

PROMOTING THE SUCCESS OF THE NORTH SEA COMMISSION

A proposal from Andrew Llanwarne (IDEAction) and Vivien Collie (Vivid)

Summary

This proposal is for a short consultancy project that would involve work with the North Sea Commission in raising awareness of its achievements and the benefits which it provides to participants and member organisations.

The project will draw together the experience and insights of those who have been involved in the Commission's work, to demonstrate the real, practical benefits that have resulted.

The resulting report and presentation materials can then be used both in supporting the further development of the North Sea Commission and in sustaining a strong membership. It could also be of value to the Interreg Secretariat, in setting out the value of collaboration on projects among partners from around the North Sea Region.

Two main options are presented for consideration:

- A) A relatively short exercise covering a selection of participants, which would result in a report on the achievements of the NSC, but would not include input from all member organisations.
- B) A more detailed exercise to which all member authorities would be invited to contribute, with a more extensive set of outputs.

Option A could be selected as a first phase which, if the outputs are acceptable, could then be expanded into Option B.

1. Background

The North Sea Commission has been active for the past 18 years in promoting partnership and collaboration between European regions bordering the North Sea. It facilitates the exchange of good practice and development of shared expertise in areas such as environmental management, fisheries, shipping, energy and regional planning. It promotes economic co-operation, and provides a forum for discussing areas of common interest and agreeing a position in dealing with the European institutions. It supports the development of inter-personal and inter-organisational contacts which result in additional benefits to those involved. More broadly, it nurtures a shared sense of goodwill, common North-European identity and collective purpose.

Nevertheless, politicians and officials in regional and local administrations are often challenged to justify their involvement in – and financial contribution towards – international bodies such as this, where a tangible contribution to delivery of outputs may be difficult to demonstrate.

This is where the use of narrative techniques – or “storytelling” – can be very helpful. By spending 30 – 60 minutes with an individual who has been involved with a body such as this over a period of time, holding a semi-structured discussion, it is possible to draw out

the benefits both to the individual and to the organisation. Sometimes these may be quite vague, but more often the individual will be able to point to specific actions, developments, capabilities, and other results which would not have come about without this involvement. In many cases clear quantifiable benefits can be demonstrated.

This material can then be gathered, analysed and reported on, using quotes in a highly effective way to reinforce the overall message. These may be attributed to the individuals concerned, subject to their agreement. The same content can be re-used for different purposes. For example:

- it can be used to provide an overall report on the contribution made by the international body over a period of time (perhaps at the end of a presidency or at a significant anniversary);
- it can be included in an application for EU funding;
- it can be tailored to meet the needs of a particular participant, within his or her organisation;
- it might be used by the EU Commission in promoting the benefits of collaboration among member states.

The discussions could be organised to take place around a network event that is already planned, to simplify the process and minimise the costs involved. However, to cover all member areas would require a more extensive period of work, possibly including some telephone or video-conference discussions where face-to-face meetings are difficult to arrange. These options are outlined in this proposal.

Format of the discussions: This narrative technique uses semi-structured discussions rather than formalised interviews, with the emphasis on encouraging participants to describe their experience of attending NSC events, being involved in NSC-inspired initiatives and making use of informal ties established through the NSC. They will be invited to consider how this has influenced their own work, and the lessons which they have been able to take into their organisations. They will be prompted to indicate specific initiatives or developments which would not have happened without their involvement in NSC, and to estimate the value or significance of this. They will also be asked to suggest ways in which they would like to see NSC to develop in the future, and to consider any areas for further improvement.

This tried and tested technique usually opens up memories which may have been dormant, which are not easily captured with more formalised questionnaires and interviews. It can be used to gather information on the softer benefits arising from knowledge working, collaboration and networking as well as more tangible outcomes.

The resulting narrative, combined with others, can then be analysed in a structured way to provide an overall picture of the benefits and achievements of the NSC, through the eyes of its members.

2. Alternative Options

This proposal outlines two options for consideration. The process can be applied either to Option A or Option B, but the volume of work would be greater at each stage under Option B, particularly the time spent in interviews.

Option A would be organised around a single NSC event (e.g. a NSC Executive Committee meeting) in order to minimise the time and travelling costs involved. However, there would need to be sufficient time before, during or after the formal NSC business for the interviews to take place (it is proposed to use two interviewers so that two interviews can take place at the same time). Often NSC members arrive a few hours early for events, or have a few hours spare before departure, and the interviews can be scheduled for these times. Other interviews could be slotted in to spaces in the formal timetable. The NSC secretariat could help to contact participants, let them know what is involved, and check their availability. The consultants would work flexibly as required.

A minimum of 10 completed interviews would be aimed for. If not achieved at the event, some follow-up discussions would be organised by telephone or video-conference. These would allow a reasonable picture to be built up of the achievements of the NSC and the benefits to members. The report would be relatively short, accompanied by presentation materials. The timescale could be correspondingly tight – a draft final report issued to NSC for approval within one month of the event taking place.

Option B would require more time to organise discussions, some of which may need to be held by telephone or video-conference to avoid excessive travelling time and cost. It might be organised around two NSC events, with further meetings and discussions being organised in between. Therefore, it might take 6-8 months from start to finish, depending on the timing of events and the ease with which meetings can be organised.

With 36 member organisations, and probably a number of officers who should also be included, around 40 completed discussions would be aimed for.

3. Relevant Experience

Andrew Llanwarne worked with these techniques during his time as Director of Knowledge Management at Scottish Enterprise Tayside, and subsequently Head of Knowledge Architecture for Scottish Enterprise. He drew on the lessons from experts such as Dave Snowden and Steve Denning, and shared practical experience through the UK Knowledge Management Forum.

He used these techniques to develop the Scottish Enterprise approach to Knowledge Capture when individuals leave the organisation, piloting this with the departing Chief Executive and two other senior directors. He also used it to capture the benefits to the organisation provided by a number of business improvement initiatives, and to draw out lessons from project activity. The outputs were used to help shape subsequent policy and project design.

In his current consultancy role, working on two projects with the Scottish Government, he has applied similar techniques to interviews with a wide range of chief executives and senior officials in public bodies and research organisations. The findings will influence Government policy and communications.

Vivien Collie is a chartered town planner with a business degree and a professional marketing qualification. By the end of 2007 she will also have completed professional facilitation and mediation training.

Over the last nine years Vivien has worked as a specialist consultant involved in a wide range of projects including economic development, research, marketing, town centre management development, event management, public/private sector partnership advice and evaluation, and business networking. Before becoming a specialist consultant she spent eight years with various local councils in Scotland working on a wide range of economic development and planning activities. These duties involved working with different external funding agencies and a wide variety of community, business and partnership organisations.

For three years Vivien was contracted as the Co-ordinator of the North Sea Commission Economic Development Group. In 2006 and 2007 Vivien has assisted the NSC with its Annual General Assembly by managing their international politicians' workshop and supporting their Annual General Meeting.

4. Methodology

The involves three main stages of work:

Stage 1: Preparatory work

- commissioning meeting to agree on timetable, reporting arrangements and outputs
- drafting scripts for the discussions, checking these with NSC secretariat before use
- scheduling of meetings
- notifying individuals and providing brief information in advance
- confirming venues and facilities

Stage 2: Holding meetings and follow-up

- one-to-one discussions held, lasting 30-60 minutes each
- recordings transcribed, checked, and sent to participant for checking
- progress monitored to ensure project is on track

Stage 3: Collation, analysis and reporting

- responses coded and organised into a database
- initial analysis prepared
- draft report with supporting data discussed with NSC secretariat
- final report prepared and submitted
- presentation materials prepared and submitted.

Note: The interviews will be conducted in English. It is estimated that each interview would require the equivalent of approximately half a day's work (including the consultant's time and the administrative support).

Option A could be selected as a first phase which, if the outputs are acceptable, could then be expanded into Option B. Because of the additional reporting involved in this two phase approach, however, there would be a small additional cost.

5. Costs

It is estimated that the two options would require the following work:

	Consultancy days @ £500/day	Administrative days @ £200/day	Stage totals (£)
Option A			
Stage 1	2	2	1,400
Stage 2	6	2	3,400
Stage 3	2	1	1,200
Total	10	5	£6,000
Option B			
Stage 1	4	4	2,800
Stage 2	18	6	10,200
Stage 3	4	2	2,400
Total	10	5	£15,400

These figures are exclusive of UK VAT and expenses. Expenses, including travel and accommodation where necessary, would be recharged at cost supported by receipts.

Note: If Option A was selected as a first phase and then be expanded into Option B as a second phase, it is estimated that the total costs would be £16,600 to take account of the additional reporting involved.