

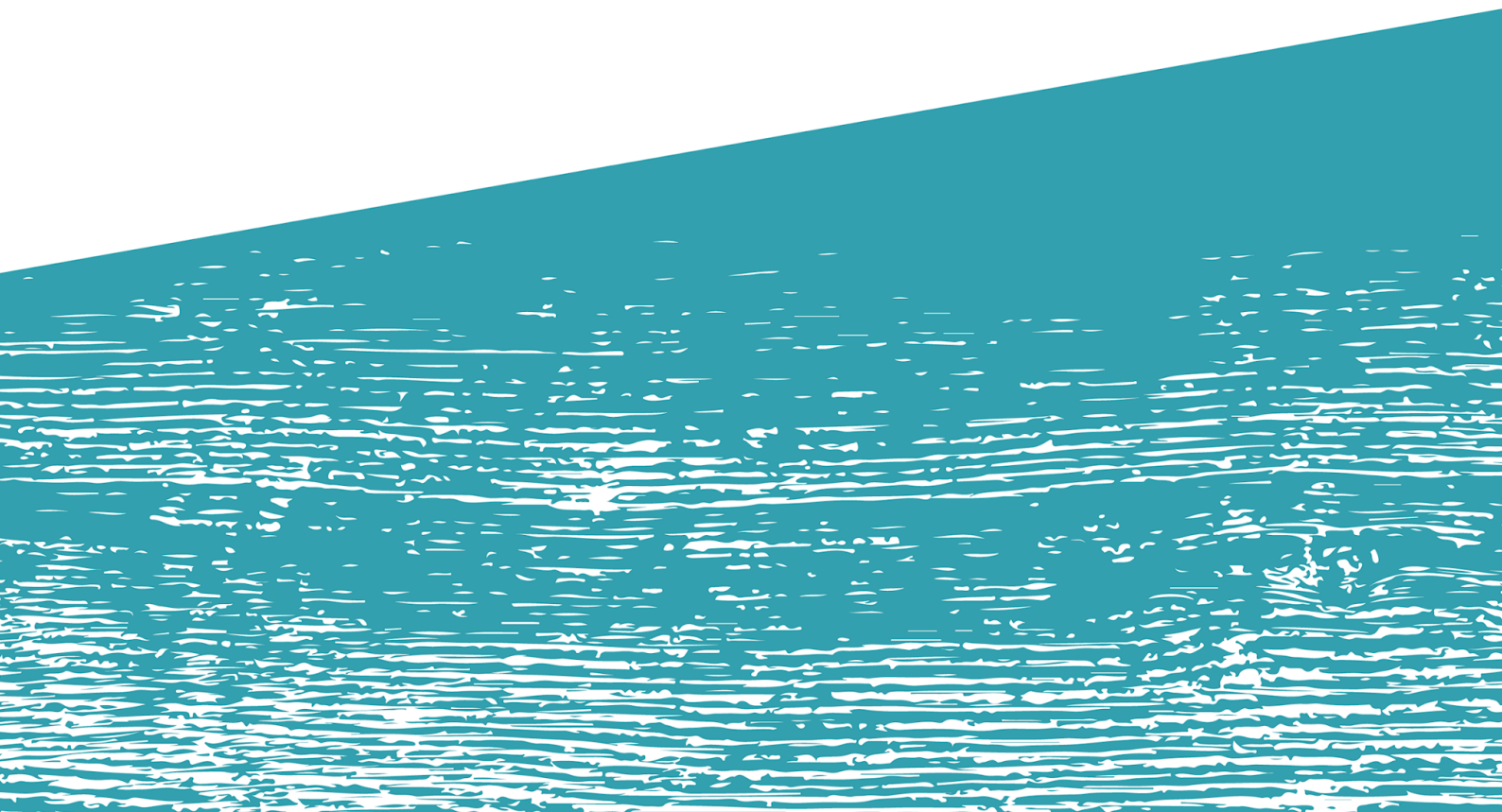


A strategy and action plan for Irish Sea Cooperation

**Produced as part of the Developing Irish Sea
Cooperation project**

August 2026

Prepared by Upstream on behalf of the Southern Regional Assembly and DISC
project partners



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Prepared by Upstream for the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) and the Developing Irish Sea Cooperation (DISC) project. DISC is supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Upstream is a policy and strategy consultancy, dedicated to good policy. We are based in Scotland and work with public bodies, charities and companies across Europe.

Executive Summary

There is real opportunity for jurisdictions around the Irish Sea to pursue greater territorial cooperation - now and in the years ahead. This strategy and action plan provides a vision and focus for territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea.

Developing Irish Sea Cooperation (DISC)'s research and discussion have built a clear evidence base for territorial cooperation as a force for peace and prosperity.

This strategy now puts forward the elements that are needed for territorial cooperation to flourish and sketches a maturity model for those elements. New principles for Irish Sea cooperation can be taken forward into future efforts, and this all builds to an emerging strategic vision for Irish Sea cooperation.

A shared vision of cooperation for the future:

Where the **mutual benefit of territorial cooperation** is better understood.

Where a **cooperation mindset** is more widespread across the jurisdictions.

Where public servants have more **capacity to cooperate**.

And where **stronger networks** build on the strong foundations that underpin cooperation around the Irish Sea.

An action plan builds on this to set out a way forward on Irish Sea territorial cooperation that will help make DISC's shared strategic vision a reality. It identifies tangible activity, with five key cooperation activities and a wider directory of ideas.

Momentum is key to territorial cooperation - and the action plan looks at options to support activity so that the momentum from DISC and other cooperation initiatives is sustained and increased. The actions are in line with the strategic principles, and focus in particular on strengthening a cooperation mindset, strong networks, and cross-border policy approaches.

This is an unusual strategy and action plan: it is not for any one team, department or jurisdiction to "own". It has developed out of cooperation and will only be taken forward through cooperation. This means that actions in this plan can be taken forward by the DISC partners, other public bodies, and third sector, academic, and private sector organisations.

This strategy and action plan is a rare opportunity to think from first principles about territorial cooperation - and the power to effect change by coming together with shared purpose and common goals.

Background to the DISC project

Launched in 2024, the two-year DISC project was an innovative project aimed at enhancing social and economic territorial cooperation between Northern Ireland, Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

DISC launched a process of strategy development and action planning for future north-south and east-west cooperation.

There is a wide ranging legislative framework underpinning Irish Sea cooperation, and there are important diplomatic frameworks between the jurisdictions - most notably the UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement, the Ireland-Wales Shared Statement 2030, and the Ireland-Scotland Bilateral Cooperation Framework 2030. DISC seeks to help translate these higher-level political and diplomatic agendas into action: to strengthen these links by building the capacity of public servants to cooperate at all levels of public administration, to extend cooperation activity more widely, better achieve shared policy aims and build pathways to expand bilateral activity into multilateral cooperation.

DISC was supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

The DISC Project focused exploration of cooperation through the following three key thematic areas, and it remained open to exploring other areas:

- Sustainable blue economy;
- Innovation through health and life sciences; and
- Communities and culture.

A core element of the project was to take a proactive approach to future cross-border cooperation by bringing together national, regional and local leaders across a range of sectors. This leveraged top-down strategic guidance and bottom-up community engagement.

The strategy and action plan has been informed by the different elements of the DISC project:

- DISC held four symposiums, one in each partner jurisdiction, which brought together stakeholders interested in territorial cooperation in general and/or on DISC's themes. The events built on each other to develop discussion on how to support territorial and interregional cooperation.
- Research was carried out for the [DISC project by the European Policies Research Centre \(EPRC\) and the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation](#)

[\(CCBC\)](#), which uncovered a wealth of ideas and possibilities in DISC's three thematic areas of policy as well as providing a policy and literature review.

- The project was contributed to by a large Project Steering Committee, which was made up of subject matter experts in each jurisdiction.
- There has also been an evaluation process, which gathered insight.

The case for territorial cooperation

Territorial cooperation is beneficial to the nations, organisations and people who pursue it. It can look and feel very different - from large, structured programmes dedicated to territorial cooperation, to a culture of day to day cooperation between individuals across borders. This section explores types of cooperation - and why they matter.

Defining territorial cooperation

Territorial cooperation is when areas in a territory work together towards shared goals and for shared benefits. It is defined in DISC's research as "*a set of processes, principles and organisational arrangements between two or more entities targeted at normative goals of mutual territorial development and integration benefits*".¹

Most commonly, people think of territorial cooperation activity as big research projects backed by large scale grant funding programmes designed to support international cooperation - such as the EU's Interreg programme. But there is a broad spectrum. As the EPRC and CCBC policy and literature review notes: "*territorial cooperation arrangements vary enormously in terms of their scope, scale, objectives, and operations*".²

At one end, there are large, very structured programmes. At the other end, via the wide range of cooperation activity, there is a quiet culture of cooperation: a cooperative mindset prompts someone to think about which neighbours share the problem or opportunity in front of them. They have positive, pragmatic relationships with counterparts in different regions or nations, to be drawn on when needed. There is no major institutional framework, no funding streams attached - just relationships and an inherent willingness to share, learn, and work together when it makes sense.

Why cooperation matters

The DISC project has a simple belief at its heart: that there is inherent value in territorial cooperation.

¹ McMaster, I., Michie, R., Soares, A. and Campbell, A. (2026) *Intergovernmental Cooperation: Policy and Literature Review*, EPRC University of Strathclyde/CCBC/DISC Project, p.4

² Ibid., p.5

The true economic and social value of territorial cooperation across the Irish Sea in its entirety is hard to measure due to its varied, organic, widespread nature without a single point of oversight.

But major territorial cooperation funding programmes measure their impact to unpick the mechanisms of change and the academic research that DISC commissioned brings together a strong evidence base making the case that territorial cooperation can:³

- Build critical mass on shared issues, which are inefficient or uneconomic to tackle in isolation;
- Enhance both the capability and the capacity of organisations that are cooperating;
- Promote innovation;
- Inspire and catalyse new ideas that are taken back into organisations; and
- Fund “*niche/emerging territorially important sectors*”⁴ that are not necessarily national policy priorities.

More generally, a culture of territorial cooperation can support economic growth, build trust and contribute to social cohesion. In an uncertain world, it helps cement alliances and promotes peace and prosperity between nations.

³ McMaster, I., Michie, R., Soares, A. and Campbell, A. (2026) *Intergovernmental Cooperation: Policy and Literature Review*, EPRC/CCBC/DISC Project, pp.10-11

⁴ Ibid., p.11

How cooperation can flourish

Although territorial cooperation activity can look very different, there are several underpinning elements that all need to come together for a culture of territorial cooperation to thrive. This section considers those elements, provides a maturity model, and looks briefly at the Irish Sea context.

Necessary elements for success

To help guide thinking about how to support territorial cooperation, this strategy has used DISC's research and discussions to identify seven elements that would be found in a strong cooperation ecosystem. The elements feed each other and support a wide range of different types of cooperation activity.

- **A cooperation mindset:** this element looks like the normal business of the day, but carried out at all levels with a mindset that believes in the inherent value of cooperation - and its necessity. As the EPRC and CCBC research notes, *“cooperation is not an “add-on” to core work, but rather a means to maximise the impact of core work”*.⁵ It is about individuals and teams thinking to look up and out to their nearby neighbours: to share problems and solutions, maximise benefit by working together, or mitigate unintended impact of activity on one side of a border on the other. With this mindset, cooperation activity can start casually - day to day cooperation done in faith that relationships will yield unforeseen benefit.

Barriers: Those participating in cooperation activity are often time poor and operating in risk averse environments. Lack of civil service or employee empowerment, inadequate understanding of the benefit of cooperation activity, lack of training, and the absence of good examples to follow also detract from a cooperation mindset.

Associated activity: informal idea exchange, ways of working

Examples: Museum Galleries Scotland speaking to international counterparts when designing an Intangible Cultural Heritage pilot

- **Strong networks:** effective networking activity is generally a necessary component of a strong cooperation ecosystem. Strong networks can disseminate ideas and information, connect people, and build a culture of openness; they support the cooperation mindset. Networks need to be

⁵ McMaster, I., Michie, R., Soares, A. and Campbell, A. (2026) *Intergovernmental Cooperation: Opportunities and Barriers to Cooperation across the Irish Sea Space*, EPRC/CCBC/DISC Project, p.17

accessible, focused and their value well-evidenced so that participation can be justified by organisations.

Barriers: networks may be inaccessible (e.g. low-profile or high barriers to participation), old-fashioned or lack focus. There may be scepticism of the value of networking across a workplace. In-person networking brings costs of travel and subsistence. Networking effectively is a skill in itself and it can feel uncomfortable.

Associated activity: membership groups, conferences, training schemes, study visits, exchanges, secondments	Examples: DISC symposiums; BIC Study visits; Interact Academy (training on Interreg); Nordic-Baltic Mobility Programme for Public Administration; UK Government Interchange Scheme; Celtic Academies Alliance
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- **Cross-border domestic policy approach:** different approaches to the same issue across a border need to be understood and respected in context. But an open approach to domestic policymaking and policy delivery - not only in central administrations but in regional and local governments and ALBs or state agencies - where it impacts cross-border areas allows the potential for collaboration to be explored. Resulting policy initiatives can drive wider cooperation, and flexibility in policy implementation allows for adaptation and enables cooperation.

Barriers: if there is no flexibility in how domestic policies operate, or in the funding supporting them, areas cannot seize opportunities to collaborate that might arise - and border friction may be created unintentionally.

Associated activity: cross-border policy initiatives, policy platforms	Examples: Borderlands growth deal (Scotland/England); Peatlands project in Shared Island Fund (Ireland, N. Ireland, Scotland); BIC workstreams; Greater North Sea Basin Initiative
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- **Funding:** funding is a major enabler and driver of territorial cooperation. It allows for meaningful, scaled activity - perhaps most importantly unlocking people's time to drive it forward.

Barriers: lack of funding can be a significant blocker. Bureaucracy of funding programmes can also disincentivise participation. Confidence is undermined if funding programmes are not clearly focused, well run, and able to evidence impact.

Associated activity: funding programmes	Examples: PEACEPLUS, EPSRC-Science Foundation Ireland Agreement, UK-Ireland 2030 Cultural Cooperation
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	Programme, Shared Island Fund, Horizon
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- **Diplomatic frameworks:** these provide a vital stable environment and empower organisations and jurisdictions to pursue cooperation agendas. They give confidence to investors to unlock private capital, and allow institutions to plan with confidence over longer horizons.

Barriers: when there is instability at the framework level - be it cyclical renegotiations or external shocks - confidence in cooperation can be undermined.

Associated activity: diplomatic frameworks	Examples: Good Friday Agreement, UK-EU Summit, Ireland Wales Shared Statement 2030, Ireland-Scotland Bilateral Cooperation Framework 2030
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- **Structures and institutions:** likewise, these provide crucial stability, leadership, and momentum in a strong cooperation ecosystem. The roles of government and academic institutions are particularly important - underpinning cross-border policy and research and development.

Barriers: overlapping or unclear remits, unpredictable or contradictory decisions, frequent changes in leadership, or lack of power and relevance.

Associated activity: organisations and institutions with cooperation in its remit; universities; think tanks	Examples: Agile Cymru, British-Irish Council, Food CoCentre, Øresund University Cross-Border Research Consortium, Nordregio, Centre for Cross Border Studies
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- **Legislation:** the experience of EU-exit negotiations shone a spotlight on the importance of legislative frameworks in allowing cross-border flows of goods and services. Legislation is a key enabler to cooperation, giving certainty and freedom to institutions and individuals to operate legally across borders.

Barriers: Cross-border friction undermines cooperation - both practically and in terms of confidence and mindset.

Associated activity: primary and secondary legislation; legal duties	Examples: Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act 1998
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A maturity model for territorial cooperation

A maturity model is a tool for understanding the level of capability of its subject. The elements of cooperation identified above can be used to form a high-level maturity model for territorial cooperation.

This model can help structure thinking about where new efforts to strengthen Irish Sea cooperation might be directed.

	Emergent	Developing	Mature
Cooperation mindset	Isolated examples of the cooperative mindset, largely driven by exceptional individuals or confined to organisations where it is a core remit. Wanting to cooperate is a minority view.	Some examples of the cooperation mindset, with a significant number of individuals and organisations prioritising it beyond those for whom it is part of the core remit. Wanting to cooperate is the majority view.	A cooperative mindset is widespread across individuals, institutions and organisations. Wanting to cooperate is the default point of view.
Strong networks	No or few networks, with high barriers to access and low perceived value. There may be few opportunities for knowledge exchange, and/or widespread scepticism of the value for money and impact of networks.	Some valuable and accessible networks. Some opportunities for knowledge exchange between individuals and organisations. Some scepticism on the value for money and impact of networks.	Many valuable and accessible networks. Many opportunities for knowledge exchange between individuals and organisations. Widespread belief in the value for money and impact of networks.
Funding	There is no or very little funding available for territorial cooperation. Funding programmes that do exist may be very bureaucratic and hard to use.	There is funding available but there are limitations - perhaps limited amounts, bureaucratic systems, and/or asymmetry in access and admin burden between different areas of the territory.	There is funding available and funding programmes are well-designed and well-run. There is parity between areas involved in territorial cooperation in their access to funding.

Cross-border policy approaches	There may be a lack of respect on one or both sides for each other's decisions. There is no or little openness to cooperation on shared areas of policy interest. Existing policies and funding do not tend to be adapted to seize opportunity because there is no or little openness to cooperation.	There is mutual respect for each other's decision. There is some openness to cooperation on shared areas of policy interest- but this may be constrained by e.g. political differences, institutional lethargy or bureaucracy. It may be hard to adapt existing policies and funding to seize opportunity.	There is mutual respect for each other's decisions and openness to cooperation on shared areas of policy interest. Existing policies and funding can generally be adapted to take advantage of cooperation opportunities if they emerge.
Diplomatic frameworks	No or very few diplomatic frameworks exist. Where they do, they are not seen as fit for purpose and do not set the tone for cross-border relationships.	Some diplomatic frameworks exist. They may be seen as quite useful and help set the tone for cross-border relationships - but there are also limitations - perhaps they are often changed, incomplete or lack leadership.	Many diplomatic frameworks exist. They are seen as the cornerstone documents for government policy on respective cross-border relationships. They are comprehensive and long-lasting.
Stable structures and institutions	No or very few structures of institutions exist and/or those that do are temporary, ineffective and not respected. They do not work well with counterparts and do not deliver on their cooperation remit.	Structures and institutions exist but may - for example - lack power or respect. They sometimes work well together. They have some successes but only partially deliver on their cooperation remit.	Enduring, effective, respected structures and institutions work well together to deliver on their cooperation remit
Legislation	There is no or very little territorial cooperation legislation in place with neighbours. The rule of law may be unreliable.	There is a framework of territorial cooperation legislation in place with neighbours - but it may be untested, incomplete or inflexible to be adapted to demands. The rule of law is strong.	There is a rich framework of territorial cooperation legislation in place with neighbours, which has been tested and adapted as needed to endure. The rule of law is supreme.

Cooperation in context: the Irish Sea

There is a rich, enduring, complicated history of cooperation around the Irish Sea, which was most recently put to the test by the UK's vote to leave the EU. Intense, multilateral negotiations have achieved a sustainable legal position - and institutions, processes and structures are in place which allow for discussion and negotiation on points of friction.

DISC's interim research describes this transition from EU-anchored territorial cooperation programmes to "*bespoke, bilateral, and sub-state cooperation frameworks*"⁶ around the Irish Sea. And ten years on from the UK's vote to leave the EU, there are comprehensive structures, institutions and diplomatic frameworks which are re-energising territorial cooperation activity.

That means many elements of an ecosystem for territorial cooperation - the major funding programmes, diplomatic frameworks, institutions and organisations, and legislative frameworks - are largely in place and mature.

But DISC's research, symposium discussions and feedback have still shown a need and appetite to spread a cooperation mindset more widely and build stronger networks across the public sector, academia, the third sector and the private sector.

⁶ McMaster, I., Michie, R., Soares, A. and Campbell, A. (2026) *Intergovernmental Cooperation: Policy and Literature Review*, EPRC University of Strathclyde/CCBC/DISC Project, p.19

A cooperation case study: Shared Island Initiative Peatland Programme

Cooperation mindset | Strong networks | Funding

The Shared Island Initiative Peatland Programme is a partnership of organisations across Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland - the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and NatureScot. It has a collective objective of improving peatland, but with ambitions to realise the economic opportunity of restoration, and reflect the deep social history of peat in each of the jurisdictions.



The project developed a 'lighthouse' project approach, with three projects in each of the jurisdictions pioneering a particular approach. One project, for example, developed a template for engaging with different kinds of landholder and relevant stakeholders in any given location was developed - usable by any jurisdiction.

The overall ambition of restoration is broken down into clear, tangible topics or skills which can be shared through working groups looking at particular aspects of the challenge.

This is complemented by study visits, and an annual conference. This allows people to see their peers' work, learn from their challenges and successes, and build relationships over time.

The real value has come less at the technical level of a technique - how to restore a particular kind of natural environment - and more at a system level, where the policies, frameworks and organisational capacity to scale-up restoration can be unlocked. The programme has the ability to seek further funding, and applies a principle of respecting the underlying legal system of each nation. This is vital when there is divergence over agricultural subsidies, land use law, and funding streams, and allows it to focus on the areas for deeper cooperation faster, rather than requiring total consistency on every aspect of policy.

It is funded with €10m from the Shared Island Initiative, alongside €5m in additional funding from the National Parks and Wildlife Service and contribution of personnel from NIEA and NatureScot.



A shared Strategic Vision

This section puts forward a strategic vision for territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea - guided by core principles.

A strategic vision for territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea

A shared strategic vision creates a common sense of purpose. This vision hopes to inspire and empower people and organisations to change mindsets and seek out opportunities to cooperate across the Irish Sea.

A shared vision of cooperation for the future:

Where the **mutual benefit of territorial cooperation** is better understood.

Where **a cooperation mindset** is more widespread across the jurisdictions.

Where public servants have more **capacity to cooperate**.

And where **stronger networks** build on the strong foundations that underpin cooperation around the Irish Sea.

By pursuing this vision, through DISC's Action Plan and activity more widely, processes will grow and cement "grassroots" architecture for sustained cooperation - and, crucially, show the value of cooperation to others.

Principles for territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea

DISC's findings also point to a clear set of principles to guide Irish Sea territorial cooperation in the coming years:

A strong culture of territorial cooperation is an intrinsic good. There is much evidence of the economic benefits of territorial cooperation - from increased trade flows to more innovation. Economic data, policy outcomes, and evaluations of specific cooperation activity demonstrate this well. More importantly, the island of Ireland is testament to territorial cooperation as a force for peace. The Good Friday Agreement enabled a new, peaceful era of cooperation between Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK - and nearly thirty years on, it should not be taken for granted. There is inherent value in strengthening a culture of cooperation around the Irish Sea to sustain peace and increase the resilience of national relationships.

Stability sustains cooperation. Uncertainty is known to stifle innovation and investment - and cooperation is no different. A stable geopolitical environment, with long-term institutions and medium term policy and diplomatic frameworks, enables effective cooperation to take root. After a period of significant uncertainty and change as the UK negotiated a new relationship with the EU, there is now restabilisation in the UK's relationship with Europe - which is creating a more stable environment for Irish Sea cooperation.

Governments have the mandate, convening power, and policy levers to lead the way. A strong culture of cooperation sees governments, the wider public sector, academia, civil society and the private sector all participate in territorial cooperation activity. Within that, governments should be a catalysing force, open to appropriate risk and not a blocker. Governments can lead the way, with their mandates from diplomatic frameworks and their ability to set policy agendas and convene interested parties.

Tangible activity is needed to drive cooperation - and its impact needs to be captured. Discussions about cooperation and aspirations to cooperate are important in fostering a cooperative environment - but this needs to be converted into tangible activity otherwise nothing happens. This does not necessarily need significant budgets or time - but it requires empowerment, commitment and creativity to turn conversations into actions. The most effective way to build a case for future cooperation activity is to be able to point to successful cooperation projects, whose impact have been independently measured.

Capacity to cooperate can be built. Cooperation need not be complicated but it does need a certain mindset. This can be developed deliberately in organisations through strong leadership, specific training, clear communication and a culture of empowerment. Investing in building this mindset will create greater institutional capacity to cooperate.

Cooperation needs to build on existing, strong foundations. The Good Friday Agreement institutions are now well-established. They are surrounded by a web of cooperation frameworks, institutions and programmes - from the UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement to the Five Nations Health and Justice Collaborative Group. These sit above more informal collaboration. Any new cooperation activity needs to complement and strengthen these, and embed itself in the foreign policy of its nations - targeting weaknesses and gaps in territorial cooperation through open engagement, communication, and design.

Small steps now can set up greater cooperation in future. DISC's research found that "*territorial cooperation is associated with big ideas and ideals, but it is important to be realistic about what it can do well*".⁷ Around the Irish Sea, focus

⁷ McMaster, I., Michie, R., Soares, A. and Campbell, A. (2026) *Intergovernmental Cooperation: Policy and Literature Review*, EPRC University of Strathclyde/CCBC/DISC Project, p.13

now should be on targeted, actionable activities - not major new programmes or frameworks that would require significant investment and disrupt the landscape.

Respect differences and allow for flexibility between territories where possible. Cooperation between different nations inevitably brings together people and institutions with different cultures, contexts, and capacities. This can create imbalances in the cooperation - with issues around the scale of the benefit, share of costs, and joint decision making. But this should not be allowed to become a blocker to any cooperation activity. Where there is asymmetry in contribution, efforts should be made to design activity to enable some level of participation, on the mutual understanding that some participation is better than none for all partners involved. So wherever possible there should be understanding that at different times partners will need to contribute differently - but also acceptance that those who contribute the most will benefit the most.

If activity is in line with these principles, it will be strengthening territorial cooperation - whoever is doing it and whatever it is.

Five key cooperation actions

This section moves from overall strategy to options for action. These five activities - or variations of them - were identified repeatedly when DISC explored successful territorial and interregional cooperation initiatives. They are not mutually exclusive and actively complement each other.

An inter-regional workshop programme

This model would see one partner lead a cross-jurisdiction partnership in a programme of inter-regional cooperation activity on a specific policy area. Inspired by the EU's Interreg programme, it would learn from the most successful aspects of that programme and tailor it to suit the Irish Sea jurisdictions' specific circumstances and priorities.

The programme of activity would allow for discovery, testing, and implementation - for example: capturing the status quo in each area, understanding what has worked and not worked elsewhere, commissioning research, arranging study visits, identifying opportunities to pool resources and work at scale together, feeding back on partner ideas, and organising a small number of symposiums or informal get togethers.

What would this achieve? Identifiable improvements and innovations in delivering policy as a result of the cooperation.

An Irish Sea cooperation network

A network run by a cross-border partnership would deliver a programme of communication and stakeholder engagement activity to raise awareness of cooperation, share ideas, celebrate success, and promote the benefits of cooperation.

The programme of activity would allow a wide range of public servants and engaged stakeholders to be kept informed about cooperation opportunities, learn about what works well, be inspired to apply that learning to their own areas, and meet like-minded cooperation enthusiasts. For example - newsletters, online sessions with guest speakers, development of case studies, and in-person events with experts.

What would this achieve? Measurably more informed and enthusiastic attitudes to interregional cooperation among a growing number of public servants.

Training in the benefits and basics of territorial and interregional cooperation

A programme of training in why cooperation is beneficial and how to go about it could be targeted at particular disciplines, levels, policy specialists or general public servants. The training programme could bring together cohorts of public servants across the jurisdictions to learn about the benefits and basics of cooperation: it could deliver e-learning, require the design of a cooperation project that would support their “day job”, and provide networking opportunities to establish cross-border relationships among the cohort.

What would this achieve? Measurably greater understanding of the benefits of cooperation and how to cooperate among participating public servants - and new networks established to support future cooperation.

Connecting public servants across jurisdictions

A new central cross-border function focused on connecting public servants could ensure people looking to cooperate can find their way to the right partners. Representatives of each jurisdiction could work together - and with colleagues in diplomatic offices - to identify key connections when requests for introductions are received.

What would this achieve? Specific cooperation projects, potentially backed by pooled funding, developed after the introduction of subject experts to their counterparts in other jurisdictions.

Establishing a centre of expertise on cooperation

A programme of activity could establish a (virtual) centre of expertise on Irish Sea cooperation. This could work with existing structures and build an evidence base for effective cooperation. It could bring together evaluations of cooperation projects or programmes, track cooperation activity levels, conduct horizon scanning of opportunities (or threats) and articulate the case for greater investment in Irish Sea cooperation.

What would this achieve? Greater understanding of specific cooperation activity that really works; an evidence base for future funding applications; stability and line of sight for potential projects; and better project design using effective evaluation techniques.

A cooperation directory

This section brings together the wealth of specific ideas and opportunities identified during the DISC project into a directory of options. It should be treated as a starting point or a source of inspiration: it reveals how different combinations of activities could be focused on different policy areas to create all kinds of cooperation projects.

It is structured into three sections: the first breaks down the five ideas in the chapter above into some of their component parts; the second looks at specific cross-cutting ideas; and the third sets out specific policy areas within DISC's three themes, which have been identified through DISC as ripe for cooperation activity.

This does not provide value judgements on the validity of each idea - but presents them neutrally for policymakers and others to consider on their own merits and in relation to particular circumstances.

This is also not an exhaustive list of options - rather it is an illustration of potential activity, which has been identified through the DISC project and which can act as inspiration for potential cooperation.

Component parts of key cooperation actions

This section fleshes out the five key ideas in the previous chapter, providing options and variations in possible project design.

An inter-regional workshop programme

- **The range of activity for a model like this includes:**
 - Funded visits
 - Peer-to-peer learning exchange
 - Sharing of good practice
 - Mapping the status quo
 - Bringing in specialised grant writers
- **Bring in expertise from academia, business & third sector.** This is to ensure that policy development benefits from a wide range of perspectives and opportunities to co-fund future activity are identified.
- **Use portfolios of funded domestic projects to identify opportunities for interregional cooperation and knowledge exchange.** Parallel funding organisations (such as the lottery funds) are supporting projects with similar goals. Support these organisations to identify opportunities for knowledge exchange from within their portfolios and target the workshop programme on a cohort of those projects.
- **Adopt a “task and finish” approach.** Ensure a focused, targeted approach by using a task and finish approach to project design and management.
- **Fund early career researchers to carry out cooperation projects.** This would expose them to cooperation potential now that EU structures have fallen away in the UK and ensure institutional memory of how to cooperate is maintained.
- **Engage early with local authorities and the community early.** This will help successful implementation of ideas or pilots and aid sustainability.

An Irish Sea Cooperation Network

- **Commission a marketing and comms plan for Irish Sea cooperation.** This would set out how to share news on cooperation across the Irish Sea as widely and effectively as possible.

- **Develop a “how-to” guide or toolkit to cooperation.** This could make the case for cooperation and give easy actions to take at an individual/team level to get cooperation projects off the ground.
- **Deliver regular seminars or briefing series.** This could be a series of events on relevant themes, policy changes and joint statements, targeted at a policy-practitioner audience – such as new Interreg programmes, new joint statements, new policy frameworks.
- **Spotlight on securing funding.** Consider grant funding masterclasses and examples of a funding journey as part of the Network’s activity.

Training in the benefits and basics of territorial and interregional cooperation

- **Develop standards of capacity and leadership in accordance with international benchmarking frameworks.** These include frameworks developed by the Council of Europe for development cooperation underpinned by good democratic governance and the OECD on strengthening regions’ economies, resilience and sustainability.
- **Build in a cohort approach to a training programme.** Ensure that there is opportunity for participants to establish new connections and cross-border links
- **A mini project (or project design component) is important to embed ideas.** Some kind of mini-project that could support participants’ role would help turn theory into reality.
- **Secondments across jurisdictions.** This would come with logistical challenges but the benefit would be deepening awareness of cross-border contexts and the potential to collaborate on shared priorities.
- **Consider a “young leaders” focus.** This could energise early-career public servants and equip them to take a cooperation mindset into their careers.
- **Consider a student programme.** This could adopt a model similar to policy-focused Erasmus placements, to enable students to learn about career opportunities in public service across the jurisdictions, hear new ideas and take an awareness of interregional cooperation into their careers.
- **Consider training for politicians and decision-makers.** The case was made during DISC for training decision-makers in the opportunities and benefits of cooperation.

Connecting public servants across jurisdictions

- **Identify clear government leads.** Designate clear government leads on Irish Sea cooperation in each jurisdiction to provide clarity around responsibilities and political commitment - this could help address the

uncertainty many stakeholders reported during DISC's research about who is responsible for cooperation, and the sense that they need permission to cooperate.

- **Establish a light-touch Irish Sea Coordination/Contact Point.** A small, agile coordination function could map cooperation activity and key contacts, signpost public servants to opportunities, act as a conduit between governments, agencies and networks, and provide continuity and institutional memory.
- **Set up a “cooperation matchmaking” service for public servants.** A more targeted version of the idea above, a small core of cross-jurisdiction public servants could adopt a bottom-up service model to connect public servants. This would advertise itself as a service for public servants to use when they need to find their way to counterparts in other jurisdictions. Or it could adopt a top-down model that focuses on policy areas ripe for cooperation and then actively seeks to identify and connect public servants in that area.

Establishing a centre of expertise on cooperation

- **Develop a shared Irish Sea knowledge base (‘living map’).** A knowledge base like this could include an integrated, durable ‘living map’ of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, a database of actors, networks and contact points, and a repository of evidence and good practice.
- **Introduce a joint foresight/horizon-scanning function.** This could deliver annual Irish Sea scenarios reporting, monitoring of emerging cross-cutting themes and analysis of future opportunities – addressing a gap identified during DISC.
- **Commission an evaluation toolkit.** Evidencing impact is vital for cooperation activity - it is only by having a robust evidence base that future projects will be able to make a compelling case for funding or investment. Evaluation can be commissioned and independent evaluation may be part of the project's funding criteria. But it can also be effectively carried out by the project team - in which case a bespoke evaluation toolkit could be valuable. This could set projects up with the right skills and approach to evaluate their own impact successfully.
- **Set up an Irish Sea Cooperation working or steering group.** A cross-border group (with participation from outside government as well) could maintain momentum at the centre for a wider range of cooperation projects. This could also consider technical or regulatory solutions aimed at removing obstacles to harmonised approaches, where these can release added value across and between jurisdictions.
- **A centre of expertise type team could focus itself by taking a thematic approach - such as a policy innovation hub.** This would ensure a tighter

focus, but potentially prevent opportunities being seized as they arise by narrowing its remit.

Cross-cutting ideas

This section captures cross-cutting ideas that span the policy spectrum and which could complement any of the five key ideas in the previous chapter.

- **Map the similarities between the UK-Ireland, Wales-Ireland and Scotland-Ireland agreements.** This would demonstrate the compatibility and shared interests threaded through the agreements between all jurisdictions - and help design multilateral activity that delivers on multiple bilateral agreements. This could connect UK-Ireland, Ireland-Scotland, Ireland-Wales and North-South initiatives, identifying gaps and joining up bilateral 'islands' of cooperation.
- **Develop a multilateral shared diplomatic statement or framework, covering all the jurisdictions, that sits above the bilateral agreements.** This would empower public servants to pursue multilateral cooperation activity as a route to delivering on shared priorities at both multilateral and bilateral levels.
- **Establish a coordinating mechanism - for example, a territorial cooperation team or agency - in Ireland, Scotland, and Northern Ireland to support and facilitate interregional and territorial cooperation.** This would create a more balanced funding landscape focused on supporting cooperation projects of this kind.
- **Establish an independent advocacy group for Irish Sea Cooperation.** An advocacy group that operates independently of government could energise and make the case for Irish Sea cooperation. This could develop thematic focus, or remain sector-agnostic.
- **Harness existing multilateral activity to forge connections.** Identify multilateral activity where Irish Sea jurisdictions participate individually - and create space in event programmes for discussion and connection as Irish Sea neighbours.

Policy areas ripe for cooperation

This section looks at specific policy areas that could benefit from Irish Sea cooperation, which have been identified by the DISC project within the three themes that it focused on: sustainable blue economy, innovation in health and life sciences, and culture and community. The EPRC and CCBC report, which was based on stakeholder feedback and a policy review, and the DISC symposiums have been particularly important in identifying these opportunities.

Sustainable blue economy

- **Marine planning.** Marine planning maturity is different across the jurisdictions, and strategies and approaches to regulation overlap but remain distinct. There is only informal and sporadic cooperation between the teams due to constrained resources. Activity could build on the Ireland-UK agreement and include cooperation on seabed mapping and marine planning, such as developing common data standards for the shared marine space.
- **Sharing of best practice between ports of the Irish Sea.** Port ownership structures look very different across the Irish Sea, but they face shared challenges and opportunities. One suggestion was that this could include “twinning” of particular ports.
- **Offshore energy.** Projects such as shared test sites for offshore renewables, building on the shared-seas logic and the offshore energy commitments in the UK-Ireland joint statements, could reduce cost and risk in renewable energy. Cooperation on solutions to common challenges - such as skills shortages - and projecting inward investment opportunities together on the international stage could be considered.
- **Onshore and ecosystem elements of the energy transition.** This includes skills, capacities and opportunities linked to how the built environment is planned and developed, supporting economic innovation to deliver the transition, and delivering effective placemaking.
- **Establish an Irish Sea ‘Lighthouse’.** A hub to coordinate Blue Economy activity and link to other networks, modelled on EU Mission lighthouses and building on the Agile Cymru workshops held in Belfast, Cork, Anglesey and Cardiff.
- **Support marine restoration and nature-based solutions led by coastal communities.** This could include nature finance and options such as a blue sustainability investment fund, with restoration driven by coastal communities to support sustainable regional development.

Innovation in health and life sciences

- **Establish a cross-border centre of excellence for researchers.** This could clarify industry needs to build the case for investments, balance societal needs with commercial imperatives, and support the next generation of academics in key clinical areas. This could effectively identify and highlight funding gaps and map activities across the Irish Sea to highlight synergies and gaps in activity.
- **Support cooperation on clinical trials capacity.** The jurisdictions across the Irish Sea all have strengths in life sciences, but capacity for clinical trials is varied. As a result, clinical trials often end up happening outside the UK and Ireland. Cooperation on clinical trial capacity could keep the economic and research benefit within these islands - recognising that each nation

would benefit at different times by carrying out clinical trials for neighbours' life sciences projects.

- **Develop digital health and digital mental health cooperation.** Build interoperable, non-system-specific digital health solutions that can be shared across jurisdictions – identified by interviewees in DISC's research as especially well-suited to interregional cooperation.
- **Cooperate on rural health and service delivery.** Share rural health service models across similar geographies in different jurisdictions, tackling shared challenges of rurality, access and sustainability of health and care systems.
- **Share approaches to healthy ageing and addiction support.** Joint work on healthy ageing and addiction/digital addiction support is ripe for cooperation, reflecting shared demographic pressures and building on prior projects (such as iSIMPATHEY, mPower).
- **Strengthen SME–university brokerage in life sciences.** There is an opportunity to improve brokerage between SMEs and universities, building on CALIN (200+ SMEs supported across Wales and Ireland) and InterTradeIreland life-sciences networks.

Culture and communities

- **Enable wide-ranging cooperation on heritage.** This could include how to develop and fund policy on intangible cultural heritage in the wake of the UK signing the UNESCO convention. Heritage organisations are also trialling innovative methods in their own jurisdictions that others are interested in - for example Wales is interweaving national languages into audio experiences, while Northern Ireland is trialling community heritage posts.
- **Develop regenerative/sustainable tourism cooperation.** This could develop a framework spanning environmental stewardship, community wellbeing and economic diversification, building on CUPHAT (coastal uplands heritage and tourism in Ireland and Wales).
- **Establish a maritime heritage/maritime museum network.** Connect tangible assets (historic vessels, waterfront sites) and intangible traditions (navigation practices, oral histories, coastal folklore) reflecting shared seafaring identity.
- **Identify cooperation on support for minority languages.** Work on Welsh, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Scots and Ulster Scots could be connected – linking to British-Irish Council and bilateral work, with scope to broaden Celtic links to the Isle of Man, Cornwall, Brittany and Galicia.
- **Support community-led local development (CLLD) cooperation.** This could revive bottom-up, community-determined cooperation between rural areas, building on 'green shoots' such as the relaunched CLLD Network for

Scotland and rejoining the European LEADER Associate for Rural Development (ELARD).

- **Share insight and approaches on the concept of a basic income for the arts.** This is policy in Ireland, ambition in Scotland, and part of the policy debate in the partner jurisdictions. As an area of developing policy, there is learning to be shared that could shape policy implementation in Irish Sea jurisdictions with shared goals.

Miscellaneous policy areas

These additional ideas have been put forward by stakeholders during the DISC project but do not fall into any of the project themes:

- **The construction of Green AI data centres across the regions.** These could incorporate green energy use, fresh water, land use, and mitigate overall environmental impact.
- **Safe AI, cyber, and data training activities, resources or observatory** - including investment in common tools for safe AI and data.
- **Support clusters that want to internationalise patient investment.**
- **Raise awareness of climate and biodiversity issues interregionally.** This could include mapping special areas of conservation (SSSIs, SACs etc) that are relevant across the Irish Sea region because of migratory species or their role in wider ecosystems, and convening discussions about how best to protect and enhance these areas.

