

Interreg IIIB North Sea Programme Report to the North Sea Commission Executive Committee meeting February 2005

The North Sea Programme continues to make good progress. A fact sheet has been produced giving the "vital statistics" of the programme to date. This is attached.

The programme avoided de-commitment in 2003 and 2004 and the projects continue to work well so it is hoped that we meet our spending targets for 2005. The main focus for all concerned with the programme is now to spread the news regarding its transnational added value. The Lead partner seminar, which will take place in Ringsted, Denmark on the 21 and 22 February, concentrates on Publicity and Communications. An external consultant has been contracted to help the secretariat with the event. Most of the 54 approved projects will attend the seminar.

At a recent meeting in DG Regio some sceptical remarks were made about the projects approved under the North Sea Programme. For example are they really North Sea specific or could they really be funded under the Interreg C strand! It is important to take comments like this on board and to address them in a positive way. It should be remembered that there are 6 key objectives for the North Sea Programme approved in the CIP document (which was approved by the European Commission):

- Reducing the levels of depopulation in peripheral areas
- Support regional development/competitiveness
- Improvement of economic conditions in economically weak areas
- Preventing and remedying social exclusion
- Improve quality of life in the North Sea Region
- Improve the physical environment in the North Sea Region

All the approved projects contribute to these 6 key objectives and we have more and more data to demonstrate this. It underlines the message that we have to join together to spread the good news about the programmes achievements!

The future North Sea programme will be discussed at the MC meeting in March but at the moment the national authorities are still involved in negotiations with the Commission at treasury level so progress is necessarily slow. It is hoped that planning meetings can start in the North Sea region in the autumn. Some developments in this direction include the information which will arise from the mid-term evaluation update and the studies for the Spatial agenda which aims to update the work of Norvision. The work of the update of the mid term evaluation has been awarded to Nordregio. The studies for the Spatial agenda have been awarded to four consultants. The draft findings will be discussed at the joint Annual Conference in June.

The Maritime Safety Umbrella Operation continues to make good progress. A co-ordinator (Richard Hill) has been appointed from the UK and a project officer from Norway (Trine Solevågseide). The NWE and Northern Periphery programmes have formally joined the umbrella. The Atlantic Area and the Baltic Sea are interested but have some work to do to get the formalities in place. The Alpine Space has also expressed interest (the programme covers part of the Adriatic). In terms of thematic work for a future programme period this should provide a good foundation .

The work with the Interact programme continues to be difficult due to the restrictive administrative framework but things have undoubtedly improved in the past 6 months. It has provided a very good opportunity to promote the work of the North Sea Programme.

Lorraine George
16 February 2005