DISC
DEVELOPING IRISH SEA COOPERATION

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DEVELOPING IRISH SEA COOPERATION

Intergovernmental Cooperation: Policy and Literature Review

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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. Final conclusions and recommendations are presented in an accompanying report that builds on this policy and literature review.



Role of for intergovernmental cooperation on territorial development

Regional development challenges and solutions are not confined by borders and addressing these issues requires partnership, cooperation, and collaboration.[1] The importance of territorial cooperation in development is highlighted, e.g., by the OECD[2] and EU.[3] Territorial cooperation involves a set of processes, principles and organisational arrangements between two or more entities targeted at normative goals of mutual territorial development and integration benefits.[4] Forms of formal cross-border cooperation have taken place between borderland regions in Europe developed gradually from the late 1950s onward.[5]

More recently, 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 heighted geopolitical instability. Strategic policy documents regularly call for more cooperation and exchange, but as has been noted, operationalising these ambitions is challenging.



Irish Sea Territory and Cooperation

The Irish Sea is bounded by Scotland, Wales, England, Northern Ireland and Ireland. The Irish Sea itself connects with the Celtic Sea to the south and, through the North Channel, to the Atlantic in the North. Past experience, needs of the area and demands in the future all underline the rationale for territorial cooperation in the Irish Sea area,[6] based on shared geography and associated development issues, in particular related to sustainable blue economy, innovation through health and life sciences, and communities & culture.
On these issues, territorial cooperation can potentially offer the opportunity to add a dimension to existing initiatives and maximise benefits to the area, e.g. by enabling wider

links, connecting expertise, and amplifying results. However, to do so effectively and efficiently, territorial cooperation must complement existing established systems and structures and enable connections - not add complexity. With this in mind, the following review highlights the range of connections across the area, but also the 'gaps' to be filled and connections that can continue to be developed.

Bilateral and sectoral links across the Irish Sea Area are extensive. What makes territorial cooperation distinctive is its focus on cooperation between regions and countries to help the economic and social development of the 'territory'/area. The focus is on territorial needs, shared, inter-connected and common development challenges, such as marine environments, innovation networks, coastal communities and ports.

Territorial cooperation is, and has been, an important and long-standing element of cooperation across the Irish Sea space. This section provides a brief mapping of the main current cooperation channels, including recent developments. Distinct from bilateral and intergovernmental cooperation mechanisms discussed in the preceding section, territorial cooperation across the Irish Sea has primarily been operationalised through multi-level, programme-based instruments, most notably Interreg and related EU frameworks. However, while Interreg has historically been a key channel for territorial cooperation in this space, a clear demonstration of continued cooperation can be seen post-Brexit despite institutional change most notably though the DISC project itself. Although there is evidence of asymmetry in terms of the practical channels for territorial cooperation in the countries involved,[7] functional cooperation persists even where formal territorial programmes are absent or reduced.



Irish Sea Territory and Cooperation

The most familiar forms of territorial cooperation are the EU's Territorial Cooperation Programmes, specifically Interreg. However, in practice territorial cooperation arrangements vary enormously in terms of their scope, scale, objectives, and operations. In a rapidly changing policy environment, and against a background of difficult economic conditions, the role and expectations of territorial cooperation are continually challenged and changing. Key points to note are:

- the 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 get more/less formal/lead to spin off initiatives
- cooperation initiatives can 'co-exist' and work in complementary ways to the benefit of all partners.[8]

1 INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE AND POLICY REVIEW

This interim report comprises a concise and up-to-date review of policy and literature relating to territorial cooperation, with a focus on two key areas relevant to the DISC project:

- **cooperation across the Irish Sea space**; and
- **international best practice and expertise** on transboundary cooperation, in particular, newer forms of transboundary cooperation such as the EU's b-solutions, which aim to tackle legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border cooperation.

In addition, attention is given throughout to the specific themes covered by the DISC project, which can face distinct issues around cooperation.

1. **Sustainable Blue Economy**, e.g. linked to advances in marine spatial planning and the clear shared and common interests around Irish Sea cooperation where some aspects of blue growth have progressed. However, blue growth is a broad topic with many different aspects that experience varying levels of integration/coordination.

2. **Innovation through health and life sciences**, e.g. cooperation on these issues has been dominated by R&I funding operating either at international or national level. However, territorially-based cooperation and closer cooperation on more operational aspects of, e.g. innovations in service delivery, have increasingly gained greater attention.[9]

3. **Communities & Culture**, e.g. this is an established pillar of territorial cooperation efforts. However, budgetary pressures and capacity constraints pose particular challenges to maintaining sustained engagement.

The resulting document aims to provide a robust overview and reference source for territorial cooperation in the area and a source of ideas for future action. The review will form the basis of a further report, drawing on interviews and workshop evidence to deliver according to the following points.

1. Identify and analyse the main opportunities for intergovernmental cooperation across the Irish Sea space with a focus on the three theme areas – Sustainable Blue Economy, Innovation in Life and Health Sciences, and Culture & Community.

2. Examine and understand the barriers to intergovernmental cooperation North South and East West that can impact cooperation to include but not limited to: Capability and Capacity, Regulations and legislation, Social and civic barriers and Legal and administrative expertise, political, economic, social, cultural, and infrastructural.

3. Assess the impact of the Windsor Framework, the Common Travel Area, and UK, Irish, and EU funding mechanisms on transboundary relationships in the Irish Sea Space.

4. Explore sector-specific opportunities and challenges to marine economy, healthcare, education, tourism, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability.

5. Understand the impact of positive or lack of / limited intergovernmental cooperation across some aspects of the three theme areas: sustainable blue economy, innovation in life and health sciences and culture and community.

6. Provide actionable recommendations to improve intergovernmental cooperation across different sectors and regions with a focus on the three theme areas.

The literature review comprises a review of cooperation around the Irish Sea space, as well as reviewing best practice and expertise on transboundary cooperation internationally. The policy overview covers transboundary cooperation overall, and in relation to the specific themes covered by the DISC project. The policy review is informed by and builds on the literature review. This review identifies and reviews relevant policies, frameworks, and funding mechanisms that: influence transboundary cooperation in the Irish Sea Space; and offer lessons and best practice examples for future cooperation in the Irish Sea Space. This overview can be used to inform the development of an approach to addressing opportunities and barriers to cooperation and as an information resource for planning.

2 APPROACH

The literature review provides a review of intergovernmental, and in particular territorial cooperation, across the Irish Sea space. Crucially, this work also reviews international best practice and expertise on transboundary cooperation, in particular on newer forms of transboundary cooperation, such as the EU's b-solutions, which aim to tackle legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border cooperation.

The policy review identifies and reviews relevant policies, frameworks, and funding mechanisms that:

- influence transboundary cooperation in the Irish Sea Space;
- offer lessons and best practice examples for future cooperation in the Irish Sea Space.

The review is informed by and builds on the literature review. The review examines and offers an understanding of policy and legal barriers to intergovernmental cooperation, including the role of the Windsor Framework, the Common Travel Area, and UK and EU funding mechanisms on transboundary relationships in the Irish Sea Space.

In particular, the analysis focuses on the identification of policy and legal barriers and opportunities to transnational cooperation in the Irish Sea Space overall and in relation to the project's core cooperation themes.

- 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;
- Innovation through health and life sciences
    - 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.
- 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.[10]

3 TERRITORIAL COOPERATION: WIDELY PURSUED AND INCREASINGLY SOUGHT AFTER

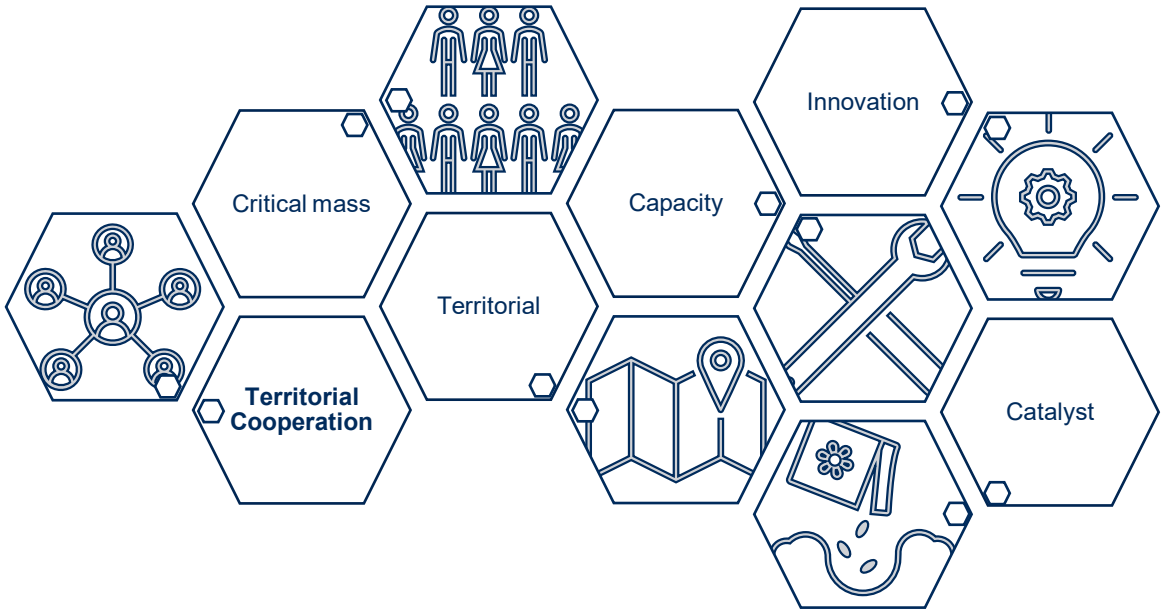
Overview

Regional development challenges and solutions are not confined by borders and addressing these issues requires partnership, cooperation, and collaboration.[11] The importance of territorial cooperation in development is highlighted, e.g., by the OECD[12] and EU.[13] Territorial cooperation involves a set of processes, principles and organisational arrangements between two or more entities targeted at normative goals of mutual territorial development and integration benefits.[14] Forms of formal cross-border cooperation have taken place between borderland regions in Europe developed gradually from the late 1950s onward.[15]

More recently, 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 heighted geopolitical instability. Strategic policy documents regularly call for more cooperation and exchange, but as has been noted, operationalising these ambitions is challenging.

Territorial cooperation is widely pursued internationally as a means for areas with shared interests to address joint challenges and opportunities.[16] It features strongly in academic and policy debate, and its benefits at international, regional and local levels, as well as its role in territorial approaches to development, are recognised by the OECD and EU and reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goals.[17,18] Cooperation initiatives are complex and vary in context, scale and capacity over time, making it challenging to assess their added value, which itself has multiple dimensions.[19,20,21] Nevertheless, evaluations and partner consultations highlight several key areas where territorial cooperation provides distinct added value, see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Territorial Cooperation: Areas of Added Value



Source: Author Illustration

Supporting territorially integrated thematic and place-based approaches. Cooperation allows partners to work within territorially-relevant and relatable areas of activity, alongside territories with similar opportunities and challenges. As noted by the OECD, "Cooperation recognises the functional nature of place-based relations in which flows of goods, people

and ideas do not stop at administrative borders".[22] UK participation in Interreg programmes, for example, showed strong sectoral clusters in energy, low carbon/green technology, transport and connectivity, construction, blue growth and the marine economy, health and life sciences, agri-food, environmental protection and creative industries and culture.[23] Programmes such as the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme focused on the needs of remote and sparsely-populated areas, particularly relevant for the Scottish Highlands & Islands, while the North Sea Programme linked territories along the North Sea coast, funding a number of innovative projects in fields such as maritime transport and off-shore renewables. Overall, the programmes enabled collaboration in niche/emerging territorially important sectors which were not always prioritised by national policy e.g. specific types of aquaculture.[24]



Building critical mass to develop, test and pilot specialised and tailored actions. Cooperation helps to fill specific knowledge gaps and enables access to external expertise on territorially-relevant themes, which might not have been possible working in isolation.[25] For example, Interreg was early to support work on remote health care provision in extremely remote communities. It connects areas and interests that can be marginalised in national policies, such as coastal, island or peripheral regions e.g. work on the value of cruise tourism to island communities. Triple and quadruple helix partnerships involving public authorities, industry, academia and citizens bring together diverse partners, and extend territorial networks, build connections and facilitate joint work e.g. with centres of research excellence or public authorities leading development in service provision.



Enhancing confidence, visibility and stakeholder capacity. International recognition has proven valuable for partners.[26] For example, Dundee's leading role in the use of city branding and strategic communication as an economic development tool in the URBACT CityLogo project provided a strong evidence base for further action.[27] Participation in Programme Monitoring Committees (PMCs) strengthens communications and multi-level governance by enabling regular contact with international counterparts and multi-level partnerships. Long-standing networks built through successive programmes provide strategic know-how, local knowledge, thematic expertise and combined capacity to innovate across areas such as economic development, SMEs, entrepreneurial skills (particularly youth), R&I, labour markets, university engagement, vocational training, environment, transport, tourism, culture, media and e-government.[28]

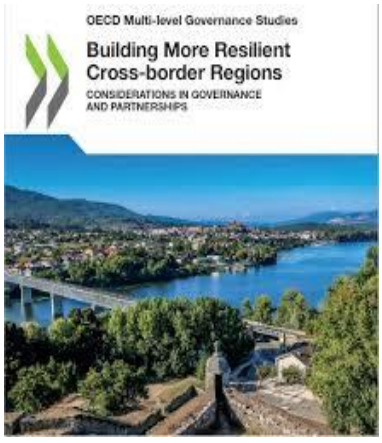


Promoting innovation and foresight. Territorial cooperation programmes have acted as 'early adopters' in areas such as the circular economy and remote public service provision, prior to their prioritisation in mainstream programmes, enabling partners to 'take a risk' or draw on best practice in a way that would be difficult to pursue alone. They facilitate information

exchange, build up social capital and trust and increasingly support the development and application of new knowledge e.g. pre-commercial research working in association with potential end-users, and product and process innovation with marketable products and improved approaches.[29] Partners value the opportunity to explore and validate innovation in other regions, e.g. North West Europe Programme partners in a project supporting entrepreneurial firms working in digital and green economies highlighted the valuable chance to explore validation of their innovation in partner regions.[30] Partners also invest effort into developing innovative thinking and gaining wider perspectives. A study of the Ireland-Wales programme found that cooperation empowered policy networks in Ireland and Wales, strengthening their roles in new cross-border processes in areas such as scientific research, culture and tourism.[31] The small scale and collaborative nature of projects encourages piloting, testing and trialling. Success has clear benefits, and failure still provides learning that informs alternative solutions.

Catalyst to stimulate new ideas, funding and action. Cooperation can spur new thinking at a time when budgetary pressures risk narrowing the organisational focus to core tasks only. The scale of projects and the opportunity to work in partnership provide an accessible 'kick-start' for organisations lacking experience or resources for larger programmes. Informal exchanges and interpersonal links help build enthusiasm that partners bring back to their own organisations. Many Interreg partners note the importance of recognising, retaining and embedding these 'soft' outcomes, retaining links and knowhow and extending them in participating organisations.[32] The exchange of ideas and approaches has supported responses to recent challenges, such as understanding the territorial impacts of COVID-19 and adapting economic, social and environmental practices under rapidly changing conditions.[33] Cooperation also supports dialogue and collaborative efforts on global challenges such as the management of specific territorial needs and potentials related to climate change.

On this basis, territorial cooperation remains a strong theme in contemporary academic and policy debate, including in several high-level recent reports:



The OECD's 2024 report "Building more resilient cross-border regions", notes that the development of cross-border regions is a growing priority for many governments across the OECD. This reflects the fact that regions can face significant development challenges related to their proximity to national borders, which can constrain regional economic development, impede the delivery of cross-border services and hamper the co-ordination of cross-border disaster management. Equally, territorial cooperation can strengthen enhance the resilience and socio-economic development.[34]

Linked to future planning for the EU budget and strategic objectives, a series of high-level reports highlight the added value of structured collaboration:

- as a means for territories to mobilise internal development potential and participate in wider EU and global networks;[35]
- (particularly Interreg programmes) in achieving more balanced territorial development by fostering innovation, development and improved governance;[36] and
- to support future competitiveness and ensure broader regional participation in growth sectors[37] and reducing cross-border barriers to mitigate the 'border effect'.[38]



The 2025 European Commission's Interreg citizen and stakeholder consultation also showed strong grassroots support for continued territorial cooperation to address shared opportunities and challenges across areas such as environment and climate, competitiveness and economic development, public services, cultural exchange and security.[39]

While widely supported, it is important to note that various **operational criticisms have been levelled at territorial cooperation**. Assessments note challenges such as the time taken to build up relationships, technical/administrative issues, and the challenges of how best to deliver, capitalise on and carry forward results.[40] Important questions have been raised about the value of pursuing regional cooperation; questions which are all the more relevant against the background of the cost of living crisis, pressures on domestic public services and major public sector budget cuts. Despite efforts at simplification, formalised programmes such as Interreg remain complex due to, e.g. the time taken to develop projects, time and cost involved in maintaining large partnerships, administrative complexities and delays, heavy reporting requirements and bureaucracy around verification of claims and procurement requirements. Issues around administrative complexity has sometimes discouraged participants, in particular private sector partners. In some instances, difficulties have been heightened by weaknesses in the support and guidance offered to partners. Lack of identifiable results has been an ongoing concern, with many project outputs criticised for being temporary, limited to joint reports/strategies or lacking transferability.[41] Taken together, the high level of administrative effort and limited returns suggests an overall high transaction cost involved in Interreg, which runs counter to its overall aim of reducing such barriers. Thus, territorial cooperation is associated with big ideas and ideals, but it is important to be realistic about what it can do well.

4 COOPERATION ACROSS THE IRISH SEA: RICH COOPERATION HISTORY & DIVERSE NETWORKS

Overview

The Irish Sea is bounded by Scotland, Wales, England, Northern Ireland and Ireland. The Irish Sea coastline area has an estimated population of 15 million and a combined GDP of €500 billion.[42] The Irish Sea itself connects with the Celtic Sea to the south and, through the North Channel, to the Atlantic in the North. Past experience, needs of the area and demands in the future all underline the rationale for territorial cooperation in the Irish Sea area,[43] based on shared geography and associated development issues, in particular related to sustainable blue economy, innovation through health and life sciences, and communities & culture.

On these issues, territorial cooperation can potentially offer the opportunity to add a dimension to existing initiatives and maximise benefits to the area, e.g. by enabling wider links, connecting expertise, and amplifying results. However, to do so effectively and efficiently, territorial cooperation must complement existing established systems and structures and enable connections - not add complexity. With this in mind, the following review highlights the range of connections across the area, but also the 'gaps' to be filled and connections that can continue to be developed.

4.1 Territorial Governance in the Irish Sea Area

The area incorporates a **wide range of governance arrangements and levels of government** including: UK and Irish Government; devolved governments within the UK (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland); self-governing British crown dependency (Isle of Man); regional assemblies (Ireland); and county and local authorities. There are also **formal governance structures for inter-jurisdictional and regional cooperation** established under the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement: the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (UK and Ireland); the British Irish Council (UK and Irish Government, Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Government, Welsh Government, Isle of Man and the Channel Islands); and the North South Ministerial Council (Irish Government and Northern Ireland Executive).

Within the area covered by the study, **capacities and interests in pursuing territorially-adapted approaches to development have been increasing in recent years**. In Scotland, the South of Scotland Act in 2018 established South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) as a **new non-departmental public body** which operates in the local authority areas of the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway.[44] Further, Dumfries and Galloway local authority is also involved in a new **cross border partnership with local authorities in England**, in the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal.

There has been an increasing focus on the regional level, with Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) working to identify economic strategies for their areas. The REPs are collaborations between local government, the private sector, education and skills providers, enterprise and skills agencies and the third sector. They differ in make-up and operate either across a single area or across a number of local authority areas. **Scottish Government has committed to working with regional and local partners to identify how best to formally devolve further elements of decision-making and delivery** to the REPs.[45] In late 2025, new legislation was announced to enable a major devolution deal for Glasgow City Region, providing legal status, unlocking significant new powers (e.g. skills, planning and economic development), and a long-term funding settlement. This may provide **a model for future regional devolution** in Scotland, mirroring to some extent the 'devolution by default' governance model introduced across England by the English Devolution White Paper in 2024.[46]

Similarly, in Wales, the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 put in place a new framework to encourage **greater collaboration between Welsh local authorities**.[47] This included new Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs), regional corporate bodies with similar powers and duties to local authorities. Four CJCs are responsible for strategic development planning, regional transport planning and promoting the economic well-being of their areas. CJCs are involved in delivering the Investment Zones in Wales and are responsible for developing Strategic Development Plans and Regional Transport Plans.

In Ireland, Regional Assemblies **already have a range of powers in relation to spatial planning and economic development** and regularly emphasise the need for a strong regional input into development initiatives, such as Ireland's National Development Plan and Ireland's National Planning Framework. The current nature and composition of the Regional Assemblies resulted from the Local Government Reform Act 2014, which also altered the number and composition of local authorities and established Local Community Development Committees.[48] Although in Northern Ireland there is no equivalent to Ireland's Regional Assemblies, the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 also led to a major reconfiguration of the local authorities landscape, replacing 26 councils with 11 local authorities, and placing a statutory duty on them to collaborate with partners in community planning.[49]

4.2 Bilateral and Intergovernmental Cooperation across the Irish Sea Area

The UK and Ireland share deeply rooted, multifaceted connections. Brexit has had a huge, complex, and challenging impact on the practice and operationalisation of these links. New arrangements, such as the Windsor Framework (2023) and on-going dialogue with the EU on 'dynamic alignment'[50], mean that formal relationships and arrangements continue to evolve.

Bilateral and intergovernmental cooperation mechanisms across the Irish Sea are increasingly important in this space. Formal intergovernmental channels play a different role to territorial cooperation programmes, focusing on policy coordination, diplomatic relations and the management of shared competences, while territorial cooperation programmes institutionalise cooperation at sub-national and organisational levels.

A core institution in this architecture is the **British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC)**, established under Strand Three of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement to promote cooperation "at all levels on all matters of mutual interest within the competence of both Governments." The BIIGC meets periodically, bringing together senior representatives from both governments to address shared political, security and economic issues, including implementation of related legislative commitments and the protection of frameworks such as the Common Travel Area.[51]

In addition, the **British-Irish Council** (BIC) remains a parallel multilateral forum for cooperation bringing together the UK Government, the Government of Ireland and administrations from across the UK (including Scotland, Wales and the Crown Dependencies). It provides a structured platform for intergovernmental collaboration on areas such as collaborative spatial planning, creative industries, digital inclusion, energy, environment, housing, languages and culture, social inclusion and transport.[52] Another forum is The British Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which brings together elected representatives from the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments, the Welsh Senedd, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Ireland's Oireachtas, and also includes amongst its areas of work climate and energy, and peoples and cultures.

Functioning in a sense as a strategic political framework to the BIIGC and BIC, the **UK-Ireland Joint Statement 2030** sets out a shared vision and priorities for UK–Ireland relations to 2030, see Table 1.[53] Following an inaugural UK-Ireland summit in Liverpool in 2025, the second Summit highlighted key areas for cooperation, including interconnectors between NI and Scotland and Wales-Ireland and the scope for the countries to work together to address cost-of-living challenges as well as strengthen domestic security and manage crises.[54]

Table 1: Key points from the Joint Statement

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 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.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-between-prime-minister-keir-starmer-and-taoiseach-micheal-martin-6-march-2025

The **Shared Island Initiative** has the potential to deliver on the Joint Statement's cooperation-focused objectives. Launched in 2020 as a whole-of-government policy initiative of the Irish Government, the initiative supports practical cooperation, connectivity and relationships, primarily on the island of Ireland (North–South), but also with the ability to include the East-West dimension, such as investments in the Co-Centre for Climate + Biodiversity + Water and the Co-Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. Unlike formal intergovernmental mechanisms such as the BIIGC or the BIC, Shared Island is underpinned by dedicated funding and focuses on project-level delivery involving universities, public bodies and civic organisations (via the Shared Island Fund).

Alongside summit-level dialogue, the devolved governments in the UK have launched their own **joint statements and framework agreements** to structure cooperation in thematic portfolios. Much of the activity focuses on national/devolved government-level cooperation, but a territorial focus is a recurring theme. For example, the **Ireland–Scotland Bilateral Cooperation Framework 2030**, agreed in late 2025, and building on the preceding Ireland-Scotland Joint Bilateral review 2021-2025, commits both governments to deepening links across devolved policy areas. The new framework highlights the shift from EU-mediated cooperation to direct bilateral and sub-state diplomacy, with Scotland seeking to compensate for reduced EU programme access.[55] It provides a high-level, action-oriented and forward-looking basis for cooperation, with a focus on renewable energy, research and innovation, trade, sustainability, culture and languages. The framework notes 'significant progress made across all areas of the Bilateral Review', and 'growing connections' in areas including renewable energy, research and academic links, regional cooperation, and cultural

partnerships.[56] Support for engagement between the regional enterprise agencies on rural economic development is specifically mentioned, as is support for continued engagement on opportunities and challenges facing rural, coastal and island communities.

Similarly, the **Ireland-Wales Shared Statement 2030** highlights support for cooperation and shared learning around renewable energy (particularly skills development and supply chains), research and innovation connections, maritime connections and environment, environmental protection, natural and built heritage and cultural institutions and partnerships.[57] This emphasises the long-standing Wales–Ireland relationship and highlights how Brexit has prompted renewed political interest in bilateral engagement.[58]

Table 2: Bilateral Cooperation Frameworks

Aspect	Similarities	Differences
History / Context	Both frameworks are based on long-standing relationships between Ireland and devolved governments and update earlier cooperation into a 2030 framework.	
Who	Both involve the Government of Ireland working bilaterally with devolved administrations (Welsh Government / Scottish Government).	The Ireland-Wales cooperation is strongly anchored in the Ireland-Wales Forum; The Ireland-Scotland cooperation is led more through ministerial and official-level engagement.
What	Both are forward cooperation frameworks with similar priorities; in particular, both are action-oriented programmes covering similar thematic pillars: political engagement, economy, climate, education, culture, and communities.	
Why	Both advance work on political, economic and social links and seek to tackle shared challenges like climate change and regional development.	
When	Both run to 2030 and were launched mid-2025 to guide medium-term cooperation.	
How	Both rely on regular dialogue, joint initiatives, stakeholder engagement, and cooperation within devolved competencies.	Ireland–Wales uses an annual forum and structured follow-up; Ireland–Scotland relies on bilateral meetings and sector-specific contacts.
Where	Cooperation for both is geographically located around the Irish Sea. In both the geographic proximity and the movements of goods and people across the Irish Sea means that both frameworks focus on similar challenges/ priorities given the shared geographical connections.	

Two additional fora with the scope to support East-West dialogue are the Council of the Nations and Regions, and the East-West Council. The **Council of the Nations and Regions** was set up in 2024 to facilitate partnership working between the UK Government, the Devolved Governments, the Mayor of London and the 13 English combined authority mayoralties. The Council will "focus on shared missions, delivery of public services, and shared values. It will provide a forum to share best practice, to collaborate on shared issues,

and agree how to work together to drive delivery on areas of mutual priority."[59] The Council meets biannually; the first meeting was held in Edinburgh, in October 2024.

The **East West Council** was also set up in 2024, as part of the UK Government's Safeguarding the Union Command Paper, ahead of the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland, and with a purpose to improve links between Northern Ireland and rest of the United Kingdom. The East West Council brings together key representatives from government, business, education, trade, transport, and culture sectors, aiming to encourage collaboration between ministers and industry experts.[60] The **Connect Fund** was launched at the first East West Council meeting in June 2025, to grant awards of between £300 and £50,000 from a funding pot of up to £1 million to strengthen East West collaboration between community and voluntary groups.

Box 1: Connect Fund project example - Community Places NI

Based in Belfast, and with partners in Cardiff, Edinburgh and London, the **Community Places NI** Connect Fund project aims to deliver targeted planning advice and build capacity for disadvantaged communities using Spatial Place Plans, via a study visit to Wales, where CPNI will collaborate with Welsh leaders to implement place-based plans and develop a community empowerment tool, and a workshop bringing together all UK Planning Aid Services to share lessons, address challenges, and establish long-term cooperation.

Source: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/694290ba8f4636fa2c547d6c/Connect_Fund__successful_applications.pdf

Links with specific areas of **England** have also been reflected through, for example, Cornwall Council's participation in the British-Irish Council and the Irish Government's decision to open a Consular office in Manchester to represent Ireland across the North of England. Although lacking a cross-border element, the role of 12 English local councils in driving the 'Britain's Leading Edge' initiative, focused the needs of largely rural areas, also highlights the interest in pursuing cooperation based around shared territorial concerns.[61] Mayors of the Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Regions have also undertaken joint missions with the Irish Government, signalling strategic cooperation on trade, investment and innovation linkages across the Irish Sea. While not a formal territorial programme, it provides an example of sub-national cooperation in functional economic geographies.[62]

In summary, the preceding sections chart the transition from EU-anchored territorial programmes to bespoke, bilateral, and sub-state cooperation frameworks in the Irish Sea cooperation space. This potentially creates opportunities for flexible, targeted projects, and a shift toward networked projects (universities, regions, cities, ports). It may also raise questions around sustainability, the potential for uneven capacity, and dependence on political continuity.[63]

More broadly, the House of Lords European Affairs Committee's November 2025 report *Unfinished Business: Resetting the UK-EU relationship* underscores that post-Brexit frameworks such as the **Protocol/Windsor Framework** (along with the Trade and

Cooperation Agreement) continue to be central to how the UK and EU manage cross-border arrangements that affect UK–EU connectivity, including trade flows involving Northern Ireland and, by extension, the Irish Sea space. It also points to ongoing negotiations over mutual recognition of professional qualifications and touring mobility, areas that have implications for cultural and professional exchange across borders, including for organisations and individuals operating in Irish Sea cities and regions.[64]

4.3 Sectoral Connections and Policy Review

As well as well-established and evolving bilateral and intergovernmental links, the territories around the Irish Sea area share similar and related policy priorities. Examples of the types of strategies and initiatives are listed in Table 3. This is an indicative overview and not an exhaustive review. It also covers DISC partner areas, but equivalent priorities are in place in England.

Table 3: Sectoral Policy Overview (selected)

	 **Blue Growth**	**Innovation**	 **Culture and Communities**
Ireland	Ireland's government is developing its "blue economy" through initiatives like the National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) and the Maritime Area Planning Act (MAPA), aiming for sustainable growth in ocean-related activities. Key areas include offshore renewable energy, aquaculture, and maritime transport, supported by a recent overhaul of maritime safety regulations and a new, integrated marine governance structure. This approach is aligned with the EU's Blue Growth Strategy. More specifically, the Southern Regional Assembly is already active in areas of Blue Growth and identified it an area of high potential for the region.[65]	The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is currently seeking the views of interested stakeholders to inform the development of a new National Life Sciences Strategy which is a key commitment in the Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future. The development of a strategy will provide a clear, coordinated roadmap to strengthen Ireland's position as a global leader in life sciences, foster innovation and ensure sustainable economic growth. It will also seek to align with emerging EU policies and global trends, ensuring that Ireland remains competitive and agile in an evolving healthcare and technology landscape. The Southern Region's Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy has a strong focus on innovation through a wide range of schemes and supports innovation in health and life sciences in particular.	Promoting Ireland through culture and communities have been longstanding pillars of boosting arts heritage and creativity both within the country and engaging with the wider Irish diaspora. Community development is also already identified in, e.g. Irelands Project Ireland 2040 as an area of shared opportunities and challenges and an area for cooperation and coordination. At regional level the Southern Regional Assembly has a key role in advocating for communities in the area and is involved in a wide range of schemes and supports e.g. THRIVE projects.
Northern Ireland	Blue economy: The Northern Ireland Energy Strategy - the Path to Net Zero Energy (2021) includes the 'Clean Maritime and Transport Sector' as a priority for research and innovation activity and as commitment to developing NI's offshore wind sector. Also, the	Life/Health science innovation: a Northern Ireland Science and Technology Advisory Network has been established, helping to develop a regional R&D strategy and prioritise sectors including life	A new Rural Policy Framework is to be developed collaboratively with rural communities and across government.

	Department for the Economy's Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan for Northern Ireland (2025) sets out among its objectives 'maximising the long-term economic benefits that the offshore renewable energy sector can offer communities and businesses in NI'.	and health sciences (NI programme for government 2024-27) Intent to support greater investment in R&D by enhancing engagement between universities and business, and through additional investment in the Higher Education Innovation Fund and similar programmes, and by focusing on increasing the uptake of European and UK-based funding programmes. (NI programme for government 2024-27). Innovation in health and life sciences is also a key feature of regional plans, such as the Belfast Region City Deal, which sets out investment in research excellence in advanced clinical healthcare and in digital health care technology. Similarly, the Derry ~ Londonderry & Strabane City Region City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund has innovation, digital and health as one its core pillars.	Communities will be supported to be active participants in energy transition (Energy strategy) Community policy focuses on building shared, inclusive and safe communities, with key priorities being good relations, reconciliation, reducing sectarianism, tackling social exclusion, and enhancing community safety through local planning and engagement. The NI Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme for 2024 addresses actions to conserve, protect and promote cultural heritage and historic environment; and to encourage, support and develop the curiosity, active engagement and creativity it helps to inspire particularly through the arts.
Scotland	Blue economy: Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2025-26 commits to delivering £14m of funding to support sustainable, inclusive economic growth in the marine economy and coastal communities. Scottish Ministers have taken forward initiatives to support the sustainable development of offshore renewable energy, including a Sectoral Marine Plan for offshore wind, draft sectoral plans for wave and tidal energy, and a short-life working group to deliver a joint evidence-based offshore wind skills action plan by autumn 2025. A scientific research framework has been created to improve knowledge of the marine environment and the potential effects of marine and offshore renewable energy. Scottish Ministers committed to start developing a new national marine plan for Scotland in the 2022-23 Programme for Government; this commitment was reaffirmed in the 2024-25 Programme for Government.	Health & Life sciences. Life sciences is identified as a growth sector for Scotland and is highlighted in both the National Strategy for Economic Transformation and the National Innovation Strategy. Life Sciences Scotland (LSS) is the Industry Leadership Group for Scotland's life sciences sector. Members include Scottish Ministers, life sciences leaders from industry, academia, trade bodies, the NHS and the Enterprise Agencies. LSS is responsible for developing and implementing the Life Sciences Strategy for Scotland. The Life Sciences vision for 2025 includes 'Internationalisation' as a key theme.	Culture and communities: The 2025-26 Programme for Government commits to delivering the biggest increase in culture funding in the history of the Scottish Parliament, investing at least £100 million more in the arts and culture by 2028-29. The Scottish Government's policy on rural communities focuses on empowerment, sustainability, and resilience. Key initiatives include Community Led Local Development (CLLD), £20m+ for a rural housing grant scheme, and a commitment to rural-proofing policies to support population retention
Wales	The Welsh National Marine Plan[66] sets out policy for the sustainable use of the seas around Wales. As well as the importance of marine environmental protection, marine renewable energy opportunities and other parts of the Blue economy is noted. The Blue economy has also been the focus of a transatlantic pilot project to boost cooperation between EU and non-EU Atlantic Regions, with a	Health & Life sciences: The 2021 Wales Innovation Strategy 'Wales innovates: creating a stronger, fairer, greener Wales',[68] includes Health and Wellbeing as one if its key missions. Initiatives include a Life Sciences Hub Wales, which aims to help innovators and businesses to navigate the integrated NHS and social care system in Wales, and the	In May 2025, Welsh Government launched new priorities for culture and more widely committed to a building towards a million Welsh speakers, and enabling tourism, sports and arts industries to thrive. On Community making, cities towns and villages 'better places to live and work is underlined, as is building civic engagement.

	particular focus on Wales and Québec, by fostering dialogue around green maritime infrastructure and climate change adaptation[67].	Innovation, Technology and Partnerships funding programme.

The links and crossovers are clear. Additionally, in the current complex global economic and political context, the area offers offer a stable, rules-based environment and this relative stability is a core requirement for cross-border collaboration.[69]

- 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;

- Innovation through health and life sciences

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.

- 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.[70]

4.4 Sectoral, thematic and functional cooperation

Alongside the multi-level and bilateral frameworks and based around themes outlined in preceding sections, there is evidence of substantive cooperation in the Irish Sea space that is organised on a sectoral or thematic basis, or around clusters or functional geographies. This form of cooperation often cuts across administrative boundaries and can be shaped by shared assets, infrastructure, ecosystems or economic specialisations.

Studies have highlighted the value of area-based cooperation in the Irish Sea in relation to key sectors, such as renewable energy and the marine economy.[71] The Irish Sea area is also the focus of thematically based cooperation through structures such as the **Irish Sea Maritime Forum**, which works in particular in relation to marine spatial planning and marine protected areas, and the **Celtic Sea Developer Alliance**, which focuses on offshore renewable energy. Sector-specific bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (for example in marine, energy and research fields) also provide enabling frameworks for cooperation in these areas.

Cooperation in this context is not confined to EU programmes or formal government-to-government channels, but is also expressed through shared infrastructure, operational systems and economic interaction. Sectoral and functional cooperation therefore demonstrates practical connectivity and joint problem-solving, rather than just policy alignment.

Cooperation around the **blue and green economies** is well-established in the Irish Sea area and future potential is recognised both in existing and emerging sectors.[72] Cooperation aimed at supporting a more sustainable blue economy is particularly important in delivering environmental and climate objectives.[73] There are a number of established collaborations, including research cooperation between the Marine Institute in Ireland and Marine Scotland, as well as thematic engagement through the abovementioned Irish Sea Maritime Forum.[74] The Smart Specialisation approach has become a driver in highlighting innovation potential, especially in the emerging sectors of the blue economy.[75]

The benefits of collaboration on blue economy and aquaculture, and the potential for research exchanges between marine parks and innovation centres have been highlighted by the Scottish Government. Similarly in Wales, the marine economy is recognised as having an important role in attracting investment, supporting low-carbon growth and strengthening coastal economies,[76] whilst in Northern Ireland marine technologies are seen as a central element of the renewable technology mix,[77] with a drive to unite the maritime and offshore sectors through innovation and collaboration for sustainable economic growth.[78] Comparable opportunities are also identified within green growth sectors, for example through links between the Scottish and Irish forestry sectors, particularly in relation to climate mitigation, afforestation, rural employment and the development of green jobs.[79] A strong commitment to greening economies is also evident in future cooperation priorities between Ireland and Wales.[80] Similarly, Northern Ireland's draft Green Growth strategy sets out the need for collaboration both with Ireland and Great Britain,[81] and it is part – along with the Scottish and Welsh governments – of the Under2 Coalition.[82] The importance of coastal and inshore links is further highlighted in the North West England marine plan area, reflecting shared environmental and economic challenges across the Irish Sea basin.[83]

Recent developments illustrate how functional cooperation around **ports, transport and energy infrastructure** is becoming increasingly prominent. In response to disruption at Holyhead, a new **Irish Sea Resilience Taskforce** was convened in 2025, bringing together representatives from Wales, Ireland, the UK (including English ports and authorities), Scotland and Northern Ireland.[84] The Taskforce includes port operators, ferry companies and logistics stakeholders, and focuses on contingency planning, infrastructure resilience and future development needs. It provides an example of multi-sector, cross-jurisdictional cooperation organised around shared functional infrastructure.

The Welsh Government is a partner in the **TRANSATLANTIC pilot project**, which aims to encourage the green and blue recovery in the Atlantic by creating a precursor of a cooperation scheme at transatlantic level to foster exchanges of best practices and joint projects on the green recovery of maritime sectors important to Atlantic coastal regions, including outermost regions and non-EU regions.[85]

There is also evidence of growing cooperation in **maritime logistics and decarbonisation**. Peel Ports Group and NatPower Marine have announced plans for a 'green shipping corridor' between the UK and Ireland, including Irish Sea routes, aimed at decarbonising maritime connections and developing electric ship-charging infrastructure.[86] CLdN RoRo is expanding freight services between Liverpool and Dublin, underlining the evolving nature of Irish Sea connectivity in ports and supply chains,[87] while plans for a new Irish Sea terminal in Liverpool demonstrate strategic investment strengthening east–west maritime links.[88] Belfast Harbour and Cork Port have signed an agreement to cooperate on aims including delivering offshore wind energy and boosting cruise tourism.[89]

Although broader than territorial cooperation, recent agreements on **offshore wind and subsea energy network alignment** between the UK and Ireland also indicate growing cooperation in marine spatial planning and energy infrastructure, with implications for territorial connectivity around ports, energy systems and coastal regions. These developments were reinforced at the recent UK–Ireland summit, where both governments announced closer collaboration on subsea energy infrastructure across the Irish and Celtic seas, including data-sharing arrangements and efforts to minimise regulatory barriers for offshore wind developers.[90]

In relation to innovation, the Wales Innovation Network (WIN) and Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland's **Research Alliance Award** provides an example of thematic cooperation structured around research collaboration and innovation capacity, supporting joint projects and researcher networks across priority areas relevant to the Irish Sea space.[91] North–South cooperation in the sector is supported by **InterTradeIreland** (which creates and supports partnerships across the island in the areas of advanced manufacturing, the bioeconomy, fintech and life sciences),[92] new cross-border

research calls/projects (e.g. **OneHealth**-type projects)[93] and NI alliances such as **HIRANI**, the Health Innovation Research Alliance Northern Ireland.[94]



In terms of **culture and communities**, the Irish Sea space contains several key urban and economic centres, including Belfast, Douglas, Dublin, Cardiff and Liverpool, alongside extensive rural, coastal and island communities. Cooperation between urban areas is well established and supports objectives such as regeneration, resilience and economic diversification. Beyond this, there are also important links with Cornwall and other parts of the west coast of England, particularly in relation to the Celtic Sea.

Marine and coastal territories do not operate in isolation from their terrestrial hinterlands. The relationships between towns, cities, rural areas, islands and coastal communities across the Irish Sea are therefore critical to balanced development. Cooperation is particularly highly valued among rural, coastal and island communities in Scotland and Ireland, especially in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries and the marine environment. These priorities are reflected in national and regional strategies, including Scotland's National Islands Plan.[95] The importance of these areas has become more pronounced following the Covid-19 pandemic, with increased emphasis on remote and digital working, connectivity and service provision. Digitalisation is widely recognised as offering potential to overcome distance barriers, improve access to services and support new employment opportunities in rural and island contexts.

Complementing formal state-to-state mechanisms, bilateral cooperation in culture and people-to-people ties has been reinforced through joint cultural programmes. The British Council's **UK–Ireland 2030 Cultural Co-operation Programme** supports cross-border cultural collaboration and institutional partnerships with dedicated funding through to 2030.[96] In parallel, the **Shared Island Cultural Cooperation Fund** and related heritage initiatives aim to deepen cultural exchange and joint programming between institutions and communities.[97]

Research by bodies such as the British Council highlights the importance of cultural mobility, touring, artist networks and collaborative festivals in sustaining long-term cultural ecosystems across Ireland and the UK.[98] The Irish Sea area has a rich and shared cultural heritage, with successful collaborations including Showcase Scotland[99] and Tradfest[100] in Ireland, Culture Ireland[101], and the Eisteddfod,[102] alongside growing links between creative industries and language sectors.[103] Creative industries are increasingly recognised as drivers of economic diversification, resilience and well-being.[104]

5 TERRITORIAL COOPERATION IN THE IRISH SEA SPACE

Overview

Bilateral and sectoral links across the Irish Sea Area are extensive. What makes territorial cooperation distinctive is its focus on cooperation between regions and countries to help the economic and social development of the 'territory'/area. The focus is on territorial needs, shared, inter-connected and common development challenges, such as marine environments, innovation networks, coastal communities and ports.

Territorial cooperation is, and has been, an important and long-standing element of cooperation across the Irish Sea space. This section provides a brief mapping of the main current cooperation channels, including recent developments. Distinct from bilateral and intergovernmental cooperation mechanisms discussed in the preceding section, territorial cooperation across the Irish Sea has primarily been operationalised through multi-level, programme-based instruments, most notably Interreg and related EU frameworks. However, while Interreg has historically been a key channel for territorial cooperation in this space, a clear demonstration of continued cooperation can be seen post-Brexit despite institutional change most notably though the DISC project itself. Although there is evidence of asymmetry in terms of the practical channels for territorial cooperation in the countries involved,[105] functional cooperation persists even where formal territorial programmes are absent or reduced.

5.1 Long-standing expertise and experience with territorial cooperation programmes

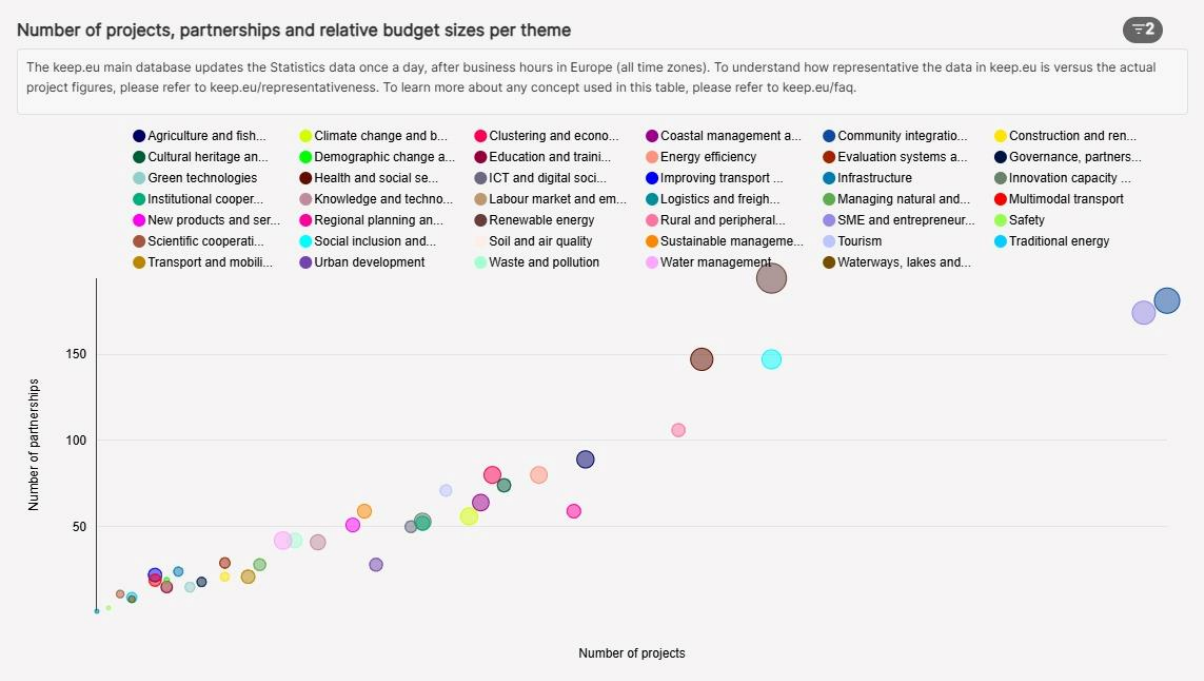
5.1.1 Engagement with European Territorial Cooperation

One of the main fora for territorial cooperation has been the EU-funded Interreg programmes. For EU Member States, Interreg continues as the main Cohesion Policy instrument to promote cross-border cooperation, tackle shared challenges and strengthen European integration. Since its launch in 1990, it has supported thousands of cross-border, transnational, and interregional projects within the EU and beyond. Interreg has served as a platform for innovation and experimentation, engaging local and regional stakeholders across diverse policy areas and industries.[106] For former UK participants, **Interreg functioned not only as a funding mechanism, but as an institutional infrastructure for trust-building, policy learning and governance experimentation across the Irish Sea.**

Ireland and UK partners have been **valued and valuable participants in cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation** (see Table 4) and worked together on a wide range of themes and areas including:

- developing and embedding key sectors, diversifying and strengthening local economies, including through green growth, blue growth and circular economy;
- support for entrepreneurship, SMEs and microenterprises;
- social inclusion and public service provision; and
- climate change and environmental management and protection.[107]

According to the EU's data source on projects, keep.eu, in the 2014-2020 period alone 1,190 Interreg project partnerships included partners from either Ireland, Norther Ireland, Scotland or Wales. The sum of the budgets of the partners from those regions and countries amounts to over €667 million. Common cooperation themes included community identity and integration, renewable energy, health and social services and agriculture and fisheries.



Source: Keep. eu

Notable features of activities are their results in relation to two key areas:

- Supporting **innovation** where territorial cooperation programmes have developed a role in facilitating the flow and exchange of information, which underpins innovation. Additionally, programmes are increasingly in a position to develop, apply and exploit that information. Pre-commercial research is undertaken in association with potential end users. Product innovation is a target for some projects, with a commitment to deliver a new marketable product. In many other cases, process innovation is the objective leading to the development of more efficient, effective and sustainable approaches.
- **Governance and services** are also cross-cutting themes in projects. For many projects, the main focus is the systems or knowledge that help practical developments to happen rather than the development itself, e.g. systems to support

SMEs development, toolkits to improve or develop services and approaches, or data and knowledge to inform policy decisions.[108]

In terms of the stakeholder types involved, public authorities and agencies, as well as higher education institutions are highly represented, with charities and trusts and the private sector participation increasing, particularly in the 2014-2020 round of programmes.[109]

Table 4: Selected Interreg Programmes 2014-2020

INTERREG 2014-2020	Programme	Total Budget (million €) (EU + national)	Partner Countries	Coverage in the UK and Ireland
INTERREG A	Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland	€283	Ireland, UK	Northern Ireland and Western Scotland, Ireland
INTERREG A	Peace	€270	Ireland, UK	Northern Ireland, Ireland
INTERREG A	Ireland, Wales	€100	Ireland, UK	Wales (not all Wales covered)
INTERREG B	Atlantic Area	€185	Ireland, Spain, France, Portugal, UK	Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Ireland and Western England
INTERREG B	North West Europe	€620.6	Ireland, UK, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, parts of France, Germany, and the Netherlands	Whole of UK and Ireland
INTERREG B	Northern Periphery and Arctic	€72.6	Finland, Ireland, Sweden, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and Norway	Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland

Source: DG Regio

In relation to the Irish Sea area, three of the most relevant programmes are the 2014-2020 Interreg A Ireland-Wales, Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland and PEACE programmes and their predecessors.

The 2014-2020 **Ireland-Wales** Programme had a budget of €100m and focused on the following priorities.



- Cross-border innovation - working in relation to key sectors of shared interest: Marine and Environmental Sciences (including renewable energy); Food & Drink and Life Sciences.
- Adaptation of the Irish Sea and Coastal Communities to Climate Change - focused on the links between the impacts of climate change on jobs and growth and responses to cross-border

challenges in the Irish Sea and coastal communities.

- Cultural and Natural Resources and Heritage aimed at enhancing sustainable growth through co-operation by utilising the potential of the natural and cultural assets of the cross-border maritime area.

The 2014-2020 **Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland Programme** had a budget of €283 million. The programme's four main objectives were:

- enhanced research and innovation, encouraging the creation of new and further development of existing cross- border partnerships particularly in relation to life and health sciences and renewables and supporting engagement of SMEs in collaborative innovation;
- environmental initiatives, promoting habitat and species recovery through cross border planning and management, and promoting collaboration on marine and coastal area management;
- sustainable transport projects focusing on low carbon transport promotion; and
- health and social care services on a cross-border basis through enabling improved access to cross-border services, remote services and cross border training and trials.

For North South cooperation on the Ireland of Ireland, the **2014-2020 PEACE IV Programme** was a unique initiative of the European Union designed to support peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. The Programme had four key priority areas where it aimed to make significant and lasting change,

- Shared Education;
- Children and Young People;
- Shared Spaces & Services
- Building Positive Relations.[110]

Collectively the Interreg B transnational programmes also provided a considerable resource and mechanisms for cooperation between partners from the Irish Sea area and more widely. They focused on strongly relevant areas of activity, e.g. blue growth and coastal communities **(Atlantic Area),** innovation and green development **(North West Europe)**, and experiences of remote and rural areas **(Northern Periphery and Arctic).**

Within the broader Interreg cooperation framework, UK and Ireland partners also participated in **Interreg Europe**, **ESPON** (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) and **URBACT**, a programme dedicated to sustainable urban development, helping cities across Europe to share knowledge, develop integrated strategies, and implement practical

solutions to urban challenges, and also within the framework of EU Cohesion policy, UK and Ireland partners have a long history of participation in international knowledge exchange and best practice networks such as **IQ-Net**, a network of Structural Funds managing authorities.[111]

Figure 2: Shared Access to European Territorial Cooperation Programmes Around the Irish Sea Area



5.1.2 Diverging experiences of territorial cooperation post 2020

Cooperation pathways have significantly diverged since Brexit.

Northern Ireland



Photo by Michal Pokorný on Unsplash

For the 2021-2027 period, UK partners have, so far, not formally joined any Interreg programmes, except for **Northern Ireland's role in the PEACEPLUS programme**. The PEACEPLUS Programme is a new EU cross-border programme for Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland for the 2021-27 period. The new programme combines the previously separate programmes PEACE IV and INTERREG VA (Northern Ireland,

Ireland and Western Scotland), building on their activities and achievements. Covering Northern Ireland and the Border counties of Ireland, the programme continues to fund activities that promote peace and reconciliation and contribute to the cross-border economic and territorial development of the region.

PEACEPLUS has the scope to involve partners and activities outside the programme area, as long as these contribute to the objectives of the programme and benefit the citizens of the programme area. The instrument allows for flexibility in the funding of projects of strategic and environmental relevance which would significantly benefit from expanded territorial coverage − waterways and cross-border impacts, for example. This wider inclusion is especially relevant to actors in Scotland, who were active partners in the implementation of the INTERREG VA Programme in 2014-20. Scotland's ongoing involvement in the PEACEPLUS programme has resulted in several cooperation projects in areas such as health, life sciences, digitalisation water and coastal management.

Beyond PEACEPLUS, Northern Ireland is represented in a range of Horizon Europe projects, with its Contact Point (Horizon Europe NI) encouraging and supporting organisations and SMEs to become involved in the programme. Examples of the participation of Northern Ireland organisations include a number of projects working with partners across Europe to support communities to address climate change, such as Queen's University Belfast's involvement in JustREACH (Just Climate Resilience through Enhanced Adaptation and Capacity Harnessing). The same institution is leading on ONDEP (ONdas DE Peniche), which is addressing challenges to wave energy as a green energy solution to climate change, whilst MOF Technologies Limited is participating in UNICO2RN and leading NUACO2, projects looking at carbon capture.

However, although these particular projects do not involve partners from the Republic of Ireland, there are many others where this is the case, and where there is also the involvement of organisations based in Great Britain, particularly from Scotland. An Illustrative example is MarinePlan (Improved transdisciplinary science for effective ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning and conservation in European Seas), which has the participation of Ireland's Marine Institute and the involvement of Queen's University Belfast and England's International Estuarine and Coastal Specialists Ltd in a project on management of marine activities and the sustainable use of marine and coastal resources. Another is BEYOND the Current (Improving European flowing waters in an era of global change), which aims to train the next generation of water professionals to advance scientific and technological innovation to address water quality problems. This project includes the involvement of Northern Ireland's Agrifood and Biosciences Institute, Ulster University, and the Irish and Scottish Environment Protection Agencies.

The Northern Ireland Executive has a presence in Brussels, as it does in Washington DC and Beijing. With Invest NI located in the same premises to support Northern Ireland businesses, the Executive's Brussels Office has as one of its prime functions to promote the

opportunities available to Northern Ireland under the Horizon Europe programme, as well as to showcase Northern Ireland to an EU audience. It is likely that the Brussels Office will have its staffing complement increased, although this is due to its role in supporting the Executive and key stakeholders in dealing with the outworkings of the Windsor Framework.[112]

Ireland



Photo by Paul Costello on Unsplash

Ireland's regions continue to participate in Interreg programmes in 2021-27, including the Atlantic Area programme, the North West Europe Programme and Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme, as part of programme monitoring and steering committees and by acting as National Contact Points supporting Ireland's participation in the programmes. Significant expertise, capacity and appetite for cooperation is currently shown by Irish partner organisations in the three programmes, including on themes relevant to this study.

Alongside the many Irish universities who participate regularly in cooperation projects, examples of currently participating organisations include the Western Development Commission in DIBEST - Digital Innovation for Blue Enterprises & Social Tourism (Atlantic Area programme), Marine Energy in BC4MSP (Mapping and valuing blue carbon for utilization in marine spatial planning) (NPA programme), and BlueWise Marine, the Marine Institute, Medtronic, Teagasc and The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (all in projects under the NWE programme).

The Irish regions also take part in and lead projects under the Interreg Europe strand of the programme. Again, many projects are in fields which are thematically relevant to this study with, for example, the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) participating in ROBIN (Advancing Bioeconomy Governance), and the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) participating in GREENHEALTH (Strengthening links and strategic/operational collaboration between biodiversity protection and human health & well-being).

More broadly, the regions also participate in other EU programmes that support partnership projects, including **LIFE** (e.g. the Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE Integrated Project, led by the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage) and **Horizon Europe** (formerly **Horizon 2020**) (e.g. SRA is a partner in SMCNetZero, which focuses on creating and strengthening local innovation ecosystems in Small and Medium-sized Cities). Horizon Europe is currently open to participation by UK organisations, but no association agreement

yet exists between the EU and the UK for the LIFE programme. LIFE rules do allow for participation of third-country entities on an exceptional basis, if their involvement is necessary to achieve the programme's objectives (e.g., environmental projects that directly relate to EU goals). In such cases, third-country entities might be eligible to participate, but usually without receiving LIFE funds and based on the rules of the specific call.



Organisations in Ireland are also currently partners in a number of projects under the EU's **Interregional Innovation Investments Instrument (I3)**, while all three of Ireland's regions take part in the collaborative **Regional Innovation Valleys** initiative, along with Scotland (and, separately, Highlands and Islands) and West Midlands in the UK, enabled by the UK's association to Horizon Europe. The initiative is designed to connect innovative regions across Europe to bridge innovation divides and scale local solutions to EU-wide challenges. Participating organisations, such as the Irish Regional Assemblies and Community Enterprise Association Ireland (CEAI), or Scottish Enterprise and the Industrial Biotechnology Innovation Centre (IBioIC) in Scotland, can find international partners, exchange knowledge, and collaborate on transnational projects that would not be possible in isolation.[113]

Wales



Photo by Daniel Seßler on Unsplash

In Wales, new policy initiatives and programmes have emerged to support continued territorial cooperation activity. The Welsh Regional Investment Framework highlights how Wales intends to build on the activity and networks which were established through participation in ETC programmes,[114] and, consequently, the Welsh Government's Programme for Government, International Strategy and Action Plan for Priority Relationships all place a high importance on cooperation activity with other regions and nations.[115]

Along with developing the **Irish Sea Framework**, the Welsh Government's **Agile Cymru** initiative provides a programme of coordinated action to support cross-border and international activity that maximises shared opportunities across themes, sectors, and geographies. This includes financial assistance to support Welsh participation in Horizon Europe (building on the previous SCoRE Cymru and WECF schemes). Welsh universities

have valued highly EU research and innovation programmes for the unique scale of networks and collaborations that could be built and funded through their support.[116] Active engagement with **Horizon Europe** continues, especially in collaborative clusters including health, climate, energy and bioeconomy.

Another key area of Welsh participation and success has been in the area of culture. A recent example is Welsh participation in the proposed **Horizon Europe Partnership in Resilient Cultural Heritage**.[117] The new Horizon Partnership is due to be launched in 2026, with a focus on three key themes: cultural heritage and the environment; cultural heritage and society; and the management of cultural heritage. Events were organised recently in Brussels to showcase Welsh university research work on cultural heritage and to explore collaborative opportunities in European research programmes. The events were supported by Universities Wales, the Welsh Government's Agile Cymru Fund, Welsh Higher Education Brussels and the Wales Arts and Humanities Alliance (WAHA), a collaborative initiative facilitated by the Wales Innovation Network.

The **Wales Innovation Network** was set up in 2021 to respond a report by Professor Graeme Reid's (Strength in Diversity).[118] The network aims to facilitate greater collaboration across Welsh universities and to identify projects that offer the best opportunities for collaboration, providing a co-ordinated voice for Welsh universities with partners and funders. Key priority areas include Green Futures Wales, with a focus on Net Zero, and Healthy Wales. In addition, the **Global Wales** programme provides a strategic and collaborative approach to international higher and further education in Wales, with a key objective for 2022-26 of working across Europe to maintain and grow partnerships including research activities.[119]

Wales is also a member of the **Vanguard Initiative**, which, along with providing a platform for SMEs, clusters and knowledge institutes and taking a policy influencing role, focuses on building sustainable and robust European partnerships.[120] (Scotland is a member until the end of 2025).

Scotland



In Scotland, strategic ambition to continue territorial cooperation is evident. Scotland's International Strategy aims to build and maintain international relationships through 'a range of formal and informal methods of cooperation such as formal agreements, partnerships, promotional events and support for organisations'.[121] The importance of

cooperation in the **cultural sector** is specifically recognised, and the strategy prioritises regaining full access to EU programmes including Erasmus+, ETC and Creative Europe. In addition, the strategy identifies international cooperation as a key pillar for helping achieve Scotland's ambitions for the **Blue Economy**, through:

- engagement with European and international partners to learn from others' experiences, share Scottish expertise, encourage investment and work together;
- participation in international forums and negotiations to deliver on shared commitments and obligations, to ensure marine assets are managed and used sustainably and inclusively to deliver benefit to Scotland, neighbouring coastal states and others, to further shared values, to support global ocean governance and to maintain Scotland's international influence; and
- continuing to develop multidisciplinary science partnerships with international partners to support evidence-based decision-making.

Alongside outward-facing cooperation activity such as participation in the Regional Innovation Valleys Initiative and the CPMR North Sea Commission described above, Scotland has also put in place an **Arctic policy framework.**[122]



Despite the Scottish Government maintaining a presence in Brussels, Scottish Enterprise is discontinuing funding of Scotland Europa, a key body promoting Scottish interests in Europe, from March 2026. The closure removes a significant presence connecting Scottish businesses, public bodies, and institutions with their European counterparts. Nevertheless, Scottish Enterprise continues to lead on Regional Innovation Valleys participation and other initiatives.

Notable efforts have been made to maintain some connections to European Territorial Cooperation programmes, especially through the application of the 'functional areas' approach in the Peace Plus programme. Successes include projects with 15 partners, with an estimated budget of €10.3 million working on smart towns and villages, biodiversity, nature recovery and resilience, marine and coastal management, collaborative health and social care, innovation and strategic planning and engagement. Partners include universities, health board, voluntary sector organisations and government agencies. However, key knowhow and expertise is increasingly being lost and maintaining momentum is difficult.

England

There are some asymmetries evident within the countries with a potential interest in cooperation across the Irish Sea space. The lack of a coherent English territorial cooperation narrative post-Brexit may hinder the participation of English local authorities in territorial cooperation. Nevertheless, there is evidence of bilateral cooperation (see the following section) and, as noted above, the West Midlands participate in the EU **Regional Innovation Valleys** initiative. Irish Sea-adjacent UK universities have regained access to the Horizon Europe e.g. The University of Liverpool has secured multiple Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Fellowships, spanning areas from quantum materials to energy-related systems, illustrating sustained international research cooperation.

5.1.3 Retaining and reshaping links

To an extent sea basin cooperation continues through the **EU's Atlantic Strategy & Action Plan** and the work of the **Council of Peripheral and Maritime Regions' Atlantic Arc Commission**. Within these programmes, geographic flexibility and collaboration with neighbouring external networks are increasingly valued aspects of participation in cooperation arrangements. Although no longer participating in EU-funded territorial cooperation programmes, it is interesting to note that Scottish authorities continue to participate in the **CPMR North Sea Commission**, which advocates for shared geographic policy priorities, and in 2025, the Highland Council rejoined both CPMR and the North Sea Commission to strengthen European engagement.[123]

Place-based connections within the area have also been explored. For example, **the North Channel Partnerhip** between Mid and East Antrim Borough Council in Northern Ireland and Dumfries and Galloway Council in Scotland which focused on regional cooperation and aimed to develop areas of shared interests in tourism, ports, infrastructure, digital connectivity, food and drink, and energy. The partnership group was established in 1999 and has involved with varying degrees of engagement on a range issues.

More broadly, the **Irish Sea Rim (ISR)** initiative proposes a transnational economic, innovation and infrastructure zone encompassing multiple jurisdictions around the Irish Sea (including English city regions and ports), aimed at boosting investment, research networks and cross-border business linkages. This is currently more aspirational/strategic than programme-funded but provides a new paradigm of regional partnership.[124]

As mentioned above, Wales' **Irish Sea Framework** is an informal framework to guide and influence actions to increase economic co-operation across the Irish Sea region. It aims to provide strategic direction in the short term and a pathway to medium term goals. The Framework is flexible and will evolve and complement relevant policies, strategies and

programmes. The Framework is not a funding programme. The Framework aims to maximise the impact of existing resources and lever in investment where possible. Linked to the Welsh Government's Agile Cymru fund, some seed funding has been available to support related activities.

The Framework will support any activity that:

- mobilises economic co-operation across and around the Irish Sea region
- adds value to existing activity; and
- delivers economic and social benefits.

Related activities in 2023/24 included a series of workshops on the sustainable blue economy, held in Belfast, Cork, Anglesey and Cardiff to meet with interested stakeholders and determine the need for an 'Irish and Celtic Sea lighthouse'. A 'Lighthouse' would focus on fostering cooperation and building strategic relations between territories in relevent areas of activity, aiming to:

- Increase economic co-operation across the Irish and Celtic Seas, supporting sustainable growth of blue economy sectors e.g. fisheries and aquaculture, marine renewables for more resilient coastal communities.
- Foster regional collaboration, working towards shared data portals and the development of innovation partnerships and wide-reaching funding proposals.
- Align with European schemes: EU Mission lighthouses and Ocean Missions, sharing common challenges and knowledge for greater impact and reach.
- Develop long term, meaningful strategies at the Sea Basin level around Energy, Biodiversity, Pollution, Transport, Fisheries and Aquaculture.
- Increase understanding of complex regional governance, embracing differences and shared ambitions. Increasing regional prosperity, ocean health and resilience for future generations through better-connected Irish and Celtic Sea regions. [125]

With roots in the Irish Sea Framework, the **DISC project** was 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 launched a process of strategy development and action planning for future North-South and East-West cooperation.

The project is supported by the PEACEPLUS programme and builds on work led by the Welsh Government exploring the potentials around Irish Sea Cooperation. DISC focuses on three themes:

- Sustainable Blue Economy

- Innovation through health and life sciences and
- Communities & Culture.

The project has already secured important political support, e.g. from the Irish Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform Minister Paschal Donohoe TD and the Northern Ireland Executive's Finance Minister Dr. Caoimhe Archibald MLA, who both spoke at the project launch.[126] 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.

- DISC convenes a Project Steering Committee of high-level strategic and policy decision-makers from each jurisdiction, ensuring that the project's ambitions align with and maximise national and regional policy goals.
- DISC hosts symposia across each jurisdiction, where grassroots stakeholders will have a platform to share their experiences and explore the challenges and opportunities for future North-South and East-West cooperation. Symposia have so far taken place in Belfast (May 2025) and Cardiff (November 2025). A third is planned for Edinburgh in February 2026, and a fourth in Ireland.

As discussed in this and previous sections, territorial cooperation in the Irish Sea space has in the past mainly been operationalised through multi-level, programme-based instruments. Notably, many of these ran through EU and EU-adjacent programmes and networks. Currently, cooperation across the Irish Sea works in a more asymmetric way, mainly because of the UK's withdrawal from the 2021-27 Interreg programmes, while Ireland remains fully engaged in EU territorial cooperation programmes. While new initiatives are in place and, in particular, extensive bilateral actions, dialogues and frameworks exist, territorial cooperation opportunities specifically targetting the Irish Sea Area and its distinct development needs are limited in terms of their resource and impact. More generally, opportunities for territorial cooperation are imbalanced, with Ireland retaining strong engagement in Interreg programmes and extensive North South links on the island of Ireland, but weaker links around the eastern edges of the Irish Sea. Also missing are:

- opportunities to access funding to work with territorially-relevant partners across partner types (e.g linking Universities, Local Authorities, NGOs and Government agencies)
- dependable longer term policy and financial frameworks, with stable priorities and resources
- cooperation with a shared territorial focus, as opposed to individual administrative agendas.

Initiatives like the Irish Sea Framework and DISC are trying to help re-establish these links and explore ways to fill gaps and balance opportunities for cooperation.

6 LESSONS FROM INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE ON TERRITORIAL COOPERATION

Overview

The most familiar forms of territorial cooperation are the EU's Territorial Cooperation Programmes, specifically Interreg. However, in practice territorial cooperation arrangements vary enormously in terms of their scope, scale, objectives, and operations.

In a rapidly changing policy environment, and against a background of difficult economic conditions, the role and expectations of territorial cooperation are continually challenged and changing.

Based on the following overview, key points to note are:

- 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 get more/less formal/lead to spin off initiatives

- cooperation initiatives can 'co-exist' and work in complementary ways to the benefit of all partners.[127]

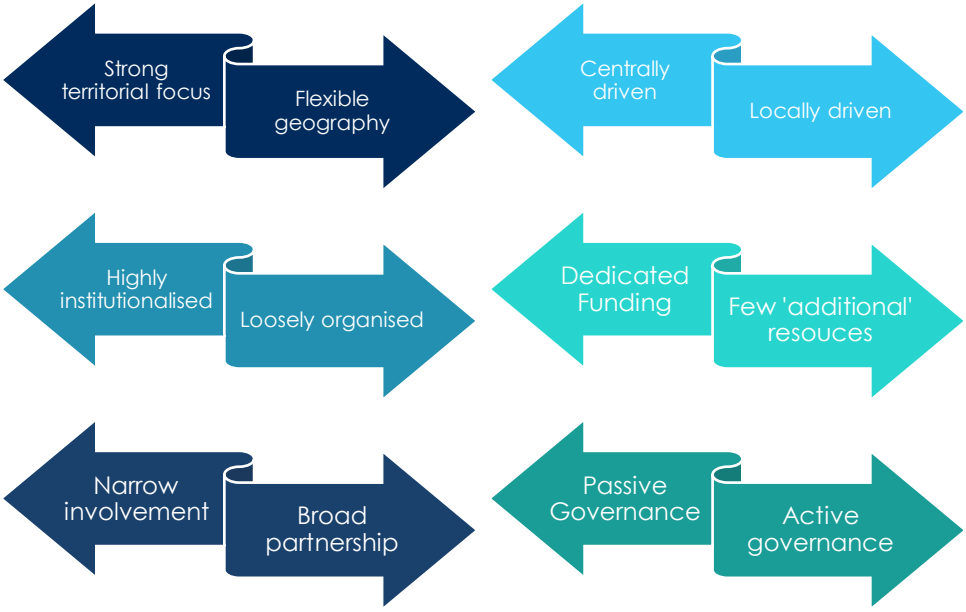
6.1 Diversity in territorial cooperation

Bilateral and sectoral cooperation are well established around the Irish Sea area, albeit they have faced significant change in recent years. Territorial cooperation does not have to detract or complicate these systems and structures. Instead, it adds a dimension, by linking territories which face the same or similar development issues and benefiting those areas by enabling joint action to address those concerns/opportunities. These territorially-based actions are particularly well adapted to managing development around shared/common features, such as sea-basins, borders, coastlines.

Based on recent experience, territorial cooperation tends to be equated with Interreg. However, territorial cooperation is a much broader concept and process. The rationales, forms and foci of territorial cooperation programmes differ considerably. Consequently, the way territories pursue and organise cooperation varies, linked to different development paths, contexts and needs.[128] Key variables when differentiating between forms of territorial cooperation structures are: the extent to which the target area is 'fixed'; the degree of administrative centralisation or decentralisation; the levels of formality/institutionalisation involved; the level of 'openness' and intensity of partner involvement; the extent to which joint or parallel structures are in place to support cooperation; and the extent to which the

institutions involved take an active role in driving cooperation (see Figure 3). **Error! Reference source not found.**

Figure 3: Governance Variables



Source: author adapted from McMaster, I, van der Zwet, A. and Vironen, H. (2013) Territorial Cooperation Governance, in in Gorzelak, G. and Zawalinska, K (eds) European Territories: From Cooperation to Integration? Scholar: Warsaw, pp. 155-1

6.2 Interreg

The most familiar forms of cooperation in the area are the EU's Interreg programmes. Interreg has a long, 30-year history and has become a well-established, well-respected component of the policy landscapes of participating territories.

Interreg is a **highly structured, institutionalised, closely managed/regulated, programme-based** cooperation. The programmes are developed based on a partnership approach with strong regional/local involvement in the development and delivery of the programmes. Interreg programmes also have a specific territorial focus, long-term strategic (seven year) approach, and dedicated resources. As the Irish Sea Area now covers a non-EU Member State area, it is worth stating that non-EU Member States can, and do, participate in Interreg programmes, noting the opportunities to pursue synergies with national policy objectives and opportunities to link with related territories in neighbouring counties.[129]

Despite major proposed changes to EU funding programmes for the forthcoming 2028+ period, participating Member States and the European Commission have expressed support for Interreg in the future. Proposals indicate that the different strands of Interreg are retained. Programme geographies are unchanged, unless requested by Member States or programmes. The funding levels proposed are comparable to current levels, which is a stark contrast to other major areas of investment which are facing cuts. A notable trend is the focus on geographic flexibility and functional territorial links that can extend beyond administrative boundaries. This concept was applied in the Peace Plus programme but it did prove challenging to work with and apply linked to varying interpretations and applications. Nevertheless, the use of functional areas did enable ongoing engagement with Scottish partners and a number of innovative projects.

Even though Interreg programmes have their limits, including administrative complexity for administrators and beneficiaries, a lack of flexibility and challenges in delivering truly cross border results, Interreg programmes offer other important advantages, such as structured and strategic cooperation opportunities, funding, access to experienced partners as well as access to wider EU networks.

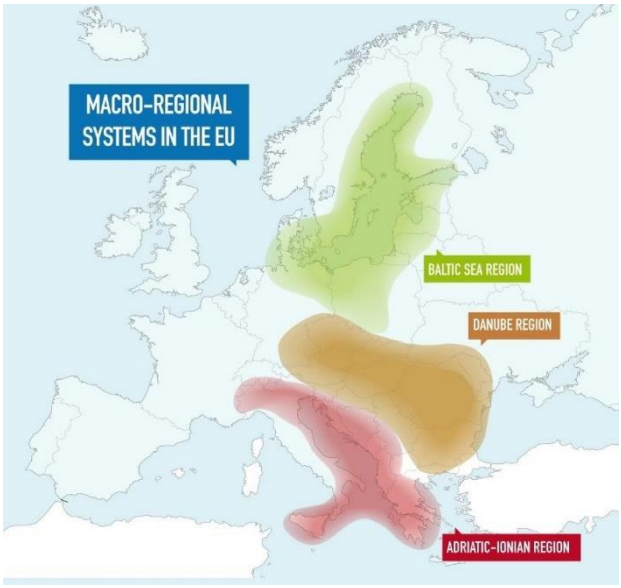
Table 5: Interreg Actions in Relevant Fields (selected examples)

Blue Growth 	Interreg 2021-27 programmes clearly emphasise blue growth as a key area for cooperation and offer useful examples of practices such as knowledge exchange, blue growth projects that demonstrate how countries can use cooperation to jointly monitor shared sea areas, improve marine spatial planning and develop a sustainable, climate-friendly and responsible model of blue growth.[130] - In the North Sea, the Building a Blue Economy project shows how transnational cooperation can support blue growth activities such as the decarbonisation of ports, development of sustainable sea-based energy supply chains, and underwater ecosystem monitoring instruments. This cooperation demonstrates how cooperation can facilitate economic growth and biodiversity objectives in cross-border areas.[131]
R&D Health and Life Sciences	Across Interreg programmes, research and development in health and life sciences is regarded an important aspect of cooperation. - The **North-West Centre for Advanced Manufacturing (NWCAM) was** funded through INTERREG VA to deliver 16 industry-focused R&D projects in the life and health sciences field, with collaboration between industry and academic partners. Universities and industries from Northern Ireland, Ireland, and Scotland jointly cooperated to advance manufacturing and grow a cross-border super cluster of geographically concentred and interlinked organisations.[132] Its successor, **NWCAM2**, now under PEACEPLUS, follows the original plan, aiming to support SMEs on both sides of the border to develop sustainable and more-advanced technologies for the health and life sectors[133].
Communities and Culture 	Interreg programmes offer opportunities for cooperation in communities and culture: - the Intererg Europe projects **PROSPERO** illustrates how collaboration between a wide partnership of public authorities in different countries can play a significant role in turning creative and cultural industries into effective drivers of prosperous development.[134]

6.3 Macro-regional and Sea basin Strategies

Macro-regional and Sea Basin Strategies offer the opportunity for more strategic, territorially-based cooperation and working in synergy across different funding/policy areas in order to build more territorially relevant actions. The European Council has endorsed four macro-regional strategies and four Sea basin strategies, the first of which was adopted in 2009.[135]

EU macro-regional and sea basin strategies arose from a need to find more targeted solutions to common societal challenges. The aim is for the strategies to be efficient frameworks to engage relevant stakeholders in defining and implementing strategic actions and macro-regional processes, such as flagships, projects, and 'example projects'.[136]



Source: https://www.regions.eu.org/category/macroregional-strategy

Table 6: MRS Actions in Relevant Fields (selected examples)

Blue Growth	In the field of blue growth, macro-regional structures and joint solutions are considered essential, given that uncoordinated single actions from individual countries or stakeholders will not resolve the challenges faced in the blue growth sector.[137] - The EU Sea Basins Assistance Mechanism provides a platform for blue growth cooperation across Europe's Atlantic facade, the Western Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Examples of current cooperation practices include: Aquawind, Black Sea CONNECT, 2B-BLUE, all demonstrating the strength of sea-basin cooperation to foster blue economies across borders. - EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBR). Blue growth is also a key objective of the Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021-27. This programme encourages cross-border projects to support the EUSBR blue economy: e.g. sustainable use of fresh and sea waters in the whole region; effective management of marine resources; tackling climate change; promoting innovative business development in the marine field; joint use of waters without conflicts; diversifying the blue economy.[138]
R&D Health and Life Sciences	- In the **Danube** region, R&D in life and health sciences is reinforced by the EUSDR Priority 7 on knowledge society. Cooperation is fostered through investment in R&D, networking schemes, specialisation strategies in the whole Danube region, joint Steering Group meetings, joint support for project proposals and common workshops.[139] Other cooperation practices include the **Multilateral Danube call**[140] supporting: scientific and technological cooperation in the Danube region; DIGI4Care,[141] seeking to improve patient journeys through innovation in healthcare across the region; and flagships such as caring communities and cross-border emergency healthcare that aim

	to contribute to better quality of life and health services across the borders of the Danube region[142]. - The **EU strategy for the Alpine Region 2023-25** focuses on creating an effective research and innovation ecosystem for the Alpine Region, emphasising networking and collaboration between Alpine Region universities and research centres, improving research and innovation initiatives and implementing joint actions to boost people's health and quality of life in the Alps.[143]
Communities and Culture 	- The **EU Macro-Regional Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region** engages different countries in combined operations, improving communities and culture transnationally and resulting in added value that boosts the competitiveness of, not only the region, but also the entire Community.[144] - The revised **Adriatic Ionian EU Strategy (EUSAIR) Action Plan** includes social cohesion as a cooperative objective across borders. Culture is set as a basis for tourism strategies given that culture is considered as a tool for knowledge exchange and enlargement. EUSAIR also fosters cross-border community engagement.[145]

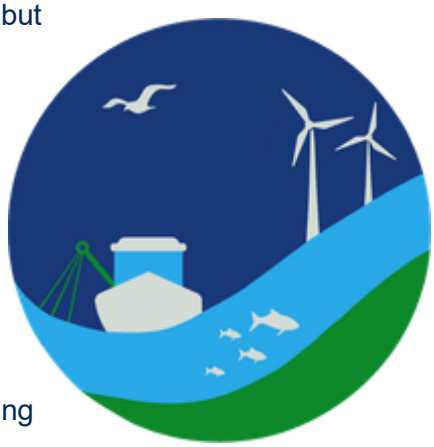
All existing formal strategies include non-EU Members. Governance arrangements are flexible and can be adapted to specific national/regional needs. The content and focus of the strategies are established by the participating territories themselves, not by the European Commission. They are, however, complex initiatives and have to consider diverse and different perspectives.

Nevertheless, macro-regional strategies are viewed as a means to integrate and empower stakeholders in policy-making.[146] For example, macro-regions and sea basin strategies can offer a strategic framework for projects and interventions to define and refine their priorities and capitalise on results. The Sea Basin strategy for the Atlantic Area has contributed to more strategic cooperation, with longer-term horizons than through project-based cooperation, and helped prioritise and build synergies across a portfolio of actions. For the Atlantic Area, it has also been a route through which to pursue cooperation with other Atlantic nations, most notably Canada.[147]

6.4 Marine & Coastal Territorial Cooperation

Beyond EU initiatives, efforts to boost cooperation around marine spaces have intensified in recent years. As opportunities around blue growth have increased and environmental pressures have intensified, the need for more integrated and holistic approaches to managing marine spaces is more apparent.

The adoption of sea basin strategies is one example of action, but numerous other initiatives also exist, all underlining the importance and value of collaboration. The **Greater North Sea Basin** was established in 2023 and includes nine North Sea countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The initiative aims to support maritime spatial planning (MSP) and implement efficient management processes. Furthermore, the platform is designed to be a space for cross-sectoral and cross-border knowledge sharing, fostering a better understanding of common challenges and encouraging close cooperation.



Another interesting initative is the **Coast-R Network** which brings together academics, UK marine, coastal and government agencies, industry partners, local authorities, the voluntary sector and communities most affected by coastal change.[148] This example has a specific UK focus, but illustrates the opportunities in working across stakeholder types as a means to develop innovative solutions, e.g to share learnings and best practice across sectors and disciplines so as to build UK coastal and marine resilience and work in partnership with coastal communities and other partners to identify and respond to priority needs.

6.5 Area Commissions

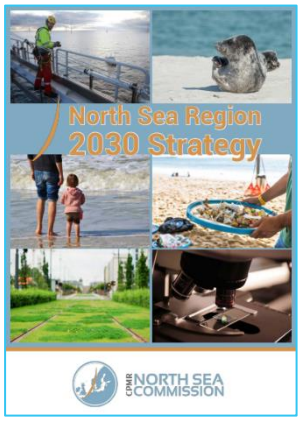
Area conventions and commissions cover territories from multiple countries linked by shared/common territorially based themes. For example:

The North Sea and Atlantic Arc Commissions are examples of looser forms of cooperation. The Commissions are two of six geographical Commissions of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR). Both are cooperation platforms for regions around their respective shared marine territories. Wales, Ireland and England have areas which are involved in the Atlantic Arc while Scottish and English Regions have been involved in the North Sea Commission.

Working on a similar basis to the Atlantic Arc Commission, based on geographic scale and type, the **North Sea Commission (NSC)** is a useful example. The NSC mission is to strengthen partnerships between regional authorities which face the challenges and opportunities presented by the North Sea. The main objectives of the North Sea Commission are:

- to promote and create awareness of the North Sea region as a major economic entity within Europe;
- to be a platform for developing and obtaining funding for joint development initiatives; and
- to lobby for a better North Sea region.

The work of the Commission is based around a formal membership structure, dialogue and promoting shared interests. The Commission has a shared, long-term strategy for the region (North Sea Region 2030)[149], runs thematic working groups, annual conferences and events, and it has secured funding to explore future collaboration. The Commission is also distinctive in that it takes a broad policy approach covering both territorial and marine policy, which can often suffer from being viewed separately.



The Commission operates on a voluntary basis and has strong local level roots as local and regional authorities can join directly. The Commission works in a range of relevant policy areas, engages actively with wider policy networks, and offers an international profile and presence. For example, the North Sea Commission has long-standing links with the North Sea Interreg programme and hosts an annual joint conference along with the programme. However, the Commission has struggled to achieve large-scale active participation from UK partners in the past, relies on regional/local levels of government with capacity and resources to commit to membership, and the funding arrangements through the CPMR can narrow the appeal to territories that identify specifically as maritime and peripheral.

Current priority areas for NSC cooperation are: a productive and sustainable North Sea; a climate neutral North Sea region; a connected North Sea region; and a smart North Sea region. Both NSC and Atlantic Arc have been very active in supporting projects addressing Blue Growth/Blue Economy themes.

Table 7: Area Commissions Actions in Relevant Fields (selected examples)

Blue Growth	NORSAIC aims to improve cooperation and governance in marine spatial planning (MSP) by adapting and advancing crucial MSP elements, establishing innovation capacity and building joint cooperation capacity.
	TRANSATLANTIC aims at encouraging the green and blue recovery in the Atlantic by creating a precursor of a cooperation scheme at the transatlantic level to foster exchanges of best practices and joint projects in the maritime sector important to Atlantic coastal regions, including outermost regions and non-EU regions.
	Atlantic Power Cluster builds on the Marine Energy Working Group set up in the CPMR (Atlantic Arc Commission) and is intended to implement a transnational marine energy strategy so the partner regions can seek complementarities to tackle the crucial challenges for the development of marine energies in the Atlantic Area.

Blue Biotechnology Master for a Blue Career (BBMBC) is developing a Master's degree exploring the potential benefits of Blue Biotechnologies for health, nutrition and aquaculture.

FANBEST supports a network of Atlantic partners in transfer of blue economy technology. FANBEST in particular enables fund raising and business support so that technologies and innovations "made in Atlantic Regions" can reach the market.

6.6 Nordic Territorial Cooperation

In the Nordic area, common societal and cultural links lie at the heart of contemporary cooperation in the region, while formalised/political territorial cooperation gradually developed as needed to manage problems.[150] Informal cooperative activities commonly existed before formalised institutional channels for interaction were created and there has been a secondary role for joint structures. This path of development distinguishes Nordic cooperation from experience in neighbouring EU countries, where many cooperation and integration efforts are 'top-down', originating from an original political decision and interaction. Also, the main objective of Nordic cooperation is not to integrate the Nordic countries into one political unit, but to facilitate constructive and mutually beneficial management of various regional problems.[151] As a result, Nordic cooperation has not led to the levels of integration and cooperation that are pursed in the EU.

A particularly interesting example of territorially based cooperation in the Nordic/Scandinavian area is the **NORA** (Nordic Atlantic Cooperation) organisation. NORA (Nordic Atlantic Cooperation) is an intergovernmental organisation under the regional cooperation programme of the Nordic Council of Ministers that brings together Greenland, Iceland, Faroe Islands and coastal Norway. Scotland is considered to be a natural partner.[152] NORA is a unique strand in the complex web of Nordic, Arctic, and Northern cooperation, which organises its activities on the basis of multi-annual strategic programmes. NORA is funded as a regional cooperation programme of the Nordic Council of Minister's regional political collaboration programme and is supplemented by contributions from the four participating countries and the West Nordic Fund.

The overall goal of the organisation is to contribute to the creation of a strong and dynamic North Atlantic region characterised by strong and sustainable economies.[153] NORA's focus is on strengthening collaboration among the business community, research organisations and the development agencies throughout the region. There are three main dimensions to its work:

- project funding, which funds collaboration projects involving stakeholders in the North Atlantic and the Arctic;
- agenda setting, which uses a variety of measures to put relevant themes on the political agenda in the North Atlantic and the Arctic on its own initiative; and

- alliance building, which seeks to establish collaboration and identify areas of synergy with other stakeholders and organisations active in the North Atlantic area as a means to increase the effectiveness of collaborative activities. [154]

Activities are organised around multi-annual strategic programmes and a 'project-based' platform, which is used to stimulate and facilitate transnational collaboration. Current strategic themes and priorities include: resource security; artificial intelligence; regenerative tourism; nice places to live; mobility and green transition; marine industries and food production; and silver economy.[155]

A large part of NORA's activity is to provide financial support for projects that promote development and cooperation across the region. There are two funding rounds per year. Support is provided for main projects, pre-project development, and network building activities. A funding requirement is the participation of at least two NORA countries in the project. NORA provides a maximum of 50 percent of the budget and a maximum annual contribution of DKK 500,000 over a period of three years. NORA has developed strong, long-standing, productive working links with the Northern Periphery and Arctic Interreg programmes. For example, a representative of NORA is involved in programme drafting committees and a number of NORA projects have 'up-scaled' and secured funding from the NPA programme.[156]

The NORA committee is comprised of up to three members from each of the four collaborating regions. The Committee meets annually and, amongst a range of activities, is responsible for agreeing strategic programmes and approving funding for projects. The work of the Committee is supported by a secretariat located in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands. In addition, regional contacts are situated in Iceland, Greenland, South and West Norway, and Northern Norway. In recent years, the organisation has gained in profile and has built robust links with key partners both within the region and externally, including in Scotland. Current NORA priorities include the following.

Table 8: Nora cooperation in relevant fields (selected examples)

Blue Growth 	Focus issue: Marine industries and food production: Sustainable and innovative solutions in marine industries and food production that strengthen coastal communities. Priorities: Projects that incorporate locally produced ingredients; Projects that promote sustainable fisheries and aquaculture; Initiatives to promote the circular economy by reusing and recycling marine resources Projects that explore new ways to integrate by-products from the fishing industry into new value chains, such as biotechnology and pharmaceuticals In addition, NORA supports blue growth youth initiatives such as the North Atlantic youth blue innovation camp aimed at discussing new ideas and solutions for the blue economy among the youth of the North Atlantic,[157] and also facilitates the organisation of events that link different stakeholders of the North Atlantic with international organisations such as FAO, laying the groundwork for a broadened scope of cooperation.[158]

R&D Health and Life Sciences	Health and healthcare are priorities under two identified focus issues: **resource security and artificial intelligence**
Communities and Culture 	**Focus issue**: Ensuring that communities have the economic, cultural and social capital that is important for young in-migrants, as well as for encouraging out-migrants to return **Priorities**: Projects and initiatives for children, young people and families. Of particular interest are those that focus on creating employment opportunities, well-being and local identity **Focus issue**: Focus on local cultural heritage and experiences that directly support communities and producers **Priorities**: Projects that emphasise traditions, identity and culinary practices in remote areas. Of particular interest: "micro-infrastructure" and site-specific development More generally, Nordic Cooperation benefits from a long-standing history of cooperation on communities and culture, marked by the Helsinki Treaty[159] and more recently the **Nordic Co-operation Programme for Culture 2025–30**.[160] Nordic Cooperation in the field of art, culture and media is presented as key for the Nordic Council of Ministers, and joint efforts to foster an inclusive cross border culture and cooperative practices on sustainable lifestyles and cohesive communities are considered crucial to the development of Nordic countries, i.e. cooperation allows democratic cross-border dialogue, the preservation of cultural heritage across the area, and the development of resilience across the Nordic countries.[161] Practices of cooperation focus on joint networks and funding such as the **Nordic Culture Fund**[162] and the **Culture and Art Programme**[163] that provides funds for active cooperation in the field of art and culture for a diverse and sustainable Nordic region.[164] Nordic cooperation also involves events seeking to strengthen democratic dialogue between all the Nordic countries, with a particular focus on the younger generation. **Kulturytring, Folk och Kultur and Kulturmødet Mors** are examples of cross-border exchange for the cultural debate in Norway, Sweden and Denmark.[165] Cultural institutions such as **NAPA**, The Nordic Institute in Greenland under the Nordic Council of Ministers, promote cooperation through creative meetings, exchanges, relationships, and networks to strengthen communities and shared culture across the Nordic space.[166]

6.7 Regional and Local Territorial Cooperation

Much of the focus has been on large-scale frameworks, but it is important to highlight that territorial cooperation takes place at a regional and local level and increasingly more focussed initiatives between 'invested' territories are pursued. Pre-dating Interreg and underlining the point that not all forms of territorial cooperation are driven by the EU are **Euroregions**. Euroregions are cooperation structures between two (or more) contiguous territories located in different European countries. The German-Dutch border area was a pioneer in setting up the first Euroregion in 1958 which brought together five border regions. Since then, Euroregions have proliferated, see Figure 4. Euroregions vary in form, but the Association of European Border Regions sets the following criteria for their identification:

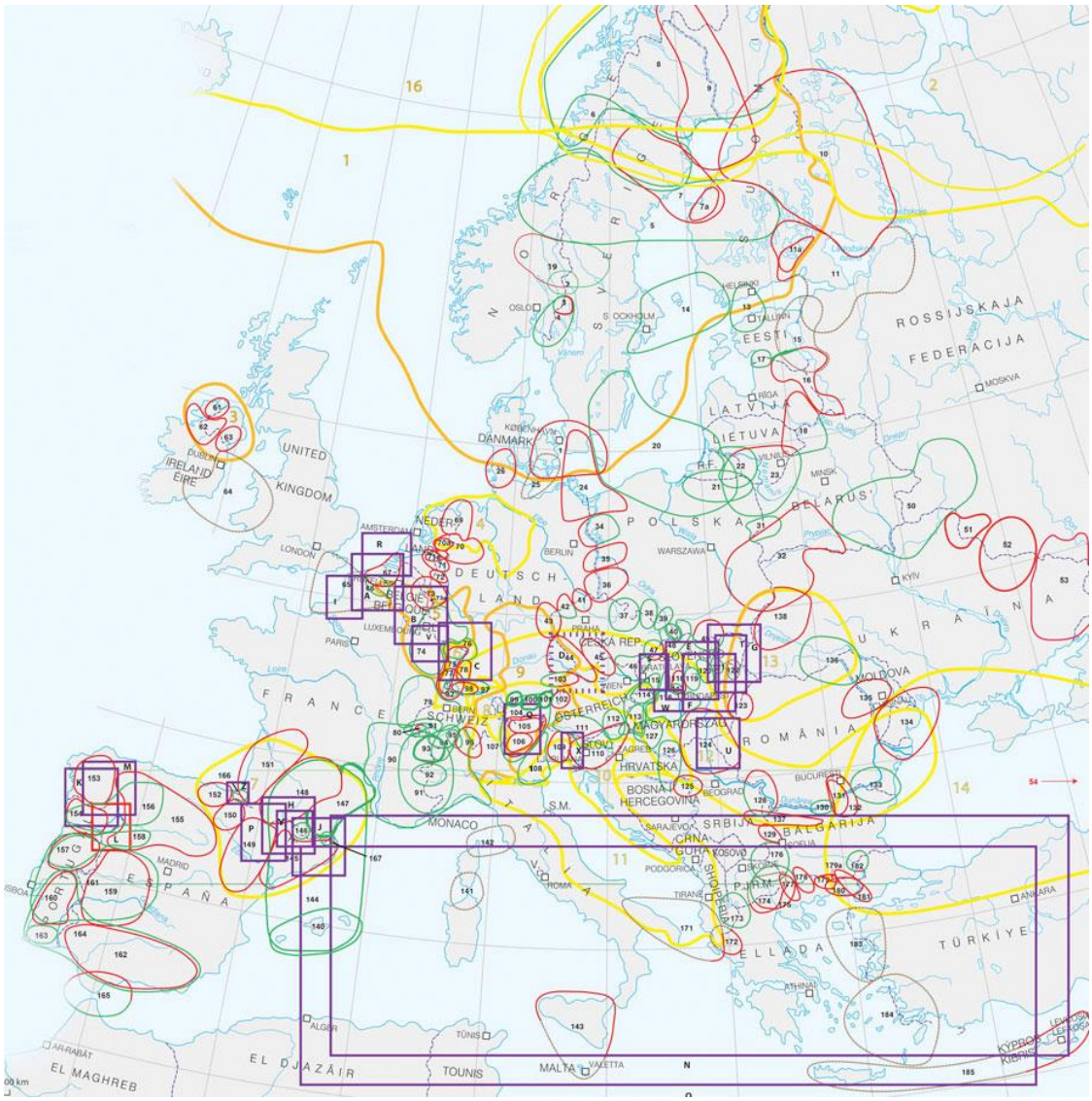
- an association of local and regional authorities on either side of the national border, sometimes with a parliamentary assembly;

- a transfrontier association with a permanent secretariat and a technical and administrative team with own resources;

- of private law nature, based on non-profit-making associations or foundations on either side of the border in accordance with the respective national law in force; and

- of public law nature, based on inter-state agreements, dealing among other things, with the participation of territorial authorities. [167]

Figure 4: Euroregions (as defined by the AEBR)



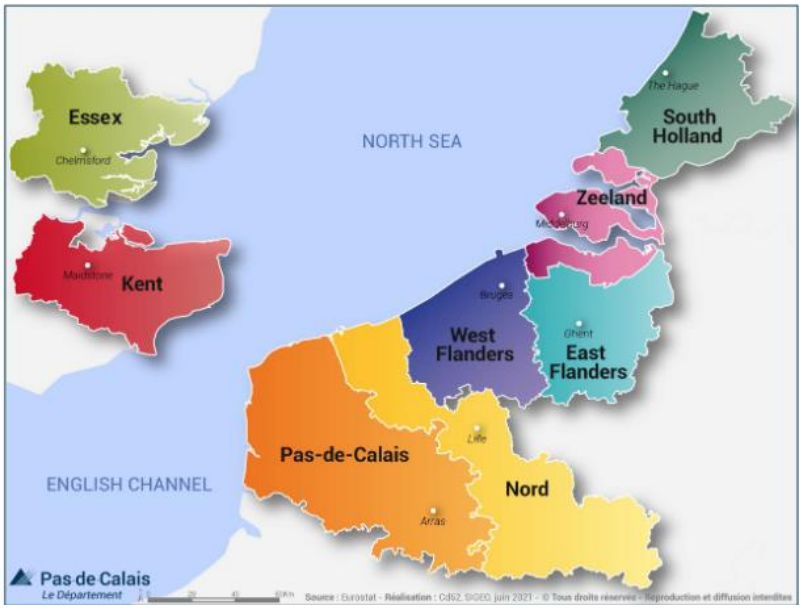
Source: Association of European Border Regions <https://www.aebr.eu/

The general aim is to create a coherent space, developed collectively by bringing together stakeholders, policies and projects. Within this framework and over time, beneficial links to

other European policies and initiatives have emerged. The majority are based around land border but notably some do cover include aqua territories, e.g. around the Baltic.

Cross border cooperation arrangements continue to evolve in response to changing policy contexts, opportunities and needs. For example, the **Straits Committee** is a voluntary partnership, launched in 2020 between two UK County Councils (Kent and Essex) and neighbouring local authorities in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, see Figure 5. Following the loss of a number of Interreg programmes spanning the Channel, the Straits Committee has a role as a means to maintain at least some regional links across what has been a very closely connected area. Efforts were further inspired by lessons from the Covid pandemic and the resulting disruption of already challenging border links.[168] Member authorities meet around four times per year. The aim is to promote good neighbourly relations, encourage cross-border discussions on matters of mutual interest, e.g. cross-border clusters, flooding and coastline management, and seek to create opportunities for working together. The Committee has an integrated vision and strategy document and is piloting an initiative to support local organisations either side of the Channel working together, offering small grants of up to £5,000 for UK partners.

Figure 5: Straits Committee Cooperation Area



Source: https://straitscommittee.eu/

6.8 Territorial Instruments

Contemporary policy papers stress the achievements and value of deeper institutional cooperation, e.g. through b-solutions and EGTC.[169] Continued development of initiatives such as b-solutions, EGTC, and cross border programmes with narrow foci on specific border issues has the potential to deliver results through robust and meaningful cooperation in the future.

6.8.1 European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs)

European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) were set up to facilitate cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation between Member States or their regional and local authorities.[1]

EGTC's role as a comparatively new initiative and step change in the legal foundations of territorial cooperation is important. Seen as a 'next step' in intensifying cooperation, EGTC allow public entities of different EU Member States to come together under a new entity with full legal personality.[170] Through an EGTC, public authorities can set up a single joint structure to implement projects, investments or policies, whether co-financed by the EU budget or not.

EGTCs enable partners to implement joint projects, share expertise, and improve coordination of spatial planning. Key features include:

- Holds legal status at an EU level
- Allows for stronger representation of microregional interests
- Framework fulfils the conditions of EU funding e.g., Interreg and eases the administrative process of funding applications.
- Formalises the commitment of relevant parties where informal commitment has persisted.
- The framework allows or diversification of interests and regional focus
- Disproportionate uptake and national monitoring across Europe
- Legal basis of one state must preside – may discourage states with different political landscapes to participate
- Not suitable for all forms of cooperation especially where longer precedents remain.

As of November 2025, 92 EGTC have been set up. According to the official register, Ireland are so far only involved in one EGTC, the **Euro Contrôle Route (ECR) EGTC** which aims to strengthen international cooperation in road traffic control and improve road safety. Along with Ireland, founding members include Poland, Croatia, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Luxembourg. Czech Republic, Portugal and Romania also joined in August 2025.

The UK can also join an EGTC but as a third country participant and subject to specific conditions. Domestic UK legislation (the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EU Exit) Regulations) was introduced post-Brexit to enable UK public authorities to continue to participate in EGTCs, subject to UK Government approval.[171] Applications require consent

[1] implemented according to EU Council Regulation 1082/2006 of 5 July 2006.

from the UK Secretary of State, and from Devolved Administrations for Scottish/Welsh authorities. EGTCs, however, can no longer be registered in the UK itself; their registered office must be in an EU Member State.

6.8.2 *Integrated Territorial Investments & Community-Led Local Development*

Initiatives such as Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and Community Led Local Development (CLLD) were introduced under EU Cohesion Policy to promote the combination of various funding sources across multiple levels and sectors to best fit and benefit the relative territory. They provide a bottom-up approach to making the most of potential investment. In both cases, cooperation across domestic administrative boundaries lies at the heart of the investments.

Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) are a territorial delivery mechanism that enable funding from multiple EU funds to be combined to support a single integrated territorial development strategy. They can help to integrate sectoral issues into local economic development measures.[172] Under EU Cohesion Policy, Managing Authorities have the final responsibility for ITIs. However, Intermediate Bodies (IBs - local authorities, regional development bodies etc.) may be appointed to carry out delegated tasks. The territory of an ITI can be any geographical area (urban, urban-rural, sub-regional, inter-regional or cross-border).[173]

Ireland has not used the EC's ITI approach in 2014-20 or 2021-27, instead implementing other integrated territorial approaches (e.g. urban-focused funding, functional area strategies) under its national and regional programmes. England was the only part of the UK to adopt EC-type ITI in 2014-20. The nine core cities implemented ITIs for their sustainable urban development (SUD) strategies, while Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly implemented a non-SUD ITI. The UK also operates its own domestic place-based multi-level regional development frameworks, such as City Deals and Growth Deals.

CLLD was introduced in EU Cohesion Policy as a place-based, bottom-up tool where local actors (public, private, NGOs and communities working together through Local Action Groups (LAGs)) design and implement integrated local strategies. CLLD is primarily a local development delivery method, but it can support collaboration, as opposed to territorial cooperation. Cooperation is encouraged, but in a functional and voluntary sense, rather than as a legal or programme-based framework. CLLD promotes cooperation among local stakeholders within Scotland and can link to wider networks. There is potential for soft, informal, non-structured collaboration, for example through knowledge exchange, study visits or networking.

Interestingly, in Scotland, EU LEADER activity has been replaced by domestically-funded Community Led Local Development. Grants support local projects that align with Scottish

Government priorities, such as green skills, tourism, rural poverty reduction, and community well-being. In addition, the Scottish Rural Network has supported cross-European and UK networking, including hosting visits and events with partners from across Europe and facilitating the sharing of rural development ideas and approaches.

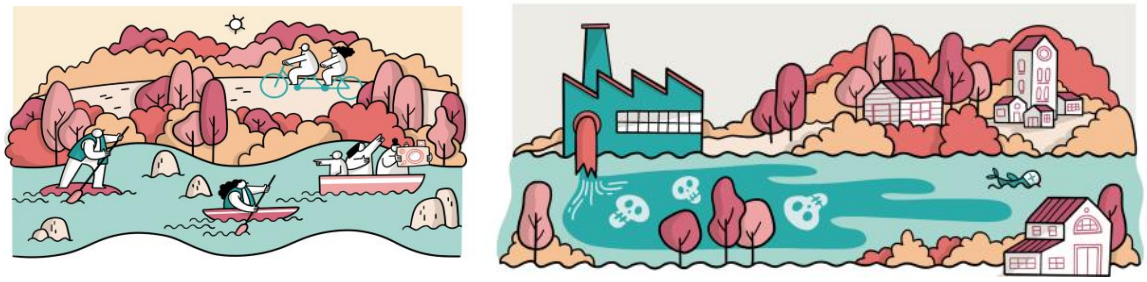
Examples of how ITI and CLLD have incorporated the three focal themes for this study are shown below.

Table 9: ITI and CLLD initiatives in relevant fields (selected examples)

Blue Growth 	There are examples where territorial strategies integrate marine sectors and natural assets. For example, the AZUL ITI aimed to strengthen coastal connections and links to fishery industry and/or the blue economy. Anchored in Spain's Atlantic Strategy, developed together with the EC's DG MARE to enhance and promote the development of the Atlantic territories. In England, a priority under the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly 2014-20 ITI strategy was investment in activities with growth potential to develop Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly as a 'green and marine' region. The region's offshore renewable potential provided a focus for future investment and collaboration with partners. CLLD applies to coastal/fisheries areas, supporting local diversification and blue economy activities.
R&D Health and Life Sciences	ITI strategies can include **health/social innovation**, with health included in some ITI plans.[174] e.g. E-health and E-wellbeing were among the sectors identified by the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly 2014-20 ITI strategy as areas with assets and potential for growth. CLLD supports **health & wellbeing projects at community level**.
Communities and Culture 	ITI strategies often leverage **cultural assets and creative sectors** as part of integrated territorial development e.g. the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly 2014-20 ITI strategy aimed to develop communities that are economically and socially resilient, sustainable and inclusive. CLLD funds a **wide range of community-led cultural activities and local engagement projects**. In 2014-20, CLLD thematically tended to focus on social inclusion, fighting poverty, and discrimination. Many strategies specifically emphasised supporting marginalised communities. CLLD strategies in more developed regions tended to emphasise investment in digitalisation, environmental protection, support for SMEs and cultural heritage. For instance, German CLLD focused on improvements in rural infrastructure for tourism, healthcare, and quality of life.[175]

6.8.3 b-solutions

The 'b-solutions' initiative aims to tackle legal and administrative border obstacles along EU internal and external borders. The initiative is promoted by the EC's DG REGIO and managed by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR).[176] The b-solutions initiative builds on various forms of pre-existing collaboration to provide a technical tool to improve and overcome border obstacles.



Border-adjacent municipalities and regions, along with cross-border entities, can submit information about a border-related legal or administrative obstacle they face. These generally seek solutions around the provision of cross-border public services, institutional cooperation, the Green Deal, and labour market and education. Successful candidates are assigned EC support to help remove the border-related obstacles.[177]

Under the first round of b-solutions (2018-21), four calls for proposals were launched, and 90 cases were reviewed by experts to advise on potential solutions to overcome the identified obstacles in various thematic fields. Identified cases have addressed thematic areas covered by this study, e.g. boosting cross-border water tourism along the Danube (**Blue Economy**), and facilitating health data accessibility to initiate cross-border public policies (**Health & Life Sciences**).[178]

A successor programme 'b-solutions 2.0: Solving Cross-Border Obstacles' ran from 2022-24, and broadened coverage to **EU internal land and maritime borders** as well as along EU borders with EFTA (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) and IPA countries (Turkey, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina).

The third round of the programme (b-solutions 3.0: Solving Border Obstacles to Facilitate Cooperation) has been running since October 2024. b-solutions 3.0 offers:[179]

- technical support to identify potential solutions to legal and administrative obstacles
- mentorship and further technical support to move forward the implementation of a suggested solution, and
- grants to autonomously implement a solution to be distributed through a call for proposal.

7 OVERVIEW AND 'TAKE AWAYS'

The literature and policy review has encompassed both international good practices and recent developments in the territorial cooperation space, as well as mapping the cooperation that already exists around the Irish Sea space. Although coverage of current cooperation cannot be exhaustive, as some projects and initiatives may operate 'under the radar' and new ones appear regularly, the description of this baseline helps to outline the opportunities, challenges and basis for any future cooperation, helping to avoid duplication and overlap, take advantage of synergies and potentially providing inspiration.

Conclusions and takeaways from the review include:

- **Rationale for territorial cooperation**

Territorial cooperation has a distinct focus and role, based on a focus on shared and common development opportunities and challenges in a territory, such as the Irish Sea. As a tool to help address shared opportunities and challenges, territorial cooperation can support joint approaches, knowledge exchange, shared thinking and combined efforts. For example, complex cross-sectoral development issues, such as supporting blue growth, benefit from engaging a range of stakeholders and expertise, engaging with regional and local know how and shared approaches around the shared space.

- **Long history of cooperation and extensive on going efforts**

There is a long history of cooperation based on a strong set of shared interests and priorities in the area. However, the opportunities to collaborate directly, and in particular to involve sub-national partners in the cooperation, have narrowed substantially and are imbalanced.

- **Territorial cooperation does not have to be one size fits all**

The preceding review illustrates the wide diversity that exists in the coverage, type and scope of territorial cooperation. Adding this variety into the already complex conditions around Irish Sea cooperation makes for a daunting array of networks and structures. This complex network of links around the Irish Sea Area could suggest that the idea of an 'extra' layer and additional 'model' of cooperation is likely to be challenged. However, the review of approaches does offer lessons and insights which could help to inform approaches in the future.

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 are 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; and
- cooperation initiatives ‘co-exist’ and work in complementary ways to the benefit of all partners.
- **Territorial cooperation is an evolving process.**

The flexibility of territorial cooperation is a key characteristic to highlight in the context of the Irish Sea area, where cross border relationships have been, and continue to be subject to major shifts and changes.

This review will form the basis of a further report, drawing on interviews and workshop evidence, which will address the points listed.

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