



Developing the North Sea Region Programme 2021-2027
Results of public consultation

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1. Executive summary

The public stakeholder consultation for the North Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 took place between 10 July and 30 September 2020 and received 391 responses. The main outcomes are summarised below.

Themes in the new programme

A major part of the survey was designed to gauge stakeholders' opinions on the five policy objectives (POs) set out by the European Commission. This revealed PO2, a greener Europe, is the highest priority across the board. Topics such as climate mitigation and adaptation, green and circular economy, blue economy, and biodiversity are clearly high on the agenda for the vast majority of respondents.

The second highest rated PO was PO1, a smarter Europe. Within this theme, digital transformation is seen as the most important topic, followed by green energy, circular economy, and skills development. This theme thus appears somewhat linked to PO2.

Although less pronounced, there is a good level of support also for the remaining three policy objectives (PO3, PO4 and PO5). The stakeholders' perception of their relative importance differs between countries.

Project approach, set-up, and duration

There is a push for increased flexibility in several aspects, including methodologies, scope, duration, and geographic coverage. The most popular project approach is pilots and demonstrations, and the least favoured is feasibility studies. As regards project budget, stakeholders prefer a total budget of 3 to 15 million euros. There is a clear preference for smaller partnerships, and a wish for new approaches allowing more types of partners to participate.

Administration and programme support

In general, there is an interest in smarter, more flexible, more agile set-up and procedures in the programme. The two-step application procedure appears to be well received, however there is a wish for a shorter and easier process based on simplified systems and better guidance. Opinions are divided on introducing more flat rate options e.g. for travel and accommodation. A majority find the online monitoring system (OMS) sufficient for their needs; however, there is a wish for greater ease of use.

The majority of respondents considered that NCPs had a crucial role to play during each stage of the project lifecycle. Many stakeholders express a wish for more regular engagement with the National Contact Points. Also, NCPs have an important role to play in disseminating information about projects as well as their results.

Crisis responsiveness

Many stakeholders suggested the programme respond to crises such as the current Covid-19 crisis by focusing more on digital tools and technologies at programme and project level. Others asked for increased flexibility, for example to allow for more project changes and extensions. Some suggested allocating a special budget for crisis projects.

Overall, a large number of thoughtful, high-quality responses showed a strong engagement among the respondents.

2. Introduction

This report presents the outcomes of the public consultation on the future North Sea Region Programme 2021-2027, conducted via an online survey between 10 July and 30 September 2020. The main purpose was to gather ideas and opinions from a broad range of stakeholders to inform the development of the new programme. This report will thus feed into the work of the Programme Preparation Group, which takes decisions on the future programme based on several studies, evaluations, and stakeholder inputs.

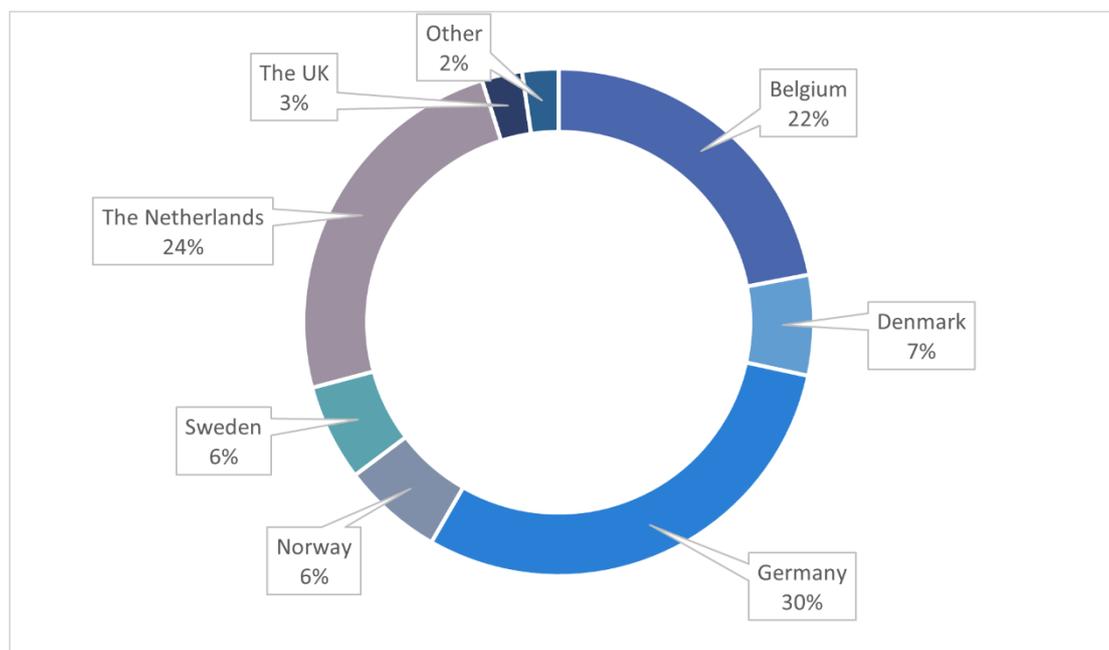
In total, the consultation received 391 responses from respondents with a variety of backgrounds and locations across the region. Many respondents chose to provide ideas and suggestions in comment fields, in addition to answering the mandatory questions. This has resulted in a large number of quality inputs, which will be useful also in the secretariat's further work to put the new programme into place.

3. Respondents

Below is a summary of the participants' backgrounds.

3.1 Country distribution

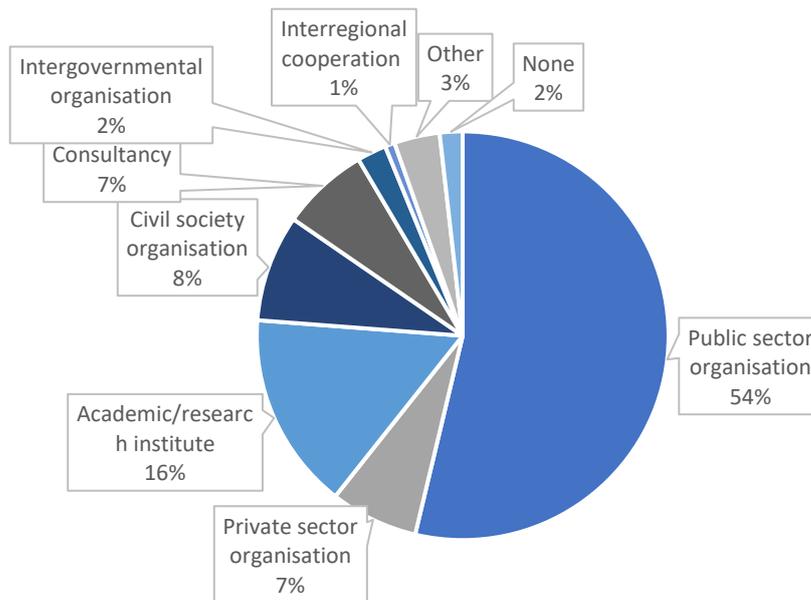
All 391 respondents answered the question "Which country are you from?" The results shown below reflect the level of programme participation in the individual countries, except the UK which had a low participation. Brexit and the UK's decision not to participate in the next programme period are likely explanations.



3.2 Type and level of organisation

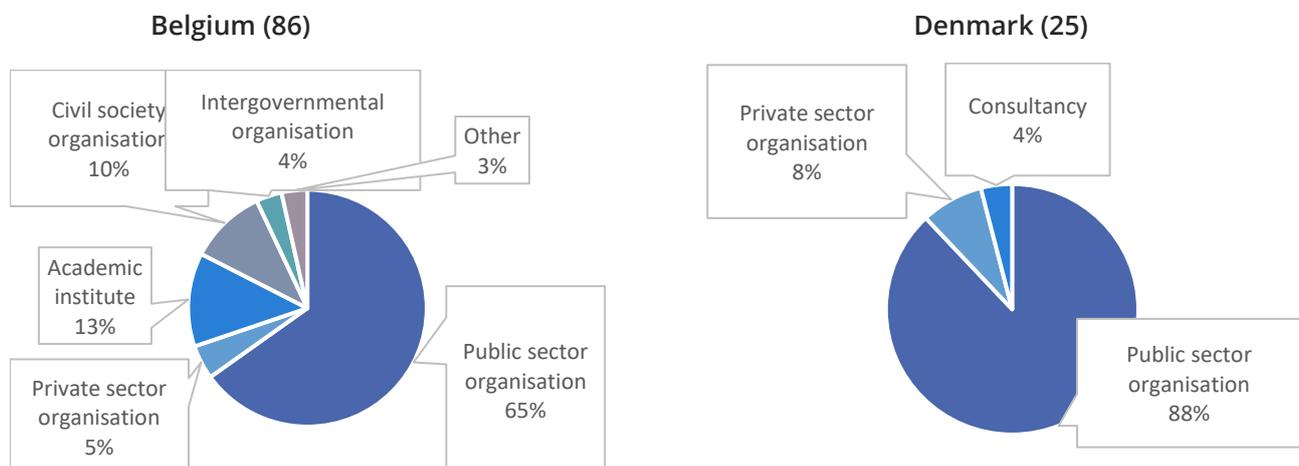
3.2.1 Type of organisation

More than half of the respondents represented the public sector (54%). The second most prominent type of organisation was academic/research institute (16%), followed by civil society organisations (8%), consultancies (7%), and private sector organisations (7%).

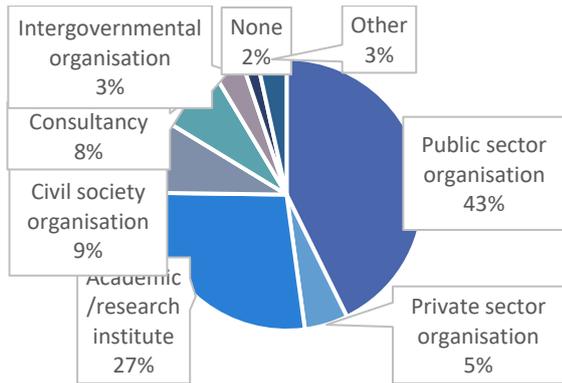


3.2.1 Type of organisation per country

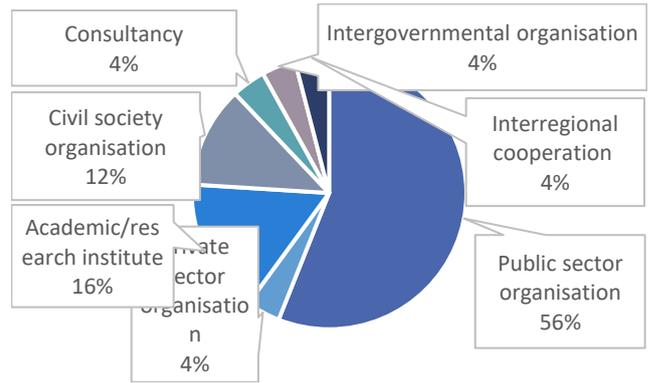
When split on the individual countries, the pattern is rather similar to the overall distribution, however there are some differences. For example, the public sector dominates significantly more among respondents from Belgium, Denmark and Sweden. Some types of organisations are not represented in some countries where the overall level of response is comparatively small.



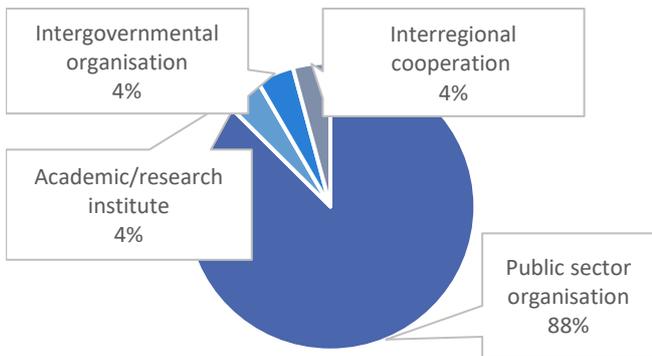
Germany (117)



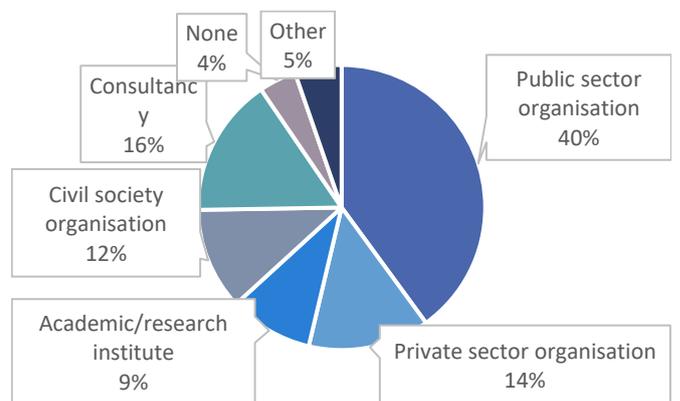
Norway (22)



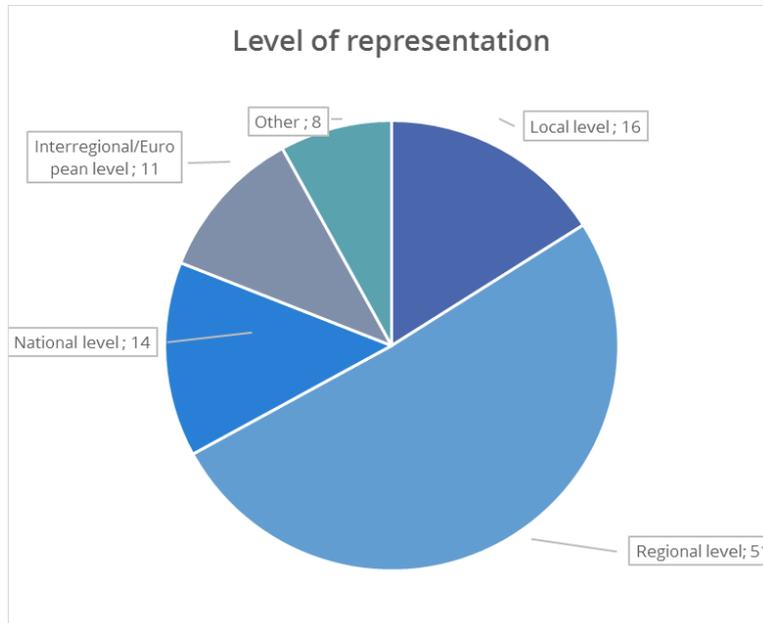
Sweden (25)



The Netherlands (95)



Just over half of the respondents completing the survey were from the regional level (51%). There were also respondents from the local (16%), national (14%) and European level (11%). Overall, the level of organisations responding to the survey reflect the nature and main target audiences of the programme in relative proportion.

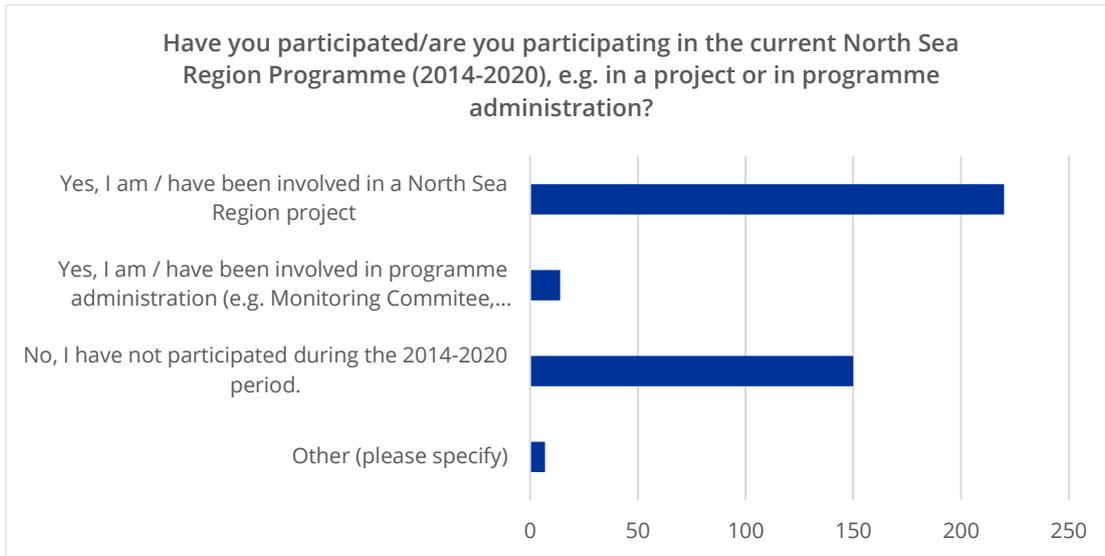


3.3 Current and future participation

All 391 respondents answered the questions about current and future participation.

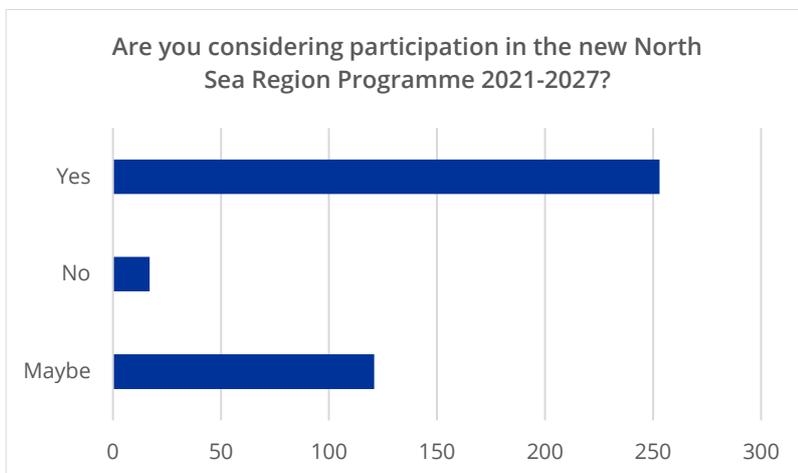
3.3.1 Current participation

As the graphic below shows, nearly 60% of the respondents are or have been involved in a project in the current programme. More specifically, 220 respondents (56%) are or have been involved in a North Sea Region Programme VB project, 150 (38%) have not participated in the current programme, 14 respondents (4%) have been involved in programme administration, and 7 respondents (2%) chose "Other".



3.3.2 Future participation

The majority of the respondents are considering participation in the next programme. As the graph below shows, 253 (65%) are considering participation, 17 (4%) are not and 121 (31%) said maybe.



The respondents could specify why they were or were not considering participation. The most common reasons for considering participation were possibilities for international cooperation and broadening knowledge. The themes of the programme were found relevant by many respondents and some mentioned that they have had good experiences with the programme.

The most common reason for not being sure about participation was financial; the 50% co-funding rate is too low for some organisations. Many respondents also mentioned that participating in the new programme depends on the calls, terms, topics and finding right partners. A couple of respondents had found the administrative burden too high. However, more respondents had good experiences of working with the programme.

4. Outcomes

4.1 Thematic focus

The themes and topics covered are central to the programme's relevance. A core aim of the North Sea Region Programme is to address and develop solutions for the most important challenges in the region.

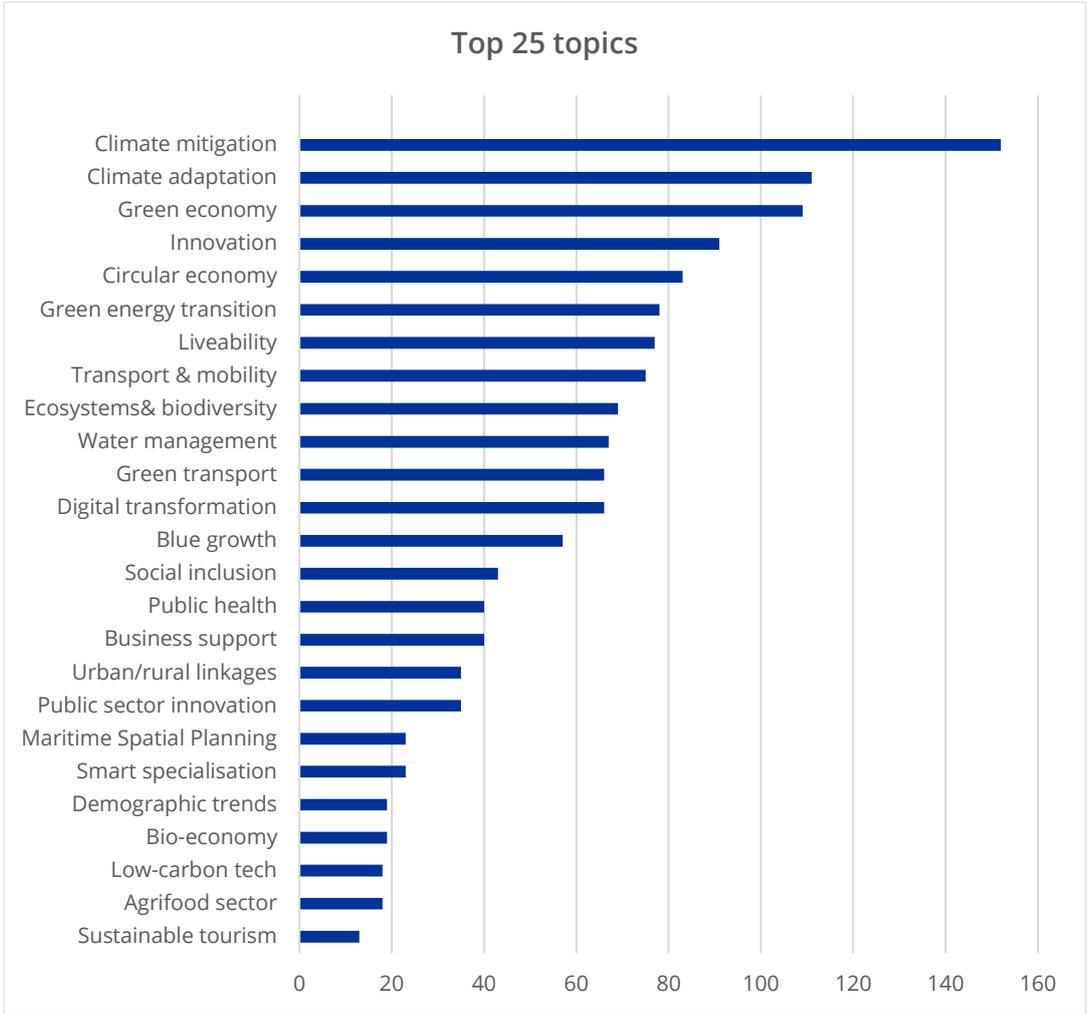
The regulations and the Orientation Paper for the North Sea Region set out five policy objectives (PO) describing the main themes and topics that might be covered in the future programme. In its Orientation Paper for the North Sea Region, the Commission emphasises PO1 (a smarter Europe) and PO2 (a greener Europe). The programme is expected to choose a maximum of three policy objectives. Each PO includes several specific objectives (SO), which the programme needs to choose from.

Stakeholders were asked about topics and themes in several ways, to effectively capture opinions and see how they correlated with the POs: An initial open-ended question, structured questions about the POs and SOs, and a final question where respondents could choose the most relevant POs from the five.

4.1.1 Open-ended question about topics

At the beginning of the survey, and before they had been presented to the PO and SO, respondents were asked to list the topics that they would like the future programme to focus on. A total of 263 people responded to this question. A list of 15 key words was provided for inspiration, and in addition respondents added a great variety of other words, including additional topics. Most respondents listed a number of topics that they found important. A tagging system was used to link and group the many different words used.

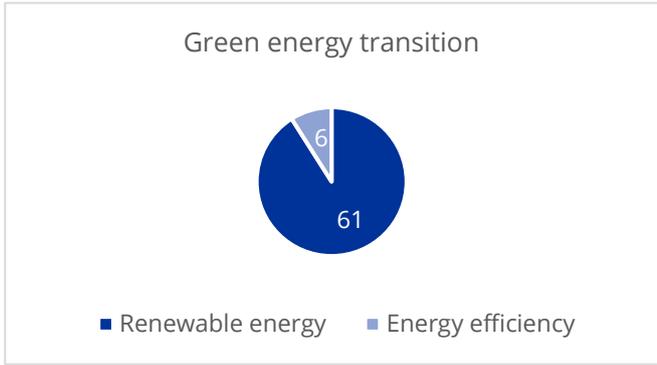
The graphic below shows the top 25 topics identified by the stakeholders in response to this question. Please note that some topics are in fact sub-topics of other topics: For example, "climate mitigation" includes green energy, circular economy, green transport, and low-carbon tech. These are also highlighted as separate topics.



As seen from the graphic, climate mitigation ranks highest, followed by climate adaptation. Thus, the majority of respondents clearly deem climate change to be the most important challenge for the programme to address.

Other top rated areas include green economy, innovation, circular economy, green energy transition, liveability, and transport and mobility.

In the category green energy transition, a significantly higher share of respondents focus on renewable energy compared to energy efficiency:

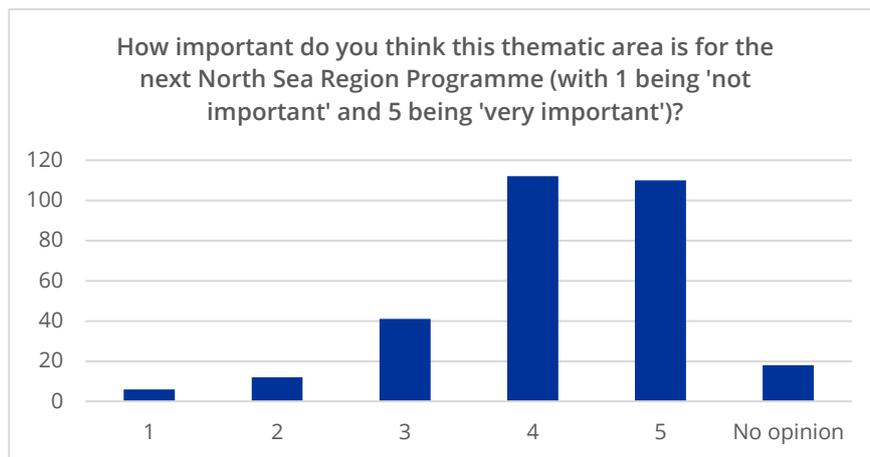


4.1.2 Structured questions about policy objectives and specific objectives

The survey subsequently asked the respondents specifically about the policy objectives and specific objectives outlined in the regulations and the Orientation Paper.

Policy Objective 1: A smarter Europe

PO1 focuses on innovation and smart economic transformation. The diagram below provides an overview of the relevance of PO1 for the stakeholders. PO1 is considered to be highly relevant across all the respondents, with a majority of them awarding the PO a 4- or 5-point relevance. The weighted average across all respondents is 4.10.

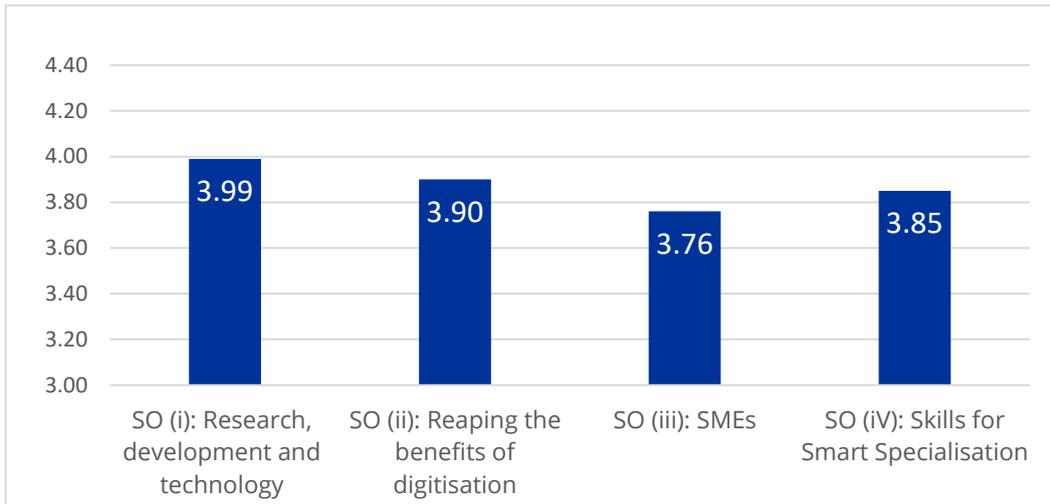


Based on 299 responses

The following four specific objectives are proposed under PO1:

- SO (i) "Enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies"
- SO (ii) "reaping the benefits of digitisation for citizens, companies and governments"
- SO (iii) "enhancing growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs"
- SO (iv) "developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship"

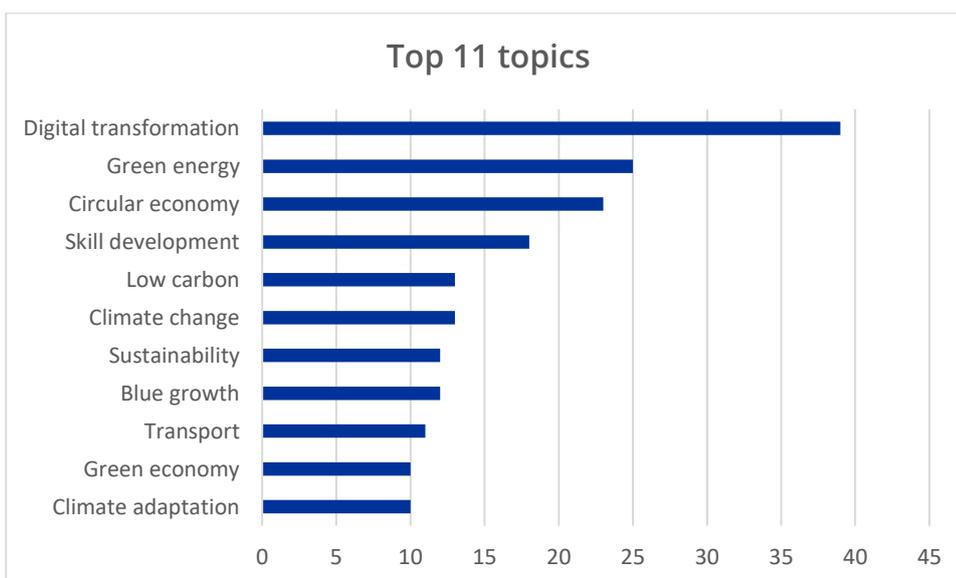
The following diagram shows how stakeholders rate the importance of each SO in the new programme. Stakeholders were asked to rate their importance on scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The diagram shows the weighted average of responses received.



Based on 299 responses

Stakeholders see SO (i), enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies, as the most relevant. This is followed by SO (ii), reaping the benefits of digitisation for citizens, companies, and governments. SO (iv), developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship ranks in third place. SO (iii), enhancing growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, is rated at least relevant.

In addition, the stakeholders were asked to list the topics that they would like the future programme to address to foster innovation and smart economic transformation. Most respondents listed a number of topics. A tagging system was used to link and group the many different words used. The graphic below shows the top 11 topics identified by the stakeholders in this question.



Based on 207 responses

The two main themes emerging from these answers are the digital transformation and the green transformation of the North Sea Region, respectively.

Digital transformation is the topic mentioned by most stakeholders. This refers to the further digitisation and digitalisation of the public and private sector as well as supporting citizens to reap the benefits. More specifically, stakeholders mention the need to enable small and medium communities to participate in the digital transition, to strengthen the digital workforce and to implement digital tools for smart cities and smart regions. Other issues highlighted in this regard are digital sovereignty, digital inclusion, the digitalisation of education, traffic, and health services as well as the importance of blockchain, open source software solutions and open data standards.

The focus on green transformation topics clearly shows the close connection between PO1, a smarter Europe, and PO2, a greener Europe. Many respondents support the idea of greening the region via innovation and business opportunities supported under PO1.

Green energy, renewables and the green energy transition is highlighted as an especially relevant topic to address under PO1. Many stakeholders make a connection to the region's strength in the blue economy, emphasising the potential of offshore wind energy and other blue energy besides wind, such as wave and tidal energy. Hydrogen is also mentioned. **Circular economy** is mentioned as another key topic, similar to **low-carbon** issues. The latter includes the development and deployment of low-carbon technology for example in urban environments, the transport sector, agriculture and clean shipping and energy production as well as the focus on low-carbon societies more generally. The **green economy**, another important topic highlighted by the stakeholders, refers more generally to actions to support the achievement of the EU Green Deal and to support innovative, greener solutions as part of a sustainable economy. Lastly, stakeholders also mention the importance to address **sustainability** issues more broadly as well as **climate adaptation** under PO1.

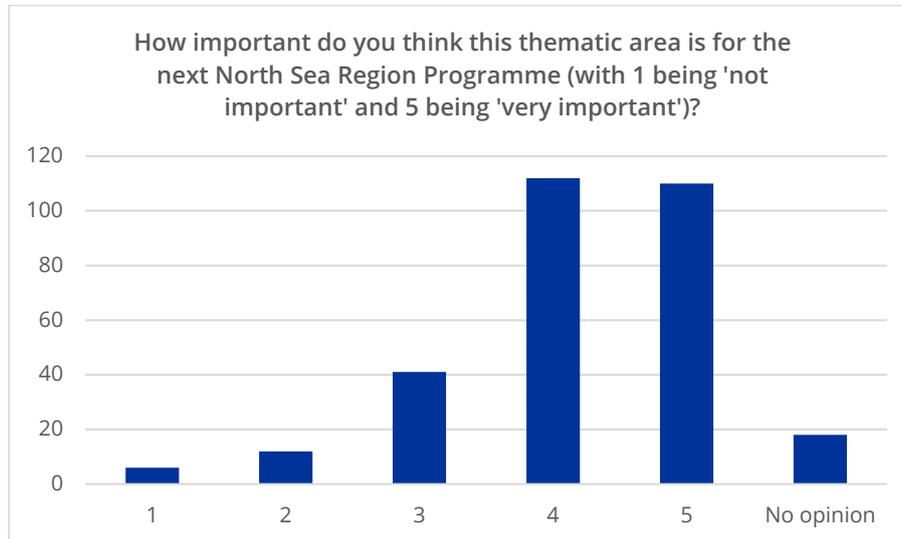
Skills development is also mentioned as an important topic. This refers to up-skilling workforces in smart economy sectors, in regard to digital skills, the strengthening of education, and training, especially for SMEs and entrepreneurship education.

Lastly, **blue growth** and **transport issues** are also stressed as important topics to address in order to foster innovation and smart economic transformation.

Beyond these topics, several stakeholders also elaborate on project approaches that should be funded under PO1. Especially highlighted is the focus on pilots and demonstration, the further stimulation and support for test facilities, especially for SMEs, and the focus on quadruple helix approaches. Other approaches mentioned are the upscaling of solutions/innovations, cross-industry collaboration, and the building of regional knowledge ecosystems.

Policy Objective 2: A greener Europe

PO2 focuses on a greener and low-carbon Europe. The diagram below provides an overview of the relevance of PO2 for the stakeholders. PO2 is considered to be highly relevant across all the respondents, with a majority of them awarding the PO a 4- or 5-point relevance. The weighted average across all respondents is 4.61.

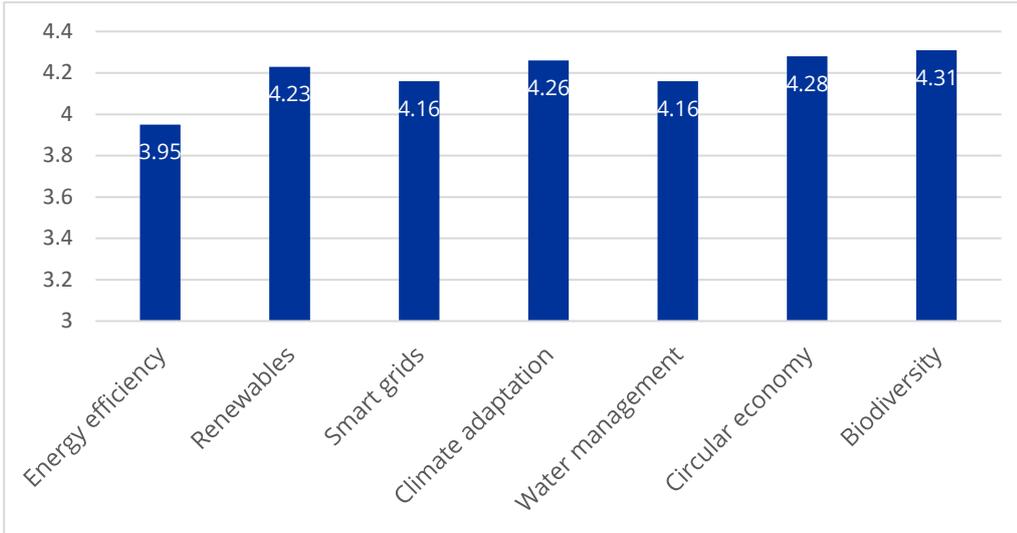


Based on 285 responses

The following seven specific objectives are proposed under PO2:

- SO (i) "promoting energy efficiency measures"
- SO (ii) "promoting renewable energy"
- SO (iii) "developing smart energy systems, grids and storage at local level"
- SO (iv) "promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and disaster resilience"
- SO (v) "promoting sustainable water management"
- SO (vi) "promoting the transition to a circular economy"
- SO (vii) "enhancing biodiversity, green infrastructure in the urban environment, and reducing pollution"

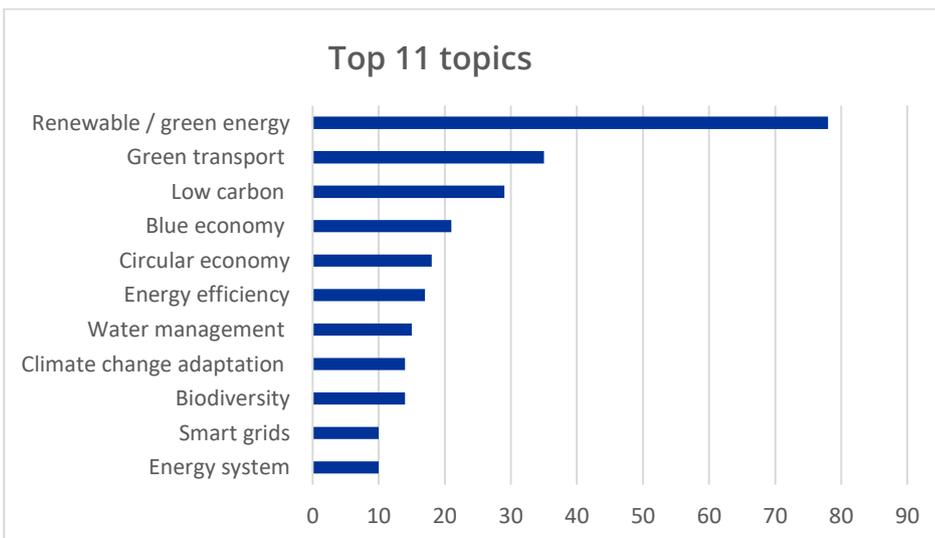
The following diagram shows how stakeholders rate the importance of each of them in the new programme. Stakeholders were asked to rate their importance on scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The diagram shows the weighted average of responses received.



Based on 285 responses

SO (vi), promoting the transition to a circular economy and SO (vii), enhancing biodiversity, green infrastructure in the urban environment, and reducing pollution are rated as the most relevant PO2 specific objectives by all stakeholders. This is followed by SO (iv), promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and disaster resilience and SO (ii) promoting renewable energy. SO (iii), developing smart energy systems, grids, and storage at local level and SO (iv), promoting sustainable water management share the second least important rating. SO (i), promoting energy efficiency measures is rated as the least relevant specific objective by the stakeholders.

In addition, the stakeholders were asked to list the topics that they would like the future programme to address to foster clean energy and the environment. A total of 187 people responded to this open-ended question, and most respondents listed a number of topics. A tagging system was used to link and group the many different words used. The graphic below shows the top 11 topics identified by the stakeholders in this question.



Based on 187 responses

The main topics identified by the stakeholders support the seven SOs suggested by the European Commission for PO2. **Renewable and green energy** is mentioned most and can be seen as the topic for the future programme. Some examples for clean energy: Energy from solar power, biomass, waste, and wastewater, boosting hydrogen initiatives etc. Green energy was in several cases connected to aspects of blue economy, as for example offshore wind, ocean energy and wind propulsion.

Green transport is also one of the key topics mentioned by the stakeholders under PO2 – even though there is no SO directly relating to it. Green transport includes topics as sustainable, shared, and smart mobility, alternative fuels as for example hydrogen and bio-fuel and electric transportation. The need for a car-free transport and rather other modes as for example walking/ bicycle infrastructure is mentioned. An improved connectivity between rural and urban areas is also highlighted. Also, green transport has clear links to the maritime dimension, for example clean ship traffic.

These topics will lead to a **low carbon** North Sea Region, which includes a massive reduction of CO₂ and other emissions on all levels, also including **circular economy** and **energy efficiency** measures.

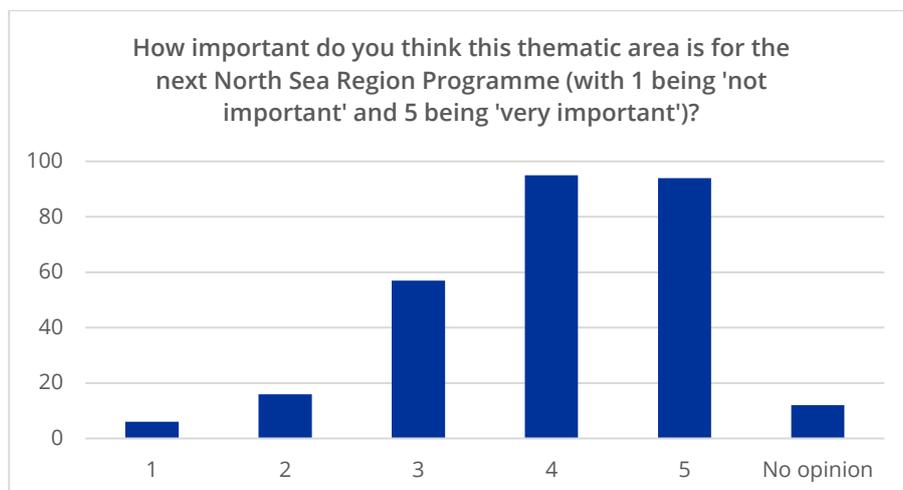
Stakeholders also highlighted **water management** and **climate change adaptation**, two topics that are interlinked. Smart use of water, for example as urban infrastructure serving in flood risk management and disaster resilience is highlighted. Nature-based solutions are mentioned several times as an approach to climate adaptation.

Biodiversity is also a topic, covering the biodiversity loss and the restoring of ecosystems. An explicit focus is also on healthy maritime ecosystems.

Smart grids and **energy systems** rank as the least important topics. Examples are grid management 2.0 (local energy production), the transport of energy via UHVDC connections and the storage of energy.

Policy Objective 3: A more connected Europe

PO3 focuses on digital connectivity and on green and sustainable transport. The European Commission has not recommended that PO3 be included in the new programme. The stakeholder express less support than for PO1 and PO2, however the majority awards the PO a 4- or 5-point relevance. The weighted average across all respondents is however only 3,95. This is the second least supported PO by all stakeholder.

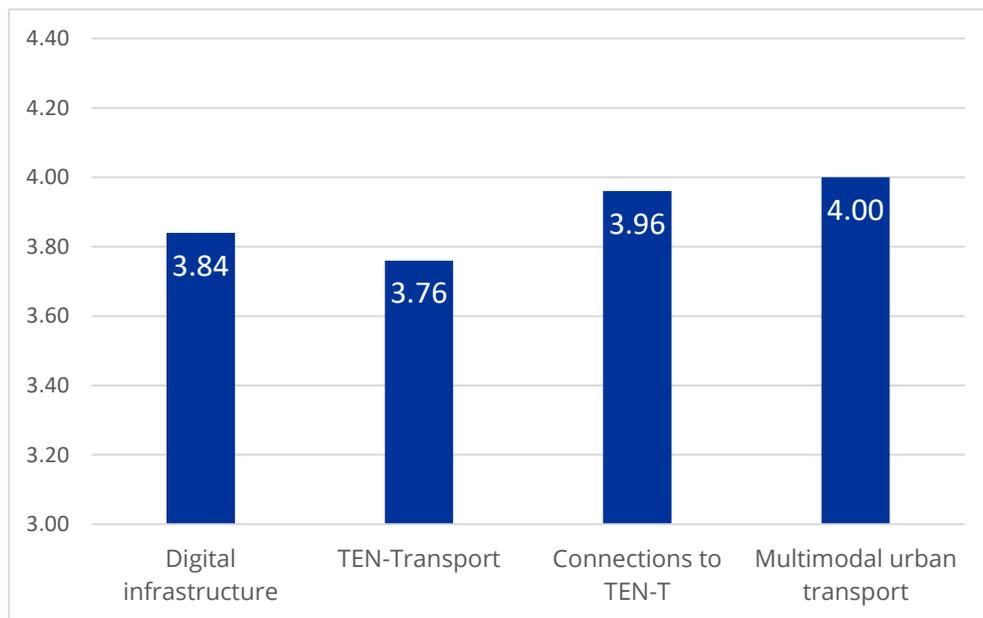


Based on 280 responses

The following four specific objectives are proposed under PO3:

- SO (i) "Enhancing digital connectivity"
- SO (ii) "Developing a sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent, secure and intermodal TEN-T"
- SO (iii) "Developing sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent and intermodal national, regional and local mobility, including improved access to TEN-T and cross-border mobility"
- SO (iv) "Promoting sustainable multimodal urban mobility"

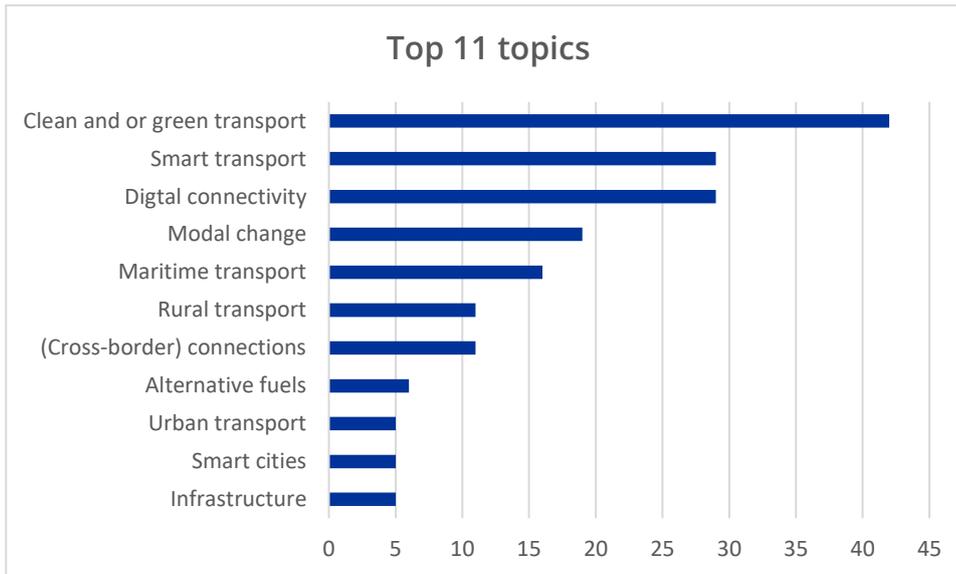
The following diagram displays the stakeholders' weighted rating of the relevance of the different SOs on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).



Based on 280 responses

Stakeholders view SO (iv), promoting sustainable multimodal urban mobility as the most relevant. This is followed by SO (iii), developing sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent, and intermodal national, regional, and local mobility, including improved access to TEN-T and cross-border mobility and SO (i), enhancing digital connectivity. SO (ii), developing a sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent, secure, and intermodal TEN-T is rated as least relevant.

A total of 155 respondents answered the open-ended question of which themes and topics the new programme should address to foster transport and digital connections. The graphic below shows the top 11 topics identified by the stakeholders in this question.



Based on 155 responses

The most important topic mentioned by stakeholders is **clean/ green transport**, including low carbon technologies – by that fostering zero emission transport and the contribution to climate neutral transport. One part of it is covered by the topic of **alternative fuels**, which is arguing for a fossil free transport and promoting for example the use of green hydrogen.

As part of it, **smart transport** was highlighted as a topic, covering intelligent transport (ITS), open data, the Internet of Things (IoT), Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and autonomous mobility etc.

As yet another topic – slightly away from transport – the topic of **digital connectivity** is regarded as a topic. This is corresponding to the first SO and includes aspects like fast, safe, and secure digital connections for everyone and well as digital infrastructure that can enhance digital connectivity.

Modal change is mentioned several times with the idea of either looking into car-sharing or into moving transport from own car use to rather other modes like public transport (trains, busses) and even cycling and walking. This covers the aspect of multimodal use of transport. Cycling is also mentioned with regard to better **infrastructure** for cycling. This is especially highlighted with regard to the **urban** areas.

When dealing with **rural** areas, the connection from rural areas to urban areas is a topic that the stakeholders have identified the need for.

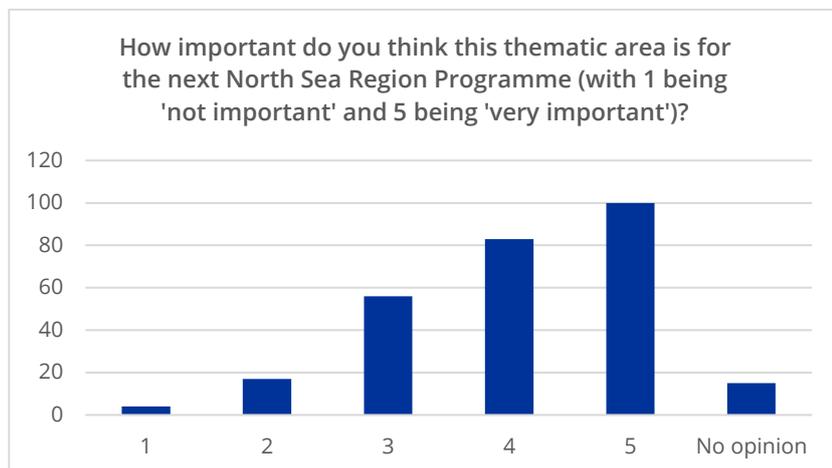
Maritime transport is clearly part of the main topics. Improved carbon neutrality for the shipping industry in form of clean shipping and clean harbours are key words here as well as green inland waterway transport.

(Cross-border) connections is covering aspects of better connections between cities, regions, or operators but also connections between countries. The cross-border transport is explicitly highlighting better train connections in order to avoid airplanes.

The topic of **smart cities** is covering transport in the wider sense, as for example sustainable urban mobility logistics and the development of electric public transport.

Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe

PO4, a more social Europe, focuses on fostering skills, education, and health. As with PO3, the European Commission did not recommend that PO4 be included in the new programme. The stakeholders express a mix of opinions on the support of PO4, as displayed in the diagram below. While a majority award the PO a 4- or 5-point relevance, the proportion of those awarding it a 3-point relevance or less is higher than for PO1 and PO2. The weighted average across all respondents is 3.99.

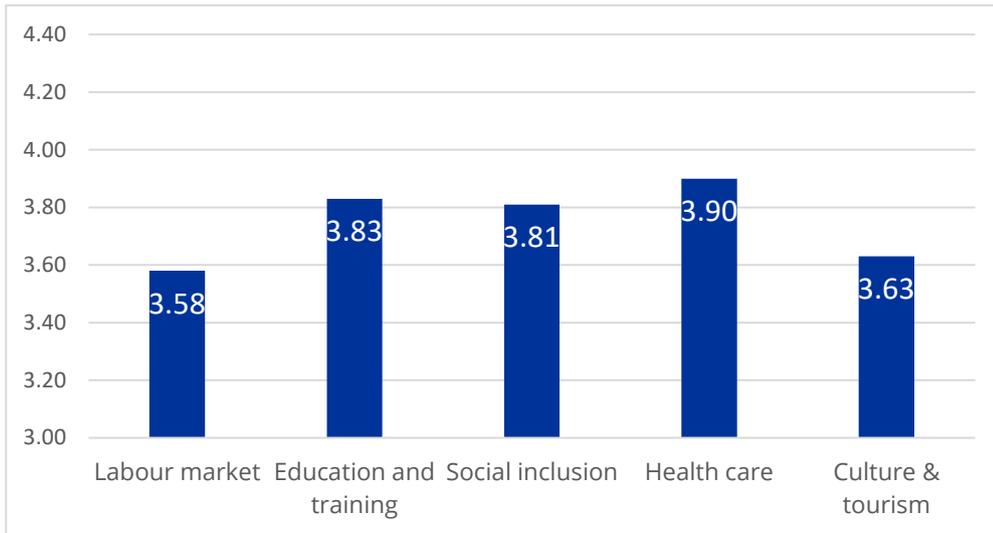


Based on 275 responses

The following five specific objectives are proposed under PO4:

- SO (i) "Enhancing the effectiveness of labour markets and access to quality employment through developing social innovation and infrastructure"
- SO (ii) "Improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning through developing infrastructure, including by fostering resilience for distance and on-line education and training"
- SO (iii) "increasing the socioeconomic integration of marginalised communities, migrants and disadvantaged groups, through integrated measures including housing and social services"
- SO (iv) "Ensuring equal access to healthcare and fostering resilience of health systems"
- SO (v) "Enhancing the role of culture and tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation"

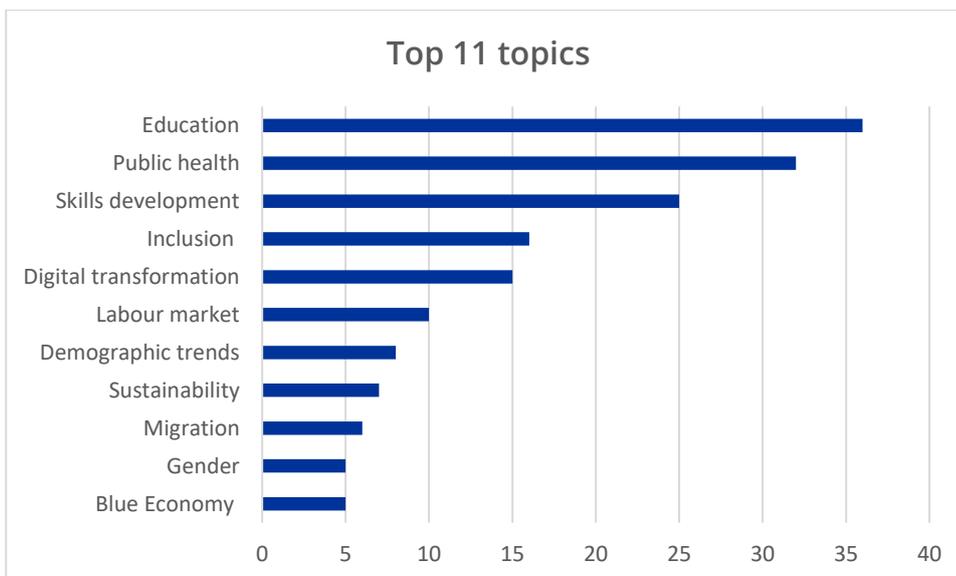
The following diagram displays the stakeholders' weighted rating of the relevance of the different SOs on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).



Based on 275 responses

Stakeholders rated SO (iv), ensuring equal access to healthcare and fostering resilience of health systems, as the most relevant. This is followed by SO (ii), improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning through developing infrastructure, including by fostering resilience for distance and on-line education and training, and SO (iii), increasing the socioeconomic integration of marginalised communities, migrants and disadvantaged groups, through integrated measures including housing and social services. SO (v), enhancing the role of culture and tourism in economic development, social inclusion, and social innovation, ranks in fourth place, followed by the SO rated least relevant: SO (i) on labour markets effectiveness and access to quality employment.

A total of 137 respondents answered the open-ended question of which themes and topics the new programme should address to foster skills, education, and health. The graphic below shows the top 11 topics identified by the stakeholders in this question.



Based on 137 responses

Education is the key topic highlighted under PO4, with a strong focus on education for sustainable development. Beyond this, this broad topic refers, amongst others, to overcoming social barriers in education and skills development, early education, integrative education for migrants/refugees, adult education. Sectors highlighted are the **blue economy** sector and the health sector. Generally, education is closely connected to **skills development**, another key topic under PO4.

Public health is the second most often mentioned topic. This includes first and foremost the improvement of healthcare systems, the improvement the work situation of healthcare workers and (informal) care for elderly people and the access to digital health solutions, especially in rural areas. Beyond that, stakeholders also stress the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, of individual health considering climate change, and of healthy food.

(Social) **inclusion** is other key topic under PO4, referring to accessibility of information, opportunities, infrastructures, and services to all people as well as to overcoming social barriers in various fields. An important topic to support inclusion is hereby **digital transformation**, such as the development of digital skills for all social groups and the creation of training infrastructure to train people on using new technologies. The topic of the digital transformation is as such also closely connected to skill building, online education and training. Another key issue in this regard is, as mentioned above, digital health solutions.

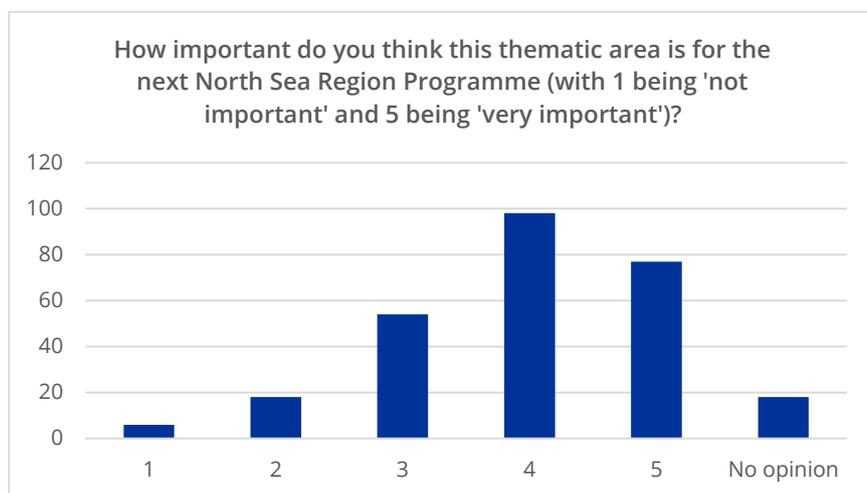
The effectiveness and support of the **labour market** also receives recognition under PO4. This refers to the creation of more efficient labour markets, the support of a more uniform labour market across Europe, job development after COVID-19 and increasing the flexibility of the workforce.

Demographic trends, such as aging societies and demographic changes, equal opportunities for **genders**, and **migration**, especially the integration of migrants/refugees in society, education, and workforce, are stressed by the stakeholders.

Lastly, **sustainability** is mentioned as a key topic. This refers especially to environmental education and education with regard to sustainable behaviour.

Policy Objective 5: A Europe closer to citizens

PO5 focuses on fostering sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural, and coastal areas and local initiatives. The stakeholder's support of PO5 is less clear cut than that for PO1 and PO2, as shown in the diagram below. Most stakeholders have awarded this PO a 4-point relevance; the weighted average of support is 3.99.

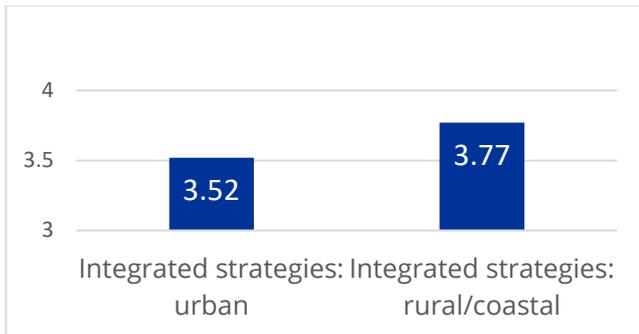


Based on 271 responses

The following two specific objectives are proposed under PO5:

- SO (i) "Fostering the integrated social, economic and environmental development, cultural heritage and security in urban areas"
- SO (ii) "Fostering the integrated social, economic and environmental local development, cultural heritage and security, including for rural and coastal areas also through community-led local development"

The following diagram displays the stakeholders' weighted rating of the relevance of the two SOs on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

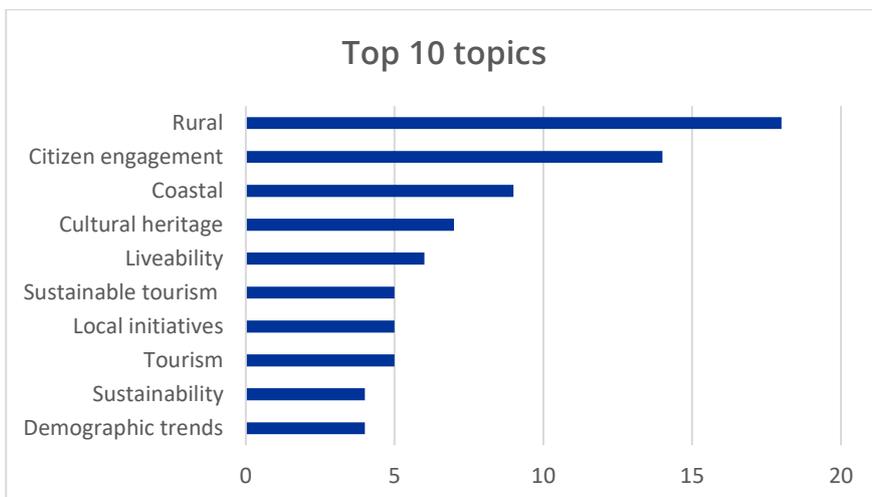


Based on 271 responses

SO (ii), relating to integrated development in rural and coastal areas, receives more support from the stakeholders with a weighted average of 3.77. SO (i) on integrated development in urban areas has a weighted average of 3.52.

Note: It is expected that the final version of the ERDF regulation will likely integrate this distinction between urban, on the one hand, and rural and coastal areas, on the other hand, under "all kind of territories."

Beyond rating the relevance of the two SOs, the stakeholders answered the open-ended questions of which topics they would like to see in the new programme to foster sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural, and coastal areas and local initiatives. The 109 answers received were tagged, and the graphic below shows the top 10 topics identified by the stakeholders.



Based on 109 responses

A majority of stakeholder stress the relevance of **rural** areas, of rural development and rural- urban linkages under PO5. Linkages should be supported both between urban and rural populations as well as SMEs. Projects should stimulate rural regions through innovative infrastructure, economy, (sustainable) tourism concepts and by using art and culture as economic instruments. Moreover, stakeholders highlight the need to invest in sustainable transport in and to rural areas, and improved service quality in rural areas.

Next to rural areas, the stakeholders also stress the importance of **coastal** areas in the North Sea Region. Here, they include supporting the sustainable and bottom-up local development of coastal area as an integrated part of further growth of the blue economy, ecosystem-based coastal protection, linkages to coastal areas, (sustainable) tourism in coastal areas as well as measures against rising sea levels.

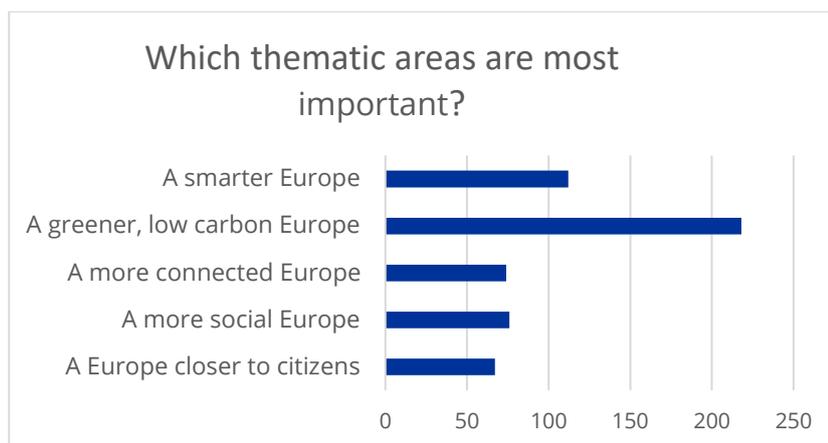
Sustainable tourism and **tourism** are clearly important topics under PO5. The stakeholders promote sustainable tourism that take pressure off urban hot spots and enhances rural and less intrusive tourism as well as linkages between sustainable tourism to nature protection measures. Beyond sustainability, they also stress tourism as a means to foster local development more generally. Similarly, **cultural heritage**, regional identity, art, and culture are highlighted as economic instruments, especially for rural and coastal areas.

Liveability, sustainability, and **demographic trends** are further topics highlighted as relevant in order to foster sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural, and coastal areas and local initiatives.

In terms of approaches under PO5, the stakeholders stress **citizen engagement** – engaging citizens in creating and implementing solutions, in citizen science, and in decision-making and planning processes; and **local initiatives** - developing and promoting local initiatives and networks in a more holistic context.

4.1.3 Final question on policy objectives

Subsequently, respondents were asked to pick the policy objectives that they found most important, seeing all five objectives listed next to each other. Respondents could pick any number of policy objectives. A total of 271 respondents answered this question and the outcome is shown below:



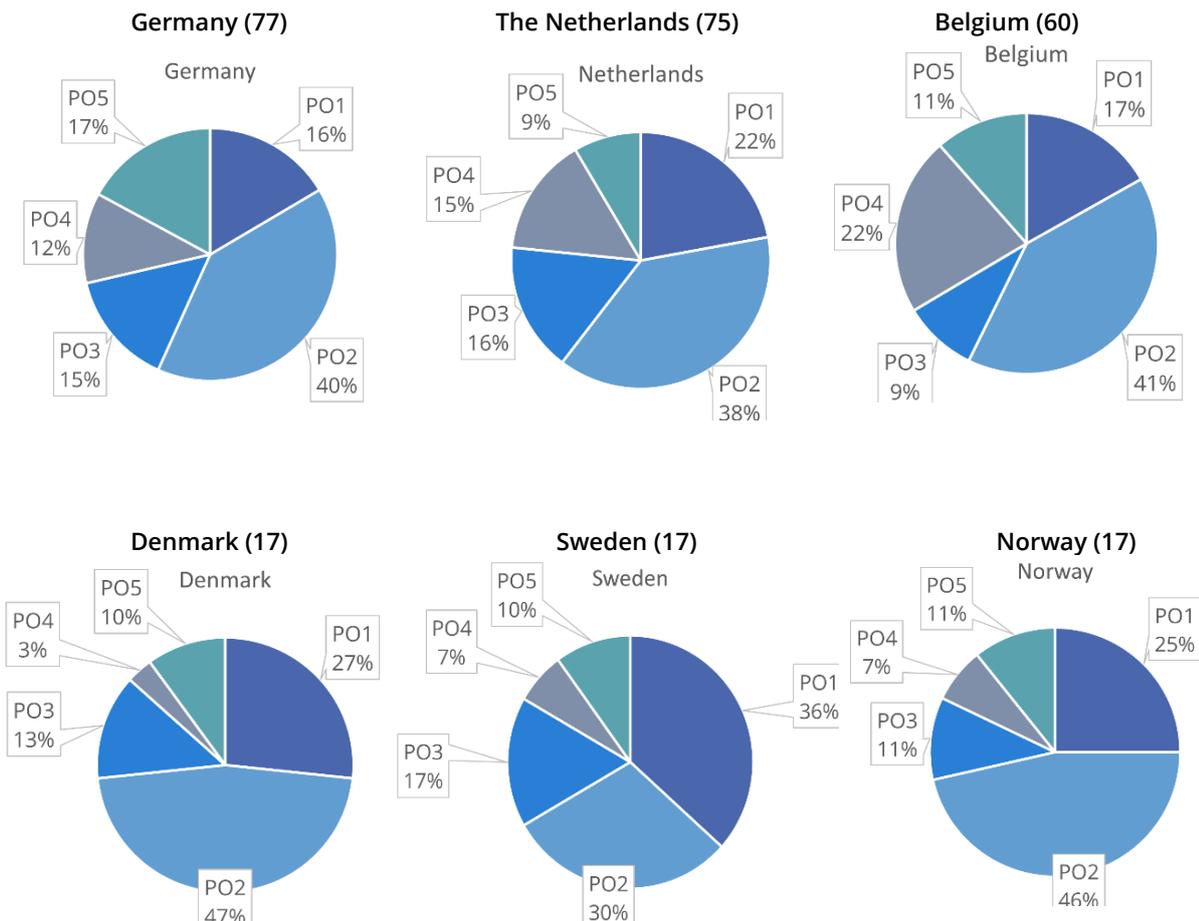
In line with the previous findings, the respondents showed the strongest preference for PO1 and in particular PO2. However, each of the three remaining POs is still supported by a significant proportion of the respondents (24% or more).

Responses by member country

The responses per country are shown in the graphics below, with number of respondents in brackets. There are some striking similarities and also a couple of differences:

- There is clearly consensus about PO2 as the most important PO.
- Respondents from all countries except Belgium deem PO1 the second most important. In Belgium, it is rated third most important.
- The results indicate quite varying opinions as regards PO4. In Belgium, PO4 comes in second after PO2. PO4 is rated somewhat lower in Germany and the Netherlands and significantly lower in the Scandinavian countries.
- Similarly, PO3 is rated differently across the countries. The strongest support for PO3 is seen in Sweden and the Netherlands.
- German respondents rate PO5 significantly higher than respondents in other countries.

However, as the number of respondents is limited (especially for the Scandinavian countries), these figures come with some uncertainty and should be merely seen as indications of possible patterns.



4.1.4 Conclusions on thematic focus

There is very clear support for **PO2 (a greener Europe)** as the single most important policy objective. In this PO, the stakeholders find the following specific objectives to be most relevant: SO (vi), promoting the transition to a circular economy and SO (vii), enhancing biodiversity, green infrastructure in the urban environment, and reducing pollution.

Summarising all topics-related questions, and looking at topics linked to this PO, stakeholders find the following most important: Climate mitigation, climate adaptation, green and circular economy, blue economy, green energy transition, renewable energy, green transport, low-carbon technology, and biodiversity.

PO1 (a smarter Europe) comes in second and also takes a very high priority. In this PO, the most important specific objectives are SO (i), enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies and SO (ii), reaping the benefits of digitisation for citizens, companies, and governments.

As for topics relating to this PO, stakeholders rank the following as the most important: Innovation, digital transformation, green energy, circular economy, skills development, low-carbon technology, and climate change. Evidently, PO1 and PO2 are strongly interlinked in the eyes of the respondents.

PO3 (a more connected Europe) received significantly less support than PO1 and PO2 but is still backed by a large proportion of stakeholders. In this PO, stakeholders rate the following specific objectives as the most important: SO (iv), promoting sustainable multimodal urban mobility, and SO (iii), developing sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent, and intermodal national, regional, and local mobility, including improved access to TEN-T and cross-border mobility.

With regards to topics, the following rank highest: Green transport, smart transport, digital connectivity, modal change, maritime transport, and rural transport.

Stakeholders in Sweden and the Netherlands are more supportive of PO3 compared to stakeholders in other countries.

PO4 (a more social Europe) received a rating slightly higher than PO3. In this PO, stakeholders rate the following specific objectives as the most important: (iv), ensuring equal access to healthcare and fostering resilience of health systems, and SO (ii), improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning through developing infrastructure, including by fostering resilience for distance and on-line education and training.

Regarding topics, the following rank highest: Education, public health, skills development, inclusion, and digital transformation.

PO4 has a significantly higher support from stakeholders in Belgium compared to stakeholders elsewhere in the region. In Belgium, PO4 ranks as the second most important PO after PO2.

PO5 (a Europe closer to citizens) received the lowest score, but not far behind PO3 and PO4. In this PO, there are only two specific objectives to choose from. Stakeholders found SO (ii) most important:

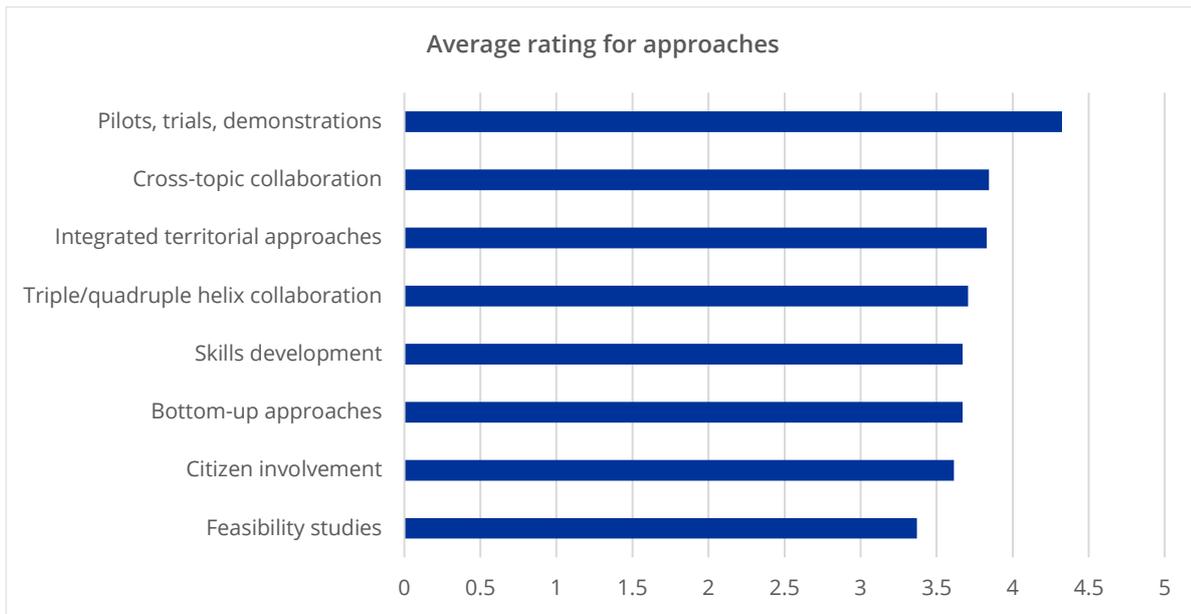
Fostering the integrated social, economic, and environmental local development, cultural heritage, and security, including for rural and coastal areas also through community-led local development.

The following topics rank highest: Rural, citizen engagement, coastal, cultural heritage, liveability.

Support for PO5 is quite divided among countries, with significantly more stakeholders in Germany backing this PO compared to stakeholders elsewhere in the region.

4.2 Project approaches and project design

The responses show a preference for targeted projects that have tangible results. In terms of approaches, pilots, trials, and demonstrations clearly receive the highest average rating (4,33 on a scale from 1 to 5) from the respondents. Then there are multiple approaches (cross-topic collaboration, integrated territorial approaches, bottom-up approaches, triple/quadruple helix collaboration, skills development and citizen involvement) that have received a similar rating between 3,61 and 3,85. Feasibility studies seem to be least popular, receiving an average rating of only 3,37.



The need to increase capacity to turn innovation into economic action and embed project results in a long term strategy was identified by multiple respondents. To achieve this, there is a need to work together in new structures (cross-topic, cross-sector, and cross-discipline) and with new partners (more involvement of, for example, SMEs and citizens). Additionally, respondents point towards the importance of an effective communication and dissemination strategy to capitalise on results. Also increased cooperation with other projects and Interreg programmes is mentioned in this regard.

Several respondents explicitly call for more flexibility offered by the Programme regarding approaches and methodologies. Room for experimentation could include support for new and innovative approaches used in projects, which in turn could benefit project results. Moreover, it is being stated by respondents that projects should be more result driven and should focus less on the process and project administration along the way.

4.2.1 Project duration

With regard to the preferred duration of projects, the opinions are divided. Some respondents would favour a duration of 2-3 years, while others prefer a longer project duration of up to 5-6 years. Additionally, the potential for a project start-up phase which is facilitated by the programme is highlighted.

In terms of project duration, flexibility seems to be key. A lot of respondents would like to be able to extend and redesign their project after the first stage of implementation. For example, one respondent argues for a standard project duration of three years, with a possibility for two extensions that both add two years to the project lifetime. Modular projects or projects with different 'chapters', in which different groupings of project partners participate, are also mentioned.

4.2.2 Partnership

Overall, there is a clear preference for smaller partnerships which would be easier to manage. Multiple respondents argue for a maximum partnership size of between 6 and 15 partners. It is often highlighted that bigger partnerships do not necessarily achieve better results, and that smaller partnerships should be rated just as valuable by the programme.

It is also often mentioned that the diversity in project partners should be enlarged. In terms of what types of project partners should be attracted, new/unexperienced organisations, national authorities, SMEs, large companies, interest groups and PhD students are mentioned. Stakeholders express that the programme should be more accessible for these partners, also in terms of reducing the administrative burden. One respondent suggests a mentorship system, and also programme events and courses are mentioned in this regard. Lastly, one respondent would like to include observer partners without a budget in a more formalised way in future projects.

4.2.3 Budget and finances

The favoured total budget for projects ranges between 3 and 15 million euro, with a slight preference for the larger budgets, which would facilitate larger scale demonstration projects. Six respondents added comments that argue for a higher funding rate, of which two specifically focus on universities and research institutes. Overall, the call for simplifying financial project administration is clear among the answers provided.

4.2.4 Geographic coverage

There is quite a strong call for more flexibility regarding the geographic coverage of the projects. One suggestion is that a minimum involvement of only two member countries should be sufficient, while multiple other respondents argue that it should be easier to include partners from outside the programme area. In addition, it is suggested to simplify the 20% rule regarding budget spent outside the programme area for beneficiaries from member countries that work on a national level but are located in provinces outside the programme area.

4.3 Project administration

4.3.1 Two-step application

One of the questions was: "If the programme continues using a two-step application process, how could it be improved?" There were 105 responses to this question.

The responses included a broad range of opinions and suggestions. By far, the most frequent suggestions were to **shorten the overall process** (40% of respondents) and to **ease the process** through **better guidance** and/or **simplification** (36%).

To ease the application process, several comments suggested that more guidance and feedback could be provided at step 1 or both steps. Simplification proposals related mainly to step 1. Several commenters found step 1 too demanding and suggested it should be kept simpler. For example, the requirement to include a budget at step 1 means that the detailed activities must be worked out at this stage. Some suggested simplifying the application forms, and one stakeholder asked for alignment of forms between programmes.

To shorten the process, several asked for faster feedback on applications and specifically suggested shortening the period in between step 1 and 2.

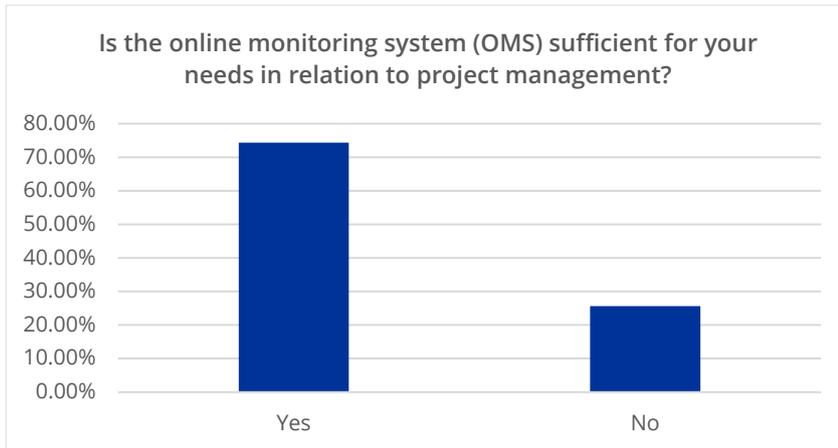
Several respondents generally felt the process could be handled in a **smarter, more agile** way with **less bureaucracy** involved.

A couple of comments were concerned with language barriers: One person suggested that feedback on step 1 applications should be conveyed in local language. Another suggested the programme to provide an automated translation service such as [deepl.com](https://www.deepl.com).

Although the question did not ask participants to evaluate the two-step application process as such, 16 respondents explicitly stated that they were happy with it, while 3 urged for a one-step system. One stakeholder suggested a less calls-focused, more continuous application system. Others asked for two calls a year.

4.3.2 The Online Monitoring System (OMS)

Respondents were asked if the OMS was sufficient for their needs in relation to project management. A majority of 74% found the OMS sufficient for their needs, while 26% did not.



Based on 187 responses

Most comments on why the OMS is not sufficient for some of the respondent's needs relate to a **high level of complexity**, which makes it difficult to find certain functions and efficiently process project administration. A number of respondents call for **less functionalities** and **more intuitive navigation**. Four respondents indicate that it would be easier for them if the monitoring systems of **different Interreg programmes were harmonised**. In addition, the **speed** of the OMS is clearly an aspect that should be improved upon in the next Programme period.

In terms of additional functionalities, some respondents would like to be able to analyse financial data and create statistics, for example on the spending level of the project and separate beneficiaries. Also, the messages module and document centre should be improved by adding more functionalities, for example by making it possible to file messages and documents in folders.

Multiple respondents highlight that the OMS is not necessarily used as an internal project management tool, and it does not need to have this function in the future, as there are numerous extensive and useful tools for this available for project managers.

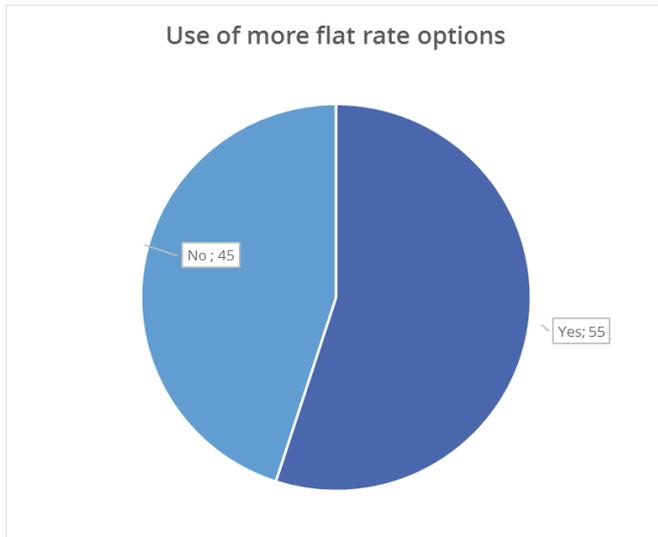
Regarding the different types of user accounts and user rights, it would be helpful for project managing users to have a better overview of which roles are assigned to whom for the different beneficiaries and have more insight in the status of the different Authorised Signatory and first level control designation processes. In general, respondents find that these designation processes could be more streamlined, especially when it comes to the paper document that currently needs to be send to the Joint Secretariat to assign an Authorised Signatory, which is something that should be discarded for the next programme period according to some respondents. Additionally, some respondents that have different roles in different projects call for a clear separation of these roles in their user accounts.

In relation to the reporting module, some respondents highlight a high level of repetition in the qualitative sections in the progress reports, which creates an extra burden for both beneficiaries and the project manager. Additionally, the connection between the beneficiary and project level progress reports could be streamlined, as it is often not needed that beneficiaries fill in all sections of the report and it costs a lot of time for the project manager to compile all information provided by the partners. Lastly, two respondents indicate they would prefer monitoring visits to (partly) replace the reports.

4.3.3 Flat Rate

Introducing more flat rates in the new programme

There were 202 responses to this question. Just over half (55%) supported the proposal of having more flat rate options e.g. for travel and accommodation. Just under half of the respondents (45%) were not in favour of using more flat rates options.



The majority of respondents that were in favour of additional flat rate options considered them a means to further simplify the financial set-up and reduce the administrative burden for projects. They also reflected that additional flat rate options would help to create more common ground/rules which would be applied to all project beneficiaries. Some respondents also noted that if additional flat rates were instigated, they should be high enough to cover costs for all organisations such as universities. Others remarked that flat rates were simpler but might not cover the different needs of the project beneficiaries.

Those respondents not in favour of including more flat rate options thought that the existing system worked well and saw no need for change.

Introducing a flat rate for travel and accommodation

A large majority of respondents that answered to this question referred to the example of a flat rate for travel and accommodation. The majority of these comments veered on the side of caution. They considered that the travel and accommodation costs from country to country were simply too varied to make it a practical option. For example, a hotel room in some regions in the Netherlands would cost less than in Scandinavia or flying from a regional airport in Norway with several stop-overs compared to flying from a major hub such as Schiphol. A number of the respondents favoured a set-up for travel and accommodation based on real costs (and as cheap as possible) because they felt it left more budget for content related activity.

It should be noted that many of the respondents that referred to and supported a flat rate for travel and accommodation also added supplementary comments. For example, they supported the idea in theory but in practice it depended on the actual flat rate itself. They also thought there should be some sort of

compensation or consideration for projects with partners located in remote or more expensive destinations or reimbursement on a need-to-travel basis only.

A small proportion of respondents (in both for and against the flat rate for travel and accommodation comments) supported the idea of reducing travel/promoting more sustainable travel and increased use of online meetings. For example, only reimbursing costs for sustainable travel and accommodation and only reimbursing a journey when it is absolutely necessary.

4.4 Role of National Contact Points (NCPs)

There were 118 responses to this question.

The majority of respondents considered that NCPs had a crucial role to play during each stage of the project lifecycle, i.e. project development, project delivery, and closure. There was a particular emphasis on NCP support during project development in terms of helping with partner search and finding new partners and especially in identifying and attracting new stakeholders (as partners). Some respondents noted the importance of NCPs role in identifying overlaps between different project ideas and - where possible - proactively work to merge them or helping them to become distinct from one another.

A lot of respondents would like to have more regular contact and meetings with the NCPs, especially using online applications and digital communications. Examples of potential online meetings/meet-ups included: workshops about project management/dealing with partnership conflict, thematic exchanges, and general project to project exchanges.

A number of respondents viewed NCPs as 'connectors' who were in a good position to facilitate cooperation and information flow between the European Commission, national and regional authorities, experts and the Joint Secretariat. Respondents reflected that NCPs were ambassadors for local projects and thought they had an important role to play in showcasing and sharing good news stories and project results at national and regional level.

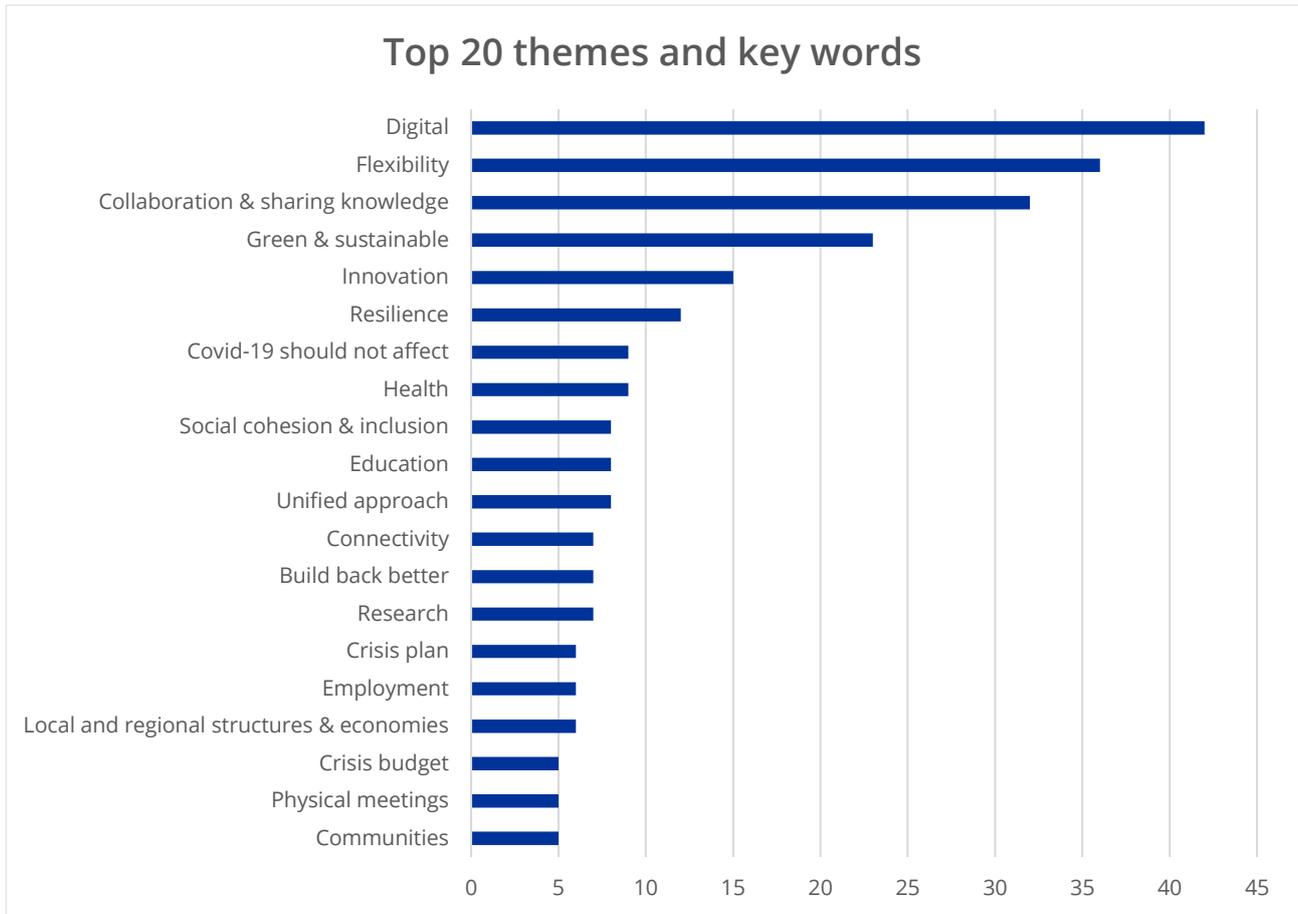
Several respondents noted that they were happy with their NCP and the level of support they provided in their respective country.

4.5 Addressing crises

One of the survey questions was: How can the programme most effectively deal with the repercussions of crises such as the Covid-19 crisis?

This question received 173 responses. The question was open-ended and there is a substantial variation in the responses. The inputs were categorised into over 50 themes, many of which were mentioned only once while some were overlapping.

The graphic below shows the top 20 themes identified by the respondents.



The most mentioned key word / theme, **digital**, refers to both internal use of digital tools and to digital transition as a topic to be supported by the programme, e.g. e-export and remote work and learning. The programme is asked to arrange trainings on hosting online events and meetings and to invest in online meeting facilities that meet the security standards of all partners. Furthermore, digital technologies were seen as a means to increase resilience in times of crisis. However, 5 respondents highlighted the need for continuing physical meetings and finding a balance between the digital and physical meetings.

Many hoped for **flexibility** in the design and implementation of the programme. More specifically, stakeholders asked for the possibility to extend projects and allow more changes to project activities and outcomes. In addition, some respondents expressed their hope for a more agile approach to the application procedure and that the new programme would be established fast, to avoid a gap between projects.

Collaboration and sharing knowledge were mentioned on different levels: project level, regional level, and European level. Many suggested that the programme would use digital tools to foster knowledge sharing. The importance of sharing experiences, setbacks, best practices, and lessons learnt was highlighted. Some called for a **unified approach** in times of crisis, meaning common rules and policies between programmes or on the European level.

Several respondents emphasised that the programme should continue supporting **sustainability and green investments** as means to foster economic recovery. The topics mentioned included green infrastructure, biodiversity, climate resilience, climate adaptation, green transport, and green energy.

Build back better refers to not trying to save all the suffered businesses but rather supporting building new green and sustainable businesses. Moreover, **resilience** was mentioned by many respondents, either as such, or in specific areas: environmental resilience, resilient labour market structures, resilient communities, technical resilience, resilient food supply chains, and resilient local and regional economies.

Supporting **innovations** overall and in *SMEs* and small *communities* was emphasized by a number of respondents. Furthermore, fostering transition of innovative technologies into business and the importance of cross-sectoral project partnerships were mentioned. Supporting **employment** through investments, especially **locally and regionally**, was also mentioned by several respondents.

A small number of respondents thought that **Covid-19 should not affect** the programme. Instead, they hoped that the programme would continue as before and focus on long-term goals instead of short-term crises.

On the other hand, some respondents suggested creating a **crisis management plan**, either within the programme or on a European level. Some also suggested establishing a **crisis budget** for crisis projects or ad hoc projects, similarly to the UIA and Horizon 2020.

Finally, some respondents suggested supporting the **health** sector and health innovation, especially preventively.

4.6 Other reflections

In total, 62 respondents took the opportunity to provide their final reflections. As per the open nature of this final comment field, the reflections are a mixed collection of comments, greetings, and thoughtful remarks including several constructive suggestions not found elsewhere in the survey.

This report will conclude by giving space to some of the stakeholders' own voices:

Reflections on themes, scope, and types of projects

"Support more the small and mid-sized towns: a higher percentage of funding, more additional support of the national contact points, ..."

"It seems as if secondary vocational education / VET is poorly represented in Interreg, although we can see that it is increasingly playing a crucial role in the innovations towards a new and sustainable Europe."

"Common sense solutions should receive just as much attention as technological solutions. Also, implementing existing effective solutions should be viewed just as positively as new solutions. One should not have to be forced to innovate just for the sake of innovation [...]."

"The current programme gives very little possibilities for cycling and walking projects, since proposals are evaluated against their CO₂ reduction potential [...] This does not reflect the potential of cycling and walking for society, which is more than only CO₂ reduction (health, economy, well-being, noise, ...)"

Reflections on administration

"As change happens ever faster, how can bureaucracies adapt?"

"More guidance and clear-cut deadlines are needed. It can be difficult to keep momentum for project interest if there is a constant pushing of deadlines e.g. the last call of the now existing programme period."

"Interreg demands innovation from projects. But Interreg itself acts like 15 years ago, structures, products (projects, procedures etc.) are old-fashioned. Should be modernised according to modern demands. Other Programmes (IUC, H2020) are much more attractive because of demand driven forms, activities."

Reflections on funding and financial issues

"Greater freedom should be given to move funds between budget lines to reflect the uncertain nature of pilot projects, research etc."

"50% funding is not very attractive, H2020 (or Horizon Europe) are much more attractive for us."

"NSR needs to increase co-financing from 50% to 60, 70 or 75% in order to better support projects ideas and to be suitable as a programme for funding."

"At the moment it is difficult for small companies that are not classified as an SME to join the project. Also, big companies who are willing to contribute are not easily able to do so. Would it be possible to get more funding than the 50% cost contribution for some partners? It would be helpful, especially for the SMEs."

"A Seed Money call to bridge the gap between the two programmes and better prepare future projects would be helpful."

Reflections on target groups

"Stop focussing exclusively on SMEs but look at all companies. You will need them all. It will be the big companies who will be at the forefront of economic transition. Or as our smaller companies put it: "take care of the big ones, they are the ones who are giving us contracts."

"INTERREG is one way to show people that cooperation between the countries leads to more success than working alone. It is important to involve people in projects that have no previous connection to the EU."

Reflections on the survey itself

"Thanks for the opportunity to share thoughts"

"Great survey, very useful"

"The survey is not ideal because many questions could be answered/perceived as very important."

"Very good this! Do hope there will be a relevant new programme with the right and spot-on themes in it!"

"I hope this input is perceived useful. This is my contribution to improving the programme"

Reflections on the programme/Joint Secretariat

"A great programme, great support from JS. Keep going and let's make the new programme even more inspiring and effective!"

"JS is open and approachable. Cooperation runs smoothly, pragmatic. Please, keep up the good work!"

"Keep up the good work, NSR is one of the nicest grant programs to work with, please keep it as informal and accessible as it has been the past programme period!"

"I think the secretariat is doing a good job. I would like to underline the importance of the secretariat will continue to develop the academic skills with the chosen programme themes. Topics like climate change, water resources, adaptation and mitigation requires a skilled management team with knowledge on the topics you support. Please continue to improve the internal knowledge."