

North Sea Strategy Comments – Sustainable Development Group

The Sustainable Development and Education and Innovation Committee having met to discuss broader input into the North Sea Strategy agrees that the North Sea Region is much more than simply the North Sea Basin and that this has to be fully reflected in any North Sea Strategy. While it understands that the sea is what physically links us together too much focus on the physical maritime space also opens up the potential for a strategy failing to fully engage or benefit a large portion of the communities that are intended to be the principle beneficiaries.

Given the feedback from all other group which indicate that a North Sea Strategy (NSS) should look to tackle the key land and maritime challenges and more importantly opportunities faced by the regions of the North Sea and that this will require broad political and civil support at a domestic/regional level. Of perhaps of greater importance is that any Strategy has the financial backing to ensure that it is action focused with positive impacts visible on the ground. That is why we would agree with some of the comments put forward by other groups that there should be:

- Closer correlation with the themes of the North Sea Programme and other EU transnational funding Programmes
- Clearer identification of how the North Sea Strategy will work in collaboration with EU policy aims and targets such as those outlined in the EU 2020 Strategy
- Clearer identification of local, regional and national competencies in taking a Strategy forward and a means of ensuring broad buy in from all sectors.
- Aims and targets articulated through a clear time frame.

Closer coordination with the North Sea Programme and other sectoral funding programmes.

By having any strategy that makes direct reference to the North Sea Programme and other EU Funding streams, A NSS it can work to ensure a mutually beneficial relationship cannot only be maintained but enhanced. By showing that a North Sea Strategy aims to reflect the aims and objectives of the North Sea and other EU Funding Programmes it shows the value given by the North Sea Commission to the INTERREG IVB and other transnational funding programme as an important driver of macro-regional cooperation.

By making explicit reference to INTERREG IVB Programme and joint working through other transnational EU funding programmes in any North Sea Strategy, we not only highlight examples of existing Macro-Regional development in the North Sea, but for the opportunities for this to be developed and expanded not only through a definitive strategy but through targeted funding. By referring to and placing increased value on the INTERREG IVB

programme, a North Sea Strategy would also implicitly act as lobbying tool to improve opportunities for Post 2013 funding to be more generously allocated to INTERREG IVB.

It must be noted however that the current North Sea Programme and expected post 20103 funding award will be insufficient to drive forward a larger initiative such as a North Sea Strategy. It is therefore key to have any future macro-regional strategy delivered through all of the funding schemes that are available.

EU 2020 Strategy

Given the comments from the other groups and reflecting the view of the Sustainability and Education and Innovation Group that a North Sea Strategy should have a broader reach than the current draft, we feel that the best approach to move forward, would be for a North Sea Strategy to be closely aligned with the EU 2020 Strategy and perhaps the targets of the EU 2020 Strategy. The Baltic Strategy has paved the way for the EU Commission to be supportive of macro-regional approaches to tackling some of the key challenges facing the EU. While Commission support for the Baltic Strategy was achieved through an illustration of how efficient and transparent regional cooperation can help balanced regional development emanating from a specific shared problem, this does not mean that a North Sea Strategy has to go down this same route.

The EU Commission support for Baltic Strategy was based, in part, on the potential for macro-regional cooperation to become a solution to the multiple challenges and opportunities facing the region on a broader scale and for closer cooperation to be replicated into different thematic areas. By having the North Sea Strategy looking to embrace the wider potential of Macro-regional approaches to economic development it will not only more closely reflect the views of the North Sea Commission thematic groups but also more closely reflect the ambitions of the EU Commission. A North Sea Strategy should therefore look to match its own vision for improving social cohesion and economic compositeness within the North Sea Region in a manner that is reflected within the EU Commissions own policy ambitions over the coming decade.

One opportunity to do this is to have the Strategy closely aligned to the targets of the EU 2020 Strategy, with intended actions falling under the three overarching themes of "Smart Growth, Sustainable Growth, Inclusive Growth". The EU2020 targets and three overarching themes of "Smart Growth, Sustainable Growth, Inclusive Growth" presented in the EU2020 Strategy can be seen in closer detail in the table below.

ANNEX 1 - EUROPE 2020: AN OVERVIEW

HEADLINE TARGETS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Raise the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 from the current 69% to at least 75%. – Achieve the target of investing 3% of GDP in R&D in particular by improving the conditions for R&D investment by the private sector, and develop a new indicator to track innovation. – Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% compared to 1990 levels or by 30% if the conditions are right, increase the share of renewable energy in our final energy consumption to 20%, and achieve a 20% increase in energy efficiency. – Reduce the share of early school leavers to 10% from the current 15% and increase the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40%. – Reduce the number of Europeans living below national poverty lines by 25%, lifting 20 million people out of poverty. 		
SMART GROWTH	SUSTAINABLE GROWTH	INCLUSIVE GROWTH
<p><i>INNOVATION</i> EU flagship initiative "Innovation Union" to improve framework conditions and access to finance for research and innovation so as to strengthen the innovation chain and boost levels of investment throughout the Union.</p>	<p><i>CLIMATE, ENERGY AND MOBILITY</i> EU flagship initiative "Resource efficient Europe" to help decouple economic growth from the use of resources, by decarbonising our economy, increasing the use of renewable sources, modernising our transport sector and promoting energy efficiency.</p>	<p><i>EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS</i> EU flagship initiative "An agenda for new skills and jobs" to modernise labour markets by facilitating labour mobility and the development of skills throughout the lifecycle with a view to increase labour participation and better match labour supply and demand.</p>
<p><i>EDUCATION</i> EU flagship initiative "Youth on the move" to enhance the performance of education systems and to reinforce the international attractiveness of Europe's higher education.</p>		
<p><i>DIGITAL SOCIETY</i> EU flagship initiative "A digital agenda for Europe" to speed up the roll-out of high-speed internet and reap the benefits of a digital single market for households and firms.</p>	<p><i>COMPETITIVENESS</i> EU flagship initiative "An industrial policy for the globalisation era" to improve the business environment, especially for SMEs, and to support the development of a strong and sustainable industrial base able to compete globally.</p>	<p><i>FIGHTING POVERTY</i> EU flagship initiative "European platform against poverty" to ensure social and territorial cohesion such that the benefits of growth and jobs are widely shared and people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are enabled to live in dignity and take an active part in society.</p>

As can be seen in the above table there are a number of thematic sub groups that closely match some of the existing outlines of a future North Sea Strategy highlighted below.

Smart Growth - Innovation, Education, Digital Society

Promoting innovation and excellence; *The North Sea Region is a European stronghold in relation to other regions when it comes to innovation capacity and performance. The progression towards a knowledge based society and a strong research base have enabled excellence in sectors such as ICT, renewable energies, marine technologies and creative industries. The future challenges in this context will be to capitalise on the regions excellence and to promote and maintain innovation in existing and upcoming sectors.*

Sustainable Growth - Climate, Energy and Mobility, Competitiveness

Managing Maritime Space; *The North Sea is a **very complex and open marine ecosystem**, providing a nursery for fish and a migratory and wintering area for many species of birds. It is also one of the most heavily-used seas, supporting fishing, shipping, trade, energy, sand mining, defense and recreation. Increasing economic activity in the sea, such as growing shipping traffic and the development of offshore wind farms, is leading to more and more competition between users of the sea.*

Increasing Accessibility and Attractiveness; *North Sea ports are important hubs for the export/import of goods and provide access to business locations and Europe's hinterland, stimulating **economic development** in our region. Further globalization of the economy and an increase in the global population is likely to increase traffic. It is essential to ensure free passage in the North Sea and a good flow to the hinterland.*

Tackling Climate Change; *One of the main challenges facing the North Sea Region is **climate change**, with adaptation and mitigation measures required. Increased precipitation and flooding in the North, coupled with increased temperatures and aridity in the South will cause significant changes to both physical and human geography in Europe. Exhaustion of fossil fuels and the resulting increase in fuel prices will be another challenge for the region.*

Inclusive Growth – Employment and Skills, Fighting Poverty

Sustaining liveable communities; *The North Sea area is a diverse region offering both attractive natural and urban environments. The changing population structure brings with it a shift in demands which impacts upon the vitality and sustainability of communities. One challenge will be to continue to support and enhance the strengths of urban and rural areas and their mutual links on the macro regional level. In this way economic growth and attractiveness of the regions communities need to be promoted to sustain liveability.*

While the detail of what a NSS aims to achieve and focus on will be expanded upon over the coming months, Macro-regional cooperation to boost “Smart Growth, Sustainable Growth and Inclusive Growth” is a clear articulation what we want a NSS to achieve overall. In order for a NS macro-region to emerge that is meaningful and can bring about real benefits to the people of the North Sea there has to be a clear identification of local, regional and national responsibilities and competencies in the areas of focus within a NSS. While there are clear areas where local and regional authorities can take a lead and have influence, the future success of any strategy will be determined by the manner in which there is also grassroots support from local communities, businesses, colleges, universities, chambers of commerce as well as strong input and direction from national administrations and the Commission.

Many of the aims and focuses for a NSS thus far highlighted can be taken forward to some extent through closer political collaboration. Through closer political led cooperation it is possible to carry forward action in the area of:

- Managing Maritime Space,
- Increasing Accessibility and Attractiveness,
- Tackling Climate Change,
- Creating Sustaining liveable communities

However, arguably the key strength of the North Sea Region is in the area of innovation and excellence and it is in this area where political organizations such as local and regional authorities have only limited influence. The progression towards a knowledge based society and a strong research base has enabled excellence in sectors such as ICT, renewable energies, marine technologies and creative industries. Promoting and maintaining innovation in existing and upcoming sectors is a future challenge for the region requires much more thought and direct involvement from research organizations and the business sector. A Macro-regional focus on promoting innovation and excellence” is one that is more complex and requiring input from a broader range of stakeholders.

While it is perhaps the most lucrative and beneficial of all the aims thus far mentioned, it will also be the most challenging to put into practice. One opportunity however is to have the “promoting innovation and excellence” strand as one that is purely focused on looking to better harness the joint research and commercialisation capacity of the North Sea region and therefore one very much led by universities, spin of business and Chambers of Commerce. The overarching focus of this strand could be the putting in place the infrastructure for a focused North Sea Research and Innovation Circle.

North Sea Research and Innovation Circle

The increasing focus on closer multi-national co-operation in the fields of medical, environmental, industrial and socio-economic research is reflected in the development of a European Research Area. The European Research Area is often likened to a research and innovation equivalent of the European "common market" for goods and services. Its purpose is to increase the competitiveness of European research institutions by bringing them together and encouraging a more inclusive way of work, similar to what already exists among institutions in North America and Japan. Increased mobility of knowledge workers and deepened multilateral co-operation among research institutions among the Member States are central goals of the ERA.

In order to drive the development of The ERA, large swathes of the EU budget are being allocated to R&D programmes such as FP7 and subsequent commercialization activities through CIP, IEE, regional structural funds amongst many other programmes. With the huge funding focus on transnational university led research and development, the North Sea Strategy should be seen as an opportunity to develop a North Sea Region knowledge infrastructure led by the regions research and development bodies. By looking to develop a transnational research circle, focused on our existing expertise and fueled by EU funding we can look to further develop leading research and commercialization hub.

The manner in which world class research and related funding is progressing towards a transnational dynamic means that there needs to be a greater push for multinational collaboration in order to tap into funding opportunities and be a leading research institution. Creating a nascent infrastructure for a North Sea research hub would seem like a logical part of any North Sea Strategy. For this to become a reality initial actions could involve agreements at Member State/regional level to work collaboratively to:

- increase international researcher mobility amongst the North Sea Region through the Marie Curie Fund
- increase student and teacher Erasmus exchanges within universities.
- increase the number of transnational EU research projects focused on key industries and challenges of the North Sea
- increase the number of joint post graduate and Doctorate degree programmes such as those funded under Erasmus Mundus

Every university in the North Sea Region has in place an internationalisation strategy that looks to increase both the number of outgoing and incoming students through Erasmus type programmes and collaborative research opportunities. There are also similar national internationalization strategies in place with the same focus with Sweden and Denmark having notable mobility and internationalization strategies in the area of Higher Education.

Having increased institutional and national agreements on mobility and research collaboration would allow for a leading knowledge infrastructure to be fomented and drive forward innovation and excellence.

Purpose through Clear Time Frame

In order to promote targeted action, the development of a corporate strategy will also be benefited by articulating its aims and intentions through a clear time frame for achievements. Again the most natural one would appear to be 2020, given that these are the main date not only for the 2020 Strategy but also the principle carbon reduction targets. It would also allow for appropriate planning that takes account of the future 2013-2019 funding arrangements. Having a Strategy with a specific time frame for action would also allow for progress reports and cataloguing of actions taken during the course of the next decade.

Conclusions

Overall the idea of a North Sea Strategy has been given direction through the valued efforts of the Maritime Resources Group. While they have developed what is a clear vision of what can be achieved through better coordination of the resources within the North Sea Basin, there is a need to integrate this with land based needs and opportunities to reflect the interdependence of sea and land based activities so they can work in a symbiotic and holistic manner. The development of a meaningful Strategy will require buy-in from the EU Commission, Member States and National Administrations and this will only come about by having a Raison d'être that complements the aims of these political bodies. As can be seen in the targets laid out in the EU2020 Strategy, there is a common goal of sustainable economic development and improved social cohesion. Given there is already a commonality of interest, a North Sea Strategy should look to approach this common regional interest through focusing on the many strengths we already share. While the development of a North Sea Strategy has thus far being very much politically led and there are clear areas where progress will continue to be driven by political cooperation, in the area of innovation and excellence, there will need to be a similar level of discussion between universities, colleges, chambers of Commerce and the business sector to be fomented to ensure that this strand can become a core action led strand of the NSS. By being action focussed it can be seen to have real worth to the communities of the North Sea and be the building block for further regional driven development up to and beyond 2020.