General Guidance for project applicants

including special guidance for the first call

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This document was endorsed by the Programme Preparation Steering Group on 15 April 2015. However, please note that the information it contains is still subject to final approval by the Monitoring Committee to be established within three months of the date of notification of the Commission decision adopting the Cooperation Programme

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General Guidance for project applicants

How to use this document?

- This guidance is meant as an introduction to the programme and the most important rules and requirements for applicants. It is not intended as a replacement for the official documents and rules and all applicants should refer to the official documents before they apply. Please note that there is also specific guidance for each call for applications, which sets out any special conditions applying for that call. You can find the specific guidance at the end of this document.

Who can apply?

- The North Sea Region programme is open to anyone in the programme area, which is the whole of Norway and Denmark, eastern parts of the United Kingdom, the Flemish Region of Belgium, northwest Germany, the northern and western parts of the Netherlands and the south western area of Sweden. There is a detailed list of regions in the Cooperation Programme.

- You apply as part of a partnership. Every partnership must include at least 2 beneficiaries from 2 different countries. However, projects should have a positive effect on large parts of the programme area so only meeting the minimum requirements will generally be a considerable weakness.

- You need to be a legal entity (organization or enterprise) based in the programme area in order to apply. Partners from outside the programme area can be part of a partnership under special conditions.

Two-stage application

- All project developers are asked to submit an Expression of Interest. If the programme's Steering Committee approves the Expression of Interest, the project will be asked to develop and submit a Full Application. If this is approved, the project will receive a contract and can start work.

- The Expression of Interest is a short form allowing the Steering Committee to decide whether a project proposal fits the programme and whether the planned partners, activities, budget and results seem realistic to deliver the idea. It is important that some care is taken with preparing the Expression of Interest to ensure that all important information has been included in the limited space.

- The purpose of the Expression of Interest is to allow new and especially inexperienced beneficiaries to experiment with a project proposal without making a significant time and budget commitment. It also allows the Steering Committee to provide recommendations and/or conditions before the Full Application is submitted, such as requesting the inclusion of another country or private sector stakeholders etc.

- After an Expression of Interest is approved, the project team must submit a Full Application to one of the next two meetings of the Steering Committee. The next two meetings will be after approximately 6 and 12 months – meaning that all documents will have to submitted to the programme between 3 and 9 months after approval of the Expression of Interest. This procedure is to avoid a situation where earmarked funds are never claimed.

- The Full Application requires detailed activity plans with targets, budgets and timelines, as well as technical information and funding guarantees from beneficiary organisations. A lump sum payment of €20,000 is offered to cover preparation costs provided that the final submitted application lives up to quality requirements (see below).

What kind of issues does the programme work with?

- The programme has 4 priority themes and each theme is divided into two or three specific objectives. Consult the Overview Table in the Citizens Summary for a quick summary of priorities and specific objectives. Every project has to select one specific objective that it will work towards. In the past, broad projects tackling a number of objectives were sometimes approved but projects for the new period must be more focused and all activities must clearly contribute towards the specific objective.

- The descriptions of the priorities in the Cooperation Programme also include examples of the types of activities and outcomes expected. These are only examples! Any relevant activity which clearly requires cooperation and which will contribute strongly to a specific objective can be considered for funding. Likewise, the fact that an activity is mentioned in the Cooperation Programme does not guarantee success for projects including the activity if the overall contribution to the specific objective is weak.

- In addition to specific themes, all projects granted funding under the programme also have to comply with a number of cross-cutting issues like the need to promote equal opportunities and sustainable development. These are covered separately below.

- There is more focus on results in the new programme. All projects under the same specific objective will have to use many of the same indicators to ensure that results can be compiled into total figures for reporting to national authorities and the European Commission. Most indicators are compulsory but the system has been greatly simplified. A separate fact sheet on indicators tells you exactly what you need to do but as a general rule, make sure that the indicators and targets you use are realistic and really capture what you are trying to achieve.

- The Cooperation Programme and Citizen Summary also contain some examples of successful project types exploring how organizations can work together regardless of theme. These are meant for inspiration but do not mean that other types of cooperation are impossible.

Are there special rules for Norway?

- Norwegian partners and Lead Beneficiaries are treated the same as EU partners in the North Sea Region programme and are subject to the same rules.

- The only important difference is that Norwegian beneficiaries are funded from their own separate reserve of Norwegian money (€10 million in total). As a result, Norwegian money is kept separate from EU money in the application and reporting systems. The most important practical result is that even if there are still funds available under a certain theme for the programme as a whole, the Norwegian funds for that theme may be more limited. This makes it particularly important that Norwegian beneficiaries ask the programme about available funding before applying.

Can private companies get involved?

- Private companies, and in particular SMEs, are welcome. They must demonstrate that their work contributes to wider programme goals. For some specific objectives (especially under priority 1), the strength of private sector involvement will be one of the main factors deciding whether a project application gets a positive assessment.

- There are specific requirements for how companies operate in the programme and all participating enterprises must agree to respect these rules. These often differ from standard private sector operating procedures. These rules cover issues like state aid, revenue generation, real cost principles, public procurement and record keeping. It is essential that all private sector partners consult these rules carefully before committing to the programme to avoid problems during implementation. They are described in a separate fact sheets on State Aid and Private Sector Beneficiaries.

How should partnerships work together?

- All of the beneficiaries must cooperate on joint development and joint implementation of the project. As a change from earlier programmes, all beneficiaries must now state individually in the application how they will be involved, what they will deliver and what they expect to gain from the project.

- Beneficiaries must also cooperate in the staffing and/or financing of the project. When filling in the application form, projects are asked to explain how staff will work together on delivering the project. There are also various options for using shared costs for activities carried out on behalf of the whole partnership.

- The need for transnational cooperation needs to be reflected in the way that project activities are planned and implemented. It is not enough for each beneficiary to act independently and then exchange results. Beneficiaries should help each other to design, implement and communicate new solutions.

- It is also important to involve the 'right' beneficiaries – meaning those with the required expertise and contacts in each country. The partnership will be assessed on whether it has the right skills and knowledge in place in each participating country.

- The partnership also needs to be viable, which means that all beneficiaries should have a clear role in the project, be committed for the entire lifetime of the project and be prepared to support activities after the lifetime of the project.

- It is also important to demonstrate the involvement and support of the main users of project results. For example, a project to develop new ways of encouraging SME innovation, must involve effective feedback from SMEs if the results are to be credible.

What is the role of the Lead Beneficiary?

- The Lead Beneficiary leads the project, ensures that all beneficiaries deliver what has been promised and is the contact point between the project and programme management. Every project must have a Lead Beneficiary agreed by the partnership. In particular, the Lead Beneficiary will:

- Prepare and submit the application (in cooperation with the rest of the partnership).

- Prepare and submit all progress reports and requests for payment based on inputs from the other beneficiaries (see Control and Audit for details)

- Ensure that information from or to the programme is communicated on time and in full
- Receive all payments from the programme and distribute the amounts owed to all beneficiaries

❖ There is a separate fact sheet providing more detail on the Lead Beneficiary role and explaining different roles and responsibilities within partnerships.

Help for small organizations

❖ It can be a lot of work to understand all of the programme rules, forms and procedures – especially for small organizations with limited resources. Such organisations often fulfill an important but limited role in the partnership but may feel that the budgets available are not worth the administrative effort of future participation. These partners may therefore participate as 'Co-beneficiaries'.

❖ Small co-beneficiaries can be grouped together under one larger Coordinating Beneficiary (generally a public authority of some kind). The advantage of forming this Local Partnership is that all beneficiaries submit a combined claim for payment and activity report (less paperwork). This also means that the whole partnership can use the same First Level Controller and get its expenditure checked at the same time (lower control costs).

❖ There is a separate fact sheet with detailed rules but the following points must be kept in mind:

- All co-beneficiaries are still subject to all programme rules about the eligibility of funding
- All co-beneficiaries must keep full separate records of their expenditure
- It is the responsibility of the Coordinating Beneficiary to ensure that there is real and effective control of all co-beneficiary expenditure
- Co-beneficiaries are still liable for any irregularities in their expenditure and are covered by the standard programme rules for repaying any amounts incorrectly paid out

Funding rates

- All partners can claim reimbursement of 50% of costs for all project activities though applicants should always check the specific conditions for each call for proposals for information on the total funds still available and any special funding terms that may apply. There is no formal minimum or maximum budget for projects but projects will be assessed on value for money and larger projects will be expected to deliver significant benefits to the programme area.

Information about funding opportunities

- The programme launches regular calls for proposals. All project applications correctly submitted through the online application system with all relevant supporting documents before the end of a call will be assessed. Applicants should regularly consult the programme website at www.northsearegion.eu for announcements about new calls. As a rule these will happen every six months or so during the start of the programme.

Important documents

- You have to make sure that your idea fits with the programme. Regardless of thematic strengths, applications can only be approved if they link with European policy goals and the interests and needs of the wider programme area. The programme strategy and expectations for projects under each priority theme are set out in the Cooperation Programme. A shorter Citizen Summary provides only the information needed for project partners. The Programme Manual provides a short overview of other sources of information.

Cross-cutting issues

- Cooperation: This should be reflected in a work plan based on joint efforts to develop and implement new solutions. Cooperation should also be understood as bringing together different sectors (sometimes called 'horizontal' cooperation) and different levels of administration from local to international (sometimes called 'vertical' cooperation). The aim of these multi-level and multi-disciplinary approaches is to develop durable solutions based on winning the support of all main stakeholder groups. This need for cooperation should be balanced against the need to ensure that the partnership remains manageable and focused on core stakeholders. The wider stakeholder network will often not be part of the partnership but will be involved in other ways. This should be described in the application.

- Innovativeness: Some parts of the programme focus on 'innovation' in the sense of developing new products and services for the market. All parts of the programme should be 'innovative' in the sense of developing and spreading new and improved solutions throughout the partnership and the wider programme area. Some projects will try to develop completely new approaches to the challenges they are addressing. Others will try to introduce existing technologies and methods into areas or organizations where they have not been used before. The priority descriptions in the Cooperation Programme contain information on the preferred approach for some specific objectives. Applications should clearly set out the innovative aspects of the projects and how they differ from existing norms and practices in target regions / organisations.

- Additionality: Project funds cannot be used to fund the regular activities of partner organisations. The activities carried out in the project should be additional to the normal work of the partners and programme funds will only cover the costs for this additional work.

- Integrated approach to territorial development: All activities should be considered in terms of their likely effect on the wider programme area. Project activities should promote balanced development across the region and should especially aim to support regions facing particular geographical, structural or economic challenges. A specific section in the Cooperation Programme provides indications about how this can be approached.

- Sustainable Development: North Sea Region 2014-2020 works for an on-going improvement of sustainability. During project development, projects should consider how to ensure net social, environmental and climate benefits (where possible) in particular when making investments.

- Equal opportunities and non-discrimination: All organisations involved in the North Sea Region 2014-2020 must contribute to a positive environment for the active pursuit of equal opportunities and the prevention of deprivation, exclusion and discrimination in all forms.

- Explain links to other policies and funds: Projects must demonstrate an awareness of the main actions and results under related programmes and applications should reflect on how the North Sea project fits into this wider picture. In particular, projects should highlight specific results from earlier projects that can be used in the new project, and explain how the expected results of the new project will feed back into other programmes and funds. The Cooperation Programme contains an overview of the most relevant policies and funds but the application should also address national and regional actions.

How to find partners

- The project ideas section on the website allows you to publish project outlines and review the ideas being prepared by others.
- There are regular events with structured sessions to allow you to meet partners.
- National Contact Points can also assist you with contacts in some cases.
- Check online discussion groups and social media for partner search features.

How to apply

- A description of the application procedure can be found in the programme manual.
- Expressions of Interest and Full Applications must be submitted through the online application system which also has technical information about how to fill in the different parts of the form. All documentation is electronic so there is no need to send any paper copies.
- All partners need to submit a Letter of Intent with the Full Application form.

How to prepare a good application

- Assessments are based on the information provided in the application **only**. You should not rely on assumed knowledge or arguments about, for example, the general need for innovation support or sustainable public transport but must instead relate these to the specific circumstances of the partners and the programme area. In particular, you must make sure that you clearly explain:

- The need for your project and how it differs from current norms and practices
- The need for transnational cooperation
- The role of each partner
- The important outputs and results that will be delivered
- How you will ensure that the project has an impact beyond the project partnership

- Try to avoid quoting programme documents and focus on clearly explaining what your project will do and deliver
- Try to avoid jargon and abbreviations

What is the Steering Committee really looking for?

- The programme uses a set of assessment criteria and this is what every project proposal is checked against. In addition, however, representatives of the countries in the programme have provided an informal list of key points that can influence how positively they look at an application. These are:

- Easy Language (answering the right questions)
- Being very clear about the assumptions behind the project
- Is it clear why all of the actions are included?
- Is there a clear logic for moving from one action to the next?
- What would happen if one activity needed to be changed? Are they all necessary?
- Show the added value of each result / output - for each partner and for the North Sea Region
- Show how you will focus communication. In particular, have you selected the right target groups and appropriate channels / means for reaching them?
- Explain the road to the application. Why has the partnership decided that this project is the solution?
- Describe what you want to change and where (geographically)
- What could go wrong? Show you are aware of the main risks and are managing them
- How will you test whether the desired change has been delivered?
- Embed your project in the context of regional strategies and other programmes
- Be concise!

- There is no golden rule for getting a project approved. Following the advice here and using the support available will, however, give you a good chance.

Assistance with preparing an application

- National Contact Points can provide extensive information and individual guidance on how to apply. There is a list of Contact Points.

- Online materials about rules and procedures are collected in the Programme Manual and Fact Sheets

- ❖ Project advisors at the Joint Secretariat in Denmark can provide you with phone, e-mail and/or tele-conference consultations on ideas submitted before a call for applications opens. When a call for applications is open you can only approach the secretariat for advice on technical issues and not on content.

- ❖ Project ideas submitted to the programme can be found in the project idea section on www.northsearegion.eu

- ❖ An overview of projects funded during the IVB programme can be found on www.northsearegion.eu

- ❖ General support includes:
- Workshops and conferences where you can hear the latest news and ask questions
- Website and other online materials with regular updates
- Publications and fact sheets (for an overview see the Programme Manual)
- The possibility to submit project ideas and receive informal feedback on how well your project fits the programme and possible areas for improvement

Submitting Project Ideas

- ❖ Every project can submit an idea to the programme for informal advice. All ideas must be submitted on a standard form through the programme's online application system.

- ❖ In the idea you explain the main activities and outcomes of your project proposal, the partners who are already committed to participating, and the approximate budget required.

- ❖ Project advisors at the Joint Secretariat will assess your proposal and give feedback on whether the idea fits with the programme, recommendations for improving the proposal, and any problems that can already be identified with activities or partners.

- ❖ Submitting a project idea is optional.

Assessment of Expressions of Interest and Full Applications

- ❖ You will only be able to submit your application through the online system if you have correctly completed all sections.

- ❖ Once your application is received, it will go through an eligibility check. The purpose of this brief check is to ensure that the partnership and project meet minimum requirements, that there are no obvious errors with the budget or eligibility rules, and that any uploaded documents have been completed correctly.

- If your project passes the eligibility check, it will next go through quality assessment. The purpose of this assessment is to evaluate how far your proposal meets the strategic and operational requirements of the programme and its detailed rules.

- The assessment of both the Expression of Interest and the Full Application are based on the programme's selection criteria. For the Expression of Interest a limited set of criteria is used to assess the degree to which a potential project will match the programme's objectives and envisaged results. Assessment of the Full Application goes further and focuses on how the project will be delivered. It also addresses more technical questions concerning eligibility, horizontal principles and coordination. Assessment ends with a recommendation to the Steering Committee on whether the project should be approved or rejected. You can find the assessment criteria in the relevant fact sheet.

- Assessment of the Full Application will also consider whether it corresponds to the proposal made in the Expression of Interest. If there are significant differences, particularly with regard to the results that will be delivered, this will be highlighted in the assessment and will be considered when the Steering Committee makes its funding decision.

How is the funding decision made?

- Project applications and assessments together with a recommendation to fund or reject the project are provided to the programme's Steering Committee made up of national and regional representatives from all of the countries in the programme. The committee decides whether to approve or reject the project based on the secretariat's assessment, and sets any conditions that need to be met before contracting.

- The funding decision is primarily based on the score awarded to the proposal. Other factors may, however, also play a role especially limits on the funding available. As a result, there is no guarantee that a project with a qualifying score will be approved. The decision of the committee is final.

- All applicants will be informed about the committee's decision in writing. You can complain if your project is rejected. Complaints can only address the assessment procedure and will be expected to demonstrate that there has been a clear and significant breech of the published procedures and criteria. If a complaint is upheld, your project will be considered at the next meeting. The Complaints Procedure is available online.

What happens after approval?

- Contracts are prepared by the secretariat.
- Project expenditure is eligible from the date of approval of the application (though see the special conditions for preparation costs). It is not therefore necessary to wait for the signed contract to start the project.
- All beneficiaries in the project must sign a Partnership Agreement no later than by the time of submission of the first progress report. The Partnership Agreement must describe the most important working processes in the project and confirm the deliverables to which each beneficiary has committed. It should also set out arrangements for sharing costs for any activities implemented on behalf of the whole partnership, and for recovering any funds incorrectly paid to a beneficiary for ineligible expenditure. There is an outline agreement in Fact Sheet 14.
- All beneficiaries in the project must appoint a First Level Controller to check all expenditure. This must be done no later than by the time of submission of the first progress report. Arrangements for appointing controllers vary between countries. Details can be found in the First Level Control Manual. Please note that Sweden has a centralised system for control and that there are specific rules for Swedish beneficiaries to follow. In most cases projects will have to remember to set aside a budget for control work and will have to run a public procurement procedure to select the controller (not in Sweden). No payment will be made to any project that has not appointed controllers for all beneficiaries.

Running your project

- All projects must be implemented in accordance with the approved proposal.
- All projects have to submit a progress report every 6 months. They must submit a claim for payment at least once every year. Details of timing and the different types of reports can be found in the Fact Sheet on Reporting.
- All reports must be submitted through the programme's online monitoring system.
- Some projects appoint a consultant or company for project administration and management tasks. It is important to remember that this kind of contract needs to be awarded through a public procurement procedure.

- All claims for payment must be checked and approved by each beneficiary's appointed controller.
- There are special rules for activities outside programme area. Please check the fact sheet on this issue for details
- An overview of detailed rules and procedures for project implementation can be found in the Programme Manual.

What kind of assistance is available during implementation?

- Every approved project is assigned to a team of two project advisors. As far as possible the same advisors will stay with your project for the whole implementation period. Your advisors can clarify programme rules and procedures for you, as well as advising on general project implementation issues.
- The Joint Secretariat runs regular events for approved projects to explain issues that seem to be causing problems, provide information and guidance on the latest developments in the programme, and allow you to meet and exchange views with other projects.
- Whenever a new progress report is due, you will be provided with an overview of any changes or issues you need to be aware of.
- National Contact Points are the starting point for information on national rules and regulations.

Changes to your projects

- You have to implement the project as it is described in the approved application. This means that if there are important changes, you will need to get approval from the programme before going ahead. This means that your new proposal needs to be assessed, which of course takes time. There were far too many changes in past and the rules have therefore been tightened up to make sure that most projects just do what is in the original application. Requests for changes should only be made when there are unavoidable and unforeseeable changes in the project's operating environment.
- Agreeing to be part of a project should be seen as a commitment until the end of the project. If beneficiaries leave, the project may be terminated. Funds already paid to the beneficiary leaving may have to be repaid to the programme if the beneficiary has not delivered on its commitments in the application form.

- Please see the Fact Sheet on Changes for details.

Keeping records

- It is very important for all beneficiaries to keep good records of the project's work and for Lead Beneficiaries to try and make sure that beneficiary record-keeping is up to date and adequate. There is a list of essential documents for the audit trail but as a general rule you should be able to document exactly why you claimed every amount (invoices, staff salary documents etc.), why it was necessary for the project, and what steps you took to live up to other rules like the providing value for money. The programme has made a lot of efforts to make the rules and requirements much easier this time. You can find all the rules in the relevant Fact Sheets and the First Level Control Manual. In the event of an audit, failure to keep good records may result in a demand to pay back some or all of the grant.

Control and audit

- The Lead Beneficiary must check and confirm that (i) all of the costs claimed arise from implementing the project (ii) that only activities agreed by the whole partnership are included in the claim and (iii) that all of these activities comply with the contract and the approved application. This is a check that each beneficiary only claims for work which has been agreed as necessary by the whole project partnership.

- The Lead Beneficiary must ensure that every beneficiary's claim for payment has been checked and approved by the appointed First Level Controller. Details of how this should be done can be found in the First Level Control Manual.

- See the First Level Control Manual for a discussion about identifying and correcting Irregularities

Communication

- Communication is an essential part of all project activities in order to ensure that the most relevant stakeholders are aware of what the project is doing and can become involved. Communication of final results is essential if the benefit from each project is to spread beyond the partnership.

- There are a small number of programme rules on communication. The most important of these is the requirement to display clearly on all publications and products that the project has been funded by the European Union. This applies equally to digital publications.

- The application form includes a separate work package for communications and this issue is part of the assessment of the full application. Even good project proposals can be rejected if communication activities are too weak to achieve communication objectives.

- See the Programme Manual for more information.

Open access to all results

- It is a requirement that every project partner **must** disseminate the results it produces as early as possible. Only beneficiaries participating in the programme under an approved state Aid scheme are exempted.

Special guidance for the first call

- This is the first call and the full programme budget is available. See the financial tables for an overview of amounts available for each priority. All partners will be funded at 50%.

- For the first call only, it is **not** necessary to submit an Expression of Interest before submitting a Full Application. For this call only, applicants may choose to go straight to a full application.

- There are no specific guidelines on content for this call – projects are welcome under any programme theme.

- Quality will be in focus as well as new requirements for the 2014-2020 programme period. Even experienced partners should carefully consult the guidance and make use of the advisory services available to avoid disappointment.

- Rules and procedures are still developing so it is essential that applicants regularly consult the programme website for important updates. Similarly the programme's website and Online Monitoring System are still under construction. Please be patient with any problems and inform the Joint Secretariat about them so we can work to resolve important errors as soon as possible.

- Contrary to advice given before finalization of this document, it has now been decided that in-kind costs will **not** be eligible under the North Sea Region programme.

- Please note that it will not be possible to contract first call projects until the Cooperation Programme has been formally adopted by the European Commission. We currently estimate that this should happen mid 2015.

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