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DEVELOPING IRISH SEA COOPERATION

**Intergovernmental
Cooperation:
Opportunities and barriers
to cooperation across the
Irish Sea space
(summary report)**

**European Policies Research Centre &
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: DEVELOPING IRISH SEA COOPERATION



Context: 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, followed by interviews with key stakeholders and workshop discussions, to map existing cooperation and identify barriers and opportunities. The report sets out findings and proposed next steps to support and encourage cooperation across the Irish Sea space.



Why Territorial Cooperation Matters: Current collaboration across the Irish Sea is extensive but fragmented. Most links are bilateral or sectoral, leaving a gap in multilateral, territorial cooperation that could better address shared strategic issues. The literature, workshops and interviews underscore that regional development challenges are not confined by borders and that coordinated action improves effectiveness, reduces duplication and builds resilience.



Barriers to collaboration

Stakeholders identified several systemic barriers to cooperation.

- Regulatory and administrative divergence between the UK and Ireland, particularly post-Brexit.
- Loss of EU funding streams and associated institutional memory, reducing capacity for cross-border project development.
- Uncertainty over responsibilities and contact points, leaving actors unsure where to seek advice and support.
- Short-term budgeting cycles, which undermine planning, risk-taking and continuity.
- Perceived imbalances in resources and commitment that can weaken trust and deter engagement.

Despite the challenges, technical barriers are not seen as insurmountable. Stakeholders consistently emphasised that existing frameworks, such as the multiple bilateral joint statements and frameworks, Shared Island initiatives and the work of the British-Irish Council provide a strong basis to complement and build on.



Opportunities for Collaboration

Stakeholder appetite for collaboration is strong across all jurisdictions, with multiple partners highlighting the value of maintaining momentum and the need for a focal point to “join up the dots”. Several strong opportunities emerged across the DISC themes.

- **Sustainable Blue Economy:** shared seas, offshore energy development, marine planning, ecosystem management and nature-based solutions present natural fields for cooperation.
- **Innovation in Health & Life Sciences:** existing networks demonstrate clear benefits of joint research, digital health solutions, shared service challenges and SME–university collaboration.
- **Communities & Culture:** deep social and cultural connections provide avenues for regenerative tourism, maritime heritage initiatives and community-led development.
- **Emerging Themes:** skills mobility, data infrastructure, climate adaptation, logistics, rural resilience and digital innovation are identified as

areas requiring collective foresight and planning.



Conclusions & Recommendations

1. A coordinating mechanism is needed to connect existing initiatives, support navigation of complex cooperation landscapes, and maintain institutional knowledge.
2. Capacity building is essential to restore skills, relationships and know-how lost after the end of Interreg and other EU programmes.
3. Future cooperation must be pragmatic and additive, complementing rather than duplicating existing frameworks, and enabling light-touch, flexible, low-resource collaboration.

Key recommendations:

- Establish clear government leads
- Improve communication, coordination and visibility
- Rebuild cooperation capacity
- Develop a durable shared Irish Sea knowledge base
- Support a small number of proof-of-concept projects in 'early-win' areas with strong foundations
- Build in horizon scanning to identify emerging strategic needs and cooperation opportunities
- Connect and align existing bilateral agreements into a wider territorial frame
- Ensure flexible, low-resource, scalable arrangements



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Introduction: Future Irish Sea Cooperation

Context for the study: the DISC project

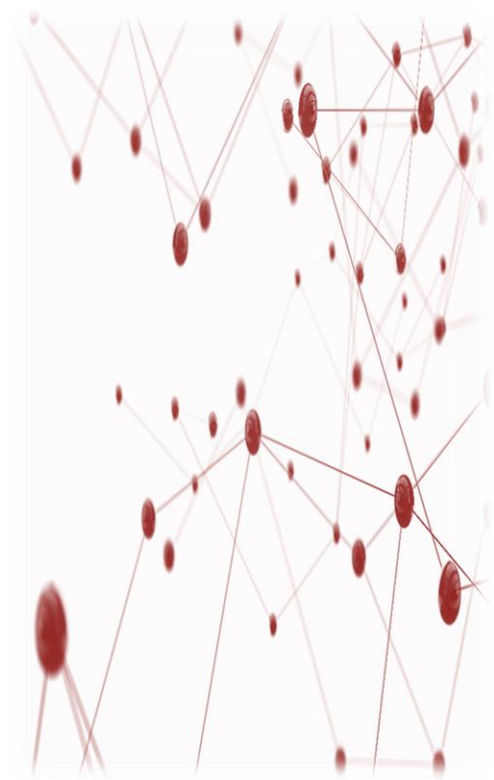
Launched in 2024, the two-year DISC project is an innovative project aimed at enhancing social and economic co-operation between Northern Ireland, Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Specifically, the project begins a process of strategy development and action planning for future North-South and East-West cooperation. The project is supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), and builds on work led by the Welsh Government exploring the potentials around Irish Sea Cooperation. The DISC Project focuses on three themes:

- Sustainable Blue Economy
- Innovation through health and life sciences, and
- Communities & Culture.

This is a **briefing report based on two more extensive reports** focused on intergovernmental cooperation and supporting the DISC project process by:

1. Identifying and analysing the main opportunities for intergovernmental cooperation across the Irish Sea space, drawing on experience in the area and internationally, with a focus on the three theme areas.
2. Examining and understanding the barriers to intergovernmental cooperation North-South and East-West that can impact cooperation.
3. Exploring sector-specific opportunities and challenges.
4. Providing actionable recommendations to improve intergovernmental cooperation across different sectors and regions with a focus on the three theme areas.

In doing so the report represents a step towards a framework and identification of best practice for leveraging knowledge and expertise from across and around the Irish Sea Space.



Methodology for the study



A **mixed methodology** was applied involving desk-based policy and literature reviews and interviews with key stakeholders, along with workshop discussions.

An extensive literature and policy review was undertaken providing an 'evidence base' for future action and established a foundation for the interviews and workshops.

Nearly 50 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, based on an initial listing of important organisations and contacts agreed with the DISC project, plus

secondary contacts supplied by interviewees. **Workshop discussions** took place in the context of the DISC symposium in Edinburgh in February 2026. The literature and policy review also took into account the outputs of previous DISC symposia (Belfast and Cardiff).

Opportunities for Territorial Cooperation around the Irish Sea

Opportunities for Territorial Cooperation

Findings from the project's literature and policy review provide an 'evidence base' for future action and established a foundation for the interviews and workshops. In particular the reviews underlined the distinct value in territorial cooperation based on shared and common development opportunities and challenges. 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 is 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;
- cooperation initiatives 'co-exist' and work in complementary ways to the benefit of all partners; and
- flexibility of territorial cooperation is a key characteristic to highlight.

Cooperation and collaborative links across the Irish Sea and between the jurisdictions are numerous and play a vital role in development in and around the Irish Sea area. There is

clear willingness and appetite among stakeholders to deepen cooperation. Illustrative quotes from stakeholders include the following.

Culturally we're very similar, and the competencies match well. Cooperation should continue, even outside an EU framework
If we don't think about... the joined up all Ireland picture, but also the East West picture, we're missing an opportunity
The demand and the need for cooperation... is well understood... everybody understands within the system and is willing... wants to move forward on [it].
Some of the opportunities... absolutely are UK and Ireland together, and actually the only way to be competitive is to do it at scale... (Stakeholder interviews)

This positive foundation provides a key enabling condition for future cooperation. Also, given the accelerating pace of change (including technological, climate-related and geopolitical), territorial cooperation provides an essential mechanism for collective foresight, flexibility and innovation. At the same time, any addition to current arrangements must also 'fill a gap' and 'add value'. Future initiatives should be explicitly designed to complement rather than replicate existing bilateral and sectoral cooperation mechanisms by acting as an integrator and connector across them.

In summary:

The Irish Sea region has a dense cooperation landscape, but it can be fragmented and difficult to navigate. Across governments, agencies and sectors, there is a large volume of existing collaboration, formal, informal, bilateral, multilateral, sectoral, community-led. Cooperation is uneven, ranging from deeply embedded operational relationships to thinner, more ad hoc or more relationship-dependent connections. Stakeholders repeatedly noted difficulties in identifying the right contacts, fitting into existing systems, or understanding where efforts overlap.

A 'territorial cooperation gap' exists: cooperation is mostly bilateral, rather than multilateral. Evidence shows that cooperation tends to occur either within Ireland–Northern Ireland or bilaterally between Ireland–Wales or Ireland–Scotland, but rarely across all jurisdictions together. The result is a gap in addressing shared regional development challenges at the level of the wider Irish Sea space.

Loss of EU programmes (especially Interreg) has significantly weakened capacity. Stakeholders describe a loss of expertise, institutional memory, facilitator roles, long-term planning tools and funding stability following Brexit. The relevant teams and staff are often already overstretched. Annual budgeting cycles further undermine continuity and risk-taking. The cooperation system is suffering from erosion of capacity and needs deliberate rebuilding, otherwise, pre-existing networks risk further atrophy.

Regulatory and administrative barriers to cooperation exist but are not the main obstacle. Stakeholders acknowledge divergent regulatory systems, post Brexit administrative burdens and legal complexity. But crucially these issues are not seen as insurmountable; instead, capacity, coordination, and confidence are the more pressing problems. Addressing governance, coordination and institutional capacity will have more impact than technical regulatory solutions.

There is overwhelming willingness and appetite for cooperation. Across all jurisdictions and sectors, interviewees consistently highlight strong enthusiasm for collaboration. This is a very positive asset. Many networks have continued informally without funding, demonstrating resilience and demand.

The three DISC themes are particularly cooperation-ready. The Blue Economy (marine planning, offshore renewables), digital health, and community/cultural connections all show strong foundations, existing networks, and proven benefits from past cooperation.

These areas offer immediate 'early wins' for demonstrating value and rebuilding momentum.

Emerging cross-cutting themes require oversight and future planning. These include strategically important themes with potential for future cooperation. A foresight function (horizon scanning) is needed to track emerging opportunities.

Cooperation should complement rather than duplicate existing structures. The Irish Sea landscape is already crowded with initiatives and dialogues. Any new mechanism must be light touch and integrative, with a focus on filling gaps, linking systems, and enabling coherence.

Looking ahead

The messages from the literature and policy review, reinforced by the feedback from stakeholders, highlights an evolving role for intergovernmental cooperation in supporting and encouraging cooperation. It also offers insights into the flexible approaches and models that can be adapted and applied to suit the specific conditions in the Irish Sea area.

Capturing, communicating and coordinating



There is a need to **build a knowledge base** to inform more effective and efficient cooperation and coordination and support routes to act jointly on shared interests and challenges identified in shared statements. There is also a need to communicate and coordinate on the range of regional economic development activities underway or planned across the territory.

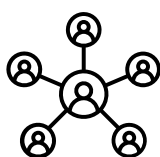
There is value in not just knowledge sharing, but knowledge building, with a view to having a 'knowledge bank' and a resource to connect and capitalise on links.

"Future cooperation frameworks must actively address asymmetries in funding access, capacity, and institutional backing to avoid undermining reciprocity and long-term sustainability." (Stakeholder interview)

There is strong evidence that multiple disconnected networks, fragmented evidence, stakeholder confusion about who to contact and the need for mapping and signposting justify a mechanism such as an Irish Sea knowledge bank. Furthermore, there are points where a territorial, collaborative approach can, e.g., deliver practical/'relatable' steps towards meeting wider strategic objectives, amplify impact and/or up-scale and/or extend the visibility, networks and engagement of sectoral and smaller scale initiatives and help identify gaps for action in the future.

- The literature and policy review developed as part of this study, along with the work of the project evaluation, provides a useful starting point and could be readily updated, e.g. as joint statements are revised and the successor to the PEACEPLUS programme is developed.
- Multiple interviewees identified a need for forward looking joint planning, rather than reactive cooperation, such as a shared Irish Sea Foresight Unit producing annual scenarios and strategic analyses, and long-term strategic planning for the Irish Sea as a macro region (energy, climate, transport, digital corridors).
- A contact point role is valuable as facilitator 'conduit' role, draw in learning, resource and capability.

Retaining and building capacity and knowledge of territorial cooperation



As well as an information resource, there is value in retaining and building capacity. **Knowledge exchange, the opportunity to learn from best practice, and building capacity** are widely recognised aspects of the added value of territorial cooperation. Networks, links and relationships between key stakeholders form the foundations of these connections. They can help save time and effort through shared efforts, boost and amplify individual inputs,

support beneficial synergies that improve results, support forward planning and foresight and improve the wider cooperation environment, smoothing the path for wider cooperation in new fields. These connections can take time to establish and take effort to maintain but can be lost extremely quickly.

Looking across the cooperation fora already in place, the 'gap' is where policy makers can have an open 'informal yet informed' dialogue and engage more widely with partners engaged in territorial cooperation. This could be addressed through the following.

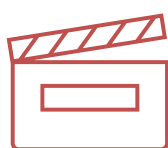
- **Some form of regular 'steering group'** - type meetings. However, given the challenges in securing attendance, pressures on travel budgets, and multiple commitments stakeholders have to fulfil, it is important that any meetings can involve on-line participation if needed, are not excessive in number and length, and could be held alongside/on the margins of other events. Having an element of routine/regularity is helpful, but it is also important to incorporate flexibility and responsiveness. While it is important to have a core partnership and participation by key stakeholders, it is worth considering widening partnerships to include 'trusted partners' and make more strategic use of intermediaries and existing networks.ⁱ This would draw in knowledge and expertise and help maintain momentum. The role of the steering group could involve:
 - making recommendations to link existing or proposed funded initiatives where these would amplify impact, reduce duplication and, potentially, reduce costs;
 - signposting the work/ initiatives already underway to avoid duplication of effort;
 - discussing and identifying 'routes', specific issues for cooperation in the future on an ongoing basis;
 - if a small, dedicated resource is secured, as will be discussed, the steering group would be responsible for decisions on allocations and use.
- **Seminars and events** – opportunities to engage and meet in person at DISC events held in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Dublin have been important for a number of reasons: for sharing ideas, indicating commitment, drawing together diverse stakeholders and offering a platform to build on. There is an opportunity to take forward this momentum and develop this process. Options include:
 - having a 'DISC'/ or Irish Sea seminar series – a select number of policy relevant seminars/briefings on relevant themes/issues, e.g. developments in the external policy environment such as emergence of new EU Interreg programmes, overviews on new joint statements, policy frameworks, presentation of new relevant policy initiatives. These could be targeted specifically at a policy practitioner audience.
 - to boost the profile of territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea, visibility at other events and fora is useful. For example, a 'representative/s' of the group could attend events and talk about Irish Sea Cooperation to build further connections and in turn feed back to the wider group and share information. Thus, part of any future work should ensure communication and information sharing on the overall principles and rationale for territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea, e.g. through presentations at partner events, easy to

disseminate information on Irish Sea Cooperation and key themes, a web-page with updates on progress and initiatives.

- network meetings could be held bringing together partners from specific areas of activity. For example, the national Horizon contact points could meet and share information.

Most importantly, whatever options are taken, even seemingly small initiatives can have a big impact, e.g. initial exploratory contacts to gauge interest can reveal substantial untapped interest/potential. Together these types of initiatives and approaches would facilitate the capacity to develop and evolve cooperation in line with changing policy and development contexts. It could also help to promote a better balance across cooperation networks. Cooperation is more attractive where it helps ensure balanced contributions and benefits across partners.

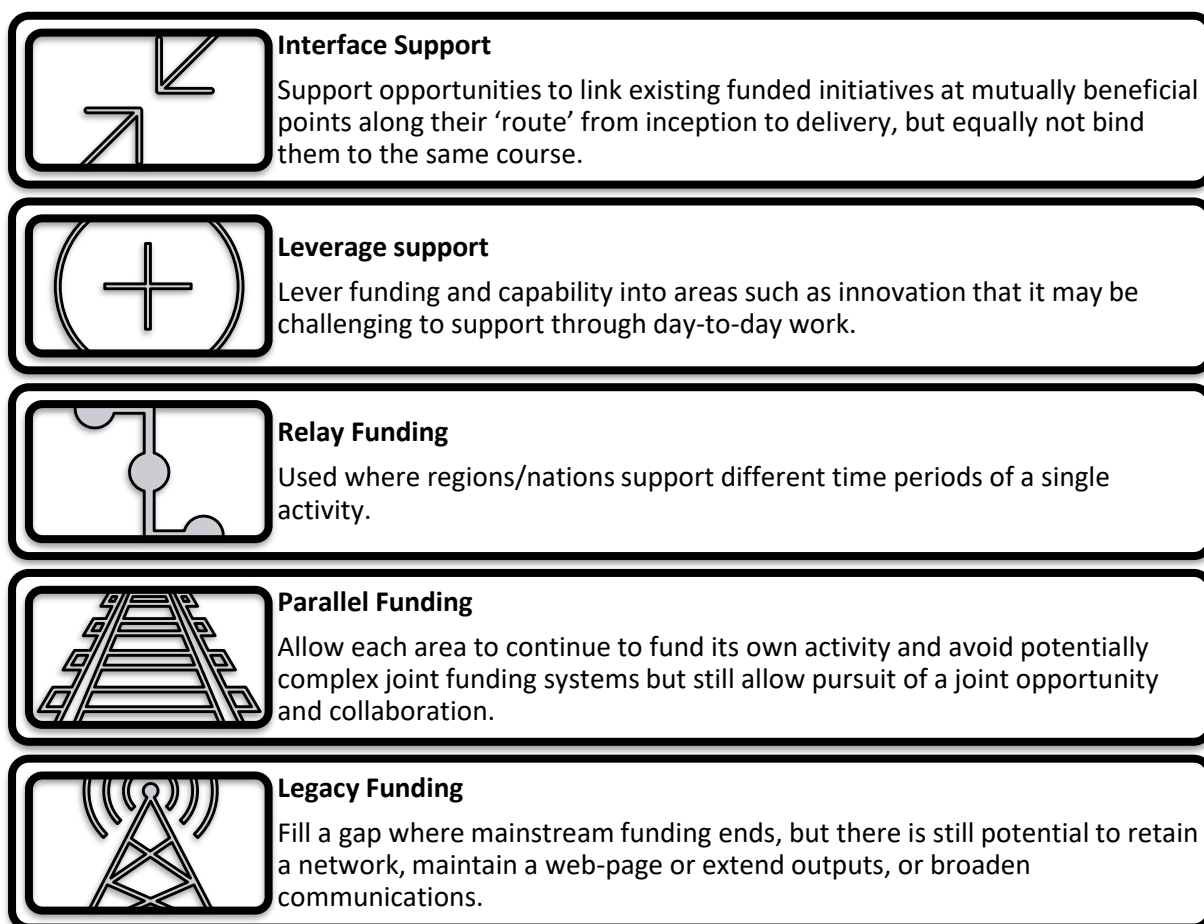
Identifying opportunities and delivering results



The capacity to **act on the identified opportunities** is also important. Any funding for territorial cooperation efforts must be very carefully justified and in no way duplicate existing funding streams. Furthermore, it is important to be realistic about the opportunities and availability of funding in the current economic climate. Access to dedicated funding is likely to be limited.

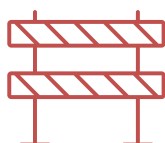
Nevertheless, even small-scale support could make a big difference. For example, while a funding resource for a project is always well received, there is also value in support to enable, e.g. an in-person meeting or attendance at a joint event. Building on and linked to the work of a steering group, there are also opportunities to link to or draw together established funding to maximise reach and impact, increase results, and reduce or share cost or risk. Relatively modest funding could help to address the funding asymmetries between partners by providing a bridging point between those stakeholders managing substantial budgets and dealing with the associated pressures, and those with more limited resources, but with the capacity to add value by bringing knowhow and experience. Options could be as follows.

Figure 1: Future funding options



Agile Cymru

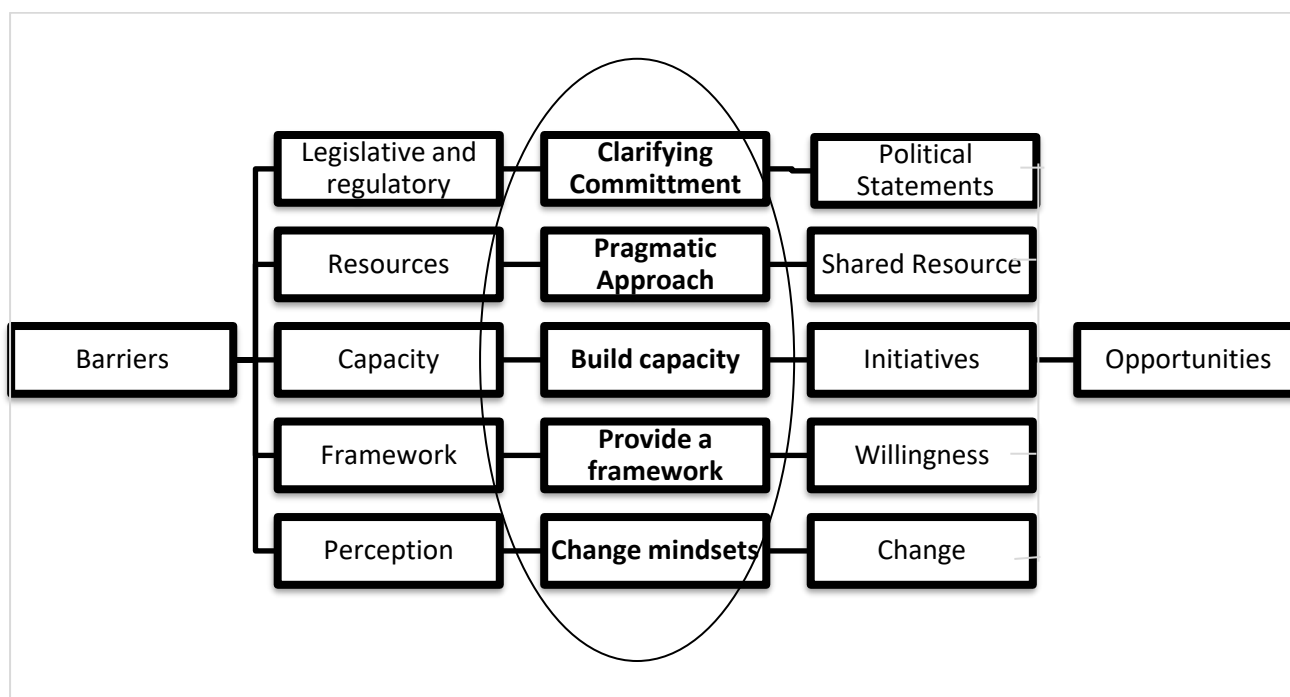
Even comparatively small schemes like Agile Cymru can have a major impact in supporting the continuation of cooperation – helping to maintain networks and supporting building new proposals/seeking new sources of funding. It also sends a clear message that international collaboration is a priority.



Addressing barriers and taking opportunities

These types of actions fulfil important roles in **addressing regional development barriers and opportunities** at an operational level for the stakeholders most directly engaged in delivery and enabling. Most notably, barriers and opportunities are addressed in relation to mindsets and perspectives, commitment, frameworks and leadership, and capacity.

Figure 2: The interface between barriers and opportunities



Clarifying commitment

Any cooperation initiative benefits from a **clear position and well-structured, clear governance**. A clear statement or initiative on Irish Sea territorial cooperation would take forward the broad commitments made in joint statements and recognise the individual efforts of organisations and networks. Strong, clear leadership and signalling from key partners would help get the most out of even modest resources and help address real and perceived regulatory and administrative barriers to cooperation.

In contrast, ambiguity at a strategic level can leave project partners in an uncertain position, having to justify or push their role, having to address issues beyond their technical skills and expertise or simply losing any drive, capacity and commitment to this type of cooperation activity. Imbalance and variable commitment are barriers to cooperation. As was made clear in interviews, organisations are not comfortable in collaborative arrangements where they feel that one or more organisation is ‘putting in’ more or is more committed than the others.

However, addressing asymmetries and variation are also important arguments *for* action on territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea. It may be that the political, financial and resource commitments that can be made across the partners will differ. Some may have a more ‘hands-off’ approach. Territorial cooperation can fall within the jurisdiction of various different government departments, including international, EU funding, regional development, other sectoral areas, which adds to complexity. Additionally, there is value in openness to new partners, e.g. in western England. Where possible this can be accommodated, e.g. with engagement in some activities and not others, e.g. partners could be invited to seminars and events on an ad hoc basis. However, to deliver any substantial value there must be some kind of leadership, formal commitment and facilitation. At minimum, positions and expectations should be clearly set out.

Taking a pragmatic approach

The **availability of resources, financial, institutional and staff** for even modest actions is a challenge. This issue cuts across multiple stakeholders, from national governments to local government (which have been key partners in territorial cooperation in the past) and from government agencies to universities. All have to make difficult choices about 'extra' activities. Staff shortages and short-term financial pressures make it difficult to look beyond 'business as usual' rather than innovation/even survival mode in some cases. There is a risk of organisations becoming protective of funds rather than strategic. More widely, interviewees noted a more competitive, less collaborative culture in some sectors, such as renewable energies.

In this context, any discussion of a 'new' initiative faces questions around strategic engagement and alignment with objectives, value for money and financial viability, risk and impact. Furthermore, the range of bilateral and multilateral initiatives already in place between governments, local authorities, universities and others is already intense. However, there is an opportunity to help stakeholders navigate the at times confusing and opaque array of initiatives, clarifying what's already going on, who the interested actors are, what ongoing cooperation they could join, or whether they are duplicating existing efforts. Cooperation around the Irish Sea also offers an opportunity to take complementary action to support existing initiatives and networks. It can be developed in a way that is complementary, delivers impact but does not demand substantial resource.

(Re) Building knowhow and capacity

The loss of **capacity in relation to territorial cooperation** across the area, and in particular the UK territories, was widely noted by respondents. Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the loss of institutional memory and reduced capacity for cooperation as a significant barrier.

The constraints identified are acute and multi-dimensional linked to:

- loss of expertise and institutional memory of territorial cooperation after several years without Interreg programmes. Losses are made more acute as the strength of partnerships can be very dependent on individuals.
- loss of facilitator, 'conduit' roles in the UK partner countries, which drew in learning resource and capability. Previously, national contact points for territorial cooperation programmes offered help where potential participants had limited capacity, provided a clear port of call, boosted awareness, and facilitated cooperation. There was a sense that it was useful having someone whose job it was to spend the time speaking to people, going places, and making and facilitating contacts.

Loss of capacity is even more impactful as cooperation takes perseverance and effort to build up over a sustained period, which is made all the more difficult when capacity is constrained. A commitment to rebuilding mechanisms that support institutional continuity, knowledge retention and stakeholder navigation would add value in relation to opportunities linked to territorial cooperation. It is also a transferrable resource to work across a range of fields and initiatives, e.g. engagement in Horizon Europe.

Providing a framework

Cooperation efforts need a **framework to provide structure, focus and ensure a balanced and reciprocal relationship**. In the past with Interreg programmes, formal multi-

year funding programmes provided this framework. In the short-term, current imbalances and asymmetries in resources and institutional commitments make it difficult to envisage a detailed framework or programme for cooperation along the lines of an Interreg programme. However, a framework, reflecting the flexibility in cooperation noted in the literature review, would provide a focal point for cooperation, some routes or objectives for collaboration, and help incentivise action.

As mentioned above, any new arrangements must 'fill a gap'. One such gap which has been consistently evidenced across literature and in interviews is the presence of a territorial cooperation gap. Bilateral links are thriving, but there are fewer mechanisms linking N-S and E-W partners simultaneously. Future cooperation frameworks should explicitly position future cooperation to fill this multilateral gap.

Where possible, a support system or mechanism would be invaluable and make cooperation easier to initiate and sustain. For example, some form of Contact/Information Point to help make connections, troubleshooting, signposting and acting as a conduit between partners in different countries would be highly valuable. Drawing on the experience of other cooperation formats, the specific function and role of the contact point can vary.

Most commonly, they fulfil a supportive, advisory role under the supervision of the steering group. This involves an individual in addition to the steering group members. The contact point can act as a 'first point of contact' for stakeholders, can provide valuable input to steering group meetings and provide information and advice/support. Given the likely pressure on resources, maintaining an individual 'contact point' for each jurisdiction may not be practical. It could also be perceived as 'limiting' cooperation to areas with a named contact and excluding England and the Isle of Man. However, at minimum a 'cooperation' contact with a clear remit in relation to Irish Sea intergovernmental cooperation would be valuable. Intergovernmental cooperation focussing on the Irish Sea area could position itself as a 'convening hub', a mechanism that interlinks multiple initiatives, prevents duplication, and channels knowledge between jurisdictions. In this case, having regularly updated key contacts for each authority would still be valuable.

Changing mindsets and perspectives

Recent years have been uniquely challenging for territories around the Irish Sea following Covid and Brexit and in the face of rapid and complex change. Related to this, there are changing mindsets in relation to cooperation and a sense that:

- some organisations may not yet have fully emerged from the inward-looking focus that characterised the aftermath of these periods.
- cooperation has become (and is perceived to have become) more difficult politically and administratively. Cooperation is increasingly framed as a "nice to do" rather than "must do" under current pressures and with competing priorities.
- imbalances in opportunity around the Irish Sea make establishing partnerships seem harder and can contribute to reluctance. *"There's a lot of resource on one side of the Irish Sea and limited resource on the other. So, how do you make something workable given that imbalance?"*
- some organisations by their nature can be quite territorial in focus (e.g. tourism or heritage bodies). This is perceived as hindering an interest in getting involved in

wider cooperation. For example, projects exploring heritage and tourism links have found some national tourism and heritage bodies to be very territorial in their focus.

Promoting territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea could play an important role in **encouraging a mindset shift**: viewing cooperation as investment, rather than cost; recognising that cooperation is not an “add-on” to core work, but rather a means to maximise the impact of core work; raising awareness of UK partners as active and willing participants; and extending and capitalising on the valuable bilateral links already in place.

Recommendations - encouraging and supporting territorial cooperation across the Irish Sea

Given the barriers (and opportunities), territorial cooperation will not just ‘happen’ automatically. It needs a push, encouraging a mindset shift that views cooperation not as “dead” cost but as investment bringing returns. With this in mind, eight recommendations to encourage and support territorial cooperation around the Irish Sea space are set out below.

	1. Identify clear government leads	• There is a need for clarity around responsibilities and political commitment; many interviewees mentioned uncertainty in government structures.
	2. Improve communication, coordination and visibility	• Establish a light-touch Irish Sea Coordination/Contact Point. A small, agile coordination function should: map activity and contacts; signpost opportunities; act as a conduit between governments, agencies and networks; provide continuity and institutional memory. • A working group/steering group can help refine focus, maintain momentum, build capacity. Representation for core partners is important, but support could come from experienced partners beyond government. • Deliver a regular seminar/briefing series on relevant themes, policy changes and joint statements. Increase visibility of cooperation by attending conferences, presenting at partner events, and maintaining a simple web presence. Use existing networks to amplify information flow.
	3. Rebuild cooperation capacity	• Capacity-building measures could include: small funding for networking and partnership development; peer learning exchanges; rebuilding lost ‘intermediary/facilitator’ or broker roles. Monitor and support renewal of cooperation skills. Embed reflective learning: periodic reviews, shared evaluation frameworks, cross-project learning exchanges.

	4. Launch a limited number of targeted ‘proof-of-concept’ projects	• Identify 2–3 “early win” areas where cooperation can be demonstrated quickly (e.g. Blue Economy test sites, digital health pilots, data sharing initiatives). These should be small-scale but with high visibility, align with areas of clear shared interest and demonstrate practical benefits quickly. Quick wins will demonstrate the value of territorial cooperation and rebuild trust. Use small, catalytic funding models (Agile Cymru, relay funding, parallel funding) to enable cross-border participation without heavy programme structures. • Ensure each proof of concept answers the “so what?” question for socio-economic development.
	5. Develop a shared Irish Sea knowledge base	• This could include an integrated map (‘living map’) of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, a database of actors, networks and contact points or a repository of evidence and good practice. It is important that this is a durable mechanism to retain knowledge.
	6. Introduce a joint foresight/horizon-scanning function	• This could take the form of annual Irish Sea scenarios reporting, monitoring of emerging themes and analysis of future opportunities.
	7. Connect and align existing bilateral agreements into a wider territorial frame	• Rather than creating new structures, an use intergovernmental cooperation initiative to connect UK–Ireland, Ireland–Scotland, Ireland–Wales, North–South initiatives. Identify gaps and opportunities for joining up bilateral ‘islands’ of cooperation.
	8. Ensure flexible, low-resource, scalable arrangements	• Any cooperation structure should allow variable geometry (partners join topics as relevant), be easily ‘activated’ when needed and avoid heavy governance frameworks.

ⁱ Use intermediaries and existing networks to compensate for limited government capacity. More strategic use of networks across the “quadruple helix” (academia, industry, public sector, third sector).