

'Status of the Interreg IIIB North Sea Programme'

Presentation at the North Sea Commission Annual Business Meeting, Göteborg 18 June 2004

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

I'm here today instead of the Head of the Secretariat Lorraine George who had to return to Denmark to celebrate her son's graduation. I will give you an up-date on what has happened in the North Sea Programme during the past year.

Two days ago we arranged the 8th Annual Conference of the North Sea Programme. The first was held here in Göteborg in 1997 organised by the North Sea Commission after your annual conference. This was six months before the programme was approved and an example of the positive and visionary approach that has existed from the very beginning in the North Sea Programme. On Tuesday we had a very full day with the national representatives in the Programme Supervisory Group and the Lead Partners planning the rest of the programme period for the immediate and long-term future. Over the 7 year period from 1997 to today, we in the North Sea Programme really have achieved a great deal together and we strongly believe that there is much more we can do to improve the quality of life in our region and to put the North Sea Programme on the world map.

The present status of the Programme is that we have already allocated 96% of the programme funds or 117,699,155€ to the 54 projects approved. In total about 10,5 m€ ERDF remains to be committed. The 54 projects are all under way, making a real

difference in our region. Now the real work begins because carrying out the action plans of the 54 projects and completing all the work packages, is what this is really all about. We never forget that we exist because of the projects, not the other way round! And you should make no mistake about it, the implementation of all those approved projects is the hardest part. This is why the stakeholders in the programme put great emphasis on close contact and full support for our projects.

2003 was the first year the Programme faced the possibility of de-commitment. For the uninitiated, de-commitment is a rather strict rule that aims to ensure that the structural funds programmes actually get a move on and spend the money allocated to them. Failure to do so for a period of two years means that in the third year, the money is taken away from the Programme with consequences felt all round. Now, the North Sea Programme succeeded in meeting its spending targets in 2003 actually paying out €12,156,229 million to projects. But of course there is no room for complacency as this year the Programme will have to pay €23,659,012 to projects in order to avoid losing the funds. This is quite a challenge for all of us both in terms of those involved in running the projects and for those of us in the Programme Secretariat, checking and processing and sorting out the points of contention. Then with the help of the national authorities we can resolve the majority of the problems.

The North Sea Programme had a really positive mid term evaluation which was carried out in 2003. This will be updated during 2005 and will look at what has been achieved by the projects approved under the programme. This in turn will feed into the ex-ante evaluation which will form the foundations for the future programme. We are pleased to tell you that

the report gave a very positive verdict on the programme. The conclusion of the report notes that some of the strong features of the North Sea Programme are:

- The pragmatic approach
- Clear procedures
- Effective management
- No political problems hampering the implementation
- Open and helpful secretariat

Now these are all the things which we hope are true about our programme and will continue well into the future! Copies of the report are available from the Secretariat if you would like to read more.

During this hectic year, the programme was made the Interact Point for Qualification and Transfer. Part of this work will involve identifying the good practice from Interreg programmes around Europe and spreading the good practice around. Work begins very soon, 1 July, and will involve the A, B and C strands of Interreg. The Interact Point will be backed up the North Sea Programme Secretariat.

Finally, I will tell you about our innovative actions and the focused call in the autumn. First of all have we been working on a cross-programme construction to coordinate projects on maritime safety and I will tell you a bit more about this later on.

Another example of working across programmes was the joint Water Forum. It was held in May in Lüneburg and was organised in collaboration with 4 neighbouring IIIB programmes; the North Sea Programme, the Baltic Sea Programme, North West Europe and CadSES, covering central and eastern Europe. This event will be followed-up with the North Sea

Tourism Forum, which is planned for the end of September in Lund, also here in Sweden, under the title 'Advancing sustainable tourism in the North Sea Region'.

We also take a strategic approach to project development, which was decided on by the Monitoring Committee last year. This is to fill the gaps and to fine tune the programme in order to reach our targets and to plan for the future. There are 6 particular themes for the focused call for applications in the autumn:

- Increased accessibility of the North Sea Region
- The development of a sustainable tourism framework for the North Sea Region
- Integrated coastal management, including improvement of coastal defence
- Integrated river management and water shortage
- Updating the spatial vision for the North Sea Region
- The maritime safety umbrella operation

The two latter of the themes are of particular strategic importance.

At the Annual Conference two days ago we had meetings in project development groups on three of these themes. Outlines of the themes will be available on the Programme website early July, the call for proposals will close at the end of November and the Steering Committee is expected to meet in March 2005 to decide on the projects.

I will now tell you a bit more about the cooperation on maritime safety. Following the decisions by the Monitoring Committee in autumn 2003, the Secretariat initiated a discussion on a cross-programme cooperation on maritime safety between five Interreg IIIB programme areas covering the Atlantic Area, North West Europe, the North Sea, the Baltic Sea and Northern Periphery. After a series of meetings with relevant institutions and

after a joint task force of the five secretariats, a project development seminar was organised in Stavanger in April. Representatives from the five areas met, together with eight projects and representatives of the Bonn Agreement. Those represented came from the Russian border along the coasts down to Santiago de Compostela in North West Spain. They met to discuss whether and how projects working on this broad theme could work together in a practical way. The Monitoring Committees of all the programmes have been consulted and we now have a construction called the umbrella operation which we hope will be in place in the autumn of this year. Our hope is that we can demonstrate through this work that Interreg is a flexible programme and has the potential to deliver even more than we have done so far.

I would like to finish off by thanking you in the North Sea Commission for good cooperation this past year and we look forward to continued good cooperation in the years to come. We look forward to see you again next year!