland, Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England, and includes the Isle of Man. It spans multiple national jurisdictions, an international border, an EU and non-EU Member State boundary and a diverse set of governance arrangements and levels of government.

The different legal systems, regulations, policies, bureaucratic differences, reporting and recording vary across the jurisdictions and cause significant challenges in the delivery of initiatives that cross these jurisdictions. In particular, post-Brexit, the UK and the devolved administrations are increasingly diverging from Ireland in areas as wide-ranging as State aid, educational standards, aspects of the recognition of qualifications, the levels of bureaucracy faced by social enterprises, and the specifics of cross-border insurance.

In relation to territorial cooperation, the **research does not confirm that technical issues are viewed as an insurmountable barrier to future cooperation**, although some interviewees noted that some of these issues would need to be addressed where cooperation would have to be at a sufficient scale to attract private investment. However, the research also highlighted that **there are multiple valuable frameworks, agreements, systems and structures in place within which technical barriers can be addressed**, along with wider legal and regulatory issues.

The Windsor Framework has eased some challenges to moving goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. However, discussions on how to improve its operation continue and challenges remain, e.g. with SMEs finding the systems and processes involved complex and

challenging to navigate.⁸ Outcomes will also be shaped by wider dialogues linked to the 'reset' of relationships between the EU and UK. The first EU-UK Leaders' Summit in May 2025 set out areas for further work on a "common understanding", including security and law enforcement, energy markets, food standards, youth mobility or experience, ERASMUS and defence. For example, UK partners can now participate in ERASMUS and in the Horizon Europe research programme. However, except for Northern Ireland's participation in PEACEPLUS, UK partners have almost no access to the Interreg territorial cooperation programmes. Only a very limited number of partners have remained involved as observers in some projects.

Loss of funding and resources for cooperation

The loss of multi-annual EU funding is seen as the single biggest barrier to cooperation. While there was never a dedicated Irish Sea Interreg territorial cooperation programme, the post-Brexit decision of UK Government not to participate in Interreg territorial cooperation, beyond the PEACEPLUS programme, greatly impacted on the opportunities available to Scottish, Welsh and English partners to work on joint, longer-term projects and with a diverse range of partners.

There are opportunities to pursue bilateral sectoral links and links between the same/similar organisation types, e.g. universities through Horizon Europe. Funding can help to attract colleagues into collaborative effort and acts as a catalyst. However, opportunities are much more limited to apply a territorial lens to development actions and challenges in the area and work across partner types from multiple countries. The prevailing impression is that annual budget cycles discourage cooperation by undermining planning, relationship-building, and risk-taking, all of which are crucial as collaboration projects take time to develop and rarely fit neatly within one financial year. Numerous interviewees commented on the 'convening power' of funding, making it challenging to not only find funding but also keep networks and partnerships together and to interest colleagues in pursuing cooperation opportunities.

A perceived (and actual) imbalance in funding opportunities between the territories also put partners off exploring links, both due to lack of funding or because cooperation funding is not seen as comparable to other (larger) funding streams. At the same time, organisations have become protective and risk-averse, linked to resource pressures and external tensions and are focusing on shorter term priorities at a time when the need to avoid duplication and find solutions to shared problems is greater.

Loss of institutional capacity and knowhow in relation to territorial cooperation, beyond bilateral links.

In the past stakeholders could rely on operational experience with cross-border and transnational funding sources for regional economic development inside and outside of government across the area. This is now not a resource that all partners have access to. Particularly in the UK, it can now be very difficult to know who is responsible, and whom interested stakeholders should approach.

For example, previously Scottish partners benefitted from support for network engagement, projects and funding from Scotland Europa, which had been funded through Scottish Enterprise. Scotland Europa has now closed and the level of dedicated support is not available. Where support is available, the focus is more fixed on trade and investment, with a business and commercial perspective.⁹

Loss of structured programmes/frameworks of support and leadership

It is not solely the loss of resources that is a barrier. With the exception of PEACEPLUS, it is also the loss of programmes providing a framework for cooperation, with agreed priorities which provide focus, structure and a mutually agreed platform for discussion and action between partners. These frameworks were especially important as consistency matters and international relationships take years to build and can be lost quickly without continuity. Associated with this is an appreciation of the time that effective collaboration networks take to build up, but the speed at which they can be lost. The loss of structured programmes also means that cooperation activity may now be the responsibility of a range of different government departments and agencies, adding to complexity and confusion. Stakeholders report difficulties in knowing who is responsible, whom to approach, and experiencing communication barriers: *"You need to have either the knowledge of who the right people are within government and to have a personal connection, or to have important advocates within government."*

Negative perception of eligibility and 'attractiveness' as cooperation partners, and a sense of 'backing'/leadership from relevant institutions

Ambiguity and lack of clarity on commitment and roles at a strategic level can leave partners having to justify and push their role. When there is no buy-in: *"you felt after a few years, you were pushing a rock up a hill, and nobody really wanted you to be on the hill or to have the rock."* There have been periods (in NI) where it has been difficult to progress due to lack of a government. Political, and more particularly, Ministerial backing gives impetus to cooperation: *"Ministerial direction is crucial for securing participation. This is why cross-border programmes are so important - they provide shared political commitment."*

More generally, concerns over complexity, lack of 'bandwidth' to consider 'yet another' cooperation initiative are important to acknowledge. Translating high level political commitments to bilateral and multilateral cooperation into achievable/practical programmes of work to deliver tangible outcomes for citizens is very challenging. This is especially so given that while cooperation at the level of officials and civil servants has been found to be 'nice to do, the 'best' projects are considered to be those which add value to outcomes for citizens.

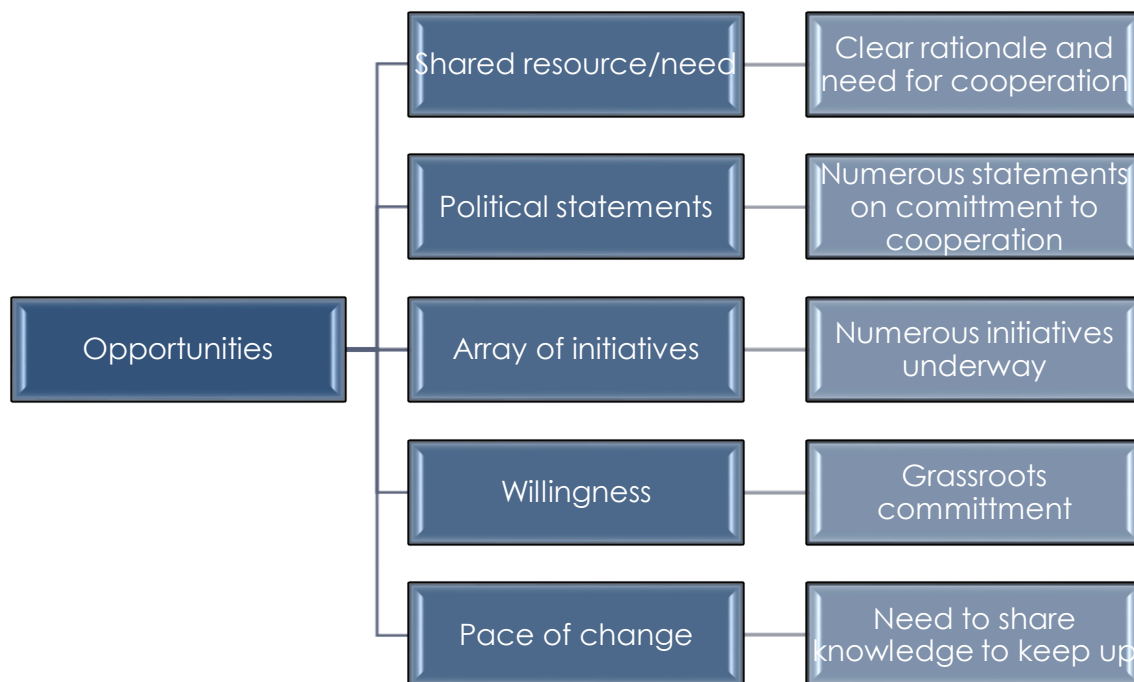
Even in relation to DISC, the project evaluation notes the fact that all administrations lack capacity, with variable levels of institutional investment and backing. Some partners have an explicit cross-border remit while others participate in DISC alongside other priorities and roles.¹⁰ On this basis, positioning cooperation efforts within the arrangements already in place,

providing designated officials with a cross-border remit, making cooperation as 'easy as possible' and addressing the gaps and barriers identified are key considerations.

3.3 Opportunities for future cooperation

Alongside the barriers and challenges discussed above, the interview and workshop results also supported the literature and policy review findings on opportunities for future cooperation around the Irish Sea, with recurring themes again in evidence (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Opportunities for cooperation



Shared resource/need

Territorial cooperation is widely pursued internationally as a means for areas with shared interests to address joint challenges and opportunities and as an interface between stakeholders such as science and policy makers.¹¹ The area around the Irish Sea is bounded by Northern Ireland, Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England, and also the Isle of Man. It spans multiple national jurisdictions, an international border, and an EU and non-EU Member State boundary. It encompasses a diverse set of governance arrangements and levels of government: UK and Irish Government; devolved governments within the UK (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland); a self-governing British crown dependency (Isle of Man); regional assemblies (Ireland); and county and local authorities. More importantly the areas share regional economic development opportunities, challenges, connections and interdependencies.

Political statements

The high level of commitment to Irish Sea cooperation has been repeatedly emphasised. The Irish Sea is described as “*water which connects rather than divides us*”¹². Scotland’s First Minister stated that “*For Scotland, regional cooperation is vital. That includes cooperation on these isles. Whatever Scotland’s constitutional future, England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will form a distinct family of nations.*”

Notably, in some cases, the contribution of the Irish Sea Framework and two-year DISC project have been highlighted. For example, the Ireland-Wales Shared Statement 2030 states: “*We welcome initiatives such as the Developing Irish Sea Cooperation (DISC), which we hope can support wider collaboration around the Irish Sea*” ...“*In carrying forward our work, we will actively look to extend our collaboration and cooperation into new and emerging fields.*”¹³ Similarly, the Ireland Scotland Framework states: “*We welcome initiatives such as the Developing Irish Sea Cooperation (DISC) (a PEACEPLUS funded project), with its aim to support wider collaboration around the Irish Sea*”.¹⁴

Array of bilateral links

Engagement takes place across multiple scales from high-level governmental dialogue to long-standing links between partner organisations ‘on-the ground’. The complexity and density of links across the Irish Sea and opportunities to connect through wider initiatives e.g. Horizon Europe is a huge opportunity but also daunting. There is an associated opportunity for territorial cooperation to offer a means to navigate and connect with bilateral initiatives and wider networks. Any addition to current arrangements must therefore ‘fill a gap’ and ‘add value’, rather than becoming another structure exacerbating the confusion expressed by some interviewees.

Willingness

A clear message in the interviews and symposium discussions is the willingness to cooperate and the appetite to take forward links. For example, the work of the DISC project has helped maintain a territorial cooperation focus and capacity at a time when UK nations have moved away from this. There is an abundance of places/institutions/individuals that are already keen - “*It’s there to be built on*” (see also Figure 4).

Figure 4: Stakeholder willingness to cooperate around and across the Irish Sea

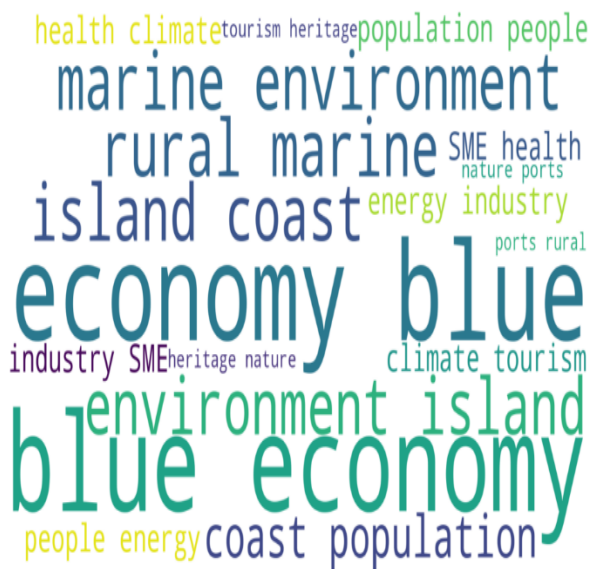


Source: stakeholder interviews

Pace of change

The pace and unpredictability of change underline the value of cooperation and collaboration as a means to enhance flexibility and responsiveness, boost innovation and support social cohesion. Turning to trusted partnerships and near neighbours is also a valued element of territorial cooperation at a time of heightened geopolitical instability. Strategic policy documents regularly call for more cooperation and exchange, but as has been noted, operationalising these ambitions is challenging.

4 OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION ON KEY THEMES



Alongside the wider and more general cooperation opportunities highlighted through the policy and literature review, interviews and workshops, consideration of intergovernmental cooperation also underlines opportunities for cooperation on the specific DISC project themes.

Previous work for the DISC project and linked to the development of the Irish Sea Framework identified three key thematic areas for territorial cooperation targeting regional economic development in the area. They reflect existing capacity, complement many existing and planned policies and programmes, and link to

future development needs.

1. **Priority 1: Sustainable Blue Economy.** This recognises that the Irish Sea, Celtic Sea and North Channel are key assets. It also recognises the shared challenges of climate change and net zero policy. Marine energy and renewables, including decarbonisation and green energy (offshore wind generation, hydrogen, etc) are a key opportunity. The role of ports, the fishing industry and coastal communities are also considerations. Balance is needed to maximise economic opportunities and protect the environment and biodiversity.
2. **Priority 2: Innovation Strengths.** This recognises that innovation across sectors is a key enabler. This may include research but with a focus on impact and collaboration with the private sector. Health and life sciences are a key opportunity. The principles of the EU concept of Smart Specialisation will be used to identify other opportunities. There is also potential for the transfer of international knowledge to improve the direct delivery of priorities, e.g., in health and Net Zero.
3. **Priority 3: Communities & culture.** This recognises the importance of coastal and rural communities. There is also the potential to include urban communities. It recognises the shared history and culture in the Irish Sea space. There is an opportunity to engage through arts, culture, heritage and sports. Community assets, leveraged for economic benefit, can increase tourism and support marine based industries.¹⁵

These themes are not 'exclusive' and a **horizon scanning element to future work could be a valuable addition**, boosting capacity for the territory in terms of innovation and early adoption of new approaches in new areas of activity. Nevertheless, **there is also value in 'working with what's there'**, especially during a period dominated by multiple resource and policy challenges. On each of the three themes identified, the following sections outline opportunities for cooperation to inform thinking on intergovernmental cooperation drawing on workshop and stakeholder interviews, as well as the literature and policy review.

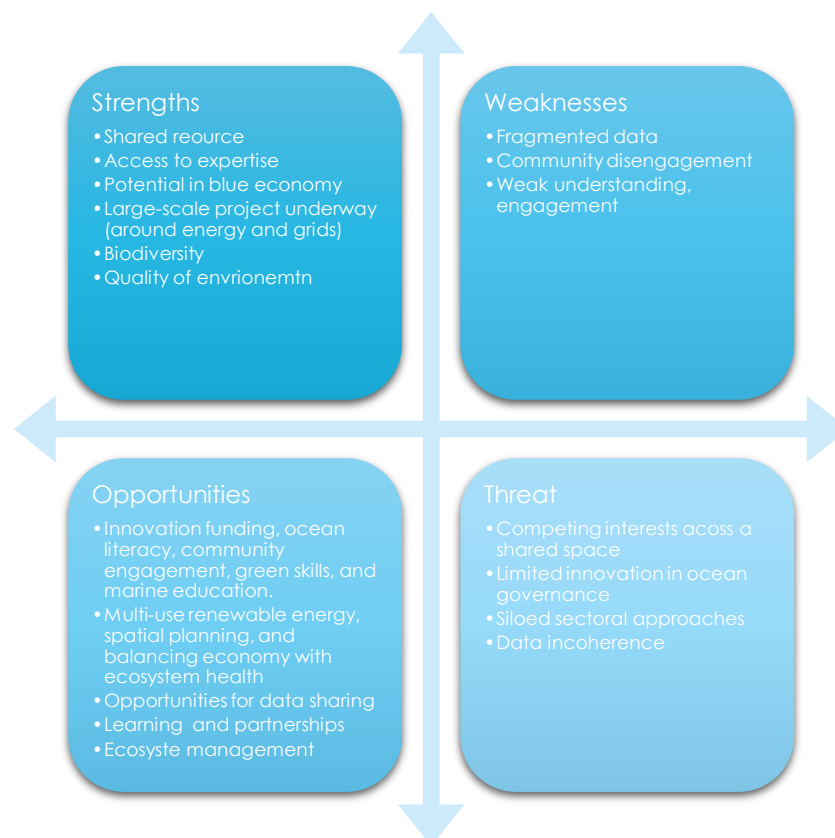
4.1 Sustainable Blue Economy

In relation to the blue economy there is an extremely strong logic for cooperation, as it is based on:

“Shared seas and ecosystems; need for shared ecosystem management; similar regulatory and technical challenges; and need to reduce cost and risk for industry.”

“Right now, the world seems to be moving very, very fast. ...So, you know, it's hard to keep up with all the emerging new networks and forums.”

Even more so than other areas of cooperation, the marine space, and coastal regions, are the focus of multiple cooperation plans, frameworks and agreements, including, for example, Maritime Area Plans, National Maritime Planning Frameworks, Project Ireland Marine 2040, and EU regulations and definitions. Linked to developments in the Irish Sea there is also an Irish-UK Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Energy Transition, Offshore Renewables and Electricity Interconnection. ‘Neighbouring’ initiatives such as the Atlantic Area Strategy and Plan and Greater North Sea Initiative are also important to consider.



More widely, there are multiple cooperation initiatives on marine spatial planning and development, and Ireland and the UK have agreed to cooperate on seabed mapping and marine planning. This presents an already crowded cooperation space, the risk of duplication of effort and pressures on capacity. These challenges are increased by different perspectives,

structures and policies across the jurisdictions and limitations in the availability of resources and capacity to cooperate.

On the one hand, the intensity of activity and complexity of arrangements poses a challenge for any new territorial cooperation arrangement targeting blue growth. On the other hand, stakeholders point out that, particularly in relation to a shared resource such as the Irish Sea, it underlines the value of, and need for, cooperation and exchange to navigate the existing structures, capitalise on the collaborative work already being done, and develop future oriented collaboration.

“We just want everybody on the bus [or boat] going in the same direction”

“help coordinate a little bit, ... or just create a little bit of momentum around that Irish Sea cooperation, coordinate activities maybe, or just be a signposting, anything we can, but also act as a way of connecting everybody in with Horizon Europe and possible funding or networks. I mean, I think overall, one of our overarching aims is to bring people together.”

These are areas in which there are experienced and active partners who could be well placed to deliver ‘quick wins’ and tangible examples of beneficial cooperation. The commitment to continuing links and delivering benefits to the territory are also evidenced by initiatives pursued through Agile Cymru support to undertake a series of workshops focused on Blue Growth. The events were organised between the University of Bangor, Ulster Wildlife Trust and University College Cork, were well attended and took place in each of the participating areas. They generated a momentum for cooperation and led to wider links, such as participation at the European Oceans Day. This shows the potential of even relatively modest knowledge exchange and networking events, and the scope for Irish Sea cooperation to be a platform for wider engagement.

“really nice momentum and positivity around cooperation around this Irish Sea”

“representation of the Irish Sea and those nations around it within the Atlantic and Arctic lighthouse and how that's very, very important right now.”

“So the positive, there is a lot of positive momentum, but I will say one of the things that we're hampered by is the amount of funding that we can utilise and get access to.”

Previous projects (e.g. Selkie) demonstrated potential gains through, e.g. the value of industry–academia collaboration and creation of useful tools and networks. They also provide a solid base of experience to draw on in order to engage with the high-level strategic commitments which have been made e.g. under the UK-Ireland Shared Statement 2026.

SeaMonitor July 2017-2023 was a unique marine research project, studying the seas around Ireland, western Scotland and Northern Ireland. It delivered Europe's largest telemetric marine array and spatial models supporting conservation and management plans.

As well as making its own contribution the project was successful in connecting to other projects, with working relationships strengthened with existing projects such as COMPASS, MarPAMM, Catchment CARE, and SWELL. The project was a partnership of nine funded partners in Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland, with non-funded partners located in Canada and the US.



Source: interviews and <https://www.seupb.eu/latest/case-studies/seamonitor>

With support from Agile Cymru and led by the University of Bangor, in 2023/24 a series of workshops, funded by Agile Cymru were held in locations around the Irish and Celtic seas (Belfast, Cork, Anglesey and Cardiff) to meet with interested stakeholders and determine the need for an 'Irish and Celtic Sea lighthouse'.

As with the European Mission lighthouses, e.g. Blue Mission Atlantic and Arctic lighthouse, the Irish and Celtic Sea lighthouse would focus on fostering cooperation and building strategic relations between Wales and Ireland. The output from the workshops suggested support for the formation of a hub to coordinate activity and link to other networks and hubs to increase activity within the Blue Economy whilst remaining sustainable and resilient.



The workshops and resulting report all found a strong appetite to co-create and collaborate across regions and nations to bring about whole system solutions to multifaceted challenges.

Source: interviews and Agile Cymru, (2024) Agile Cymru Irish Sea Report

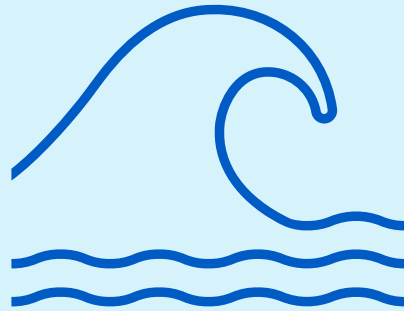
Highlighted opportunity areas are outlined in Box 2.

Box 2: Highlighted opportunity areas – Sustainable blue economy

Specific opportunities are identified in relation to:

- Cooperation (and associated funding) especially around jurisdiction / strategy overlaps
- Projects linked to cost and risk reduction in renewable energy, e.g. shared test sites
- Investigation into sub-sea infrastructure connections (e.g. data)
- Aquaculture and seaweed
- Data and knowledge sharing around marine planning and regulation
- Marine restoration and nature finance
- Marine and aquaculture supply chains
- Planning and shared resources/infrastructure for marine research, e.g. options to access to Irish/UK Marine Institute vessels / cross-country collaboration

- Irish & Celtic Sea 'Lighthouse'
- Opportunities around planning and ports
- Cooperation on climate change mitigation (e.g. around ports)
- Helping people to work with the marine environment
- Collaborative evidence-gathering and target-setting for blue growth
- Education, citizen science and the role of both volunteers and scientists in collating data sets
- Nature-based solutions driven by coastal communities supporting sustainable regional development.
- Blue sustainability investment fund

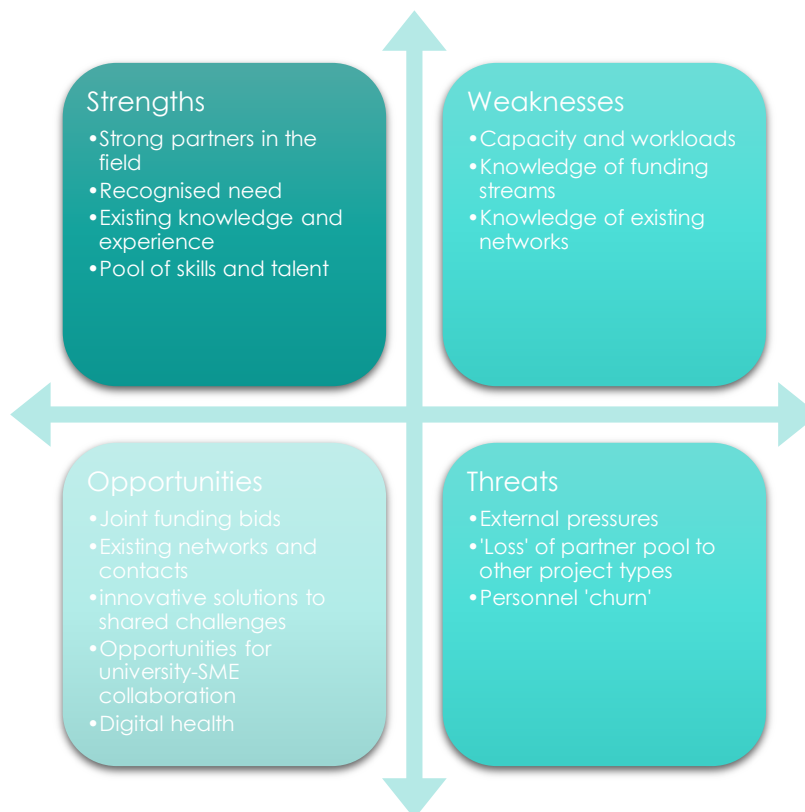


Note: Findings also draw on and aim to align with Agile Cymru (2024) Agile Cymru Irish Sea Report

“An overarching aim to bring people together, collaborative partnerships to be able to answer some of the questions that we've got, some of the challenges that we've got. And that's where I can see that [cooperation] can actually do something really quite impactful ...or really be quite innovative across the space.”

4.2 Innovation through health and life sciences

The DISC project's focus on cooperation in the life and health sciences sector builds on shared existing strengths across the participant countries.



Project partners working on innovation in this space are both highly experienced and enthusiastic on pursuing cooperation across the Irish Sea. The strength of their commitment to cooperation is evidenced by **ongoing efforts to maintain networks, both formally and informally**. Examples include the life sciences business support networks on the island of Ireland supported by Intertrade Ireland² and the network arising from the Interreg Wales Calin project in Wales, which has been supported by Agile Cymru funding.

CALIN (the Celtic Advanced Life Science Innovation Network) was a four-year Ireland-Wales INTERREG project with a total budget of c. €10.3 million, which supported R&D programmes for SMEs in the life science sector.

CALIN connected businesses with the Welsh and Irish academic knowledge base including six higher education institutes: three in Wales (Swansea University (Lead), Bangor University and Cardiff University) and three in Ireland



² https://intertradeireland.com/assets/files/All-Island-Oncology-Industry-Report_FINAL.pdf

(University College Dublin, Tyndall National Institute-Cork and National University of Ireland Galway). The HEIs brought a broad mix of different strengths and specialisms, and SMEs were linked up with the most appropriate partner for their needs.

CALIN supported over 200 SMEs, split evenly between Ireland and Wales. Around 70 SMEs went on to do further projects, including with PhD students for three-year projects and smaller projects ranging from 3 months to two years. Feedback from supported businesses was found to be extremely positive.

Source: interviews and <https://www.irelandwales.eu/projects/calin>

This deep enthusiasm and commitment reflects a shared recognition of the importance of cooperation to the sector. Territorial cooperation seen as particularly valuable in pressured health systems, where space for reflection and innovation can be limited.

“it’s the value of giving them a couple of days headspace, which they don’t have in their day-to-day work.”

The strong benefits of joint cooperation projects have been such that partners would welcome improved visibility amongst policymakers, to heighten awareness and improve the links between policy and what is happening on the ground within cooperation projects.



iSIMPATHTY
making medication personal

iSIMPATHTY was a €3.1 million project supported under the Interreg VA Northern Ireland – Ireland – Scotland programme during 2019-2023.

iSIMPATHTY sought to transform the approach to optimisation of medicines through the delivery of medicine reviews to over 6,000 patients taking multiple medicines, and in delivering training to 120 GPs, hospital doctors and pharmacists. It provided a significant contribution towards the embedding of a single approach for polypharmacy management as well as firmly establishing the value of cross-border working in this field.

The project was managed by the Scottish Government, the Health Service Executive, the Medicines Optimisation Innovation Centre and the Special European Projects Body (SEUPB), with delivery partners NHS Highland, NHS Dumfries & Galloway, NHS Ayrshire & Arran, Health Service Executive CH01 and CH08, and Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Source: <https://www.isimpathy.eu/>

The mPower project was funded through the INTERREG VA Programme for Northern Ireland–Ireland–Scotland. With a budget of €8.7 million, the project ran from 2017-22 and aimed to support older people (age 65+) living with long-term conditions across the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. mPower worked with communities to enable people to take the steps needed to live well, safely and independently in their own homes by self-managing their own health and care in the community. Community Navigators were employed to work with people referred from health and care services to develop wellbeing



plans connecting them to activities in their community as well as connecting them to technology to enhance support for health and wellbeing.

Source: <https://mpowerhealth.eu/about/>

The enthusiasm for cooperation also reflects awareness of and strong alignment on the shared challenges, such as those presented by demographic pressures, rurality and access issues, and the sustainability of health and care systems.

“Those specific shared interests and areas where we could do more together than apart.”

Cooperation in this sector provides opportunities for sharing expertise and learning, identifying and sharing better ways of doing things and bringing them back to participants' home environments, leading to better processes, systems and results.

“it's the value of taking professionals, whether they're community and voluntary sector or clinicians and saying come and meet somebody who's doing a very similar job to you [.....] open your ears, they'll want to hear what you're doing”

Previous initiatives have supported multi-sectoral links, for example by involving the public sector, universities, SMEs and the third sector.

“you've then got this much broader access to a huge amount of expertise that we don't have in-house either side of the border, which was a real bonus for the businesses.”

Cooperation is also seen as a potential gateway to wider European engagement, particularly where Ireland retains stronger links than the UK, as well as supporting the pursuit of joint funding opportunities. However, several interviewees noted that European funding programmes such as Horizon Europe are now considerably more competitive and difficult to obtain.

A common thread for interviewees when discussing future areas of opportunities (see Box 3) was a focus on digital innovation, which is seen to lend itself especially well to cross-border cooperation.

“there's always a richness around digital health because it's so easy to share solutions. You can certainly design them so that they're not system specific, they're not too tied down. There's enough interoperability so that everybody can have their cake and eat it, so to speak.”

Box 3: Highlighted opportunity areas - life sciences and health

Key opportunity areas identified include:

- digital health & digital mental health
- rural health and service delivery
- population health
- health inequalities
- aquaculture, agri-tech and animal health

- healthy ageing
- addiction services & digital addiction support
- women's health
- obesity & weight management

4.3 Communities and culture



The theme of culture and communities is inherently wide-ranging, encompassing topics from heritage and the arts to language, identity, social wellbeing and civic participation. Around the Irish Sea space, these themes sit within a long tradition of cross-border and multilateral connection, shaped by shared geography, longstanding social ties and overlapping cultural histories. These historic links provide a natural platform for continued collaboration across the region, creating a strong foundation for cooperation while also allowing space for diverse and locally-driven initiatives.

“...there's definitely an affinity there... definitely a shared culture and history.”

“Culture connections are also really strong and very varied.”

The breadth of the theme creates wide-ranging opportunities for cooperation, but it also carries risks, including overlap with existing initiatives and being vulnerable to losing momentum or funding to competing priorities. Interviewees also noted that national tourism and heritage bodies can sometimes adopt inward-looking or protectionist approaches, which may limit their appetite for collaboration with neighbouring regions.

The communities and culture theme has attracted diverse engagement during DISC symposia and interviews. In particular, the **Culture & Communities Network/Steering Group** set up under DISC continues to meet regularly. The network has identified three sub-themes.



Regenerative tourism: Tourism that is sustainable, or actively regenerative, has emerged as a priority for many places around the Irish Sea. It reflects a shared recognition that visitor economies must support, rather than strain, local environments and communities, and that coordinated action can help achieve long-term resilience and shared value. Regenerative tourism offers a broad framework for cooperation, encompassing environmental stewardship, community wellbeing and the diversification of local economies. Within the Irish Sea context, these approaches draw strength from a common natural heritage and a collective ambition to manage visitor pressures responsibly. Existing cooperation activity around tourism has tended to emphasise North-South/all-Ireland shared tourism products that rely on cultural assets or events (e.g. major sporting events, screen tourism, culinary and whiskey-based tourism), rather than broader cooperation across the Irish Sea space.



Maritime heritage: Maritime heritage represents a wide and diverse platform for regional cooperation, spanning tangible assets such as historic vessels and waterfront sites, as well as intangible traditions including navigation practices, oral histories, coastal folklore and the shared legacy of life shaped by the sea. These long-standing connections provide a strong basis for collaboration, reflecting centuries of exchange, movement and maritime identity across the region.



Minority languages: As a thematic area, minority languages encompass a broad spectrum of linguistic and cultural practices, from revitalisation initiatives to creative industries and community transmission. In the Irish Sea region, languages such as Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Scots and Ulster Scots are part of a long-standing network of cultural interconnections. As a result, there is already a wide range of initiatives and interactions around this theme, including work by the British Irish Council and bilaterally. As noted in some interviews, minority languages can also be a challenging theme in some areas. However, the symposium and partner feedback also underlined the range of connections around this theme and potential to connect. The scope for cultural cooperation also links closely with the **geographical coverage of Celtic culture**, which could also be broadened to include the Isle of Man, Cornwall, the northwest of England, Brittany in France and Galicia in Spain.

Interviewees also mentioned several aspirational **proposals that have not yet progressed to implementation**, for example, the idea of a Celtic pilgrimage route with UNESCO cross-border designation, or support for cultural cooperation under the North Channel Partnership.



The **CUPHAT** (Coastal Uplands: Heritage and Tourism) project was funded through the Ireland-Wales Cooperation Programme. Led by Aberystwyth University in partnership with University College Dublin and the Dyfed Archaeological Trust, the project involved a range of community, local and national stakeholders.

CUPHAT aimed to showcase the natural and cultural heritage of coastal upland areas in Ireland and Wales to increase sustainable forms of tourism within them, leading to the creation of more sustainable livelihoods, communities and environments. CUPHAT worked with twelve upland communities in the four coastal upland areas of the Cambrian Mountains, Preseli Hills, Wicklow Mountains and Blackstairs Mountains. Project outputs included:

- A guidance document to support regenerative tourism
- A regenerative tourism marketing strategy
- Guidance on starting or enhancing regenerative tourism businesses and community projects
- An audit of pre-existing digital representations of heritage sites in the Wicklow Mountains, Blackstairs Mountains, Cambrian Mountains and Mynydd Preseli.

Source: <https://cuphat.aber.ac.uk/> and <https://coastaluplands.com/about/>

Relating particularly to rural communities, **Community-Led Local Development** was highlighted as a possible forum for future cooperation. In Scotland, for example, domestically-funded Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) has developed from the activity formerly funded under the EU LEADER programme. Under LEADER, cooperation took place between Local Action Groups both inter-territorially and transnationally. The bottom-up ethos of CLLD means that communities themselves determine the theme of their cooperation. Prior to Brexit, there were numerous examples of Local Action Groups in Scotland cooperating with groups in other countries, including in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Cooperation under CLLD in Scotland has not continued to the same extent in recent years, in part due to the LAGs adjusting to the post-LEADER landscape, and constraints imposed by the annual budgeting process (rather than the multi-annual funding previously available). Some 'green shoots' are visible, however, in that some Scottish LAGs have relaunched a CLLD Network for Scotland, and there has also been a rejoining of ELARD, the European LEADER Association for Rural Development, which among its roles facilitates cooperation between LAGs, including in non-EU countries. Further, in March 2026, publication of Scotland's new Rural Support Plan, which outlines domestic arrangements for the sector over the period 2026-31, implies greater budgeting certainty by reintroducing the possibility of multi-annual funding.¹⁶ (Note, however, that Scotland is unique among the UK DISC partners in this development.)

A selection of potential opportunities for cooperation in the culture and communities theme highlighted by interviewees are outlined in Box 4.

Box 4: Key opportunity areas, culture and communities

Key opportunity areas identified by interviewees included:

- a maritime museum network
- environmentally-sensitive coastal tourism and eco-tourism initiatives
- activities preserving local skills and craft/creative economy
- connecting bilateral initiatives to build on shared and distinct cultures
- innovative approaches to local engagement and development in rural and coastal communities
- promoting ocean literacy through education, training, festivals, and connecting land and sea

4.4 Emerging Cooperation Themes

In addition to the three established DISC themes, interviewees also highlighted potential future focus areas. **Maintaining oversight of these themes and topics could be a key role for intergovernmental cooperation**, undertaking medium and longer-term foresight and visioning activity to identify emerging strategic themes and gaps for future cooperation.

“One thing we don’t do particularly well.... horizon scanning....looking long-term to the future.”

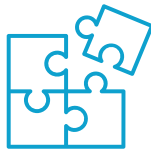
This section highlights the main cross-cutting cooperation themes identified in the interviews which currently fall outside the three DISC priority areas.

Theme	Potential areas for future cooperation
Skills, education & talent mobility Interviewees identified skills shortages, mobility barriers and a fragmented post-Brexit landscape for training and accreditation.	 Shared apprenticeship frameworks or technical skills models; mutual recognition of qualifications (particularly in offshore energy, construction, digital, environmental specialists); a joint skills forecasting model; shared demography and labour market modelling; student, researcher and staff mobility, building on Horizon Europe re-association and linked to internationalisation strategies; joint approaches to talent attraction and retention for rural and peripheral regions; shared training pipelines for specialist shortages (e.g. marine/environmental scientists, ornithologists, data analysts)
Transport, ports, freight & critical infrastructure Transport and infrastructure emerged as high-priority areas for practical cooperation.	 Port governance, vulnerability and resilience (e.g., Port of Holyhead closure impacts); an Irish Sea freight and logistics coordination mechanism linking ports, haulage, and emergency response partners; North Channel connectivity, including ferry routes, freight flows and the long-standing North Channel Partnership; alignment on EV charging, transport regulation and mobility infrastructure (including Scotland-NI precedents); climate resilient infrastructure, especially flooding and coastal erosion/climate-resilient infrastructure; recognition of the South of Scotland as a potential strategic gateway to Ireland/EU
Climate change, Just Transition & environmental resilience Climate change is a shared territorial challenge and potentially a major future driver of cooperation. Interviewees emphasised that climate transition planning requires macro regional collaboration	 Joint climate adaptation planning, including coasts, flooding and shared ecosystems; Just Transition models for rural and coastal economies, including community ownership of renewables; alignment of environmental regulations; cooperation on nature-based solutions and shared biodiversity assets; regenerative tourism as a climate/resilience strategy

across the Irish Sea, rather than isolated national strategies.

Innovation, technology and emerging sectors

Innovation and the potential for a pan-Irish Sea Innovation Zone emerged as a wide-reaching area where cross border collaboration is already happening but is potentially under-supported. Industrial innovation is constrained by capacity and (in the UK) the end of EU mechanisms that previously 'oiled the wheels' of collaboration.



Expansion of medtech, digital and AI-driven models beyond health-specific applications; strengthening digital innovation ecosystems, including data infrastructure, cyber security, and tech transfer; renewable energies (non-marine); joint development of industrial clusters in advanced manufacturing, renewables innovation, food, logistics and digital; improved brokerage between SMEs and universities

Regional and rural development & spatial planning

Rural and peripheral territories across the Irish Sea share similar structural challenges. A jointly designed Irish Sea Rural Futures Programme could pool expertise and reduce duplication.



Rural housing solutions; rural public service innovation, including mobility and digital access; shared approaches to spatial planning, with lessons from Netherlands, Denmark and Germany; integration of rural and coastal economic development agendas; rural community resilience strategies tied to climate change and economic transition

Data infrastructure, data sharing & digital interoperability

The theme featured strongly across jurisdictions; a dedicated Irish Sea Data Spine could underpin cooperation across multiple sectors.



Shared datasets on environment, logistics, climate, tourism and economic performance; digital corridor opportunities via new data cables; addressing digital skills gaps; interoperable data governance frameworks

5 OPPORTUNITIES FOR TERRITORIAL COOPERATION AROUND THE IRISH SEA: CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Opportunities for Territorial Cooperation

Findings from the project's literature and policy review provide an 'evidence base' for future action and established a foundation for the interviews and workshops. In particular the reviews underlined the distinct value in territorial cooperation based on shared and common development opportunities and challenges. Cooperation can range from sporadic consultation involving limited resources to wide-ranging and well-resourced programmes with accompanying institutional frameworks. Each arrangement has pros and cons. However, the fact that territorial cooperation has developed in such a range of ways and in different contexts demonstrates:

- cooperation is widely valued and sought after by stakeholders across sectors and levels of government;
- there is a range of 'entry points' for territorial cooperation, associations, formal programmes, and mixed approaches;
- cooperation efforts change and evolve, participants come and go, arrangements can get more/less formal/lead to spin off initiatives;
- cooperation initiatives 'co-exist' and work in complementary ways to the benefit of all partners; and
- flexibility of territorial cooperation is a key characteristic to highlight.

As noted in the preceding sections of this report, cooperation and collaborative links across the Irish Sea and between the jurisdictions are numerous and play a vital role in development in and around the Irish Sea area. There is a clear willingness and appetite among stakeholders to deepen cooperation. This positive foundation provides a key enabling condition for future cooperation. Also, given the accelerating pace of change (including technological, climate-related and geopolitical), territorial cooperation provides an essential mechanism for collective foresight, flexibility and innovation. At the same time, any addition to current arrangements must also 'fill a gap' and 'add value'. Future initiatives should be explicitly designed to complement rather than replicate existing bilateral and sectoral cooperation mechanisms by acting as an integrator and connector across them.

In summary:

The Irish Sea region has a dense cooperation landscape, but it can be fragmented and difficult to navigate. Across governments, agencies and sectors, there is a large volume of existing collaboration, formal, informal, bilateral, multilateral, sectoral, community-led. Cooperation is uneven, ranging from

deeply embedded operational relationships to thinner, more ad hoc or more relationship-dependent connections. Stakeholders repeatedly noted difficulties in identifying the right contacts, fitting into existing systems, or understanding where efforts overlap.

A 'territorial cooperation gap' exists: cooperation is mostly bilateral, rather than multilateral. Evidence shows that cooperation tends to occur either within Ireland–Northern Ireland or bilaterally between Ireland–Wales or Ireland–Scotland, but rarely across all jurisdictions together. The result is a gap in addressing shared regional development challenges at the level of the wider Irish Sea space.

Loss of EU programmes (especially Interreg) has significantly weakened capacity. Stakeholders describe a loss of expertise, institutional memory, facilitator roles, long-term planning tools and funding stability following Brexit. The relevant teams and staff are often already overstretched. Annual budgeting cycles further undermine continuity and risk-taking. The cooperation system is suffering from erosion of capacity and needs deliberate rebuilding, otherwise, pre-existing networks risk further atrophy.

Regulatory and administrative barriers to cooperation exist but are not the main obstacle. Stakeholders acknowledge divergent regulatory systems, post Brexit administrative burdens and legal complexity. But crucially these issues are not seen as insurmountable; instead, capacity, coordination, and confidence are the more pressing problems. Addressing governance, coordination and institutional capacity will have more impact than technical regulatory solutions.

There is overwhelming willingness and appetite for cooperation. Across all jurisdictions and sectors, interviewees consistently highlight strong enthusiasm for collaboration. This is a very positive asset. Many networks have continued informally without funding, demonstrating resilience and demand.

The three DISC themes are particularly cooperation-ready. The Blue Economy (marine planning, offshore renewables), digital health, and community/cultural connections all show strong foundations, existing networks, and proven benefits from past cooperation. These areas offer immediate 'early wins' for demonstrating value and rebuilding momentum.

Emerging cross-cutting themes require oversight and future planning. These include strategically important themes with potential for future cooperation. A foresight function (horizon scanning) is needed to track emerging opportunities.

Cooperation should complement rather than duplicate existing structures. The Irish Sea landscape is already crowded with initiatives and dialogues. Any new mechanism must be light touch and integrative, with a focus on filling gaps, linking systems, and enabling coherence.

5.2 Conclusions: looking ahead

The messages from the literature and policy review, reinforced by the feedback from stakeholders, highlights an evolving role for intergovernmental cooperation in supporting and encouraging cooperation. It also offers insights into the flexible approaches and models that can be adapted and applied to suit the specific conditions in the Irish Sea area, see Table 5 Error! Reference source not found.

Table 5: Potential Roles

	Early stage	Framing and piloting	Scaling, mainstreaming	Acting in mature frameworks and policy ecosystems
Steward	Champion Support positive change in relation to territorial cooperation	Convening role Draw together expertise	Connecting networks Fostering connections between networks and partners	Co-producing Facilitate collective joint solutions
Leader	Agenda informing Build awareness and confidence in opportunities	Planning With a view to the future, help plan for future capacity needs and demands in relation to cooperation	Informing Building information	Collaborating Providing platforms for stakeholders to exchange views
Provider	Innovator Forum for testing and trialing	Foresight Harnessing capacity to consider needs in the future	Services Support capacity building	Insights Knowledge and information sharing
Funder	Early adopter Explore and trail new opportunities of territorial, strategic added value	Incentives for future cooperation Direct support to stimulate new thinking	Support for wider engagement Incentives/support to attend meetings/events	Platform provision Scale up proven ideas
'Influencer' / Communicator	Catalyst Accelerate cooperation and engagement	Communications Visible and engaged	Disseminator Supporting information circulation, sharing dissemination	Engage wider networks and initiatives Presence and engagement in wider networks

Author adaptation based on <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2017/09/22/designing-policy/>

Capturing, communicating and coordinating



There is a need to **build a knowledge base** to inform more effective and efficient cooperation

and coordination and support routes to act jointly on shared interests and challenges identified in shared statements. There is also a need to communicate and coordinate on the range of regional economic development activities underway or planned across the territory.

There is value in not just knowledge sharing, but knowledge building, with a view to having a 'knowledge bank' and a resource to connect and capitalise on links.



"Future cooperation frameworks must actively address asymmetries in funding access, capacity, and institutional backing to avoid undermining reciprocity and long-term sustainability."

There is strong evidence that multiple disconnected networks, fragmented evidence, stakeholder confusion about who to contact and the need for mapping and signposting justify a mechanism such as an Irish Sea knowledge bank. Furthermore, there are points where a territorial, collaborative approach can, e.g., deliver practical/'relatable' steps towards meeting wider strategic objectives, amplify impact and/or up-scale and/or extend the visibility, networks and engagement of sectoral and smaller scale initiatives and help identify gaps for action in the future.

- The literature and policy review developed as part of this study, along with the work of the project evaluation, provides a useful starting point and could be readily updated, e.g. as joint statements are revised and the successor to the PEACEPLUS programme is developed.
- Multiple interviewees identified a need for forward looking joint planning, rather than reactive cooperation, such as a shared Irish Sea Foresight Unit producing annual scenarios and strategic analyses, and long term strategic planning for the Irish Sea as a macro region (energy, climate, transport, digital corridors).

- A contact point role is valuable as facilitator 'conduit' role, draw in learning, resource and capability.

Retaining and building capacity and knowledge of territorial cooperation



As well as an information resource, there is value in retaining and building capacity. **Knowledge exchange, the opportunity to learn from best practice, and building capacity** are widely recognised aspects of the added value of territorial cooperation. Networks, links and relationships between key stakeholders form the foundations of these connections. They can help save time and effort through shared efforts, boost and amplify individual inputs, support beneficial synergies that improve results, support forward planning and foresight and improve the wider cooperation environment, smoothing the path for wider cooperation in new fields. These connections can take time to establish and take effort to maintain but can be lost extremely quickly.

Looking across the cooperation fora already in place, the 'gap' is where policy makers can have an open 'informal yet informed' dialogue and engage more widely with partners engaged in territorial cooperation. This could be addressed through the following.

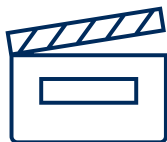
- **Some form of regular 'steering group'**- type meetings. However, given the challenges in securing attendance, pressures on travel budgets, and multiple commitments stakeholders have to fulfil, it is important that any meetings can involve on-line participation if needed, are not excessive in number and length, and could be held alongside/on the margins of other events. Having an element of routine/regularity is helpful, but it is also important to incorporate flexibility and responsiveness. While it is important to have a core partnership and participation by key stakeholders, it is worth considering widening partnerships to include 'trusted partners' and make more strategic use of intermediaries and existing networks.¹⁷ This would draw in knowledge and expertise and help maintain momentum. The role of the steering group could involve:
 - making recommendations to link existing or proposed funded initiatives where these would amplify impact, reduce duplication and, potentially, reduce costs;
 - signposting the work/ initiatives already underway to avoid duplication of effort;
 - discussing and identifying 'routes', specific issues for cooperation in the future on an ongoing basis;
 - if a small, dedicated resource is secured, as will be discussed, the steering group would be responsible for decisions on allocations and use.
- **Seminars and events** – opportunities to engage and meet in person at DISC events held in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Dublin have been important for a number of reasons: for sharing ideas, indicating commitment, drawing together diverse stakeholders and offering a platform to build on. There is an opportunity to take forward this momentum and develop this process. Options include:
 - Having a 'DISC' / or Irish Sea seminar series – a select number of policy relevant seminars/briefings on relevant themes/issues, e.g. developments in the external

policy environment such as emergence of new EU Interreg programmes, overviews on new joint statements, policy frameworks, presentation of new relevant policy initiatives. These could be targeted specifically at a policy practitioner audience.

- To boost the profile of territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea, visibility at other events and fora is useful. For example, a 'representative/s' of the group could attend events and talk about Irish Sea Cooperation to build further connections and in turn feed back to the wider group and share information. Thus, part of any future work should ensure communication and information sharing on the overall principles and rationale for territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea, e.g. through presentations at partner events, easy to disseminate information on Irish Sea Cooperation and key themes, a web-page with updates on progress and initiatives.
- Network meetings could be held bringing together partners from specific areas of activity. For example, the national Horizon contact points could meet and share information.

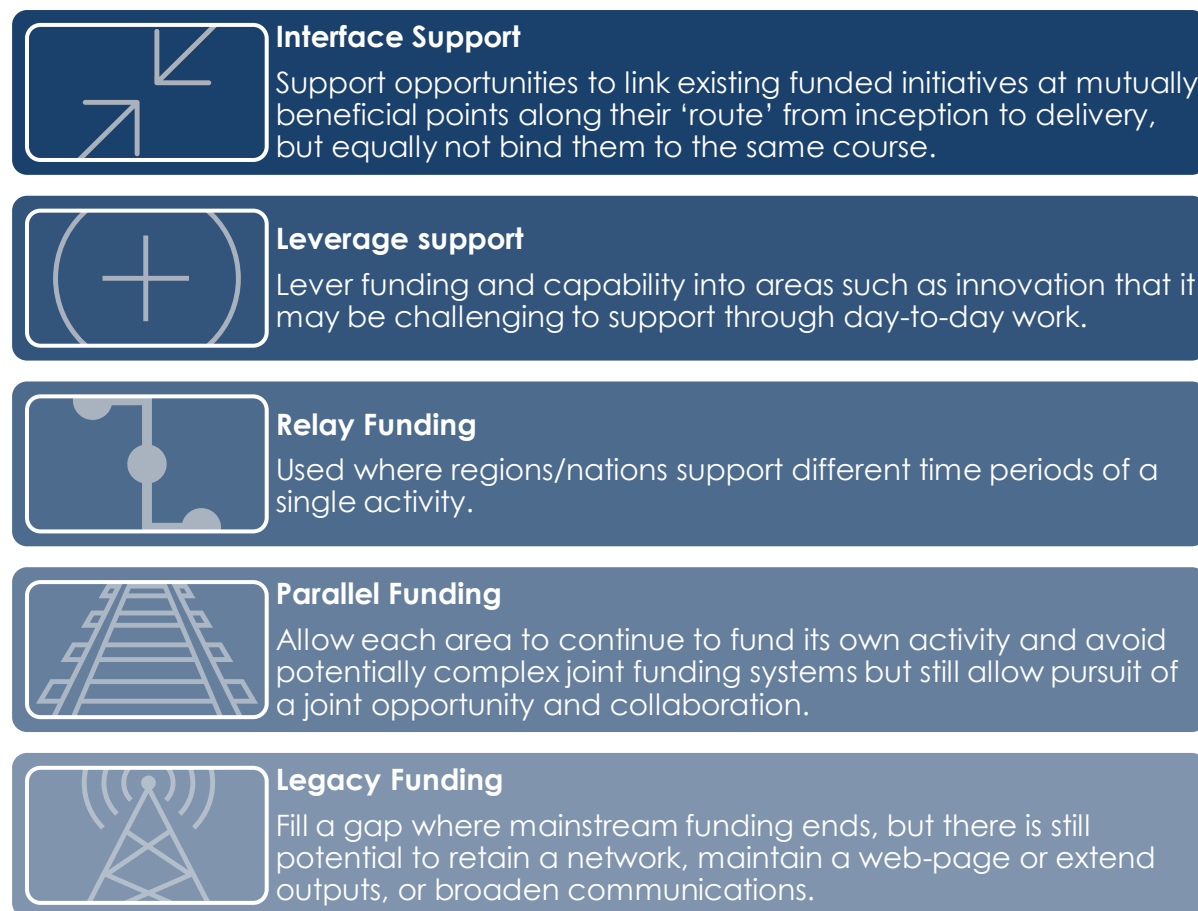
Most importantly, whatever options are taken, even seemingly small initiatives can have a big impact, e.g. initial exploratory contacts to gauge interest can reveal substantial untapped interest/potential. Together these types of initiatives and approaches would facilitate the capacity to develop and evolve cooperation in line with changing policy and development contexts. It could also help to promote a better balance across cooperation networks. Cooperation is more attractive where it helps ensure balanced contributions and benefits across partners.

Identifying opportunities and delivering results



The capacity to **act on the identified opportunities** is also important. Any funding for territorial cooperation efforts must be very carefully justified and in no way duplicate existing funding streams. Furthermore, it is important to be realistic about the opportunities and availability of funding in the current economic climate. Access to dedicated funding is likely to be limited. Nevertheless, even small-scale support could make a big difference. For example, while a funding resource for a project is always well received, there is also value in support to enable, e.g. an in-person meeting or attendance at a joint event. Building on and linked to the work of a steering group, there are also opportunities to link to or draw together established funding to maximise reach and impact, increase results, and reduce or share cost or risk. Relatively modest funding could help to address the funding asymmetries between partners by providing a bridging point between those stakeholders managing substantial budgets and dealing with the associated pressures, and those with more limited resources, but with the capacity to add value by bringing knowhow and experience. Options could be as follows.

Figure 5: Future funding options

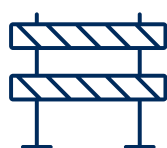


Agile Cymru

Even comparatively small schemes like Agile Cymru can have a major impact in supporting the continuation of cooperation – helping to maintain networks and supporting building new proposals/seeking new sources of funding. It also sends a clear message that international collaboration is a priority.

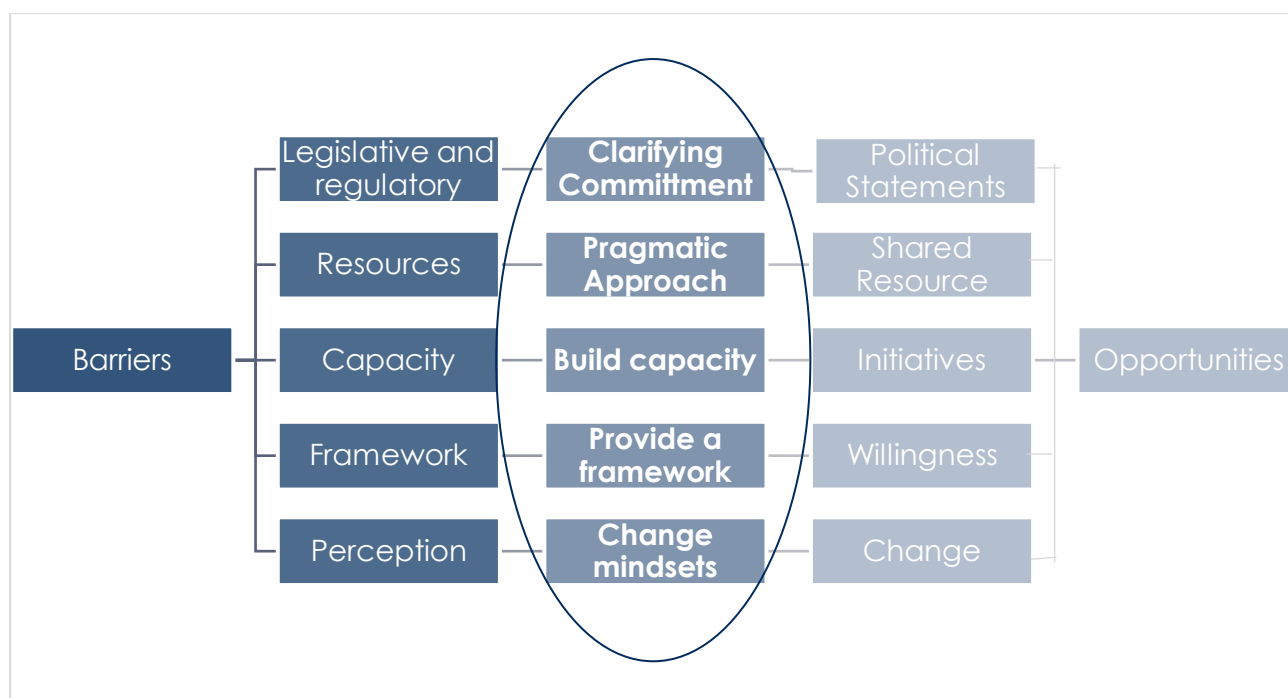


Addressing barriers and taking opportunities



These types of actions fulfil important roles in **addressing regional development barriers and opportunities** at an operational level for the stakeholders most directly engaged in delivery and enabling. Most notably, barriers and opportunities are addressed in relation to mindsets and perspectives, commitment, frameworks and leadership, and capacity.

Figure 6: The interface between barriers and opportunities



Clarifying commitment

Any cooperation initiative benefits from a **clear position and well-structured, clear governance**. A clear statement or initiative on Irish Sea territorial cooperation would take forward the broad commitments made in joint statements and recognise the individual efforts of organisations and networks. Strong, clear leadership and signalling from key partners would help get the most out of even modest resources and help address real and perceived regulatory and administrative barriers to cooperation.

In contrast, ambiguity at a strategic level can leave project partners in an uncertain position, having to justify or push their role, having to address issues beyond their technical skills and expertise or simply losing any drive, capacity and commitment to this type of cooperation activity. Imbalance and variable commitment are barriers to cooperation. As was made clear in interviews, organisations are not comfortable in collaborative arrangements where they feel that one or more organisation is 'putting in' more or is more committed than the others.

However, addressing asymmetries and variation are also important arguments for action on territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea. It may be that the political, financial and resource commitments that can be made across the partners will differ. Some may have a more 'hands-off' approach. Territorial cooperation can fall within the jurisdiction of various different government departments, including international, EU funding, regional development, other sectoral areas, which adds to complexity. Additionally, there is value in openness to new partners, e.g. in western England. Where possible this can be accommodated, e.g. with engagement in some activities and not others, e.g. partners could be invited to seminars and

events on an ad hoc basis. However, to deliver any substantial value there must be some kind of leadership, formal commitment and facilitation. At minimum, positions and expectations should be clearly set out.

Taking a pragmatic approach

The **availability of resources, financial, institutional and staff** for even modest actions is a challenge. This issue cuts across multiple stakeholders, from national governments to local government (which have been key partners in territorial cooperation in the past) and from government agencies to universities. All have to make difficult choices about 'extra' activities. Staff shortages and short-term financial pressures make it difficult to look beyond 'business as usual' rather than innovation/even survival mode in some cases. There is a risk of organisations becoming protective of funds rather than strategic. More widely, interviewees noted a more competitive, less collaborative culture in some sectors, such as renewable energies.

In this context, any discussion of a 'new' initiative faces questions around strategic engagement and alignment with objectives, value for money and financial viability, risk and impact. Furthermore, the range of bilateral and multilateral initiatives already in place between governments, local authorities, universities and others is already intense. However, there is an opportunity to help stakeholders navigate the at times confusing and opaque array of initiatives, clarifying what's already going on, who the interested actors are, what ongoing cooperation they could join, or whether they are duplicating existing efforts. Cooperation around the Irish Sea also offers an opportunity to take complementary action to support existing initiatives and networks. It can be developed in a way that is complementary, delivers impact but does not demand substantial resource.

(Re) Building knowhow and capacity

The loss of **capacity in relation to territorial cooperation** across the area, and in particular the UK territories, was widely noted by respondents. Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the loss of institutional memory and reduced capacity for cooperation as a significant barrier.

The constraints identified are acute and multi-dimensional linked to,

- loss of expertise and institutional memory of territorial cooperation after several years without Interreg programmes. Losses are made more acute as the strength of partnerships can be very dependent on individuals.
- loss of facilitator, 'conduit' roles in the UK partner countries, which drew in learning resource and capability. Previously, national contact points for territorial cooperation programmes offered help where potential participants had limited capacity, provided a clear port of call, boosted awareness, and facilitated cooperation. There was a sense that it was useful having someone whose job it was to spend the time speaking to people, going places, and making and facilitating contacts.

Loss of capacity is even more impactful as cooperation takes perseverance and effort to build up over a sustained period, which is made all the more difficult when capacity is constrained. A commitment to rebuilding mechanisms that support institutional continuity, knowledge retention and stakeholder navigation would add value in relation to opportunities linked to territorial cooperation. It is also a transferrable resource to work across a range of fields and initiatives, e.g. engagement in Horizon Europe.

Providing a framework

Cooperation efforts need a **framework to provide structure, focus and ensure a balanced and reciprocal relationship**. In the past with Interreg programmes, formal multi-year funding programmes provided this framework. In the short-term, current imbalances and asymmetries in resources and institutional commitments make it difficult to envisage a detailed framework or programme for cooperation along the lines of an Interreg programme. However, a framework, reflecting the flexibility in cooperation noted in the literature review, would provide a focal point for cooperation, some routes or objectives for collaboration, and help incentivise action.

As mentioned above, any new arrangements must 'fill a gap'. One such gap which has been consistently evidenced across literature and in interviews is the presence of a territorial cooperation gap. Bilateral links are thriving, but there are fewer mechanisms linking N-S and E-W partners simultaneously. Future cooperation frameworks should explicitly position future cooperation to fill this multilateral gap.

Where possible, a support system or mechanism would be invaluable and make cooperation easier to initiate and sustain. For example, some form of Contact/Information Point to help make connections, troubleshooting, signposting and acting as a conduit between partners in different countries would be highly valuable. Drawing on the experience of other cooperation formats, the specific function and role of the contact point can vary.

Most commonly, they fulfil a supportive, advisory role under the supervision of the steering group. This involves an individual in addition to the steering group members. The contact point can act as a 'first point of contact' for stakeholders, can provide valuable input to steering group meetings and provide information and advice/support. Given the likely pressure on resources, maintaining an individual 'contact point' for each jurisdiction may not be practical. It could also be perceived as 'limiting' cooperation to areas with a named contact and excluding England and the Isle of Man. However, at minimum a 'cooperation' contact with a clear remit in relation to Irish Sea intergovernmental cooperation would be valuable. Intergovernmental cooperation focussing on the Irish Sea area could position itself as a 'convening hub', a mechanism that interlinks multiple initiatives, prevents duplication, and channels knowledge between jurisdictions. In this case, having regularly updated key contacts for each authority would still be valuable.

Changing mindsets and perspectives

Recent years have been uniquely challenging for territories around the Irish Sea following Covid and Brexit and in the face of rapid and complex change. Related to this, there are changing mindsets in relation to cooperation and a sense that:

- some organisations may not yet have fully emerged from the inward-looking focus that characterised the aftermath of these periods.
- cooperation has become (and is perceived to have become) more difficult politically and administratively. Cooperation is increasingly framed as a “nice to do” rather than “must do” under current pressures and with competing priorities.
- imbalances in opportunity around the Irish Sea make establishing partnerships seem harder and can contribute to reluctance. *“There’s a lot of resource on one side of the Irish Sea and limited resource on the other. So, how do you make something workable given that imbalance?”*
- some organisations by their nature can be quite territorial in focus (e.g. tourism or heritage bodies). This is perceived as hindering an interest in getting involved in wider cooperation. For example, projects exploring heritage and tourism links have found some national tourism and heritage bodies to be very territorial in their focus.

Promoting territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea could play an important role in **encouraging a mindset shift**: viewing cooperation as investment, rather than cost; recognising that cooperation is not an “add-on” to core work, but rather a means to maximise the impact of core work; raising awareness of UK partners as active and willing participants; and extending and capitalising on the valuable bilateral links already in place.

5.3 Recommendations - encouraging and supporting territorial cooperation across the Irish Sea

Given the barriers (and opportunities), territorial cooperation will not just ‘happen’ automatically. It needs a push, encouraging a mindset shift that views cooperation not as “dead” cost but as investment bringing returns. With this in mind, eight recommendations to encourage and support territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea space are set out below.

	1. Identify clear government leads	• There is a need for clarity around responsibilities and political commitment; many interviewees mentioned uncertainty in government structures.
	2. Improve communication, coordination and visibility	• Establish a light-touch Irish Sea Coordination/Contact Point. A small, agile coordination function should: map activity and contacts; signpost opportunities; act as a conduit between governments, agencies and networks; provide continuity and institutional memory. • A working group/steering group can help refine focus, maintain momentum, build capacity. Representation for core partners is important, but support could come from experienced partners beyond government. • Deliver a regular seminar/briefing series on relevant themes, policy changes and joint statements. Increase visibility of cooperation by attending conferences, presenting at partner events, and maintaining a simple web presence. Use existing networks to amplify information flow.
	3. Rebuild cooperation capacity	• Capacity-building measures could include: small funding for networking and partnership development; peer learning exchanges; rebuilding lost 'intermediary/facilitator' or broker roles. Monitor and support renewal of cooperation skills. Embed reflective learning: periodic reviews, shared evaluation frameworks, cross-project learning exchanges.

	4. Launch a limited number of targeted 'proof-of-concept' projects	- Identify 2–3 “early win” areas where cooperation can be demonstrated quickly (e.g. Blue Economy test sites, digital health pilots, data sharing initiatives). These should be small-scale but with high visibility, align with areas of clear shared interest and demonstrate practical benefits quickly. Quick wins will demonstrate the value of territorial cooperation and rebuild trust. Use small, catalytic funding models (Agile Cymru, relay funding, parallel funding) to enable cross-border participation without heavy programme structures. - Ensure each proof of concept answers the “so what?” question for socio-economic development.
	5. Develop a shared Irish Sea knowledge base	This could include an integrated map ('living map') of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, a database of actors, networks and contact points or a repository of evidence and good practice. It is important that this is a durable mechanism to retain knowledge.
	6. Introduce a joint foresight/horizon-scanning function	This could take the form of annual Irish Sea scenarios reporting, monitoring of emerging themes and analysis of future opportunities.
	7. Connect and align existing bilateral agreements into a wider territorial frame	Rather than creating new structures, an use intergovernmental cooperation initiative to connect UK–Ireland, Ireland–Scotland, Ireland–Wales, North–South initiatives. Identify gaps and opportunities for joining up bilateral ‘islands’ of cooperation.
	8. Ensure flexible, low-resource, scalable arrangements	Any cooperation structure should allow variable geometry (partners join topics as relevant), be easily ‘activated’ when needed and avoid heavy governance frameworks.

6 ANNEX 1

Table 6: Listing of North-South Cooperation

Cooperation Listing	
 Implementation on bodies	1 Special EU Programmes Body 2 Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (Loughs Agency) 3 Food Safety Promotion Board (SafeFood) 4 Waterways Ireland 5 North-South Language Body (The Ulster Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge) 6 Trade and Business Development Body (InterTrade Ireland) 7 North South Implementation Bodies - Cross cutting operational Issues
 Agriculture	8 Discussion on CAP issues 9 Safe use and disposal of animal by-products/ TSE management / rendering capacity 10 Cooperation on disease eradication programmes e.g. Tuberculosis (TB), Aujeszky's disease 11 Animal Health including Epizootic diseases 12 Equines 13 Plant Health and quarantine pests 14 Forest management and development 15 Rural development 16 Dairy international trade working group 17 Invasive Alien Species 18 Farm Safety 19 Agricultural Education 20 Movement of companion and farm animals 21 Cooperation on Products of animal origin 22 Exchange of Information on veterinary medicines 23 Pesticides 24 Timber 25 Veterinary public health and trade meetings 26 Informal cooperation on agri-food policy issues 27 Cooperation on the safety of the animal feed chain
 Environment	28 Environmental protection reporting and research 29 Water quality management in a cross-border context 30 Waste management in a cross-border context 31 Work Programme agreed by Ministers in September 2016: sustainable development; waste/water management; cooperation and exchange of information on marine/bathing/shellfish waters and water sewage services; circular economy; and tackling environmental crime 32 Nature/biodiversity, including habitats and birds 33 All-island pollinator plan 34 All-island marsh fritillary group 35 Flood risk management 36 Lough Erne water level agreement 37 Strategic environmental assessments; environmental impact assessments; appropriate assessments 38 Northern Ireland Water/ Irish Water knowledge sharing, 39 Mapping data; 40 Geodetic network 41 Radiation 42 Wildfire initiatives 43 All-island fracking 44 All-island air quality research: Residential Solid Fuel and Air Pollution 45 River basin management 46 Wildlife trade including CITES 47 Fluorinated gases
 Transport	48 Strategic Transport Planning: national road network 49 Strategic Transport Planning: rail network 50 Cross-border bus services 51 Sustainable transport 52 Alternative fuels infrastructure, including electric vehicle charge point network 53 Coordination of transport aspects of EU cross-border programmes, including those funded through INTERREG and/or TEN-T 54 Strategic Transport Planning: cross-border projects 55 Road and rail safety 56 Road and rail safety reporting and information systems, including mutual recognition of driving disqualifications, penalty points 57 Rail standards, certification and licensing 58 Road and rail safety: Cooperation between the railway inspectorates North and South 59 Road haulage operator, licensing and qualifications 60 Operation of cross-border taxis 61 All Ireland free travel scheme for senior citizens 62 Recognition of driving licences and disqualifications 63 Motor insurance 64 Vehicle registration 65 Ferries 66 Blue badges
 Health	67 Cross-border service provision, including hospital services such as primary percutaneous coronary intervention services in Altnagelvin, Derry 68 North West Cancer Centre 69 All-island congenital heart disease network 70 Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) 71 Workstreams on child protection 72 Health protection and promotion (including addressing alcohol misuse, tobacco control, ECDC, and public health alerts) 73 Major emergencies and emergency services cooperation, including Cross Border Emergency Management Group 74 Organs for transplantation 75 Blood 76 Tissues and cells 77 The Institute of Public Health in Ireland 78 Controlled drugs licensing group 79 All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care (AIHPC) 80 Human Milk Bank 81 Cross-border GP out of hours service 82 Mutual recognition of prescriptions 83 Continuity of supply of medicines (including radiopharmaceuticals) and devices 84 Serious cross border threats to health (health security) 85 Disease surveillance and ERNs pertaining to the diagnosis and management of rare diseases 86 ENT Cooperation 87 Clinical trials and Joint Health research 88 Disability Services (aids, appliances, training, cross-border residential placements)

 Tourism	89 Tourism Ireland Limited 90 Hosting major cross-border events
 Education	91 Education for children with special needs, including Middletown Centre for Autism 92 Educational underachievement 93 School, youth, and teaching exchanges 94 Cross-border movement and cooperation for pupils and school staff 95 Cooperation between the Inspectorates 96 Psychological services 97 North-South Teacher Qualifications working group (NSTQWG) 98 School planning and development 99 North-South Education and Training Standards Committee for Youth Work (NSETS) 100 North-South youth exchanges, including the Causeway programme 101 Recognition of school-based/state-accredited examinations
 Energy	102 Wholesale Electricity Market (Single Electricity Market) 103 Gas security of supply 104 Oil resilience planning
 Higher and further Education	105 Cross-border provision of apprenticeships 106 Cross-border movement of students 107 Staff mobility 108 Skills provision and FE/HE link to the local economy 109 Cross-border partnerships between Higher and Further Education Institutions, including SFI investigators programme and SFI partnerships 110 Research and development, including through Horizon 2020 111 Higher and further education in agriculture, equine, and horticulture disciplines
 Telecommunication and broadcasting	112 Irish language broadcasting 113 Mobile roaming 114 Spectrum 115 Subsea cables
 Sport, art and culture	116 Sport governance 117 Major events 118 Horse racing 119 Greyhound and pigeon racing 120 Motorsport road safety promotion 121 Health promotion 122 National museums 123 Libraries 124 Development and promotion of the Arts (in Northern Ireland, Ireland and abroad) 125 Northern Ireland Screen
 Justice and security	126 Intergovernmental agreement on criminal justice cooperation, including public protection project advisory group; victims and survivors services project advisory group; forensic science project advisory group; youth justice project advisory group; and criminal justice and social diversity project advisory group 127 Mutual legal assistance in criminal matters 128 Intergovernmental agreement on police cooperation, including protocols for police cooperation and cross-border secondments and eligibility for posts in policing 129 Northern Ireland Related Terrorism threat 130 Multi-agency cooperation on fuel fraud 131 Multi-agency cooperation on organised crime and drugs 132 Extradition/Surrender, including the European Arrest Warrant 133 Access to shared law enforcement information systems 134 Criminal asset seizure 135 Transfer of prisoners 136 Civil judicial cooperation 137 Other aspects of criminal justice cooperation 138 Joint investigation teams
 Inland Fisheries	139 Fisheries liaison group 140 Salmon stocks 141 Eel stocks on the Erne 40 142 Fish health and aquaculture 143 Voisinage Agreement
 Other Areas	144 EURES Cross Border Partnership 145 Benefit fraud cross-border cooperation 146 Spatial Planning 147 Enterprise Ireland, InterTrade Ireland, INI and other enterprise development agencies cooperation to promote enterprise development and job creation through enhanced innovation, competitiveness and trade 148 National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee 149 Public Service Reform 150 All Island Public Procurement Steering Group 151 Obstacles to Cross Border Mobility (Border People Project) 152 All-Island Local Authority Forum 153 Local authority led cross-border engagement 154 North West Gateway Initiative / North West Development Fund 155 North-South Senior Officials Group on implementation of Section E infrastructure 156 Cooperation between the CSO and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Source: European Commission (2019) Mapping of North-South cooperation & Implementation Bodies Report and key findings of the exercise.

Notes

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⁵ Ferreira E. (2021) Interreg Annual Event, Speech by Commissioner Elisa Ferreira, DG Regio,

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⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/interreg_25years_en.pdf

⁸ Trofaen, Ry Hon Lord Murphy (2025) Independent Review of the Windsor Framework, Presented to Parliament pursuant to Schedule 6A to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68b59ad53f3e5483efdba87d/Independent_Review_of_the_Windsor_Framework_by_the_Rt_Hon_Lord_Murphy.pdf

⁹ Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Government (2026) Written Note on Scotland Europa,

¹⁰ Upstream Research (2026) *Developing Irish Sea Cooperation: Interim Evaluation Report, January 2026*

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¹⁵ Welsh Government (2025) The Irish Sea Framework: guidance, <https://www.gov.wales/irish-sea-framework-guidance#117803>

¹⁶ Scottish Government (2026) Rural Support Plan (RSP) <https://www.gov.scot/publications/rural-support-plan-rsp/>

¹⁷ Use intermediaries and existing networks to compensate for limited government capacity. More strategic use of networks across the “quadruple helix” (academia, industry, public sector, third sector).