Evaluation of Interreg Europe Programme

Lot 1: Operational evaluation, including communication

Lot 2: Impact evaluation

Final Report

03 March 2026

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviations and Acronyms	Complete name
CBC	Cross-border cooperation
EEIG	European Economic Interest Group
EGTC	European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EU	European Union
MA	Managing authority
MC	Monitoring committee
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
JS	Joint secretariat
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
PoC	Point of contact
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
ToC	Theory of Change

Executive summary

Objectives and scope of the evaluations

The Interreg Europe Programme supports interregional cooperation to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion across Europe. With a total budget of EUR **394.5 million**, the **2021–2027 Programme** focuses on improving regional development policies by enabling public authorities and non-profit bodies to exchange experiences and good practices. It operates through **two core components**: **EU-funded interregional cooperation projects** and the **Policy Learning Platform** offering continuous learning services. In line with EU regulatory requirements, two intermediate evaluations, **operational (Lot 1, focusing on governance, management structures and communication performance) and impact (Lot 2, examining progress toward objectives and wider territorial effects, which will be updated in 2028)**, have been undertaken to assess effectiveness, monitor progress toward strategic goals, identify challenges and provide recommendations for both the remainder of the programming period and post-2027 design. The evaluation scope spans all **36 participating Partner States**, covering activities from 2021 onward and incorporating new candidate countries joining in 2024.

Evaluation methodology

A mixed-methods approach was applied, involving **desk research**, **in-depth stakeholder interviews**, **multiple surveys** targeting project partners, Monitoring Committee members, and Policy Learning Platform users, as well as **two focus groups** on communication effectiveness. **Case studies** complemented the analysis by exploring project lifecycles, identifying enabling factors and tracing pathways from capacity building to policy impact. Together, these methods ensured **robust triangulation and provided a comprehensive evidence base to assess the Programme's operational performance and impact**.

Lot 1: Operational evaluation – Main findings

The operational evaluation concludes that Interreg Europe's **programme management, steering, and communication functions operate effectively**, supported by clear governance documents, transparent decision-making, and strong day-to-day administration by the Joint Secretariat. **Roles and responsibilities are well defined and broadly understood**, and stakeholders consistently report high responsiveness and professionalism. Two minor weaknesses were noted: uneven engagement of Points of Contact across countries, and occasional shifts of Monitoring Committee discussions toward operational detail due to its size and diversity. **Support to projects is similarly effective**. Beneficiaries value the clarity of rules, quality of guidance, transparency of assessment procedures, and reliability of reporting and payment systems. Challenges relate mainly to structural constraints (such as pre-financing needs, national control delays, administrative burden, specific eligibility questions, and contextual budget limitations in high-cost regions). Digital tools are robust, though some user-experience improvements (navigation, document uploads, character limits) would be beneficial.

The **Policy Learning Platform (the Platform) is perceived as well organised, with clear roles, strong operational processes, and high satisfaction with its services**. Its adaptability enables it to respond quickly to emerging needs. However, the Platform has strong potential to expand engagement to actors beyond those already involved with the Programme.

Communication activities are considered effective, **benefiting from standardised tools, templates, and strong Joint Secretariat support**. Social media, events, and project webpages are viewed as the most impactful channels for disseminating project achievements. Still, a number of targeted improvements were identified, including addressing webpage usability constraints, clarifying criteria for featuring project content, and strengthening support for social-media-oriented communication.

Lot 1: Operational evaluation – Recommendations

Task 1.1	**Recommendation #1.** Improve visibility of the Points' of Contact intermediary support role to beneficiaries.
Task 1.2	**Recommendation #2.** Reinforce the existing support system by further tailoring assistance and greater visibility
(Project-related)	**Recommendation #3.** Mitigate administrative and financial constraints within the existing framework

Task 1.2 ***(Platform-related)***	**Recommendation #4.** Optimise user interaction with electronic tools by consolidating guidance and feedback mechanisms
	Recommendation #5. Monitor Platform performance in a single structured tool or database
	Recommendation #6. Extend access to Platform services to broader user profiles
Task 1.3	**Recommendation #7.** Consider providing optional social media training and support for project partners
	Recommendation #8. Enhance project webpage flexibility (while preserving branding consistency)
	Recommendation #9. Clarify how project content is selected for website/ newsletter featuring

Lot 2: Impact evaluation – Main findings

The impact evaluation highlights that Interreg Europe delivers **clear added value to EU Cohesion Policy thanks to its pan-European reach, focus on capacity building, and strong policy orientation**. Its distinctive model enables policy actors to strengthen skills and knowledge in ways national programmes cannot, leading to measurable policy improvements.

Progress toward objectives is strongest where project themes align with policy priorities, peer learning formats are practical and immersive, and organisations have sufficient capacity. Barriers to impact are generally external (e.g., institutional complexity) rather than programme-related.

Capacity building is a major strength. Both projects and the Platform improve individual capabilities and organisational readiness for policy change, although full effects depend on time, relevance and resources. **The Programme also contributes to territorial cohesion**, with broadly balanced participation across regions and slightly higher learning gains in less developed areas. Targeted refinements (e.g., better visibility of results) rather than structural changes were suggested, reflecting overall high satisfaction and strong performance.

Lot 2: Impact evaluation – Recommendations

Programme level	**Recommendation #1.** Provide more guidance on Interreg Europe's strong potential for complementarity with other EU programmes and instruments
	Recommendation #2. Systematic offer for beneficiaries to engage in Platform services post-project
	Recommendation #3. Systematise onboarding on the intervention logic to clarify expected outcomes and the learning to policy pathway
Project level	**Recommendation #4.** Provide targeted guidance and support to help projects make informed choices about optional features, particularly pilot actions
	Recommendation #5. Strengthen awareness of resource implications linked to policy improvements
Platform level	**Recommendation #6.** Consolidate and scale follow-up to peer reviews to maximise policy impact
	Recommendation #7. Strengthen the strategic use and complementarity of other Platform services
	Recommendation #8. Improve evidence on the impact of knowledge-based services ("Access to Knowledge" pillar) through light-touch monitoring

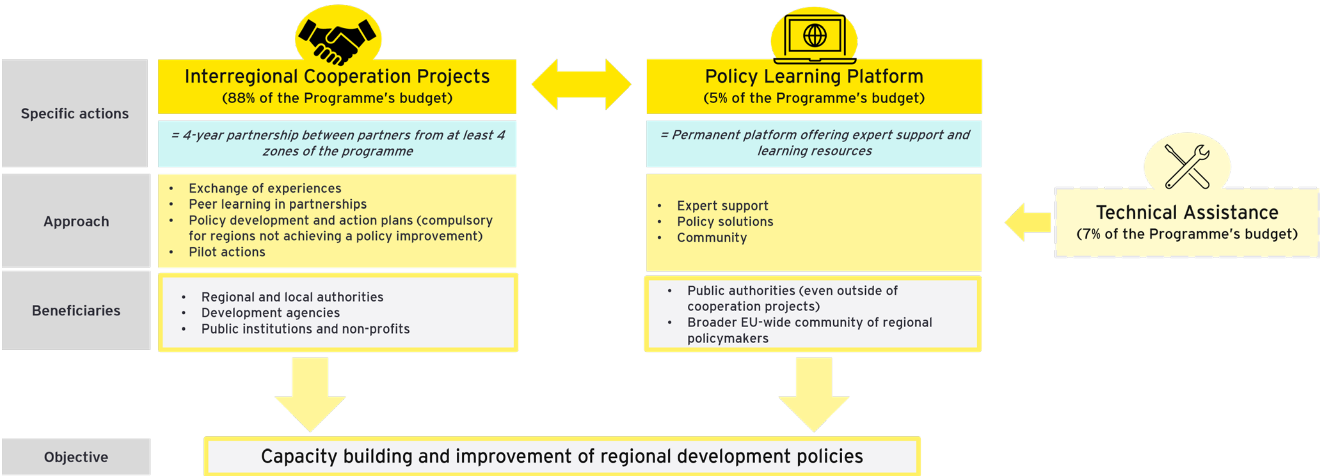
1. Background & context

The Interreg Europe Programme: an instrument of EU Cohesion Policy

The Interreg Programmes, launched in 1990, aim to promote cross-border, transnational and interregional) cooperation and foster balanced development throughout Europe. Specifically, the **Interreg Europe Programme** (Interreg IIIC, then Interreg IVC and finally “Interreg Europe”) was introduced in the 2000-2006 period to further enhance regional development through interregional cooperation, serving as a central component under Strand C (“Interregional Cooperation”) of the **EU cohesion policy**. Interreg Europe operates under the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Regulation (EU) 2021/1059), contributing to the EU’s overarching objective of economic, social, and territorial cohesion as laid out in Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (“TFEU”).

The 2021-2027 Interreg Europe Programme continues this mission with the single objective of fostering ‘better cooperation governance’ through engagement with national, regional or local public authorities, institutions governed by public law, and private non-profit bodies. In this context, the Programme focuses on capacity building through the exchange of experiences and good practices across all priorities of EU cohesion policy to strengthen policy actors’ implementation of their development policies and deepen their territorial impact.[1] This is done in two ways (presented in Figure 1 below): i) the provision of EU co-financing for **interregional cooperation projects**; and ii) offering a suite of policy learning services through its **Policy Learning Platform (“the Platform”)**.

Figure 1 Components of the Interreg Europe Programme



Source: Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Programme Manual, Version 5, June 2025.

The Programme is financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)[2]. These are jointly referred to as “Interreg funds”. The budget for the Programme is **EUR 394.5 million** and is allocated as follows:

- EUR 347.6 million to co-finance interregional cooperation projects undertaken by partnerships (minimum of 4) of public authorities and other organisations (88.1%)
- EUR 17.7 million to finance activities carried out by the Policy Learning Platform (or “the Platform”) (4.5%)
- EUR 29.2 million for technical assistance (7.4%).

Eligible partners for interregional cooperation projects are divided into three categories: i) public authorities (national, regional, or local authorities), which represent the core target group of the Programme; ii) public law

[1] Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Cooperation Programme document (p.15).
[2] Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Programme Manual, Version 5, June 2025.

bodies or bodies governed by public law;[3] and iii) private non-profit bodies.[4] Public bodies and bodies governed by public law are entitled to a co-financing rate of 80% from Interreg funds for their cooperation projects, while private non-profit bodies are entitled to a co-financing rate of 70%.[5] **Partners from Norway and Switzerland are not entitled to Interreg funding**, and must finance their participation in cooperation projects via national sources. More information on the current state of play of the Programme is available in Annex 3.

1.1 Objectives of the evaluation

In accordance with Article 35 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 (the "Interreg Regulation"), which requires evaluations to be conducted during the Programme's lifetime, the Interreg Europe monitoring committee has decided to carry out two intermediate evaluations in the second half of 2025: an operational evaluation (including on Programme communication) and an impact evaluation.

The evaluations are based on the evaluation plan that has been developed by the managing authority (MA) with the joint secretariat, in compliance with the Common Provision Regulation (Regulation (EC) N°2021/1060)[6]. The evaluation plan defines the evaluation questions, indicators, data sources and methods to be used as a framework to conduct the operational and impact evaluations of Interreg Europe.

The main objectives of these evaluations are to:

- Assess the **effectiveness** of the Programme and its implementation structures in achieving the Programme's strategic objectives.
- **Measure the progress** made since the Programme's launch in delivering its intended outputs and results. The evaluation also enables to assess whether the Programme’s strategy and underlying rationale remain consistent with its original objectives, ensuring that activities continue to address real needs and generate coherent and meaningful results.
- **Identify any deviations**, challenges, or limitations in Programme design, performance, or delivery mechanisms.
- Provide concrete, **forward-looking recommendations** to enhance implementation for the remainder of the programming period and prepare the development of the post-2027 Programme (2028-2034).

More precisely, the specific objective of the **Lot 1 operational evaluation** is to evaluate the extent to which the Programme governance and management structures (including the managing authority, joint secretariat, and monitoring committee) support effective implementation with a view to helping improve effectiveness in delivering the Programme. The operational evaluation also included an assessment of the effectiveness of the Programme’s communication strategy and key activities in achieving the communication indicators.

The specific objective of the **Lot 2 impact evaluation** is to assess progress towards the Programme’s objectives, to check and showcase Programme achievements, and provide lessons learned for the remaining programming period.

The key steps of the evaluation are summarised in Annex 4.

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[3] The definition of “public law bodies” in this instance refers to those complying with the following criteria set out in Article 2.4 of Directive 2014/24/EU: a) they are established for the specific purpose of meeting needs in the general interest, not having an industrial or commercial character; b) they have legal personality; and c) they are financed, for the most part, by the State, regional, or local authorities, or by other bodies governed by public law; or are subject to management supervision by those authorities or bodies; or have an administrative, managerial, or supervisory board, more than half of whose members are appointed by the State, regional, or local authorities, or by other bodies governed by public law; […]. See Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Programme Manual, Version 5, June 2025.

[4] Private non-profit bodies must comply with the following criteria: a) they do not have an industrial or commercial character; b) they have a legal personality; c) they are not financed, for the most part, by the state, regional, or local authorities, or other bodies governed by public law; or are not subject to management supervision by those bodies; or not having an administrative, managerial, or supervisory board, more than half of whose members are appointed by the State, regional, or local authorities, or by other bodies governed by public law. See Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Programme Manual, Version 5, June 2025.

[5] Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Programme Manual, Version 5, June 2025.

[6] https://interreg-euro-med.eu/wp-content/uploads/documents/published/en/Programme-documents/Programme-documents/evaluation-plan/interreg_euro-med_evaluation_plan_21-27_en.pdf.

1.2 Scope of the evaluation

The scope of the evaluation is defined along three dimensions: temporal, institutional, and geographic.

Temporal: The impact evaluation and operational evaluation (including the communication) of the 2021-2027 Interreg Europe Programme focus on 29 countries **covered from 2021**, and the 7 candidates – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine – from their arrival in 2024.

Geographic: the evaluations cover the whole Programme area (i.e. 36 Partner States: 27 EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Moldova, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Ukraine) and all activities implemented since the beginning of the programming period 2021-2027.

Institutional: in addition to the Managing Authority and the Joint Secretariat, other relevant stakeholders, such as the Monitoring Committee.

2. Evaluation Methodology

2.1 Overall approach

Both evaluations adopt a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure robust, evidence-based conclusions. Key steps of the evaluation and evaluation matrices are available in Annex 4 and Annex 5.

Lot 1 – Operational evaluation

Focused on implementation effectiveness, Lot 1 combines **desk review** with **in-depth interviews** with Programme participants to capture perceptions of Programme delivery. Specific to Lot 1, additional qualitative insights were gathered through specific **focus group discussions** exploring user experiences with the Programme's communication strategy and tools. An **online survey** provided both qualitative and quantitative self-reported data perceptions and experiences with the Programme, complementing preliminary findings and adding further nuance.

Lot 2 – Impact evaluation

Lot 2 seeks to assess causal effects and added value, using a theory-based approach grounded in a **Theory of Change (ToC)** framework. This framework examines causal pathways and underlying assumptions, explaining how and why changes occur. Data collection for Lot 2 combines **desk review**, **in-depth interviews**, and an **online survey** which together provide a strong evidence base to map Programme objectives and outputs against the ToC, analyse perceived impacts and mechanisms of change, and provide broader quantitative data (from the survey) to validate patterns and triangulate findings. In addition, **case studies** were used to illustrate tangible results at the project level, adding depth and nuance to the overall analysis.

2.2 Methods and tools

Document review and analysis

Following the preliminary desk review initiated during the inception phase, the evaluation team continued its thorough and systematic review of Programme documentation. This desk research has provided the foundation for the evaluation and enabled us to identify key issues and areas of focus that need further exploration through primary data collection. The documents were systematically analysed against the evaluation questions, which facilitated triangulation. The inventory of documentation analysed is available in Annex 7.

In-depth interviews with key stakeholders

The evaluation team has conducted **58 in-depth interviews** with strategic stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Programme, covering both Lots whenever relevant. In particular, they were conducted with the Managing Authority (1), the Joint Secretariat (5), Platform's Thematic Experts (3), Monitoring

Committee and / or Points of Contact members (21)[7], and Beneficiaries (28). Interview guides are available in Annex 6.

Surveys

As planned in the evaluation plan and the inception report, the evaluation team designed **two surveys for project partners and Monitoring Committee members** with the aim of gathering data on their satisfaction with project implementation and support received from Programme bodies during both the application phase, as well as during the duration of the project. The survey also provides insights on the Programme's emerging results for Lot 2 evaluation. They were distributed on November 12th to target groups through the Joint Secretariat. They were closed on December 5th.

In addition to the two main surveys, the evaluation team designed a **short public questionnaire for users of the Policy Learning Platform ("Platform")**, which was sent to the Joint Secretariat on October 30th and published on the programme's website. This questionnaire aimed to gather data on users' satisfaction with the Platform, its activities and the support received. They were closed on December 5th.

Focus Groups

The evaluation team gathered additional qualitative insights through **two focus group discussions** exploring user experiences with the Programme's communication strategy and tools (Lot 1), targeting the following programme participants:

- **Beneficiaries of Interreg Europe cooperation projects** (Focus Group 1, held on December 9, 2025), to collect information and feedback on how the Programme communicate its activities and results, as well as how it supports beneficiaries' communication efforts.
- **Selected points of contact** (Focus Group 2, held on December 17, 2025), to gather their perspectives as key actors in disseminating information, supporting beneficiaries, and ensuring national-level visibility of the Programme.

Focus Group interview guides are available in Annex 6.

Case studies

In conclusion, the evaluation team conducted **eight case studies covering seven selected projects from Call 1 and one peer review**, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of project lifecycles and performance, identifying challenges and enabling factors, and tracing links from capacity building to policy improvement and, ultimately, territorial effects (Lot 2). The case studies were developed through triangulation of evidence collected via desk review, surveys, and additional interviews. In this context, 20 additional interviews were conducted with beneficiaries (18) and peer reviewers (2). These case studies are available in Annex 1.

2.3 Limitations and constraints of the evaluation

During the evaluation, some operational limitations were encountered:

Limitation	Mitigation measures
In a number of cases, the stakeholders identified for data collection activities (in-depth interviews, case studies' additional interviews, focus groups) were not readily available, which created challenges in scheduling and conducting data collection activities.	To mitigate this issue, the evaluation team at the Joint Secretariat provided active support in facilitating contact with the relevant stakeholders, thereby helping to ensure an adequate coverage of perspectives for the purposes of the analysis.
Respondents to the Platform user survey and project beneficiaries survey may not fully represent the broader	To mitigate this issue, efforts were made to broaden outreach and diversify participation, including the use of multiple communication channels (Platform, email), and extensions of

[7] The Evaluation Team initially planned 22 interviews with Monitoring Committee members. However, due to the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the Ukrainian representatives were forced to decline the invitation for an interview.

user population, which can introduce bias in the findings and limit the generalisability of conclusions.	survey closure deadlines. These measures helped ensure a high number of respondents and strengthened the reliability of the analysis despite the risk of non-representativeness.

3. Main findings of the operational evaluation (Lot 1)

3.1 Task 1.1 - Programme management and steering

- **The roles and responsibilities of Programme bodies are clearly defined in formal documents and are widely understood by its participants to be clear and complementary, although a minority of Monitoring Committee members and beneficiaries noted some ambiguities regarding the role of the Point of Contact.**
- **Decision-making processes are transparent, characterised by clear procedures and high transparency of Joint Secretariat communication, and perceptions of Programme actors indicate that the Managing Authority/Joint Secretariat are adequately resourced for fulfilling their tasks.**
- **Programme management has been effective overall, characterised by timely communication and solid coordination by the Joint Secretariat. One minor weakness in steering effectiveness was found regarding the clarity of the Point of Contact role as an intermediary between beneficiaries and the Programme on Programme-related information.**

3.1.1 Do the Programme management system and related structures work in an effective way?

Are responsibilities of the Programme bodies clear and complementary?

The evaluation found the roles of the Programme's bodies (e.g. Managing Authority, Joint Secretariat, National or Regional Points of Contact) to be highly clear and complementary, with information clearly available in Programme documentation. A full visual overview of the Programme's functioning and roles of its bodies can be found in Annex 2 of this report. Programme-level roles and responsibilities are detailed in the **Management and Control System document** (MCSD) and annexes. First, the Programme's organisation and the relationship between its bodies is presented visually in Annexes 1 and 2 of the MSCD.[8] Second, the **Interreg Europe Programme Procedures** document (Annex 4 of the MSCD) lays out the key procedures and the bodies responsible at each step.[9] In addition, the **Monitoring Committee Rules of Procedure** explicitly describe the scope and nature of tasks and decision-making processes by the Monitoring Committee.[10] Lastly, the **Interreg Europe Programme Manual** describes in extensive detail the responsibilities of the Joint Secretariat vis-à-vis the Programme's beneficiaries. The Joint Secretariat carries out the day-to-day operational administration of the programme, for which details of the organisation and division of responsibilities for its specific roles (under three main units) can be found in the Interreg Europe Joint Secretariat profiles.[11]

Evidence collected from Members of the Monitoring Committee and Points of Contact demonstrates that Programme participants find these roles to be clear and complementary to one another. Out of 28 respondents to the survey, 27 found that the responsibilities of the Programme bodies to be either "very" (24) or "mostly" (3) clear, with only one respondent finding responsibilities to be "partially clear".[12] When asked about the

[8] Flowchart of the organisational relationship between the bodies involved in the management and control system, in Annex 2: Programme Management Structure, in Interreg Europe, Description of the management and control system (Version 2 – Oct. 2024).

[9] Interreg Europe Programme Procedures (October 2024), in Annex 4: Interreg Europe, Description of the management and control system (Version 2 – October 2024).

[10] Rule of Procedure of the 2021-2027 Interreg Europe monitoring committee (04 June 2024).

[11] Interreg Europe Joint Secretariat Profiles, in Annex 23: Description of the management and control system (Version 2 – Oct. 2024).

[12] Online survey question "How clear do you find the responsibilities of the Programme bodies (e.g. managing authority, joint secretariat, national or regional points of contact)?" Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contact (n=28). Closed question.

complementarity of responsibilities, survey respondents responded similarly, with 27 out of 28 selecting "very" (23) or "mostly" (4) complementary. Overall perceptions about the clarity and complementarity of roles were further confirmed through interviews with Monitoring Committee members and Points of Contact, who expressed that their role and those of the Joint Secretariat and Managing Authority to be largely clear to them. The programme documents (Programme Manual, Monitoring Committee Rules of Procedure) were also cited, demonstrating a solid understanding of where to find information on the responsibilities of each body. Moreover, the day-to-day visibility of the Joint Secretariat relative to the Managing Authority has been highlighted as being higher than for other Programmes, while still reflecting a functional division of labour that works in practice. **Key factors** to role clarity highlighted by interviewees included the **regularity of meetings**, **clear communication channels**, and **structured collaboration** with Monitoring Committee members and Points of Contact. With respect to the Joint Secretariat itself, both staff and Thematic Experts noted a high degree of role and decision-making clarity, as well as between the Joint Secretariat and Platform team, ensured through regular coordination and communication meetings

Box 1 Interview highlight on responsibilities between programme bodies

"We find that the responsibilities of the main programme bodies — the Managing Authority, the Joint Secretariat, and the Monitoring Committee — are generally well defined and complementary. Coordination between the MA, the Joint Secretariat and the Monitoring Committee is effective. Regular Monitoring Committee meetings, clear communication channels, and structured collaboration ensure that tasks are aligned, and decisions are implemented smoothly"

Source: Point of Contact interviewed

"There is a close collaboration combined with a clear distinction of responsibilities, especially regarding hierarchical decision-making at Joint Secretariat level. It is very clear who does what."

Source: Thematic Expert Interviewed

The clarity of the roles of the Points of Contact was also found to be mostly clear. Points of Contact act primarily as national or regional information and communication intermediaries and their responsibilities fall under the six activities agreed to by each Partner State to support Programme implementation.[13] Their role is to provide assistance during the preparation of applications, confirm the eligibility of potential partners, and disseminate official Programme information. They mostly organise info days, host Q&A sessions, offer individual support, and prepare materials in their national language. 21 out of 22 Points of Contact responding to the survey rated the clarity of their roles as "very" (15) or "mostly" (6) clear.[14] Further, feedback gathered from interviews with Points of Contact and Monitoring Committee members confirmed that in practice, their role is largely clear, and cited regular updates from the Secretariat and clear information as key factors in understanding their role.[15] Several Points of Contact during interviews and focus groups described regular bilateral meetings with the Joint Secretariat for tailored support on their role. However, it is worth noting the responses from some survey respondents that the Point of Contact role is broad in nature, and that their exact responsibilities, geographical scope, and financial resources can differ between countries and regions given the differing national contexts in which they operate.[16] At the same time, a small minority of beneficiaries expressed that they do not receive much direct communication from their Point of Contact or did not know who they were (see Task 1.3), suggesting they may be unclear about the scope of their role, particularly regarding technical Programme queries (typically handled by the Secretariat). Importantly, the Interreg Europe model for Points of Contact is intentionally flexible,

[13] The Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Cooperation Programme Document (page 33-34) states : "All Partner States agreed to support the programme's implementation with: 1) Checking the eligibility of partner status, based on the information provided and on the national legal framework; 2) Checking the relevance of the letter of support's signatory (if applicable and further specified in the programme manual); 3) Supplying national specific information; 4) Establishing a point of contact for potential applicants; 5) Disseminating programme information widely, including about the Platform's services; 6) Organising national/ regional events for information and dissemination, including promoting the Platform's services.

[14] Online survey question "Specifically, how would you rate the clarity of your role as a point of contact?" Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contact (n=22) Closed question.

[15] Documentary review found that briefings have been given to Points of Contact every year, which include presentations on topics ranging from general Programme information, key information on the Policy Learning Platform, event planning for the following year, and information regarding financing. Documentary review also confirms the regularity of Programme updates send by the Joint Secretariat to Points of Contact, counting 7 update emails in 2023, 16 in 2024, and 4 during the first half of 2025.

[16] Online survey question "Specifically, how would you rate the clarity of your role as a point of contact?" Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contact (n=5) Open question.

demand-driven, and adapted to national contexts; observed differences may therefore reflect these differences in national/regional context rather than gaps in the definition of their responsibilities.

Are decision-making processes clear and transparent?

Overall, decision-making processes were also found to be clear, transparent, and consistently applied. Documentary review found that the **formal rules and procedures for decision-making are clearly** described in Programme documentation. The Monitoring Committee Rules of Procedure clearly describe the process(es) and modalities by which decisions are made, including voting procedures, the thresholds required, and measures to be taken when a majority cannot be reached.[17] Decisions related to programme management and implementation and on projects are generally made by **consensus**, or by vote with a five-sixths (for programme management) and two-thirds (for projects) majority if consensus cannot be reached. The document also describes the tasks required of the Joint Secretariat to assist in the decision-making process, including the drafting of decisions made and clarifications to questions by members on project eligibility and quality assessments. Documentary review confirms the presence of decision notes following each bi-annual meeting of the Monitoring Committee up to December 2025, confirming a high degree of decision traceability.

Evidence gathered from Monitoring Committee members also shows the decision-making is **perceived to be** highly transparent, with 27 out of 28 survey respondents describing the Programme's decision-making processes as either "very" (24) or "mostly" (3) clear.[18] Interviews with Monitoring Committee members, Points of Contact and Joint Secretariat staff showed a similar picture. In particular, they highlighted two key factors that contributed to this practical clarity:

- **Proactive communication and timely provision of relevant supporting information in advance of meetings** (e.g. clear decision notes, explanatory notes, continuous updates) were noted by the majority of interviewees as important aspects of transparency. In particular, one member highlighted that while the Joint Secretariat responds promptly to questions, they do not rush decisions that need to be approved. Instead, they leave time for all Partner States to assess the issue, communicate it within the country, and reflect on a decision. This, in their view, strengthens transparency and ensures the full consideration of Partner States' views.
- Another interviewee appreciated **the practice of presenting several alternative proposals** (e.g., Plan A, B, C) when a decision needs to be made, rather than requesting validation of a single option, which was viewed as increasing the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the process.

However, **one respondent to the survey described processes as "not transparent nor clear"**, adding that they thought Monitoring Committee meetings focused too much on management details and not enough on the broader strategic issues of the Programme.[19] In their view, the issues that are not considered enough relate to evaluation matters, the priorities and thematic orientation of calls for projects, and questions related to the next Interreg Europe programming period (2028-2034).

Are MA/Joint Secretariat adequately resources for fulfilling their tasks?

All staff from the Joint Secretariat interviewed suggested the **resources available were largely sufficient to carry out their work,** while acknowledging some fluctuations in workload during certain periods over projects' lifecycle (i.e. the assessment of applications and project progress reports, annual events, and pilot action applications). However, when workload consistently increases, there is a commensurate reinforcement of human resources, notably through increasing the number of Thematic Experts and opening the position of Platform Thematic Manager when demand increased following the signature of the new framework agreement in 2023. Moreover, the increase in workload resulting from the accession of new Partner States led to a reinforcement of Joint Secretariat resources with the recruitment of two additional officers (1 finance officer

[17] Monitoring Committee rules of procedure, in Annex 7: Description of the management and control system (Version 2 – October 2024), pp. 5-7.

[18] Online survey question "In your view, how transparent and clear are the Programme's decision-making processes (e.g. strategic direction, programme management, project selection)?" MONITORING COMMITTEE members / Points of Contact (n=27) Closed question.

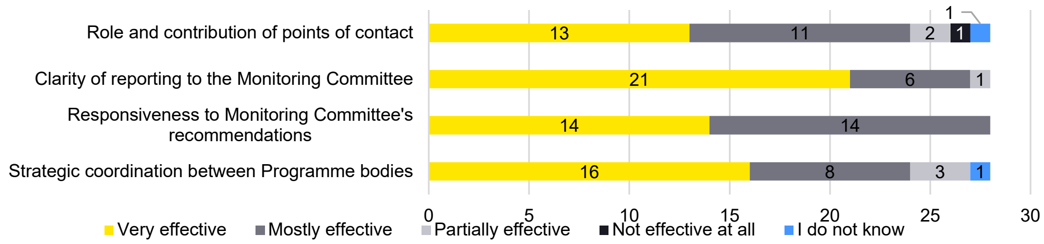
[19] Online survey question "Please specify any good practices you have noted regarding the decision-making processes" MONITORING COMMITTEE members / Points of Contact (n=14) Open question.

and 1 policy officer). These perceptions were confirmed during interviews with Monitoring Committee members, Points of Contact, and beneficiaries who also perceived from an outside perspective the Joint Secretariat to be adequately resourced, as indicated by its proactivity and quick response time to queries (findings on support to beneficiaries are further detailed in Task 1.2).

Is the Programme management effective (including Points of Contact)?

The evaluation found Programme management to be highly effective overall, consistently characterised by Programme actors as professional, responsive, and well-coordinated. From the survey conducted with Monitoring Committee members and Points of Contact, at least 85.7% of respondents rated the below aspects of Programme management as either "very" or "mostly" effective. The Joint Secretariat's reporting clarity and responsiveness to the Monitoring Committee were considered the most effective aspects of Programme management, while the role and contribution of the Point of Contact was rated as less effective by a small margin.

Figure 2 Online survey question: Based on your experience in the monitoring committee, how would you assess the following aspects of Programme management?



Source: Online survey to Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contacts[20]

Perceptions gathered from interviews with Programme actors (Monitoring Committee members, Points of Contact, Joint Secretariat staff, Thematic Experts) converge strongly with the survey results, who **consistently described Programme management as effective, transparent and responsive, with clear procedures and well-defined roles enabling smooth steering**. The Joint Secretariat in particular is seen to operate very effectively, as interviewees highlighted the stability of Secretariat leadership, quick response times, and proactive support. In this light, the following key elements of Programme management were highlighted as contributing to its overall effectiveness:

- Well **defined roles and procedures** for Programme bodies (see observation above)
- **Transparent decision-making and legitimacy** of Partner State input (all views are considered)
- **Fast and high-quality responses** to queries by the Joint Secretariat, as well as the early detection and resolution of issues
- **Provision of quality tools and materials** to support Points of Contact
- Overall **high degree of stability** in top-level Programme management, strengthening institutional memory.

Box 2 Interview highlight on Programme management

> *"The strength is the well working team of seasoned experts at the high level. If people below change and there is still good leadership, the expertise stays. They have a proactive and also experimental approach. They try to test something new in each programming period. The strength is really in their institutional capacity and continuous improvement. These improvements are embedded throughout the project cycle, and everything is harmonised. Coordination is also strong."*
>
> *Source: Monitoring Committee member interviewed*

Notwithstanding, it is worth noting that **complexity of the Programme and diversity and number of actors involved in steering decisions could pose a potential barrier to effective management, although this view was held by a minority of Monitoring Committee members**. Two survey respondents underscored this effect, noting that the size and diversity of the Monitoring Committee can, at times, make steering more difficult, particularly

[20] Online survey question "Based on your experience in the monitoring committee, how would you assess the following aspects of Programme management?" MONITORING COMMITTEE members / Points of Contact (n=28). Closed question.

when discussions are focused on details rather than decision points. For example, one respondent suggested that meeting steering could be strengthened slightly to ensure the agenda is kept and that the length of interventions is not too long.

Box 3 Interview highlight on programme management

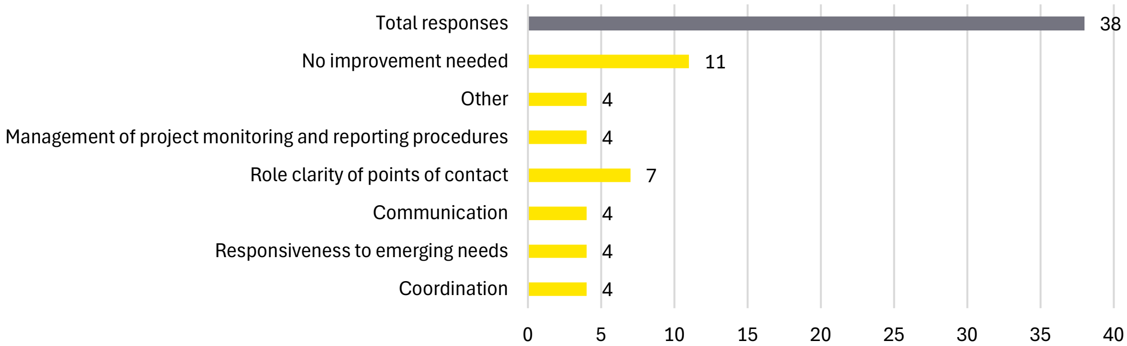
> *"Interreg Europe is a large programme with many member states and Monitoring Committee members. The Joint Secretariat facilitates the Monitoring Committee [meetings] and decision-making processes, but it is sometimes challenging to function in an actual steering capacity with such a large committee".*
>
> *Source: Monitoring Committee member interviewed*

While the role of Points of Contact in Programme management is generally regarded as important for relaying information to beneficiaries (see survey results above), **a minority of Programme actors perceived a need to clarify and/or strengthen their contribution**. These perceptions coexist with a widely expressed view that the Joint Secretariat's comprehensive support often reduces the need for deeper Point of Contact involvement in technical guidance as compared with other Interreg Programmes. A minority of beneficiaries reported that they had not received much communication from their Point of Contact.[21] However, this can **vary by national organisational set-up**, as well as a lack of necessity for communicating with Points of Contact on the part of beneficiaries already familiar with the Programme (see Question 1 Task 1.1).

What are the recommendations for improving the Programme management and steering?

While the majority of respondents indicated no improvement was needed, the Monitoring Committee members and Points of Contact identified several areas of Programme management and steering that could be improved.

Figure 3 "If any, which area of Programme management and steering could be improved?"



Source: Online survey to Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contacts

Where suggestions arise, these often focused on light-touch improvements to already strong procedures. Based on these suggestions, the evaluation identified the following recommendations for improving Interreg Europe's management and steering:

- **Point of Contact role visibility:** While Points of Contact generally report high clarity regarding their own responsibilities and already receive regular briefings and support, a small minority of Monitoring Committee members indicated the role clarity of the Points of Contact could be strengthened. This is combined with a perceived lack of direct communication from Points of Contact among a small minority of beneficiaries. This does not point to a need to redefine or formalise the Point of Contact role (which is intentionally flexible, with support to Points of Contact adapted to demand) but suggests that beneficiary-facing information on the Points of Contact could be made more visible and accessible. This could provide those less familiar with the Programme with clearer understanding of their designated responsibilities (e.g. organising information days, conducting initial eligibility checks, relaying information etc.) and ensure that current or potential beneficiaries are better informed about the appropriate contact points for different types of queries.

[21] Interviews conducted with beneficiaries. Online survey question, "How satisfied are you with the communication of programme updates and achievements from national or regional point of contact?", (n=374). Closed question.

3.2 Task 1.2 - Programme support to operations

- **The programme offers a wide range of assistance measures throughout the development of projects, which are generally relevant, widely used, and considered sufficient by all stakeholder groups.**
- **Programme partners, especially the Points of Contact, play an overall effective and complementary role to that of the Joint Secretariat, although their level of involvement varies significantly across countries and depending on available resources.**
- **While many stakeholders consider Programme support satisfactory, the main recommendations focus on strengthening communication and the visibility of support tools, simplifying and increasing the flexibility of administrative rules, providing more targeted and pedagogical support, reinforcing peer review follow-up, and further developing synergies and networking opportunities between projects and with the Policy Learning Platform.**

Project-level

- **The support provided by the Programme to beneficiaries during the project generation phase is seen as highly effective. The Joint Secretariat and the Points of Contact play complementary roles within this support system, perceived as effective, structured and useful in improving the quality of applications.**
- **The assessment process is not only effective but also perceived as robust, structured, transparent, and fair. It enables the selection of projects of good quality, aligned with programme objectives, while providing applicants with detailed and useful feedback.**
- **The Programme's reporting and monitoring procedures are well established, relevant and widely regarded as satisfactory. They enable effective verification of outputs and results thanks to robust tools, active guidance from the Joint Secretariat and well-structured internal mechanisms within consortia.**
- **The system in place ensures payments are made within appropriate timeframes, limits the occurrence of financial errors and reduces commitment-related risks thanks to systematic controls, a clearly defined correction procedure and efficient payment processing. Remaining challenges mainly concern the obligation for beneficiaries to pre-finance their activities, which affects some partners, as well as delays linked to national first-level controls rather than to the Programme's internal processes.**
- **Overall, the mid-term review is perceived as an effective, well-structured, and valuable process for verifying the project's trajectory, identifying adjustments, clarifying expectations for the remaining period, and anticipating potential challenges, particularly financial ones.**
- **The procedure for pilot actions is generally regarded as clear and relevant, although certain improvements, i.e. flexibility, greater certainty regarding the availability of funding and examples of what constitutes a 'good' pilot actions, could further strengthen its flexibility and predictability.**
- **The Programme has achieved a high level of clarity by design, and beneficiaries' overall perceptions are largely positive. Remaining challenges relate less to the regulatory framework itself than to its operational complexity in specific areas, suggesting that further gains could be achieved through targeted clarifications, practical examples and continued support, rather than through fundamental changes to the rules and procedures.**
- **The Programme's electronic system tools are effective and widely appreciated for their reliability and functionality, especially for mandatory processes, while specific user-experience and navigation issues persist, pointing to opportunities for incremental improvement rather than systemic redesign.**
- **Interreg Europe project budgets are, in most cases, adequate to deliver the outputs planned in the application forms, particularly where projects are well budgeted and aligned with Programme cost rules. However, adequacy is not uniform across all contexts: travel-intensive or high-cost regions, partners facing national legal constraints, organisations with limited cash-flow capacity, and projects requiring greater flexibility in reallocating resources are more likely to experience constraints. These issues do not generally prevent output delivery but can affect efficiency, equity of participation and the scope for adaptive implementation.**

- **Although most beneficiaries do not report major challenges requiring additional support, the recurring difficulties identified relate mainly to financial and reporting burdens, limited flexibility to adapt projects to evolving contexts and challenges in partnership dynamics and coordination.**

Platform-level

- **The Platform's organisational setup is generally perceived as well-defined and easy to understand for all stakeholders involved, notably thanks to clearly defined and operationalised roles and procedures structured through detailed documentation, planning tools, and coordination mechanisms. Evidence points to complementary roles, well established procedures, and a mature collaborative environment shaped by previous collaboration.**
- **The Programme's support measures are highly effective, evidenced by consistently high satisfaction, driven primarily by access-to-expertise services and, to a lesser extent, access-to-people. The Platform's agile and adaptive model ensures activities remain closely aligned with evolving beneficiary needs, sustaining overall high effectiveness.**
- **Engagement with the Platform has been very strong, with 257 events drawing 8,8569,390 participants since July 2023. However, mobilisation beyond the already engaged community could be further strengthened. Although the Platform reaches a broad range of stakeholders, evidence indicates that additional efforts could be done to expand reach to new audiences.**

3.2.1 Is the Programme support to applicants and beneficiaries effective?

Are the assistance measures taken at the different stages of project development relevant and sufficient?

The programme offers a wide range of assistance measures throughout the development of projects, which are generally relevant, widely used, and considered sufficient by all stakeholder groups. Accordingly, 90% of Monitoring Committee members respondents consider the support provided by the Programme to be effective and relevant[22]. **Support from the Joint Secretariat is perceived as particularly proactive**, more so than in other Interreg programmes.

Among **beneficiaries** who needed or asked for support, 90% considered the support they received to be fully or mostly sufficient and relevant[23]. They considered that the programme assistance is particularly strong during the application phase (*see below 3.2.2*) and then during the implementation, especially on reporting (*see below 3.2.4*). This is also underlined by 80% of Monitoring Committee members who identify these stages to be the most effectively supported [24].

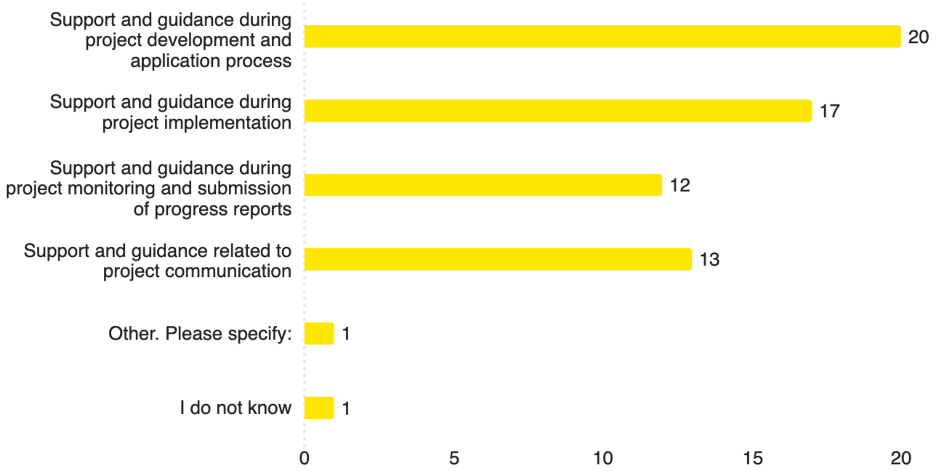
Figure 4 "Please indicate the stages of project development and implementation where Programme support to beneficiaries

[22] Online survey question "Do you consider the support provided to beneficiaries by the Programme to be relevant and effective?" Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contacts (n=28). Closed question.

[23] Online survey question "To what extent was the support you received during the project application relevant and sufficient to prepare your application?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[24] Online survey question "Please indicate the stages of project development and implementation where Programme support to beneficiaries is particularly strong" Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contacts (n=25). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

is particularly strong."



Source: Online survey to Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contacts

During the application phase, the main support tools are considered relevant and well adapted (*see question 4.2.2*). Among beneficiaries who received assistance during this phase, the vast majority found it sufficient and relevant[25].

At every stage, extensive documentation is made available to applicants and beneficiaries. Programme documents are described as clear, accessible, and regularly updated. The Programme's website constitutes another substantial resource, gathering approved projects, project ideas, a help centre with tutorials, FAQs, a glossary, and a database of more than 16,000 organisations to help identify suitable partners.

Events organised by the Programme are also perceived as a structuring component of support throughout the project cycle. Launch seminars, Q&A sessions with policy and finance officers, methodological webinars, full-day project trainings, and specialised workshops are offered regularly. Evaluations for the 2023–2025 period[26] show very high satisfaction levels, averaging over 93%, with a steady upward trend from 90.25% in 2023 to 93.7% in 2024 and 94.55% in 2025. The highest-rated formats include project training days, welcome webinars, LP seminars, and storytelling workshops, all scoring between 97% and 100% satisfaction. A few technical webinars attracting large audiences score slightly lower and represent potential areas for improvement, particularly the 2025 Sustainability Webinar, the 2025 FO Reporting Webinar, and the 2023 Portal Training.

Overall, **Programme support is considered responsive,** helping beneficiaries quickly clarify questions related to the identification of relevant policy instruments, financial rules, or project management.

Do Programme partners, including Points of Contact, play an effective role in these measures?

Points of Contact play a useful role within the Programme's support and act as key territorial intermediaries. Beneficiaries who have used Points of Contact support (57%) express a high level of satisfaction, highlighting their availability, their ability to clarify national aspects (audit procedures, co-financing rules, internal obligations), and their usefulness during the project idea generation phase[27]. Beneficiaries indicate that Points of Contact have a tangible impact on the quality of applications. In some cases, their early input even influenced applicants' decisions to proceed with their proposal. They therefore play a complementary role to that of the Joint Secretariat.

However, not all beneficiaries use Points of Contact support. Some experienced partners, familiar with Interreg programmes, may opt to contact the Joint Secretariat directly, which is generally regarded as highly responsive.

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[25] Online survey question "To what extent was the support you received during the project application relevant and sufficient to prepare your application?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[26] Data based on excel Project event evaluations

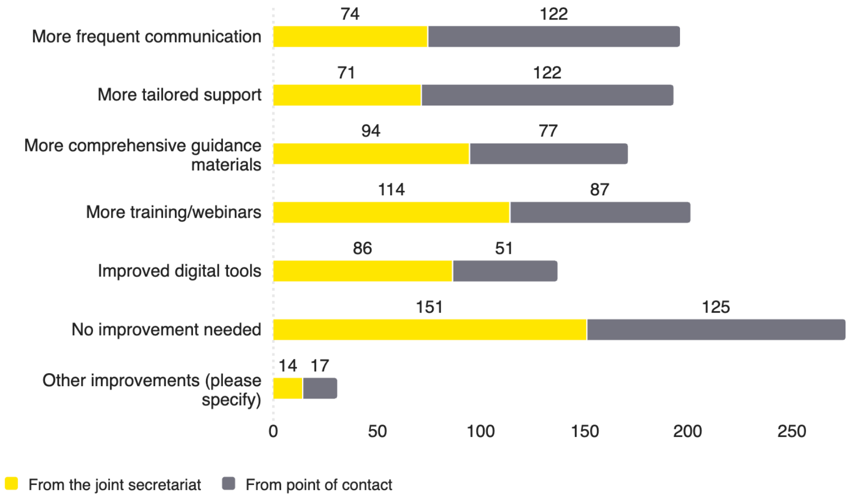
[27] Online survey question "To what extent was the support you received during the project application relevant and sufficient to prepare your application?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

While Points of Contact are available, their perceived added value differs; for some beneficiaries, this may be related to the visibility of their role or simply the absence of direct contact. Regarding the project development phase, Points of Contact adopt varying approaches: some operate on a demand-driven basis, while others offer more proactive support, including partner searches, assistance with national procedures, or coordination with first-level controllers. This heterogeneity is also linked to **their capacity to provide proactive support and depends heavily on the resources available**. If most Points of Contact consider their human and financial resources to be very sufficient (24%) or mostly sufficient (28%), 28% feel that their resources are only partially sufficient[28]. Several Points of Contact report **persistent** shortages of human or financial resources, **substantial** workloads **related** to coordinating multiple programmes, **and insufficient** funding for national-level promotion and travel. These constraints contribute to variations in proactivity and influence the ability of some Points of Contact to offer more intensive or tailored support.

What are the recommendations for improving the Programme's support?

The Programme support is considered satisfactory as it stands. 40% of beneficiaries believe that no improvement is needed from the Joint Secretariat and 33% from the Points of Contact[29], a trend also observed among Monitoring Committee members, with nearly one third of respondents suggesting no changes[30].

Figure 5 "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries

Nevertheless, among the improvement proposals expressed:

- Beneficiaries as well as Monitoring Committee members (18%)[31] express an **expectation for more frequent communication** from the Joint Secretariat (20%) and, even more from the Points of Contact (33%)[32]. Some beneficiaries, predominantly project partners, consider that existing support tools are insufficient and report that they were not aware of all available resources, such as specific trainings or dissemination tools. This perception may partly come from the fact that most trainings are primarily targeted at lead partners and that information is often communicated directly from the Joint Secretariat to projects' lead partners, rather than through Points of Contact or to all project partners. However,

[28] Online survey question "How would you rate the sufficiency of your human and financial resources in your capacity as point of contact to effectively support Programme beneficiaries?" Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contacts (n=22). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[29] Online survey question "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[30] Online survey question "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support to beneficiaries?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contacts (n=28). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[31] Online survey question "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support to beneficiaries?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contacts (n=28). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[32] Online survey question "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

the need to adapt messages to different target audiences, to strengthen territorial and national communication, and to improve the visibility of the role and services of the Points of Contact is highlighted.

- Beneficiaries refer to requirements that are considered burdensome and time-consuming and point to the need to **simplify rules**, reduce administrative jargon, ensure that financial rules are more proportionate to actual costs, and increase flexibility.
- A strong expectation for more **targeted and tailored support** is expressed by 19% of beneficiaries with respect to the Joint Secretariat and by 33% with respect to the Points of Contact[33], including a request to strengthen sector-specific expertise to provide more guidance on specialised topics. 46% of Monitoring Committee members[34] and 30% of beneficiaries request more training and webinars from the Joint Secretariat and 23% from the Points of Contact[35]. Four beneficiaries call for strengthened networking opportunities to facilitate the exchange of experiences and partner search.
- Some beneficiaries highlighted the difficulty of mastering Programme tools and procedures and call for more **pedagogical support** for the preparation of applications and reports. 54% of beneficiaries[36] and 29% of Monitoring Committee members[37] stress the need to develop more guidance and user-oriented materials (i.e. templates, case studies and interactive online tools) and multilingual documents to reduce barriers linked to English.
- Finally, several contributions highlight the value of further **developing synergies between projects, between different calls,** and with the activities of the Platform.

3.2.2 How effective is the Programme support to beneficiaries during project generation?

Are the supporting tools sufficient and appropriate to generate good quality applications?

Programme stakeholders express a high degree of satisfaction with the support provided during this phase, described as clear, practical and responsive. **Beneficiaries consistently describe the support provided by the Joint Secretariat as very strong**. It is considered particularly proactive, especially when compared to other Interreg programmes in which some beneficiaries have also been involved. Among beneficiaries who needed or asked for support, 90% considered the support they received to be fully or mostly sufficient and relevant[38]. Also, responses to queries from the Joint Secretariat (emails/calls) were rated very or mostly useful by 93% of beneficiaries that have declared using it[39], confirming the perceived reliability and responsiveness of the Joint Secretariat.

The support tools are regarded as sufficient, appropriate and well aligned with applicants' needs:

- The **self-assessment tool** is widely considered easy to use and helpful in checking the alignment of project ideas with the Programme's priorities.
- The **project idea feedback system** is a central component of the support during the project generation phase. 152 feedback were provided by the Joint Secretariat across the three calls. For the first call, most feedback (84%) was delivered within 15 days, and 33% within 5 days[40]. The variety of formats (written

[33] Ibid.

[34] Online survey question "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support to beneficiaries?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contacts (n=28). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[35] Online survey question "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Online survey question "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support to beneficiaries?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contacts (n=28). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[38] Online survey question "To what extent was the support you received during the project application relevant and sufficient to prepare your application?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[39] Online survey question "How useful do you assess the following supporting tools for the preparation of project application?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[40] Analysis made on data provided by the Joint Secretariat regarding the project idea feedback for the three calls, excels.

(41%), videoconference or phone (56%), or in-person at events) enabled adaptation to applicants' needs. Feedback from the Joint Secretariat was rated very useful or mostly useful by 173 beneficiaries[41]. This reflects close, responsive support tailored to individual needs, occasionally complemented by in-person interactions during events. Beneficiaries report that this feedback helped clarify and adjust their proposals, strengthening the structure and relevance of their applications.

- Regarding the Programme documentation, the **Programme Manual, call documents, and application template** are described as clear, accessible, and regularly updated. They help support transparency and predictability in the application process. 78% of beneficiaries reported using the available materials and templates, and 68% rated them as very or mostly useful[42].
- The **Programme's website** is considered a major resource, praised by all stakeholder groups. It offers an extensive content library, including approved projects, project idea lists, tutorials, FAQs, 180 educational videos, 31 key documents, and a glossary.
- The Programme also provides some support in consortium building. **Networking** is facilitated through the Programme website, the "Find the right people" page, combined with the annual networking event during open calls "*Europe, Let's Cooperate! Interregional forum"*. These tools help applicants build consortia, receive expressions of interest, and select partners.
- Considering **programme-organised events**, beneficiaries identified applicant seminars, tutorials and Q&A sessions as particularly useful, offering further clarification on project methodology, management, budgeting and communication. Survey responses confirmed this high level of usefulness: programme events were rated very or mostly useful by 90% of beneficiaries that have declared using it (the highest score in the toolset).

Even though 63% of beneficiaries indicated that they had used and found the support of national or regional Points of Contact useful[43], **perceptions of Points of Contact support appear more heterogeneous**. Some beneficiaries with significant experience in EU projects or those regularly involved in Interreg programmes tend to engage less frequently with Points of Contact, often demonstrating confidence in independently managing procedures or opting to liaise directly with the Joint Secretariat, which is recognised for its proactive responsiveness. However, Points of Contact also help strengthen understanding of the Programme through info days. 79% of beneficiaries who participated in these events rated them as very or mostly useful[44]. Beneficiaries who did engage with Points of Contact highlighted their usefulness in clarifying specific aspects such as the importance of exchanging good practices or the Programme's focus on policy improvements. Points of Contact themselves report having access to abundant and well-adapted tools from the Joint Secretariat, (i.e. information materials, presentations, templates) to support their role.

The support provided by the Programme is seen as contributing to better-structured, more relevant, and higher-quality applications compared with the previous programming period. Beneficiaries state that the support significantly strengthened their proposals and report that guidance and structured feedback enabled them to produce clearer and more coherent applications, better aligned with Programme requirements. **Members of the Monitoring Committee and Points of Contact also note an improvement in application quality compared with the previous period**. According to several stakeholders, this improvement is linked to the strengthening of certain requirements, such as the obligation to cover an appropriate geographical scope or the mandatory involvement of authorities responsible for public policies. These adjustments combined with the self-assessment tool and Programme feedback appear to have reduced the number of lower-quality proposals.

[41] Online survey question "How useful do you assess the following supporting tools for the preparation of project application?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Online survey question "To what extent was the support you received during the project application relevant and sufficient to prepare your application?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[44] Ibid.

3.2.3 How effective is the assessment of applications?

Is the project assessment and selection process sound, transparent and fair?

The assessment process is perceived as robust, structured, transparent, and fair. Its procedures are known in advance through the documents related to each call for proposals. The call calendar is stable and respected. Beneficiaries confirm that announced deadlines are met, which contributes to the overall effectiveness of the assessment process. They also particularly appreciate knowing the expected project start dates at the call stage.

The assessment of applications itself is regarded as coherent, transparent, and reliable. 94% of beneficiaries' respondents[45] consider the assessment and selection procedure solid, transparent, and fair. In line with the rules set out in the Programme Manual, each application first undergoes an **eligibility check** to verify compliance with administrative requirements. The Monitoring Committee is responsible for deciding on the initial stage. The Joint Secretariat on the behalf of the Monitoring Committee formally notifies lead applicants whose proposals fail to meet the eligibility criteria. Some Joint Secretariat members suggest that further **automating eligibility controls** could enhance the efficiency of this initial phase.

Eligible applications then undergo an **in-depth qualitative assessment** conducted by the Joint Secretariat, based on **five criteria** divided between:

- **Strategic criteria:** Relevance; Quality of expected results and Quality of the partnership.
- **Operational criteria**: Coherence and quality of the approach and Coherence budget.

The **transparency of these criteria is widely acknowledged**. Requirements and rules are well understood and accepted by beneficiaries. The use of a structured assessment grid is highly valued, as it ensures analytical consistency and reinforces the perception of objectivity. A small number of stakeholders nevertheless report some degree of subjectivity in this process, regarding for instance the project's innovative character. These observations remain marginal and do not call into question the consensus around the transparency and fairness of the assessment process. Members of the Monitoring Committee particularly appreciate being involved at all stages of the assessment with the opportunity to participate as observers in the quality assessment initial briefing, which strengthens their confidence in the procedure. The quality assessment harmonisation document and calibration sessions organised by the Joint Secretariat are also praised as they help ensure a shared understanding of criteria, reduce interpretation discrepancies, and contribute to the overall consistency of the process.

Following the qualitative assessment, the **Monitoring Committee makes the final decision** on each project. Applicants then receive detailed communication. Rejected proposals receive their full assessment grid along with the specific reasons for rejection. Approved projects are informed of the amount awarded, the conditions to be met before contract signature, and the deadlines for doing so. Overall, beneficiaries highlight the quality of the feedback provided, which they find constructive, detailed, and useful. 93% of beneficiaries consider the feedback received after selection clear[46]. Monitoring Committee members also note that Interreg Europe provides more detailed feedback than other comparable programmes. This systematic communication, complemented by transparent information on the Programme's website, reinforces the perception of coherence and fairness.

Is the assessment process leading to selecting good quality projects?

This assessment process leads to the selection of high-quality projects. The approved projects appear **aligned with the programme's objectives and demonstrate a satisfactory level of quality**. This alignment is consistently confirmed by Monitoring Committee members, and the findings of the Quality Report further substantiate this assessment. While, by definition, only applications reaching the required average score (3) are recommended for approval, the systematic gap observed between recommended projects and non-recommended projects

[45] Online survey question "How useful do you assess the following supporting tools for the preparation of project application?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[46] Online survey question "What is your perception of the application assessment process?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question

(with respective average scores of 3.4 for calls 1 and 2 to 3.5 for call 3) demonstrates the capacity of the assessment system to discriminate between proposals according to their relative level of quality.

Compared with the previous programme period, the Joint Secretariat notes an improvement in the **policy relevance of projects**, which had previously constituted a common cause for proposals being rejected. New partnership requirements, assessed at the eligibility stage, appear to have had a positive impact. Remaining weaknesses mainly relate to geographical coverage and innovation, which represent areas for improvement for applicants.

3.2.4 How effective is the Programme support to beneficiaries during the project implementation?

Are the reporting and monitoring procedures of project implementation well set up and relevant? Does it allow for effective verification of project outputs and of project results?

The reporting and monitoring procedures established for project implementation are well designed, adequate and overall effective. At Programme level, the monitoring and reporting system is well understood by partners and considered relevant, clear and well designed, providing a structured overview of the progress of activities and expenditures. Several stakeholders find it simpler and better structured than in other European programmes. The combination of a **technical and a financial report every six months** is considered complete and coherent, with some describing it as very simple, clear and standardised. **Progress reports** are appreciated for their conciseness, their results orientation and the absence of unnecessary information. When asked about the **clarity and ease of use of the structure of partner and progress reports**, including the reporting on output indicators, a large majority of beneficiaries report indeed a positive assessment: **91%** consider the reports to be clearly structured and easy to complete[47], and **88%** find output indicators straightforward to interpret and measure[48]. The **reporting portal** is also widely praised for its user-friendliness, ergonomics and automatic saving function, which reduces the risk of errors or data loss. Once submitted to the Joint Secretariat, the report undergoes thorough checks and clarification requests whenever necessary. Since the beginning of the programming period, 444 clarification requests have been issued, in some cases requiring up to six clarification cycles, although 74% were resolved with one or two cycles[49]. This process ensures coherence, reliability and quality of data.

Compared with the previous programming period, the reporting system has improved. Progress reports have been simplified, duplicate information removed and sections streamlined. Cost options have been harmonised, with increased use of flat rates for administrative and travel expenses and a single method for staff costs without timesheets. The budget flexibility rule has also been simplified and now applies only at partner level.

Stakeholders also underline the importance of internal mechanisms set up within consortia, particularly the role of the lead partner, in meeting reporting requirements effectively. In most projects, steering groups, monthly meetings and regular exchanges coordinated by the lead partner facilitate information collection, task monitoring and problem solving. These internal arrangements complement the Programme system and ensure continuous monitoring between two reporting periods. **The lead partner plays a key role by checking each partner's contribution before submission to the Secretariat**. To address these needs, the Secretariat has strengthened its support for lead partners, that takes the form of training sessions, timely assistance in responding to clarification requests, guidance on rule interpretation and access to pedagogical tools such as videos and tutorials. Nearly half of Monitoring Committee members identify monitoring and progress report submission as the area where Programme support is strongest[50].

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[47] Online survey question "What do you think of the structure of partner reports and progress reports, including the reporting on output indicators?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

[48] Ibid.

[49] Based on data on Progess Report monitoring, excel.

[50] Online survey question "Please indicate the stages of project development and implementation where Programme support to beneficiaries is particularly strong" Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contacts (n=25). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

Despite these strengths, some challenges remain. Joint Secretariat members highlight the difficulty some beneficiaries face in collecting contributions from all partners on time, as well as the requirement for detailed descriptions of certain types of expenditure, particularly external expertise. Several beneficiaries rate financial reporting as burdensome, sometimes disproportionate to the amounts concerned. The level of justification required, even for minor expenses, is seen as excessive and time-consuming. A few beneficiaries point out redundancies between sections[51], such as activity summaries in the financial report when a policy report already exists, or a lack of clarity in the structure of certain policy report sections, leading to confusion. While widely appreciated, the portal also has limitations, particularly character restrictions that reduce the level of detail partners can provide.

Regarding the verification of deliverables and results, the system is widely recognised as effective. Beneficiaries highlight the clarity of indicators, considered easy to interpret and measure[52]. Most Monitoring Committee members believe that the indicators provide an accurate picture of the Programme's results[53]. However, a minority of indicators remain generic or harder to interpret, especially those related to capacity building. In the case of this indicator, it may be explained by the fact that no projects have reported on it so far. In addition, information sessions aimed at clarifying this indicator were still forthcoming at the time of drafting this report. Also, their interpretation may depend on internal procedures specific to each partner, making certain measurements more subjective. They are also seen by some Monitoring Committee members as insufficiently precise to reflect results at regional level or too oriented towards programme-wide analysis[54]. A few members would welcome more qualitative information to complement the quantitative perspective and better capture the diversity of project effects. Nevertheless, many recognise that the information provided enables effective monitoring.

Does it allow payment of beneficiaries in adequate time, reducing financial errors and the commitment risks?

The reporting and monitoring procedures generally ensure that payments are made within appropriate timeframes while reducing the risk of financial errors and commitment-related risks. Data show that payments are issued quickly once reports are approved. The average time between the submission of a progress report and the corresponding payment is 38 days[55], which is well below the 80-day deadline set out in CPR Article 74(1)(b). This demonstrates a **responsive and efficient system**, provided that the upstream steps, particularly the submission of partner reports and validation by the first-level control, are carried out on time. Most beneficiaries confirm that payments are received within the expected timeframe. Some even highlight a **significant improvement compared with the 2014–2020 period**. In cases where delays occur, they are mainly due to the late submission of the progress report (i.e. after the official deadline). Some beneficiaries reported that this delay to be linked to the first-level control process.

The absence of pre-financing remains a challenge for some partners. As the Programme cannot provide advance payments, each beneficiary must pre-finance all project activities until reimbursement following the approval of the progress reports. This requirement weighs on small organisations with limited financial capacity. **Several beneficiaries explain that they face difficulties in advancing travel costs or other significant expenses, or even covering non-eligible costs**, even when payments themselves are not delayed. For these organisations, cash-flow constraints can complicate smooth project implementation.

Financial corrections remain limited overall. The Programme manual clearly frames the process by requiring that any previously approved expenditure subsequently deemed ineligible must be corrected and documented in the Portal, which includes a dedicated module allowing for the tracing and justification of such corrections. This procedure helps limit the persistence of financial errors throughout the project lifecycle.

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[51] Online survey question "What do you think of the structure of partner reports and progress reports, including the reporting on output indicators?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Online survey question "What do you think of the structure of partner reports and progress reports, including the reporting on output indicators?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contacts (n=28). Closed question, complemented by open conditional question.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Based on data on Progress Report monitoring, excel.

According to available data[56], only **14 partners out of 2,267[57] were so far affected by corrections in 17 projects, amounting to a total of €53,494.13**, corresponding to an average correction of €557.23. The distribution of corrections highlights the areas presenting higher financial risks:

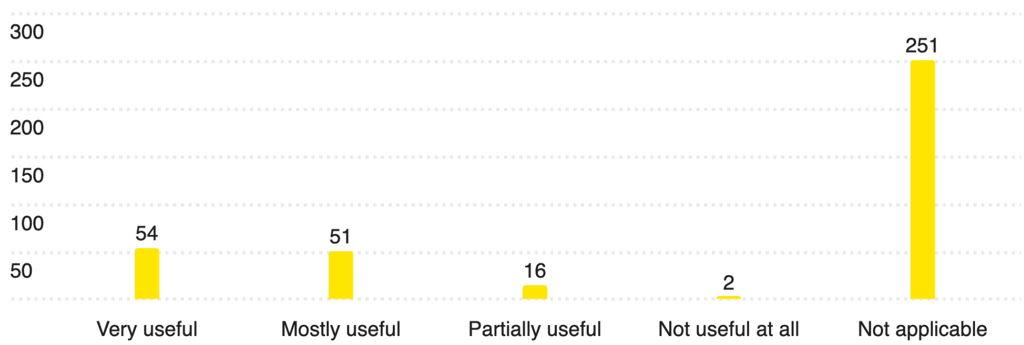
- Expenditures related to **external expertise** represent very few cases, only five, but with a high average correction of €3,252, suggesting heavy but occasional errors.
- **Staff costs** represent the majority of corrections, with 43 cases accounting for 53.5% of the total. These corrections appear to reflect recurring difficulties, often linked to allocation rules or calculation methods.
- Corrections related to **office and travel costs** are linked to errors in staff costs as these categories are calculated using a flat-rate methodology based on staff costs. Office and travel costs each represent around one quarter of cases, but for low amounts, approximately €179 per correction.

Overall, the main risk associated with external expertise lies in the size of individual corrections, while for staff costs the risk lies in the fact that two flat rates are calculated on the basis of staff costs. Therefore, a single error in staff costs may lead to two subsequent corrections. For this reasons, particular attention is paid to monitoring the occurrence of staff costs corrections and keeping their numbers as low as possible.

How efficient is the mid-term review of projects?

The mid-term review is regarded as an effective, useful, and well-designed mechanism. According to the Programme manual, it should take place during the fourth semester of activities. It provides the Joint Secretariat with a more detailed understanding of the project's performance, supplementing the information contained in progress reports, and represents a key milestone in the project's life cycle. It offers an opportunity for an in-depth exchange on the project's progress and helps to identify underspending trends as well as the corrective measures to be taken. Members of the Joint Secretariat note that, although **the review may sometimes seem early to take definitive decisions on possible budget reductions, given that projects often spend more heavily toward the end of their implementation, it remains essential to anticipate potential financial risks**. The review also provides an opportunity to examine **whether pilot actions could be implemented and to clarify the conditions for doing so**. Thus, **mid-term reviews conducted for the first-call projects have been described as constructive exercises, allowing for transparent discussions and a clear assessment of progress.**

Figure 6 "In case you want through the mid-term review (first call projects), how useful was this process in helping your project adjust or improve?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries

Beneficiaries from the first call widely describe the process as useful, smooth, and relevant. Out of 123 responses from people having gone through this process, 85% indicated that the review was either very useful or mostly useful, and only 2 respondents did not find it useful at all[58]. Many beneficiaries emphasise that the review confirms the project's progress, helps identify necessary adjustments, and provides direct feedback from officers. The process is seen as not time-consuming. For some projects, it helped clarify financial issues, including

[56] Based on data on financial corrections, excel.

[57] Number of partners as of February 24th.

[58] Online survey question "Q.12. In case you want through the mid-term review (first call projects), how useful was this process in helping your project adjust or improve?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

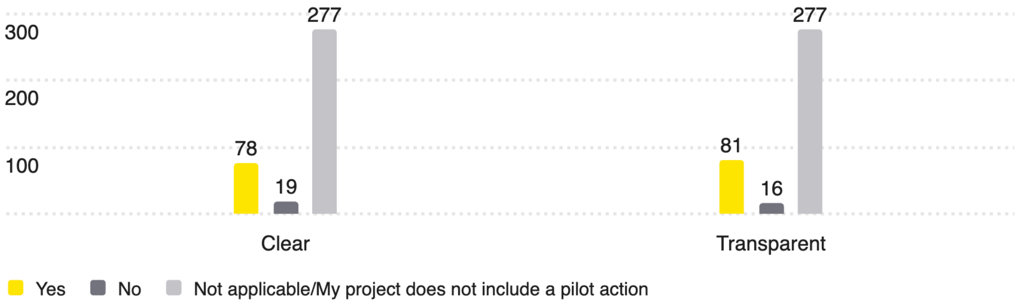
the reallocation of unspent funds, while for others it simply confirmed that the project was on track. **Several beneficiaries also appreciate the constructive and progressive nature of the exercise, perceived as a discussion rather than a formal control.** One beneficiary notes that the review helped them better understand expectations for the final phase and improve the quality of their deliverables. More complex situations may arise when the review coincides with requests for modifications, such as the introduction of pilot actions. In one case, the rule linking pilot actions to the earlier mobilisation of underspending led to a budget adjustment sooner than expected, triggering discussions within the consortium on how to redistribute unused amounts.

Is the procedure for deciding and supporting possible pilot actions clear and relevant?

Based on a "learning by doing" approach, pilot actions complement traditional peer-learning activities when these alone are not sufficient to improve public policies. **Stakeholders consider them particularly useful and relevant, as they allow innovative practices to be tested in real conditions and strengthen interregional learning**.

Pilot actions may be requested either at the application stage or after the mid-term review. To be eligible, they must meet **four criteria**: policy relevance and durability, contribution to the interregional learning process, testing character, and additionality. The approval process consists of an eligibility check followed by a qualitative assessment indicating whether each criterion is fully met, partially met, or not met. **Overall, the clarity of this procedure is satisfactory**. **Beneficiaries find the concept clear, the guidance understandable, and the templates easy to use, especially with support from the lead partner**. Among 97 beneficiaries whose project includes a pilot action, 80% consider the process clear and 84% consider it transparent[59]. To date, 61 pilot actions have been approved, 31% at application stage and 69% through post-mid-term review calls (therefore only concerning first-call projects)[60].

Figure 7 "If you have requested funding for pilot actions, was the process clear and transparent to you?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries

Some occasional challenges nevertheless remain. One concern relates to the **lack of flexibility** in the system, particularly the difficulty of launching a pilot action outside the designated timeframe, which limits partners' ability to seize emerging opportunities. Others mention **uncertainty regarding the availability of funding for pilot actions**, that may lead to reallocations of partners' resources. Another beneficiary reported **difficulties understanding what constitutes a "good" pilot action** and regretted the lack of concrete examples illustrating expectations.

3.2.5 How clear and simple are the rules and procedures for Programme beneficiaries, taking into account the regulatory framework?

The Interreg Europe Programme has put in place a clear and structured regulatory and procedural framework, explicitly designed to translate EU regulatory requirements into practical and operational guidance for beneficiaries. The Programme Manual is indeed conceived as a comprehensive reference document for

[59] Online survey question "Q.11. If you have requested funding for pilot actions, was the process clear and transparent to you?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[60] Based on data from overview pilot action, excel.

applicants, project partners, financial managers and controllers, to support them in the consistent interpretation and application of rules and procedures. This clarity-by-design is reinforced by a strong procedural architecture centred on the Interreg Europe Portal as a **single-entry point** for applications, reporting and change requests, thereby reducing ambiguity about where and how key processes are to be carried out. Within this framework, reporting rules, timelines and responsibilities are described in a structured and standardised manner, complemented by simplification mechanisms (such as simplified cost options and harmonised control templates) intended to ease administrative burden and ensure proportionate, risk-based implementation. This picture is strongly corroborated by beneficiaries, for whom the Programme's rules and procedures appear **largely clear and accessible**. Beneficiaries interviewed consistently describe Programme information as "clear", "very detailed", and easy to access through manuals, events and direct contact with officers, and highlight that clarity is reinforced by complementary support tools such as tutorials, Q&A webinars, reporting webinars and guidance from Points of Contact.

At the same time, evidence shows that **clarity does not necessarily translate into simplicity**: several interviewees acknowledge that the manual is long and that understanding comes fully only after experiencing a complete project cycle[61], implying a learning curve particularly for first-time beneficiaries. Even if the rules are "as clear as possible" and aligned with regulatory requirements, **conceptual elements and cross-country variation** (e.g., policy instrument definitions needing to fit across many countries) might reduce the overall clarity, hence the importance of national Points of Contact in "translating" the concepts and requirements into national contexts and languages. Beneficiary interviews further specify where difficulties concentrate: one respondent reports recurring challenges in interpreting financial rules related to eligibility and budget categories – especially for partners operating under different national accounting practices – often requiring additional clarification through the lead partner or the Joint Secretariat rather than relying solely on written guidance.

Other notes that while rules are generally clear, **financial and eligibility aspects** may require careful interpretation in initial phases, again pointing to experience as a factor[62]. A more concrete example of perceived lack of clarity concerns budgeting across phases and the semester spending plan in the Portal[63], suggesting that some procedural expectations may not always be self-evident to beneficiaries without additional explanation.

3.2.6 How effective are the electronic system tools (i.e. the Portal, website tools, SharePoint) developed by the Programme?

Evidence indicates that the **electronic system tools developed by the Programme, most notably the Portal, website tools, and the SharePoint environments are overall perceived as effective, reliable and fit for purpose**, while also revealing **specific usability and user-experience limitations** that affect certain beneficiary groups or use cases.

By design, the Programme has deliberately adopted a **centralised digital architecture**, with the Portal acting as the main operational entry point for mandatory processes such as reporting, document submission and project monitoring, complemented by the Programme website, project websites, and the SharePoint spaces to support communication, learning and knowledge exchange. This design is intended to ensure consistency, traceability and compliance with regulatory requirements, while facilitating access to information and programme support. This overall design logic is **strongly corroborated by the Programme partners and beneficiary interviews**, which consistently describe the electronic tools as functional, reliable and "easy to use", with no major difficulties in accessing information or carrying out required tasks. Beneficiaries emphasise the **convenience of having all key information and procedures in one place**, noting that the Portal is "useful and convenient" and that initial 'technical hiccups" were resolved over time[64]. Procedural clarity is also directly linked to user experience: one beneficiary explicitly notes that rules, procedures and eligibility criteria are "clear and accessible" on the Portal, with the only reported limitation relating to GDPR-linked access restrictions. Beneficiaries also highlight the broader digital ecosystem surrounding the Portal: Programme website, project webpages, webinars and social media channels are seen as supportive tools for communication and visibility, while SharePoint environments are considered "very useful" for internal document sharing within partnership. Several interviewees stress that,

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[61] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries

following some initial delays at the start of the programming period, the system is now finalised, stable and "working quite well", with no major weaknesses currently identified beyond normal transition issues linked to the introduction of a new system[65]. Survey evidence confirms this overall positive assessment, with 88% of beneficiaries perceiving the Programme's electronic tools as user-friendly and effective in supporting programme participation[66].

At the same time, some **nuances regarding usability and navigation** have arisen, particularly beyond strictly mandatory tasks. While beneficiaries generally perceive the Portal as effective and reliable, some note that it is functionally strong but less intuitive from a user-experience perspective. Specific challenges mentioned include the need for double registration and approval for partner accounts, which is perceived as potentially 'simplifiable'[67]. There is also a scope to enhance the **intuitiveness** of navigation, especially for less experienced users, and to clarify the overall structure in order to facilitate more efficient access to key documents. These perceptions are mirrored by survey responses from the remaining 12% of beneficiaries, who provide a detailed and consistent picture of where **usability frictions arise in practice**. Recurring issues include difficulties in locating information within complex website structures; non-intuitive navigation and hierarchy of sections; slow loading times; limited optimisation for mobile devices; and challenges linked to the financial reporting interface (e.g. extensive scrolling, difficulties removing uploaded documents, and repeated data entry). A particularly recurrent theme concerns **document management**, with multiple respondents calling for the possibility to upload ZIP files or folders, especially for procurement and supporting documents, to reduce administrative burden and facilitate checks by First Level Controllers[68]. Additional comments highlight **process-related usability issues** rather than technical failures per se, such as repeated logins, difficulties accessing or changing user roles and responsible persons on project websites, inconsistencies when printing applications from the Portal, and challenges linked to the structure and logic of some reporting sections[69]. Several respondents explicitly note that the tools "require time to get used to", particularly for users who interact with the Portal intermittently or who must navigate multiple programme systems across different Interreg strands[70]. Nevertheless, even among critical respondents, many acknowledge that the tools are generally functional and that limitations relate more to **modernisation, clarity of guidance and user-experience design** than to fundamental shortcomings.

3.2.7 Are the resources allocated to projects adequate to allow projects to produce the outputs planned in the application forms?

The **resources allocated to projects are generally considered adequate to enable the delivery of outputs planned in the application forms**, while also revealing **structural and contextual constraints** that affect certain types of partners, cost categories and implementation conditions.

The Programme sets budget levels and cost rules intended to ensure proportionality between planned activities, partnership size and expected outputs, while relying on simplified cost options and predefined budget structures to facilitate implementation and control. This framework aims to ensure that projects are sufficiently resourced to deliver learning activities, policy improvements and capacity-building outputs, while maintaining financial discipline and comparability across projects. This overall design logic is **confirmed by beneficiaries**, who largely state that funding is fully sufficient (29%) or mostly sufficient (51%) to deliver planned outputs[71].

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Online survey question "Do you consider the Portal and other website tools developed by the Programme user friendly?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions.

[67] Ibid.

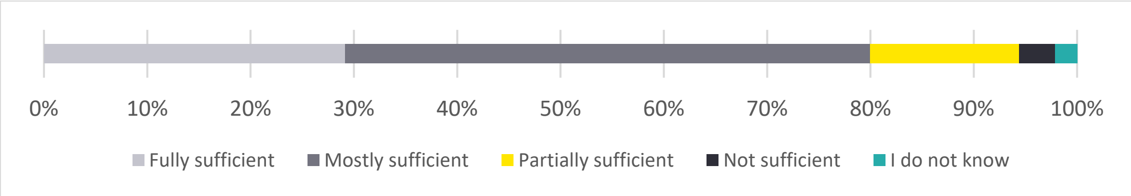
[68] Online survey question "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support to beneficiaries?" Monitoring Committee / Points of Contact Members (n=28). Closed question where multiple answers were allowed and complemented by open conditional questions

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid;

[71] Online survey question "Are the resources allocated to projects adequate to allow projects to produce the outputs planned in the application form?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question

Figure 8 "Are the resources allocated to projects adequate to allow projects to produce the outputs planned in the application form?"



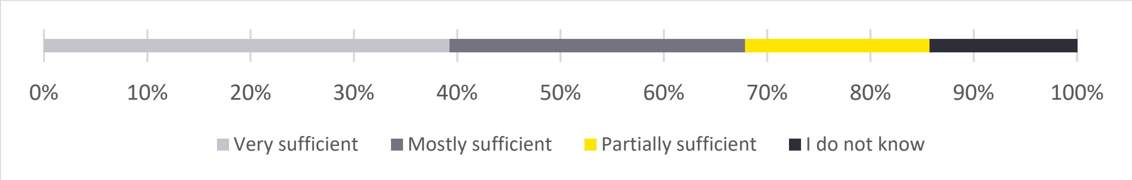
Source: Survey to Beneficiaries

Several beneficiaries report that financial implementation is "on the right track" and aligned with what was planned in the application, that funding is sufficient with even some unused budget lines (e.g. communication), or that the resources available fully match what they deliver, as projects were budgeted internally with a clear link between planned activities and financial allocations[72]. Other beneficiaries emphasise that funding was "more than sufficient" and that payments were processed quickly compared to other programmes, with only minor delays linked to first-level control[73]. Similarly, the budget was considered adequate to cover staff, external expertise, travel and administrative needs, and resources sufficient to produce the expected outputs[74]. At the same time, evidence reveals **important nuances and disparities** linked to partner context, cost structures and regulatory rules. **Pre-financing and cash-flow issues** were identified as a constraint, particularly for partners with weaker financial starting positions, including partners from developing regions or with limited institutional liquidity[75]. **External cost pressures** that were not fully anticipated at application stage were also highlighted, notably in terms of increased travel costs following the pandemic. In this regard, while one beneficiary notes that they managed to cope with these increases, they indicate that the flat-rate approach for travel and accommodation was "sometimes not enough"[76]. Travel costs also emerge as a recurring concern for geographically remote or high-cost regions: one beneficiary reports that the standard allocation for travel is insufficient for Northern Europe, forcing a shift to virtual meetings to remain within budget, while another one raises similar concerns for partners in Eastern Europe, stressing that flat-rate or capped travel approaches may disproportionately burden partners with limited national co-financing capacity and indirectly affect the intensity of participation. **Structural constraints linked to national legislation and budget composition emerged too**: for instance, one beneficiary from Greece stated that, sometimes, national policy authorities are legally unable to use Interreg Europe funds for staff costs, leading to the outsourcing of work and, sometimes to imbalances between staff and travel budgets that complicate implementation[77]. Similarly, difficulties linked to the need to mobilise specialised external expertise to support national legislative requirements have been reported. In this case, the initial allocation of budget to staff costs did not fully reflect their implementation needs, which required a greater share of resources for external services[78] In addition, while a few respondents perceive limits in reallocating budgets across partners during implementation, it should be noted that Interreg Europe already offers a comparatively high degree of budget flexibility, including a 20% reallocation margin at partner level without prior approval and the possibility of streamlined major budget changes beyond this threshold. Finally, certain costs perceived as relevant for output delivery (e.g. compensating citizens for participation) are not eligible under Programme rules, requiring alternative solutions and potentially limiting engagement approaches[79].

[72] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries
[73] Ibid.
[74] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

Finally, perspectives from the **Monitoring Committee Members and/ or Points of Contact** further contextualise these findings[80]. Most respondents consider the financial resources allocated to project budgets to be **fully sufficient (39%) or mostly sufficient (29%)**, while **18%** assess them as *partially sufficient*. In explaining this assessment, respondents point to **rising costs** (notably wages, external services and travel) which are not always fully reflected in current budget levels. In addition, several respondents highlight that while available resources generally cover **core project activities**, they may be more limited when it comes to supporting **more ambitious capacity-building actions, intensified stakeholder engagement, or expanded dissemination activities**, particularly in contexts where costs have increased significantly over the programming period[81].

Figure 9 "How would you rate the financial resources allocated to project budgets to achieve their planned outputs and results, including capacity building?"



Source: Survey to Monitoring Committees / Points of Contact Members

3.2.8 Are there recurring challenges in project implementation that could be better addressed by project support?

Although 83% of survey respondents report not experiencing challenges that require additional support[82], several types of recurring difficulties are noted during project implementation:

- **Financial and reporting aspects represent a recurring source of difficulties**. First, some challenges external to the programme are mentioned, such as the difficulty for certain partners to find national financial controllers, particularly in countries where this expertise is limited or expensive, such as the Netherlands. Directly related to the Programme, some partners report an administrative burden linked to drafting, justifying, and reporting of expenditures. Some partners request greater flexibility in interpreting small costs when these clearly contribute to project objectives. Difficulties are also reported in demonstrating the effective improvement of the policy instrument according to programme rules. In addition, some partners highlight challenges in ensuring that all project partners fully understand what policy instrument improvement entails.
- **The issue of limited flexibility is also often raised**. Several partners point out that projects evolve in rapidly changing thematic and political contexts, particularly in areas where technologies and public priorities shift quickly. The constraints associated with strict adherence to the original application limit the ability of projects to adapt. Some partners therefore recommend increased flexibility to adjust objectives and activities when thematic or territorial conditions evolve.
- **Projects also face challenges related to partnership dynamics**. Some feedback indicates that a low-performing partner can slow down the entire project or even jeopardise specific activities. Cases of partner withdrawal have been reported, leading to significant disruptions in the implementation of the projects concerned. Some partners also emphasise the central role of the lead partner and request a more structured management approach, more frequent reminders, and stronger coordination. Thus, even though most projects do not face major challenges requiring additional support, a range of difficulties is identified by beneficiaries, Joint Secretariat and Monitoring Committee Members. These challenges represent **areas in which strengthened programme support could improve the quality and effectiveness of project implementation**.

[80] Online survey question "How would you rate the financial resources allocated to project budgets to achieve their planned outputs and results, including capacity building?" Monitoring Committee / Points of Contact Members (n=28). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Online survey question "Are there any recurring challenges during project implementation that could be better addressed by some additional project support?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions.

3.2.9 Is the Platform setup sufficiently clear and effective?

Roles and procedures regarding the Platform set up and organisation are both sufficiently clear and effective, underpinned by comprehensive contractual documentation, well-structured coordination mechanisms, developed through a long-standing collaboration between the Joint Secretariat and the Platform contractor.

This **clear articulation of roles and responsibilities** between the Joint Secretariat and the Platform contractor **is clearly set out in numerous documentations**. The former are defined in the Terms of Reference governing the Platform framework contract[83]. These Terms of Reference set out in detail the services to be delivered by the contractor, the activities to be undertaken, and the organisational structure required to implement these activities. They also specify the human resources needed, which includes both a coordination team and a policy team with thematic experts, as well as a support pool to be mobilised when necessary (e.g. communication or IT specialists).

The **working modalities between the Platform contractor and the Joint Secretariat support the effectiveness of the Platform setup**. These operational arrangements are precisely described in the Special Administrative Specifications[84]. Coordination between parties is structured around a Work Plan and budget proposal submitted for each sub-contract period[85], subject to Joint Secretariat approval and in line with the decisions of the Monitoring Committee. The Work Plan outlines detailed activities, methods, timelines, and associated communication tasks. The contractor must provide interim progress reports each semester and a final report covering the full Work Plan implementation cycle. Biannual coordination meetings are organised in Lille between the Joint Secretariat and the contractor’s core team, supplemented by ongoing exchanges.

The success of this coordination seems to notably be **attributed to the two entities’ longstanding collaboration of more than five years**. Parties now know that they can always turn to the Platform Coordinator (who interfaces between the contracting team and the Joint Secretariat) whenever issues arise, valuing the reliability and responsiveness they receive.[86]. Parties additionally decided to set up regular internal coordination meetings to address previous ambiguities in the division of responsibilities[87]. Such meetings include weekly bilateral meetings between the Joint Secretariat Communication Head of Unit and Platform Coordinator, and a bi-weekly COCOM (Coordination and Communication meeting) between the Joint Secretariat communication Head of Unit, Platform contractor management and thematic managers. The assessments of the contractor’s performance by the Joint Secretariat does show improvement over time: the comments’ lists in the Programme’s 2025 feedback on the Final Implementation Report (FIR) are significantly shorter and less substantive than those from 2018 and 2019[88], when the quality performance of the Platform contractor’s activities was rated at 100% by the Joint Secretariat in 2025[89] compared to a rating of 99.83% in 2018 that had led to a possible payment reduction of up to 10%.[90]

Interviews with **Joint Secretariat staff and Thematic Experts confirm that both parties consider roles and procedures to be clearly defined.** They described the division of work as complementary, reporting no ambiguity regarding responsibilities, even when certain organisational arrangements initially appeared unusual, such as having separate communication functions in both the Platform contracting team and the Joint Secretariat. Furthermore, the workflow governing interactions was portrayed as highly efficient. Having one main point of contact within the Joint Secretariat for most exchanges[91] highly facilitates the efficiency and clarity of exchanges

[83] GEIE GECOTTI PE, Single Award Framework Agreement With Subsequent Contracts.
[84] GECOTTI - PE EEIG, Special Administrative Specifications.
[85] The first subcontract period lasted 18 months, from July 2023 to December 2024, when other periods should generally last 12 months.
[86] According to interviews conducted with the Joint Secretariat and Thematic Experts.
[87] According to interviews conducted with the Joint Secretariat.
[88] Final Implementation Report 2025, Final Implementation Report 2019, Final Implementation Report 2018.
[89] FIR Quality performance assessment system.
[90] 2018-08-15 SC2 IR2 Quality performance assessment.
[91] The Platform Coordinator.

for Thematic Experts[92]. Notably, several interviewees mentioned that this current efficient working arrangement[93] enables Thematic Experts to focus on substantive tasks[94].

Box 4 Interview highlight on the set up of the Platform

> *"[…] there are many procedures to understand. Nonetheless, these procedures ensure that processes are fluid and that everyone understands who does what and in which sequence. For example, I appreciate having clearly defined rules that specify when I can communicate directly with the Joint Secretariat and when I must go through validation by the management team."*
>
> *Source: Thematic Expert Interview*

3.2.10 How effective are the support measures taken by the Programme to implement the Platform activities?

> *Disclaimer on Data Coverage*
>
> *The following two sections on Platform activities (operational evaluation) use Platform performance data up to the end of SC2, i.e., until December 2025, including a count of 71 peer reviews, to ensure consistency with other indicators covering the same period.*
>
> *The peer review section (impact evaluation, 4.3.4* To what extent does the peer review service contribute to policy improvements?*) uses the most up-to-date dataset, reflecting 73 peer reviews completed up to January 2026. As this section is not compared with other indicators, latest available figures were used.*

Overall, data highlights **very positive feedback on the effectiveness of support measures regarding the implementation of Platform activities**[95]. The Contractor has undertaken numerous activities and tasks since July 2023 until December 2025:

Table 1 Tasks published and activities organised by the Platform

Access to knowledge	Access to people	Access to expertise
▸ Editorials (20 published since SC1) ▸ Stories (64) ▸ Policy briefs (23) ▸ Validation of good practices (793)	▸ Online policy learning events / webinars (50 events organised since SC1) ▸ On site policy learning events (18)	▸ Policy Helpdesk (in the form of written feedback, matchmaking sessions or other personalised support) (187) ▸ Matchmaking events (22) ▸ Peer reviews (71)

Source: 2025-12-31 Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool[96]

The **Platform manual**[97] **describes in precise detail the specific tasks to undertake for each activity provided by the Platform**. Each activity is associated with implementation steps and a specific timeline for its implementation. For instance, for Policy helpdesk requests, the manual sets out that Thematic Experts should prepare and send a written reply by email within 2 weeks after having received the request. The manual presents good examples of written publication (editorials, stories, and policy briefs). Support measures are accordingly articulated in a clear and operational way for the contractor to implement.

[92] According to interviews and GEIE GECOTTI PE, Single Award Framework Agreement With Subsequent Contracts.

[93] The current structure has dedicated staff for cross-cutting tasks, such as communication and administration.

[94] According to interviews conducted with the Joint Secretariat and Thematic Experts.

[95] Access to expertise is one of the three services offered by the Platform. It mainly consists of three activities: managing the policy helpdesk, organizing and facilitating matchmaking sessions and peer reviews, providing thematic advice to running projects, data available on 31/12/2025.

[96] Both the peer review overview Excel workbook and the 2025-12-31 PLP monitoring and reporting tool, along with its associated datasheets, provide information on the number of peer reviews. These multiple data sources were triangulated to ensure the reliability of the results. However, the fragmentation of these sources makes it more difficult to obtain a comprehensive view of the total number of events.

[97] Policy Learning Platform Manual – Draft, May 2025.

Interviews highlight very positive feedback on the effectiveness of support measures to implement Platform activities, **particularly regarding activities related to *access to expertise***. Interviewees expressed strong appreciation for the peer review service, and the possibility to receive feedback on their application and the justification behind the final decision - each peer review request is answered through a 5-pager feedback report on the quality of the application. Interviewees also expressed satisfaction regarding matchmaking sessions and more generally, access to knowledge activities, with interviewees finding webinars and workshops in general quite useful. Similarly, good practices were deemed useful, although one interviewee expressed that their validation takes time.

Satisfaction rates of Platform event beneficiaries confirm these findings. The data collected by the contractor following the unfolding of Platform events shows that **people participating in Platform events were highly satisfied**, with on average 88% of participants claiming that the event met 'very much' and 'to a large extent' their expectations[98]. The event with the highest satisfaction rate is the matchmaking sessions with 98% of participants indicating that the event met their expectations, followed by workshops (97%), capacity-building events (97%) and peer reviews (95%), proving that Platform measures are highly effective, particularly those providing *access to expertise*, with *access to people* also delivering positive benefits.

Table 2 Share of satisfaction among Platform events participants and number of events organised per type of event since July 2023 until December 2025

Row Labels	Number of events organised	Average of share of satisfied participants (satisfied « to a large extent » and « very much »)
Matchmaking	22	98%
Capacity building event	3	97%
Workshop	15	97%
Peer reviews	71	95%
Helpdesk meetings	9	94%
Online discussion	9	91%
Peer review - follow up	9	83%
Eworkshop	7	80%
Webinar	43	71%
Grand Total	257	88%

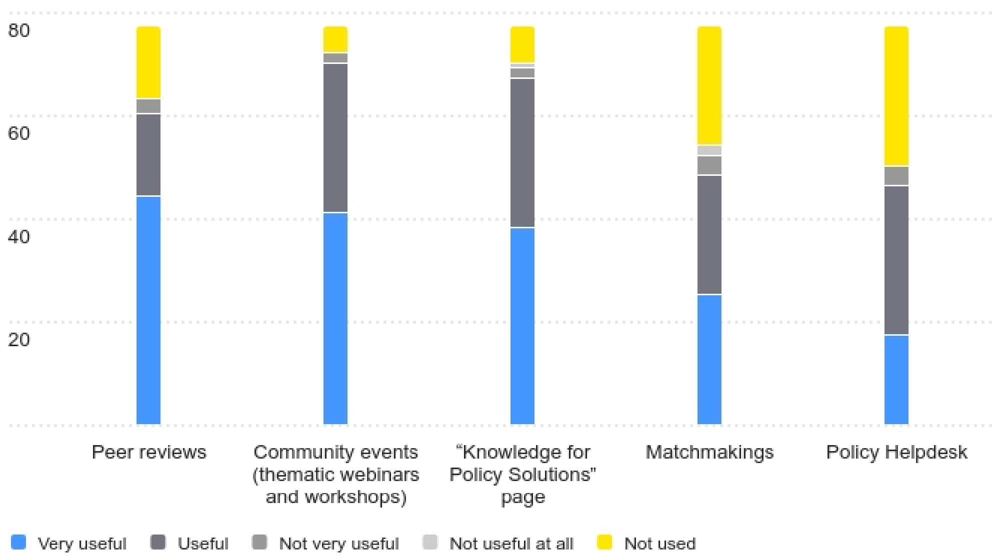
Source: 2025-12-31 Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool

Similarly, **satisfaction rates on the usefulness of the Platform's services are prominently high**[99], as 94% of the time, respondents to the Platform survey rated the services as "useful" or "very useful," with only about 6% of the time rating services as "not very useful" or "not useful at all". Overall, perceptions lean strongly positive, with 53% describing the services as "very useful", 41**%** as "useful", and just 6**%** finding them "not very useful" or "not at all useful". Here, peer reviews stand out as a unique experience, generating the highest concentration of "Very useful" ratings (44).

[98] 2025-12-31 PLP monitoring and reporting tool, data available on 31/12/2025.

[99] Online survey question "Q.4 How would you rate the usefulness of the services offered by the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions.

Figure 10 'How would you rate the usefulness of the services offered by the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform?'



Source: The Policy Learning Platform survey

Additionally, Programme support measures **show strong adaptability in responding to the needs of Platform beneficiaries, tailoring their services to needs of Platform users**. Interviewees praised this flexibility, notably mentioning the Regio-Silience initiative. In 2024, the Regio-Silience initiative was implemented after the Polish Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship reached out to the Platform through the Policy helpdesk[100], seeking support in responding to the challenges along its border with Russia, arising from the war in Ukraine. Thus, the Platform launched an interregional learning process (online discussions and onsite event) involving regions and local authorities from the six European countries bordering Russia. These exchanges focused on sharing knowledge and experience regarding policies to support development in the affected areas, resulting in the development of a set of policy recommendations. Also testifying of the Programme's flexibility and adaptability, new thematic capacity-building events were introduced in 2024 through the Platform to better support the integration of seven new Partner States[101], reflecting the Platform's ability to adapt its offer to emerging needs. These were organised by the Platform in cooperation with the Points of Contact[102], where each country could select the topic of their capacity-building event according to their strategic needs. Therefore, **the Platform's organisational setup is generally perceived as well-defined and easy to understand for all stakeholders involved.**

Box 5 Interview highlight on the Platform's agile model

"The Platform benefits from an agile and flexible model, allowing continuous adaptation of services to emerging needs. For example, new capacity-building events were introduced in 2024 to support new partner states. Its flexibility is a key asset compared to traditional public administration constraints."

Source: Monitoring Committee member interviewed

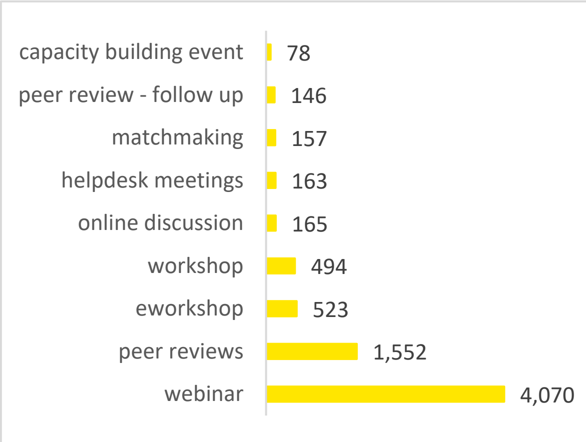
3.2.11 How effective are the outreach, animation, mobilisation actions to wider stakeholders and potential beneficiaries of the Platform?

Engagement has been strong across Platform events, but additional efforts could help connect with stakeholders still out of reach. The Platform had a wide outreach since 2023. Between 2023 and 2025, Platform events (including events organised by the Platform and events organised by other institutions i.e. external

[100] Interreg Europe, Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship, 2025, Regio-Silience Final report
Capital of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship.
Experts.
[102] Interreg Europe, 2025, Building capacities in EU candidate countries

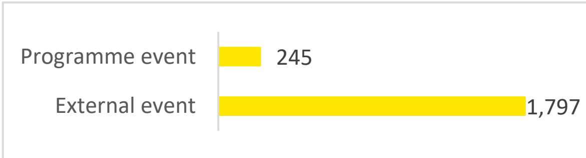
events, where the Platform content was presented) reached 9,390 participants across 257 events[103]. The event portfolio shows that peer reviews (71 events) and external events (66 events) make up the largest share of the 257 total activities, followed by webinars (43). Although peer reviews and external events dominate in occurrence, webinars consistently attract the highest attendance per session. Webinars and, to a lesser extent, external events and peer reviews, have mobilised the highest number of stakeholders.

Figure 11 Total number of participants per Platform event type



Source: 2025-12-31 Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool

Figure 12 Total number of participants in Programme events in which Platform content was presented



Source: 2025-12-31 Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool

However, **mobilisation of external stakeholders could be further improved**. On average, when data is available[104], **65% of survey respondents following a Platform event were attending a Platform event for the first time[105].** Although capacity building events were quite successful in mobilising external stakeholders (on average, 88% of people attending these events were attending a Platform event for the first time), only 38% of webinar attendees were first time Platform event attendees. They were 48% in e-workshops and 67% in workshops[106]. Additionally, the Policy Learning Platform survey shows that 69% of self-identified Platform users are Programme project partners, whereas only 31% are not project partners[107]. Similarly, 37% of peer reviews beneficiaries are already Interreg Europe project beneficiaries, compared to 63% not being already project beneficiaries[108]. This finding suggests that although the Platform already reaches a fair number of stakeholders who are not yet involved in the Programme, there is still room to mobilise a broader range of external stakeholders than usual Platform users or those who are not yet involved in a project and may be less familiar with the Programme.

This finding is corroborated by interviews and survey responses, with several interviewees noting that outreach to external stakeholders has not yet reached its full effectiveness. Several interviewees mentioned that the Platform's services remain largely unknown[109], some particularly referring to specific services, such as the peer review[110], and that it would benefit from more visibility and communication. Similarly, survey responses align

[103] 2025-12-31 Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool, data available on 31/12/2025.

[104] The Platform monitored the share of first Platform event attendees in four events only ie. only for capacity building events, e-workshops, webinars and workshops. Additionally, feedback is not mandatory, with an average response rate of 44%. Additionally, some erroneous values were removed from these calculations. For example, one data point indicated that 3,800% of participants were first-time platform users, and another stated 800%. These figures were excluded from the calculations to ensure data reliability.

[105] 2025-12-31 Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool, data available on 31/12/2025.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Online survey question "Q.1 Please specify your role regarding the Platform." Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Closed question.

[108] Peer reviews - full overview, data available on 31/12/2025.

[109] According to interviews conducted with Thematic Experts.

[110] According to interviews conducted with Thematic Experts.

with this finding: of the 23% of Platform survey respondents who are not users of the Platform, 20% declare that it is because they are unsure of how to access its services, and 32% because they were unaware of its existence, reinforcing the need for a wider mobilisation of external stakeholders.

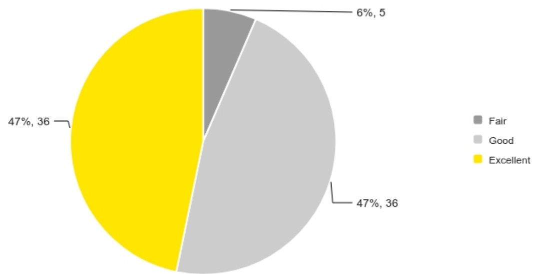
Box 6 Interview highlight on awareness of Platform's services

> *"If people were more aware of this tool, it would be even better. When I see that a project lasts four years, […], costs 20% to the national authority, etc., it is quite complex and demanding. In contrast, applying for a peer review is two pages long, and people get a response within 15 days to three weeks. Experts organise meetings, everything is taken care of, translation, interpretation, which is essential (often a barrier), as the language barrier is a big problem. Meals are covered, but also shuttles/minibuses, and accommodation. There are only advantages to this tool. "*
>
> *Source: Thematic Expert interviewed*

To mobilise a wider range of stakeholders, outreach activities of Points of Contact could be further exploited. Several interviewees noted that although Points of Contact events have the potential to promote the Platform's services, their reach often remains confined to the immediate regional community[111]. They highlighted that some areas, "grey zones", show little to no Point of Contact activity, suggesting that outreach efforts are not consistently extended across all regions, and that communication on the Platform's services should target these areas.

Beyond Programme activities and events, the structure of the Platform also has an impact on the outreach to wider stakeholders. **While evidence demonstrates that the Platform's ergonomics are widely perceived as clear, accessible, and user-friendly, the Platform remains not visible and difficult to access for first time users, curbing outreach to wider stakeholders.** Survey feedback is highly positive: 93.5% of respondents rated the accessibility and navigability of the Platform's content as either "good" or "excellent"[112],[113]. Users explicitly described the Platform as "consistently clear" and "excellent in terms of accessibility and quality of information."[114] Overall, respondents consider it well structured, transparent, and intuitive to use, with no significant technical issues reported. Beyond general accessibility, several users also highlighted the effectiveness of the filtering functions[115] and noted that the Platform is easier to use than many other EU level websites[116]. Interviews with the Joint Secretariat reinforce these findings, confirming that user-centric elements were considered during the Platform's design, allowing users to access support aligned with their needs and degree of involvement.

Figure 13 "How would you rate the accessibility and navigability of the Platform's content on the programme website"



Source: The Policy Learning Platform survey

Findings indicate that Platform first time-users may initially feel slowed down by the amount of information available on the website, which may hinder accessibility of services to wider stakeholders. Some Platform

[111] According to interviews conducted with project beneficiaries.

[112] Among 77 respondents to the Policy Learning Platform survey, 93.5% evaluated the Platform as *excellent* (36) or *good* (36), with only 5 selecting *fair*.

[113] Online survey question "Q.4 How would you rate the accessibility and navigability of the Platform's content on the programme website?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions.

[114] According to interviews conducted with Platform users.

[115] According to interviews conducted with Platform users.

[116] Ibid.

users[117] indicate that the volume of content may feel substantial for first-time users. Findings from the user tests conducted in May 2024 with 11 participants[118] further confirm this assessment. While **users expressed overall strong appreciation** for the Interreg Europe website, highlighting the usefulness and reliability of its content, they also pointed to several ergonomic shortcomings. Participants noted the visual load and navigation complexity, which hindered their immediate grasp of the offer and structure of the Platform's available services[119]. Although the Interreg Europe website, hosting the Platform, underwent an SEO (Search Engine Optimization) audit in 2025[120] since these tests, which is likely to have contributed to improving the website's overall visibility, clarity, and ergonomic coherence[121], interviewee feedback indicates that these issues may nonetheless remain marginally present.

Box 7 Interview highlight on the accessibility and effectiveness of the Platform

> *"The Platform is effective. You have a map of good practices where you can pick things next to where you are. […] If you look for a peer review on a thematic topic, it is possible. You can do a lot of things, but you must know that you can do that."*
>
> *Source: Thematic Expert Interviewed*

3.3 Task 1.3 - Communication strategy and selected communication activities

- **Implementation of the Programme's communication strategy is largely effective and efficient for core audiences, underpinned by professional management, standardised tools and strong capacity-building. Minor constraints were found in relation to extending reach beyond the Interreg Europe community and strengthening the communication of results.**
- **The Programme's digital and online tools were found to be effective in enabling day-to-day communication and well-suited to the operational needs of projects. Some minor limitations in the flexibility of the design of the project web pages were noted.**
- **Programme partners, including Points of Contact, contribute generally well to Programme communications. However, the intensity and scope of Point of Contact contribution were found to be uneven across a minority of countries. Most beneficiaries rely primarily on the Joint Secretariat for Programme updates.**
- **The level of satisfaction among project implementors with the Programme's communication support tools is very high, with trainings, templates and ad hoc support enabling beneficiaries to deliver communications confidently. However, some beneficiaries noted that dedicated social media support could help them communicate project achievements more effectively. The most effective communication activities are social media channels, public relations & events, and the project web page.**

3.3.1 Is the implementation of the communication strategy effective and efficient?

Overall, implementation of the communication strategy was found to be professional and reliable at the Programme level. Monitoring Committee Members and Points of Contact during interviews describe the Joint Secretariat's communication as high-quality and responsive, with clear, precise materials and visible presence

[117] According to interviews conducted with beneficiaries.

[118] Interreg, Wexperience, May 2024, Feedback from User Tests Interreg Europe.

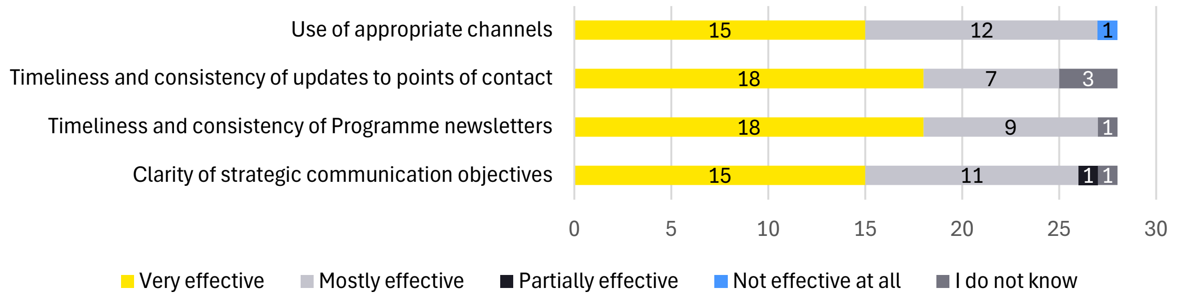
[119] Ibid.

[120] Interreg Europe, 2024, SEO Gap Analysis.

[121] The SEO audit in April 2024 identified more than 700 broken links, incorrect redirects, and duplicated pages. It provided detailed recommendations aimed at improving efficiency, reducing user time burden, and making the interface more attractive and coherent.

at European events. Survey findings reinforce this view; at least 25 out of 28 Monitoring Committee members rated each of the below aspects of Programme communication as either "very effective" or "mostly effective".[122]

Figure 14 "Based on your experience in the Monitoring Committee, how would you assess the implementation of the Programme's communication strategy in the following areas?"



Source: Survey to Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contact

The above results do not indicate clear variation across areas - the "timeliness and consistency of Programme newsletters" was rated the most effective only by a small margin. In addition, the comparatively higher count of "I do not know" for "timeliness and consistency of updates to Points of Contact" may be due to the fact that some Monitoring Committee members are not Points of Contact and would not have any opinion on the matter. One member rated the "use of appropriate channels" as "not effective at all" but did not provide an explanation when prompted to expand. Notwithstanding, the perceived effectiveness of the implementation of the communication strategy was largely confirmed during interviews, where Monitoring Committee members and/or Points of Contact highlighted the high demand for the Programme[123] as a key indicator demonstrating Programme awareness, and appreciated the quality of communication activities and materials produced by the Joint Secretariat.

At the project level, beneficiaries in focus groups likewise report that the framework for communication "works well" and has improved since 2014–2020, noting the Joint Secretariat's ongoing efforts to update and improve tools.[124] The current model is described as more efficient, consistent, and user-friendly, while standardised tools, templates, and training allow for harmonised outputs and a reduced burden on project partners.[125] Communication training and practical workshops (e.g., storytelling) are also widely valued, especially for staff without communications backgrounds, and are frequently re-watched on demand. Further information regarding the effectiveness of digital tools and Joint Secretariat communication support (trainings, guidelines, templates) are presented in the two subsequent evaluation questions under Task 1.3.

With respect to attracting new partners at the Programme level, word of mouth was found to be the most effective channel. When current or potential beneficiaries were asked how they first learned about Interreg Europe, colleagues within or outside of their organisation accounted for almost half of the responses. Out of 598 total responses (multiple choices allowed), 295 (49.3%) cited knowledge of Interreg Europe came from colleagues within their organisation (183) or peers in other organisations (112)[126]. The Interreg Europe website also ranked highly, with 134 counts, while events accounted for 98 responses. On the other hand, only 38 beneficiaries responded that they learnt about the Programme through social media.

[122] Online survey question "Based on your experience in the Monitoring Committee, how would you assess the implementation of the Programme's communication strategy in the following areas?" Monitoring Committee / Points of Contact Members (n=28). Closed question.

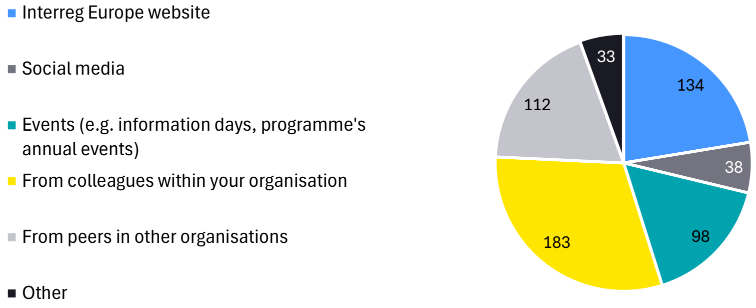
[123] Based on data collected from the Quality Report Table (found on the Interreg Europe Portal), the Programme approved a total 262 project proposals over the three calls from 374 eligible applications, demonstrating a high overall demand for participation.

[124] Focus group conducted with project communication managers.

[125] Interviews conducted with Programme beneficiaries. Focus group conducted with project communication managers.

[126] Online survey question "How did you first learn about Interreg Europe?" Beneficiaries (n=598). Closed question – multiple answers allowed.

Figure 15 "How did you first learn about Interreg Europe?" (Responses = 598)



Source: Survey to beneficiaries/potential beneficiaries

These patterns suggest that Programme information travels predominantly through pre-existing users and their professional networks, with direct channels (e.g. website, events) acting as effective secondary outreach tools and social media contributing only marginally. Notwithstanding, while multiple beneficiaries at interview said that they had been involved with the Programme in previous programming periods, registrations for annual events regularly show over half of attendees self-reporting as newcomers (55% in 2023, 60% in 2024, 50% in 2025).[127] Therefore, these results should not necessarily be taken solely as a reflection of the Programme's outreach efforts during the current 2021-2025 period.

These findings are partially corroborated with evidence gathered from interviews and focus groups with Programme actors. Although Programme communication is generally perceived as effective, some beneficiaries reported difficulties in engaging the general public and actors outside their networks and sometimes perceived the Programme's communication efforts to lean towards informing active beneficiaries rather than conveying results and impact to broader audiences. Several beneficiaries and Points of Contact highlighted the importance of and perceived stronger engagement from social media or other new content forms in communicating project results, with some suggesting this area could be strengthened at both programme and project levels. They cited lower visibility of EU projects, as well as the content-overloaded nature of social media channels as potential barriers to gaining attention.[128] Thus, while social media may play a more limited role in Programme discovery, it is perceived as more effective communicating project achievements to wider audiences. In this regard, one Monitoring Committee member and one Joint Secretariat staff member at interview highlighted a shift in Programme communication towards more innovative media, highlighting that younger staff with "fresh" ideas are helping to push the communication of project achievements now that implementation is underway.

3.3.2 Are the digital / online communication tools helping the Programme's operations to be implemented in an effective way?

Project webpages on the Interreg Europe site are regarded as logical, easy, and non-burdensome, functioning as a single repository for news, events, and partner information that is easier than maintaining a standalone site. Beneficiaries consistently highlight that the project webpages and online spaces simplify communication work, save time, and allow internal teams to operate without external experts, all while ensuring compliance with Interreg Europe branding. This standardisation delivers consistent outputs across projects as teams can rely on a ready-made framework instead of building materials from scratch. For example, the page's built-in prompts (field descriptions) were highlighted by one beneficiary during the focus group as particularly helpful. In addition to providing a tool for beneficiaries to communicate project achievements, some communication managers during the focus group noted that the projects' webpages are also useful places for other partners and Joint Secretariat staff can go to monitor project activity.

Notwithstanding, some minor issues with the project web page were observed. The first pertains to the occurrence of bugs in the setting up project pages at the start of their implementation for some beneficiaries,

[127] Based on data from registrations for annual events between 2023-2025

[128] According to multiple interviews conducted with beneficiaries and focus group conducted with project communication managers.

although they highlighted that these issues were promptly resolved by the Joint Secretariat.[129] Secondly, a minority of beneficiaries during the focus group noted a lack of flexibility with the length and type of content that can be posted onto a project's webpage. One project partner noted that the 60-character title limits are sometimes too restrictive, making creative and varied titles difficult, while another expressed frustration over the limitation of only one photo for their project's "library" page. A third partner noted that while HTML editing of the page is supposedly offered, it does not work in practice, preventing them from customising the look and feel of the webpage. Another partner noticed that closed or invitation-only events sometimes appear on the public page, which they thought could be confusing for external audiences, despite being tagged as "invitation-only". Lastly, two project communications managers requested greater transparency regarding how project updates are selected for publication on the Programme's central webpage and in its newsletter. When uploading an article, they tick the option indicating that they wish it to be published; however, publication does not always follow.

Among other digital assets, beneficiaries characterise the Good Practice database within the Policy Learning Platform as one of the Programme's "brightest feature[s]".[130] They use it to showcase practices, contact them directly, and prepare proposals or peer reviews by identifying via filters experienced peer organisations on a given policy area. This functionality was found to directly support policy learning and collaboration. More information on the Platform databases is presented in sections 3.2.11 and 4.3.

That being said, while beneficiaries highlighted the utility of project webpages and the Good Practice database for information access and partner discovery, **a minority noted that they can feel more functional and not as well suited for outreach to relevant audiences outside of the Programme** (see 3.3.1.).[131] Several beneficiaries and Monitoring Committee members perceived that external audiences engaged with the Programme more strongly through social media (especially LinkedIn) and thus treat the project webpages as less of a main driver of outreach. With respect to the Platform itself, one Thematic Expert expressed that social media communication is a possible area for improvement.[132]

3.3.3 Do the Programme partners, especially the Points of Contact, contribute effectively to the implementation of the Programme's communication strategy?

Evidence of effective partner contribution was found across interviews and focus groups, with Points of Contact and Monitoring Committee members describing concrete national-level dissemination (websites, social media, thematic seminars, info days) and beneficiaries reporting specific instances of timely programme-level updates from the Joint Secretariat. Points of Contact confirm their active involvement in publishing project results on national websites and organising thematic seminars to showcase achievements.[133] They also describe the organisation of the national info days before calls, training sessions for partners and controllers, and Point of Contact meetings with the general view that they play an effective role in disseminating Programme information. These perceptions are confirmed by surveyed Monitoring Committee, of which 15 of the 28 respondents considered that Points of Contact contribute to disseminating information "very effectively" and 7 "somewhat effectively" (with 6 responding "I do not know").[134]

Beneficiary survey results indicate **high overall satisfaction (92%) with Point of Contact communications**, albeit alongside **a minority of dissatisfaction (8%)** which respondents linked to communication infrequency, lack of

[129] According to focus group conducted with project communication managers.

[130] According to focus group conducted with project communication managers.

[131] According to interview conducted with a Programme beneficiary.

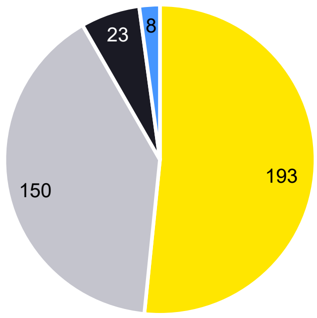
[132] According to interview conducted with a Thematic Expert of the Policy Learning Platform.

[133] According to interviews conducted with Monitoring Committee members and Points of Contact.

[134] Online survey question: "To what extent do points of contact contribute effectively as relays to disseminate information concerning the Programme information?". Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contact (n=28). Closed question.

contact, or the fact that Points of Contact generally serve only to relay administrative information, in addition to expressing a preference for the timelier information from the Joint Secretariat.[135]

Figure 16 "How satisfied are you with the communication of programme updates and achievements from national or regional points of contact?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries

These survey results were echoed by perceptions of project communication managers gathered during focus groups and interviews, which confirmed generally high satisfaction with communication from Points of Contact. However, a minority of beneficiaries pointed to some **variation in Point of Contact contributions by country and by stage of the project lifecycle.**[136] For instance, one participant reported lower interaction on communication and limited visibility, while another found them to be accessible but primarily for administrative/financial/reporting questions with little proactive outreach. A different participant reported strong support at application but rare contact during implementation, with day-to-day communication handled by lead partners. This is reflective of their naturally heavier communication responsibilities at the project application stage in attracting new beneficiaries and advising them on eligibility.

Capacity and delivery constraints, acknowledged by Points of Contact at interview, help to explain this unevenness, as some national teams face limitations in human resources, time, and tools, adapt channels to local audiences (e.g. translation of communication outputs). In addition, for some beneficiaries, reduced interaction reflects limited demand due to familiarity with the Programme and strong coordination with the Secretariat.

Box 8 Interview highlight on Point of Contact communication challenges

"As a Point of Contact, it is really tricky to find time for the communication strategy. I am not able to communicate purely about Interreg Europe. On the Joint Secretariat level, they do a great job, but on the national level it is more complicated, as it depends on the workload of the Points of Contact."
Source: Point of Contact interviewed

Notwithstanding, Points of Contact in the focus group described several communication activities they believe to be effective in disseminating Programme updates and attracting new audiences. These included in-person meetings, formal letters/emails with public bodies, joint national websites and country-specific Interreg Europe pages, as well as national information days (especially with support from the Joint Secretariat).

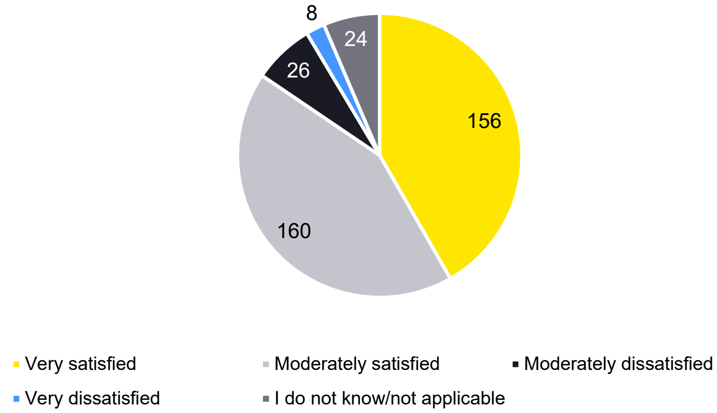
[135] Online survey question "How satisfied are you with the communication of programme updates and achievements from national or regional points of contact?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed and open question.

[136] When asked about their satisfaction with the communication of Programme updates by the Points of Contact, only 23 and 8 out of 374 beneficiaries responding to the survey reported being "moderately" or "very" dissatisfied respectively.

3.3.4 What is the level of satisfaction among the project implementors with the Programme support tools, such as seminars, tutorials, in person written guidance, templates?

When asked about their satisfaction with the supporting tools for communication, 84.5% of Beneficiaries responded positively, reporting being either “very” (156) of “moderately” (160) satisfied with the seminars, tutorials, guidance and templates provided by the Programme[137].

Figure 17 “How satisfied are you with the communication of available support tools (e.g. seminars, tutorials, in person/written guidance, templates) from national or regional point of contact?“



Source: Survey to Beneficiaries

Project communication managers describe a set of support tools that is largely **clear, accessible and directly usable**. The **training seminars and guidance** (e.g. storytelling and article-writing workshops and website/CMS tutorials) were repeatedly cited as extremely useful for project teams. The **“Storytelling” seminar** was highlighted as particularly inspiring, with several participants reporting increased communications skills as a direct result that are applicable not only to the project but to their role more broadly within the organisation. For example, one focus-group participant said the storytelling training “completely changed” their project video, shifting it from listing partners and budgets to a human, narrative story that better engages audiences.[138] The “kick-off” training days (including a full day dedicated to communication for newcomers), were highly valued for helping teams understand rules and good practices at the outset. The recording of these sessions was also greatly appreciated by communications managers as they allow for learning on their own time, especially useful when they are unavailable or when new staff join.

Templates and structured materials were also found to be useful to beneficiaries, especially PowerPoint decks, which are viewed as **helpful and “time-saving,”** providing a solid base that projects can adapt to their needs without hiring external experts. Moreover, the Programme manual and branding/logo guidelines are described as clear and easy to use, providing a solid reference point when preparing materials.

Across interviews and focus groups, the **responsiveness of the Joint Secretariat** in dealing with communication matters emerges as a consistent strength. Participants report that ad-hoc questions (e.g., layout problems, analytics issues, CMS glitches) receive quick, practical answers, whether contacting the Joint Secretariat directly or via the lead partner. In comparison with other European Programmes, several beneficiaries noted that Interreg Europe provides more practical, project-specific support, while others tend to offer generic European Commission guidance with far less hands-on applicability.

Box 9 Interview and focus group highlights on the effectiveness of communication tools

“The programme’s communication tools, especially webinars, were excellent. They helped us learn from other projects and share experiences.” *Source: Beneficiary interviewed* *“In comparison with support received from European Programmes, Interreg Europe is the only one giving such support*

[137] Online survey question “How satisfied are you with the communication of available support tools (e.g. seminars, tutorials, in person/written guidance, templates) from national or regional point of contact?” Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[138] According to Focus Group conducted with project communication managers.

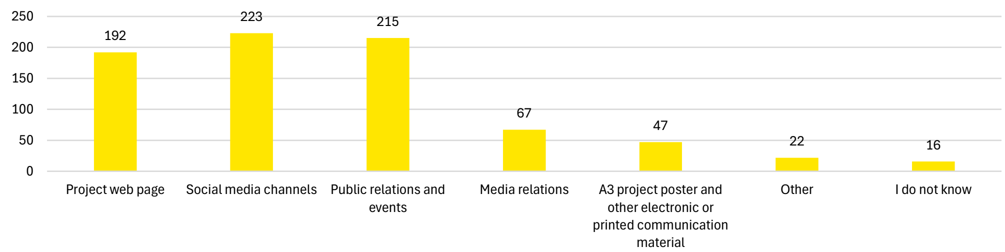
(event, training). The first events and training days were very useful".
Source: Project communication manager during focus group

While overall satisfaction with the Programmes communication support tools was found to be very high, two minor shortcomings and gaps were observed. Firstly, programme implementors generally noted the increasing **importance of social media tools** to be able to communicate their projects' achievements effectively, which often requires a different approach vis-à-vis traditional communication methods (e.g. websites, newsletters). Multiple focus group participants thus noted a gap in dedicated social media training. As most beneficiaries rely on their own organisational experience, they emphasised that more structured guidance and support on aspects such as platform choice (e.g. LinkedIn vs Instagram vs X), content strategy (especially short-form video content), and tone/frequency would help them increase the effectiveness of this communication. One partner did not recall any dedicated social media training, while another recalled only a brief mention during a training day in Lille. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that not all projects maintain social media accounts, and participation on social media is not an obligation under the Programme's requirements.[139] In addition to dedicated trainings for social media, one communications manager expressed a desire for less rigid templates that can be used for more diverse communication formats, such as e-magazines or brochures. Finally, one beneficiary noted that some tools (e.g. story telling workshop) were not visible to all partners (despite other project partners reporting having attended), and several non-lead partners reported never attending a communication event despite holding communication responsibilities, suggesting that the dissemination of tools and events could be strengthened.

3.3.5 Which communication activity is the most effective in helping the project implementors communicate on their project achievements?

Survey responses show a clear preference for three communication activities:[140] social media channels (223 selections), public relations & events (215), and the project web page (192), which are selected far more frequently than media relations (67) and printed materials (47). As multiple responses were allowed, this pattern indicates that beneficiaries use a mix of complementary channels (i.e., hosting content through webpages, engaging with audiences through social media or events) to reach their audiences.

Figure 18 "From your experience, which has been the most effective tool to communicate your project's achievements?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries

Interview evidence further supports these findings and explains these activities' practical utility in communicating project achievements. Several beneficiaries described the project web page as their **primary publishing hub for achievements**, which are then amplified through their own organisations' social media and other outlets. Another interviewee was explicit that the "project webpage is the most effective" channel for showcasing results, while others listed websites and LinkedIn/social media among their core vehicles. Within public relations & events, beneficiaries highlighted thematic webinars, peer-to-peer/thematic events, and Good Practices via the Platform as effective for visibility and uptake among the relevant audiences, rather than one-way communication. These formats help demonstrate achievements to peers who can apply or adapt them, complementing the webpage and social media channels. Conversely, media relations and printed materials appear secondary in both the survey counts and featured very little during interviews.

[140] Online survey question "From your experience, which has been the most effective tool to communicate your project's achievements?" Beneficiaries (n=782). Closed question – multiple answers allowed.

3.3.6 What are the recommendations for improving the Programmes communication strategy and/or selected activities, mainly for the project implementors?

Evidence indicates that the Programme's communications are professionally managed, effective and largely efficient, supported by reliable digital tools, standardised templates and valued training. Beneficiaries commonly use the project webpage to communicate achievements, while discovery of the Programme itself remains driven by professional networks. Minor issues relate to the perceived lack of guidance on communicating results via social media, uneven Point of Contact capacity across some countries, and specific usability/visibility gaps (webpage flexibility, publication transparency, social media skills and templates). The recommendations below were identified by Programme actors during consultations and focus on practical adjustments that can help beneficiaries communicate results more effectively.

- **Provide dedicated social media support (training, practical guidance and adaptable templates) for project teams.** Several project communication managers requested tailored social media training and more flexible assets to support short-form, platform-specific content (e.g. LinkedIn), noting that social channels are perceived as effective for communicating achievements to external audiences. A structured training (how to choose channels; content formats; tone/frequency) would help projects that lack communications expertise and address the observed gap in current provision, according to focus group participants. Notwithstanding, not all projects use social media for communication, and its use is not obligatory (as opposed to other formats). Programme support for communication should still therefore remain reflective of all project communication activities.
- **Ensure communications trainings reach audiences beyond Lead Partners.** Some project communications managers during focus groups noted they did not have access to some trainings on communication. As trainings related to communication for the Programme are open to both project Lead Partners and communication managers, the perceived lack of coverage or access may thus be due to changes in communication managers after invitations have already been sent.
- **Work to enhance the flexibility of project webpages while preserving brand consistency.** Beneficiaries flagged specific constraints (e.g., 60-character title limit, single image in "library", HTML editing not functioning as intended). Addressing these minor issues would allow communication managers to provide a richer and more tailored presentation of results while maintaining the webpage's role as an easy, non-burdensome publishing hub.
- **Clarify and communicate the criteria and process for featuring project content on the Programme website/ newsletter.** Two project communications managers sought greater transparency about how updates are selected for central publication after opting in. A brief published set of criteria would reduce frustration, set expectations, and help communication managers to adapt their submissions to the Programme's needs.

4. Main findings of the impact evaluation (Lot 2)

4.1 Task 2 – Overall questions on Programme performance

- **The Programme's intervention logic is understood and perceived as clear, relevant and coherent. Although it may not be immediately intuitive for new users, understanding improves rapidly as stakeholders engage with the Programme.**
- **The Programme is achieving its objectives to date by effectively delivering interregional learning and capacity-building activities and placing participating organisations on a credible pathway towards policy improvement, although many results are still emerging and cannot yet be fully observed or quantified.**
- **The Programme supports territorial cohesion by fostering balanced participation and learning across regions, with indications of slightly greater learning gains in less developed regions, however, measurable reductions in territorial disparities are expected to materialise only over the longer term, likely beyond 2028.**
- **Progress towards the Programme's objectives is primarily driven by strong alignment with national/ regional/ local policy priorities, effective peer-based learning formats and adequate organisational**

capacity, while constraints remain non-systemic and largely attributable to external political, institutional and resource factors beyond the Programme's control.

- **Programme performance does not present major structural weaknesses, while a clear set of targeted, incremental improvements could further strengthen effectiveness, impact and usability.**
- **Interreg Europe demonstrates strong EU added value through its pan-European scope, strategic policy focus and emphasis on capacity building, which already translates into tangible policy improvements. National mechanisms cannot replace the distinctive learning-based cooperation model underpinning Interreg Europe's intervention logic.**

4.1.1 Is the Programme's intervention logic clear and coherent?

Among project beneficiaries, Platform users, and Monitoring Committee Members, the Programme's intervention logic is understood as clear, coherent, and relevant. **Interviewees agreed that the Programme logic is clear, but a few noted that its "soft" character, focused on improving how regions design and deliver policy rather than financing large-scale physical infrastructure, can be less intuitive at the start**. Interviewees state that they consider the means and indicators highly relevant to achieve the intended results of their project[141]. Beneficiaries widely said the intervention logic guided their work, and they viewed the activities as coherent with the objectives and expected outcomes. They particularly valued the Programme's "soft" measures and activities, based on knowledge sharing and capacity-building to drive policy improvement rather than direct physical investments, which tend to drive longer-term policy change[142], hence highlighting the relevance of the intervention logic. Few beneficiaries mentioned that because the Programme seeks profound, long-term transformation, impacts are often not visible to the public and are difficult to grasp and communicate in the short-term. In two case study projects (DEBUTING and SKYLA)[143], individual partners reported early-stage difficulties linking activities to objectives and described the intervention logic as initially abstract. However, the few concerns raised were typically resolved as stakeholders became more familiar with the Programme and as project implementation progressed.

Platform users reported that the intervention logic was clear (see § 4.3.1 for further detail) and, similarly**, most project beneficiaries (around 70%) understood from the start how the Programme would support improvements to regional development policies**, indicating a strong clarity of the intervention logic at entry, while 24% found the logic unclear at first but understandable later[144]. Only 6% continued to find the intervention logic unclear. Among these 21 respondents who still found the intervention logic unclear, most nonetheless reported policy improvements resulting from the capacity-building gained through the Programme[145], showing that the logic works even when not fully understood at first. Only two of the 21 respondents reported seeing no pathway toward policy improvement, while six indicated it was simply too early to assess results. Moreover, most of these respondents (16 out of 21) belong to Call 2 and Call 3 projects. These elements could reinforce earlier findings that the intervention logic becomes clearer as stakeholders gain experience with the Programme.

Survey responses from Monitoring Committee members, who are highly familiar with the Programme, corroborate these findings. The monitoring committee **members judged all three links in the intervention logic to be relevant, with no link rated irrelevant.** The strongest conviction is at the start: Monitoring Committee members widely estimate that exchange of experience leads to people gaining new knowledge and increasing their capacities in their policy area (93% of respondents rated it as relevant, with 75% very, 18% mostly)[146]. The middle link, that the new knowledge gained would lead to organisational capacities, maintains 93% score of relevance among Monitoring Committee members, but with lower intensity (50% rate it as very relevant, 43%

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[141] According to interviews conducted with beneficiaries.

[142] A finding corroborated with case study findings.

[143] Case studies are available in Annex 1.

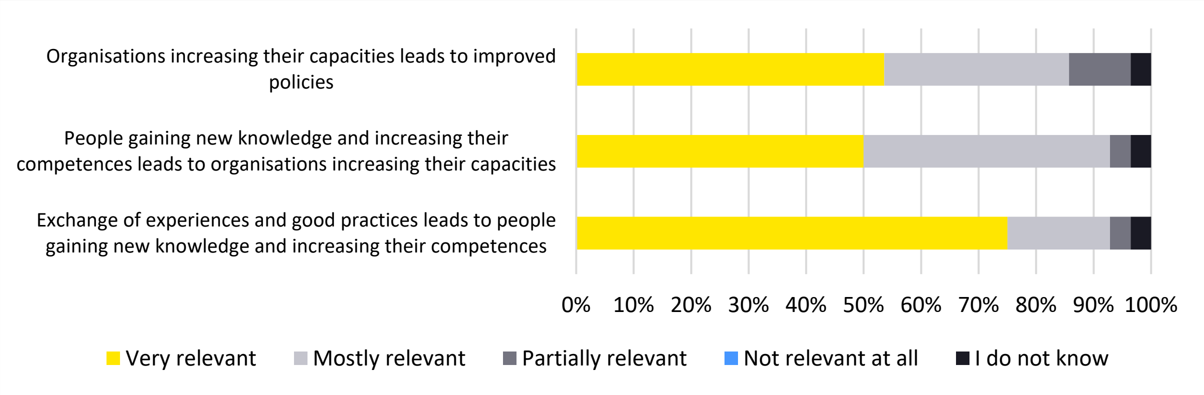
[144] Online survey question "From the start of the project, did you understand how the Programme would help participants and organisations improve regional development policies?" Platform users (n=77). Closed question with conditional questions.

[145] Among the 21 respondents who indicated that the intervention logic remained unclear, 13 nonetheless reported achieving policy improvements attributed to the capacity building gained through the project.

[146] Online survey question "What is your opinion on the relevance of the Programme's intervention logic?" Monitoring Committee respondents n=28). Closed question with conditional questions.

as mostly). The final link, that organisational capacities lead to improved policies, remains perceived as highly relevant (86% overall). Overall, all links of the intervention logic are deemed as relevant according to Monitoring Committee members, and confidence is highest at the experience exchange stage and gradually softens toward policy outcomes. This strong relevance suggests that the Programme has a credible path toward capacity-building and policy improvements: assuming the right conditions are in place, the intervention logic can realistically deliver the Programme's intended impact.

Figure 19 "What is your opinion on the relevance of the Programme's intervention logic?"



Source: Survey to Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contact

4.1.2 To what extent does the Programme achieve its objectives?

Evidence from across the evaluation questions provides consistent support for the conclusion that the Programme is achieving its objectives to date. Findings across the impact evaluation confirm that the Programme's intervention logic is clear, coherent and well understood by beneficiaries and stakeholders, and that its design provides a credible pathway from interregional learning to institutional capacity-building and policy improvement. Across projects and the Platform services, learning activities are widely perceived as relevant and effective, and are consistently associated with improvements in individual professional capacities and organisational practices. Importantly, multiple evaluation questions document that increased organisational capacity has already translated into concrete policy improvements in a range of contexts, including through new projects financed through the policy instrument(s) addressed by the project, changes in the management if the instrument(s), and revision of the instrument(s). While the scale and timing of these effects vary and full impacts will materialise over a longer timeframe, barriers to objective achievement are limited and largely external, and no systemic implementation issues have been identified. Triangulated evidence across the following sections indicates that the Programme is functioning as intended and is on a credible pathway towards achieving its objectives, while recognising that some results are still emerging.

Overall, the available evidence indicates that the Programme is progressing in line with its objectives and intervention logic. While monitoring data remain partial and result-level indicators are still immature, early outputs demonstrate substantial engagement and implementation momentum, particularly through interregional cooperation projects and the Platform events. Triangulated findings from across the evaluation questions confirm that learning and exchange activities are relevant, well understood and effective in strengthening individual and organisational capacities, and that these capacity gains are already translating into concrete policy improvements in a range of contexts, albeit unevenly and at different speeds. Given the Programme's stage of implementation and the expected timing of policy effects, the absence of fully measurable results at this stage does not point to underperformance. Rather, the evidence suggests that this unique Programme is functioning as intended and remains on track to achieve its objectives over the full programming period, with a clearer picture of outcomes expected as projects progress into later phases.

Indicators

The Interreg Europe Programme pursues the objective of **strengthening the institutional capacity of public authorities and relevant stakeholders to improve the implementation of regional development policies**[147].

Table 3 - Output indicators

Specific objective	Indicator	Measurement unit	Final target (2029)
Enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, in particular those mandated to manage a specific territory, and of stakeholders	Participations in joint actions across borders	Participants	14,000
	Organisations cooperating across borders	Organisations	13,000
	Pilot actions jointly developed and implemented in projects	Pilot actions	190
	Policy instruments addressed	Policy instruments	1,700

Source: Interreg Europe, Cooperation Programme documents, 2nd amendment – final version (approved by EC on 23 July 2024).

Table 4 - Result indicators

Specific objective	Indicator	Measurement unit	Final target (2029)
Enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, in particular those mandated to manage a specific territory, and of stakeholders	People with increased capacity due to their participation on platform events	Participants	4,200
	Organisations with increased capacity due to their participation in interregional cooperation	Organisations	8,500
	Policy instruments improved thanks to Interreg Europe	Policy instruments	850

Source: Interreg Europe, Cooperation Programme documents, 2nd amendment – final version (approved by EC on 23 July 2024).

The quantitative evidence presented below is based on partial monitoring data. For interregional cooperation projects, available figures relate to two out of three project calls, with several indicators depending on self-reporting at specific project milestones. For the Platform, data are available for four out of five reporting periods. As a result, the data provide an early and incomplete picture of progress and should be interpreted as indicative rather than exhaustive.

Outputs

Available data point to **substantial early implementation of Programme activities**, particularly through **interregional cooperation projects and** the **Platform**. Participation in joint actions across borders, as captured through the Platform events, reached **9,390 participants,** against a target of 14,000, based on data from four reporting periods[148]. This early engagement was driven primarily by strong uptake in MS1 (5,697 participants), with a further 3,693 participants recorded in MS2, reflecting a significant level of engagement at an early stage of the Programme. In parallel, cooperation projects (call 1 and 2) address a large number of policy instruments, with **1,033 policy instruments** targeted across calls 1 and 2 only, complemented by a further 73 policy instruments addressed through the peer reviews, against a total target of 1,700[149].

Uptake of **pilot actions** currently stands at **61**, against a target of 190[150]. Pilot actions may be introduced either at project application or later during implementation after the mid-term review. To date, three calls for interregional cooperation projects have been launched, but they are at different stages of maturity. Only call 1 projects have already completed their mid-term reviews, which effectively closes the window for introducing additional pilot actions under that call. In contrast, projects approved under calls 2 and 3 are still at earlier stages of implementation and may still introduce pilot actions once they reach the mid-term review stage.

Disaggregated data show that 57 of the 61 approved pilot actions originate from call 1 projects, while only one pilot action has so far been approved under call 2 and three under call 3, all at application stage[151]. Within call 1, approximately one third of pilot actions were requested at application stage, while the majority were introduced later during implementation following the mid-term review[152]. The current level of uptake therefore largely

[147] Interreg Europe, *Cooperation Programme document* (2nd amendment - final version; approved by EC on 23 July 2024).
[148] Interreg Europe, *Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool* Excel
[149] Interreg Europe, *Policy Report Results* Excel; *Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool* Excel
[150] Interreg Europe, *Overview pilot actions* Excel
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

reflects the behaviour of the most mature call and the initial application-stage choices of later calls. As a result, the observed uptake cannot yet be interpreted as representative of overall pilot action uptake under the Programme.

Illustratively, if projects approved under calls 2 and 3 were to display uptake patterns similar to those observed for call 1, in particular a comparable increase in pilot actions following mid-term reviews, the cumulative number of approved pilot actions would increase substantially relative to current levels and could contribute significantly towards the Programme target. However, such an outcome remains contingent on future project-level decisions and implementation dynamics and cannot be assumed at this stage. The indicator should therefore be considered as still evolving, with a significant share of potential pilot actions expected to materialise later in the Programme lifecycle.

Results

Result-level indicators show early but limited observable effects, reflecting both the Programme's stage of implementation and the nature of the reporting mechanisms. With respect to individual capacity gains, as of December 2025, **1,080** (target: 4,200) participants have so far reported increased capacity as a result of participation in the Platform activities, however the numbers are expected to increase once final reporting is completed[153].

Indicators related to organisational capacity gains and policy improvement remain particularly immature, largely due to the Programme's implementation timeline and reporting coverage to date. Available quantitative data from cooperation projects currently cover two out of three project calls, and only projects from call 1 have progressed far enough to report any policy improvements. Available policy results data indicates that 62 partners have so far reported and demonstrated policy improvements (i.e., validated by the joint secretariat), in addressed policy instruments, complemented by a small number of cases reported through the Platform monitoring[154].

The available evidence shows that core mechanisms underpinning the Programme's intervention logic are functioning as intended: participation and learning activities are well established, institutional capacity gains are already observable, and where projects have reached sufficient maturity, these gains are translating into concrete policy improvements. These patterns provide consistent indications that the Programme is on track to generate meaningful policy improvements over time, even though the full extent of results cannot yet be quantified.

4.1.3 To what extent does the Programme contribute to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?

Overall, there is strong consensus that the Programme makes a clear contribution to reducing territorial disparities and improving territorial cohesion, particularly for less developed regions, which supports the finding that disparities are narrowing. Definitive conclusions cannot yet be substantiated at this stage of implementation.

Project beneficiaries[155] stress that **learning from other territories helps them avoid isolation and exposes them to policy solutions they might otherwise never encounter**[156]. They emphasise that all regions benefit in some way, and many particularly value the opportunity to compare themselves with more advanced regions [157]. Beneficiaries also emphasise that the more actively and consistently they engage in projects, the more they tend to learn[158]. While most believe the Programme will ultimately help reduce territorial disparities, a few caution that it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions at this stage.

Survey results corroborate this finding: Monitoring Committee members express **a strongly positive view of the Programme's contribution to reducing territorial disparities**. A large majority of respondents (74%) believe the

[153] Interreg Europe, *Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool* Excel

[154] Interreg Europe, *Policy Report Results* Excel; *Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool* Excel

[155] According to interviews conducted with beneficiaries.

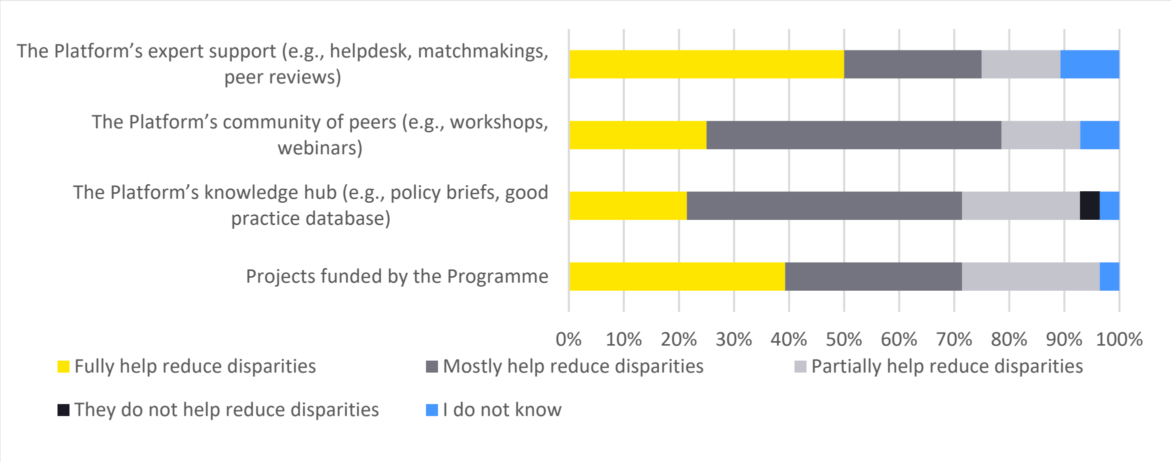
[156] Ibid.

[157] Ibid.

[158] Ibid.

Programme helps reduce disparities, either fully (34%) or mostly (40%), indicating broad alignment with cohesion objectives[159]. The survey highlights that projects strongly help reducing disparities (39,9% fully, 32.1% mostly), but also the Platform. Most respondents (71%) believe The Platform's knowledge hub helps fully or mostly reduce territorial disparities (21% fully, 50% mostly). Similarly, 75% of peers rate the community of peers as fully or mostly helpful while the strongest appreciation lies for expert support, with 79% of respondents stating that the latter helps fully or mostly reduce territorial disparities. Only 1% think the Programme does not help reduce disparities, and 6% are unsure, both marginal results compared with the positive assessments. No additional qualitative insights were collected to explain the one negative and few uncertain responses. Given that these answers are isolated[160], they likely reflect personal experiences or limited exposure to certain Programme activities, rather than pointing to a broader pattern.

Figure 20 "Do you believe the Policy Learning Platform and projects of the Programme help reduce disparities?"



Source: Survey to Monitoring Committee members / Points of Contact

Similarly, **available geographical data points to a regional balanced distribution of project participants, policy improvements, and funds influenced, with a slightly greater emphasis on learning for less developed regions**[161]. Overall, 9% of countries reported at least one policy improvement attributable to their project. Among the reported improvements, more developed regions account for 42 (44%), less developed regions for 37 (37%), and transition regions for 18 (19%). This pattern mirrors the overall composition of project partners: 35% from less developed regions, 39% from more developed regions, 23% from transition regions, 1% from EU candidate countries, and 1% from Switzerland and Norway. The distribution of declared policy improvements is broadly proportional to this mix, suggesting that all region types have improved their policies at a similar rate. At the same time, the volume of funding influenced is higher in less developed regions (over EUR 26.9 million), than in more developed regions (over EUR 19.8 million), which aligns with the finding that less developed regions tend to gain more from the Programme. While this may be partly due to the greater availability of Cohesion Policy resources in less developed regions[162], it is also important to note that more developed regions often rely more on their own resources and may face higher costs for comparable policy improvements. As a result, this pattern remains consistent with the Programme's contribution to reducing territorial disparities.

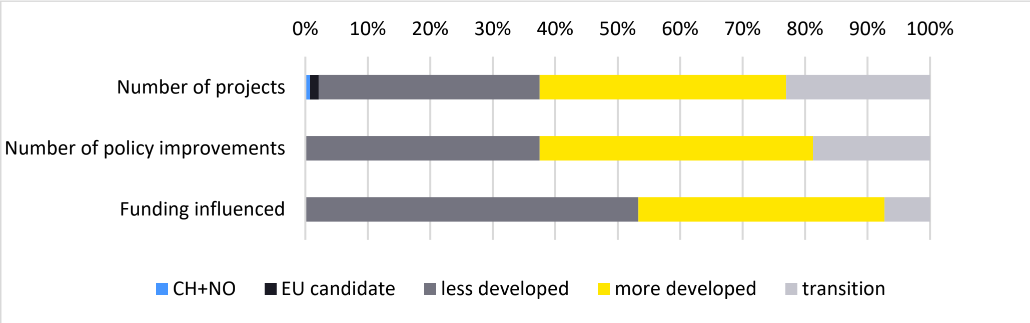
[159] Online survey question: "Do you believe the Policy Learning Platform and projects of the Programme help reduce disparities?". Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contact (n=28). Closed question.

[160] Across the four Programme components, only one respondent selected 'does not help' (knowledge hub), and a total of seven respondents selected 'I don't know' (projects: 1; knowledge hub: 1; community of peers: 2; expert support: 3)

[161] Interreg Europe, *Policy Report Results* Excel; Interreg Europe, *Aggregated country data* Excel

[162] EUROSTAT, 2026, Cohesion policy indicators - Statistics Explained

Figure 21 Distribution of participants per projects, policy improvements reported, and funding influenced for each region type



Source: Policy Reports Results and Aggregated country data

Case studies further highlight that the Programme accelerates learning and supports territorial cohesion[163]. Partners note that exchanges and study visits deepen their understanding of one another's governance models and solutions, providing insights that often motivate them to adapt and adopt similar approaches in their own regions. While some remain cautious and note it is still too early to fully measure long-term reductions in disparities, many case study interviewees believe the project has helped reduce territorial disparities. Several projects (notably VIADUCT and DEBUTING) plan to continue collaboration beyond project closure, suggesting durable, longer-term effects on territorial cohesion.

4.1.4 What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the Programme's objectives?

Programme's learning-oriented design, partnership model and support structures provide a robust framework for achieving its objectives, with success most likely where multiple enabling factors operate in combination. The limited articulation of barriers, alongside their predominantly external and contextual nature, indicates that challenges more often affect the pace and sustainability of policy uptake rather than the quality or relevance of learning generated. While some operational and procedural constraints introduced in this section may affect efficiency for certain beneficiaries, these are generally perceived as manageable. Overall, the findings presented below point to a Programme that is well-positioned to support policy learning and capacity development, with outcomes shaped less by structural barriers within the Programme and more by broader political, institutional and resource environments in which projects operate.

The triangulated evidence indicates that achievement of the Programme's objectives is primarily facilitated by a combination of policy relevance, effective learning design and organisational capacity, which together create favourable conditions for translating learning into action. Across sources, success factors consistently relate to the alignment of project insights with national or regional priorities, the practical applicability of peer-based learning, and the availability of leadership commitment, stakeholder engagement and resources. By contrast, **barriers are reported infrequently and, where identified, tend to reflect external constraints rather than weaknesses in the Programme's design or implementation**.

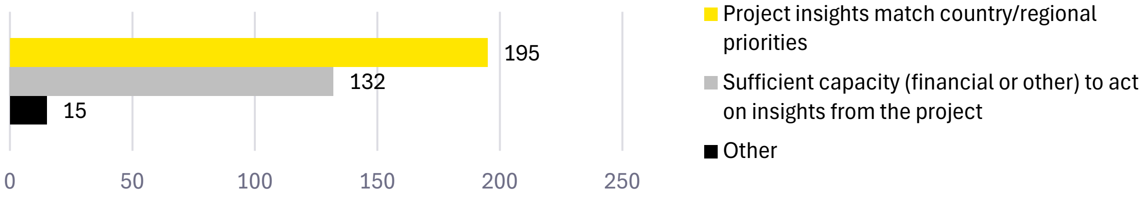
Success factors

Survey evidence suggests that progress towards the Programme's objectives is most strongly facilitated where project learning aligns closely with existing national or regional policy priorities and where beneficiaries have sufficient capacity to act on acquired knowledge. Among beneficiaries who reported having already observed policy changes following capacity building, **alignment of project insights with existing priorities** clearly emerges as the primary enabling factor, selected by a large majority of respondents (195 out of 269 respondents; 72%). This points to project and learning relevance as a decisive condition for translating capacity gains into concrete policy improvement. **Organisational capacity** also appears to play an important supporting role. Nearly half of these respondents identified the availability of sufficient capacity, including financial resources, as a key enabler of implementation (132 respondents; 49%), indicating that even well-aligned learning is less likely to result in

[163] Case studies are available in Annex 1.

change where resource constraints persist. Qualitative responses further suggest that enabling conditions extend beyond formal resources. Respondents pointed to **leadership commitment** and **active stakeholder engagement** as factors that facilitated uptake.

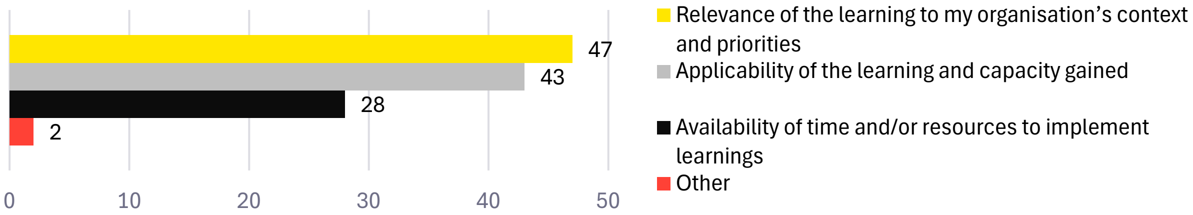
Figure 22 Please clarify which factors you think have contributed / could contribute to the policy improvement.



Source: Survey to beneficiaries.

Platform users point in the same direction, suggesting that learning is more likely to be applied where it is perceived as relevant to the organisational context and practically usable, and where sufficient time and resources are available to support implementation. Among respondents reporting improved capacities, these factors were most frequently selected, with relevance to the organisational context (47 out of 73 respondents; 64%) and practical applicability (43 respondents; 59%) identified more often than the availability of time and resources (28 respondents; 38%).

Figure 23 Please clarify which factors you think have contributed to the application of gained capacities acquired thanks to the Platform



Source: Survey to the Policy Learning Platform users

Beneficiaries consistently emphasised the **value of peer-based and interregional learning formats** that expose participants to concrete, implemented policy solutions, such as study visits, bilateral exchanges and peer reviews, which were described as particularly effective in translating learning into actionable policy approaches[164]. Interviewees highlighted that seeing legislative frameworks, governance arrangements and implementation models in operation in other regions enhanced the credibility and transferability of project insights, thereby facilitating uptake at regional or local level. **Strong partnership** quality and **active engagement** were also repeatedly identified as enabling factors, with interviewees pointing to careful partner selection, sustained collaboration and network-building as conditions that supported learning intensity and longer-term cooperation beyond the project lifetime. Interviews further indicate that leadership commitment, stakeholder involvement and institutional positioning play a critical role in enabling capacity gains to be acted upon, even where formal policy change is constrained by external political factors. From a programme-level perspective, interviewees across beneficiaries, Monitoring Committee members and thematic experts highlighted the professionalism and responsiveness of the Joint Secretariat, clear governance arrangements, structured monitoring routines as key success factors that support smooth implementation and allow partners to focus on policy learning.

Progress towards project objectives is consistently associated with a combination of **cooperation**, **learning design** and **alignment with national or regional policy priorities and institutional capacity**[165]. Most prominently, trust-based interregional cooperation - supported by regular interaction, informal exchanges and peer relationships between comparable territories - emerges as a core condition that strengthens learning quality, applicability of practices and smooth implementation[166]. This is closely linked to the learning-oriented design of

[164] According to interviews conducted with beneficiaries.

[165] According to the case studies. Case studies are available in Annex 1.

[166] Ibid.

Interreg Europe and the effectiveness of specific learning formats, including study visits, thematic seminars, staff exchanges and structured peer discussions, which help translate policy learning into concrete, context-adapted knowledge. **Capacity building** at both individual and organisational level represents a central success factor, enhancing partners' ability to engage stakeholders and refine governance arrangements. However, the case studies indicate that these capacity gains primarily function as enabling or preparatory mechanisms, with the translation into observable policy improvements depending on additional conditions. In this respect, **alignment with national or regional policy** priorities and the availability of **sufficient institutional or financial capacity** significantly facilitate the translation of learning into policy improvement, while remaining partly outside project control. Case studies also underline the importance of effective facilitation by Lead Partners in maintaining strategic focus, clarifying complex concepts and fostering coherence within diverse partnerships. Finally, where present, evidence-based approaches, active involvement of stakeholders beyond the project partnership and responsive programme-level support further reinforced the results. Overall, the case studies suggest that Programme objectives are most effectively advanced where these factors operate in combination, creating favourable conditions for learning, capacity development and policy influence.

Barriers

Interviews suggest that barriers are neither widespread nor systematically linked to the Programme's design or implementation. Majority of beneficiaries reported **no major barriers**, emphasising instead that policy change is inherently long-term and gradual, which they did not frame as an obstacle but as a normal feature of policy development. Across triangulated evidence, where barriers were identified, most frequently referred to **external political, institutional and governance factors**, such as shifting political priorities or decision-making dynamics beyond the Programme's control, reflecting the type of contextual constraints tentatively signalled in the survey responses. In line with isolated survey mentions related to capacity and scale, interviews and case-study evidence also point to unequal institutional capacity, limited staff time and differing proximity to decision-makers across partners, which can limit the ability of some organisations to translate learning into concrete policy improvement and, in some cases, position them primarily as knowledge recipients. Programme-internal barriers were mentioned less frequently and, where raised, mainly concerned **operational and procedural aspects**, for example unclear or evolving rules for pilot actions (including uncertainty around eligibility, funding availability and what constitutes a 'good' pilot), limitations of programme-level indicators in capturing policy improvement, and administrative or reporting workload, which some interviewees nonetheless described as manageable[167]. Among interviewees who identified any constraints, a recurring theme concerned the need for **greater flexibility** to adapt activities over the course of implementation, particularly in fast-changing thematic areas, where evolving conditions were perceived as difficult to accommodate within a relatively static framework. Additional contextual constraints included the late timing of key learning activities, changing media environments affecting communication efforts, and structural features of certain national systems. From a Programme management perspective, the Joint Secretariat also highlighted challenges linked to the **extension of the Programme to EU candidate countries**, where lower levels of prior Interreg experience required additional adaptation and support. Similarly, survey evidence points to a very limited articulation of barriers to achieving the Programme's objectives. Only a very small minority of beneficiaries reported any obstacles to translating project learning into policy improvement (less than 2%)[168], and none of the Platform users identified barriers to applying acquired capacities[169]. Where barriers were mentioned, they were primarily described as external and contextual, notably the influence of political agendas or broader economic constraints, rather than as issues linked to the Programme's design or implementation.

4.1.5 What are the recommendations for improving Programme performance?

The recommendations emerging across the triangulated evidence point towards a model of continuous improvement rather than corrective action. Stakeholders broadly confirm the relevance, adequacy and added value of existing Programme support, while calling for targeted enhancements. Addressing these areas could

[167] According to interviews conducted with beneficiaries and to the case studies.

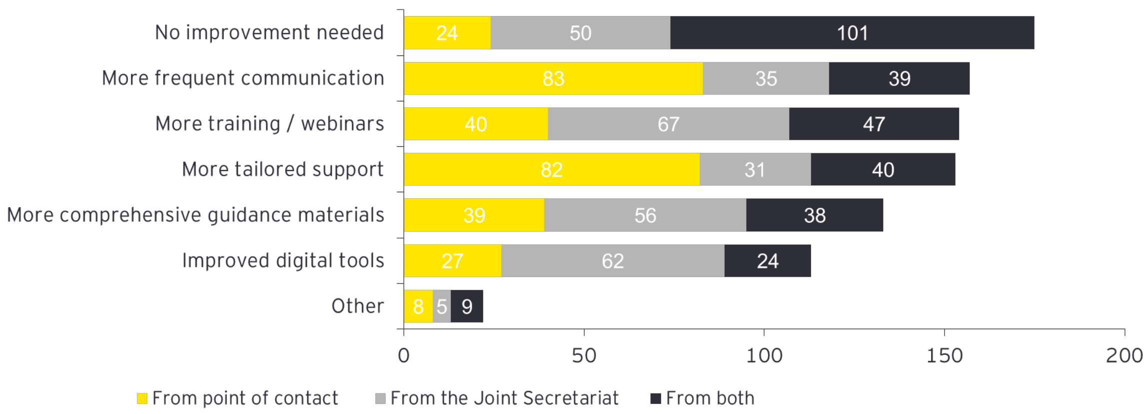
[168] Online survey question "Please clarify which barriers have limited / hindered the increase of your individual capacities in your policy area." Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

[169] Online survey question "Please clarify which barriers you think have hindered the application of gained capacities acquired thanks to the Platform." Policy Learning Platform users (n=100). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

help the Programme maximise the uptake and sustainability of its outputs. At the same time, expectations regarding impact need to remain proportionate to the Programme's role and mandate, recognising that many constraints on policy improvements lie beyond the Programme's direct control.

Across surveys and interviews, stakeholders emphasise that future performance gains are less about fundamental redesign and more about refining **communication**, **guidance**, **capacity-building** support and the strategic alignment of learning activities with policy processes, while remaining within the Programme's non-implementation mandate.

Figure 24 "What specific improvement would you suggest for Programme support."



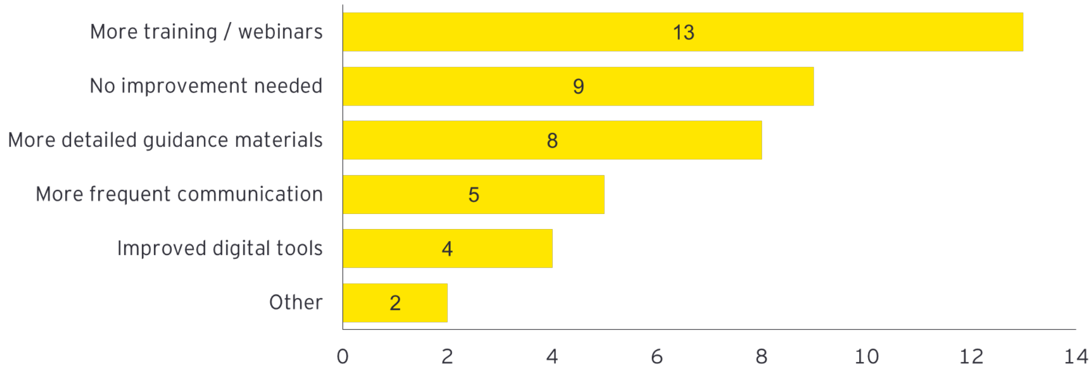
Source: Survey to beneficiaries.

Responses to the beneficiary survey indicate a generally **high level of satisfaction** with existing support arrangements[170], with nearly half of the beneficiaries indicating that no improvements were needed (175 respondents, 47%). At the same time, the results point to clear expectations for more targeted forms of support and communication. Beneficiaries most commonly identified the need for more frequent communication and more tailored support, particularly in relation to Points of Contact (157 respondents; 42% and 153 respondents; 41%, respectively). Requests for additional training, webinars and more comprehensive guidance materials were also relatively common, particularly from the Joint Secretariat (154 respondents; 41% and 133 respondents; 36%). By contrast, digital tools appear to be a lower priority for improvement, suggesting that perceived gaps relate more to human interaction, guidance and responsiveness than to technical infrastructure (113 respondents, 30%).

While **most beneficiaries did not identify any major gaps** and considered existing Programme support to be adequate, others highlighted areas where adjustments could further enhance effectiveness[171]. Recurrent suggestions focused on the need for greater clarity of the pilot action framework, including clearer criteria, more consistent communication and practical examples, as well as greater flexibility in programme implementation to accommodate emerging activities and evolving thematic contexts. Several beneficiaries also pointed to a need for stronger support in navigating administrative and legal steps and in identifying complementary funding sources, while recognising the Programme's non-implementation mandate. Additional suggestions focused on improving the practical usability and measurability of programme indicators through clearer guidance on how learning and capacity-building results should be defined and evidenced. Respondents also pointed to the need to refine the timing and sequencing of learning activities, such as the uploading of good practices or the organisation of study visits, to better align them with real policy decision-making cycles, however it is worth noting that t is fully up to each project to organise its learning process. Finally, several beneficiaries highlighted the importance of adapting communication to better reflect contemporary dissemination practices, particularly through short-form online content or social media.

[170] Online survey question: "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support." Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.
[171] According to interviews conducted with beneficiaries.

Figure 25 "What specific improvement would you suggest for Programme support to beneficiaries?"



Source: Survey to Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contacts.

As among beneficiaries, a notable share of respondents (9 Monitoring Committee Members; 32%) indicated that no improvement is needed, confirming a **generally positive assessment of existing Programme support**[172]. At the same time, Monitoring Committee members placed stronger emphasis on capacity-building measures, with more training and webinars emerging as the most frequently selected improvement (13 respondents, 46%). Requests for more detailed guidance materials (8 respondents; 29%) were also relatively common, aligning with beneficiaries' calls for clearer guidance, while more frequent communication (5 respondents; 18%) and improvements to digital tools (4 respondents; 14%) were chosen less often.

According to Monitoring Committee members the Programme's impact could be further strengthened primarily through **more systematic connections with mainstream European Union, national and regional policy processes**[173]. Respondents most frequently pointed to the need for closer linkages with Cohesion Policy and mainstream programmes, including European Regional Development Fund and European Social Fund Plus, as well as stronger engagement of managing authorities and policymakers to support the uptake of Interreg Europe results beyond individual projects[174]. Several respondents emphasised the importance of addressing the "last mile" of policy improvement, noting that while projects generate substantial knowledge and action plans, partners face administrative and legal challenges in translating these into formal policy decisions, measures or calls, although this seems to be beyond Programme's control[175]. In this context, suggestions included more structured follow-up, hands-on support and clearer pathways for policy uptake, while remaining within the Programme's non-implementation mandate[176]. Respondents also highlighted the potential to enhance impact through greater visibility and more targeted communication towards high-level decision-makers, including clearer aggregation and presentation of results to demonstrate systemic effects. While this suggestion was raised by respondents in response to a question on programme support, such efforts may depend not only on programme-level actions but also on communication and dissemination activities at project level.[177].

While several Monitoring Committee members and Points of Contact considered that the Programme is already operating close to its maximum potential and that key constraints lie primarily in national administrative capacity, others across stakeholder groups highlighted opportunities to strengthen impact through **clearer synthesis and communication of results**[178]. In particular, Monitoring Committee members, Points of Contact and Joint Secretariat representatives pointed to the value of more concise, aggregated overviews of trends emerging from projects and the Platform activities, improved availability and use of Programme-level data, and more

[172] Online survey question: "What specific improvements would you suggest for Programme support to beneficiaries?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contact (n=28). Closed question.

[173] Online survey question: "In your opinion, in what ways could the Programme have greater impact?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contact (n=28).

[174] Ibidem.

[175] Ibidem.

[176] Ibidem.

[177] Ibidem.

[178] According to interviews with all stakeholder groups.

targeted national outreach, especially in less active regions and towards policy-relevant audiences. In line with survey findings, Monitoring Committee members and Points of Contact emphasised the importance of engaging managing authorities and other policy-responsible bodies more systematically, noting that impact depends on reaching senior decision-makers involved in mainstream programmes. At the same time, peer review beneficiaries and thematic experts highlighted the need to reinforce the visibility and strategic positioning of specific Programme services, including peer reviews and the Platform, as well as to strengthen continuity and follow-up beyond one-off interventions to sustain momentum and support policy uptake over time.

From the Platform users perspective, respondents most frequently highlighted the need to **strengthen interaction and peer exchange**, particularly through more dynamic online networking, topic-specific webinars and structured opportunities for matchmaking among practitioners[179]. In parallel, several respondents pointed to the challenge of translating policy learning into practical change, suggesting that light-touch follow-up mechanisms and continued engagement after peer reviews could help sustain momentum and support policy instrument improvement, within the Programme's non-implementation mandate[180]. Recurrent suggestions also related to usability, including clearer navigation, more effective search functions and improved structuring of content to facilitate access to good practices and policy solutions[181]. Some respondents also pointed to the potential of digital tools, including AI-based solutions, to further support navigation and user interaction, though such suggestions were less prominent compared to broader usability and engagement-related themes[182]. Finally, respondents indicated that greater personalisation of support and improved visibility of results and policy impacts could further strengthen engagement across different types of authorities and territories[183].

4.1.6 Does Interreg Europe bring added value to the EU / Cohesion Policy?

Overall, Interreg Europe adds value to the EU Cohesion Policy through its wide geographical focus, its learning approach, its policy-strategic focus, its strategic policy orientation, and its already evident effects on improving policies aligned with Cohesion Policy objectives. The Cooperation Programme document sets out Interreg Europe's unique value and complementarity with other funding programmes and instruments[184].

- Unlike Interreg A (cross-border), Interreg B (transnational), and Interreg D (outermost regions), which concentrate on solving territorial challenges within defined geographies, Interreg Europe helps regions improve their regional development policies regardless of their geography within Europe.
- The Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) and Interreg Europe have different scopes and objectives: I3 focuses on investments in mature partnerships and developing value chains in less developed areas. However, synergies can be created between both Programmes. As part of the EU Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3), Interreg Europe can support the Learn and Connect phase of cooperation within S3 platforms, whereas I3 can support the Demonstrate, Commercialise and Upscale phase of interregional investments.
- The distinct roles and objectives of Interreg Europe with INTERACT, URBACT and ESPON are set and further clarified by the ETC Regulation. INTERACT supports the implementation and capitalisation of Interreg programmes themselves. URBACT differs through its specific thematic focus on integrated and sustainable urban development, while ESPON provides territorial analyses and data on European development trends, which Interreg Europe can use to inform policy learning. Regular meetings coordinated by INTERACT are scheduled between the four Pan-European programmes to define areas of collaboration.
- Synergies of the Programme with other EU instruments and policies illustrate Interreg Europe's added value as a policy-learning mechanism rather than a funding instrument for investments (i.e. Horizon Europe, Single Market/SME instruments, the European Green Deal, CEF, Digital Europe, Health, Erasmus+, CAP/LEADER). Complementarities with S3 and the Territorial Agenda 2030 are set, as Interreg Europe improves regional policies and reduces territorial disparities across Europe.

[179] Online survey question: "In your opinion, how can the Platform be improved to increase its impact?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Open question.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Interreg Europe, Cooperation Programme document (2nd amendment - final version; approved by EC on 23 July 2024).

- The Programme strongly contributes to the Investment for Jobs and Growth goal, as each project must address at least one Investment for Jobs and Growth policy instrument[185], a unique feature of the Programme compared to other European programmes, and the Managing authorities of the Investment for Jobs and Growth programmes are one of the main target groups of the Platform[186], thereby helping to implement the Investment for Jobs and Growth goal.

The **Programme's broad geographical coverage enables a unique international learning dynamic, which brings strong added value to the EU Cohesion Policy**. Most interviewees highlight the Programme's pan-European reach as a key added value: the Programme spans all 27 EU Member States, Norway, Switzerland, and the seven EU candidate countries, 36 countries in total, when other EU mainstream programmes only cover EU Member States and other Interreg strands only focus on specific areas within Europe. This breadth gives partners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries access to an exceptionally diverse pool of international expertise, helping to reduce territorial disparities and strengthen territorial cohesion (as observed in the earlier evaluation questions of Task 2). Thus, by virtue of its scope, Interreg Europe puts Cohesion Policy's principle of reducing territorial disparities into practice: partnerships typically combine regions that are more developed, less developed, in transition, and from the EU candidate countries[187].

Interreg Europe's intervention logic, based on capacity building to strengthen public policies, is clearly distinctive and delivers concrete added value to EU Cohesion Policy through its **innovative design and proven impact**. Interviewees stress that the programme adds value not only through its pan-European reach but also through its unique model centred on peer learning and the exchange of experience that translates into long-term impact: policy improvements. The capacity-building dimension is repeatedly cited as influencing local policy decision-making in a way that is both unique and strategically significant. The Monitoring Committee survey[188] confirms that Interreg Europe's added value lies mainly in its strategic, policy-driven focus (48%) and its strong emphasis on interregional learning (31%). These findings indicate that the Programme's distinctiveness primarily comes from offering interregional learning designed to influence policy.

Interreg Europe stands out as the only EU-level programme dedicated to exchange of experience and policy improvement and is the only one having chosen better governance as their main objective[189]. By design, the Programme does not fund physical projects (such as infrastructure, or services) the way mainstream cohesion programmes like the ERDF, ESF+, or Cohesion Fund do; instead, it supports continuous learning and capacity-building. This "soft" approach, distinct from most mainstream national and regional programmes, is widely viewed as innovative and capable of delivering substantial long-term impact despite a comparatively small budget[190].

Policy improvements achieved by Interreg Europe across the Commission's six priority policies provide evidence of the Programme's strong added value to the EU/ Cohesion Policy. In total, the Programme has validated 62 policy improvements[191], demonstrating the strong impact of the Programme. The largest share relates to the Commission's policy objective Greener Europe (41 improvements) and Smarter Europe (35), while More Social Europe accounts for 14 improvements, and Better Governance and Europe Closer to Citizens each registered three. The Objective More connected Europe did not bring about any policy improvement yet. Together, these results highlight the Programme's broad and meaningful contribution to the Commission's priorities, which the EU Cohesion Policy seeks to deliver[192].

[185] Programme Manual

[186] Interreg Europe, Cooperation Programme document (2nd amendment - final version; approved by EC on 23 July 2024).

[187] The manual strongly recommends that project partnerships include a mix of regions with different levels of development as this allows less developed regions to access the knowledge and experience of more advanced regions.

[188] Online survey question: "How do you perceive the distinctiveness and uniqueness of Interreg Europe compared to other Interreg strands or mainstream Cohesion Policy programmes?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contact (n=28). Closed question.

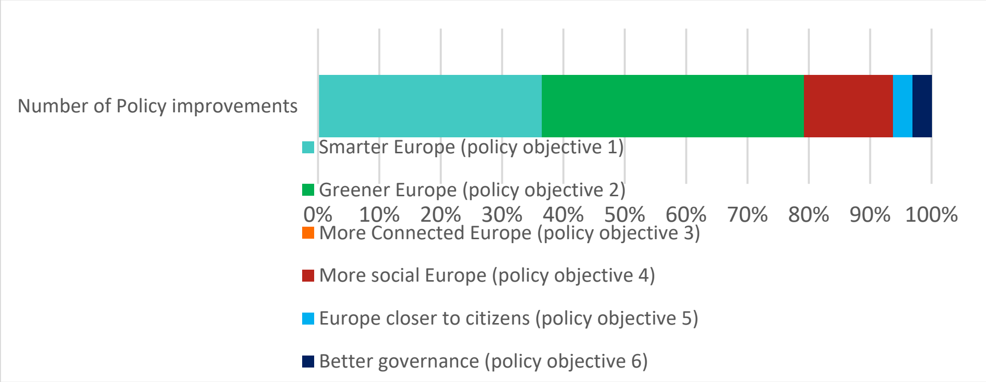
[189] Programme manual

[190] Interviews with beneficiaries and Monitoring Committee Members

[191] Interreg Europe, *Policy Report Results* Excel; *Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool* Excel 2025-09-29

[192] Inforegio - Cohesion Policy

Figure 26 Number of Policy improvements per Policy Objective



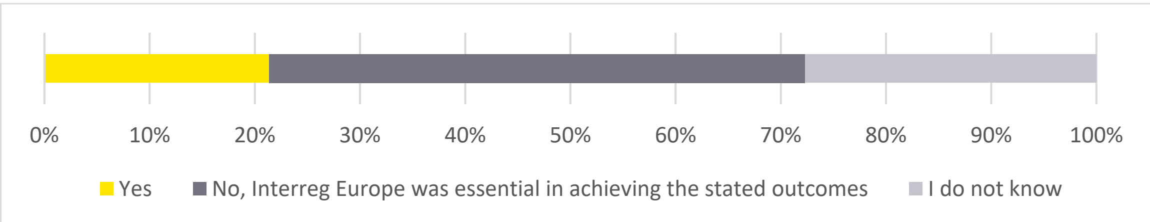
Source: Policy Reports Results and Aggregated country data

The beneficiaries' survey shows that most respondents consider Interreg Europe to be a uniquely valuable instrument that cannot be replaced. **While certain results may be complemented by other EU programmes, these alternatives do not offer the same capacity-building benefits**. A majority of respondents to the beneficiaries' survey (51%) affirmed that Interreg Europe was essential in achieving their project's outcomes, which could not have been achieved through other mechanisms[193]. Some respondents (21%) believed similar results could be achieved through other national, regional, or EU mechanisms. When providing more detail, respondents pointed to national or regional support schemes, and three referred to other EU Programmes such as LIFE, Horizon Europe, or I3 as possible alternatives, aligning with statements of the Cooperation Programme document. Interviewees also highlighted cases of synergy and complementarities between Interreg Europe and other EU policy Programmes (other Interreg strands, Horizon Europe). However, among those who believe similar outcomes could be achieved through other mechanisms, some noted that such alternatives would struggle to replicate the quality and added value of Interreg Europe's capacity-building, international cooperation, and learning. They stressed that domestic mechanisms would lack the unique interregional learning, structured exchange, and cross-border inspiration that Interreg Europe provides.

Box 10 Interview highlight on the added value of the Programme

> *"Perhaps it could be achieved through other mechanisms, but the experience and knowledge we gain through the Interreg Europe program, especially for people from the local level in Serbia, is invaluable and unattainable from other sources."*
> *Source: Project beneficiary interviewed*

Figure 27 "Do you think the results achieved/expected through your project could be reached using other mechanisms (e.g. national/regional support schemes, mainstream EU programmes)?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries

[193] Online survey question: "Do you think the results achieved/expected through your project could be reached using other mechanisms (e.g. national/regional support schemes, mainstream EU programmes)?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

4.2 Task 2.1 – Evaluation of the projects' performance

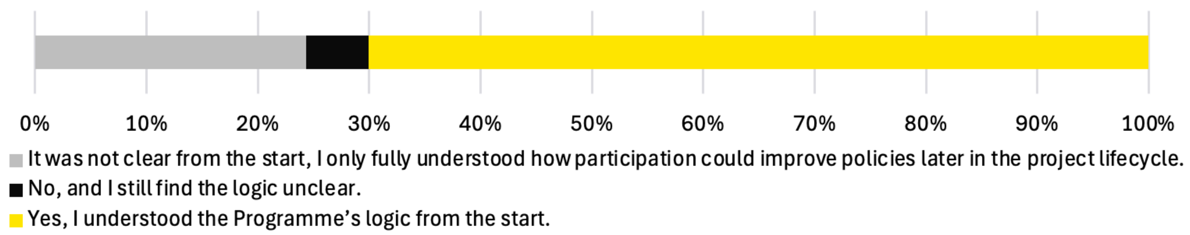
- **Projects' intervention logic is clear and coherent, with well-articulated objectives and a consistent link between needs, activities and policy-oriented outcomes, although some initial difficulties in understanding or operationalising this logic have been identified.**
- **Project activities contribute to improved individual capacities, particularly through peer-based learning, with the scale and application of gains varying according to role relevance, participation intensity and organisational constraints.**
- **New project features, when embedded in the Programme's core design, are relevant and supportive of project objectives, while the added value of more implementation-dependent features (such as pilot actions and follow-up flexibilities) varies by context and is not always considered essential.**
- **Organisational capacity gains contribute to policy improvements in diverse ways, ranging from formal revisions and new funded measures to changes in management and implementation practices. However, their translation into policy improvement depends on enabling institutional and resource conditions and often materialises over time.**

4.2.1 Is the project's intervention logic clear and coherent?

Clarity and coherence of the intervention logic predominated across projects, providing a solid conceptual foundation for learning-oriented and policy-focused activities. Where challenges were reported, these were limited in scale and related primarily to how easily the logic could be understood or applied in practice, rather than to weaknesses in its internal consistency. Overall, the findings point to a robust intervention logic, while also highlighting the importance of ongoing clarification and adaptive support to ensure that all partners can effectively translate this logic into sustained policy engagement over the course of project implementation.

Projects' intervention logic is generally described as **clear and coherent**, with objectives that are well articulated and understood by project partners and a broadly consistent link between identified needs, planned activities, and intended policy-oriented outcomes[194]. Case studies describe a **structured intervention logic connecting interregional exchange, learning activities, and stakeholder engagement to policy improvement**, often already articulated at design stage. Partners across multiple projects report a shared understanding of objectives and a coherent sequencing of activities intended to support learning and policy orientation. At the same time, the evidence indicates that, while overall clarity predominated, a limited number of partners reported early-stage variation in how clearly the intervention logic was understood. In two projects (DEBUTING and SKYLA), individual partners reported **early-stage difficulties** in grasping the link between activities and objectives or described the intervention logic as initially abstract. In DEBUTING, this was linked to the timing of the needs analysis, which was conducted before sufficient stakeholder awareness had developed, while in SKYLA one partner reported that the policy-improvement logic became clearer through implementation and targeted clarification.

Figure 28 "From the start of the project, did you understand how the Programme would help participants and organisations improve regional development policies?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries.

Most survey respondents reported that the **logic was apparent from the outset**, with around 70% indicating that they understood from the start how the Programme would support improvements in regional development

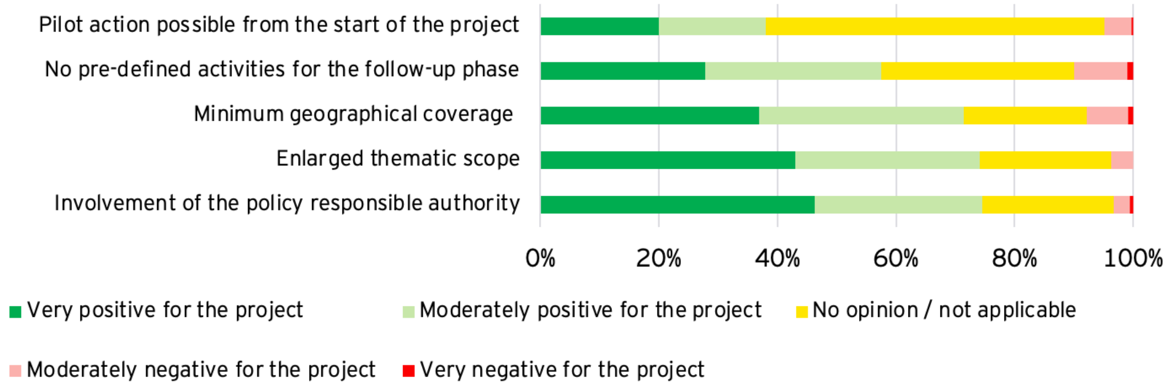
[194] According to the case studies. Case studies are available in Annex 1.

policies[195]. At the same time, roughly one quarter of respondents reported that clarity emerged progressively during implementation, and a small minority continued to find the logic unclear, suggesting that understanding was not fully uniform across all beneficiaries[196]. Interview largely reinforce this assessment, consistently describing the intervention logic as coherent and aligned with Programme objectives, often already at the application stage[197]. Where challenges were raised, they related primarily to the practical application of a predefined intervention logic in evolving contexts. It does not call into question the internal coherence of the intervention logic itself, but rather how smoothly it could be operationalised in practice. A more detailed analysis of clarity and coherence at Programme level is provided in Section 4.1.1.

4.2.2 Are the new projects' features relevant and sufficient to achieve the project objectives?

Triangulated evidence indicates that the new features introduced under the Interreg Europe Programme provide an enabling and flexible framework that is broadly aligned with projects' objectives. Features embedded in the programme's structural design, including the involvement of policy responsible authorities, the enlarged thematic scope and minimum geographical coverage, are consistently perceived as relevant and supportive of project development across stakeholder groups. By contrast, features whose contribution depends on project-specific choices or later stages of implementation, in particular pilot actions and the flexibility of the follow-up phase, are viewed more unevenly. Where taken up and effectively implemented, these features are generally considered value-adding, notably by supporting practice-oriented learning and experimentation. However, their practical sufficiency is shaped by contextual factors such as resources, capacity, eligibility conditions and timing, and cannot yet be fully assessed for all projects. As projects progress towards completion, a more definitive judgement on the contribution of these implementation-dependent features to the achievement of project objectives will become possible.

Figure 15 "What role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in your project development and implementation?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries.

Survey evidence from both project beneficiaries and Monitoring Committee members indicates that the new features introduced under the current Programme are **widely perceived as relevant for project development and implementation**. Among beneficiaries, positive assessments (very or moderately positive) clearly outweigh negative ones across all features, typically accounting for between 60% and 75% of responses, while negative assessments remain marginal, never exceeding 10% for any feature[198]. The strongest and most consistent positive perceptions relate to features embedded in the programme's core design, notably the **involvement of policy responsible authorities** (279 respondents, 75%), the **enlarged thematic** scope (277 respondents, 74%), and the **minimum geographical coverage** (267 respondents, 71%), all of which directly shape project design

[195] Online survey question: “"From the start of the project, did you understand how the Programme would help participants and organisations improve regional development policies?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

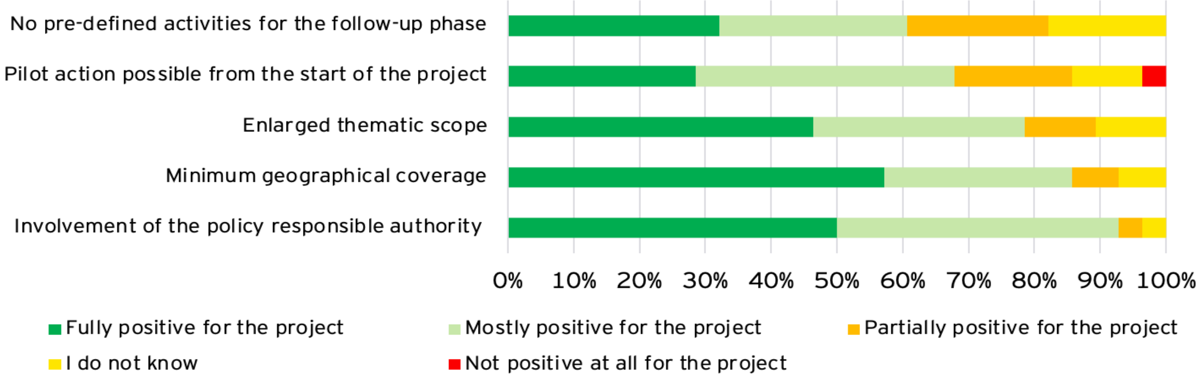
[196] Ibid.

[197] According to interviews conducted with beneficiaries and Monitoring Committee Members.

[198] Online survey question: "What role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in your project development and implementation?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

choices from the outset[199]. Monitoring Committee members express similarly positive views, with the large majority of respondents (20–24 out of 28, depending on the feature) assessing these structural features as fully or mostly positive[200].

Figure 16 "In your opinion, what role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in the projects' development and implementation?"



Source: Survey to Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contact.

Survey evidence from both project beneficiaries and Monitoring Committee members indicates that the new features introduced under the current Programme are **widely perceived as relevant for project development and implementation**. Among beneficiaries, positive assessments (very or moderately positive) clearly outweigh negative ones across all features, typically accounting for between 60% and 75% of responses, while negative assessments remain marginal, never exceeding 10% for any feature[201]. The strongest and most consistent positive perceptions relate to features embedded in the programme's core design, notably the **involvement of policy responsible authorities** (279 respondents, 75%), the **enlarged thematic** scope (277 respondents, 74%), and the **minimum geographical coverage** (267 respondents, 71%), all of which directly shape project design choices from the outset[202]. Monitoring Committee members express similarly positive views, with the large majority of respondents (20–24 out of 28, depending on the feature) assessing these structural features as fully or mostly positive[203].

At the same time, the survey results point to a more nuanced assessment of features whose contribution depends on project-specific choices or later stages of implementation, in particular the possibility to implement pilot actions from the start of the project and the absence of pre-defined activities for the follow-up phase. For both features, a substantial share of beneficiaries reported having no opinion or considered them not applicable to the projects, which limits the interpretability of the results, despite a moderate level of positive assessment among those who expressed a view[204]. Monitoring Committee members likewise express more differentiated views on these features, with higher shares of partially positive assessments and uncertainty, and only isolated negative responses. Overall, the survey suggests that the new programme features provide an enabling and flexible framework that is perceived as supportive of the projects' objectives. While their relevance is clearly recognised, particularly for features embedded in the programme's structural design, the perceived sufficiency of more optional or later-stage features remains contingent on project uptake and implementation progress. As a result, a fuller assessment of their contribution will become possible as projects are completed.

[199] Ibidem

[200] Online survey question: " In your opinion, what role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in the projects' development and implementation?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contact (n=28). Closed question.

[201] Online survey question: "What role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in your project development and implementation?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[202] Ibidem

[203] Online survey question: " In your opinion, what role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in the projects' development and implementation?" Monitoring Committee Members / Points of Contact (n=28). Closed question.

[204] Pilot actions: 57% no opinion/not applicable; 38% positive. Flexibility of the follow-up phase: 33% no opinion/not applicable; 57% positive.

Pilot actions

The possibility to implement **pilot actions** from the start of the project emerges as the most consistently discussed new feature and is generally described by partners **as relevant and value-adding**[205]. In particular, pilot actions are associated with more practice-oriented learning, allowing partners to test or demonstrate solutions identified through interregional exchange, engage directly with target groups, and adapt approaches to different territorial contexts. At the same time, the case studies show that the practical sufficiency of pilot actions varies across projects and depends on whether partners were able to implement them in practice, given available resources, capacity, eligibility conditions, and timing. Across the case studies, issues affecting the practical feasibility of pilot actions were reported in five of the seven projects, typically by individual partners or a subset of partners rather than uniformly across partnerships. These issues related to funding and co-financing arrangements, staff capacity and organisational readiness, time and scope constraints, and, in one case, perceived rigidity in linking pilot actions to policy instruments defined at application stage. In addition, in a limited number of cases, partners reported that pilot actions were not considered necessary to achieve objectives in their specific context, but rather as an additional opportunity. By contrast, views on other new features remain more limited and case-specific. Where explicitly discussed, the enlarged thematic scope and the absence of pre-defined activities for the follow-up phase were perceived as strong assets, while the involvement of policy responsible authorities and minimum geographical coverage were assessed positively in individual cases. **Overall, the case studies reinforce the survey conclusion that the new features provide a flexible and enabling framework, while underlining that the perceived sufficiency of more optional or implementation-dependent features is shaped by project context and stage of implementation.**

Interview evidence confirms that the sufficiency of pilot actions is context-dependent among beneficiaries with experience of implementing them. While most of these beneficiaries viewed pilot actions as a valuable complement to the Programme's learning and exchange mechanisms, some reported that constraints related to requirements, timing, budgetary rules or organisational capacity limited their effective use. Monitoring Committee and Point of Contact interviews reinforce this assessment, noting strong beneficiary interest alongside the relatively high implementation effort and capacity demands associated with testing-oriented activities. Detailed information on the level and timing of pilot action uptake, including figures and distribution across calls, is presented in Section 4.1.2 (To what extent does the Programme achieve its objectives?).

4.2.3 To what extent do project activities improve the professional capacities of the project beneficiaries?

Triangulated evidence suggests that the projects function primarily as effective enablers of individual learning, creating conditions for professional capacity development through relevant, interactive and context-sensitive learning formats. While most beneficiaries expect capacities acquired through project participation to be applied within their organisations, this expectation is strongly mediated by the perceived relevance and applicability of the learning to organisational priorities, as well as by available time, resources and organisational capacity. The absence of a single dominant barrier, combined with frequent references to the early stage of implementation, indicates that limitations in observed or anticipated impacts are largely contextual and temporal rather than structural. As such, the evidence supports a cautious but positive assessment of the projects' contribution to capacity development, while underscoring that sustained organisational uptake depends on conditions extending beyond individual participation alone.

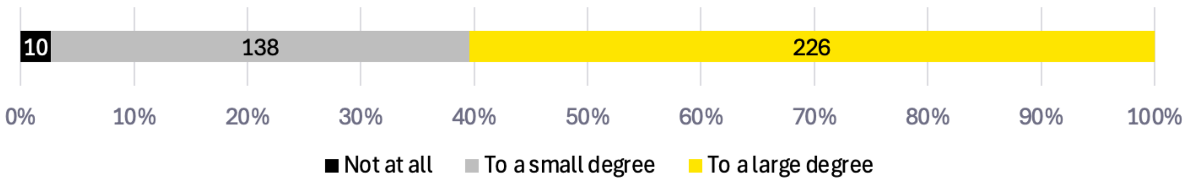
Across the seven case studies, project activities are consistently reported by beneficiaries as contributing to the development of professional capacities, with positive effects described in all cases. Professional capacity development primarily took the form of enhanced thematic or technical knowledge in the respective policy fields, often complemented by increased professional confidence, communication skills, and ability to engage with peers and stakeholders. Learning is most commonly described as practice-oriented and experiential, emerging through interregional exchange, peer learning, study visits, staff exchanges, and repeated engagement in project activities. Exposure to practices in other regions and interaction with peers are repeatedly identified as important enablers of professional learning, supporting reflection, comparison, and the development of applied understanding. At the same time, the intensity of professional capacity gains varied, with a minority of beneficiaries reporting more limited improvements, mainly in cases where they explicitly linked these to partial

[205] According to the case studies. Case studies are available in Annex 1.

alignment between their professional roles and the project focus, or to more limited opportunities to participate actively in project activities.

Individual capacity gains

Figure 17 "To what extent have your individual capacities in your policy area improved thanks to the project involvement?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries.

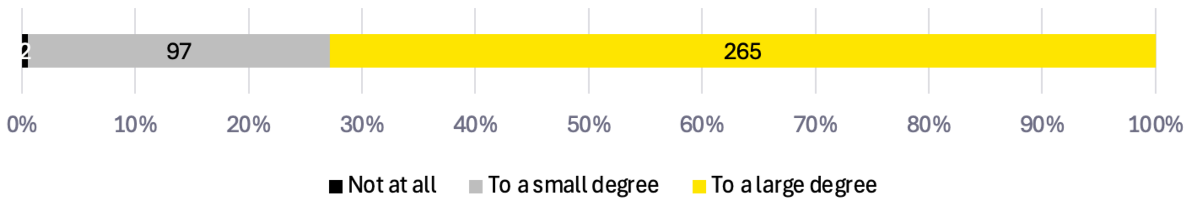
Survey evidence from beneficiaries suggests that the projects have made a **substantial contribution to strengthening individual capacities** in the relevant policy areas. A clear majority of respondents reported some degree of capacity improvement, with most indicating that these gains were significant (60%), and only a very small minority reporting no improvement (3%)[206]. Among those experiencing strong capacity gains, the project design itself appears to have been a key enabling factor. Respondents most frequently highlighted the structured learning approach and opportunities for interregional exchange, which were seen as facilitating meaningful engagement with peers and partners (71%). Capacity gains were further reinforced where project objectives aligned closely with beneficiaries' professional responsibilities (54%) and where organisational conditions, particularly the availability of time and flexibility, supported active participation (51%).

By contrast, among respondents reporting limited or no capacity improvement (148 respondents), **no single dominant barrier** emerges from the survey evidence. While some respondents selected predefined barriers such as time constraints within their organisation (24*%),* limited opportunities for meaningful engagement with partners (18%) or weaker alignment between project goals and professional responsibilities (16%), a substantial share selected the "Other" option (43%)[207]. The open-text explanations provided by these respondents indicate that this response was frequently used to qualify the timing of the assessment rather than to report concrete obstacles, with many respondents explaining that the **project was still at an early stage**, that capacity effects had not yet fully materialised, or that improvements were expected to emerge later in implementation.

Overall, the above survey findings suggest that perceived individual capacity development is closely linked to the degree of alignment between project activities, organisational context and participants' roles. At the same time, lower reported gains at this stage are more often associated with project maturity and contextual factors than with fundamental shortcomings in project design, indicating that the absence of reported capacity gains during early implementation does not preclude such effects from materialising later and that a full assessment will require projects to reach completion.

Organisational capacity gains

Figure 18 "To what degree are you likely to apply the capacities gained through the project in your organisation?"



Source: survey to beneficiaries.

Similarly to individual capacity gains, a clear majority indicated a **strong likelihood of organisational application**, with 265 respondents (73%) reporting that capacities gained through the project are likely to be applied to a

[206] Online survey question: "To what extent have your individual capacities in your policy area improved thanks to the project involvement?" Beneficiaries (n=374). Closed question.

[207] Ibidem.

large degree, while 97 respondents (27%) expected application to a small degree[208]. Only 2 respondents (less than 1%) considered that no application would take place. The most frequently chosen enabling factor contribution to organisational capacity gains was the **relevance of the learning to their organisation's context and priorities** (132 respondents, 50%)[209]. Respondents also highlighted the applicability of the learning and capacities gained (90 respondents, 34%), while a smaller share referred to the availability of time and resources to support implementation (40 respondents, 15%)[210]. These responses suggest that organisational uptake is primarily associated with the perceived fit of project learning with existing organisational needs and priorities.

By contrast, among respondents reporting a limited or no likelihood of organisational application, the survey does not point to a single prevailing barrier[211]. Reported constraints are dispersed across several factors, with capacity-related issues, notably limited time and resources and limited absorption capacity within the wider organisation, cited most often, though only by around a quarter of respondents (28% and 26%, respectively)[212]. Other factors, such as difficulties in translating learning into practice or weaker relevance to organisational priorities, were mentioned less frequently[213]. Notably, a further share of respondents selected the "Other" option (18%), with explanations pointing primarily to contextual and timing-related factors, including the early stage of implementation, organisational scale and complexity, variation in partner maturity, and broader political or institutional constraints[214].

Overall, the survey suggests that the organisational application of capacities acquired through the projects is widely anticipated among beneficiaries who report individual learning, and is strongly conditioned by organisational relevance, internal absorption capacity and contextual factors. As with individual capacity development, lower expectations of organisational application at this stage appear to reflect project maturity and organisational constraints rather than an absence of perceived value, indicating that a fuller assessment of organisational capacity effects will only be possible once projects have progressed further towards completion.

4.2.4 To what extent does the increasing capacity of organisations lead to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the projects?

Organisational capacity building supported by the projects represents a meaningful but conditional driver of policy instrument improvement. Qualitative and quantitative findings show that increased organisational capacity can be mobilised to inform revisions of policy instruments, the financing of new actions, and changes in management and implementation practices, while also strengthening organisations' ability to prepare, orient and support future policy development. At the same time, the relationship between organisational capacity gains and policy improvement is non-linear and context-dependent, shaped by alignment with existing priorities, the availability of sufficient organisational and financial capacity, and broader institutional and political conditions. A substantial share of beneficiaries also report that it is still too early to assess policy effects, reflecting the timing of policy cycles and ongoing revision processes.

Examples of policy instrument improvements emerging from the projects

CORE	► Contributed to the formal revision and adoption of the Regional Waste Management Plan 2023–2028 in Świętokrzyskie region (Poland), introducing new provisions enabling bio-waste processing infrastructure (including biogas and biomethanation plants) and clarifying eligibility for public and private actors. ► Mainstreamed composting and sustainability approaches within the Hungarian policy framework (Balaton Priority Area Development Programme) through updated Sustainability Guidance, adjusted sustainability scoring criteria, and revised grant schemes incentivising community composting initiatives.

208 Online survey question: "To what degree are you likely to apply the capacities gained through the project in your organisation?" Beneficiaries (n=364). Closed question.

209 Online survey question: "Please clarify which factors you think have contributed to the application of skills and capabilities acquired in your organisation thanks to the project" Beneficiaries (n=265). Closed question.

210 Ibidem.

211 Online survey question: "Please clarify which barriers you think have limited / hindered the application in your organisation of capabilities and knowledge you acquired thanks to the project." Beneficiaries (n=99). Closed question.

212 Ibidem.

213 Ibidem.

214 Ibidem.

	► Strengthened implementation of the existing Waste Management Plan in the autonomous province of Bolzano (Italy) by supporting decentralised green waste composting facilities, improved awareness-raising measures, and development of technical methodologies. Additional elements are feeding into an ongoing formal plan revision. ► Demonstrated multiple pathways from organisational capacity gains to policy influence, including use of interregional good practices as policy evidence, alignment with scheduled policy revisions, stakeholder cooperation, and embedding of pilot and demonstration activities into governance structures.
DEBUTING	► Contributed to the **operational improvement of the ERDF Programme for North-Central Sweden 2021–2027** by informing the design and approval of *"The Smart Way"* implementation project, embedding gender equality and inclusion as concrete drivers of SME competitiveness within the Smart Specialisation Strategy through funded, company-oriented measures. ► Supported the **modification of innovation funding instruments under the Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme Plus (EDIOP_PLUS) in Hungary**, notably through the introduction of mandatory gender-related eligibility requirements (including the involvement of female researchers) in R&D&I calls, translating interregional learning into enforceable policy conditions. ► Contributed to **strengthening professional skills, knowledge and institutional capacities across participating organisations**, demonstrating the added value of engaging in interregional exchange around gender equality, diversity and innovation, particularly by connecting policy, cluster development and SME support perspectives.

Evidence from case studies indicate that **organisational capacity gains were actively mobilised to influence and improve policy instruments**, although the form, timing, and degree of formalisation of these improvements varied across projects and partners[215]. Rather than following a single pathway, organisational capacity was used in different ways, including the integration of project learning into formally adopted policy revisions, the redesign or launch of calls and funded measures under existing instruments, and operational or procedural adjustments affecting how policy instruments are implemented or managed. In some contexts, learning acquired through interregional exchange and structured analysis was embedded directly into revised and adopted strategies or plans, while in others it informed updated eligibility criteria, thematic priorities, or the financing of new implementation projects. Where formal revision of policy instruments was constrained or still ongoing, capacity gains were nonetheless used to strengthen implementation practices, inform management rules, or feed into preparatory work for future revisions. Across cases, the translation of organisational capacity into policy improvement was consistently linked to the **adaptation of interregional good practices**, **stakeholder engagement** and **cooperation with policy-responsible bodies**, and the **use of evidence and diagnostics generated through project activities**. At the same time, the evidence shows that organisational capacity gains did not automatically result in formal policy improvement, with political and institutional constraints, organisational complexity, time and resource limitations, and the availability of specialised expertise shaping both the scope and pace of policy instrument improvement.

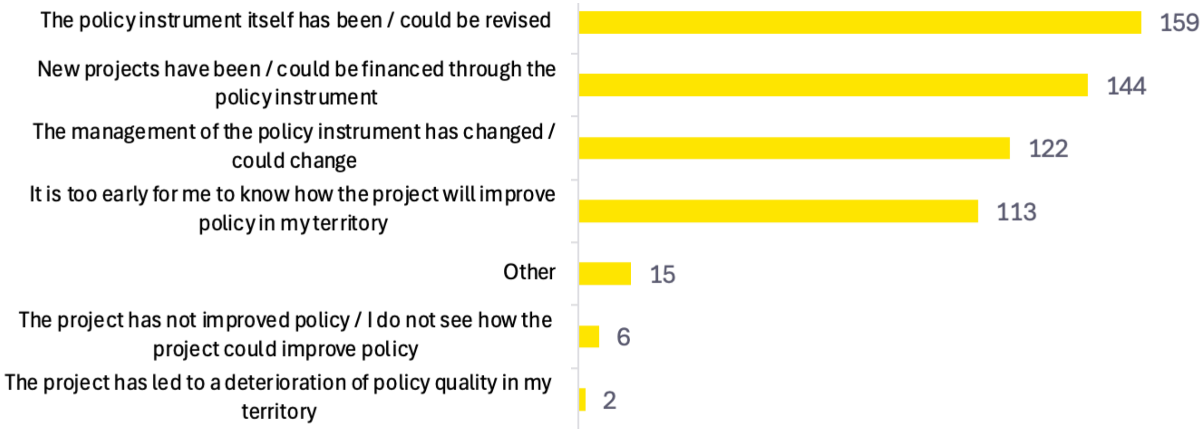
Survey evidence indicates that increased organisational capacity is widely perceived as contributing, or likely to contribute, to improvements in the policy instruments addressed by the projects. Among respondents who reported at least some likelihood of applying project-related capacities within their organisation (362 respondents), reported or expected policy changes most commonly concerned adjustments to the policy instrument itself, the financing of new projects and changes in policy management, suggesting that **capacity gains are primarily linked to operational and implementation-oriented improvements** (44%, 40% and 34%, respectively)[216]. At the same time, a substantial share of respondents indicated that it was still too early to assess policy effects (31%), reflecting the relatively early stage of implementation for many projects. Explicitly negative assessments were rare, with only a very small minority reporting no improvement or a deterioration of policy quality (fewer than 3% combined), pointing to broadly positive or cautiously optimistic expectations regarding policy change[217].

[215] Case studies are available in Annex 1.

[216] Online survey question: " Have you observed, or do you expect to observe, any policy changes following the capacity building of your organisation?" Beneficiaries (n=362). Closed question with multiple answers allowed.

[217] Ibidem.

Figure 19 "Have you observed, or do you expect to observe, any policy changes following the capacity building of your organisation?"



Source: Survey to beneficiaries.

Focusing on respondents who did not express uncertainty or negative expectations (269 respondents), the survey suggests that **capacity gains translate into policy improvements primarily where enabling conditions are in place**. Alignment between project insights and existing national or regional policy priorities emerges as the most decisive factor (195 respondents; 73%), alongside the availability of sufficient organisational or financial capacity to act on those insights (132 respondents; 49%). Qualitative responses further point to complementary enabling mechanisms, including stakeholder engagement, senior management involvement and peer learning, as facilitating the translation of organisational capacity gains into concrete policy improvement[218]. By contrast, evidence on barriers remains limited and, where reported, relates mainly to external political or economic factors rather than to shortcomings in the capacity-building process itself.

Across beneficiary interviews, respondents reported that **capacity gains linked to interregional exchange, peer reviews and exposure to external practices were actively used to prepare, revise or operationalise policy instruments**, including through the integration of project learning into regional development strategies, the adoption of new local or regional policies, and the revision of funding measures, training schemes or implementation methodologies. In some cases, interviewees described direct policy improvements that had already been adopted, including instances of formal approval, while others emphasised that capacity gains were feeding into ongoing or forthcoming policy revisions. Interviewees also highlighted that **capacity gains often functioned as enabling or preparatory mechanisms**, strengthening the ability of organisations to orient policy choices, specify requirements, engage stakeholders and cooperate with policy-responsible bodies, even where formal revision of policy instruments was still pending. At the same time, interviews confirm that increased organisational capacity does not automatically translate into policy improvement: respondents pointed to resource constraints, stakeholder engagement challenges, institutional complexity and the difficulty of isolating and evidencing policy effects as factors influencing both the pace and scope of improvements. Perspectives from Monitoring Committee members interviewees further underline that, while policy improvements linked to projects do occur, attributing and measuring these changes remains challenging, reinforcing the survey-based finding that the contribution of organisational capacity to policy improvement is conditional, context-dependent and often realised over time.

4.3 Task 2.2 – Evaluation of the Policy Learning Platform's performance

- **The Platform's intervention logic is clear and coherent in both design and practice, with initial familiarisation needs diminishing quickly as stakeholders engage and understand how components contribute to policy learning and improvement.**

[218] Online survey question: "Please clarify which factors you think have contributed / could contribute to this policy improvement." Beneficiaries (n=269). Closed question.

- **The Platform's services are highly relevant for capacity building and, as a potential result of it, for policy improvement, providing practical knowledge, peer exchange and expert support that strengthen individual and organisational capacities and often feed into policy development.**
- **The Platform's services are widely perceived as effective, with high satisfaction and strong perceived usefulness across services, particularly for peer reviews and other demand-driven expert support, while improvement needs relate mainly to scaling impact rather than service quality.**
- **Peer reviews make a direct and substantial contribution to policy improvements, especially where they are embedded in decision-making processes and followed by structured internal uptake.**

4.3.1 Is the Platform's intervention logic clear and coherent?

The **Platform intervention logic is generally clear, coherent and well understood by stakeholders**, with a degree of clarity that has **strengthened over time through use and familiarisation**. The Platform, designed as a one-stop shop for policymakers to capitalise on project results and make them accessible beyond individual partnerships[219], is perceived as a mature and internally consistent system, structured around three complementary pillars (**access to knowledge, access to people, and access to expert support**) which together form a coherent service ecosystem responding to the Programme's policy learning and capitalisation objectives. Evidence confirms that this intervention logic is not only **formally articulated** but also **understood and recognised in practice**. While the Platform may initially appear redundant[220] or unclear to newcomers[221], it becomes well understood over time and is subsequently perceived as an integral and coherent tool for learning and capacity building[222]. This is also the result of the **Platform's evolution from an add-on to a core strategic component of the Programme**: while the previous programming period focused on its launch and experimentation, the current period reflects greater maturity and strategic relevance, with the Platform becoming increasingly aligned with the Programme's capitalisation objectives and more widely trusted by Partner States[223].

In this regard, beneficiaries report regular and diversified use of the Platform (good practices, peer reviews, webinars), describing the services as coherent and easy to understand, and indicating their intention to continue using the Platform due to its perceived usefulness[224]. Users also demonstrate to well understand the **complementarity between Platform components**, as they declare to actively monitor upcoming Platform events on a weekly basis and participate well beyond minimum project requirements, indicating that the value proposition of Platform activities is clear and that the logic linking events, learning and project implementation is well internalised[225]. The Platform's role is also consistently described as clear and complementary to projects, reinforcing the idea that the Platform is perceived not as a parallel structure but as an **integrated support mechanism aligned with project and Programme objectives**[226].

Peer reviews are identified as the most concrete and useful Platform tool, with peer review beneficiaries reporting to use the Platform as the primary entry point when preparing a peer review request, easily navigating between experts, examples and previous cases, and experiencing no confusion about how the Platform works or what it is intended to provide[227]. This suggests that, also for users engaging with expert support services, the causal link between policy challenges, Platform services and expected outputs is both visible and intuitive.

[219] Policy Learning Platform Manual – Draft, May 2025
[220] According to interviews conducted with Monitoring Committee / Points of Contact Members
[221] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries
[222] Ibid.
[223] According to interviews conducted with the Joint Secretariat
[224] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries
[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid.
[227] According to interviews conducted with Thematic Experts

4.3.2 Are the Platform's services relevant for capacity building and policy improvement?

Stakeholders consistently describe the Platform as a practical mechanism that helps policy actors **strengthen skills, access actionable knowledge, benchmark approaches and translate learning into policy development**, across the three pillars (knowledge, people, expert support). This is reflected both in how the Platform is designed and monitored and in how users describe its contribution in practice. Evidence from beneficiaries strongly supports the Platform's relevance, often in very concrete terms. Several beneficiaries emphasise that the Platform provides **usable and transferable content** that improves internal knowledge and supports better-informed policy discussions. For instance, multiple service components (good practices, webinars, peer reviews, articles/news) are described as useful and directly applicable, providing examples and implementation models that do not exist locally and equipping decision-makers with "concrete European evidence," also strengthening strategic planning and the quality of policy debate[228]. Similarly, all key services are deemed as highly relevant (good practices, peer review, webinars, policy briefs, knowledge tools), with some beneficiaries stressing the value of centralised access to good practices and a comprehensive webinar calendar for project partners, while also flagging uncertainty about visibility beyond the Interreg Europe community[229]. Among the others, the **peer review and good-practice services** are repeatedly singled out as particularly relevant: beneficiaries, indeed, characterise peer reviews as an "extremely useful" tool for capitalising on capacity gains (and as the service most likely to lead to policy improvement) and highlight the relevance of the good practice database for learning and partner search, while workshops and expert interaction are described as strengthening staff competencies[230]. Moreover, peer review site visits have been described as opportunities to observe "models of excellence," understand implementation processes and bring back actionable solutions[231]. Stakeholders' perceptions are partially corroborated by survey evidence, which helps to qualify how users translate the Platform's relevance into capacity gains. Among the 77 respondents, 48% report capacity improvements "to a large degree" and 47% "to a small degree," while only 5% indicate no improvement[232]. Respondents reporting capacity gains mainly refer to improved access to good practices, learning from other regions' experiences, networking and peer exchange, and expert guidance supporting policy design, benchmarking and strategic planning. Importantly, responses indicating no observed capacity gains **do not reflect a lack of relevance of the Platform's services, but rather limited intensity of use or contextual factors**. These respondents explain that policy areas differ significantly across countries, that they have not yet used the Platform intensively enough to observe impacts, or that they lacked the time to engage with the Platform beyond occasional participation in matchmaking or peer-review activities[233].

Evidence also illustrates how **learning is not limited to individual participants but supports organisational learning processes**: one beneficiary explicitly notes learning "at the level of the organisation" within the authority responsible for the policy instrument, while another provides a concrete example of internal mobilisation after a seminar, where colleagues collectively brainstormed what could be applicable to their territory[234]. In this regard, the Programme's monitoring framework captures individual learning primarily through Platform events and tracks organisational learning and policy improvements mainly through peer reviews. Current figures reported by the Programme indicate 1,080 **people with increased capacity due to participation in Platform events (RI1)** (out of 4,200 targeted), **6 organisations with increased capacity due to participation in interregional cooperation (RI2)** (out of 50 targeted), and **4 policy instruments improved thanks to Interreg Europe (RI3)** (out of 40 targeted)[235].

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[228] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries

[229] Ibid.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Ibid.

[232] Online survey question "To what extent have the Platform's services improved your capacities in your policy area?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

[233] Ibid.

[234] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries

[235] Data extraction from the Monitoring file "Peer reviews – full overview" – NEW"

The Platform enables beneficiaries to derive greater benefit from the Programme, suggesting relevance not only for ongoing implementation but also for strategic learning and the application of newly acquired capacities. It has also, in some limited cases, been perceived as helpful in inspiring new projects, even though this is not an explicit objective of the Platform. In terms of potential capacity building, survey responses confirm that these capacities are expected to be increased to some extent, with **49%** of respondents indicating capacity gains *"to a large degree"* and 44% *"to a small degree,"* while only **6%** report that capacity increase is not expected[236]. Increase in organisations' capacity is facilitated when learning is directly relevant to organisational priorities, practically applicable, and supported by access to concrete examples, tools and peer exchange. At the same time, the translation of relevant capacities into organisational practice may be influenced by external constraints, notably the availability of time and resources to implement the learnings[237].

In some contexts, relevance is also linked to **broader alignment needs**, as some users perceive Platform inputs as contributing to broader policy alignment, including EU legislative convergence[238]. Programme-level stakeholders emphasise the Platform's high added value as a cost-efficient mechanism that extends policy learning beyond project partnerships, particularly through peer reviews, validated good practices, policy briefs and a high volume of learning events[239], and is able to reach wider audiences, including small institutions across Europe[240].

4.3.3 Are the Platform's services effective in achieving their objectives?

The Platform's services are consistently described as effective in supporting **knowledge development, policy learning and policy improvement**, with particularly strong evidence related to demand-driven and interactive formats such as peer reviews, matchmaking and other expert support. This perception is supported by both performance data and stakeholder feedback, suggesting that the Platform is largely functioning as intended.

Effectiveness is indeed reflected in high satisfaction levels and strong uptake of services: according to the Platform monitoring tool[241], satisfaction rates (value for MS2) meet or exceed Programme targets across most service categories. The share of satisfied beneficiaries of Platform services stands at 87%, above the 80% target, while satisfaction with expert policy advice and support services (helpdesk, matchmaking and peer reviews) reaches 96%. Satisfaction with peer reviews is particularly high (95%), confirming that this service is among the most effective tools offered by the Platform. Although satisfaction with policy learning events (79%) is slightly below the 80% target in early measurements, it remains high overall and consistent with qualitative feedback highlighting the usefulness of these events. These figures indicate that the Platform delivers its services in a way that largely meets users' expectations and supports the achievement of intended outcomes.

Qualitative evidence strongly reinforces this picture and provides concrete illustrations of effectiveness. Stakeholders emphasise that the Platform effectively supports decision-makers by providing **concrete European evidence** and enabling comparisons with other regions' approaches, thereby helping refine policies and identify effective solutions[242]. Some monitoring committee members and/or points of contact see the Platform as a support to prepare better projects and enhance programme engagement[243]. Others highlight that the Platform deepens thematic knowledge, supports stakeholder learning, and feeds knowledge back into local strategies and development work[244]. Thematic experts, based on their direct experience in delivering peer reviews and interacting with beneficiaries during follow-up activities, indicate that involved beneficiaries perceived expert-led services as highly effective: the beneficiaries reported to the thematic experts that the Platform enables access to suitable experts, prior cases and targeted knowledge, with no shortcomings or functionality issues

[236] Online survey question "To what extent have you / are you likely to apply the capacities gained through the Platform in your organisation?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

[237] Ibid.

[238] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries

[239] According to interviews conducted with Monitoring Committee / Points of Contact Members

[240] Ibid.

[241] Data extraction from the Policy Learning Platform monitoring and reporting tool (31/12/2025)

[242] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries

[243] According to interviews conducted with Monitoring Committee / Points of Contact Members

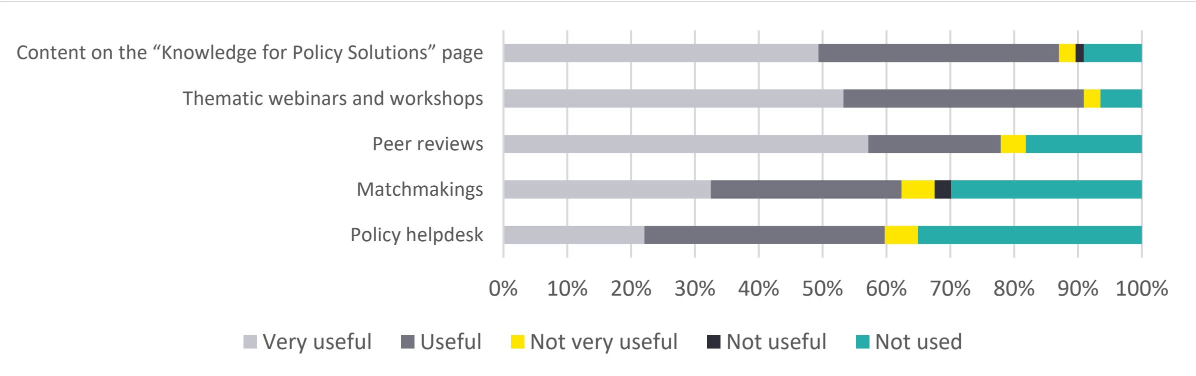
[244] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries

identified[245]. From a strategic perspective, the Platform's impact is characterised as "strong," in terms of the scale of participation in events, its geographic reach (including regions rarely covered by other programmes), and consistently positive participant feedback[246].

The effectiveness of **peer reviews** is particularly prominent: this service is enthusiastically described as helpful in improving policy instruments, structuring policy challenges and demonstrating the value of knowledge exchange even without direct funding[247], as well as highly successful in meeting real technical assistance needs (e.g., work on legislation for large-scale pilots funded nationally)[248]. Peer reviews are also considered extremely effective in influencing decision-making and supporting benchmarking of policy models[249], as they are likely to generate intense, problem-solving exchanges and deliver actionable recommendations validated with local policymakers, often resulting in high motivation and learning for both hosts and peers[250]. On the other hand, identified potential areas for improvements include enhanced follow-up or light, targeted post–peer review support to help regions operationalise recommendations[251]. **Other services** are also considered effective, albeit sometimes in a more complementary role. Good practices are reported to effectively support policy shaping and idea generation, while events and workshops are considered effective channels for acquiring applicable knowledge, as illustrated by repeated participation beyond minimum project requirements[252].

Survey evidence from Platform users further corroborates these qualitative findings and provides a more granular picture of perceived effectiveness across services. Overall, a clear majority of respondents rate the Platform's services as either *"very useful"* or *"useful"* across all service categories[253]. **Peer reviews** clearly stand out as the most positively assessed service, reflecting their strong perceived added value among users (with only **4%** considering them *"not very useful")*. **Community events** (thematic webinars and workshops) are also highly valued, confirming their effectiveness as accessible and widely used capacity-building formats. **Knowledge content**, including good practices and stories, is similarly well regarded, indicating that users find these materials relevant and practically useful for their work (while **30%** users report having not used them). Regarding **matchmaking services** and the **policy helpdesk**, while a majority of users who engaged with these services assess them positively, a substantial share of respondents reports not having used them (circa 30% in both cases). This pattern suggests that perceived effectiveness is highest among active users, while non-use reflects differences in exposure rather than dissatisfaction.

Figure 20 "How would you rate the usefulness of the services offered by the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform?"



Source: Survey to Platform users

[245] According to interviews conducted with Thematic Experts
[246] Ibid.
[247] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries
[248] According to interviews conducted with Monitoring Committee / Points of Contact Members
[249] Ibid.
[250] According to interviews conducted with Thematic Experts
[251] Ibid.
[252] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries
[253] Online survey question "How would you rate the usefulness of the services offered by the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Closed question

Importantly, suggestions for improvement (see § 4.1.5 for further details) primarily relate to increasing visibility, improving navigation, strengthening follow-up mechanisms, or supporting the transition from learning to implementation[254]. These findings therefore point to opportunities for **scaling and deepening impact**, rather than addressing shortcomings in service quality or delivery. At the same time, some beneficiaries report more limited use of the Platform's services due to a primary focus on project implementation; however, even in these cases, services are still considered useful for creating synergies and organising thematic exchanges[255]. This suggests that effectiveness is closely linked to **intensity of use**, rather than to shortcomings in service delivery. Where beneficiaries engage regularly, services are perceived as effective; where engagement is more limited, perceived benefits are correspondingly lower.

4.3.4 To what extent does the peer review service contribute to policy improvements?

The peer review service makes a substantial contribution to policy improvements across participating regions, helping translate learning into concrete policy improvement. Overall, collected evidence consistently indicates that the peer review service contributes directly to policy improvements by strengthening policy design, governance arrangements and implementation processes, rather than remaining at the level of general knowledge exchange.

Beneficiaries strongly support the **peer review's role as a catalyst for policy improvement**, describing it as particularly effective in improving policy instruments, generating new policy ideas and demonstrating the value of non-financial, knowledge-based support[256]. Insights gained through peer reviews are often actively fed back into local strategies, policy reflection and development work[257], or directly influence internal discussions and decision-making processes[258]. Some concrete examples illustrate the peer review service's direct contribution to policy improvement. In some cases, peer reviews have supported legislative work and large-scale pilot initiatives funded at national level[259]. More broadly, the peer review format encourages regions to clearly articulate their policy challenges, engage relevant local actors and receive targeted external input linked to a specific policy instrument – an element identified by experts as a key enabling factor for policy improvement. In practice, peer reviews have enabled institutional and policy changes that would otherwise have been difficult to achieve. For instance, as stated by a thematic expert, one peer review led to the formal integration of reuse centres into a regional quality management system, after auditors had previously excluded them as "irrelevant". Exposure to operational systems during the peer review also allowed the beneficiary to define concrete IT and monitoring requirements, thereby strengthening data-driven policy management and improving the design of policy instruments. Peer reviews were further reported to mobilise policymakers and enhance political engagement, with ministry representatives participating in peer review visits and the reviewed topic gaining increased policy visibility and momentum. Additional examples provided by thematic experts confirm this pattern, including policy shifts on housing and the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Norway, the creation of a remote learning centre in Östersund, and strengthened strategies on labour-market and skills development.

The **in-depth case study on the City of Tallinn** provides particularly strong and well-documented evidence of the peer review's contribution to policy improvement[260]. Tallinn used the peer review to address a complex policy challenge related to sustainability governance and the persistent gap between Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) ambitions and implementation. The peer review process enabled the City to move from a conceptual governance framework to concrete actions, resulting in both professional and institutional capacity gains. Following the review, Tallinn created an internal SDG coordination group involving key departments, integrated SDG-related goals and indicators into its annual strategic planning and budgeting cycle, initiated the development of a new ex-ante impact assessment methodology, and launched pilot projects to test new governance approaches. The peer review also directly influenced stakeholder and citizen engagement policies,

[254] Online survey question "In your opinion, how can the Platform be improved to increase its impact?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Open question

[255] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries

[256] According to interviews conducted with Beneficiaries

[257] Ibid.

[258] Ibid.

[259] According to interviews conducted with Monitoring Committee / Points of Contact Members

[260] Case studies are available in Annex 1.

leading to the organisation of the city's first Citizens' Assembly and the creation of new participatory governance tools, as well as the drafting of a politically endorsed framework for citizen involvement. At organisational level, the peer review contributed to structural changes such as strengthening the Strategic Management Office, integrating sustainability into leadership training and HR strategies, and embedding sustainability principles into internal planning and communication processes. These changes demonstrate a clear causal chain between peer review recommendations and concrete policy instrument revisions, governance reforms and implementation actions.

Survey evidence from Platform users corroborates these qualitative findings and provides a quantitative perspective on the **peer review's contribution to policy improvement**. Among respondents who participated in a peer review (39 out of 77), a clear majority report that the service contributed to improving policy in their country or region either "to a large degree" (44%) or "to a small degree" (51%), with only two respondents indicating "not at all" (5%)[261]. Importantly, respondents reporting a large contribution explicitly link peer reviews to concrete outcomes such as the creation of new projects financed through existing policy instruments, revisions of policy instruments (structural changes), and improvements in governance and management arrangements. Even among those reporting a smaller contribution, respondents describe meaningful intermediate effects, including changes in policy management, the initiation of new policy perspectives, and increased legitimacy and visibility of policy work, which in some cases helped mobilise additional resources. The very limited number of respondents reporting no contribution explicitly attribute this to a lack of relevance of the peer review content to their specific policy context, rather than to shortcomings in the peer review format itself[262].

Additional effects associated with peer reviews supporting policy improvement processes include increased capacity on topic within their organisation, better cooperation among local stakeholders, and greater prominence of the reviewed topic on national or regional political agendas[263]. These effects suggest that peer reviews not only lead to direct policy instrument improvements but also create enabling conditions, such as strengthened organisational capacity, stakeholder alignment and political attention, that are conducive to sustained policy improvement over time.

Programme-level monitoring evidence aligns with these findings. The Joint Secretariat noted high satisfaction rates (95%[264]), and increasing demand. Based on the overall **49 post-closure interviews** conducted so far – typically held around a year after each peer review – it is confirmed that **19 out of 129 peer reviews organised so far since 2018** have already led to **policy improvements** (15%), while **26** have resulted in **increased organisational capacities** (20%), a number expected to grow as more reviews reach the monitoring stage[265]. Under the current programme, only **8 post-closure interviews** were conducted so far for the **73 peer reviews organised since July 2023** during which **4** have reported a **policy improvement** (5%) and **6 increased organisational capacity** (8%)[266]. No contradictory feedback was reported, and the available evidence points to a strong and direct contribution of the peer review service to policy improvement across diverse thematic areas and territories[267]. Suggestions on the potential need for targeted follow-up support and for small-scale implementation funding in peer reviews were raised[268], but no significant shortcomings or systemic issues were identified so far, framing these suggestions as opportunities to deepen and sustain policy change rather than as responses to weaknesses in the peer review service.

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[261] Online survey question "If you have benefited from the peer review service of the Platform to what extent have the Platform's services contributed to improving policy in your country / region?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Closed question, complemented by conditional questions (both closed and open)

[262] Ibid.

[263] Online survey question "Have you observed any additional effects of peer reviews other than the aforementioned policy changes?" Policy Learning Platform users (n=77). Closed question, complemented by conditional questions (both closed and open)

[264] 2025-12-31 PLP monitoring and reporting tool

[265] Monitoring file "Peer reviews – full overview" – NEW"

[266] Ibid.

[267] According to interviews conducted with the Joint Secretariat

[268] According to interviews conducted with Thematic Experts

5. Lot 1: Operational evaluation, including communication

5.1 Lot 1: Conclusions and lessons learned

Task 1.1 – Programme management and steering	
Conclusions	Programme management and steering of Interreg Europe are effective and transparent, underpinned by clearly defined roles, reliable procedures and responsive administration by the Joint Secretariat. Programme documentation sets out responsibilities with precision, while survey and interview feedback confirms that role clarity and complementarity are high in practice. Decision-making is transparent, with Monitoring Committee minutes published and proactive information provision. Resource adequacy of the Joint Secretariat is viewed positively, which adapts staffing to demand peaks and maintains swift response times. However, one minor weakness was observed in the role visibility of the Point of Contact roles (across a minority of regions), influenced by national set-ups and capacity.
Lessons learned	► **LL #1**: **Codification of responsibilities strengthens clarity over roles, but perception gaps may still need targeted communication**. Formal documentation and consistent procedures produce high role clarity and complementary working relations. Supporting this codification with direct support through briefings, updates and other informal meetings reinforces clarity over roles and responsibilities in practice. ► **LL #2**: **Strong centralised support to Points of Contact from the Joint Secretariat reduces variance, but national capacity and organisational setups also influence Point of Contact contribution**. Comprehensive support ensures programme-level consistency; however, Point of Contact engagement was found to vary (to a small degree) by national context, which should be considered when addressing Points of Contact in case support and/or guidance can be calibrated (e.g. more hands-on support for those where demand is high and based on country-specific circumstances), while preserving Programme-level consistency.
Task 1.2 – Programme support to operations - Project level	
Conclusions	The programme’s support is widely seen as effective and well-structured, offering high-quality guidance during project generation, transparent and fair assessment procedures and reliable reporting, monitoring and payment processes. While operational challenges remain mainly linked to pre-financing, national controls, financial and reporting burdens and limited flexibility, beneficiaries generally perceive the rules as clear, the tools are reliable and the mid-term review and pilot action procedures as valuable. Budgets are mostly adequate but can be constraining in specific contexts. Electronic system tools are effective and widely appreciated for their reliability and functionality while specific user-experience and navigation issues persist, pointing to opportunities for incremental improvement rather than systemic redesign.
Lessons learned	► **LL #3: Proactive support combined with transparent assessment improves application and projects quality.** The combination of clear guidance, responsive feedback from the Joint Secretariat and complementary support from Points of Contact participate in strengthening project proposals. Tools (self-assessment tool, project idea feedback system, documentation) reduce uncertainty and help beneficiaries align their applications with Programme requirements, resulting in higher-quality applications compared with the previous period. At the same time, the transparent and harmonised assessment process, based on clear criteria and detailed feedback to applicants, fosters trust and contribute to selecting projects of high-quality. ► **LL #4: Clear rules and structured reporting frameworks enhance consistency and implementation, but effectiveness still relies on experience and targeted human mediation**. The Programme provides clear, well-structured and well-documented rules, as well as a robust monitoring framework based on semi-annual reporting, clear indicators and the one portal. These elements support implementation and oversight, reinforced by thorough Joint Secretariat checks, targeted training and dedicated financial reporting webinars and Q&A sessions linked to project implementation. These interactive formats constitute key tools to clarify recurring issues and should be used broadly, not only for lead partners but also for project partners. However, beneficiaries’ ability to apply them effectively depends heavily on their prior experience and on contextual interpretation, particularly for financial and eligibility aspects. Operational difficulties tend to recur in specific stages and topics (e.g. budgeting across phases, eligibility of costs, reporting evidence), suggesting that challenges are not systemic but concentrated and therefore addressable through targeted support. National Points of Contact and the Joint Secretariat play a critical role in translating common EU rules into national administrative and accounting contexts, confirming that guidance tools are most effective when combined with tailored, interactive support. ► **LL #5**: **Budget adequacy depends on initial project design quality but remains sensitive to contextual asymmetries and limited flexibility**: When projects are well budgeted at application stage and financial allocations accurately reflect planned activities, resources are generally

	sufficient to deliver expected outputs. However, adequacy varies across partners context (e.g. travel-intensive regions, high-cost or remote areas, partners with national legal restrictions on staff costs, limited cash-flow capacity), indicating that challenges are contextual rather than systemic. While these constraints rarely prevent delivery, they can reduce implementation efficiency, limit participation intensity for certain partners, and constrain adaptive responses to external shocks (e.g. rising travel costs), with potential implications for equity across partnerships. ► **LL #6: Usability challenges regarding the Programme electronic tools are concentrated in user experience rather than functionality.** Reported difficulties relate mainly to navigation, information retrieval and specific workflows (e.g. document management, reporting interfaces, role management), indicating that challenges are incremental and user-oriented rather than structural or technical.
Task 1.2 – Programme support to operations - Platform-level	
Conclusions	The Policy Learning Platform is widely perceived as well-organised and easy to navigate, supported by clearly defined roles, strong documentation and effective coordination tools. Its support services achieve very high satisfaction levels, and its agile, adaptive model ensures activities remain aligned with evolving beneficiary needs. Engagement is also strong however, mobilisation beyond the already active community remains limited. Additional efforts are needed to improve visibility and facilitate access for first-time users.
Lessons learned	► **LL #7: Clear, formalised roles and procedure enable sustained performance.** The strong clarity of roles and procedures combined with effective working modalities and coordination creates an operational environment where responsibilities are well defined and collaboration is seamless between the Joint Secretariat and the Platform contractor. ► **LL #8: Clear guidance, high-quality services and adaptability lead to high effectiveness of support measures.** High satisfaction rates and positive feedback from beneficiaries show that the Platform's support measures are highly effective thanks to precise operational guidance with detailed manuals and guidelines, strong performance of activities related to *access to expertise* which beneficiaries perceive as useful and delivering positive benefits as well as a flexible and adaptative operating model allowing rapid responses to emerging needs. ► **LL #9: Engagement is strong yet with many actors already involved in the Programme, revealing a potential to mobilise more actors still out of reach**. The Platform reaches a wide community of stakeholders, of whom many are already engaged in the Programme, implying that additional efforts are needed to mobilise a broader range of external stakeholders beyond the usual Platform users or those involved in a project.
Task 1.3 - Communication strategy and selected communication activities	
Conclusions	Interreg Europe's communication strategy is professionally managed and largely effective for its main audiences and operational needs, underpinned by clear materials, responsive support, and reliable tools and trainings. Social media, events and project webpages represent the primary tools to communicate project achievements, while discovery of the Programme itself remains driven mainly by professional networks. Overall performance is strong, with only minor implementation gaps identified, notably uneven Point of Contact capacity across countries, some usability and clarity issues at webpage and Programme-publication level, and a need for more tailored social media support to help beneficiaries optimise external communication of results.
Lessons learned	► **LL #10: Standardisation of communication tools and templates enables efficiency, while flexibility in certain areas could improve the richness of communication at the project level.** The Programme's standardised tools, templates and webpages reduce burden and harmonise outputs, as described by project communication managers. However, small design flexibilities (e.g. number of images, character limits, HTML editability) and clear editorial criteria for central publication (i.e. on the Programme website and in newsletters) could help projects to tailor their communication. ► **LL #11: Discovery of the Programme still occurs through networks, while social media is perceived the most effective form of results communication**. Discovery of the Programme travels mainly via professional networks/word-of-mouth, while social media and events are most effective for communicating project achievements. Managing communications with this distinction in mind would help to align content and formats to their purpose.

5.2 Lot 1: Recommendations

Task 1.1 – Programme management and steering		
#	**Recommendation**	**Responsible**
1	**Improve visibility of the Points' of Contact intermediary support role to beneficiaries.** While the obligations of Partner States are already defined in the Interreg Europe Cooperation document and the role of Points of Contact is widely understood, some beneficiaries could	Joint Secretariat

	benefit from more explicit information on where Points of Contact can assist and when questions should be directed to the Joint Secretariat. This may take the form of "who to contact" in the Programme manual, which would indicate the types of assistance the Points of Contact can provide. In recognition of the flexible design of the Point of Contact role, this should be framed so as not to formalise or standardise their responsibilities, but rather to give beneficiaries a general indication of where Points of Contact may be able to assist.	
Task 1.2 – Programme support to operations - Project level		
#	**Recommendations**	**Responsible**
2	**Reinforce the existing support system by further tailoring assistance and greater visibility**. The Programme should consolidate its strong support by further tailoring assistance to applicants' weakest areas, notably geographical coverage and the innovation dimension. To address recurring bottlenecks (e.g., financial eligibility, budgeting between phases, semi-annual spending plans), the Programme should develop targeted clarification notes or FAQs. Greater visibility should also be given to existing tools, trainings and services offered by the Points of Contact (see task 1.1) through more targeted and multilingual communication adapted to territorial levels.	Joint Secretariat
3	**Mitigate administrative and financial constraints within the existing framework**. While recognising that administrative and financial requirements are inherent to EU-funded programmes, the Programme should strengthen efforts to simplify procedures, notably using simplified cost options, and language (less administrative, more plain English). Potential redundancies between the financial report and the progress report should be reviewed to reduce duplicate information request and improve coherence. At application stage, stronger *ex-ante* guidance should be provided on realistic budgeting for travel-intensive, high-cost or legally constrained partners. The Programme should also encourage early identification and monitoring of cash-flow risks, particularly for partners with limited financial capacity. Existing budget-adjustment and reallocation mechanisms should be further clarified and more actively promoted for instance through financial reporting webinars and Q&A sessions to clarify problematic points and to support adaptive implementation where justified. When possible, greater room for adjustment should be introduced to allow projects to adapt in response to rapidly changing political, territorial or technological contexts.	Joint Secretariat
4	**Optimise user interaction with electronic tools by consolidating guidance and feedback mechanisms**. Document management functionalities should be simplified where possible (e.g. handling of multiple attachments) to reduce administrative burden. Short, system-focused guidance should be strengthen to explain how to navigate tools effectively. Finally, the use of beneficiary feedback should be optimise to inform iterative, user-centred adjustments to digital interfaces (in conjunction with Recommendation #10).	Joint Secretariat
Task 1.2 – Programme support to operations - Platform-level		
#	**Recommandations**	**Responsible**
5	**Monitor Platform performance in a single structured tool or database.** Develop a streamlined monitoring system to centralise all Platform performance data. This system could replace the current reliance on multiple Excel workbooks and datasheets, which makes it more difficult to obtain a comprehensive and reliable overview of peer review activities and overall performance of Platform services. A unified tool or database would facilitate consistent data entry, improve data quality, and enhance the clarity and readability of the monitoring outputs.	Joint Secretariat + Policy Learning Platform Team
6	**Extend access to Platform services to broader user profiles.** The Programme could strengthen outreach and communication towards less active or under-represented user groups, including eligible regions not yet involved, smaller institutions and first-time beneficiaries, in order to reduce uneven exposure and ensure that the Platform's benefits are more evenly distributed across regions and policy contexts. Also, to lower entry barriers for new users, the Programme should develop a dedicated first-time user onboarding path including a clear "Start here" page and a guided tour of key Platform features.	Joint Secretariat + Policy Learning Platform Team
Task 1.3 - Communication strategy and selected communication activities		
#	**Recommendations**	**Responsible**
7	**Consider providing optional social media training and support for project partners.** While social media is not an obligatory communication requirement under Interreg Europe, a number of beneficiaries who do use social media expressed interest in more structured guidance. In continuation of the strong communication support already provided, the Programme could therefore offer optional training and light-touch support for teams wishing to strengthen their social media presence (e.g. advice on platform choice, content formats, short-form video, tone and frequency). This additional offer would complement, rather than	Joint Secretariat

	replace, the core regulatory communication obligations, and ensure that support remains responsive to varied project communication strategies.	
8	**Enhance project webpage flexibility while preserving branding consistency**. The specific usability constraints flagged by project communication managers should be addressed to allow them more flexibility in communicating results while remaining an easy publishing hub. Title length limits, image/ library options (e.g. allow multiple images where possible) should be reviewed and adjusted, and the functionality of the available HTML editing options should be ensured (within the limits of the webpages' core structure and Programme branding guidelines).	Joint Secretariat
9	**Clarify how project content is selected for website/ newsletter featuring**. A brief note should be published explaining the criteria for how project updates posted to project webpages are selected for publication on the Interreg Europe website and in its newsletter. This could be combined with a calendar presenting the different themes to be covered over the year, in order to help project partners to time their contributions and tailor their content to the communication objectives of the Programme.	Joint Secretariat

6. Lot 2: Impact evaluation

6.1 Lot 2: Conclusions and lessons learned

6.1.1 Task 2, Task 2.1 and Task 2.2

Added value of Interreg Europe	
Conclusions	Interreg Europe demonstrates strong EU added value through its pan-European scope, strategic policy focus and emphasis on capacity building, which already translates into tangible policy improvements. National mechanisms cannot replace the distinctive learning-based cooperation model underpinning Interreg Europe's intervention logic.
Lessons learned	► **LL #1: Interreg Europe's unique model, spanning 36 countries and built on peer learning, translates exchanges into policy improvements, creating durable impact and clear added value to EU and Cohesion Policy.** By prioritising capacity-building and policy-instrument focus, the Programme delivers measurable improvements across EU priorities while contributing to the Investment for Jobs and Growth programme and complementing other EU instruments and programmes. By providing access to experience and practices throughout Europe, the Programme's unique intervention logic influences the capacities of individuals and organisations involved in elaborating and implementing regional policies, in ways mainstream national or regional funding programmes cannot.
Clarity and coherence of the intervention logic across Programme, project (Task 2.1) and Platform levels (Task 2.2)	
Conclusions	The intervention logic of the Programme is clear and coherent across Programme, project and Platform levels, providing a robust conceptual framework for learning-oriented and policy-focused action. While the Programme's predominantly "soft" approach can be less intuitive for some stakeholders at entry, understanding generally strengthens through engagement and implementation. At project level, objectives and activity sequences are largely coherent and aligned with policy-oriented outcomes, with only limited and temporary difficulties reported by a minority of partners in operationalising the logic, particularly in early stages or in evolving implementation contexts. At Platform level, the intervention logic is perceived as mature, well-structured and complementary to projects, with users clearly recognising the coherence and added value of its integrated service ecosystem once familiarised.
Lessons learned	► **LL #2: A clear and coherent intervention logic is a critical anchor for relevance, uptake, and durable policy effects across all levels of the Programme.** When the intervention logic is articulated as a simple, internally consistent narrative linking activities to learning, capacity building and policy improvement, stakeholders are more likely to engage, understand value, and translate participation into sustained outcomes. Across Programme, project and Platform levels, stronger policy-oriented results are achieved when this logic is easy to grasp at entry and reinforced over time. Early and continuous clarification therefore plays a key role in closing initial understanding gaps and supporting long-term policy improvement.
Achievement of objectives across Programme, project (Task 2.1) and Platform levels (Task 2.2)	
Conclusions	The Programme is achieving its objectives to date and remains on a credible pathway towards policy improvement. The combined delivery of interregional cooperation projects and the Policy Learning Platform effectively supports learning, capacity building and the progressive translation of knowledge into policy-oriented outcomes. Moreover, the new programme features are widely perceived as relevant to achieve projects' objectives, with particular reference to those embedded in the programme's core design, while more optional and implementation-dependent features, such as pilot actions, function primarily as flexible enablers whose contribution varies across projects and contexts.
Lessons learned	► **LL #3: Achieving policy-oriented objectives through capacity building requires time, complementary delivery mechanisms and enabling implementation conditions.** The combination of interregional cooperation projects and the Policy Learning Platform provides an effective and mutually reinforcing framework for strengthening individual and organisational capacities and supporting policy improvement. However, the translation of learning into measurable policy outcomes is inherently progressive and contingent on project maturity, organisational absorption capacity and contextual factors, underscoring the importance of sustained engagement, follow-up and adaptive support over the full programming period. ► **LL #4: Programme features embedded in the core project design offer stable and widely recognised support, whereas optional features operate as context-dependent enablers.** Structurally embedded features consistently shape project development, while the contribution of optional and later-stage features varies according to uptake, capacity, resources and project maturity.
Success factors and barriers to the achievement of Programme's objectives	
Conclusions	Progress towards the Programme's objectives is most effectively supported by strong alignment with local, regional or national policy priorities, well-designed peer-based learning formats and sufficient

	organisational capacity, while barriers are limited, non-systemic and largely driven by external political, institutional and resource-related factors beyond the Programme's direct control.
Lessons learned	► **LL #5: Policy alignment, practical peer learning and organisational capacity support the transformation of learning into action, while barriers are limited and largely external.** When project insights are closely aligned with national or regional priorities and delivered through hands-on peer formats (e.g., study visits, exchanges, peer reviews), uptake is strongest, provided leadership, stakeholder engagement and that time and resources are in place. Reported obstacles are sporadic and mostly context-driven (political, institutional or funding related) rather than systemic issues in Programme design.
Capacity building across project (Task 2.1) and Platform levels (Task 2.2)	
Conclusions	At project level, interregional exchange, peer learning and experiential formats consistently support individual and organisational professional capacity development, with stronger effects observed when activities align closely with participants' roles and allow active engagement. At Platform level, centralised access to good practices, peer reviews and expert support similarly strengthens individual and organisational capacities by providing actionable knowledge, benchmarking opportunities and policy-relevant evidence.
Lessons learned	► **LL #6: Capacity building is most effective when practice-oriented learning is reinforced by relevance, intensity of project's engagement and of Platform's use, as well as organisational absorption conditions across both levels.** The translation of individual learning into organisational practice is widely anticipated but remains strongly conditioned by organisational relevance, available time and resources, and project maturity. Where capacity gains appear limited at this stage, evidence points primarily to contextual and temporal factors rather than structural weaknesses, indicating that fuller organisational effects are likely to materialise as engagement deepens and implementation progresses.
Policy improvements at project level (Task 2.1)	
Conclusions	Increased organisational capacity can contribute to improvements in policy instruments through multiple and context-specific pathways, although this translation is neither automatic nor uniform and is strongly shaped by institutional, political, and other resource and timing factors. At the current stage of implementation, organisational capacity building therefore operates mainly as an enabling and preparatory mechanism, with the full extent of policy-level effects often only becoming visible as projects and policy processes mature.
Lessons learned	► **LL #7: Improvements to policy instruments emerge through multiple, non-linear pathways and over extended timeframes**. Increased organisational capacity contributes to policy improvement through formal revisions, operational adjustments and preparatory work, but these effects are strongly shaped by institutional, political and resource conditions and may only be fully observable after project completion.
Policy improvements at the Platform level (Task 2.2)	
Conclusions	The Platform's services are highly relevant for capacity building, as they provide policy actors with practical knowledge, peer exchange and expert support that can translate into concrete policy development. In particular, the peer review service most contributes to potential policy improvements across participating regions, moving beyond knowledge exchange to support concrete changes in policy instruments, governance arrangements and implementation practices, with particularly strong effects where peer reviews are closely embedded in local decision-making processes and followed by structured internal uptake.
Lessons learned	► **LL #8: Policy alignment, learning design and organisational capacity jointly enable learning-to-action.** Platform-supported policy improvement is most effective when learning is closely embedded in decision-making processes and followed by structured internal uptake, with peer reviews providing a particularly powerful, non-financial mechanism for translating knowledge into concrete policy change. Reported barriers are infrequent and predominantly reflect external constraints rather than weaknesses in Platform design or delivery.
Programme contribution to territorial cohesion and disparities' reduction	
Conclusions	The Programme contributes meaningfully to reducing territorial disparities and strengthening territorial cohesion. While participation and learning are broadly balanced between less and more developed regions, less developed regions may realise slightly greater learning gains, supporting the conclusion that the Programme helps reduce disparities. That said, the extent to which territorial disparities are decreasing remains difficult to determine for Programme beneficiaries, as the process is still ongoing and such effects tend to emerge over the long term.
Lessons learned	► **LL #9: Balanced participation among diverse territories drives cohesion gains.** The Programme's contribution to reducing territorial disparities is robust: learning is broadly comparable across region types, with modestly higher gains and funding leverage in less developed regions, signalling convergence and narrowing gaps. These reductions, however, will mostly be confirmed over an extended period.

Stakeholders' recommendations for improving the Programme performance	
Conclusions	Programme performance is assessed very positively by stakeholders, with no major structural shortcomings identified. Few interviewees highlight some areas of potential targeted improvements related to communication, guidance, training, and policy alignment.
Lessons learned	► **LL #10: Continuous improvement rather than an overhaul and redesign of the Programme will raise performance by reinforcing communication, guidance, training, and policy alignment.** Stakeholders are broadly satisfied and call for targeted refinements: clearer pilot-action rules with practical examples; more frequent, tailored communication; expanded training/webinars and comprehensive guidance; stronger engagement of managing authorities and policy-responsible actors; improved synthesis, visibility and use of Programme-level data; and Platform usability upgrades.

6.2 Lot 2: Recommendations

6.2.1 Task 2, Task 2.1 and Task 2.2

Programme-level		
#	**Recommendations**	**Responsible**
1	**Provide more guidance on Interreg Europe's strong potential for complementarity with other EU programmes and instruments**. The Programme could maximise its added value by enhancing its guidance on complementarities with other EU instruments and programmes. The Programme could design an interactive map on the Interreg Europe website, showing various options of complementary EU tools and funds. .	Joint Secretariat
2	**Systematic offer for beneficiaries to engage in Platform services post-project**. Interreg Europe already supports long-term cooperation, and its main purpose is to mainstream lessons into policies, so partnerships should not be expected to continue after closure. To ensure that less developed regions do not lose access to support when projects end, the Programme could encourage beneficiaries to use Platform services, for example, by systematically including in the project closure letter an invitation to stay active in the Interreg Europe online community and take part in the Platform thematic events and services. This opt-in approach, particularly beneficial for less developed regions, would help maintain the uptake and mainstreaming of project results without implying any continuation of the partnership beyond the four-year project cycle.	Joint Secretariat
3	**Systematise onboarding on the intervention logic to clarify expected outcomes and the learning-to-policy pathway**. The Programme could strengthen onboarding for first-time beneficiaries by providing an interactive intervention logic map and an embedded explainer video on the Interreg Europe website, to illustrate a typical progression, from interregional exchanges to individual learning, leading to organisational learning, and, where relevant, to policy improvement. These materials could also be used during project training days.	Joint Secretariat / Policy Learning Platform team
Project-level		
#	**Recommendations**	**Responsible**
4	**Provide targeted guidance and support to help projects make informed choices about optional features, particularly pilot actions**. Clearer, context-sensitive guidance can support realistic planning and reduce implementation constraints. The Programme could strengthen early-stage guidance by, for example, introducing a short feasibility checklist for applicants considering pilot actions (covering minimum capacity, indicative budget implications, co-financing needs, timing and external dependencies), and offering optional, pilot-action-focused Q&A sessions at pre-application stage and ahead of the mid-term review.	Joint Secretariat
5	**Strengthen awareness of resource implications linked to policy improvements.** The Programme could include a dedicated paragraph in the Programme Manual to raise awareness among applicants that improvements to policy instruments may entail additional resource needs at later stages. Providing guidance on this aspect would encourage applicants to consider, from the outset, whether sufficient time, staff capacity, and financial resources are available within their organisations to support not only learning and policy design, but also the practical follow-through of policy improvements. This would help ensure that capacity-building efforts can translate into sustainable and implementable policy outcomes, even in contexts affected by external or political constraints.	Joint Secretariat
Platform-level		
#	**Recommendations**	**Responsible**

6	**Consolidate and scale follow-up to peer reviews to maximise policy impact.** The Programme could further systematise light and proportionate follow-up mechanisms after peer reviews, with the direct involvement of the peer reviewer, focusing on implementation rather than assessment. Such follow-up could help beneficiaries maintain momentum, prioritise recommendations and embed them more effectively in decision-making processes, while preserving the peer review's non-financial, demand-driven character.	Joint Secretariat / Policy Learning Platform team Thematic Experts / Peer Reviewers
7	**Strengthen the strategic use and complementarity of other Platform services (good practices, policy briefs, webinars, matchmaking and the helpdesk).** The Programme could further strengthen guidance and communication on how these services can be combined and sequenced to support policy learning and preparation for change, rather than being used in isolation. This may include clarifying the distinct value added of each service, illustrating typical "learning pathways" (e.g. from knowledge content to events to expert support), and encouraging beneficiaries to use lighter-touch services as steppingstones towards more intensive support, thereby maximising the overall effectiveness of the Platform ecosystem beyond peer reviews.	Joint Secretariat / Policy Learning Platform team
8	**Improve evidence on the impact of knowledge-based services ("Access to knowledge" pillar) through light-touch monitoring.** The Programme could systematise mechanisms to monitor increase in professional capacity triggered by the "Access to knowledge" services (good-practice database, policy briefs, etc.), by introducing a short annual survey to the Platform community specifically focused on the use of the knowledge-based services, the consequential policy reflection or organisational learning, and concrete examples of uptake. The Programme could also integrate a simple voluntary feedback prompt within the knowledge hub asking users questions about if and how the services helped them increase their professional capacities and to which extent.	Joint Secretariat / Policy Learning Platform team

Evaluation of Interreg Europe Programme

Lot 1: Operational evaluation, including communication

Lot 2: Impact evaluation

Final Report - Annexes

3 March 2026

Annexes - Table of contents

1. Annex 1 - Case studies

1.1 SKYLA

1.1.1 Description, purpose, and scope of the SKYLA project

Title	Smart Specialisation Skills Ecosystems for the Twin Transition
Acronym	SKYLA
Start date	01 March 2023
End date	31 May 2027
Lead partner	Agency for the development of the Empolese Valdelsa (*Italy*)
Partners	**Partners:** ► Agency for the development of the Empolese Valdelsa (*Italy*) ► Podlaskie Voivodeship (*Poland*) ► Regional Council of Skåne, Department for Regional Development (*Sweden*) ► Industrial Development Center South (*Sweden*) ► Sofia Municipality (*Bulgaria*) ► Cluster of Mechatronics and Automation (*Bulgaria*) ► Fingal County Council (*Ireland*) ► Regional Development Fund of Attica (*Greece*) ► European Social Fund Agency (*Lithuania*) **Advisory Partner:** ► European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning (*Belgium*) **Discovery Partner:** ► Chamber of Economy of Montenegro (*Montenegro*) ► Regional Development Agency of Lviv Region (*Ukraine*)
Associated Policy Authorities	► Regional Government of Tuscany - Directorate for Education, Training, Research and Employment (*Italy*) ► Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (*Lithuania*)
Policy objective	Smarter Europe (policy objective 1)
Specific objective	Skills for S3 and industrial transition
Total budget	2,080,524.00 €
Overall objective	► Support public authorities in putting future skills at the centre of the twin transitions for a smarter, more resilient development, by boosting and adapting the role of VET in innovation ecosystems and smart specialisation strategies

SKYLA is an interregional cooperation project aiming to **place future skills at the heart of Europe's twin green and digital transitions, fostering smarter and more resilient development by strengthening and adapting the role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) within innovation ecosystems and Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3/S4).** Led by Agency for the development of the Empolese Valdelsa in Italy, this project involves a diverse consortium of 12 partners from 10 regions across Europe, including regional development agencies and local authorities and one research and industrial consortia.

With a **total budget of €2,080,524**, SKYLA aligns with the European Union's policy objective of fostering a **Smarter Europe**, specifically **targeting skills for S3 and industrial transition**. The projects acknowledges that the European Union is committed to driving twin green and digital transitions to build a fair, resilient, and sustainable economy and considers Vocational Education and Training (VET) as a key enabler. However, VET systems have often been slow to adapt to evolving labour market needs, lacking skills forecasts, strategic intelligence, and adequate facilities. To address this, VET modernization must align with Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3/S4), not only supplying skills but actively contributing to innovation ecosystems and strengthening absorptive capacity. Despite national reforms, territorial implementation remains crucial to overcome skills gaps, foster reskilling, and create synergies between innovation, sustainability, infrastructure, and skills. Challenges persist, including weak SME–VET linkages, limited foresight on future skills, and employment uncertainties post-COVID, while SKYLA regions show uneven progress in facilities, curricula, and skills audits.

The overall objective of SKYLA is therefore to **support public authorities in putting future skills at the centre of the twin transitions by boosting and adapting the role of VET in innovation ecosystems and smart specialisation strategies.** To achieve this, SKYLA's approach follows a **structured path**: moving from identifying policy needs to defining solutions and implementing change, supported throughout by interregional exchange, stakeholder engagement, and organizational learning.

At the outset of the project, partners establish a **Stakeholder Group** to guide activities in their territories through workshops, consultations and participation. At the partnership level, the target is to have 68 organisations cooperating across borders, notably through those Stakeholder Groups (result achieved in this regard will be available from Progress Report 8).

The **first stage (Policy Needs) focuses on identifying challenges related to public authority capacity in adapting VET systems**, such as forecasting future skills, aligning VET with S3/S4 strategies and creating modern facilities, supported by the Advisory Partner (EARLALL) through moderated exchange events, participatory sessions and territorial analyses. In this regard, Policy Event 2 during Semester 2 featured interactive sessions on regional needs, comparative analyses, and discussions on policy improvement as the project's ultimate goal, complemented by expert insights from Ireland on national initiatives addressing skills for the Twin Transition and study visits focused in particular on green transition themes.

In the second stage (Policy Solutions), partners explore how public policy can address these needs, define characteristics of effective solutions, and share good practices through peer learning sessions, bilateral work, and study visits. Therefore, during Semester 3, partners deepened collaboration through matching analyses linking good practices (GPs) to regional needs, group work on solutions, and field visits such as the MITA Academy in Tuscany. Additional activities included policy opportunity workshops, gap analyses, and the identification of a second round of GPs, with eight approved and uploaded to the PLP.

This led to **the design and initiation of policy improvements (Policy Change)**, supported by peer review and a "policy change alert" mechanism to accelerate implementation and build staff capacity. Semester 4 advanced this process with evaluations of new GPs, speed-dating sessions for exchange, expert presentations on innovative approaches, and study visits in Sweden. Regarding GPs, as of Semester 4, out of the 17 targeted, 15 have already been identified. Partners also initiated the "Policy Change alert" Mechanism, completing steps to confirm policy instruments, design improvements, and refine implementation pathways, ensuring stakeholder engagement and risk assessment.

Finally, the Follow-Up phase will be dedicated to the monitoring and consolidation of changes, with ongoing interregional input, stakeholder engagement, and capacity-building activities, combining physical events with regular online meetings to share progress and address challenges.

As of semester 4, SKYLA has already recorded **two policy improvements out of the 7 policy instruments targeted**. First, Sofia municipality has introduced a **dynamic youth-focused feedback mechanism to support the "Sofia – City of Youth" Strategy**. This tool aims to engage young people aged 15 to 29 and ensure their voices play a central role in local decision-making through accessible and scalable feedback collection. Tested with the Student Council and SKYLA stakeholders, the survey was presented to the City Council in February 2025. Two new surveys are underway to further explore preferences for volunteering, digital and green training, and cultural initiatives. Second, Fingal Country Council relied on SKYLA for **updating the Future Fingal: Skills Strategy 2024–2029**, approved in November 2024. The strategy uses forecasting models to identify skills gaps and enable targeted interventions, focusing on youth engagement, real-time labour market intelligence, and collaboration with stakeholders.

1.1.2 Methodology

The analysis for the present case study relies on a mixed-methods and triangulated approach combining documentary review, an online survey and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, in order to address (i) the relevance and coherence of the project design, (ii) the project effectiveness and impact, as well as (iii) contextual factors, success factors and barriers.

First, the evaluators made use of **administrative and monitoring data** to inform the assessment of the relevance and coherence of the project as well as to provide essential contextual elements for interpreting effectiveness and potential implementation challenges.

Moreover, the **online survey** provided primary quantitative and qualitative evidence on beneficiaries' perceptions of the project, playing a central role in assessing project effectiveness and impact and in identifying success factors and barriers, while also complementing the analysis of design relevance. This is limited in the context of this case study by the small number of respondents from the project (only one respondent). These responses have therefore been treated as qualitative evidence.

Finally, **semi-structured interviews** with key project stakeholders provided in-depth insights into the project's objectives and into stakeholders' perceptions and expectations regarding its impact on capacity building and policy improvement in the territory concerned, allowing the evaluation team to contextualise and validate survey and documentary evidence.

1.1.3 Analysis of key findings

1.1.3.1 Relevance and coherence of the project design

> ***Are the project's objectives and design, including new features, relevant and sufficient to achieve its objectives? Is the link between needs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project clear and coherent?***

The project objectives and design are relevant and sufficient. Despite variations in regional contexts and policy priorities as some regions focusing on smart specialization strategies while others emphasize social policies as their policy improvement targeted, **the overarching ambition to address the needs of both the digital and green transition remains consistent across all partners**. **The link between needs, activities, outputs, and outcomes of the SKYLA project is both clear and coherent**, as evidenced by this strong alignment among partners on the project's objectives and the structured approach adopted.

SKYLA's approach follows a structured path aligned with its objectives described in the application form and underlined by the partners encountered and the respondent to the beneficiaries' survey: moving from identifying policy needs to defining solutions and implementing change, supported throughout by interregional exchange, stakeholder engagement, and organizational learning. One partner acknowledges that, while the approach was initially perceived as abstract, particularly as he was accustomed to other programmes such as Erasmus+ or Horizon, the clarity of the process improved significantly over time. Early challenges, such as explaining the requirement to select a policy improvement, were overcome through collaborative learning and the support of the lead partner. For instance, during the Project Event held in Semester 2, a session focused on the concept of policy improvement as final goal of the project. The methodology and its steps were deepened, introducing the good practices (GPs) as tool to obtain the desired change. As experience grew, partners recognized the project's impact, noting that progress is visible and meaningful. They highlight the project's ability to generate concrete results and stimulate interregional cooperation. Minimal deviations from the original plan, such as the rescheduling of a virtual meeting, have been reported, demonstrating strong adherence to the application form and the robustness of the project design. Although occasional discussions extended beyond the core focus of green and digital skills, these exchanges enriched the collaboration and fostered innovative ideas, while the lead partner ensured alignment with the initial objective. Importantly, the project has maintained coherence even in the face of external factors such as political changes, which may influence policy evolution. Overall, **SKYLA demonstrates a well-defined and adaptable approach**.

Regarding the relevance and sufficiency of the new features introduced under the 2021-2027 programming period, **pilot actions are perceived as very useful and relevant** by partners encountered to achieve the objectives of the project. One partner of the project wanted to apply for a pilot action. However, the process proved complex due to uncertainty surrounding the sources of funding for this pilot action. As reported by the lead partner, due to under-utilisation of project funds, this would have required the use of partner's own funds or the reallocation of resources from another partner to enable the implementation of this pilot action. As a result, SKYLA does not include a pilot action as of Semester 4. Despite these complexities, the concept of pilot actions remains well understood and appreciated. Additionally, the **required involvement of the managing authority is seen as critical**, as partners encountered considered that their engagement consistently leads to positive outcomes.

1.1.3.2 Project effectiveness and impact

> ***To what extent do project activities improve the professional and institutional capacities of the project beneficiaries?***

The project activities have significantly improved the professional and institutional capacities of the beneficiaries by opening new perspectives and fostering mutual learning. According to the lead partner, the greatest added value of the project lies in **its ability to "open minds,"** giving territories and managing authorities the opportunity to learn from other regions, exchange practices, and spark new ideas.

This dynamic of openness and cooperation is at the heart of the capacity building highlighted by the partners interviewed. One partner reported that at the beginning, the lack of direct responsibility for skills and education was perceived as an obstacle, unlike other partners who were able to directly influence policies. However, the project enabled them to build strong relationships with local stakeholders through the Stakeholder Group and by involving them in meetings to establish direct contacts with their European counterparts. They also emphasized that some of the practices introduced through the project, as well as the opportunity to showcase good practices from certain partners, played a decisive role in establishing these relationships. The project thus helped transform their role as local partner. They now facilitate a feedback mechanism between industry and training organizations in a national context marked by the predominance of SMEs without HR departments. Thanks to the project, this partner now maintains regular relationships with key actors in its local economy and contributes to achieving their strategic objectives. The partner stated:

> "*When we started this project, our capacity was very, very low because [education and skills] were not a core responsibility for our municipality. The project has hugely impacted our capacity simply by talking to other partners who are responsible for [education and skills]. It had a massive impact on our capacity within our team and our organization*."

This capacity building resulted in a complete redesign of the local policy instrument, the integration of models to project skills needs, youth engagement initiatives, and strengthened ties with two universities, which did not exist before.

Another partner also confirmed the changes brought about by the project. They stressed that SKYLA "*changed the way we work and interact*," by combining theory and practice and promoting a peer learning process that works very well. This approach made it possible to better understand how regions collaborate with their stakeholders and to integrate essential social dimensions, such as skills provision, into regional strategies. This partner emphasized the relevance of this method for European competitiveness and expressed the desire to continue along this path. They reported that partners are currently exploring opportunities to continue their work under Horizon Europe to extend the results.

Evidence gathered indicates **SKYLA has not only improved the capacity of organizations to design and implement policies adapted to the challenges of the twin transition, but has also transformed their way of working**, fostering collaborations and strategic developments that will endure beyond the project. Indeed, both partners encountered and the respondent to the survey believe that the results achieved thanks to the project will remain sustainable in the future.

To what extent is the increasing capacity of organisations leading to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the project? How are knowledge, skills, and capacities gained from the project effectively used to influence policy change?

The increasing capacity of organizations participating in SKYLA is clearly leading to tangible improvements in the policy instruments addressed by the project, and the knowledge, skills, and capacities gained are being effectively used to influence policy change. This is demonstrated by two significant policy improvements achieved during the project lifecycle.

In Sofia Municipality, Bulgaria, the **introduction of a dynamic, youth-centred feedback mechanism under the Sofia Youth Strategy** exemplifies how enhanced institutional capacity translates into innovative policy solutions. This tool, developed as part of the municipality's operational processes and branded under SKYLA, emerged directly from the project's structured policy learning activities, needs and gap analyses, and peer exchanges. The mechanism addresses a critical gap identified during SKYLA activities: the lack of systematic engagement with young people in shaping skills-related policies. By leveraging lessons learned from other partners' good practices such as Fingal's stakeholder-driven feedback model, Sofia adapted the concept into a mobile-friendly survey platform that empowers youth to influence municipal decisions. The survey has already gathered hundreds of responses (670) and is integrated into local governance processes, ensuring that youth voices inform policy implementation and future initiatives. This improvement demonstrates how the project's emphasis on participatory approaches and digital adaptability has strengthened the municipality's ability to design responsive, inclusive policies.

Similarly**,** in Ireland **Fingal County Council's revision of its policy instrument, the Fingal Skills Strategy 2024–2029, reflects the direct application of knowledge and practices gained through SKYLA**. Initially, Fingal faced challenges in forecasting skills needs and engaging stakeholders effectively. Through SKYLA's gap analyses, peer learning, and exposure to good practices from other regions, Fingal incorporated a robust forecasting model into its strategy, enabling precise identification of skills deficits and targeted interventions. The updated strategy integrates multiple elements inspired by SKYLA, including youth engagement initiatives, collaborative partnerships with education and training providers, and actions to support SMEs in adapting to the twin transition. Good practices such as Tuscany's Didacta Fair from Italy and Podlaskie's Patronage Class Kan from Poland informed new initiatives like the Skills Summit and STEAM programs, while bilateral exchanges strengthened Fingal's governance and stakeholder networks. The strategy now includes mechanisms for real-time labour market intelligence, flexible learning options, and transversal skills development, all rooted in SKYLA's methodology. This transformation is supported by significant financial commitments from Fingal County Council, illustrating how increased capacity leads to resource mobilization and sustained policy implementation. Additionally, **this increased capacity has led to significant financial commitments and partnerships that reinforce policy implementation**. Fingal County Council has allocated approximately €150,000 from its annual revenue budget to support the implementation of the strategy's actions, including the Xplore Your Future Expo and Competition, sectoral events, school engagement, and promotional activities. Furthermore, SKYLA helped Fingal identify the need to engage more effectively with young people on future career opportunities, resulting in a strategic partnership with Trinity College to promote STEM education in schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas, through the "Academy of the Near Future" programme. This partnership includes the recruitment of a dedicated resource to deliver an agreed work programme over two years, supported by an annual financial commitment of €103,450 from Fingal County Council, representing 50% of the total contract value. These investments underscore how capacity building through SKYLA has translated into concrete policy improvements and resource mobilization.

In conclusion, **SKYLA has both strengthened the professional and institutional capacities of its beneficiaries and ensured that these enhanced capacities are effectively channelled into policy improvements.** Through structured learning, peer exchange, and adaptation of good practices, organizations have developed innovative tools, revised strategic frameworks, and mobilized resources to address the challenges of the twin transition. So far, these outcomes confirm that the project's approach to capacity building is directly contributing to policy improvement, which are anticipated to be sustainable in the future, beyond the end of the project.

1.1.3.3 Contextual factors, success factors, and barriers

To what extent does the available evidence suggest that the project is contributing to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?

Evidence suggests that the **SKYLA project is contributing to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities, through its alignment with EU strategies and its facilitation of interregional cooperation and peer learning.**

As presented in the application form, the project's objectives are strongly connected to European priorities for the twin transition, as reflected in the EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027, which emphasizes skills development, lifelong learning, reskilling, and education as key drivers of inclusive growth. By supporting these objectives, SKYLA directly contributes to Policy Objective 1 - Smarter Europe, and complements broader strategies such as the European Green Deal, the New Industrial Strategy, and NextGenerationEU, all of which underscore the critical role of skills in fostering sustainable development and resilience.

The project's capacity to accelerate learning and reduce disparities by transferring knowledge from more advanced regions to those with less experience in addressing skills gaps is illustrated by the development of strong relationships between partners. For instance, one partner highlights its collaboration with Sweden, based on shared priorities regarding youth and industry engagement and their desire to continue this relationship beyond SKYLA. One partner also underlines the gains for discovery partners joining later. Partners from Ukraine and Montenegro were able to quickly absorb lessons and replicate approaches in their own territories. **The role of bilateral visits and study exchanges in promoting territorial cohesion are also emphasized by partners**. These interactions, both within and beyond the formal scope of the project, create opportunities for regions to learn from each other's governance models and practical solutions. While partners underline that it may be early to fully measure the long-term impact, the evidence points to a **strong interest among partners in continuing these exchanges and adapting successful practices to their own socio-economic contexts.** This peer learning process is perceived as a core asset of the programme, enabling regions with different levels of development to converge toward shared objectives.

SKYLA's contribution to territorial cohesion therefore lies in its ability to implement EU strategies through concrete actions that promote interregional collaboration, knowledge transfer, and capacity building. Although the overall impact will become clearer over time, current data indicate that SKYLA is helping to strengthen territorial cohesion and reduce disparities between the more and less developed regions.

What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the project's objectives?

SKYLA's success in achieving its objectives is driven by several key factors, while certain barriers have posed challenges.

First, the **structured methodology adopted by SKYLA**, moving from needs identification to solution design and implementation, supported by interregional exchange, stakeholder engagement, and organizational learning, has been critical to maintaining clarity and coherence. Partners highlight that this approach, though initially perceived as abstract, became increasingly clear through collaborative learning and targeted sessions. Also, the **project's ability to foster professional and organisational capacity building** has been one significant success factor. Project's activities have opened new perspectives and encouraged mutual learning, enabling partners to transform their roles and strengthen governance structures. For example, one partner reported that SKYLA had a "massive impact" on its capacity. Similarly, another partner emphasized that SKYLA "changed the way we work and interact," combining theory and practice and promoting peer learning that improved collaboration with stakeholders and integrated social dimensions into regional strategies. These capacity gains have already translated into concrete policy improvements, such as Sofia Municipality's youth feedback mechanism and Fingal County Council's revised Skills Strategy[1]. Survey evidence illustrates the value of interregional cooperation. One respondent noted that policy improvement could have been achieved through regional support programmes alone, but this would have meant missing out on interregional learning and the transfer of best practices, highlighting how these exchanges are important for their capacities. Finally, the **active role of the Lead Partner in guiding and supporting the consortium** has been key in achieving the project's objectives. The Lead Partner has been instrumental in clarifying complex concepts, such as the requirement to select a policy improvement, and in maintaining alignment with the project's objectives. Partners acknowledged that the Lead Partner's facilitation was essential in overcoming initial confusion and ensuring that discussions remained focused on the twin transition, even when conversations occasionally deviated. This leadership role has strengthened governance and fostered trust among partners, enabling effective collaboration and problem-solving throughout the project.

Despite these strengths, several barriers have challenged the achievement of the project's objectives. One issue is the **failure of implementing pilot actions** due to uncertainty surrounding funding sources. Another barrier relates to the **initial abstractness of the Interreg Europe approach** for partners unfamiliar with policy improvements or lacking prior experience in skills governance. **External factors**, such as political changes, introduced uncertainty, although the project's adaptability helped maintain coherence. Finally, **occasional deviations from the core focus on green and digital skills** were noted, requiring the Lead Partner to steer discussions back on track.

1.1.4 Appendix – Desk Review and Interviews

1.1.4.1 List of documents consulted

Level	Title
Programme-level	• Excel table on Policy Instruments

[1] This reflects the number of policy improvements as of the date this report was written. As the SKYLA project still has three reports to be submitted, additional improvements may be forthcoming.

	• Excel table on Policy Report Results • Excel table on Quality Assessment
Project-level	• Project's application form • Project's progress reports

1.1.4.2 List of interviewees

Stakeholders	Date
Agency for the development of the Empolese Valdelsa – Lead partner (Italy)	11.12.2025
EURALL – Advisory partner (Belgium)	08.01.2025
Economic developement department in Fingal County Council, capital of Dublin – Partner (Ireland)	19.12.2026
Sofia Municipality – Partner (Bulgaria)	20.01.2026

1.2 CDREUROPE

1.2.1 Description, purpose, and scope of the CDREUROPE project

Title	Corporate Digital Responsibility in Europe
Acronym	CDREUROPE
Start date	01 March 2023
End date	31 May 2027
Lead partner	Arezzo Innovation (Italy)
Partners	**Partners:** ► Regional Government of Tuscany (Italy) ► Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia (Finland) ► National Development Centre (Hungary) ► Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (Romania) ► Catalan Cybersecurity Agency (Spain) ► Cap Digital (France) ► Cork County Council (Ireland) **Discovery partners:** ► Ministry for Regional-Investment Development and Cooperation with NGOs (Montenegro) ► Association of Citizens for the Development of Technological Entrepreneurship ICT Hub (Serbia)
Associated Policy Authorities	► Ile-de-France Region (France) ► Ministry for Research, Innovation and Digitalization (Romania)
Policy objective	Smarter Europe (policy objective 1)
Specific objective	Digitisation
Total budget	EUR 2,108,920.00
Overall objective	► Strengthen regional development policies through the promotion of Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Project summary and objectives

CDR EUROPE is an interregional cooperation project that aims to strengthen regional development policies by promoting Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).[2] Its goal is to ensure that SMEs across Europe can adopt responsible digital practices that balance technological progress with social, economic, and environmental considerations.

SMEs in all sectors are increasingly required to digitalise their operations. While digitalization offers significant benefits, it also introduces risks such as data privacy concerns, cybersecurity threats, ethical challenges, digital inclusion issues, job insecurity, and environmental impacts related to energy consumption. Corporate Digital Responsibility provides a framework for organizations to manage data and digital technologies responsibly, but implementing these practices is particularly challenging for SMEs. Public support is therefore essential to raise awareness of socio-economic and environmental risks and to provide practical tools and systems that enable even the smallest businesses to be digitally responsible.

To address this challenge, CDR EUROPE brings together eight project partners from seven EU regions, two discovery partners and two associated policy authorities, representing diverse levels of digitalization and CDR maturity. These partners combine expertise in areas such as SME digitalization support, cybersecurity,

[2] Interreg Europe Portal, CDR EUROPE Application Form.

environmental impacts, and digital inclusion. Using the International CDR Manifesto[3] as a foundation, the project employs an interregional exchange approach structured around four stages: consolidating concepts, understanding challenges, seeking solutions, and driving change. This process includes designing and testing pilot actions in four regions to promote CDR adoption among SMEs, with lessons learned feeding into broader policy improvements.

Project approach

The project's approach itself follows a sequence of activities designed to build, consolidate and finally apply the knowledge gained during interregional exchanges. This sequence is constructed as follows:[4]

- **Consolidating concepts** (semesters 1 and 2): participative interregional seminars with experts to share information on CDR, with each region running capacity building sessions with staff and regional stakeholders.
- **Understanding challenges** (semester 2 till 3): interregional exchange workshops to identify and analyse challenges. A survey among traditional and high-tech SMEs was launched in each region to understand their level of maturity as regards CDR and gather their opinions on current challenges.
- **Seeking answers** (semester 2 till 6): interregional exchange to identify possible policy tools (good practices or GPs) to address identified challenges. These GPs are related to communication, training, consultancy, funding and networking, although other topics may emerge. Matching challenges to tools involves exchanges on GPs, workshops, and visits to GP owners/beneficiaries and bilateral sessions. In parallel, the pilot action develops and tests a model to support CDR in SMEs.
- **Being the change** (from Semester 4): Policy improvements begin when opportunities arise in each region. Interregional events are organised to discuss what a policy improvement means, while partners work with regional stakeholders to identify opportunities. Interregional exchange (plenary and small group - individual and organisational learning) focuses on how the policy improvement could evolve and relevant input from partners and GPs. Partners consult stakeholders and SMEs on proposed improvements and GP transfer options. Pilot action results contribute, leading to mainstreaming of successful activities. Discovery partners participate, though not obliged to improve a specific policy instrument. In this phase, the results of the pilot action contribute to mainstreaming successful practices.

Pilot Action

This pilot action, run jointly by four project partners (Italy, Spain, Romania, France) involves testing a new support model for CDR uptake in SMEs.[5] While the international CDR manifesto provides a solid starting point for learning, given the novelty of CDR, partners have not yet identified a practical model that helps SMEs to assess CDR level, identify priorities/areas of weakness and adapt internal organisation and use of digital technologies towards more responsible procedures. This pilot action thus develops and tests a first version of this model through interregional learning. Practically, each partner:

- issues an open call to create a pool of consultants with knowledge to support CDR application in SMEs;
- issues an open call for SMEs to participate in testing the model and support service;
- runs the service on selected SMEs;
- asks participating SMEs and consultants to evaluate the model/service;
- proposes policy improvements to mainstream the pilot in each region.

[3] Corporate Digital Responsibility - Corporate Digital Responsibility, CDR Manifesto, Digital Responsibility.

[4] Interreg Europe Portal, CDR EUROPE Application Form.

[5] Interreg Europe Portal, CDR EUROPE Application Form.

1.2.2 Methodology

The analysis for the present case study relies on a mixed-methods and triangulated approach combining documentary review, an online survey and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, in order to address (i) the relevance and coherence of the project design, (ii) the project effectiveness and impact, as well as (iii) contextual factors, success factors and barriers.

First, the evaluators made use of **administrative and monitoring data** to inform the assessment of the relevance and coherence of the project as well as to provide essential contextual elements for interpreting effectiveness and potential implementation challenges.

Moreover, **semi-structured interviews** with key project stakeholders provided in-depth insights into the project's objectives and into stakeholders' perceptions and expectations regarding its impact on capacity building and policy improvement in the territory concerned, allowing the evaluation team to contextualise and validate survey and documentary evidence.

Finally, the **online survey** provided primary quantitative and qualitative evidence on beneficiaries' perceptions of the project. With respect to the CDR EUROPE project, **only one partner** responded to the survey. Their responses are therefore treated as complementary to the documentary review and interviews.

1.2.3 Analysis of key findings

1.2.3.1 Relevance and coherence of project design

Are the project's objectives and design, including new features, relevant and sufficient to achieve its objectives? Is the link between needs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project clear and coherent?

Interviews and the survey to beneficiaries revealed that the **project's objectives were highly relevant to their institutional needs** overall, with beneficiaries noting that the project's subject matter fits well alongside their ongoing work on the topic. For example, one beneficiary highlighted that while they were fairly new to the topic of CDR, the project represented a continuation of their engagement with the start-up ecosystem in their country more broadly, as well as its complementarity with their ongoing work on sustainability and climate neutral cities, of which digital responsibility is an important component. For another beneficiary, the project served to reinforce work already underway in the field of CDR, allowing them to reflect on current issues at the European level. Moreover, understanding of the objectives and intervention logic was found to be strong and was also reinforced during implementation as partners began to participate in interregional exchanges.[6] The survey respondent likewise confirmed their understanding of how the project would help participants and organisations improve regional development policies.[7]

The **design of the project itself was also found to be clear and coherent**, with strong links between the objectives initially identified and the activities realised. The application form for the CDR EUROPE project presents a logical sequence from i) the issue addressed; ii) the project's overall objective; iii) the project's innovative character; iv) the project's approach; v) its indicators; and vi) its communication strategy. The horizontal principals for the project, as well as details regarding project management are also presented. These sections of the application form clearly present the cooperation approach of the project, including how this approach will contribute to changes to policy instruments addressed, in keeping with the Programme's intervention logic and application form structure. Furthermore, the project's approach (as presented above in Section 1) lays out a clear sequence of activities intended to build on the concept of CDR presented in the International CDR Manifesto and apply it on the ground. One beneficiary at interview highlighted the particular utility of the first phase, "consolidating concepts", during which the Lead Partner organised a consortium

[6] Beneficiary interviewed.

[7] Online survey question "**From the start of the project, did you understand how the Programme would help participants and organisations improve regional development policies?"** Beneficiaries (n=1). Closed question.

meeting to ensure partners' familiarity with key concepts, including with input from the one of the authors of the International CDR Manifesto.

With regard to new features of the programme, the survey respondent expressed that its enlarged thematic scope, minimum geographical coverage (4 areas), possibility for pilot actions from the beginning of projects, and involvement of the policy responsible authority had all been "very positive" in project development and implementation.[8] One beneficiary also appreciated the ability to integrate new Discovery Partners to the project, expanding the scope of country contexts and allowing them to better understand the similarities and differences in the problems identified across regions. Given the differing levels of maturity or public awareness of CDR across countries and regions, the design of the pilot action was particularly relevant. One beneficiary highlighted at interview that in addition to allowing them to work directly with SMEs and finding the pilot activities intrinsically useful, the action itself was designed to allow freedom for partners to adapt it to their own country contexts, while at the same time leveraging the expertise of more experienced partners on the topic.

Project effectiveness and impact

To what extent do project activities improve the professional and institutional capacities of the project beneficiaries?

The results indicator for organisations with increased capacity due to participation in project activities will only be available from the eighth progress report at the end of the project. However, evidence gathered from interviews and the survey demonstrates positive initial findings on the effect of project activities on organisational capacity in the policy area.

CDR EUROPE's activities of interregional exchanges, workshops, and bilateral sessions, as well as the pilot action and 15 identified good practices[9] were found to have a **broadly positive effect on the professional and institutional capacities of its beneficiaries**. Most beneficiaries highlighted the importance and utility of exchanges with partners from different regions, learning from each other and gaining professional capacity first and foremost through a strengthened understanding of CDR.[10] Beyond exchanges of experience, each partner was invited to conduct an analysis of the CDR Manifesto, a stakeholder mapping, and SWOT analysis on CDR in their territory to identify the main areas of interest and main concerns.[11] For example, one partner at interview highlighted the particular insights they gained on the different facets of CDR, from the environmental (e.g. impact of high energy consumption of digital tools), to broader transversal challenges around mainstreaming inclusion within digitalisation. The survey respondent, however, noted that their **individual** capacities in their policy area had improved thanks to the project only to a small degree due to a lack of alignment between project goals and their professional responsibilities and background. That being said, when asked how likely they were to apply the capacities gained within their organisation, they responded "to a large degree", due to the applicability of the learning and capacity gained.[12] In addition, one more experienced partner on CDR expressed that their professional and institutional capacities may be impacted less significantly than for others, as the subject is already integrated into their organisational roadmap. Nevertheless, they also stressed that the project had certainly reinforced their ongoing work.

Lastly, the pilot action stood out as **highly effective in strengthening institutional capacities on CDR** through the opportunity to test the methodologies developed in the early stages on the ground. In particular, one project partner noted the following:

[8] Online survey question **"What role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in you project development and implementation?"** (Beneficiaries n=1). Closed question.

[9] CDREUROPE | Good practice - Interreg Europe | Interreg Europe.

[10] Interviews conducted with project partners.

[11] Project Progress Report 1 (approved April 2024).

[12] Online survey question **"To what degree are you likely to apply the capacities gained through the project in your organisation (i.e., organisational learning)?"** (Beneficiaries n=1). Closed question.

> *"The pilot action was very beneficial. The feedback we received was all positive. The pilot action helped us to conduct an assessment of our organisation and understand our weaknesses in terms of sustainability and help us deal with external suppliers who wanted proof on how committed the SME was on sustainability."*
>
> *Source: project partner interviewed as part of case study*

To what extent is the increased capacity of organisations leading to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the project? How are knowledge, skills, and capacities gained from the project effectively used to influence policy change?

Policy instrument changes

The CDR EUROPE project targets changes to seven policy instruments of its seven main project partners (including Lead Partner). Out of these, three have already seen improvements. They include changes for the National Development Centre in Hungary, the Ministry for Research, Innovation and Digitalisation (UEFISCDI) in Romania,[13] and the Ile-de-France Region.[14]

Table 1 Reported improvements to policy instruments[15]

Policy improvement 1: Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme Plus (EDIOP Plus) 2021-2027 (Hungary)
Nature of policy improvement: new projects financed The Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme Plus (EDIOP Plus) 2021-2027 is a multi-fund programme covering all Hungarian regions.[16] EDIOP Plus has two priorities relevant to CDR EUROPE offering scope to integrate CDR concepts. First, Priority 1 "SME Competitiveness" seeks to stimulate SME development, including through digitalisation, and Priority 2 "R&D" supports business-oriented innovation. In November 2024, the "Supporting the Innovation Capacity of SMEs" call was launched, reshaping the instrument by integrating CDR EUROPE learnings. Insights learned from Italy, **the Region of Tuscany's integrated model** of combining financial aid with mentoring, innovation audits, and facilitating cooperation between SMEs and research institutions was a particular inspiration. The call now moves beyond finance-only support to a blended design that includes a new component for organisational innovation consultancy. This component addresses managerial and administrative development with an emphasis on digital transformation, including digital-maturity audits, tailored transformation strategies, and the design of value-creating digital business models with necessary restructuring. In addition, the call now explicitly prioritises micro and small enterprises, including those new to innovation, and encourages open innovation, stronger R&D capabilities, and higher technological levels. Hungarian partners note in the progress report that these changes have made the instrument more comprehensive and better suited to the complex needs of SMEs. For this policy instrument, the Hungarian Partner has estimated that a total of EUR 104,000 has been influenced by its modification based on the average project size in the first round of its funding call.
Policy improvement 2: National Strategy for Research, Innovation and Smart Specialisation 2021-2027 (SNCISI) (Romania)
Nature of policy improvement: change in management The SNCISI, coordinated by the Ministry for Research, Innovation and Digitalisation, sets Romania's 2030

[13] The Ministry for Research, Innovation and Digitalisation is the policy-responsible authority for this instrument, and the Project Partner addressing the instrument is Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding.

[14] The Ile-de France Region is the policy-responsible authority for this instrument, and the Project Partner addressing the instrument is Cap Digital.

[15] Project Progress Report 4 (approved July 2025) & Policy Report Results Table accessed December 2025.

[16] Policy Instruments Table accessed December 2025.

vision to support excellence, facilitate public-private partnerships around societal challenges, and make science and innovation tools for sustainable development. It advances four objectives, addressing digitalisation through open-science data infrastructures, individual projects (e.g. on clean digital technologies), and a smart specialisation domain for the digital economy. Within this framework, the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) reviewed forthcoming financial instruments following lessons learned and data gathered during the project. The 2024 SME survey conducted during the project was particularly informative revealing high SME interest in new technologies but an overall low awareness of CDR. Following these learnings, the UEFISCDI updated the Ethics Section of call texts to require project directors to consult and integrate digital responsibility in project development and implementation. The update first applied to the "Festival of Technology Transfer" instrument launched on 8 August 2024 (budget €600,000 for 2024–2025) and will extend to all future instruments, thereby mainstreaming CDR across Romania's RDI portfolio. According to the Romanian partners interviewed, they will be launching the second call this year with a similar recommendation. The partner also noted that expertise in CDR remains limited in the country, as it is still a relatively new concept. As a result, CDR is currently included only as a recommendation within the Ethics Section of call texts. Making it a mandatory requirement would necessitate additional experts capable of evaluating how projects integrate CDR — experts who are not yet available. Once awareness of CDR grows and information becomes more accessible to SMEs, it may be feasible to make the requirement obligatory.
Policy improvement 3: Programme Régional Île-de-France et bassin de la Seine ERDF-ESF+ 2021-2027 (Ile de France Region) (France)
Nature of policy improvement: new projects financed The regional programme ERDF 2021-2027 for Île-de-France allocates resources to actions supporting 3 Cohesion Policy Objectives (PO1, PO2, and PO4), in line with the Regional Scheme for Economic Development Innovation and Internationalisation SRDEII 2022-2028 and the Smart Specialisation Strategy. Under PO1, the Programme has three specific objectives (SO1.1, SO1.2, SO1.3) directly relevant to CDR EUROPE, with SO1.3 focused on strengthening SME growth and adaptability, including support for the digital transition in response to security, data storage, and technology uptake challenges. Building on stakeholder analyses that highlighted a lack of CDR methodologies and training among regional firms, the Region decided, within the ERDF call "Accompagnement des PME", to select and finance "Refresh", a dedicated CDR training programme for digital SMEs. Launched in January 2025, the programme combines a theoretical MOOC, six expert workshops, and a certification to obtain the NR (digital responsibility) label via the Institut du Numérique Responsible. This intervention operationalises SO1.3 by coupling capacity-building with recognised certification, accelerating responsible digitalisation and embedding CDR practice across regional SMEs. The Île-de-France region has estimated that EUR 172,988.95 has been influenced by this policy instrument change, reflecting 40% of the total cost of the "Refresh" Programme.

Contribution of CDR EUROPE to policy instrument improvement

Across the three cases, **capacity-building has contributed to policy improvements** through a shift among partners from funding-only instruments to designs that embed CDR through guidance, training, and formal requirements. The National Development Centre in Hungary now blends grants with mentoring, audits, and organisational consultancy, the Ministry for Research, Innovation and Digitalisation in Romania codifies digital responsibility in ethics clauses, and the Ile-de-France region finances a structured training and certification pathway through "Refresh".

Specifically, CDR EUROPE was able to facilitate changes to the policy instrument through a combination of framing, evidence-gathering, peer learning, and design transfer (exchange of good practices). First, a **shared conceptual understanding** via the International CDR Manifesto provided some normative guidance (e.g. to the National Development Centre, Hungary) that was later referenced in new ethics requirements in funding calls under Romania's SNCISI.

Second, interregional SME surveys (2024; 3rd semester) and SWOT/Challenge Analysis discussions (Meeting in Cork, Ireland, in 2024) produced some **common diagnostics**. In particular, these related to low CDR awareness and demand for technological upgrading among SMEs, which the National Development Centre (Hungary) then translated into its "Supporting the Innovation Capacities of SMEs" call. The SME surveys were also important for highlighting the lack of knowledge on CDR methodologies, confirmed during stakeholder meetings, that provided an evidence-based needs justification for the Ile-de-France Region's financing of the "Refresh" programme.

Third, **peer-exchange meetings were found to generate some concrete good practices** (e.g. Italian Tuscany's open calls,[17] France's cybersecurity vouchers[18] and Smart Services Platform,[19] Hungary's VALI,[20] and Finland's Diginet[21]), creating transferable instrument designs. For example, the Ministry for Research, Innovation and Digitalisation in Romania explicitly leveraged Tuscany's lessons to enhance upcoming instruments and integrated CDR by updating the ethics section of its project portfolio. In Île-de-France, survey insights and regional stakeholder meetings confirmed the training gap, and learnt from the Finnish DigiNet model as a good practice of a programme of interactive workshops for SMEs to develop digitalisation, a development plan for the digitalisation and an assessment of the digitalisation of companies. This programme served as inspiration for the Region to finance a programme of a similar structure.[22] Overall, these shared standards and evidence, collective learning, and adaptation of proven models facilitated by the CDR EUROPE project were found to be effective in moving from increasing partners' institutional capacities to concrete redesigns of their respective policy instruments.

Lastly, the survey respondent also noted that the likelihood that the results of the project overall will remain sustainable into the future was moderately likely.[23] Notwithstanding, they also responded that the type of results achieved could have been reached through other mechanisms (e.g. national/regional support schemes), stating that the digitalisation of SMEs is already a priority at the national level and that several other ministries and agencies are involved in this process.[24] However, the CDR EUROPE project enabled them to create awareness about the responsible use of new technologies.[25]

1.2.3.2 Contextual factors, success factors, and barriers

To what extent does the available evidence suggest that the project is contributing to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?

The project's implementation has only reached the fifth out of eight semesters. Therefore, substantial concrete evidence of its impact on territorial cohesion is limited at this stage. Notwithstanding, the CDR EUROPE **project contributes to territorial cohesion through identifying similar challenges across regions and sought to match available good practices to them that can be transferred across different country contexts**. Partners exchanged around shared CDR standards and translated peer-learning into policy instrument improvements to increase

[17] Microinnovation Call (ERDF 2014-2020) and Digital Enterprise Call (ERDF 2021-2027).

[18] Cheque Cyber / Cyber Vouchers.

[19] The Digital, smart, sober and inclusive Smart Services Platform for Paris Region.

[20] VALI - Entrepreneurship Information Portal.

[21] Digitalising Business Networks project.

[22] Project Progress Report 4 (approved July 2025).

[23] Online survey question **"How likely do you think it is that the results of the project will remain sustainable in the future?"** (Beneficiaries n=1) Closed question.

[24] Online survey question **"Do you think the results achieved/expected through your project could be reached using other mechanisms (e.g. national/regional support schemes, mainstream EU programmes)?"** (Beneficiaries n=1) Open question.

[25] Ibid.

awareness, reduce capability gaps for SMEs and promoting more access to responsible digitalisation across regions.

Project partners interviewed and surveyed all noted that **interregional exchange and cooperation had increased and been strengthened as a result of the project**, and that the overall awareness of CDR had increased among stakeholders in their respective regions. Further to the interregional exchanges organised as part of the project itself, two partners noted that the links between regions created during the project will likely lead to future exchanges on related topics outside of the project. For example, one beneficiary noted that another project partner is currently developing a strategy on the use of AI in their region, something the beneficiary is keen to follow and stay in contact on.

With **respect to disparities, evidence gathered presents a more mixed picture** and notes that the timescale may also still be too short to observe a measurable narrowing of territorial disparities. While project partners when interviewed noted that the project provided the opportunity for less experienced regions to learn from experienced ones (thereby raising their maturity on CDR), one beneficiary emphasised that the results of the project may not be fully equal across partners due to differing national contexts and capacities, and that they are likely proportionate to the partners' involvement. For example, they mentioned that one challenge of translating the capacity gained and knowledge learned into downstream improvements on the ground relates to obtaining national funding and ensuring governmental support.

What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the project's objectives?

Based on data collected from project documentation and through interviews, the following success factors for the CDR EUROPE project were identified:

- **Integration of evidence gathering activities:** Under the cooperation project, CDR EUROPE partners launched surveys to SMEs and conducted SWOT and Challenge Analyses that both served to reveal concrete needs (e.g. low CDR awareness, high demand for tech investment). These activities were highlighted by project partners to have been highly useful in serving as evidence bases for their respective policy instrument improvements
- **Peer learning and transfer of proven models:** Interregional exchanges and good practices provided ready-made models for policy redesign and programme structures.
- **Formalisation in policy texts**: The update to the UEFISCDI's (Romania) call texts mainstreams CDR across future instruments, acting as an institutional lever that will scale the impact on CDR beyond one-off projects.
- **Strong match between project insights and country/regional priorities** was identified by the survey respondent as the main success factor contributing to policy improvements following the project. [26]

With regard to the potential barriers to achieving project objectives, the evaluation noted the challenge (presented above) described by partners of obtaining the national funding and governmental support to translating the knowledge gained into concrete policy improvements. In addition, with respect to CDR specifically, the relative novelty of the concept and lack of awareness and expertise on the subject was thought by one partner to be a challenge in evaluating the maturity of CDR across regions or businesses, as well as then requiring SMEs to integrate more advanced CDR mechanisms into their practices.

1.2.4 Appendix – Desk Review and Interviews

1.2.4.1 List of documents consulted

Level	Title
Programme-level	• Excel table on Policy Instruments • Excel table on Policy Report Results • Excel table on Quality Assessment
Project-level	• CDR EUROPE Project Web Page

[26] Online survey question **"Please clarify which factors you think have contributed / could contribute to this policy improvement."** (Beneficiaries n=1) Closed question.

	• CDR EUROPE CDR EUROPE Project Presentation (February 2024) • CDR EUROPE Project Application Form • CDR EUROPE Progress reports 1, 2, 3 and 4

1.2.4.2 List of interviewees

Partners	Date
Arezzo Innovation – Lead partner (Italy)	27.11.2025
Cap Digital – Project Partner (France)	07.01.2026
Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding – Project Partner (Romania)	12.01.2026

1.3 NACAO

1.3.1 Description, purpose, and scope of the NACAO project

Title	Nature-based Carbon Offsets
Acronym	NACAO
Start date	01 March 2023
End date	31 May 2027
Lead partner	Andalusia Regional Government. General Secretary of Environment, Climate Change and Blue Economy (SGMACCEA) (Spain)
Partners	**Partners:** ► Andalusia Regional Government. General Secretary of Environment, Climate Change and Blue Economy (SGMACCEA) (Spain) ► Marche Region (Italy) ► Marshal Office of Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship (Poland) ► Regional Council of Central Finland (Finland) ► Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Energy Environment Agency AURA-EE (France)
Associated Policy Authority	► Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Regional Council
Policy objective	Greener Europe (policy objective 2)
Specific objective	Climate change
Total budget	EUR 1,431,623.00
Overall objective	► To enhance regional capacity and to improve policy instruments addressing climate change of the partner regions involved, to enable them to develop compensation of greenhouse emissions initiatives through the use of nature-based interventions

The **Nature-based Carbon Offsets (NACAO)** project seeks to help regional governments in addressing carbon emissions through **nature-based solutions** and policies. The core aim of the project is to enhance regional capacity and to improve policy instruments addressing climate change of the partner regions involved, to enable them to develop compensation of greenhouse emissions initiatives using nature-based interventions[27]. Natural sites such as forests, wetlands, mires and other ecosystems can act as carbon sinks and compensate for greenhouse gas emissions[28].

The NACAO project involves six regional governments with competences on environment and climate change from Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Poland and Finland, with five having full competences over the policy instruments addressed, and one partner having policy relevance thus involving the managing authority of the policy instrument in the form of associated policy authority (France). Throughout the first six semesters of the project, NACAO has identified 21 Good Practices out of the 17 targeted and organised six policy-learning events (Thematic Workshops and Site Visits) among the nine targeted[29]. The project has contributed to the improvement of six public policies out of the seven targeted.

Throughout the six semesters of the Core Phase of the project, NACAO sought to organise numerous activities:

- Eight “Interregional Seminars for Exchange of Experience” and seven in-person “Site Visits”, as well as a Capitalisation of Knowledge workshop[30].

[27] Application form
[28] Website
[29] According to the Policy achievements table
[30] Progress report 4

- Stakeholder group meetings organised every semester, during which knowledge acquired during interregional events is shared with relevant regional players, who are invited to share good practices. For instance, stakeholder meetings hosted discussions on urban gardens, on new national regulations, on the design of school playgrounds including berry and fruit trees[31].
- Organisational learning meetings every year, where the knowledge acquired by individuals involved in the cooperation is mainstreamed in each partner's organisation
- A distinctive feature of the project was the partnership's decision to ensure that, at its outset, each partner conducted a Situational analysis[32]. This analysis aimed to help regions identify both successful and unsuccessful practices that could be shared, as well as to map potential sites for regional carbon sequestration and offsetting where lessons learned during the project could be applied.

On 12-13 November 2024, **t**he Ministry for Environment, Climate and Science of Bremen (Germany), supported by the Lead Partner of the Andalusia Regional Government (SGMACCEA) (Spain) organised an Interregional Thematic Seminar, Site Visit, and Steering Committee. All project partners attended; several brought stakeholders from regions in France, Poland, Finland, and Spain, as well as local organisations. In this seminar, seven Good Practices were shared:

- Transformation of a sealed square in Bremen into a collective and biodiverse urban garden (Germany)
- From former parcels to a local recreation park – Introduction to the Green Bremen West (Germany)
- Revitalisation - Better life in Starachowice (Poland)
- Green Roofs and Walls for Buildings: Guidelines for Public Administrations and Territorial Bodies (Italy)
- Seagrass restoration project (Cymodocea nodosa) in Corrales de Rota (Spain)
- "Intracting": funding renovation and energy saving projects, City of Albertville (France)
- KILVA: Climate Impact Checklist for Urban Planning (Finland)

Regarding communication activities, the project regularly publishes news on their websites, on LinkedIn, as well as newsletters and press releases. The project organises local seminars, participates in local and European events, and shares Good Practices on their websites[33].

1.3.2 Methodology

The analysis for the present case study relies on a mixed-methods and triangulated approach combining documentary review and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, in order to address (i) the relevance and coherence of the project design, (ii) the project effectiveness and impact, as well as (iii) contextual factors, success factors and barriers. Since none of the project partners responded to the survey, it was not used as an information source for this case study.

Evaluators made use of administrative and monitoring data to inform the assessment of the relevance and coherence of the project as well as to provide essential contextual elements for interpreting effectiveness and potential implementation challenges.

Semi-structured interviews with key project stakeholders provided in-depth insights into the project's objectives and into stakeholders' perceptions and expectations regarding its impact on capacity building and policy improvement in the territory concerned, allowing the evaluation team to contextualise and validate survey and documentary evidence.

[31] News section of website
[32] Progress report 4 and interviews
[33] Progress reports

1.3.3 Analysis of key findings

1.3.3.1 Relevance and coherence of the project design

Are the project's objectives and design, including new features, relevant and sufficient to achieve its objectives? Is the link between needs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project clear and coherent?

The design and objectives of NACAO appear to have been well aligned and adequate for achieving the project's goals. Interviewees expressed overall satisfaction with both the project's structure and the composition of the partnership consortium, though some raised minor concerns about specific design elements (ie. one interviewee felt that the PowerPoint presentation not particularly useful)[34]. As for the coherence between outputs and outcomes, another interviewee explained that it is still too early to make a meaningful assessment. Corroborating this finding, the link between needs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project seem to be well set out in the Application Form. Below are excerpts from the application form[35] illustrating that the partners had a clear understanding of the links between needs, activities, outputs, and outcomes:

Needs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
"Compensation of emissions through nature-based interventions is an underperformed field in the policy instruments addressed; also, in climate change policies in general; even if the topic is present, there is little practical development."	"The learning process designed will take 6 semesters and will be made up of different activities interlinked. It addresses learning at both interregional and regional levels and sets up mechanisms to ensure that the knowledge flows from individuals to organizations."	"The aim [of the learning process] is ensuring the capacity building of partner and stakeholder organizations, associated authority and individuals involved in NACAO."	"Given the number of "Interregional Seminars (and Webinar) for Exchange of Experience" (7) and "Site Visits" (6) planned, besides the "Workshop for Capitalisation of Knowledge", it is expected that at the end of the core phase the policy instruments of the 6 partner regions will be positively influenced by the project."

Overall, the project's design remains appropriate; however, the slight underspending observed in the budget raises questions about whether the financial plan was optimally constructed. Although partly attributable to postponed invoice submissions and delays in reporting, the project registers a modest budget variance of –12% (– EUR 105,420)[36]. One interviewee noted that underspending can reduce flexibility and compel partners to find new ways to utilise the remaining funds. This may indicate that the budget was not optimally designed.

With respect to new features, although the partnership expressed interest in implementing pilot actions, none were carried out, resulting in a sense of missed opportunity. Interviews revealed that one partner had prepared a pilot action within their territory and even drafted a proposal for a municipality. However, they later discovered that the activity was ineligible because the request had been submitted on behalf of another public entity (quote below). Other partners also expressed willingness to participate but were unable to move forward due to the limited information available during the mid-term review. While the project is progressing well overall, partners

[34] Interviews

[35] Portal Application Form, Section: objectives

[36] Project's progress report n°4 (approved on July 4, 2025)

generally felt that this was a missed opportunity.

> *"I was happy about the pilot action possibility; we were preparing it quite strongly with a municipality. Yet a couple of months before the submission deadline, we understood that we could not apply on behalf of a stakeholder that is not us. It was a shame, since the pilot action was closely linked to our project topic and was very hands-on. As a regional council, we do not own any piece of land. That's why we were preparing it with the one municipality eager to learn in our region. They wanted a wetland area next to a city centre because the area had strong summer rains and frequent floods in city centres. The wetland area would have prevented that and strongly supported biodiversity. But we could not apply: the Lead Partner said we could not even try. We asked the Secretariat if it was worth trying and sent the idea paper to the Joint Secretariat, who said it was not possible. […] Rules were against us, even though the action was strongly linked to the project's objectives"*

Overall, the project appears to be well designed, with clear and coherent links between identified needs, planned activities, and expected outcomes. The only element that may not have been fully optimal is the budget design.

1.3.3.2 Project effectiveness and impact

To what extent do project activities improve the professional and institutional capacities of the project beneficiaries?

Evidence gathered already points to encouraging early results, indicating that **project activities are having a constructive impact on professional and organisational capacity within the policy area**. Yet the formal results indicator measuring the number of organisations whose capacity has increased thanks to their participation in project activities will only be available with the eighth progress report at the project's end.

The exchange of good practices has resulted in **notable improvements to both the individual and organisational capacities of project beneficiaries**[37]. Interview evidence confirms that the project has directly strengthened partners' capacities within the policy area. One interviewee explained that the Situational analysis activity greatly supported their organisation in identifying priority land areas, helping determine where major nature-based solutions could be implemented. As a result, they adjusted the location of upcoming project activities to engage stakeholders who would benefit most from these solutions. Another interviewee highlighted that the project opened the door to deeper collaboration with a local university, enabling more frequent exchanges and providing new knowledge in an area previously unfamiliar to them—blue carbon. They realised that the university's laboratory work could be directly incorporated into regional policies, and project activities connected them with researchers specialising in blue carbon. Their organisation also joined a blue carbon subgroup as a direct outcome of their involvement in NACAO[38].

These improvements seem to **extend beyond the project partners and benefit the wider community as well**, as some interviewees note that professional capabilities of project stakeholders have strengthened. One interviewee noted that stakeholder-focused activities have so far targeted municipalities, landowners, and individuals working in high-emission fields. According to this interviewee, these stakeholders have gained substantial knowledge from the activities delivered by the project partner, particularly those involving guest experts (quote below).

> *"Other stakeholders outside of the office have received a lot of knowledge that has increased steadily, but I have no specific data about it, it will be more during the follow-up phase. I will prepare a survey to measure this aspect."*

[37] Interviews

[38] Interviews

To what extent is the increasing capacity of organisations leading to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the project? How are knowledge, skills, and capacities gained from the project effectively used to influence policy change?

Policy instrument improvements[39]

The NACAO project initially aimed to achieve changes in six policy instruments, a target that was successfully reached by Semester 4. Moreover, work is now underway on two additional instruments, meaning **the project has surpassed its original ambitions** and further reinforces the conclusion that **capacity building and transnational learning have translated into concrete policy improvements**. These policy improvements emerged through a combination of good practice exchanges, thematic seminars, and regular interactions among partners, all of which enabled the direct integration of shared knowledge into policy design and revision. The following section outlines the specific modifications introduced across the six policy instruments and illustrates how interregional exchanges contributed to these outcomes.

Andalusia Regional Government. General Secretary of Environment, Climate Change and Blue Economy (SGMACCEA) (Spain) - Andalusian Climate Action Plan (PAAC) 2021-2030 (PAAC 2021-2030)

The PAAC is the general strategic planning instrument in Andalusia for the fight against climate change approved in 2021. The PAAC supports the integration of climate change into regional and local planning. The policy improvement of the PAAC consisted of **creating and approving the first *Andalusian Catalogue of Absorption Projects (CAPA)* and its accompanying procedure**. These two instruments are designed for organisations seeking to offset greenhouse gas emissions through absorption projects. The catalogue identifies suitable locations on regional public land and potential absorption projects for implementation. The procedure seeks to set out operational conditions under which such projects can be implemented. Both tools, catalogue and procedure, were approved by the General Secretary of Environment and Climate Change in November 2024 (catalogue) and February 2025 (procedure). The Andalusia region estimated that no funds have been influenced in this policy improvement, since the costs for producing the catalogue and procedure were fully covered by regional funds from the PAAC 2023–2026 budget.

How did the exchange of experience lead to policy improvement?

The Spanish project partner explains that the Situational Analysis from Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (AURA), France, was particularly influential in the design of the catalogue. Unlike Andalusia's initial focus on large areas, AURA's catalogue included diverse locations of varying sizes as well as degraded carbon sinks, such as burned forests suitable for replanting. Inspired by AURA, Andalusia shifted from mapping only large areas to developing a comprehensive catalogue covering all provinces. CAPA now includes sites ranging from 2 to 700 hectares, with tailored interventions and calculated carbon capture potential for each project, going beyond AURA's approach.

The inspiration for the procedure accompanying the catalogue came from two good practices shared in Central Finland in February 2024: "CO_2 Stored in Forests Management" (Marche Region, Italy), which introduced a Public-Private Partnership model for managing state and collective forests, and "Marathon of Biodiversity" (AURA, France), which provided conventions for supplies, activities, and site protection.

Marche Regions (Italy) - Agreement between the Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security and the Marche Region on the improvement of air pollution

The policy improvement of the Marche Region consisted of the launch of a dedicated call to promote *Urban Woods* initiatives in April 2024. Through this call, nine projects were financed, covering more than 15 hectares across urban, peri-urban, and industrial areas. These projects all seek to create green spaces within cities and establish new carbon sinks on previously vegetation-free land. Six projects are urban forests with a minimum continuous surface of 2,000 m² (Type A), and three are urban micro-forests (Type B). One project, the Ancona Municipality project, focused on planting urban woods, was completed in December 2024, while the remaining eight projects continue according to schedule. The Marche region estimated that the budget impacted would amount to EUR 1.7 million.

[39] Policy Reports Results Table

How did the exchange of experience lead to policy improvement?

Project partners reported that the practices shared during the first and second NACAO Thematic Seminars significantly shaped the decision to focus the call on green carbon and carbon absorption. A key influence was the Good Practice presented by AURA (France), "Carbon compensation in forests through labelled projects", which introduced a methodology for calculating carbon stock. This approach strongly inspired the call's emphasis on maximising carbon capture through natural systems. Furthermore, the methodology for computing carbon sequestration in forests played a decisive role in drafting the eligibility criteria for projects to be financed under the call. Specifically, Type B calculations were directly inspired by the French model.

Marche Regions (Italy) - Roadmap for activating policies to reduce climate-changing emissions through nature-based solutions (green and blue carbon)

The second policy improvement of the Marche Region is the launch of a strategic plan (roadmap) which seeks to boost carbon capture in natural and semi-natural environments through green and blue carbon initiatives. Previously, climate action focused on energy and building policies, with few nature-based solutions. The new roadmap sets out a more structured approach to enhance carbon sequestration via such solutions, highlighting a new emphasis on blue carbon (carbon stored in marine and coastal ecosystems). The roadmap identifies three key objectives:

- Enhancing monitoring of carbon storage in natural and semi-natural systems.
- Promoting climate gas absorption projects.
- Supporting the creation of a voluntary local carbon market.

The exchange of experience in NACAO directly led to concrete policy improvements in the Marche Region by exposing the administration to methodologies, and practices they had never previously considered[40]. The most transformative example is the introduction of blue carbon into their regional agenda: initially deemed irrelevant for a heavily urbanised coastline, it became a new strategic priority thanks to expertise transferred from Andalusia, Spain. The Marche Region estimated that no funds have been influenced in this policy improvement.

How did the exchange of experience lead to policy improvement?

In the policy report, the project partner explained that Good Practices exchanged by the partners through NACAO increased the region's awareness of the importance of introducing in its territory and in its legal framework a voluntary carbon market founded on nature-based solutions. Learning from the Good Practices presented by Andalusia "Andalusian Carbon Standard for the Certification of Blue Carbon Credits" and by Rhone-Alpes "Carbon compensation in forests through labelled projects", both based on methodologies and tools for exchanges of carbon credits has made it clear to regional representatives that similar tools needed to be developed in their territory[41]. Through discussions with partners, particularly from Spain (Andalusia), France, Poland, and Germany, the region became aware of both gaps and opportunities in their own environmental governance. Exposure to grey-carbon practices and nature-based solutions presented by German partners broadened their approach, which inspired them to enrich environmental impact procedures with new criteria.

Environmental Protection Programme for the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship for the years 2015-2020 with a perspective until 2025 - Marshal Office of Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship (Poland)

In the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, the Environmental Protection Programme was updated, integrating lessons from NACAO into its 2015-2020 policy instrument (with a perspective until 2025) which will also be included in the 2030 policy instruments.
Key components added include:

- Climate and air quality: Blue-green infrastructure development and modern energy technology research and implementation.

[40] Interviews
[41] Policy report results

- Water resources and management: reservoir construction and modernisation, green and blue infrastructure development, watercourses renaturalisation, and educational activities on drought prevention and water conservation.
- Soils: restoration of degraded land for nature recreation, implementation of green and blue infrastructure and restoration of greenery in family allotment gardens,
- Natural resources: Blue-green infrastructure support, development of urban greenery spaces, reduction of impervious areas,
- Forests: Afforestation promotion (as an alternative for wasteland and agriculture unsuitable land management), forest retention implementation, and forest carbon farms establishment.

The programme now prioritises actions to reduce greenhouse gases and enhance CO2 absorption, with EUR 106.5 million allocated: EUR 42 million for blue-green infrastructure and soils; EUR 64.5 million for water, forests, and resources. Open calls for such activities were announced in 2025, including heritage and biodiversity protection and water management. The Marshal Office estimated that no funds have been influenced in this policy improvement.

How did the exchange of experience lead to policy improvement?

According to the Marshal Office, the Good Practices shared throughout the project inspired the office to add new elements to the list. They were inspired by the Good Practice from Germany "Urban greening on private land through regulatory standards and funding programmes" in adding all elements related to natural resources. Another inspiring Good Practice was the Spanish "Carbon Standard" for the certification of 'blue carbon' absorption units. The Good Practice presented by France on "Carbon Offsetting in Forests through Labelled (dedicated) Projects" inspired the inclusion of a task on the establishment of forest carbon farms. The Good Practice presented by Italy "Compensatory Ecological Assessment" was reflected in the task Reclamation of degraded and devastated land towards nature or recreation. Finally, the Good Practice presented by Finland "Strategic Forest Programme" is reflected in the Forest task, included forestation as a response to climate change.

*Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 (national programme for JTS, ERDF and ESF+ funding delivery) - Regional Council of Central Finland (Finland)*2The policy improvement of the Finnish partner is the support to two nature-based carbon offsetting projects in Central Finland. Two projects of the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*, NEVALA and TURBITS, were directly influenced by NACAO collaboration. NEVALA (funded by ELY Centre: EUR 145,587.71) and TURBITS (funded by the Regional Council of Central Finland: EUR 93,894.65) started in 2023 and will run until 2026. NEVALA restores 400 hectares of peatlands via nature-based methods, while TURBITS develops the value chain for plants grown in peatlands, from recovery to industrial applications. Together, they enhance carbon sequestration on wetlands totalling 2,133 hectares in Central Finland. The Regional Council estimated that no funds have been influenced in this policy improvement, since the elements affected by NACAO were the selection criteria and geographical implementation areas of the projects, not the entire projects themselves.

How did the exchange of experience lead to policy improvement?

The NEVALA and TURBITS projects were inspired by:

- The Situational analysis carried out at the start of NACAO by the Central Finland Council, which, for the first time, mapped areas most suitable for carbon sequestration, identifying priority zones for action, some of which are addressed by NEVALA and TURBITS.
- The Good Practice "Small-Scale Retention Program" introduced by Poland's Swietokrzyskie Region during the first seminar held in Seville, Spain (June 2023). This example, along with future practices like the "Nida River Restoration" inspired Central Finland's representatives due to its focus on wetland and peatland restoration, a key local concern.

Additionally, the expertise acquired through the NACAO seminar in Seville, Spain, together with ongoing stakeholder and internal meetings in Central Finland, was instrumental in the selection of NEVALA and TURBITS. During interviews, policy makers indicated that knowledge gained by ELY (stakeholder) and the Regional Council (project partner) from the NACAO seminar in Seville, alongside information from stakeholder and internal meetings in Central Finland, significantly influenced their decision-making process when selecting projects of the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme.

The interviewee explained that lessons from NACAO were progressively integrated into the evaluation criteria, which helped shape the project's guiding principles, particularly through a strong emphasis on biodiversity objectives. These criteria were defined through internal preparatory discussions for the newly adopted regional strategy. Although such objectives had already existed prior to the project, the interviewee noted that the NACAO initiative played a significant role in structuring the discussions and reinforcing their importance. As applications were received, these NACAO-informed criteria were applied through a scoring system for each proposal. Throughout the assessment process and funding allocation decisions, insights from NACAO continued to guide project selection. The interviewee explained that the extent of NACAO's influence on municipal strategies appears to vary depending on the level of each municipality's involvement in the project, showing how capacity building and improvement of public policies are interlinked.

> *"Through knowledge sharing, these topics are more in our memory, in our mind when we design policies, or have our steering group meetings"*

Climate Protection Strategy Bremen 203

- Ministry for Environment, Climate and Science of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen (Germany)

Two changes were made to this policy. First, funding was provided for ecosystem restoration in the Kleine Wümme area to help capture greenhouse gases and adapt to climate change, with EUR 6.3 million allocated for 2025-2029. Through the project, the river will undergo improvements including water retention measures, CO2 binding, development of natural banks, better drainage for fenland soils, and ecological continuity. Orchards and tree protection efforts are planned to be implemented in disadvantaged areas.

Secondly, the instrument was updated: nature-based climate change mitigation and adaptation have been added as official goals in Bremen's Biodiversity Strategy 2030. Now, the target "7.3 Nature-based carbon offsetting" includes (among others) the following contents:

- The large areas of wetland and wet grassland are being preserved and protected in the best possible way through targeted water management.
- Large, contiguous areas of raised bog will be rewetted, and peatland protection strategy will be developed by 2027.
- Other CO2 sinks typical of the natural environment will be preserved and restored, especially forests and floodplains.
- Nature-based climate adaptation measures will be used in settlement areas to promote biodiversity and should be given preference over other alternatives."

How did the exchange of experience lead to policy improvement?

Regarding the first improvement, the idea of restoring the ecological function of the river Kleine Wümme was brought up already at the first NACAO stakeholder meeting in August 2023 and was further developed in a dedicated stakeholder session in September 2023, where the river's potential for water retention, ecological improvement, and climate adaptation was discussed in line with NACAO objectives. The Polish Good Practice *"Restoration at the Nida River"*, shared during the second interregional exchange in February 2024, further pushed local stakeholders to adopt this policy. According to the German partner "without NACAO, the project would not have been initiated"[42].

Regarding the improvement of the second policy, partners claim that the NACAO in-house meetings, stakeholder meetings, and the initial situational analysis significantly increased awareness of nature-based climate change

[42] Policy reports results

mitigation measures within the unit responsible for developing the Bremen Biodiversity Strategy 2030. This learning process was strongly supported by Good Practices from partner regions: “Regional Forest Programme” (Finland), “Small-scale Retention Programe in Forests” (Poland), “CO2 Stored in Forests Marche” (Italy) and “Seagrass restoration project in Corrales de Rota (Spain)”, which demonstrated the carbon sequestration potential of restored ecosystems. As a result, nature-based solutions became a central theme in discussions and were integrated into the strategy.

The Ministry of the City of Bremen estimated that the budget impacted would amount to EUR 6.7 million, amount corresponding to the funded project amount for "Near-natural Kleine Wümme".

Therefore, the six policy improvements identified all relate to the revision and strengthening of existing climate change strategies, the development of new strategic frameworks, and the allocation of funding to nature-based solutions for climate mitigation and carbon sequestration. Most importantly, **in each case, policy changes can be directly linked to the influence of a Good Practice identified and shared during the project**. All project partners were able to recall specific examples of such practices and explain how transnational exchanges contributed to shaping their policy choices. This demonstrates that learning processes within the project went beyond knowledge sharing and effectively informed decision-making, leading to concrete and lasting policy improvements.

1.3.3.3 Contextual factors, success factors, and barriers

To what extent does the available evidence suggest that the project is contributing to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?

Although it **remains early to fully assess the project’s contribution to territorial cohesion and the reduction of disparities, the findings to date are nonetheless positive**. Interviews highlight that while exchanges of ideas, procedures, and guidelines have taken place, their translation into concrete, territorially balanced outcomes require more time. One interviewee emphasised that reducing territorial disparities is a **long-term process**, particularly given that the project partners are generally well developed and that regional land differences, especially between northern and southern Europe, limit the immediate transferability of good practices. Still, the current pattern of results is encouraging: of the six policy improvements reported, two originate from less developed regions, two from more developed regions, and two from transition regions, illustrating a genuinely balanced distribution of improvements. Therefore, while definitive evidence of the project’s contribution to territorial cohesion has yet to be established, the current policy improvements show positive results.

What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the project’s objectives?

Strengths and success factors

Overall, the project’s ability to achieve its objectives is rooted in a strong combination of **knowledge exchange**, **effective partner cooperation**, and **a unique methodological approach**. By Semester 4, the project had already addressed eight policy instruments, surpassing the initial target of six expected only by the end of Semester 6 (achieving 133% of the planned performance)[43]. This strong progress is linked, in interviews, to the project’s dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences, which has provided a valuable input for policy development. In particular, the sharing of best practices has played a significant role in empowering partners to translate their knowledge into improved policy instruments. Interviewees also emphasise that project cooperation has been smoother and less problematic than in many comparable programmes, noting that the quality of the Lead Partner’s coordination has been a decisive success factor[44]. In addition, the project’s unique methodological feature, the Situational Analysis, emerges as a critical success tool. Partners widely report that it helped them

[43] Project’s progress report n°4 (approved on July 4, 2025)
[44] Interviews

establish a shared understanding of the state of play, identify opportunities in their policy area, and adopt a common strategic lens from the beginning[45].

> *"Sometimes through the exchanges, you get big ideas, sometimes a small idea, but there is always something that you can use to change an aspect of your policy to improve performance in your organisation."*

Weaknesses and barriers

Overall, the analysis points to a small set of weaknesses that have limited the project's ability to fully maximise its learning and implementation potential. First, interviewees noted that **the design of the pilot action, particularly its timing and strict eligibility requirements created constraints for partners**. Although the intended overall objectives of the project were eventually achieved, partners felt that the pilot action could have provided a great added value and learning opportunity had the eligibility rules been better understood and communicated to them by the Programme. According to one interviewee, the inability to set up the pilot action reduced the partnership's scope for practical experimentation and limited the depth of insights that could have been generated[46].

A second weakness, raised by one interviewee, relates to the **overlap between project-level and Programme-level communication activities** regarding newsletters. They explained that because both individual projects and the Programme pursue their own communication activities, similar content can be produced in parallel for overlapping audiences, for example, through separate newsletters covering similar content. According to this interviewee, centralising certain communication tasks at Programme level, such as producing joint newsletters, could reduce overlaps.

While these weaknesses are noteworthy, interviewees emphasise that they remain **relatively minor** and do not undermine the project's overall strong performance and smooth implementation.

1.3.4 Appendix – Desk Review and Interviews

1.3.4.1 List of documents consulted

Level	Title
Programme-level	• Excel table on Policy Instruments • Excel table on Policy Report Results • Excel table on Policy Achievements • Excel Table on Quality Report
Project-level	• Project's application form • Project's progress report n°4 (approved on July 04, 2025) • Project's website

1.3.4.2 List of interviewees

Stakeholders	Date
Andalusia Regional Government. General Secretary of Environment, Climate Change and Blue Economy (SGMACCEA) – Lead partner (Spain)	19.11.2025
Regional Council of Central Finland (Finland)	19.12.2025
Marche Region (Italy)	20.01.2026

[45] Project's progress report n°4 (approved on July 4, 2025)
[46] Interviews

1.4 CORE

1.4.1 Description, purpose, and scope of the CORE project

Title	Composting in Rural Environments
Acronym	CORE
Start date	01 March 2023
End date	31 May 2027
Lead partner	Municipal Solid Waste of Castilla La Mancha Ltd. RSUSA (Spain)
Partners	**Partners:** ► LfU State Office of Environment Brandenburg (Germany) ► VLACO npo (Belgium) ► Swietokrzyskie Region - Marshal Office of Swietokrzyskie Voivodeship (Poland) ► KDRIU Central Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency Nonprofit Ltd (Hungary) ► Autonomous Province of Bolzano - Alto Adige. Environmental and Climate Protection Agency. Waste Management Office (Italy) ► Municipality of Soderhamn (Sweden) ► Region of Western Macedonia. Directorate of Development Planning (Greece) **Advisory Partners:** ► European Compost Network ECN e.V.
Associated Policy Authorities	► Government of Castilla - La Mancha. General Directorate of Circular Economy (Spain) ► Ministry of Agriculture, Environment and Climate Protection Brandenburg (Germany) ► Public Waste Agency of Flanders (Belgium) ► Lake Balaton Development Coordination Agency (Hungary) ► Region of Western Macedonia (Greece)
Policy objective	Greener Europe
Specific objective	Circular economy
Total budget	1,942,678.00
Overall objective	The overall objective of the CORE project is to improve the implementation of regional and local policies on circular economy and waste management by strengthening policy instruments related to bio-waste management and composting in rural and low-density territories through interregional policy learning and exchange.

The CORE project is an Interreg Europe cooperation project focused on improving regional and local policy instruments related to bio-waste management and composting, with a particular emphasis on rural and low-density territories. The project addresses a shared challenge across participating regions: the difficulty of developing effective, economically viable and environmentally sound solutions for organic waste management in contexts characterised by dispersed settlements, long transport distances and relatively low waste volumes. These structural conditions make many bio-waste collection and treatment models developed for urban areas poorly transferable to rural regions, despite increasing regulatory pressure to improve recycling performance and comply with EU requirements on separate bio-waste collection and waste diversion.

The overall purpose of CORE is to support partner regions in improving the implementation of circular economy and waste management policies by strengthening specific policy instruments through interregional policy learning. The project aims to enable public authorities and policy actors to exchange experience, identify and analyse good practices, and translate learning into concrete policy improvements within existing regional and local instruments, such as waste management plans, circular economy strategies or targeted bio-waste measures.

In terms of scope, CORE brings together nine partners from eight countries, including regional and local authorities responsible for waste management policies, supported by European Compost Network as advisory partner. The project covers the full policy cycle of bio-waste management in rural contexts, including prevention, separate collection, composting and anaerobic digestion, as well as the use of compost and digestate. Its activities combine interregional thematic seminars and study visits with regional stakeholder engagement, in-house dissemination and policy-focused reflection, complemented by a limited number of pilot actions intended to test or demonstrate selected solutions and feed evidence into the improvement of identified policy instruments.

1.4.2 Methodology

The analysis for the CORE case study is based on a qualitative, mixed-source and triangulated approach combining documentary review and semi-structured interviews with key project stakeholders. This approach was applied to assess (i) the relevance and coherence of the project design, (ii) project effectiveness and emerging impacts, and (iii) success factors, barriers and contextual conditions influencing implementation.

First, the evaluators conducted a targeted review of core project documentation, including the Application Form, progress reports, thematic seminar reports, stakeholder meeting reports, thematic analyses and project publications. These sources provided the primary evidence base for assessing the relevance and coherence of the project's intervention logic, the alignment between identified territorial needs and planned activities, and the extent to which project activities were oriented towards policy learning and improvement. Documentary evidence was also used to trace emerging outcomes related to capacity building, policy instrument improvement and potential contributions to territorial cohesion.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four project beneficiaries, covering the Lead Partner and three project partners. Interviews focused on beneficiaries' perspectives on the relevance and sufficiency of the project design, the effectiveness of learning and exchange activities, capacity building at professional and institutional level, the use of project-generated knowledge to influence policy instruments, and perceived success factors and barriers. The interviews enabled in-depth exploration of implementation processes and provided qualitative insights into how project activities were experienced, interpreted and mobilised by beneficiaries in different territorial and institutional contexts. Interview findings were systematically cross-checked against documentary evidence to ensure consistency and to strengthen analytical robustness.

An online survey was not used as a source of evidence for this case study. While the programme-level survey included one respondent associated with the CORE project, the response was considered insufficiently representative to support meaningful case-level analysis. Given the single response, its inclusion would risk over-interpreting an isolated perception and introducing disproportionate weight relative to the richer and more balanced evidence available from interviews and project documentation.

1.4.3 Analysis of key findings

1.4.3.1 Relevance and coherence of the project design

> ***Are the project's objectives and design, including new features, relevant and sufficient to achieve its objectives? Is the link between needs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project clear and coherent?***

The project's objectives and design were grounded in clearly identified territorial needs and articulated through a coherent and policy-oriented intervention logic. Based on the project's Application Form, the objectives of the CORE project were designed to address **clearly identified and well-documented challenges** related to bio-waste management and composting in rural and low-density territories. The project documentation explicitly situates these challenges within the broader EU policy context, including binding requirements on separate collection of bio-waste and increasing recycling targets, while highlighting structural constraints faced by regional and local authorities, such as long transport distances, low waste volumes, and limited access to decentralised treatment solutions. In this respect, the project's focus on composting and organic waste valorisation in rural areas reflects a **clear alignment between diagnosed needs and the thematic scope of the project**.

The Application Form further demonstrates a **coherent intervention logic linking these needs to the project's objectives and planned activities**. The project was explicitly designed as a policy-learning intervention aimed at improving the implementation of specific regional and local policy instruments under the "Greener Europe" objective. The logic articulated in the project description connects interregional exchange, thematic learning, and stakeholder engagement activities to the generation of knowledge and good practices, with the explicit intention that these would feed into concrete improvements of identified policy instruments**. This design logic establishes a clear conceptual chain from needs, through activities and outputs, to intended policy-oriented outcomes**.

The planned work programme reinforces this coherence by translating the intervention logic into a structured and sequenced set of activities spanning the project lifecycle. The work plan foresees repeated learning cycles combining interregional seminars and study visits with regional stakeholder meetings, in-house dissemination, and policy-focused reflection. This structure suggests that the **project design was intended to support progressive learning and gradual policy orientation**, rather than isolated or ad hoc exchanges. Taken together, the project description and work plan provide documentary evidence **that the link between needs, activities, outputs, and intended outcomes was clearly articulated at design stage and supported by a comprehensive and internally consistent activity mix**.

The relevance of the project's objectives as articulated in the Application Form is largely confirmed by the interviews conducted with project beneficiaries. Across all four interviews (one Lead Partner and three project partners), there is a **high degree of consistency in how interviewees describe the relevance of the project's objectives to identified territorial and organisational needs**. All four interviewees explicitly link the project's focus on organic waste management, composting, and bio-waste valorisation to concrete challenges faced in their respective contexts. These challenges include limited development of community composting, difficulties in managing bio-waste in rural and low-density areas, high volumes of agricultural and green waste, and pressure to comply with EU recycling and recovery requirements. In each case, the objectives are not described in abstract terms but are framed as directly responding to practical policy and operational needs, suggesting a **strong perceived relevance of the project's objectives across the partnership**.

There is also broad alignment across interviews regarding the clarity and coherence of the project's intervention logic. All four interviewees describe a **clear and logical link between identified needs, project activities, and intended outcomes**. Interviewees consistently explain how activities such as thematic seminars, study visits, exchange of good practices, stakeholder engagement, and communication or awareness-raising are designed to address gaps in experience or knowledge and to support learning oriented towards policy change. The sequence described by interviewees follows a similar pattern across cases: exposure to more advanced or tested solutions in other regions, verification and discussion through direct interaction, transfer of knowledge to local or regional stakeholders, and use of that knowledge to inform policy instruments or planning documents. This recurring narrative across all four interviews indicates that the link between needs, activities, outputs, and intended outcomes is generally well understood and perceived as coherent by beneficiaries.

Regarding the sufficiency of the project design to achieve its objectives, all four interviewees express positive assessments. **None of the interviewees identify missing activities, unclear elements, or internal inconsistencies in the project's design**. Partners consulted explicitly state that the planned mix of activities was adequate and that there was no particular need for additional study visits, or other core activities beyond those foreseen at application stage. One partner explains that the way activities were organised, especially at the start of the project, was structured and regular rather than ad hoc. According to this interviewee, the early and systematic identification of good practices and the planned sequence of seminars and study visits helped frame learning in a policy-oriented way. While these assessments are uniformly positive, they are also largely uncritical, with limited reflection on potential trade-offs or design limitations.

Views on new programme features, particularly pilot actions, are broadly convergent but nuanced. According to interviewees, **pilot actions are considered relevant and value-adding**, primarily as instruments to demonstrate or test solutions identified through exchange activities. These interviewees emphasise that, even when partners did not directly implement pilots themselves, **pilot actions contributed to learning through shared results,**

study visits, and discussion. At the same time, two interviewees explicitly note that pilot actions are not perceived as a necessary condition for achieving the project's core learning and policy objectives. One partner states that the project could have been successful without the pilot action in their specific case, framing pilots as an additional opportunity rather than an essential component. One of the interviewees further introduces a critical perspective by highlighting a **perceived rigidity in the design of pilot actions**, particularly the requirement to link them only to policy instruments identified at application stage, which is seen as limiting flexibility and responsiveness to emerging needs.

Overall, both project documentation and beneficiary interviews indicate that the **CORE project was designed with a clear and coherent intervention logic, aligned with well-identified territorial needs**. The planned mix of activities and learning mechanisms appears appropriate to support the project's policy-learning objectives, while pilot actions were conceived as complementary rather than essential elements of the design.

1.4.3.2 Project effectiveness and impact

To what extent do project activities improve the professional and institutional capacities of the project beneficiaries?

Available interview and documentary evidence indicates that CORE project activities supported the development of professional and institutional capacities among project beneficiaries, primarily through practice-oriented learning, peer exchange, and strengthened cooperation. Across all four interviews (the lead partner and all three project partners), **interviewees described project participation as contributing to professional capacity development**, with learning consistently portrayed as practice-oriented and cumulative rather than the result of isolated training events. One project partner describes learning as progressive and practice-oriented, emphasising cumulative capacity gains across several semesters, while another partner similarly frames learning as practice-oriented and supported by direct observation on site. Capacity gains were characterised primarily as knowledge acquisition, peer learning, exposure to comparable practices, and professional networking. Another partner highlights capacity building as an active process requiring preparation, self-improvement, and continuous skills development. Taken together, all four interviews converge in presenting **professional learning as experiential and closely linked to repeated engagement in project activities** rather than formalised training.

The specific content of professional capacity gains varies across interviewees but shows clear thematic consistency. All four interviews refer to **improved technical or thematic knowledge related to organic waste management**. One project partner reports enhanced thematic knowledge related to composting and organic waste management and a deeper, applied understanding of community and neighbourhood composting models. Another partner highlights learning on compost and digestate quality, use, and marketing, certification and quality schemes, and the practical application of circular economy principles. The lead partner refers to applied learning on bio-waste collection, treatment, composting, and energy recovery, and notes that partners developed a broader understanding of the entire bio-waste value chain, extending beyond their initial thematic focus. A third partner describes improved subject-matter understanding in waste management, greater confidence in discussing technical solutions, and enhanced ability to engage in professional dialogue at international level. Across all interviews, professional capacity development is therefore described as **moving toward more applied understanding and practical confidence**.

Beyond technical knowledge, interviews explicitly point to **capacity gains related to stakeholder engagement, coordination, and communication**. One project partner reports improved stakeholder engagement and communication skills and increased confidence and competence in managing projects in this thematic field. Another partner describes strengthened organisational ability to engage systematically with local stakeholders, organise and facilitate structured stakeholder meetings, and coordinate across sectors and professional communities that previously worked in isolation. The lead partner similarly refers to improvements in particularly stakeholder engagement, coordination, and change management, including the ability to work with municipalities, citizens, and political actors and to address initial resistance to changes in bio-waste management practices. For interviewees, **capacity-building extends beyond technical expertise to include practical governance and coordination skills**.

All four interviews consistently attribute capacity building to specific project activity formats, particularly study visits, thematic seminars, and peer exchange. One of the stakeholders emphasises face-to-face partner meetings and study visits, structured peer exchanges, and interactions with expert organisations, describing these formats as qualitatively different from online-only cooperation and essential for building trust. Across all interviews,

capacity gains are therefore consistently presented as closely linked to the exchange-oriented design of the project, with face-to-face interaction and practical observation playing a central role.

At the institutional level, all four interviews suggest that **capacity gains were not limited to individual staff members**, although institutional change is generally described in informal or soft terms rather than as formal restructuring. One project partner provides insights of internal knowledge diffusion through internal dissemination of knowledge within the organisation through meetings and trainings and the involvement of colleagues beyond the core project team, indicating that learning was not confined to individual staff members. Across interviews, institutional capacity improvements are thus primarily associated with internal knowledge sharing, improved coordination and stakeholder engagement, and strengthened networks, rather than with formal organisational change.

Network-building emerges as a particularly prominent theme in the interviews, where networks are described both as a product of the project and as a mechanism supporting continued learning. One of the interviewees highlights network-building and trust-based relationships, including informal exchanges outside formal project activities, as facilitating learning and ongoing cooperation. Overall, interviewees describe networks as an important institutional capacity outcome.

In addition to interview evidence, **project documentation provides consistent support for the conclusion that CORE activities contributed to professional and institutional capacity building among beneficiaries through structured learning and cooperation**. Reports from thematic seminars show that partners engaged in systematic peer learning by jointly analysing good practices in decentralised bio-waste management, using shared technical, organisational, and social criteria[47, 48]. These learning settings supported the development of applied technical knowledge and analytical skills, while also enabling collective reflection on stakeholder engagement approaches and training models across different territorial contexts. In particular, documentation from later thematic seminars combining presentations with site visits indicates hands-on learning processes, where partners deepened their understanding of operational, quality-control, certification, and communication aspects through direct interaction with practitioners and facilities.

Project publications further illustrate how **learning was consolidated and disseminated beyond individual events**. CORE e-magazines document seminars, study visits, stakeholder meetings, and partner-led analyses, contributing to knowledge diffusion and comparative learning across the partnership[49, 50]. While primarily communicative, the magazines function as a repository of shared experience and reinforce partners' analytical capacity to reflect on diverse technical and organisational solutions in bio-waste management. Similarly, the production of seven partner-led thematic analyses provides evidence of **structured analytical work at regional level**. These analyses demonstrate partners' capacity to systematically assess their own contexts by mapping good practices, identifying gaps, and examining technical, organisational, and governance conditions, thereby supporting institutional learning and informed peer exchange within the project. The thematic analysis prepared by the Świętokrzyskie Region illustrates how partners systematically assessed their regional bio-waste management context by mapping good practices, identifying gaps, and analysing technical, organisational, and governance conditions affecting composting and anaerobic digestion[51].

Stakeholder meeting reports complement this picture by documenting **capacity building through applied learning and strengthened cooperation with local actors**. The third[52] and fourth[53] stakeholder meetings show how project learning was shared with and operationalised by stakeholders through discussions on community and institutional composting, preparation of educational materials, initiation of training activities, and joint planning of awareness-raising actions. These meetings also evidence institutional capacity building through the consolidation of partnerships among public authorities, utilities, civil society organisations, and academic actors,

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47 Report on the 1st Thematic Seminar, Link

48 Detailed Report on the International Partner Meeting and Thematic Seminar in Mechelen (Belgium), Link

49 CORE E-Magazine No.1, Link

50 CORE E-Magazine No.2, Link

51 Thematic Analysis from Swietokrzyskie Region, Link

52 *3rd Stakeholder Meeting: Community Composting and Awareness-Raising in Focus*, Link

53 *New Synergies and Kindergarten Composting for Sustainability*, Link

and through the exploration of new implementation contexts. Overall, the **documentary evidence aligns with interview findings in showing that CORE activities functioned as sustained learning spaces that strengthened professional knowledge, analytical skills, cooperative working practices, and institutional networking among project beneficiaries**.

To what extent is the increasing capacity of organisations leading to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the project? How are knowledge, skills, and capacities gained from the project effectively used to influence policy change?

The available evidence indicates that increased organisational capacity gained through the CORE project has been used to influence and improve policy instruments in different ways across partners. A full assessment of the extent to which organisational capacity gains translate into policy instrument improvement will only be possible at project closure, when final reporting captures the complete set of policy-related developments emerging over the full implementation. Policy instrument improvements linked to increased organisational capacity were documented for three out of nine CORE partners at the time of analysis. Rather than following a single linear pathway, the translation of capacity gains into policy improvement reflects distinct institutional roles, governance arrangements, and policy frameworks, resulting in different forms of policy instrument improvement.

In one case, capacity gains were used directly within a **formal policy revision process**, resulting in a revised and adopted core policy instrument. In the Polish partner region, learning acquired through interregional exchanges and study visits in Ciudad Real (Spain, April 2023) and Bolzano (Italy, September 2023) was integrated into the revision of the Świętokrzyskie regional Waste Management Plan for the 2023–2028 period[54]. Compared to the previous plan, the revised instrument introduced new and concrete provisions enabling the development of bio-waste processing infrastructure, including biogas and biomethanation plants, and clarified eligibility for both public and private actors[55]. The revised plan was formally adopted by the regional authority during the project period, indicating a direct translation of organisational learning into binding policy content embedded in a single, comprehensive instrument[56].

In a second case, increased organisational capacity was translated into policy improvement through the **coordinated use of several interconnected policy instruments**. In the Hungarian context, learning from CORE activities informed the development of community composting initiatives that functioned as local demonstration models, while also being embedded in policy guidance, sustainability evaluation criteria, and funding-related instruments[57]. Project learning coming from site visits in El Robledo (Spain, April 2023) and Lokeren (Belgium, May 2024) was incorporated into an updated Sustainability Guide, the adjustment of sustainability scoring systems to incentivise composting activities, and the preparation of revised grant schemes reflecting these priorities[58]. Capacity gains were used to mainstream project learning across multiple components of the policy framework, rather than through a single policy revision, thereby shaping how sustainability objectives are promoted, assessed, and supported within the Balton Priority Area Development Programme.

In a third case, increased organisational capacity was primarily used to **strengthen the implementation and operational effectiveness of an existing policy instrument, while also informing the preparation of future policy revisions**. In the Italian partner region, CORE-related learning was inspired by a study visit in Sint Niklas (Belgium, May 2024) and two good practices presented by the Belgian and the Hungarian partners, respectively in Bolzano in September 2023 and in Flanders in May 2024. This learning was applied to establish decentralised green waste composting facilities, enhance awareness-raising and communication measures foreseen in the Bolzano Province's Waste Management Plan, and develop technical methodologies to support waste prevention

[54] Interreg Europe, Excel table *Policy Reports Results 2025-12-22*; 4th CORE Progress Report (approved in December 2025)
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

objectives[59]. These actions improved how the policy instrument functions in practice and addressed concrete implementation challenges. At the time of reporting, a formal revision of the Waste Management Plan was ongoing, with additional elements under preparation but not yet adopted, indicating that capacity gains had already contributed to policy improvement at the operational level and were feeding into subsequent policy development processes[60].

Across all three cases, common mechanisms can be identified through which organisational capacity was mobilised for policy improvement. These include the use of interregional good practices as evidence to inform policy choices, alignment of learning with existing policy priorities and planning cycles, cooperation with policy-responsible bodies and local stakeholders, and the use of pilot or demonstration activities to support the integration of new approaches into policy frameworks. While the form of policy improvement varies across partners, the evidence consistently shows that capacity gains were actively and strategically used to influence policy instruments.

The progress report provides additional process evidence that CORE's learning activities were deliberately oriented towards policy instrument improvement and that this orientation continues into the follow-up phase. It notes that the communication strategy is intended to *contribute to the policy improvements intended* and that stakeholder meetings are maintained given their relevance for achieving policy improvements and for providing conditions for further improvements[61]. The report also foresees a dedicated monitoring webinar to follow up on results and to share any new policy-related results emerging during the follow-up phase[62].

In parallel with the policy instrument improvements identified through documentary evidence, the four interviews shed light on how organisational capacity gains were mobilised in policy-related processes. Across the four interviews, there is consistent qualitative evidence that **organisational capacity gains achieved through the project were used to inform and, in some cases, directly contribute to improvements in policy instruments**. However, the nature, timing, and degree of formalisation of these improvements vary across contexts.

All four interviews indicates that **capacity gains were intentionally mobilised to influence policy instruments**. Interviewees consistently describe a deliberate effort to translate knowledge, skills, and experience acquired through project activities into concrete policy-oriented outputs, with learning being used to inform planning, revise rules, or adjust policy design within existing instruments.

Two interviews provided examples of completed and formally adopted policy instrument changes. In these cases, **increased organisational capacity is described as having led to concrete amendments to regional waste management plans**. These amendments are reported as having passed full administrative and political approval processes and are described as operational rather than preparatory. In both cases, interviewees explicitly link these changes to knowledge gained through interregional exchanges and study visits, highlighting the role of exposure to functioning solutions in other regions as a key enabler of policy change. A third project partner interview describes policy instrument improvements that are already underway but not yet fully finalised at the time of the interview. Here, capacity gains are described as directly shaping the structure and content of a waste management plan under revision, with new thematic areas and regulatory frameworks already integrated. However, the interviewee clearly distinguishes between preparatory policy work and final policy adoption, noting that some elements - particularly those linked to pilot action results - remain pending.

Capacity gains are described as **enabling partners to influence policy** even where they are not formal policy owners, primarily through stakeholder engagement, evidence-based advocacy, and the demonstration of feasible solutions. Across all interviews, several recurrent mechanisms linking capacity gains to policy improvement can be identified. These include the use of interregional good practices as policy evidence, the alignment of project learning with scheduled policy revision processes, active cooperation with policy-responsible bodies, and the embedding of learning outcomes into formal governance and decision-making structures. In contexts where the beneficiary organisation held direct responsibility for the policy instrument, interviewees describe a relatively direct pathway from learning to policy amendment.

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] 4th CORE Progress Report (approved in December 2025)
[62] Ibid.

Overall, the available evidence indicates that **organisational capacity gains generated through the CORE project have been actively mobilised to influence policy instruments** through different pathways and with varying degrees of formalisation. Capacity gains translated into concrete and, in some cases, formally adopted policy changes. In other contexts, they contributed to operational improvements or preparatory work feeding into future revisions. As the project is still ongoing, a complete assessment of the extent to which capacity gains ultimately result in policy instrument improvement will depend on final reporting at project closure, when the full range of policy-related developments over the implementation and follow-up period can be captured.

To what extent does the available evidence suggest that the project is contributing to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?

Based on the nature and design of activities implemented so far, the project demonstrates a credible potential to contribute to territorial cohesion through capacity diffusion and policy enablement, particularly for less developed or rural territories. However, a fuller assessment of whether and how this potential translates into observable territorial cohesion outcomes will only be possible at project closure, once learning is translated into sustained policy uptake and implementation.

Taken together, the documentary evidence on project activities implemented to date suggests that the CORE project has been **designed and delivered in a manner that is conducive to contributing to territorial cohesion** primarily through knowledge diffusion, capacity building and network strengthening. Across thematic seminars, publications and stakeholder meetings, a consistent focus is placed on **facilitating structured exchange between territories with different starting points** in composting and bio-waste management, including rural, sparsely populated and low-density areas with more limited institutional capacity or infrastructure.

Thematic seminars and associated learning formats demonstrate a coherent **emphasis on exposing partners and stakeholders to a wide range of good practices** adapted to small-scale, community-based and rural contexts[63], [64]. By prioritising adaptation rather than replication of practices and by explicitly addressing technical, social and economic dimensions of composting solutions, these activities create **conditions that are conducive to narrowing disparities in knowledge, awareness and policy understanding** between more developed and less developed regions. Similarly, dissemination materials such as the CORE E-Magazine reinforce this learning-oriented approach by highlighting rural environments and solutions tailored to contexts with dispersed populations and limited infrastructure, thereby supporting the diffusion of relevant knowledge across heterogeneous territorial settings[65], [66].

At local and sub-regional level, stakeholder meetings in Hungary provide additional picture of **potential contribution to territorial cohesion through concrete capacity-building actions and the strengthening of local governance networks**[67], [68]. Activities such as the placement of community composters, training of future compost masters, awareness-raising events and the establishment of institutional composting systems may lower entry barriers for municipalities and communities with limited prior experience. The emergence of synergies among public authorities, utilities, civil society organisations and academic actors further suggests a growing institutional ecosystem that could support more coordinated and inclusive approaches to sustainability challenges over time.

As such, while the activities described are well aligned with enabling conditions and plausible pathways through which territorial cohesion could be supported, they do not allow conclusions regarding realised reductions in territorial disparities at this stage. Given that the project is ongoing and that cohesion effects are expected to materialise only after learning is translated into policy and practice, the documentary evidence supports an assessment of potential contribution rather than confirmed outcomes.

[63] Detailed Report on the International Partner Meeting and Thematic Seminar in Mechelen (Belgium), Link

[64] Report on the 1st Thematic Seminar, Link

[65] CORE E-Magazine No.1, Link

[66] CORE E-Magazine No.2, Link

[67] *3rd Stakeholder Meeting: Community Composting and Awareness-Raising in Focus*, Link

[68] *4th Stakeholder Meeting: Community Composting and Awareness-Raising in Focus*, Link

Across the four interviews, the available evidence consistently frames the project's contribution to territorial cohesion primarily in terms of **reducing disparities in knowledge, practice and institutional capacity** between territories, rather than in terms of measurable reductions in material, economic or infrastructural disparities. In all four interviews, territorial cohesion is described through an institutional and functional lens, where regions or municipalities at earlier stages of development in organic waste management are enabled to learn from more advanced systems.

A shared pattern across all interviews is that the perceived **cohesion effect is linked to structured exchange mechanisms embedded in the project.** All four interviews describe territorial cohesion as emerging through knowledge transfer and peer learning, enabled via project formats such as study visits, thematic seminars, and partner meetings, as well as joint work on tools and dissemination. The interviews describe this as a process of convergence in understanding and approaches over the course of the project, where less advanced territories learn from more advanced ones. Interviewees explicitly stated that disparities between regions have decreased in terms of understanding and implementation of composting solutions. However, this evidence is consistently qualitative and perception-based.

One interview provides a concrete example of disparity reduction through policy uptake in another territory. This interview reports that a Polish partner region introduced a new policy instrument and secured funding for an anaerobic digestion plant following a study visit, inspired by the interviewee's region's system. Other two interviews broaden the cohesion perspective beyond interregional learning by describing **network and governance effects**. They suggest that territorial cohesion also operates through strengthened inter-territorial connections, with learning and cooperation extending beyond the formal partnership to actors from non-partner regions who engage in exchanges and later apply learned practices. One interview highlights effects within the interviewee's own region, where project-required stakeholder meetings brought together actors who previously worked in isolation, improved cooperation between institutions, and allowed local stakeholders to engage directly with partners from other European regions. These accounts suggest that, **in addition to convergence between regions, the project may support cohesion through denser networks and cooperation within and across territories**.

A further shared element across the interviews is a clear boundary around what can be concluded regarding actual reduction of disparities at outcome level. Differences in facilities, infrastructure, resources, or implementation remain. Project's role is to create conditions and access, not to guarantee uptake. In this framing, any **reduction of disparities is conditional on local uptake**.

Overall, the combined documentary and interview evidence suggests that the **CORE project is laying credible foundations for a potential contribution to territorial cohesion**, primarily by reducing disparities in knowledge, institutional capacity and policy understanding across territories with different starting points. At the same time, both evidence streams consistently indicate that any **reduction in territorial disparities remains conditional on subsequent policy uptake and implementation** by regional and local actors. As such, while the project demonstrates plausible pathways towards supporting territorial cohesion, conclusions on realised and sustained cohesion outcomes can only be drawn once the project has been fully implemented and its longer-term effects can be assessed.

What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the project's objectives?

Across the interviews, respondents consistently emphasised a set of reinforcing success factors that supported progress towards the project's objectives. All four interviews pointed to the **quality of cooperation and learning arrangements** within the partnership as a central enabling factor. These accounts converge on the view that regular interaction, trust-based relationships, and openness in sharing experiences facilitated effective learning and smooth implementation. The interviews describe cooperation not as limited to formal project settings but extending to informal exchanges during study visits and meetings, which helped partners discuss both successful practices and challenges. This combination of structured and informal interaction is repeatedly presented as strengthening mutual understanding and the applicability of shared solutions.

A second success factor consistently highlighted across all four interviews concerns the **design and delivery of learning activities**, particularly study visits, thematic seminars, and face-to-face meetings. Interviewees described these formats as essential for translating abstract policy concepts into concrete, usable knowledge. Seeing solutions in operation, interacting directly with practitioners and experts, and observing implementation contexts are repeatedly framed as enhancing confidence in the feasibility of good practices and supporting their adaptation to local contexts. One partner explicitly contrasts this with previous experiences of online-only cooperation, which was described as less effective for trust-building and practical understanding.

The composition of the partnership itself also emerges as a common success factor. Interviews emphasise the **complementarity and diversity of partner territories and expertise**, noting that differences in levels of experience along the bio-waste value chain enabled mutual learning rather than creating imbalance. At the same time, the lead partner stresses the relevance and comparability of territorial contexts, particularly the shared rural or low-density characteristics of partner regions, which facilitated transferability of practices. In addition, two interviews explicitly identify the **involvement of highly experienced or advisory actors**, including European-level expertise, as raising the overall quality and credibility of learning.

In contrast to the broad convergence on success factors, interviewees describe barriers in a more differentiated and nuanced way. One project partner reports no concrete barriers that hindered project implementation, characterising the process as smooth and effective, while still identifying a **range of potential or contextual barriers external to the programme**. The other three interviews do identify barriers, but these are generally framed as operational, procedural, or contextual constraints rather than as factors undermining the relevance or validity of the project's objectives.

Administrative and procedural complexity emerges as the most frequently cited barrier, mentioned in three interviews. In particular, uncertainty and rigidity around pilot actions - including timing, reporting requirements, and limited flexibility to recognise emerging outcomes - are described as creating planning difficulties, additional workload, and financial risk for beneficiaries. Two interviews explicitly refer to changes or lack of clarity in programme rules during implementation. While these issues are portrayed as manageable, they are nevertheless presented as affecting ease and efficiency of implementation.

Some interviewees also point to **governance-related and political-administrative constraints** that lie outside the project's control. Three interviews highlight the complexity of translating project learning into policy decisions, citing slow approval processes, multiple formal steps, and dependence on political or ministerial decisions at regional or local level. These constraints are described as inherent to public administration and multi-level governance rather than as flaws in project design or programme support structures. Relatedly, two interviews note that even where policy instruments are amended, actual implementation depends on decisions by municipalities or other local actors, introducing uncertainty regarding uptake.

Resource constraints are mentioned more selectively. One interview notes that pilot actions are resource-intensive, requiring significant staff time and organisational capacity, which could pose challenges for less-resourced beneficiaries. One interviewee notes that the implementation of project-inspired ideas may be constrained by limited funding availability or narrowly defined national or regional funding schemes. This is framed explicitly as an external, contextual risk linked to the design and flexibility of domestic funding and governance systems, rather than as a barrier arising from the project itself or from the Interreg Europe programme.

Overall, while barriers are acknowledged, all four **interviews place significantly stronger emphasis on enabling factors than on obstacles**. None of the interviewees attribute barriers to fundamental weaknesses in project objectives, partnership functioning, or overall project design. Instead, barriers are largely described as external, procedural, or contextual, and, in most cases, as challenges that can be mitigated through cooperation, support structures, and adaptive implementation rather than as constraints that prevented progress towards the project's objectives.

1.4.4 Appendix – Desk Review and Interviews

1.4.4.1 List of documents consulted

Level	Title
Programme-level	• Excel table on Policy Instruments • Excel table on Policy Report Results • Excel table on Quality Assessment
Project-level	• 4th CORE Progress Report (approved in December 2025) • Report on the 1st Thematic Seminar, Link

	• Detailed Report on the International Partner Meeting and Thematic Seminar in Mechelen (Belgium), Link • CORE E-Magazine No.1, Link • CORE E-Magazine No.2, Link • New Synergies and Kindergarten Composting for Sustainability, Link • Stakeholder Meeting: Community Composting and Awareness-Raising in Focus, Link • Thematic Analysis from Swietokrzyskie Region, Link • 3rd Stakeholder Meeting: Community Composting and Awareness-Raising in Focus, Link • 4th Stakeholder Meeting: Community Composting and Awareness-Raising in Focus, Link

1.4.4.2 List of interviewees

Partners	Date
Municipal Solid Waste of Castilla La Mancha – Lead partner (Spain)	10.12.2025
Świętokrzyskie Region – Marshal Office of Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship – Partner (Poland)	17.12.2025
KDRIU Central Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency Nonprofit Ltd – Partner (Hungary)	11.12.2025
Autonomous Province of Bolzano – Alto Adige. Environmental and Climate Protection Agency. Waste Management Office – Partner (Italy)	18.12.2025

1.5 DEBUTING

1.5.1 Description, purpose, and scope of the DEBUTING project

Title	Developing Business Through inclusiveness and gender awareness – new cluster competences
Acronym	DEBUTING
Start date	01 March 2023
End date	31 May 2027
Lead partner	Region Värmland (*Sweden*)
Partners	**Partners**: ► Regional Council of Lapland (*Finland*) ► North-West Regional Development Agency (*Romania*) ► Ecoplus. The Business Agency of Lower Austria (*Austria*) ► National Development Centre (*Hungary*) ► ART-ER Joint Stock Consortium Company (*Italy*) ► Navarra Development Agency (SODENA) (*Spain*) ► Pomorskie Voivodeship (*Poland*) ► Grand Est Developpement (*France*) ► VDI/VDE Innovation+Technik GmbH (*Germany*) ► Ungheni City Hall (*Republic of Moldova*) **Advisory partner**: ► Karlstadt University (*Sweden*)
Associated Policy Authorities	► Ministry of Economic Affairs, Employment and Tourism of Baden-Wuerttemberg (*Germany*) ► Ministry of Economic Affairs, Employment and Tourism of Baden-Wuerttemberg (*Italy*) ► Navarra Government – General Directorate on Business Policy, International Promotion and Labour (*Spain*) ► Grand Est Regional Council (*France*)
Policy objective	Smarter Europe (policy objective 1)
Specific objective	SME competitiveness
Total budget	EUR 2,531,667.00
Overall objective	To improve 10 policy instruments to (better) address gender equality in industry supporting via clusters' at least 10% of clustered SMEs to become more competitive by 2026

The DEBUTING project is a collaborative initiative aimed at **enhancing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by integrating gender equality as a core component of business strategy**. Led by Region Värmland in Sweden, this project involves a diverse consortium of 11 partners from 10 regions across Europe, including policy authorities, regional development agencies, various business consortia and one academic institution.

With a total **budget of €2,531,667**, DEBUTING aligns with the European Union's policy objective of fostering a **Smarter Europe**, specifically targeting the **competitiveness of SMEs**. The project recognizes that many SMEs struggle to understand the business rationale behind gender equality and often face challenges in implementing gender-inclusive practices. To address these issues, DEBUTING aims to increase:

- the business capacities for 7500+ SMEs in the regions by enabling them to develop more innovative and competitive business models for value creation through a more inclusive culture,
- the efficiency of existing measures for gender equality and inclusiveness, while designing more innovative and focused measures, and

- the capacity of policy makers, clusters and SMEs to address women in industry as a critical factor for SMEs to grow sustainably and become more internationally competitive.

To achieve these goals, DEBUTING employs a comprehensive project approach that includes a series of interregional meetings, workshops, and staff exchanges. The project's activities are structured into several steps. In the initial semesters, identified good practices (35, out of which 27 were deemed relevant for publication in the Platform database) are presented and analysed during interregional project meetings, while regional stakeholders engage in discussions to tailor these practices to local contexts. The project also includes a status-quo and needs analysis conducted through surveys and interviews, allowing partners to capture specific regional needs related to policy instruments.

Capacity-building workshops are organised throughout the project by the advisory partner, focusing on critical topics such as competence supply, organisational culture, communication, innovation through user involvement, and sustainable business development. These workshops serve as platforms for interregional discussions among partners, associated policy authorities, and stakeholders, fostering a collaborative environment for knowledge exchange.

Additionally, interregional focus groups, as part of the interregional project meetings, are organised to delve into specific themes such as monitoring and evaluation indicators related to gender, women's roles in IT, and the development of capacity-building tools for policymakers and SMEs. These focus groups are meant to facilitate peer-reviewing of policy changes and ensure that the insights gained from the project are effectively disseminated among all partners.

A significant aspect of DEBUTING is the organisation of 60 regional stakeholder group (RSG) meetings, where partners collaborate with local stakeholders to identify areas for improvement in policy instruments based on the learnings from the exchange of experiences. These meetings include representatives from policy authorities and organisations relevant to gender equality and inclusiveness.

The policy improvements identified across DEBUTING partner regions are firmly aligned with Cohesion Policy Objective 1 "A Smarter Europe" (Specific Objective 1.3 – Sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, including by productive investments) and focus on strengthening SME competitiveness, innovation capacity and structural transformation through smart specialisation strategies. A common feature is the central role of clusters as key intermediaries for translating policy objectives into operational measures, enabling effective outreach to SMEs and facilitating cooperation, capacity building and innovation uptake. Several improvements reflect a shift from strategic frameworks to concrete implementation, including ERDF-funded projects, mandatory gender-related criteria in funding calls and renewed S3/S4 strategies with stronger transversal and operational dimensions. Gender equality is systematically integrated as a driver of competitiveness, innovation and talent attraction, particularly in response to skills shortages and the green and digital transitions. The policy improvements emphasise ecosystem development and long-term capacity building for SMEs, clusters and innovation actors, and are directly informed by interregional learning and the transfer of good practices within DEBUTING, demonstrating clear European added value and strong potential for sustainable, long-term impact on regional innovation systems in the field of gender equality.

As of semester 5, DEBUTING has already demonstrated two policy improvements out of the (at least) 10 targeted: The first improvement focuses on the **European Regional Development Fund programme for North-Central Sweden 2021-2027**, addressing the need for a more inclusive business environment that recognises women as a strategic resource for competitiveness. The second improvement pertains to the Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme Plus (EDIOP_PLUS) of the **Cluster Strategy of Hungary**, which aims to foster collaboration among clusters and promote gender equality as a critical component of economic development.

1.5.2 Methodology

The analysis for the present case study relies on a mixed-methods and triangulated approach combining documentary review, an online survey and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, in order to address

(i) the relevance and coherence of the project design, (ii) the project effectiveness and impact, as well as (iii) contextual factors, success factors and barriers.

First, the evaluators made use of **administrative and monitoring data** to inform the assessment of the relevance and coherence of the project as well as to provide essential contextual elements for interpreting effectiveness and potential implementation challenges.

Moreover, the **online survey** provided primary quantitative and qualitative evidence on beneficiaries' perceptions of the project, playing a central role in assessing project effectiveness and impact and in identifying success factors and barriers, while also complementing the analysis of design relevance.

Finally, **semi-structured interviews** with key project stakeholders provided in-depth insights into the project's objectives and into stakeholders' perceptions and expectations regarding its impact on capacity building and policy improvement in the territory concerned, allowing the evaluation team to contextualise and validate survey and documentary evidence.

1.5.3 Analysis of key findings

1.5.3.1 Relevance and coherence of the project design

Are the project's objectives and design, including new features, relevant and sufficient to achieve its objectives? Is the link between needs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project clear and coherent?

The **overall objective of the project** were generally well understood and consistently articulated across different roles within the partnership. The Lead Partner stated that the project's objective was clear "from day one" and remained central throughout implementation, also emphasising that all partners shared a common understanding of what the project aimed to achieve and how this objective guided the project development[69]. Similarly, project partners described the project's objectives in substantive and thematically aligned terms. One partner framed the objective as supporting the integration of gender equality and diversity into regional innovation and business development policies, while simultaneously demonstrating the business and innovation benefits of inclusive practices[70]. Another partner described the core objective as connecting gender equality and diversity with cluster and innovation policy, highlighting clusters as key intermediaries capable of introducing "soft topics" into companies due to their existing trust-based networks[71]. While interviewees noted that regional approaches differed, they consistently indicated that the core objective was shared across the consortium.

Regarding the **coherence between objectives, activities and organisational needs**, project activities were mostly perceived as coherent with the objectives and aligned with institutional needs. One project partner explicitly stated that activities clearly connected to both objectives and organisational priorities, highlighting that activities were grounded in a joint needs analysis, adapted over time to partners' evolving needs, and designed to support intended policy instrument changes. Moreover, it was emphasised that flexibility was maintained while preserving an overall project structure, and that activities were perceived as relevant by both their organisation and other partners[72]. However, some initial challenges were revealed: one partner explained, indeed, that – at the beginning of the project – the link between activities and objectives was difficult to grasp, particularly because the needs analysis was conducted very early, before regional stakeholders had sufficient awareness or understanding of gender-related topics. In this regard, stakeholders were asked to complete a lengthy questionnaire without clearly understanding its purpose or expected benefits, which initially led to

[69] According to the interview conducted with the Lead Partner
[70] According to interviews conducted with project partners
[71] Ibidem
[72] According to interviews conducted with project partners

resistance and reduced engagement. Over time, however, this situation evolved: stakeholders became more interested, the relevance of activities became clearer, and activities were increasingly perceived as aligned with both project objectives and organisational needs[73]. The duality of these findings is consistent with the survey evidence, which shows a generally positive but not unanimous perception of programme logic and design features[74]. Most respondents (71%) reported that they understood from the start how the Programme would help participants and organisations improve regional development policies. However, the survey also highlights some heterogeneity: one project partner indicated that this understanding only became clear later in the project lifecycle, while another reported that the Programme logic remained unclear. This suggests that, while a shared understanding of objectives predominated, clarity was not uniform across all partners, particularly in the early stages.

In relation to the **relevance and sufficiency of the new features introduced under the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027**, pilot actions were identified as particularly relevant. Beneficiaries confirmed the relevance of pilot actions in allowing deeper learning from good practice exchanges, which would not otherwise be possible within standard project constraints[75]. In addition to interview testimony, documentary evidence[76] confirms that staff exchanges and the pilot action have been implemented in ways that are relevant and coherent with the project's design. For example, an official update on the Interreg Europe website reports that partners from Romania and Moldova participated, on the 9th of December 2025, in the **Robotech Girls' Day** event in Haguenau, France, as part of a staff exchange organised under DEBUTING. This activity enabled partners to engage first-hand with a concrete initiative aimed at encouraging girls and young women to explore careers in digital technology and industry, providing practical insights in line with the project's objectives of mainstreaming gender equality and inclusive practices across regional innovation ecosystems. At the same time, some limitations were identified. While pilot actions are, by design, flexible instruments under the Interreg Europe Programme, beneficiaries indicated that, in practice, their scope and duration my limit the possibility to explore certain good practices in depth. They suggested that more targeted or narrowly focused pilot actions could facilitate deeper experimentation and learning on specific aspects of identified good practices, particularly where partners aim to test concrete operational approaches within a limited timeframe. In addition, beneficiaries referred to funding and co-financing constraints that may affect the implementation of pilot actions and staff exchanges. In particular, one partner highlighted that limited staff cost budgets can indirectly restrict available travel resources, which is especially challenging for partners located in geographically remote regions or those facing higher travel costs. While funding levels were generally considered sufficient for project implementation, these constraints were reported to influence the scale and intensity with which pilot actions and in-depth exchanges of practices could be carried out[77]. These qualitative findings align with the survey results, which show generally positive but mixed perceptions of new features[78]. Pilot actions were assessed as moderately positive by some respondents (29%), while a majority (71%) selected "no opinion / not applicable," reflecting the fact that not all partners implemented or directly engaged with this feature. Other features were largely perceived as moderately to very positive (Figure 1), though again with a notable share of "no opinion" responses, suggesting uneven exposure or relevance across partners.

[73] Ibidem

[74] Online survey question "**From the start of the project, did you understand how the Programme would help participants and organisations improve regional development policies?**" Beneficiaries (n=7). Closed question

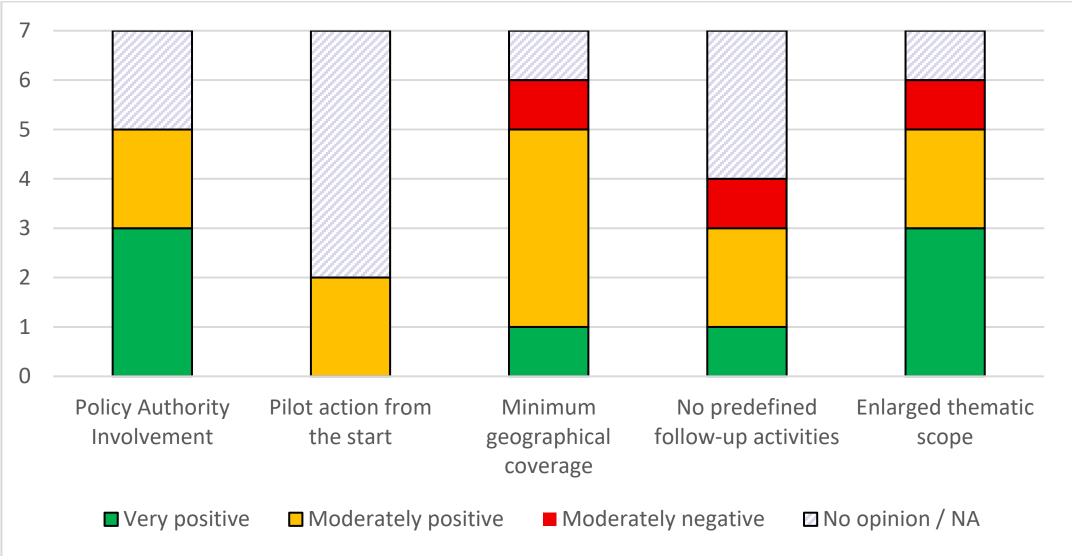
[75] According to interviews conducted with the Lead Partner and other project partners

[76] https://www.interregeurope.eu/debuting/news-and-events/news/robotech-girls-in-haguenau-as-part-of-staff-exchange

[77] According to interviews conducted with project partners

[78] Online survey question "**What role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in you project development and implementation?**" Beneficiaries (n=7). Closed question

Figure 1 – "What role did the new features introduced in the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 play in you project development and implementation?"



Sources: Survey to Beneficiaries (n=7)

1.5.3.2 Project effectiveness and impact

To what extent do project activities improve the professional and institutional capacities of the organisations?

DEBUTING's core activities – including interregional workshops, peer-learning sessions, focus groups, study visits, and staff exchanges – are deemed as **having strongly contributed to strengthening professional skills, knowledge and institutional capacities across participating organisations**. Interviewees consistently referred to the **added value of engaging in interregional exchange** around gender equality, diversity and innovation, particularly by connecting policy, cluster development and SME support perspectives. In this regard, the Lead Partner emphasised that a key added value of the project lies in addressing gender equality and inclusion "together with other regions," noting that working collectively at European level strengthened partners' capacity to integrate these topics into innovation, cluster and smart specialisation strategies. Furthermore, the project enabled actors traditionally focused on cluster and innovation policy to enrich their perspectives with gender equality considerations, while simultaneously allowing actors specialised in gender equality to better understand how these issues interact with cluster dynamics and innovation ecosystems[79]. This perception is echoed by project partners, who identified several layers of added value stemming from project activities. According to one interviewee, capacity building occurred through **enhanced understanding of local practices via comparison with other regions, inspiration drawn from different approaches to similar challenges, and the creation of a strong European network benefiting both territories and institutions**. They further stressed that informal interactions among partners played an important role in building trust, motivation and mutual understanding, thereby reinforcing the effectiveness of formal project activities. Another project partner explained that DEBUTING enabled their organisation to develop new services for stakeholders related to diversity, equality and innovation, notably through the introduction of stakeholder engagement events and advisory activities addressing gender equality and change management within cluster and innovation contexts. These services expanded the organisation's previous offer, which had mainly focused on technological themes, and improved its capacity to communicate sensitive topics in a way that is relevant and accessible to SMEs and cluster actors. They noted that, prior to the project, the organisation's activities focused mainly on technological

[79] According to the interview conducted with the Lead Partner

themes such as artificial intelligence or quantum computing, whereas DEBUTING expanded its scope towards transformation-related topics such as change management, diversity and inclusion, which are now increasingly relevant for companies.

With regard to the alignment between capacity building and identified needs, the project's capacity-building activities are generally perceived as aligned with the needs identified at regional level. One interviewee stated that, in their region, the project helped clarify how to connect cluster activities with gender and diversity topics, highlighting that the project's objectives and results were well matched, and suggesting that the capacity-building dimension responded appropriately to regional needs. Evidence further indicates that capacity building extended **beyond individual learning to include institutional and organisational dimensions**. The Lead Partner reported that participation in the project resulted in "much better skilled staff" and directly contributed to the development of two new projects funded under the relevant policy instrument, drawing on ideas exchanged with other partners, notably from Navarra (Spain). This example illustrates how learning generated through project activities was applied within the organisation and translated into concrete follow-up initiatives. Other interviewees provided additional examples of organisational capacity building. One project partner described how the project facilitated the development of new European partnerships, generated ideas for future collaborations, strengthened ties between regional authorities and academic institutions, and expanded academic networks, enabling researchers to identify partners for joint research and publications. They emphasised that these effects contributed to sustainable collaboration beyond the formal duration of the project. Another interviewee highlighted tangible outcomes at organisational level, including the expansion of her organisation's network to include actors working on gender equality, diversity, innovation, universities and educational institutions, as well as increased visibility among stakeholders previously unfamiliar with the organisation's role. They also described the emergence of a new network linking innovation actors and diversity experts, which they attributed directly to project activities.

The **survey results** provide complementary quantitative evidence on professional capacity building. Four project partners (57%) reported that their individual capacities in their policy area improved "to a large degree" as a result of the project organisational learning[80]. The explanations provided by these respondents highlight several enabling factors, including organisational flexibility to engage with project objectives, strong alignment between project goals and professional responsibilities, sufficient time and flexibility to participate in activities, and the involvement of a university as an advisory partner, which was seen as contributing to evidence-based, scientifically grounded discussions. At the same time, the survey also reveals variation in capacity-building outcomes. Three project partners (43%) reported that their capacities improved "to a small degree," citing time constraints within their organisation, limited alignment between project goals and professional responsibilities, and dependence on associated policy authorities for policy-related engagement[81]. These responses indicate that the effectiveness of capacity-building activities was influenced by organisational context, roles within the partnership, and available resources.

To what extent is the increasing capacity of organisations leading to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the project? How are knowledge, skills, and capacities gained from the project effectively used to influence policy change?

Policy change within DEBUTING has generally resulted from the cumulative effect of multiple project activities, rather than from a single intervention. Improvements to policy instruments emerged through a combination of good practice exchanges, workshops, focus groups and continuous interaction among partners[82].

[80] Online survey question "**To what extent have your individual capacities in your policy area improved thanks to the project involvement?**" Beneficiaries (n=7). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

[81] Ibidem

[82] According to interviews conducted with project partners

Under DEBUTING, two policy improvements were reported as of semester 4[83], both of them illustrating how capacity building and interregional learning translated into tangible changes in policy instrument. The table below, based on data collected through documentary review[84], summarises main findings.

Table 1 – Main findings on reported improvements of policy instruments

Policy improvement 1: ERDF programme for North-Central Sweden (Region Värmland)
The improved policy instrument is the European Regional Development Fund programme for North-Central Sweden 2021–2027, specifically under the priority "Develop skills for smart specialisation, structural transformation and entrepreneurship." Within this framework, the project "The Smart Way" was approved, with a total budget of 3 000 000 SEK, as an implementation project translating DEBUTING learning into operational measures. The design of "The Smart Way" was directly informed by DEBUTING activities, including dialogue within the Regional Stakeholder Group and learning from other partner regions. Interviews confirm that Region Värmland, as both Lead Partner of DEBUTING and the regional authority responsible for the implementation of the ERDF programme and the smart specialisation strategy, was able to internalise project learning within its own policy structures. Staff involved in DEBUTING were already directly engaged in policy design and implementation processes, which facilitated the translation of insights from stakeholder discussions into concrete policy action. Input from stakeholders was explicitly described as crucial in shaping the project's objectives and design. The project focuses on implementing a three-year development programme (2025–2027) aimed at strengthening companies' and innovation actors' capabilities in relation to gender equality, diversity and inclusion within Värmland's Smart Specialisation Strategy. This policy improvement is directly attributed to learning from DEBUTING good practices, particularly Navarra's "InnovaRSE" approach, which inspired Region Värmland to move from primarily strategic work towards a more practical, company-oriented implementation model. This illustrates a clear pathway from capacity building and peer learning to a policy-supported implementation project, constituting a concrete improvement of the policy instrument.
Policy improvement 2: Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme Plus (Hungary)
The second documented policy improvement concerns the Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme Plus (EDIOP_PLUS) in Hungary. According to the documentary review, DEBUTING played a pivotal role in shaping calls for proposals launched in November 2024 under EDIOP_PLUS 2.1.1 and 2.1.3. Based on research and interregional learning within DEBUTING, the mandatory inclusion of female researchers was introduced as a requirement in R&D&I calls for proposals. This represents a direct and operational modification of the policy instrument, with concrete eligibility conditions imposed on applicants. Documentary evidence and interviews indicate that the Hungarian DEBUTING partner is directly involved in the preparation and operationalisation of EDIOP_PLUS calls, which enabled learning generated within the project to be discussed and reflected upon within the responsible policy structures. This change is directly linked to interregional learning within DEBUTING, where Hungarian stakeholders engaged in peer exchange with partners from Sweden, Finland and Spain, through thematic workshops and partner meetings, gaining concrete insights into how gender equality can be operationalised within innovation funding instruments. The policy improvement reflects how knowledge and capacity gained through the project were used to address identified structural barriers, such as gender stereotypes and limited access of women to innovation and leadership roles, by embedding enforceable gender equality requirements into innovation funding mechanisms.

[83] Project's progress report n°4 (approved on July 22, 2025)

[84] Excel tables on policy instruments and results shared by the Managing Authority

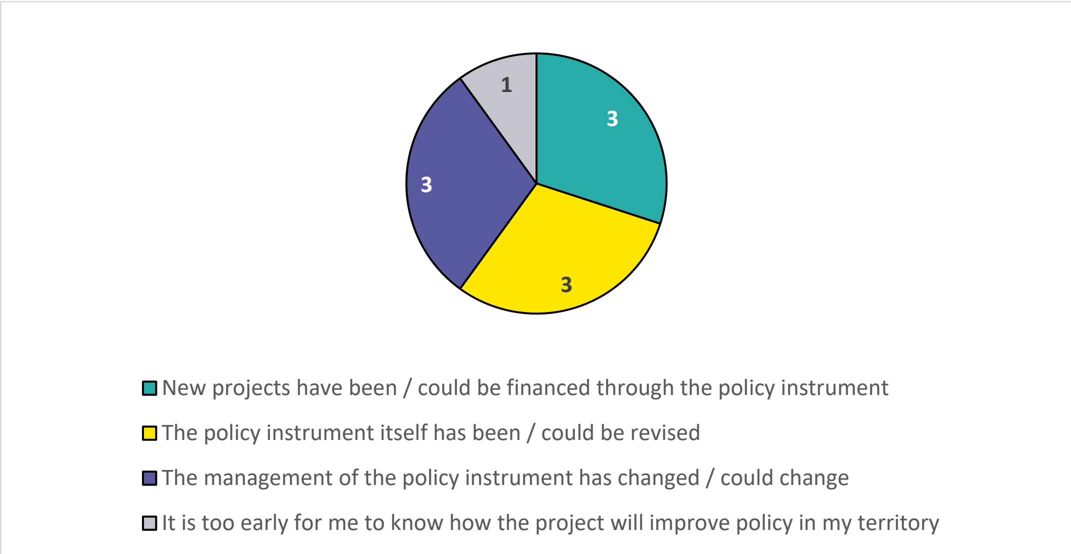
However, beyond policy improvements officially reported, some policy adaptations directly stemming from the project activities have been also identified: in this regard, a project partner explicitly recognised that – although the policy instrument itself was not formally revised in their region due to political and institutional constraints – adaptations were introduced at the level of policy measures within cluster policy implementation, particularly by integrating diversity and equality considerations into services and activities. Within the project framework, these adaptations are considered policy improvements, reflecting incremental but meaningful changes in how policy objectives are operationalised[85].

The survey results partially complement these findings by providing broader evidence on organisational learning and anticipated policy effects. 57% of project partners reported that they were likely to apply the capacities gained through the project in their organisation "to a large degree," explicitly citing the applicability of the learning and capacities developed. By contrast, 47% of respondents indicated that application was likely only "to a small degree," referring to factors such as limited relevance to organisational priorities, time and resource constraints, limited internal capacity, and difficulties translating learning into practice. Among the latter, one respondent explicitly mentioned that the project topic is "not very popular in the current political atmosphere," which constrains stronger policy engagement[86].

In terms of the **nature and scope of policy improvements reported so far**, they differ in scope and maturity across partner regions. When asked about observed or expected policy changes (Figure 2), project partners reported a range of outcomes, including[87]:

- new projects being or potentially being financed through the policy instrument.
- revisions or potential revisions of the policy instrument itself.
- changes or potential changes in the management of the policy instrument.

***Figure 2* – "Have you observed, or do you expect to observe, any policy changes following the capacity building of your organization?"**



Source: Survey to Beneficiaries

[85] According to interviews conducted with project partners

[86] Online survey question "**To what degree are you likely to apply the capacities gained through the project in your organisation (i.e., organisational learning)?**" Beneficiaries (n=7). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

[87] Online survey question "**Have you observed, or do you expect to observe, any policy changes following the capacity building of your organization?**" Beneficiaries (n=7). Closed question where multiple answers were allowed.

1.5.3.3 Contextual factors, success factors, and barriers

To what extent does the available evidence suggest that the project is contributing to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?

Evidence suggests that DEBUTING is contributing to territorial cohesion primarily by addressing a shared **structural challenge across regions and by facilitating the transfer of knowledge and capacity between regions with different levels of experience**. According to information available so far, all participating regions face gender inequality in industry, which constrains SME competitiveness and contributes to uneven regional economic performance. By framing gender equality as a driver of innovation and growth, the project addresses a common bottleneck affecting regional development trajectories and aligns regional efforts under the Cohesion Policy objective "A Smarter Europe."

This strategic contribution is reinforced by the project's scope of policy engagement. As documented, by strengthening policy design and implementation capacities across a wide range of instruments, the project contributes to reducing disparities in how regions support SME competitiveness and innovation, particularly by enabling less experienced regions to benefit from approaches tested elsewhere[88].

Furthermore, the project has contributed to strengthen cooperation between regions and organisations, which is a key mechanism underpinning territorial cohesion[89]. One project partner noted that the establishment of Regional Stakeholder Groups – some of which did not exist prior to the project – has improved coordination at regional level, by bringing together policy authorities, clusters, business support organisations and other relevant actors around gender and diversity issues. Interviewees reported, indeed, that these groups continued to meet beyond the formal duration of the project, evolving into regular dialogue or coordination platforms. These continued interactions support the sustained exchange of information, joint reflection on policy developments and the integration of gender and diversity considerations into ongoing regional innovation and cluster-related activities. Another partner highlighted strengthened cooperation through personal relationships, informal communication and face-to-face meetings, which facilitated trust and mutual support across regions.

Nuanced reflections on disparities were also provided. One partner referred to regions with less prior experience in gender equality and innovation, explaining that participation in DEBUTING enabled them to build capacity, networks and awareness, thereby initiating processes that may reduce disparities over time, even if not immediately. Another interviewee confirmed that participation in the project helped reduce thematic gaps by raising awareness and transferring knowledge.

Concrete examples of interregional knowledge transfer further support this assessment. According to the interviews, practices and materials developed in one region (e.g. Austria, Sweden, Finland, Spain) were adapted and reused in others, including through services inspired by Austrian good practices and tools developed by the advisory partner. Together, these findings indicate that DEBUTING contributes to territorial cohesion not by eliminating disparities outright, but by reducing gaps in knowledge, capacity and policy practice through structured interregional learning and cooperation.

What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the project's objectives?

A **set of interrelated success factors and barriers** influencing the achievement of DEBUTING's objectives have been identified.

Among the **key success factors**, policy improvements were considered most likely when project insights aligned with national or regional priorities, when sufficient institutional capacity existed to act on these insights, and when stakeholders were actively involved in project activities and interregional meetings[90]. Moreover, survey respondents also explicitly pointed to the role of capacity building generated through the project, learning from

[88] Interreg Europe Portal

[89] According to interviews conducted with project partners

[90] Online survey question "**Which factors you think have contributed to this policy improvement?**" Beneficiaries (n=7). Open question.

other regions, and the involvement of the advisory partner in ensuring that discussions and tools were science-based[91].

These enabling factors are echoed by the interviewed project partners, who stressed the importance of trust-based cooperation, informal exchanges and sustained interaction across regions. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted that learning was not limited to formal activities, but was reinforced by personal relationships, face-to-face meetings and continuous dialogue. The continuation of Regional Stakeholder Groups beyond the project in some regions was cited as an important success factor, as it will help institutionalise learning and maintain momentum.

At the same time, the evidence points to **several barriers and limiting factors**. According to the survey, while most respondents (86%) considered the sustainability of results to be very or moderately likely, one respondent assessed it as very unlikely, explicitly citing competing political and economic priorities (e.g. security concerns, recession, inflation) that risk marginalising gender equality and mainstreaming efforts[92]. This highlights the influence of broader contextual factors beyond the project's control.

Interviews corroborate these constraints. Partners referred to political environments, upcoming elections, complex governance structures, fragmented administrative systems and limited resources as factors that can hinder the translation of learning into sustained action. Survey further identified practical barriers, including limited working hours and resources for project staff, insufficient space for pilot or testing actions, challenges in engaging policy-responsible departments, and the need for stronger communication and organisational learning, including tailored communication for different stakeholder groups and languages[93].

1.5.4 Appendix – Desk Review and Interviews

1.5.4.1 List of documents consulted

Level	Title
Programme-level	• Excel table on Policy Instruments • Excel table on Policy Report Results
Project-level	• Project's application form • Project's progress report n°4 (approved on July 22, 2025)

1.5.4.2 List of interviewees

Stakeholders	Date
Region Värmland – Lead partner (Sweden)	03.12.2025
Karlstadt University – Advisory partner (Sweden)	18.12.2025
RegioClusterAgentur BW, hosted by VDI/VDE Innovation + Technik GmbH – Partner (Germany)	07.01.2026

[91] Ibidem

[92] Online survey question "**How likely do you think it is that the results of the project will remain sustainable in the future?**" Beneficiaries (n=7). Closed question

[93] Online survey question "**In your opinion, in what ways could your project be supported to have a greater impact?**" Beneficiaries (n=7). Open question

1.6 VIADUCT

1.6.1 Description, purpose, and scope of the VIADUCT project

Title	Valorising public research to drive technology transfer and commercialization through the creation of spin-off
Acronym	VIADUCT
Start date	01 March 2023
End date	31 May 2027
Lead partner	► University of Zaragoza (Spain)
Partners	**Partners:** ► University of Zaragoza (Spain) ► West Regional Development Agency (Romania) ► SATT Conectus Alsace (France) ► Kaunas Science and Technology Park, Public Institution (Lithuania) ► Western Development Commission (Ireland) ► Council of Tampere Region (Finland) **Advisory Partner** ► ASTP (Netherlands)
Associated Policy Authorities	► Government of Aragon (Spain) ► Grand Est Regional Council (France) ► Ministry of Economy and Innovation (Lietuva)
Policy objective	SmarterSmarterSmarerSmarter Europe (policy objective 1)
Specific objective	Research and innovation capacities
Total budget	EUR 1,796,888.00
Overall objective	► To drive knowledge transfer and commercialisation of public applied research in regional S4 priorities, by tackling the main barriers related to spin-off creation and consolidation via the improvement of policy instruments, promoting exchange of experience, innovative approaches and capacity building in relation to the identification, dissemination and transfer of good practices among regional policy actors.

VIADUCT (Valorising public research to drive technology transfer and commercialisation through spin-offs) is a project that aims to make better use of public research by helping universities and research centres turn their ideas into spin-off and start-up companies, making entrepreneurship more accessible to all. The project supports activities like feasibility studies and business planning to make entrepreneurship more accessible. The VIADUCT project involves seven project partners from seven regions of Romania, France, Lithuania, Ireland, Italy, Finland, Spain, and an Advisory Partner from the Netherlands. Throughout the first six semesters of the project, VIADUCT has identified 13 Good Practices out of the 15 targeted and organised six policy-learning events (Thematic Workshops and Site Visits) among the eight targeted[94]. The project has contributed to the improvement of two public policies out of the seven originally targeted in the application form. In the Progress Report 4, however, the project indicates that it is addressing more policy instruments than initially planned, reporting addressing nine policy instruments in total.

Throughout the project, VIADUCT has been implementing a structured set of learning and exchange activities[95], [96]. In the first phase, partners carried out a joint thematic survey with regional stakeholders to assess

[94] According to the Policy achievements table

[95] According to the Progress Report 4 approved in July 2024, accessed via the Portal

[96] According to the Application Form

how effectively authorities support the valorisation of research results through spin-offs. Based on these findings, each partner produced a regional study report, which fed into an interregional analysis report comparing conditions, barriers, and needs across the seven European regions. Building on this analytical foundation, the project delivers activities throughout its six semesters: Interregional Site Visits, Interregional Thematic Workshops, Thematic Peer Reviews, and regular Regional Stakeholder Group Meetings. These activities enable partners and stakeholders to learn on site, exchange experiences, analyse challenges, review good practices, and collaboratively develop policy recommendations. Ultimately, the knowledge and insights generated throughout this iterative process seeks to inform the Roadmap Definition to Policy Learning, a comprehensive guide that will compile lessons, tools, and methods to strengthen policy instruments supporting spin-off creation and bridge the gap between research and industry.

For instance, SATT Conectus Alsace organised, with the support of the Lead Partner (University of Zaragoza, Spain), a 2-day interregional meeting in Strasbourg (France), the 4th and 5th February. It consisted of an Interregional Thematic Workshop and Site Visit. The topic addressed during the Workshop was “Regulatory and Legal Framework of Spin-off Creation”. Three initiatives were shared and discussed; two were considered Good Practices (GPs) and published:

- GP1 “Dual legal protection for spin-offs and laboratories” (France), consisting of pairing a ‘scientific contribution agreement’ and a 'research collaboration agreement’.
- GP2. “LEANENTRIES: streamlining regulatory compliance in health tech spin-offs through digital tools from Tampere Region” (Finland).

As part of this meeting, a session on "Regional Challenges (RCs)" also took place. The partner territories not providing a Good Practices could share a Regional Challenge instead. Other regions provided coaching to regions with RCs to support them overcome the latter:

- RC 1. Revitalising Villages: Attracting Spinoffs to Unused Spaces in Pieve di Soligo (Italy).
- RC 2. Urban-Rural Spin-off creation in the medical sector: unbalanced private initiatives and the absence of human resources (Romania).
- RC 3. Employee involvement in spin-offs: conflict of interests (Lithuania)
- RC 4. Enhancing Regulatory Predictability and Cost Transparency in the EU for Health Tech Spin-Offs of Tampere Region (Finland)

The Site Visit allowed the VIADUCT delegation to visit IRCAD Strasbourg Institute internationally recognised for research and spin-offs aimed at leveraging technologies to democratize healthcare (artificial intelligence, medical imaging, robotics), as well as NextMed Campus, where models for funding and hosting start-ups and spin-offs were shared. The European Parliament in Strasbourg - where innovation policy is voted - was also visited.

All partners participated in the two-day meeting; as well as stakeholders from Lithuania, France, Italy and Spain, overall, 57 entities participated in the meeting and 13 in the Steering Committee that followed online on 26th of February.

1.6.2 Methodology

The analysis for the present case study relies on a mixed-methods and triangulated approach combining documentary review, an online survey and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, in order to address (i) the relevance and coherence of the project design, (ii) the project effectiveness and impact, as well as (iii) contextual factors, success factors and barriers.

First, the evaluators made use of administrative and monitoring data to inform the assessment of the relevance and coherence of the project as well as to provide essential contextual elements for interpreting effectiveness and potential implementation challenges.

Moreover, the online survey provided primary quantitative and qualitative evidence on beneficiaries’ perceptions of the project, playing a central role in assessing project effectiveness and impact and in identifying success factors and barriers, while also complementing the analysis of design relevance.

Finally, semi-structured interviews with key project stakeholders provided in-depth insights into the project's objectives and into stakeholders' perceptions and expectations regarding its impact on capacity building and policy improvement in the territory concerned, allowing the evaluation team to contextualise and validate survey and documentary evidence.

1.6.3 Analysis of key findings

1.6.3.1 Relevance and coherence of project design

Are the project's objectives and design, including new features, relevant and sufficient to achieve its objectives? Is the link between needs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project clear and coherent?

Overall, the evidence indicates that **the project's design, structure, and activities are relevant and well suited to achieving its objectives**. While some minor adjustments were made to the budget or specific activities, the overall project framework remains robust and appropriately designed to deliver policy improvements targeted by the partnership. Interviews with project partners reveal a high level of satisfaction with both the structure and design of the project, and a sound understanding of the intervention logic[97]. However, budget planning could have been better aligned with actual needs: expenditure was EUR 807,897.25 below plan (–45%). This discrepancy does not point to a major issue but rather highlights a modest misalignment between the initial budget forecast and the project's real implementation requirements.

According to Progress report 4, a **few minor adjustments were made compared to the original plan to better tailor the activities to partners' needs**, for example, changing meeting locations or separating the Steering Committee from the thematic webinars and study visits to shorten meeting durations. All communication activities were carried out as planned, except for the video production for the Strasbourg Interregional Study Visit, which could not be published due to a technical issue. To overcome this, the partnership instead implemented mitigating measures, such as issuing a press release, sharing social media posts, and featuring the meetings on the website and in the newsletter. Only very minor adjustments were needed to the project's initial design, and the partnership adapted effectively, demonstrating the soundness of the project's overall design.

The relevance of new features was not specifically evaluated in this project, particularly given that no pilot action was undertaken[98]. According to the survey respondent[99], the introduction of new features was assessed as moderately positive for the project overall. No specific opinion was expressed regarding the role of the minimum geographical coverage and the pilot action. However, the absence of pre-defined activities for the follow-up phase and the expanded thematic scope were considered strong assets for the project. Regarding pilot actions, none was implemented in the project. Two interviewees explained that they did not feel sufficiently prepared to apply. One noted that they needed both a committed business partner and suitable beneficiaries, but due to limited human resources, both on their side and on the beneficiary's side, they lacked the capacity to proceed. To avoid starting something they might not be able to complete, they chose not to apply. They explained that they may consider applying in the next Programming period if more engaged beneficiaries can be identified in their territory. The other partner expressed that they did not participate in a pilot action since, in their case, they simply did not identify any measure that required specific testing.

1.6.3.2 Project effectiveness and impact

To what extent do project activities improve the professional and institutional capacities of the project beneficiaries?

Data shows that **both individual and organisational capacities among project partners increased steadily**. From a professional capacity building perspective, beneficiaries reported clear skills development among staff

[97] According to interviews and survey
[98] ibid
[99] Survey to project beneficiaries

involved in the project[100]. Municipalities improved their technical and administrative competencies, particularly in project reporting and digital skills, through the use of the reporting platform (Portal)[101]. According to interviewees, participation in international meetings also enhanced language skills (notably English) of project partners, intercultural understanding, and staff confidence in representing their institutions in an international setting, an especially important gain for smaller municipalities. Particularly, beneficiaries underlined the importance of realising that local challenges are not unique and that solutions developed elsewhere can be adapted.

At the organisational level, **the project fostered stronger networking and collaboration**. Beneficiaries highlighted the value of establishing new connections with external partners, stakeholders, and peer institutions, both internationally and internally[102]. These exchanges facilitated increased interaction with stakeholders on emerging topics such as entrepreneurship spin-offs and start-ups, including direct dialogue between technical actors and political leaders in stakeholder meetings. In addition, one interviewee explained that, following the initial reporting activities, their municipality now dedicates a few hours each week to identifying new businesses, strengthening its ongoing support to the local entrepreneurial landscape. Overall, the project activities substantially improved beneficiaries' professional skills, institutional networks, and capacity to engage in international contexts.

To what extent is the increasing capacity of organisations leading to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the project? How are knowledge, skills, and capacities gained from the project effectively used to influence policy change?

Policy instrument changes[103]

The VIADUCT project was designed to enhance seven policy instruments and has successfully implemented changes in two of them. The project is currently exerting influence on seven additional instruments, addressing nine policy instruments in total. Below are the improvements to the two policy instruments described in more detail.

Grant for non-agricultural activities Bur n.87 of 28/06/2024 (Avviamento di attività extra agricole, Bur n.87 of 28/06/2024) - GAL Alta Marca Trevigiana (Local Action Group), Comune di Pieve di Soligo (Italy)

This policy instrument improvement has been undertaken by a stakeholder of the project, GAL Alta Marca Trevigiana (Local Action Group). The improvement consists in the creation of a new dedicated public fund aimed at supporting the establishment of spin-offs. The public call, open from June to October 2024, aims to support the creation and development of new commercial, artisanal, and service businesses, marking a departure from traditional agriculture and tourism-focused development in the region[104]. The objective of this grant is to encourage innovative activities within the territory by providing a lump-sum award of EUR 12,000 to individuals or companies that have established, or will establish within six months, a start-up engaged in non-agricultural entrepreneurial activities in the area.

Although the funding already existed, it had previously been allocated exclusively to agricultural activities. The grant is now formally managed by the GAL, which is responsible for the municipality of Pieve di Soligo and 28 surrounding municipalities. The call received 75 applications, requesting a total of EUR 900,000, far exceeding the EUR 516,000 available. Ultimately, 58 beneficiaries received the EUR 12,000 support. The project partner is highly satisfied with this policy improvement, noting that the high number of applications in the previous year

[100] According to interviews

[101] ibid

[102] ibid

[103] According to the Policy Reports Results Table

[104] Interreg Europe, 2025, VIADUCT - Valorising public research to drive technology transfer and commercialization through creation of spin-off

even prompted the addition of private funds, and that a second call has already been launched. The budget allocated to the new call amounts to EUR 1,000,000, to be committed in 2025 and spent over the period 2025–2027. On this basis, the funding influenced by the project (EUR 696,000), was calculated by considering the share of this total budget attributable to the project's contribution over the 2025–2027 period.

How did the exchange of experience lead to policy improvement?

The exchange of experience led to policy improvement by exposing Italian stakeholders to the Romanian *Innovation Voucher* model during the Pieve di Soligo meeting in semester 2[105]. The presentation by WRDA (Romania) introduced a practical financial mechanism supporting SMEs, which resonated strongly with the Italian stakeholder. Their participation created the direct link between the VIADUCT project and the development of a new local grant inspired by this approach. The Romanian example provided concrete data, such as applicant numbers, thematic events, mentoring sessions, and technology transfer outcomes, which helped Italian stakeholders understand how the mechanism could operate in their own context. As a result, the Innovation Voucher concept served as a model for designing a grant aimed at strengthening entrepreneurial capacities in an area traditionally focused on agriculture, offering an alternative financial tool for local spin-offs and start-ups in a less developed sub-regional environment.

> *"In the second semester of the project, a voucher system was presented by the Romanian partner. In Italy, however, it is illegal to have a voucher. The idea behind the voucher is to provide controlled financial support for new businesses. At that meeting, a GAL representative said this was very interesting: while they cannot implement a voucher, they could create something similar at the objective level. They discussed this with the mayor and held additional meetings, discovering that some agricultural funds had not being allocated to a specific call. The mayor thought: What if we allocate these funds to new businesses instead of the standard agricultural funds that we usually have and do not need? The mayor also spoke with the Romanian representative, asking: How did you do that? What were the impacts? How did you reach potential beneficiaries? How did you communicate, and what were the rules? The goal was to understand how the system was designed in Romania and how it could be adapted locally. So they did the same but adapted them to their own needs."*
>
> *Interview with VIADUCT project beneficiary*

Strategic Plan for Grants 2024 -2027 of the Department of Employment, Science and Universities of the Government of Aragon - University of Zaragoza (Spain)

The Strategic Plan for Grants 2024–2027 of the Government of Aragon's Department of Employment, Science and Universities has introduced an important policy enhancement through the creation of the "Irene Monroset Programme", inspired by the VIADUCT cooperation. As the first initiative in Aragon dedicated to reinforcing regional Research, Development and Innovation (R&D&I) structures in the region, the programme funds specialised valorisation and knowledge transfer agents (staff specialised in research and knowledge transfer) who will support researchers throughout the entire technology transfer pipeline, from identifying promising research results to fostering industry collaboration, analysing patentability, and promoting entrepreneurial culture. Officially approved in September 2024 and launched in its first call in February 2025, the programme will fund 15 contracts for public and private universities and research centres on 2 year contracts, aiming to replicate the call.

How did the exchange of experience lead to policy improvement?

[105] Interview and Project's progress report n°4 (approved on June 27, 2025)

The exchange of experience within the VIADUCT project directly inspired policy improvement in Aragon through the French Good Practice "Scouting Public Lab Inventions: Bridging Innovation in Grand Est," presented by SATT Conectus Alsace during the second Interregional Workshop[106]. This Good Practice focuses on identifying promising research results through regular engagement with researchers, including the assignment of dedicated staff who work closely with them in laboratories and provide guidance on potential knowledge transfer opportunities. The representative of the Associated Policy Authority (APA), Government of Aragon, attended this workshop together with the University of Zaragoza valorisation team, who are responsible for advising the University's researchers on the valorisation and transfer of research outcomes.

Given the strong interest in this Good Practice, the Lead Partner presented it during the second Regional Stakeholders Meeting held in Zaragoza. Prior to the meeting, the representative of Government of Aragon had already introduced the practice informally within the Regional Government, which led to the participation of two members from the Directorate of Science and Research. Their attendance was important, as they are responsible for launching calls to support research in Aragon. They listened to the Good Practice and recognised its relevance to their objectives[107]. The other 14 stakeholders, representing both public and private organizations within the Aragonese R&D&I ecosystem, also highlighted the potential of this Good Practice to promote the transformation of research results into real innovations that strengthen the region. Following internal work on the preliminary terms of the call, meetings were held between the Government of Aragon and the Lead Partner University of Zaragoza, following which the plan was approved and launched in February 2025.

1.6.3.3 Contextual factors, success factors, and barriers

To what extent does the available evidence suggest that the project is contributing to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?

Overall, data suggests that **this project has contributed to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities**. Partners' countries show a balance of more and less developed regions: Romania, France, Lithuania, Ireland, Italy, Finland, Netherlands, and two regions from Spain. The distribution of Interreg Europe funding across different region types, with 34% going to less developed areas, 22% to transition regions, 35% to more developed regions, 8% to EU candidate countries and 1% to Norway and Switzerland[108], shows that support is broadly shared among region types. By ensuring that every region benefits, this spread contributes to territorial cohesion and helps reduce regional disparities. All interviewees consider that the project contributes positively to reducing disparities by bringing together regions at different levels of development[109]. One interviewee for instance highlighted that although Romania and Italy were initially the less developed regions of the partnership in this area, Italy was the first to implement a policy improvement. One interviewee stated that although it might be too early to assess the reduction of disparities considering policy improvements have just been implemented, they affirmed that exchanges via the project have helped reduce disparities.

> "I think every partner will benefit from the project. However, it's true that Interreg Europe brings together regions that are more developed with others that are not as developed yet. For the less-developed regions, it is a major source of knowledge and a very powerful network of contacts. For the more-developed regions, where the topic is already well established, it can be more difficult to gain completely new knowledge. Still,

[106] Interview and Project's progress report n°4 (approved on June 27, 2025)
[107] Interview
[108] Interreg Europe, *Aggregated country data* Excel
[109] Interviews

in the end, everyone implements something new. The change may not be as significant in the more-developed regions, but it still helps make their policies more efficient. So yes, overall, I think everyone gains something valuable for their region."

The project clearly contributes to strengthening territorial cohesion, as partners have expressed a strong willingness to continue working together beyond the project's lifetime[110]. One partner indicated that they are already exploring future funding opportunities and identifying potential partnerships of interest. While these discussions remain at an exploratory stage and have not yet led to concrete initiatives, they nevertheless demonstrate sustained cooperation among the partners.

What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the project's objectives?

Several success factors emerge that support progress toward the project's objectives. For VIADUCT, **success lies in partnering with organisations of similar size, sharing regional challenges, accessing strong support services, and the alignment of the project with local policy needs**.

First, the small-municipality-focused approach is highlighted as a major asset in the interviews. Partners emphasise that working with territories of comparable size enables more relevant exchanges, shared understanding, and realistic transfer of practices[111]. This peer-to-peer dimension helps smaller municipalities gain visibility and access approaches they would otherwise not encounter: for instance, the availability of all materials in English was cited as a key element that improves accessibility, allowing partners to learn from contexts where language would normally be a barrier.

"Interreg Europe creates a platform where local issues feel less unique and where partners can identify not only similarities in challenges, but also actionable solutions that others have already tested."

Another strong success factor lies in the **specific learning process embedded in the project**. The regular presentation of Good Practices (GPs) as well as the distinctive feature of this partnership, of **showcasing Regional Challenges** was very useful. Showcasing Regional Challenges proved valuable to project partners[112] because it exposed issues that GPs alone would not reveal. Often, one partner's Regional Challenge sparked immediate shared learning when another region recognised the same problem in their own territory and described how they solved it. Additionally, interviewees highlight that **support from Programme authorities is an important success factor**. One interviewee highlights that, despite early confusion about eligibility rules, the programme's support services were responsive and effective in resolving uncertainties. Finally, the **relevant design of the project and its alignment with local needs is a key success factor of the project**. The survey respondent believes they will easily transfer knowledge acquired through the project to their workplace because what they learned is directly relevant to their organisation's needs and priorities. These observations support earlier findings that the project's well-designed approach helps achieve its objectives.

Few barriers nevertheless affected the ease of project implementation. One mentioned issue[113] was the **misunderstandings regarding what activities were eligible or how funds could be used**, which created early delays. These were eventually resolved but underline a steep learning curve for first-time participants. **Technical challenges, such as adapting to the programme's online Portal**, also required time and effort according to one interviewee. Another limitation[114] concerns the programme design itself: partners would have liked to have **more funding for implementation activities**, beyond the scope of pilot actions. Although the project supports

[110] Interviews
[111] Interviews
[112] According to interviews
[113] Interviews
[114] Interviews

knowledge exchange and capacity building, partners noted that it can be difficult to convince regional authorities to invest in new measures without some higher degree of co-financing from the programme. While they acknowledge the complexity of introducing such a change, they see it as a potential improvement that would strengthen policy impact.

Overall, the experiences of the VIADUCT partners show that **the project has been successful thanks to strong international collaboration between territories facing similar realities, innovative ways of sharing knowledge (notably through Regional Challenges), and supportive programme structures.** At the same time, partners still face challenges such as **eligibility misunderstandings, the learning curve for newcomers, and the desire for additional funding to put new ideas into practice**.

1.6.4 Appendix – Desk Review and Interviews

1.6.4.1 List of documents consulted

Level	Title
Programme-level	• Excel table on Policy Instruments • Excel table on Policy Report Results • Excel table on Policy Achievements • Excel Table on Quality Report • Beneficiaries’ survey results
Project-level	• Project’s application form • Project’s progress report n°4 (approved on June 27, 2025) • Project’s website

1.6.4.2 List of interviewees

Stakeholders	Date
University of Zaragoza – Lead partner (Spain)	17.11.2025
Comune di Pieve di Soligo – Project Partner (Italy)	09.01.2026
ASTP – Advisory Partner (Netherlands)	09.01.2026

1.7 NOTRE

1.7.1 Description, purpose, and scope of the NOTRE project

Title	Novel Methods Improving Production Innovation Potential with examples of senior care-related solutions
Acronym	NOTRE
Start date	01 March 2023
End date	31 May 2027
Lead partner	Pannon Business Network Association (*Hungary*)
Partners	**Partners**: ▶ National Development Centre (Hungary) ▶ Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (Finland) ▶ Eurasanté EEIG (France) ▶ Hauts-de-France Regional Council (France) ▶ San Sebastian Socio-Economic Development Agency (Spain) ▶ San Sebastian Socio-Economic Development Agency (Romania) ▶ CNA EMILIA-ROMAGNA (Italy) **Advisory Partner**: ▶ ECHAlliance (Ireland) **Discovery Partner**: ▶ University of Belgrade - School of Electrical Engineering (Serbia)
Associated Policy Authorities	▶ Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia (*Finland*) ▶ Emilia-Romagna Region (*Italy*)
Policy objective	Smarter Europe (policy objective 1)
Specific objective	SME competitiveness
Total budget	EUR 2,270,093.00
Overall objective	▶ Improving policy instruments targeting ‘healthy ageing related ▶ Knowledge exchanging among the regional stakeholders and among the participating regions ▶ Enlarging the relevant stakeholder pool by the support of highly competent international ecosystem coordinator (ECHAlliance).

NOTRE is an interregional cooperation project addressing the challenges associated with the **development and market uptake of innovative products and services for healthy ageing**. Across Europe, regions face significant difficulties in bringing new products successfully to market, with evidence indicating high failure rates and limited long-term survival of new consumer products. At the same time, demographic ageing represents a major and shared societal challenge: in 2019, people aged 65 years and over accounted for 20.8% of the EU-27 population, increasing demand for innovative solutions in senior care, health and wellbeing. In all partner regions, policy instruments are in place to support SMEs and start-ups in developing innovative products and services, including through digitalisation, research and innovation funding, and ecosystem development. Within this context, NOTRE focuses on improving policy instruments targeting healthy ageing-related innovation, with the objective of strengthening the conditions for successful product and service development and validation. The project builds on interregional learning and the heterogeneity of regional ecosystems to support the exchange of experience on test and experimentation environments, stakeholder engagement and ecosystem coordination. Its activities are aligned with relevant EU, national and regional policy frameworks (such as ERDF and ESF+ programmes, Smart Specialisation Strategies and regional development plans) which prioritise innovation, SME competitiveness, digital transformation, health and wellbeing, and societal transitions linked to ageing. By fostering cooperation among policy makers, SMEs, intermediaries, research actors and end-users, NOTRE aims to enhance the effectiveness of existing policy instruments and contribute to more robust and connected innovation ecosystems for healthy ageing across participating regions.

1.7.2 Methodology

The analysis for the present case study relies on a mixed-methods and triangulated approach combining documentary review, an online survey and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, in order to address (i) the relevance and coherence of the project design, (ii) the project effectiveness and impact, as well as (iii) contextual factors, success factors and barriers.

First, the evaluators made use of **administrative and monitoring data** to inform the assessment of the relevance and coherence of the project as well as to provide essential contextual elements for interpreting effectiveness and potential implementation challenges.

Moreover, the **online survey** provided primary quantitative and qualitative evidence on beneficiaries' perceptions of the project, playing a central role in assessing project effectiveness and impact and in identifying success factors and barriers, while also complementing the analysis of design relevance.

Finally, **semi-structured interviews** with key project stakeholders provided in-depth insights into the project's objectives and into stakeholders' perceptions and expectations regarding its impact on capacity building and policy improvement in the territory concerned, allowing the evaluation team to contextualise and validate survey and documentary evidence.

1.7.3 Analysis of key findings

1.7.3.1 Relevance and coherence of the project design

Are the project's objectives and design, including new features, relevant and sufficient to achieve its objectives? Is the link between needs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project clear and coherent?

The project's objectives are consistently considered as **relevant and clearly oriented towards improving policies** supporting innovation in services for the elderly, with a particular focus on technological solutions and ecosystem development. Based on missions carried out within the project, many innovative solutions already existed but were insufficiently shared or capitalised upon, indicating a clear rationale for the project's focus on knowledge exchange and policy learning[115].

Moreover, evidence suggests that the activities implemented are perceived as **coherent with the project's objectives and aligned with organisational needs**. In this regard, staff exchanges were identified as particularly effective in supporting the exchange of best practices[116]. The project also produced a consolidated report of existing good practices, which was seen as a way to extend the project's impact beyond the direct partnership. In addition, the role of trainings delivered by the ECHAlliance was highlighted, which aimed to build partners' understanding of ecosystem approaches and multi-stakeholder collaboration. These trainings included practical exercises and assignments (e.g. pitching sessions) and were described as contributing to the creation of a more solid ecosystem infrastructure, thereby supporting conditions for future policy improvement through improved dialogue and cooperation at regional level[117]. The Italian project partner confirmed that numerous local-level activities were carried out with very positive results, highlighting strong collaboration with provincial offices of the Italian Confederation of craft trades and SMEs (CAN) and significant interest from enterprises in the territory. The interviewee further noted that the Emilia-Romagna Region, acting as an associated policy authority in the project, launched funding measures through the Regional Operational Programme to support enterprises active in the project's thematic area. The policy improvement had already been approved by the Joint Secretariat, and

[115] According to interviews conducted with the Advisory Partner

[116] Ibidem

[117] Ibidem

the project was described as being at an advanced stage of implementation. Another project partner stated that the project provided valuable opportunities to learn from partners' practices in other countries, understand different models of cooperation, and support local businesses and stakeholders despite the relatively small size of the sector in their region.

In relation to clarity and consistency of the project design, **no unclear or inconsistent aspects of the project design were identified**. In particular, the advisory partner explicitly stated that they did not see areas where the project design could be improved to increase impact, noting effective coordination and engagement by the lead partner and efficient communication throughout the project. The interviewee also highlighted the integration of a new Serbian development partner in 2023 as evidence of the Programme's flexible structure and capacity to engage additional actors. Prior collaboration between the lead partner and some project partners was also cited as a factor contributing to trust and smooth implementation. Similarly, project partners confirmed that no issues emerged during either the design or implementation phases. One partner emphasised the long-standing and positive working relationship with the lead partner and other consortium members, noting that the proposal itself was developed through close collaboration. Another partner stated that the project progressed according to plan, with no inconsistencies identified.

In relation to the **new features of the Interreg Europe Programme**, they were generally perceived as relevant and largely sufficient to support the project's objectives. The approach to pilot actions was especially clear and relevant[118]: The partnership discussed pilot ideas during the mid-term review, received feedback, and subsequently submitted a pilot action application entitled "Adapting the EKIN+ Health Model for Healthcare Startups and SMEs in West Hungary", addressing the policy instrument "Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme Plus". At the time of the interview, the pilot action was under implementation, with semester-based reporting. Pilot actions were described as valuable in making knowledge exchange more practice-oriented, as the possibility to involve new partners and maintain strong interregional cooperation was highly relevant[119].

1.7.3.2 Project effectiveness and impact

To what extent do project activities improve the professional and institutional capacities of the project beneficiaries?

Project activities have contributed to **strengthening both professional skills and institutional capacities**, primarily through networking, exposure to new practices, and structured learning opportunities[120]. In terms of **added value at territorial level**, one project partner highlighted that the project enabled the creation of a network of enterprises active in innovation for elderly services, noting that several enterprises had not previously been connected. The interviewee also reported increased awareness among enterprises of regional funding opportunities, suggesting that the project contributed to improving beneficiaries' ability to navigate and access existing policy support mechanisms. Another project partner emphasised the project's contribution to regional ecosystem development, including the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, opportunities to share good practices and operating models, and improved development prospects for learning environments. This partner also noted that several good practices were documented and shared across regions, benefiting both their own territory and others.

With regard to the **alignment between capacity building and identified needs**, interviewed project partners stated that the project results responded to the needs identified at the outset. One interviewee confirmed that the project met initial needs, while another stated that the project delivered more than initially expected, citing increased expertise, support to development work, and valuable insights into practices across multiple countries and regions.

Interview evidence further indicates that **capacity building occurred through a combination of international meetings, study visits and staff exchanges**, which facilitated learning and professional development at

[118] According to the interview conducted with the Lead Partner
[119] According to interviews conducted with Project Partners
[120] Ibidem

organisational level. According to one project partner, participation in these activities enabled the organisation to increase knowledge of partners' practices across Europe, develop new professional relationships, and strengthen internal expertise. Staff exchanges were described as generating particularly strong interest among partners, suggesting their effectiveness as a learning mechanism. Another project partner reported that best practices emerging from the project were incorporated into teaching activities and used extensively in cooperation with stakeholders, companies and other actors. The interviewee explained that stakeholder meetings frequently included discussions on project experiences and practices from other regions, and that international guest speakers and exchanges stimulated discussion and engagement. The project was described as providing a "**window to Europe**[121]," especially for small companies and stakeholders that would otherwise have limited exposure to international practices. The advisory partner also reported capacity gains, despite primarily acting as a provider of expertise within the project. Participation in the project contributed to a better understanding of both partners' ecosystems and the advisory partner's own ecosystem, particularly in relation to healthy ageing. They explained that learning generated through the project supported the development of training content that had not previously been ready and could be reused in the future. **This suggests that capacity building extended beyond direct project beneficiaries and may have an amplifying effect through the advisory partner's broader ecosystem role**.

The survey results provide limited but complementary evidence on individual capacity building. Given the **very small number of survey respondents (n=2)**, these findings are interpreted cautiously and are not treated as representative. Instead, they are used to illustrate how individual capacity gains vary depending on organisational context and ability to engage, a pattern that is consistent with the interview evidence[122]: One respondent reported that individual capacities improved "to a large degree," attributing this to strong alignment between project goals and professional responsibilities. The other respondent reported improvement "to a small degree," citing time constraints within their organisation that hindered participation in project activities.

To what extent is the increasing capacity of organisations leading to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the project? How are knowledge, skills, and capacities gained from the project effectively used to influence policy change?

Participation in the project contributed to **strengthening organisational capacities in ways that are directly relevant for policy influence, although the nature and immediacy of policy improvement varied across partners and contexts**.

The Lead Partner reported **strong organisational capacity-building effects**, describing outcomes that went beyond individual skills development. In particular, the project supported the creation and consolidation of a dedicated department focused on services and product testing for older people, including activities such as "silver club" and living-lab-type initiatives. **Staff exchanges** played a key role by enabling a broader group of staff and ecosystem actors to engage in longer and more interactive learning processes, having the effect of "building the organisation[123]," rather than merely building capacity within a single team, indicating institution-wide learning and structural strengthening. Also, a **workshop focused on translating ecosystem approaches to startups and SMEs** was identified as especially helpful, noting that partners initially had limited knowledge in this area and that the training significantly improved their understanding and practical ability to act[124].

Furthermore, evidence highlights the **continuous involvement of policy makers** as a key mechanism enabling the translation of capacity gains into policy improvements. Under NOTRE, two policy improvements were reported as of semester 4[125], both of them illustrating how capacity building and interregional learning translated into tangible changes in policy instrument. The table below, based on data collected through documentary

[121] Ibidem

[122] Online survey question "**To what extent have your individual capacities in your policy area improved thanks to the project involvement?**" Beneficiaries (n=2). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

[123] According to the interview with the Lead Partner

[124] According to the interview with the Advisory Partner

[125] Project's progress report n°4 (approved on June 20, 2025)

review[126], summarises main findings.

Table 1 – Main findings on reported improvements of policy instruments

Policy improvement 1: Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme Plus (Hungary)
The updated call for proposals "*Support for Focus Area Innovation Projects*" (GINOP Plus 2.1.1-24), published in September 2024, represents a substantive improvement of the earlier 2021 call. The updated call introduced three specific focus areas (healthy living and care systems, green transition and circular economy, and excellence projects aligned with Hungary's S3 strategy) directly responding to needs identified through NOTRE stakeholder meetings, the 3-pillar analysis, SME interviews, and consultations with policy instrument managers. These changes are explicitly linked to project activities conducted between late 2023 and mid-2024, including stakeholder engagement, structured analysis of SME needs, and dialogue with Priority Area 2 managers. As a result, the call now includes support for innovations improving quality of life in old age (e.g. health sensors and AI-based solutions) and a broadened set of eligible activities, including applied research, hardware and software acquisition, project management, IP protection and market launch. These changes demonstrate a clear pathway from **capacity building and evidence generation within the project to operational modifications of a national policy instrument**.
Policy improvement 2: RP Emilia-Romagna ERDF 2021-2027 (Italy)
The second documented policy improvement concerns the launch and funding of the "*Social Innovation Call*" under the Emilia-Romagna ERDF Programme 2021–2027. In this context, NOTRE played a key role in shaping this call through interregional learning initiated at the project kick-off and reinforced during the first Local Stakeholder Group meeting in Bologna in June 2023. During these activities, regional stakeholders (including companies, third sector actors, associations and the Chamber of Commerce) shared data and insights on ageing-related challenges and the needs of enterprises developing innovative solutions for older people. These contributions were taken into account by the Region, owner of the policy instrument, and helped align the call more closely with real territorial needs. The resulting call supported five projects with a total investment of €659,865.53, targeting technological innovation, well-being and health, social inclusion, and environmental and social sustainability. These improvements are largely attributed to the project's learning processes, stakeholder engagement and interregional exchange on how to tackle ageing through innovation.

Even when concrete policy improvements were not described as immediate, ongoing learning processes and deeper understanding of policy topics were considered as important intermediate outcomes that support longer-term policy change, suggesting that cooperation and mutual understanding in the policy area increase significantly as a result of the project[127].

With regard to **enabling and constraining factors**, evidence suggests a differentiated picture. Continuous policy-maker involvement was explicitly identified as a facilitating factor. By contrast, it was noted that policy improvement can be slow due to the large size and complexity of organisations, major structural reforms in the social and healthcare sector, and ongoing regional reorganisation processes[128]. These systemic factors were described as limiting the speed at which organisational capacity gains can be translated into formal policy improvements, even where cooperation remains strong.

The **survey results** provide limited but complementary evidence: One respondent reported a high likelihood of applying capacities gained through the project at organisational level, citing the availability of time and

[126] Excel tables on policy instruments and results shared by the Managing Authority

[127] According to interviews with Project Partners

[128] Ibidem

resources, while the other reported a low likelihood due to limited time and resources[129]. In terms of policy effects, both respondents expected or observed policy improvements, particularly the financing of new projects through the policy instrument, with one also anticipating possible revision of the policy instrument itself[130].

1.7.3.3 Contextual factors, success factors, and barriers

To what extent does the available evidence suggest that the project is contributing to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?

The project has contributed to **territorial cohesion primarily by strengthening interregional cooperation and knowledge exchange in a policy field characterised by highly uneven levels of development and practice across Europe**. The Lead Partner emphasised that the project addresses digital solutions for elderly care, described as an unavoidable and shared challenge for all EU countries. From a territorial perspective, the project supports the implementation of a local development programme aimed at diversifying both the economy and the long-term care sector, while encouraging regions to think in terms of strategies and programmes rather than isolated projects, thereby maximising learning for territorial development.

Interreg Europe created conditions for **effective exchange between regions with well-established practices and regions acting primarily as knowledge-takers**. Italy was cited as a particularly illustrative case, where the project helped raise the profile of social and senior care digitalisation on the policy agenda, with the region increasingly perceived within the partnership as a frontrunner in this field[131]. This suggests a convergence process driven by learning and agenda-setting, rather than uniform outcomes.

Cooperation between regions and organisations was also clearly strengthened[132]. Most project partners were not connected prior to the project, and while some were already part of the European Connected Health (ECH) ecosystem, the majority developed new working relationships through the project. These connections were described as extending beyond formal cooperation, fostering personal relationships with partners and local stakeholders that are expected to support future collaboration.

Project partners confirmed strengthened cooperation with partners previously unknown to them, including through staff exchanges, company visits and joint engagement with living labs abroad. Examples of direct interregional transfer, such as French partners visiting Hungarian counterparts to adapt elements of their infrastructure, and Spanish accelerator models being tested in Hungary in the framework of the pilot action ("Adapting the EKIN+ Health Model for Healthcare Startups and SMEs in West Hungary"), were provided[133]. Additional examples included strengthened networks between living labs and continued use of learning environments developed through earlier cooperation processes[134].

Regarding **disparities**, evidence suggests a **gradual and indirect contribution**. One project partner highlighted that the project increased awareness and understanding of regional development differences, particularly valuable during periods of major structural change and rapid digitalisation in the social and healthcare sector. Rather than eliminating disparities outright, the project appears to contribute to territorial cohesion by reducing gaps in knowledge, awareness and access to practices, thereby enabling regions at different starting points to learn from each other.

What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the project's objectives?

The available evidence suggests that **strong interregional cooperation, alignment with policy priorities, and the**

[129] Online survey question "**To what degree are you likely to apply the capacities gained through the project in your organisation (i.e., organisational learning)?**" Beneficiaries (n=2). Closed question, complemented by open conditional questions

[130] Online survey question "**Have you observed, or do you expect to observe, any policy changes following the capacity building of your organization?**" Beneficiaries (n=2). Closed question where multiple answers were allowed

[131] According to the interview with the Lead Partner

[132] According to the interview with the Advisory Partner

[133] According to the interview with the Project Partners

[134] Ibidem

learning-oriented design of Interreg Europe are **key success factors**, while **barriers** appear to be **mainly context-dependent and external**, rather than linked to project design or implementation shortcomings.

A key success factor consistently identified is the **Interreg Europe framework itself**. According to the Lead Partner, Interreg Europe stands out from other Interreg programmes as a particularly strong learning and capacity-building platform, enabling deeper engagement with programme-level thinking and long-term territorial strategies. This perception is echoed by project partners, who stressed that Interreg Europe allowed them to engage with partners across Europe in a way that would not have been possible through more geographically limited programmes. Exchanges with partners and participation in staff exchange activities were described as particularly valuable. The survey evidence supports this qualitative finding[135]: Both respondents stated that the results achieved or expected through the project could not have been reached using other mechanisms, and that Interreg Europe was essential.

Another important success factor concerns **alignment with policy priorities and institutional capacity**. Survey responses indicate that policy improvements were facilitated when project insights matched country or regional priorities and when sufficient financial or organisational capacity existed to act on those insights[136]. This is consistent with interview evidence, pointing to already visible policy improvements in some regions (notably Hungary and Italy), where calls now allow SMEs to apply for funding to develop digital solutions for elderly care. These calls were described as tangible outcomes that enhance sustainability and long-term impact[137].

Regarding sustainability, both survey respondents assessed the likelihood of results being sustained as very or moderately likely[138], while the Lead Partner confirmed that results would not benefit all partners equally but are already materialising in regions with strong cooperation with local actors. The continuation of funding calls targeting elderly care solutions was identified as a concrete mechanism supporting sustainability over time.

In terms of barriers, relatively few were explicitly identified. One project partner implicitly pointed to contextual challenges, noting that rapid digitalisation and major changes in the social and healthcare sector can complicate implementation processes, even when learning and cooperation are strong. Survey responses similarly reveal limited concerns, with one respondent expressing no opinion and the other mentioning the need for greater European harmonisation, without specifying concrete implementation barriers[139].

1.7.4 Appendix – Desk Review and Interviews

1.7.4.1 List of documents consulted

Level	Title
Programme-level	• Excel table on Policy Instruments • Excel table on Policy Report Results • Excel table on Pilot Actions
Project-level	• Project’s application form • Project’s progress report n°4 (approved on June 20, 2025)

1.7.4.2 List of interviewees

Stakeholders	Date
Pannon Business Network Association (National Development Centre) – Lead Partner	14.11.2025

[135] Online survey question “**Do you think the results achieved/expected through your project could be reached using other mechanisms (e.g. national/regional support schemes, mainstream EU programmes)?**” Beneficiaries (n=2). Closed question

[136] Online survey question “**Which factors you think have contributed to this policy improvement?**” Beneficiaries (n=2). Open question.

[137] According to the interview with the Lead Partner

[138] Online survey question “**How likely do you think it is that the results of the project will remain sustainable in the future?**” Beneficiaries (n=2). Closed question

[139] Online survey question “**In your opinion, in what ways could your project be supported to have a greater impact?**” Beneficiaries (n=2). Open question

(Hungary)	
Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences – Partner (Finland)	07.01.2026
CNA EMILIA-ROMAGNA – Partner (Italy)	08.01.2026
ECHAlliance – Advisory Partner (Ireland)	09.01.2026

1.8 Peer-review: City of Tallinn

1.8.1 Description, purpose, and scope of the Peer Review of the City of Tallinn

Peer review theme	Tallinn's Sustainability Governance Framework and Model Development
Host administration and stakeholders	City of Tallinn: ▶ Strategy Director ▶ Executive Director, Tallinn European Green Capital 2023 ▶ Sustainability governance adviser, Tallinn City Strategy Center ▶ Deputy Director, Department of Environment and Infrastructure ▶ Human Resources Service ▶ Head of Green Transition ▶ Communication Specialist
Peer experts	▶ Public Strategy for Sustainable Development (PS4SD) (*Belgium*) ▶ International Public Policy Observatory and UCL (*United Kingdom*) ▶ City of Malmo (*Sweden*) ▶ City of Madrid (*Spain*)
Policy Learning Platform	▶ Thematic Expert, Greener Europe, Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform ▶ Project Manager, Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform
Policy challenge	The City of Tallinn sought to tackle the policy challenges of developing better sustainability governance to close the implementation gap regarding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, Tallinn was interested: ▶ To get feedback on its designed sustainability governance concept and model; ▶ To get an actionable set of principles for designing sustainable key processes aligned to the concept pillars of policy development, organisational development and multi-level / actor governance.

The **City of Tallinn requested an interregional peer review supported by the Policy Learning Platform of Interreg Europe**. This process enables managing authorities and public bodies responsible for local or regional development policies to receive practical advice from other European regions to better address their policy challenges.

Tallinn aimed to tackle the following policy challenge: **improving sustainability governance to close the implementation gap regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. While SDGs are embedded in urban policies, a persistent "action gap" remains. Goals are clear, resources exist, yet implementation falls short. Bridging this gap requires a governance model that translates ambitions into actions through four pillars: (i) policy development, (ii) organizational development, (iii) multi-level governance, and (iv) multi-actor governance. Tallinn envisioned this approach as holistic and inclusive, guided by principles such as agility and collaboration to drive transformative change and achieve sustainability objectives.

Despite strong economic growth, Tallinn faces critical governance challenges. Environmental and social issues persist, including the decarbonization of its mobility system, insufficient progress in reducing carbon footprint, rising consumption, and growing income disparities that fuel segregation and weaken social cohesion. Lifestyle changes are also impacting mental health and increasing youth obesity. These problems have been known for years, but efforts have yielded limited results due to a lack of coherence and measurable impact, sometimes leading to contradictory or ineffective measures. Governance reform began in January 2021 with the creation of a Strategic Management Office to improve holistic planning, yet structural and systemic shortcomings remain. Addressing these gaps is essential because without integrated, consistent, and impactful decision-making, Tallinn cannot effectively tackle climate, social, and health challenges that threaten its long-term sustainability and resilience.

In this context, Tallinn turned to Interreg Europe for the peer review process to **receive feedback on its proposed sustainability governance framework and obtain actionable recommendations for designing key processes aligned with the four pillars**. The city asked peers to provide insights on three main areas:

Governance framework overall structure	▶ Is our approach to governance relevant both in terms of theoretical approach and practical applicability for other cities? ▶ Are the two parts - the four pillars and five horizontal principles - logical and relevant? ▶ Is any key part missing and/or should the existing parts be reimagined? ▶ How would you change/develop this framework further based on your

	experience? ▶ Which other frameworks/approaches would be relevant to look at? ▶ Which input should we look for from them? What are the key processes to be elaborated in more detail in the next steps?
Main processes under the four pillars	*Policy development:* ▶ Compared to your experience, what feedback would you give on the Guidelines for integrating SDGs in Tallinn's planning processes (Annex 1)? ▶ What would be the best way to roll out the guidelines across the city administration? ▶ How to establish a monitoring system that is easy to manage, comprehensive and has good user experience? ▶ What electronic tool to use? ▶ How relevant is green (or SDGs or phenomenon-based) budgeting in this context? ▶ Are there any good green budgeting practices we could learn from? ▶ What are good impact assessment processes? ▶ When and how to implement impact assessment? ▶ Which methods to use in which case? ▶ How to mitigate the conflict between long-term policy goals and the 4-year election cycle? *Organizational development:* ▶ How to build consensus and how to embed horizontal principles and values in daily practices? ▶ How have you dealt with promoting organisational values in local government in your work? ▶ What good practices exist? ▶ Can organizational setup facilitate policy coherence? ▶ What type of leadership training is most relevant for local leaders? ▶ How can the dialogue between elected leaders and e.g. department directors lead to more transformative policies? *Multi-level governance:* ▶ How can multi-level governance mechanisms help cities better achieve their goals and targets of SDGs and green transition? ▶ How to make the most of participation in different city networks, at national, EU and global levels? ▶ How to ensure that these time and resource investments bring value? *Multi-actor governance:* ▶ How to establish common rules/guidelines for engaging stakeholders? ▶ Are such rules even needed? The cost of engagement – how to evaluate what is a reasonable cost to engage stakeholder considering the price of advertisements, workshops etc.
Selected domain-specific governance issues	▶ What are the key governance processes ("levers") for starting to address the "goal conflict" between economic development, the need to decarbonize mobility and promote a circular economy, and countering segregation and rising social inequality? ▶ Are there any good practice examples of how multi-actor governance help to tackle problems related to mental health and youth obesity?

The peer review took place over two days, on 27–28 September 2023, in a hybrid format combining in-person sessions and online participation for one peer reviewer.

Day 1 focused on assessing Tallinn's proposed sustainability governance framework. Each peer prepared by reviewing materials provided by Tallinn and developed feedback points, complemented by open discussion. The session began with a presentation of the City of Tallinn, outlining the governance framework and posing key questions about its relevance, structure, and completeness. Peers responded individually sharing insights and recommendations based on their experience. The day concluded with a second round of exchanges on the main processes under the four pillars.

Day 2 was dedicated to preparing and discussing recommendations. Peers worked collaboratively to refine actionable suggestions, ensuring they addressed Tallinn's challenges and aligned with the proposed governance model. The outcome was a set of practical recommendations and a roadmap for next steps, aimed at strengthening Tallinn's governance framework and supporting its sustainability objectives.

1.8.2 Methodology

The analysis for the present case study relies on a mixed-methods and triangulated approach combining documentary review, an online survey and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, in order to address (i) the relevance and coherence of the peer-review's design, (ii) the peer-review effectiveness and impact.

First, the evaluators made use of **administrative and monitoring data** to inform the assessment of the relevance and coherence of the project as well as to provide essential contextual elements for interpreting effectiveness and potential implementation challenges.

Also, **semi-structured interviews** with key peer-review stakeholders provided in-depth insights into the peer-review's objectives and into stakeholders' perceptions and expectations regarding its impact on capacity building and policy instrument improvement in the territory concerned, allowing the evaluation team to contextualise and validate documentary evidence.

1.8.3 Analysis of key findings

1.8.3.1 Relevance and coherence of the Peer Review's design

Are the intervention logic and design of the Peer Review clear and coherent? Are they relevant for capacity building and policy improvement?

The **design of the peer review is praised for its clarity and flexibility**. For the beneficiary, it offers a fast and low-bureaucracy alternative to cooperation projects, which often involve lengthy application procedures and heavy administrative requirements. According to stakeholders encountered, this makes the peer review particularly suitable for complex policy issues and for cities that do not have the time or resources to engage in cooperation projects. The methodology is seen as straightforward and avoids unnecessary complexity, which was highlighted as a major strength by participants.

Evidence suggests that the **intervention is clearly defined and easy to understand**. The peer review follows a **logical and transparent structure**, as outlined in the Terms of Reference. Participants confirmed that the process was very clear, well explained, and easy to follow. It begins with identifying the beneficiary's needs. In the case of Tallinn, this step involved intensive discussions with Interreg Europe's Policy Learning Platform team prior to the formal application process to validate the relevance and feasibility of the peer review request, given its unique and cross-thematic nature, and to ensure that it could benefit from the peer review. Once validated, the next stage is the selection of suitable peers. Tallinn proposed experts with strong knowledge of sustainability governance, and the Platform team confirmed their participation. This ensured that the peers were highly relevant and specialized in the topic. This was followed by preparatory work, during which peers reviewed documents prepared by Tallinn detailing their policy challenges, background information, and the city's organizational structure. The implementation phase then took place, where the review is conducted and recommendations are provided. Both the beneficiary and the peers confirmed that they knew exactly what was expected of them, which contributed to smooth execution.

The relevance for capacity building and policy improvement is also underlined by stakeholders encountered. In Tallinn's case, the peer review provided actionable recommendations on governance processes, stakeholder engagement, and integration strategies. Experts validated Tallinn's advanced approach and reinforced its leadership role in sustainability governance. The involvement of thematic experts further enhances the quality and relevance of the process. They support peer selection, briefing, content preparation, and moderation, ensuring that exchanges are productive and aligned with the beneficiary's objectives. The collaborative nature of the peer review encourages reflection, knowledge sharing, and improvement among all parties involved, which is essential for building capacity and driving policy change.

However, **one area for improvement concerns the follow-up phase**. Currently, follow-up is limited to reporting with the Policy Learning Platform, without peer involvement. Stakeholders encountered suggest that including peers in follow-up sessions to review updated documents and validate progress would strengthen the impact and sustainability of the recommendations.

1.8.3.2 Peer Review effectiveness and impact

1.8.3.3 To what extent did the Peer Review improve the professional and institutional capacities of its beneficiary?

Evidence suggests **the Peer Review has enhanced both the professional and institutional capacities of the City of Tallinn.** This process improved organisational knowledge and fostered a mindset shift towards integrated sustainability governance. It proved to be fast and resource-efficient, offering targeted learning opportunities. As highlighted by Tallinn's leadership in the follow-up article:

> *"The Interreg Europe peer review provided an excellent opportunity for Tallinn to reflect on the next concrete steps for developing sustainability governance. It helped to move from concept developing to starting to pilot actions together with colleagues from the city administration. The format was well suited for our needs, and we will look for similar opportunities in the future around topics we need to review and "activate"."*

The **organisation's capacity has been strengthened through this process**. The Peer Review fostered peer learning and exposure to innovative practices. Exchanges with peers enriched the skills of Tallinn's teams in areas such as strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, and interdepartmental cooperation. The Peer Review resulted in **policy recommendations** based on best practices and exchanges with peers and thematic experts. These recommendations were assessed for feasibility and prioritised according to their short-, medium-, and long-term implementation potential, providing a clear roadmap for action. **Recommendations were quickly translated into concrete steps**, including the creation of dedicated work streams, the specification of a sustainability governance model, and the integration of sustainability principles into strategic planning processes (see under section 3.2.2). Practical suggestions regarding communication, such as developing a common narrative, improving storytelling, and tailoring communication tools, are also being implemented. Furthermore, sustainability modules are being integrated into internal training programmes, ensuring long-term capacity building for municipal staff. **Institutional capacity has been further reinforced through structural changes** such as strengthening the role of the Strategic Management Office, introducing an annual strategic planning cycle, and involving the HR department to drive cultural change across the administration.

In conclusion, the peer review enabled Tallinn to transform sustainability governance from concept to action increasing its professional and institutional capacities.

How and to what extent has the peer review contributed to policy instrument changes?

Following the peer review, **the City has created an internal SDG group** that brings together key departments such as strategic development, environment, transport, HR, and communication and **has been strongly focused on three processes** related to policy development, the involvement of stakeholders and citizens, to close the gap between objectives and actions to include SDGs in the policies of the city, **implementing the peer review recommendations**.

First, one major change concerns policy development. The city has integrated SDG-related goals and indicators into its annual strategic planning cycle, creating a stronger link between the Tallinn 2035 strategy, annual action plans, and the municipal budget. Additionally, Tallinn initiated the development of an ex-ante impact assessment methodology for investments and major development projects based on the SDG framework. This approach replaces previous unsuccessful attempts and reflects the peer review's emphasis on evidence-based decision-making and systematic processes. The review also encouraged the launch of pilot projects to test these new methods in practice.

Another significant area of improvement relates to stakeholder and citizen engagement. Inspired by the peer review, Tallinn organised its first Citizens' Assembly, from October 7 to November 4, 2023 and consisted of 60 residents aged 16 and older, in collaboration with an NGO ensuring balanced representation and feedback mechanisms. The city government invited residents to answer the question: "*How can we connect Tallinn's green spaces into an inviting and cohesive network?*". The assembly produced 39 proposals, which the city has committed to implement in May 2024 and report on at least until the end of 2024. Furthermore, Tallinn opened HUB AvaLinn (OpenCity), an exhibition and co-creation space equipped with state-of-the-art visualisation technology designed to facilitate co-creation and dialogue between citizens, developers, and city officials. This initiative marks a major innovation in participatory governance. Complementing these efforts, Tallinn is drafting a strategic document that will establish core principles for citizen involvement across all departments, which will be politically endorsed by the City Council.

Finally, in cooperation with the H&R department, **Tallinn began integrating SDGs into its organisational values and HR strategy**, including revising leadership training programmes to embed sustainability considerations and the principle of leading by example. In terms of communication, the city is developing a "*Sustainable Tallinn*" communication plan that focuses on purpose-driven narratives and storytelling, inspired by best practices shared during the peer review.

Beyond local policy instruments, **the peer review also stimulated Tallinn's leadership role at national and European levels**. The city initiated the "R-Club" network of Estonian municipalities to support the green transition and formalised the SDG Task Force within the EuroCities network, which Tallinn now co-chairs. Tallinn is also developing a sustainability governance training programme for the EuroCities Academy based on lessons learned from the peer review.

1.8.4 Appendix – Desk Review and Interviews

1.8.4.1 List of documents consulted

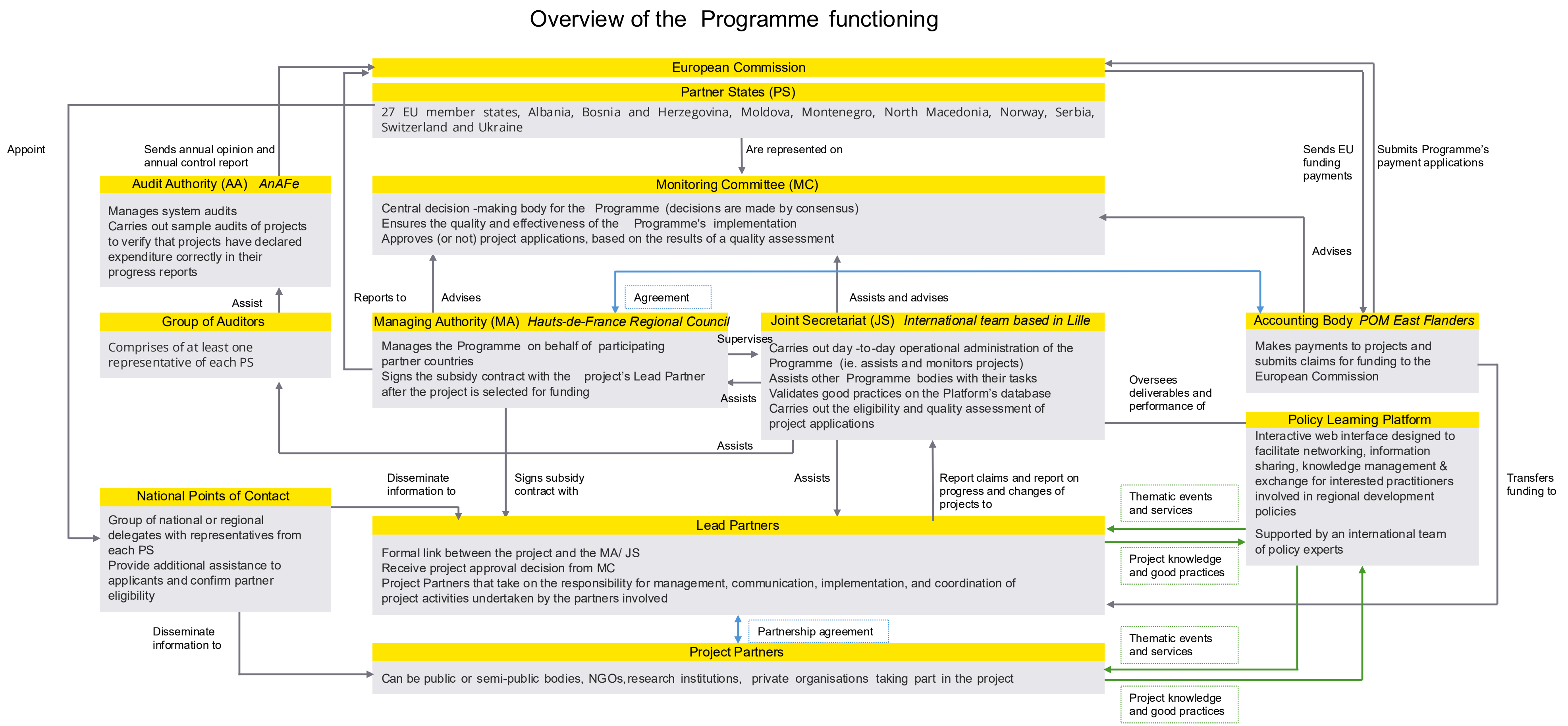
Level	Title
Programme-level	• Terms of reference – Open call for interregional peer reviews
Peer review-level	• Thematic background paper • Final report • Follow-up article • Agenda of peer-review meetings (27-28 september 2023) • Monitoring interview

1.8.4.2 List of interviewees

Stakeholders	Date
City of Tallinn – Beneficiary (*Estonia*)	03.12.2025
City of Malmö – Peer reviewer (*Sweden*)	07.01.2025
Public Strategy for Sustainable Development (PS4SD) Consultant – Peer reviewer (Belgium)	19.01.2025

2. Annex 2 - Overview of the Programme functioning

Figure 1 Stakeholder mapping and overview of the Interreg Europe Programme functioning



3. Annex 3 - Interreg Europe: Current State of Play

From three project calls, Interreg funds now support 2263 partners across 262 cooperation projects

Covering **36 Partner States**, Interreg Europe Programme is characterised by its uniquely broad cooperation space, covering the 27 EU Member States (comprising 242 "NUTS 2" regions), Norway and Switzerland (seven regions each) and, since 2024, seven EU candidate countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine. To be eligible, interregional cooperation projects must bring together partners from at least four out of five possible geographical areas (North, East, South, West and EU candidate countries). Entities from other third countries may also participate on a self-financing basis. In total, Interreg Europe has had three calls for project proposals, receiving a total of 486 project proposals involving 4044 project partners[140]. Out of these, **262 projects are now approved and ongoing, implemented collectively by 2267[141] partners**, resulting in an average of 8.7 partners per project (ranging from 5 to 14).

Table 2 Interreg Europe Calls' Key Figures

Call	Duration	Applicants		Approved	
		#project proposals	#partners	#project proposals	#partners
1	5 Apr – 31 May 2022	134	1122	72	635
2	15 Mar – 9 Jun 2023	146	1230	78	673
3	20 Mar – 7 Jun 2024	206	1692	112[142]	959
Total over 3 calls		486	4044	262	2267

Source: Interreg Europe Portal "Statistics" – Partner Table as of 24/02/2026

Although interregional cooperation projects comprise 2267 partners in total, the same organisations were sometimes found to be implicated in multiple projects. Based on the number of distinct VAT numbers (1363) and distinct partner names (1393), the number of distinct organisations participating in cooperation projects is estimated between 1363 and 1393[143].

Partner profiles and their roles in regional development

Across the 262 cooperation projects of Interreg Europe over the three calls, **EUR 369,940,292.70 in Interreg funds** has been committed to interregional cooperation projects compared to the EUR 347 million initially planned, reflecting a commitment rate of 106%. The projects themselves have a **total value of EUR 472, 500,614**, which represents a **co-financing rate of 78.3%**.

Table 3 Value of Interreg Europe interregional cooperation projects

	Call 1	Call 2	Call 3	Total

[140] The number of applicant partners was calculated based on the total number of partners in the Interreg Europe database on the Portal (approved, not approved, and n/a). It includes, however, partners who applied but were also not eligible. The total number of eligible partners who applied for Interreg Europe funding for cooperation projects was 3171 over the three calls.

[141] Throughout the lifecycle of Interreg Europe cooperation projects, changes to and addition of project partners may be requested from the joint secretariat. Thus, the 2267 project partners cited is likely to change over the programming period 2021-2027 as partners are removed and added from projects.

[142] The monitoring committee approved applications for 113 project proposals during Call 3. However, one project could not fulfil the financial conditions to reduce the budget and therefore withdrew their application.

[143] This figure is an estimate due to data clarity limitations in the partner database of the Interreg Europe portal. While VAT numbers appeared the most standardised format for partner identification, some referred to different partner names (e.g. different departments within the same institution), thereby masking the true number of distinct partners. The distinct count of VAT numbers is thus cross-referenced with the distinct count of original partner names to provide an estimate range for the number of distinct partners.

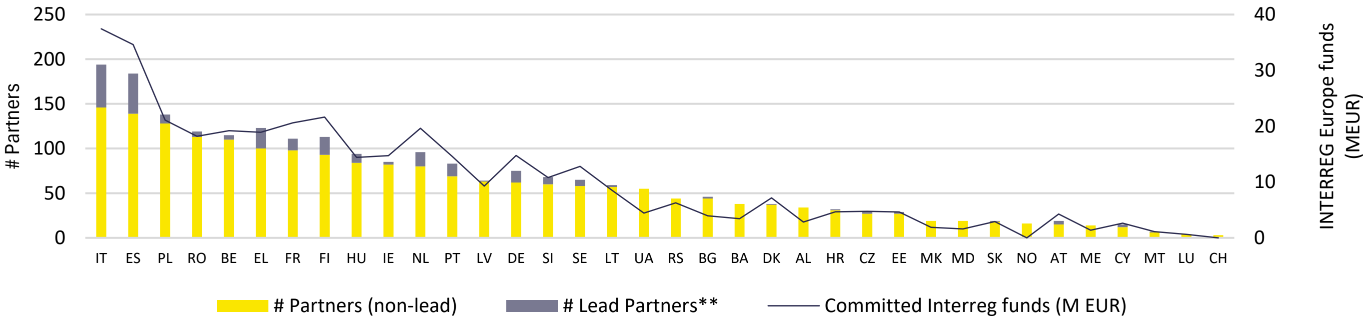
Interreg funds (EUR)	103,612,486	112,099,889.8	154,227,916.9	369,940,292.7
Total amount (Interreg funds + additional sources of financing) (EUR)	131,928,506	143,033,967	197,538,141	472, 500,614
Co-financing rate (%)	79%	78%	78.1%	78.3%

Source: Interreg Europe Portal "Statistics" – Partner Table as of 24/02/2026

Breakdown by country

The geographical distribution of the 2263 project partners is relatively concentrated among a handful of countries. Almost half (48.5%) of the project partners come from eight (22%) of the 36 countries covered by the Programme. Italy, Spain, and Poland are the top three most represented countries in the aggregate, home to 194, 184, and 138 project partners (including lead partners) respectively. At the bottom end, four of the Programme's partners are from Luxembourg and three are from Switzerland.

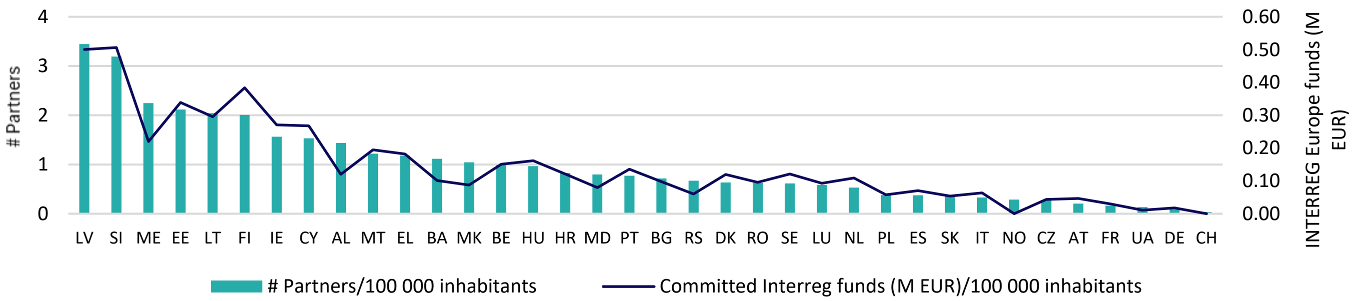
Figure 2 Geographical distribution of Interreg Europe project partners and funds by country



Source: Interreg Europe Portal "Statistics" – Partner Table as of 24/02/2026
**Partners from Norway and Switzerland not eligible for Interreg funds.*
***Lead partners includes both Lead Partners and Advisory Lead Partners*

This distribution is mostly reflected in the allocation of Interreg funding, which sees Italian partners receiving EUR 37,439,317.5, representing 10% of the total Interreg funds allocated to project partners. However, the distribution shifts when population size is accounted for, and sees smaller countries, such as Latvia, Slovenia, and Montenegro, with much higher participation rates in the Interreg Europe programme relative to their population size. Latvia has the highest, with 3.45 project partners per 100 000 inhabitants,[144] while Italy, for example has 0.33.

Figure 3 Geographical distribution of Interreg Europe project partners and funds by country (adjusted for population size)

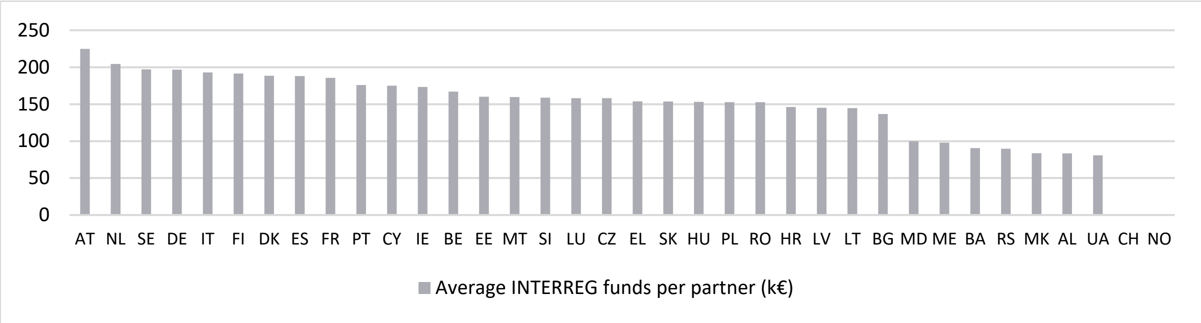


[144] Population data as of 1st January 2025 gathered from Eurostat accessible here: [tps00001] Population on 1 January. Note that figures for ES, FR, IT, CY, CH, BA are provisional, figures for EL are estimated provisional, and figures for RO are estimated. Population data for UA is dated as at 1st January 2022, the latest available data on Eurostat.

Sources: Interreg Europe Portal "Statistics" - Partner Table as of 24/02/2026; Eurostat

With respect to the average amount of Interreg Europe funds committed per partner, larger countries tend to have a higher allocation, consistent with the higher proportion of lead partners from these countries.

Figure 4 Average Interreg funds per partner



Source: Interreg Europe Portal "Statistics" – Partner Table as of 24/02/2026
*Partners from Norway and Switzerland are not eligible to receive Interreg Funds

Breakdown by policy and specific objective

The Programme itself is organised around a single overarching priority (or "specific objective") of "**a better cooperation governance**", with a selected specific objective to "**enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, in particular those mandated to manage a specific territory, and of stakeholders**".[145] As such, Interreg Europe has been structured to offer flexible yet focused financial support to regions, enabling them to cooperate on "any subject of shared relevance in line with their regional needs", provided these align with the overarching objectives of cohesion policy. More precisely, the thematic scope of Interreg Europe's intervention covers the 5 objectives defined in article 3 of regulation (EU) 2021/1058 relating to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund: i) **PO1 – A Smarter Europe**; ii) **PO2 – A Greener, Low-Carbon Europe**; iii) **PO3 – A More Connected Europe**; iv) **PO4 – A More Social and Inclusive Europe**; v) **PO5** – **A Europe Closer to Citizens.** Each of these policy objectives have their own specific objectives, which are presented in Figure 4 below. In addition, Interreg Europe projects may also "support non-thematic cooperation on challenges related to the purely administrative management of regional development policies" in light of its objective for a "better cooperation governance".[146]

The Interreg Europe Programme has maintained its target of 80% concentration of projects within the three objectives of fostering a 'Smarter Europe', a 'Greener Europe', and certain subtopics under a 'More social Europe'. The remaining 20% is committed to projects covering the other topics under policy objective 4 and those contributing to the two other thematic objectives.

In terms of number, these three principal objectives make up 223 (**85.1%**) of the **262 interregional cooperation projects**. As for value, EUR 315,609,980.20 (85.3%) of the total Interreg funds that have been allocated so far.

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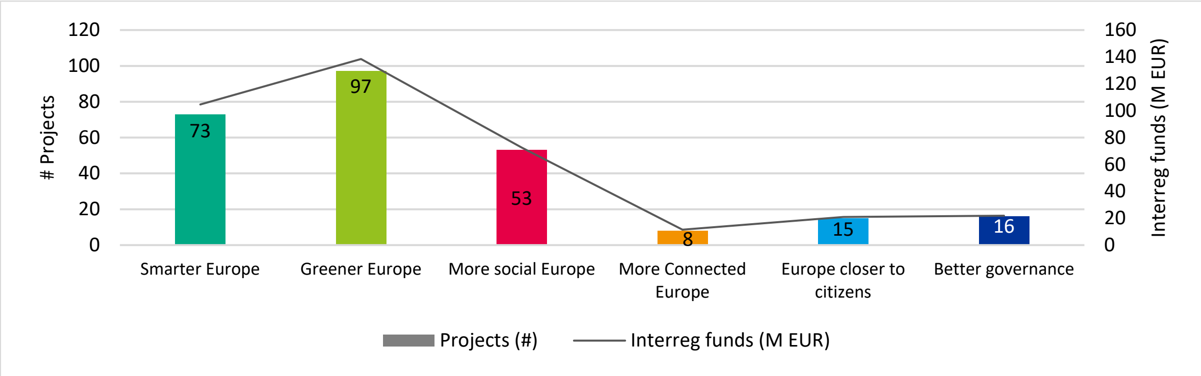
[145] Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Programme Manual, Version 5, June 2025.
[146] Interreg Europe 2021-2027 Programme Manual, Version 5, June 2025.

Figure 5 Distribution of Interreg Europe cooperation projects and Interreg funds by policy objective

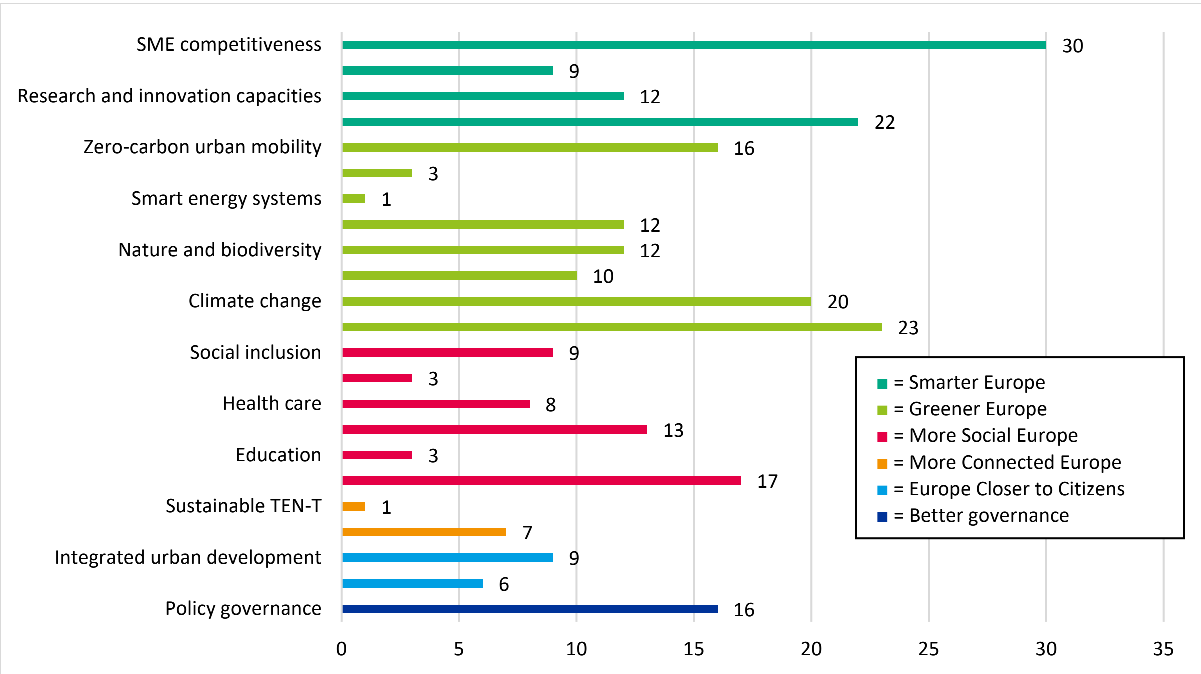


Source: Interreg Europe Portal “Statistics” – Partner Table as of 24/02/2026

Currently, **all but one specific objectives of the Programme are covered by at least one cooperation project**, that of “digital connectivity”, under the “Smarter Europe” policy objective.

The most predominant theme addressed by projects (30) is SME competitiveness. For example, the “UNLOCK”, led by Hanze University of Applies Sciences Groningen, aims to improve regional policy instruments for enhancing sustainable growth, SME competitiveness and job creation within SMEs. The initiative brings together a consortium of policy authorities, universities and other relevant stakeholders developing local green hydrogen economies.[147] The least common specific objectives are those of “Smart Energy Systems” and “Sustainable TEN-T” (Trans-European Transport Network), with one project each.

Figure 6 Distribution of Interreg Europe interregional cooperation projects by specific objective



Source: Interreg Europe Portal “Statistics” – Partner Table as of 24/02/2026

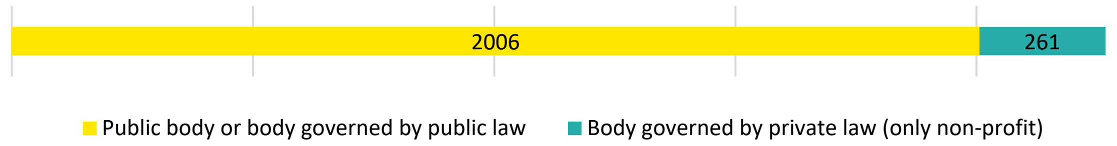
[147] Interreg Europe Portal, Projects, 01C0022 UNLOCK.

Breakdown by partner type

As described above in section 1.1, partners in interregional cooperation projects can be either public bodies or bodies governed by public law, or private non-profit organisations. The core target group of Interreg Europe are policy responsible authorities, which mostly include public bodies or bodies governed by public law. While public bodies include national, regional, or local government authorities, bodies governed by public law can include those such as agencies, research institutions, or interest groups governed by public law. Likewise, private bodies may also include research institutions and interest groups, as well as other types of organisations, such as business support organisations or infrastructure or service providers.

As shown in Figure 26 below, **the vast majority of project partners** for cooperation projects are **public bodies or bodies governed by public law**, representing 90% of the total number, with the remaining 10% being private organisations.

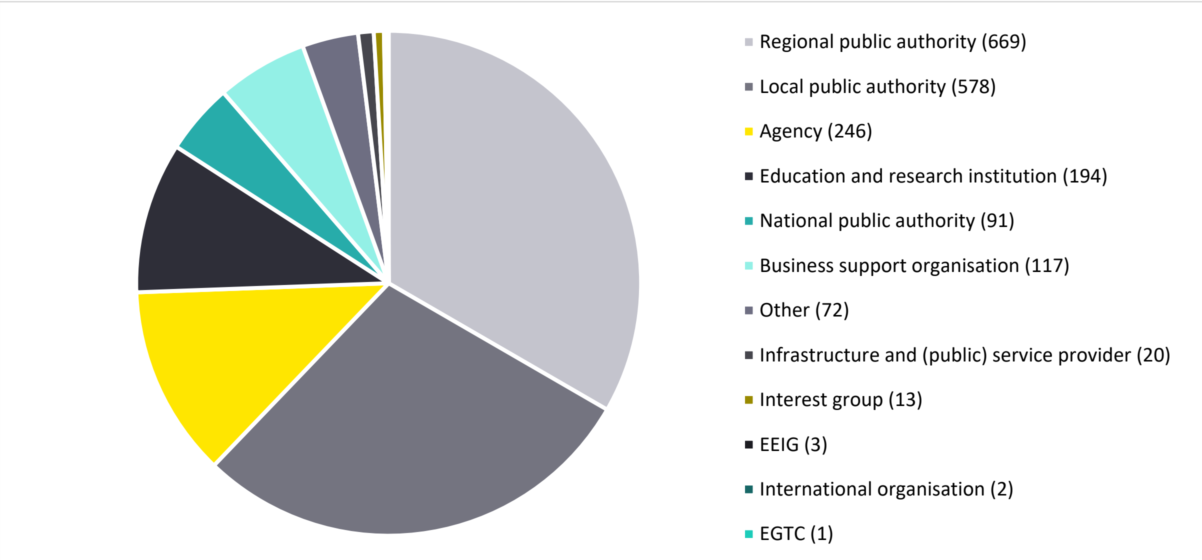
Figure 7 Distribution of the 2267 Interreg Europe partners by legal status



Source: Interreg Europe Portal "Statistics" – Partner Table as of 24/02/2026

Among **public bodies and bodies governed** by public law, the vast majority are **regional**, **local**, or **national authorities**, which together make up 1338 (59%) of the 2267 bodies, followed by agencies (246). The next most common partners are education and research institutions (218) and business support organisations (200). One European Economic Interest Group (EEIG) is also present in three projects, the European Regions Network for the Application of Telecommunications Technology, which works towards the modernisation and digitalisation of public services across three specific objectives (digitalisation, policy governance, healthcare). Lastly, European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) Ister-Granum, is Lead Partner in the SLOWDOWN project, which aims to improve policy frameworks that "*better promote slow tourism in order to find a balance between economic, social and environmental aspect of tourism (in line with Policy Objective 4)*".[148]

Figure 8 Types of project partners (public bodies and bodies governed by public law)



Source: Interreg Europe Portal "Statistics" – Partner Table as of 24/02/2026

[148] Interreg Europe Portal, Projects, 02C0497, SLOWDOWN.

For **private bodies**, most are categorised as "other" (101), and include notably Ballyhoura Development CLG, a community-led Local Development Company and registered charity delivering community, economic, and environmental development programmes in the Ballyhoura region of East Limerick and North Cork.[149] Other private partner types include **business support organisations** (83), interest groups (28), education and research institutions (24), agencies (21) and infrastructure and public service providers (5).

Policy Learning Platform: empowering stakeholders and policymakers with a permanent support structure

The Interreg Europe Programme also funds the Policy Learning Platform, a unique capacity-building instrument which serves as a knowledge and community platform of Interreg Europe. It capitalises on the results and learning taken from interregional cooperation projects, provides expert advice, and fosters peer learning to support policymakers in enhancing regional development policies. It provides three main services:

- **Expert support for policy learning**: through the policy helpdesk, peer reviews, and matchmakings, policy makers can request on-demand assistance to tackle policy challenges and receive tailored solutions;
- **Community of peers** facilitates networking opportunities among regional policy makers through community events (webinars, thematic events…);
- **Knowledge for policy solutions:** the Platform serves as a repository of knowledge products for policy solutions shared by Interreg Europe projects and from the above activities, including a good practice database, thematic policy briefs, event learnings (webinars and workshops), expert support reports (e.g. from peer reviews and matchmakings).

The Platform so far hosts 1,338 policy solutions produced over the current 2021-2027 programming period:[150] the Platform has validated 1,060 good practices from the regions covered by the Programme, of which 945 (89%) relate to the three priority Policy Objectives; 27 policy briefs, 76 "stories"; 70 event learnings; and 105 expert reports from peer reviews and matchmakings. In addition, the Platform also stores policy solutions produced during the previous Interreg Europe programming period (2014-2020), bringing the total number of policy solutions available on the Platform to 4,803.

[149] Who we are | Ballyhoura Development CLG

[150] Interreg Europe, Policy Learning Platform: Policy Solutions, As of 29/01/2026.

4. Annex 4 – Key steps of the evaluation

PHASES	TASKS	DELIVERABLES AND MEETINGS
Phase 1: inception phase *September 2025*	▶ Scoping interviews ▶ Preliminary desk research ▶ Refinement of the evaluation framework ▶ Design of the data collection tools plan ▶ Stakeholder mapping ▶ Preparation of the inception report	**Kick-off meeting:** 8 September 2025 **Kick-off presentation and minutes:** 12 September 2025 **Draft inception report:** 30 September 2025 **Inception meeting:** 16 October **Final inception report:** 17 October
Phase 2: Data collection and analysis *October 2025 – December 2025*	▶ Desk review and analysis ▶ In-depth stakeholder interviews ▶ Deployment of surveys and public questionnaire ▶ LOT 1: Organisation of focus groups ▶ LOT 2: Conduct of case studies ▶ Preparation of the progress report	**Progress report:** 28 November 2025 **Progress report meeting / Presentation of preliminary findings in the monitoring committee if requested:** 4 December 2025
Phase 3: Final report and recommendations post-2027 *January – February / April 2026*	▶ Data triangulation ▶ Drafting of evaluation questions ▶ Preparation of draft final reports and executive summaries ▶ Co-construction workshop on recommendations, with key stakeholders	**Draft final report:** 31 January 2026 **Co-creation workshop / Draft final report meeting:** 13 February 2026 **Final report:** 27 February 2026 **Presentation of findings:** April 2026
Phase 4: *On demand - Update of the tasks 1.1 and 1.2 (Lot 1)* and the tasks 2.1, 2.2 and focus on 2.4 (Lot 2) *2028*	All tasks and tools used for the evaluation: ▶ *Tools*: in-depth desk review and data analysis, stakeholder interviews, survey, case studies (20) (Lot 2) ▶ *Tasks*: all tasks undertaken during the three phases of the evaluation	**All deliverables from the three phases** **All meetings from the three phases**

5. Annex 5 - Evaluation matrix

5.1 Lot 1. Evaluation matrix

The overarching question this evaluation has sought to answer is the following: ***does the Programme and its implementation structures work effectively to achieve the objective of the Programme, including the communication objectives, set in the performance framework in the Cooperation Programme?*** Still, for each task, evaluation questions reflect the areas of interest and are tailored to address the tasks' specific scope.

The evaluation matrix below lists the evaluation questions developed in the terms of reference and adds operational elements illustrating how questions are responded to and how data is collected.

Tasks	Operational questions	Indicators and/or descriptors	Data collection tools and Sources
Evaluation criteria: Effectiveness			
	Do the Programme management system and related structures work in an effective way?		
Task 1.1 - Programme management and steering	*Are responsibilities of the Programme bodies clear and complementary?*	► Clarity and functionality of management bodies ► Coordination quality ► Complementarity or overlap of responsibilities ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (programme manual, organigrams, internal procedures, governance documents, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members, PoCs) ► Survey to MC members
	Are decision-making processes clear and transparent?	► Existence of formal rules and decision traceability ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (written procedures, monitoring committee rules of procedures, management and control system description, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members) ► Survey to MC members
	Are MA/JS adequately resourced for fulfilling their tasks? (efficiency)	► Staff resources vs workload, delays ► Satisfaction and perception of stakeholders	► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members)

	Is the Programme management effective (incl. PoC)?	▶ Timeliness and clarity of communication/support ▶ Perception of stakeholders	▶ Desk review (management and control system description, performance framework, meeting documents, etc) ▶ In-depth interviews (PoCs, MA/JS, MC members) ▶ Surveys to MC members and beneficiaries
	What are the recommendations for improving the Programme management and steering?	▶ Issues identified ▶ Proposals for improvement	▶ In-depth interviews (PoCs, MA/JS, MC members) ▶ Surveys to MC members and beneficiaries
Task 1.2 Programme support to operations	**Is the Programme support to applicants and beneficiaries effective?**		
	Are the assistant measures taken at the different stages of project development relevant and sufficient?	▶ Satisfaction and perception of beneficiaries in the assistance ▶ Perception of management stakeholders in their interaction with applicants and beneficiaries	▶ Desk review ▶ In-depth interviews (beneficiaries, MA/JS and PoCs) ▶ Surveys to beneficiaries
	Do Programme partners, including PoCs, play an effective role in these measures?	▶ Evidence of Programme partners' involvement in the assistant measures ▶ Quality and consistency of support provided by Programme partners ▶ Perception of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries	▶ Desk review ▶ In-depth interviews (MA/JS, PoCs, MC members and beneficiaries) ▶ Survey to beneficiaries and MC members
	What are the recommendations for improving the Programme's support?	▶ Issues identified ▶ Proposals for improvement	▶ In-depth interviews (PoCs, MA/JS, MC members and beneficiaries) ▶ Surveys to beneficiaries
	Questions related to projects		
	How effective is the Programme support to beneficiaries during the project generation?		

	Are the supporting tools sufficient and appropriate to generate good quality applications?	► Development and usage of tools ► Satisfaction with JS support ► Perception of stakeholders	► Quantitative analysis on tool usage (e.g. data on webinars for applicants, data on the 'ask for feedback' tool) ► Desk review (website 'Apply for funding' FAQ, etc.) ► In-depth interviews (beneficiaries, MA/JS, PoCs) ► Survey to beneficiaries
	How effective is the assessment of applications?		
	Is the project assessment and selection process sound, transparent and fair?	► Timeliness to review the applications ► Transparency of the process (rules, processes, guidelines, etc) ► Perception of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries on the fairness of the process	► Desk review (selection process, assessment reports, etc) ► Quantitative analysis on data for project assessment (submitted applications, etc) ► In-depth interviews (beneficiaries, MA/JS, MC members) ► Survey to beneficiaries
	Is the assessment process leading to selecting good quality projects?	► Relevance of the projects selected ► Process ensuring alignment with the Programme's objectives ► Perception of the stakeholders on the implementation of projects	► Desk review (assessment reports, etc) ► Data analysis based on project indicators (eligibility checks and assessment information, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members) ► Survey to beneficiaries
	How effective is the Programme support to beneficiaries during the project implementation?		
	Are the reporting and monitoring procedure of project implementation well set up and relevant? Does it allow for effective verification of project outputs and of project results?	► Timeliness of reporting and data quality ► Monitoring mechanisms and review processes of project outputs	► Desk review (monitoring mechanisms, progress reports, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries, MC members) ► Survey to beneficiaries

		▸ Perception of beneficiaries with ongoing support (rules in place and monitoring mechanism)	
	Does it allow payment of beneficiaries in adequate time, reducing financial errors and the commitment risks?	▸ Perception of beneficiaries ▸ Timeliness of payments ▸ Overall trend in financial errors	▸ Desk review (financial data, etc) ▸ Quantitative analysis of error rate (if available) ▸ In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ▸ Survey to beneficiaries
	How efficient is the mid-term review of projects?	▸ Timeliness of review ▸ Review set up (allocated resources etc) ▸ Implementation of recommendations made/ changes ▸ Satisfaction and perception of stakeholders	▸ Desk review (progress reports, etc) ▸ In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ▸ Survey to beneficiaries
	Is the procedure for deciding and supporting possible pilot actions clear and relevant?	▸ Existence of formal rules and decision traceability ▸ Adequacy of pilot actions selected ▸ Number of issues detected ▸ Perception of beneficiaries	▸ Desk review (pilot action guidelines, etc) ▸ Stakeholder interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries, MC members) ▸ Survey to beneficiaries
	How clear and simple are the rules and procedures for Programme beneficiaries, taking into account the regulatory framework?		
		▸ Most common issues detected ▸ Perception of beneficiaries	▸ Desk review (Programme rules and procedures, regulatory framework, etc) ▸ In-depth interviews (beneficiaries, PoCs) ▸ Survey to beneficiaries
	How effective are the electronic system tools (i.e. the Portal, website tools, Sharepoints) developed by the Programme?		
		▸ User satisfaction	▸ Quantitative analysis on tool usage

		► Usage of tools	► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Survey to beneficiaries
	Are the resources allocated to projects adequate to allow projects to produce the outputs planned in the application forms?		
		► Perception of beneficiaries	► Desk review (progress reports, rules and procedure, etc) ► Analysis of outputs and results indicators and financial data ► In-depth interviews (beneficiaries) ► Survey to beneficiaries
	Are there recurring challenges in project implementation that could be better addressed by project support?		
		► Frequency of common challenges detected ► Perception of beneficiaries	► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Survey to beneficiaries
	Questions related to the Policy Learning Platform		
	Is the Platform setup sufficiently clear and effective?		
		► Clarity of roles and procedures	► Desk review (Platform implementation manual, Platform contract with annual work plans, results of the surveys and the evaluation implemented by the Platform team, etc) ► In-depth interviews (beneficiaries, JS) ► Survey to beneficiaries
	How effective are the support measures taken by the Programme to implement the Platform activities?		
		► Responsiveness and coordination	► Desk review (Platform output and result indicators, results of the surveys and the

		► Satisfaction and perception of beneficiaries of support measures ► Perception of management stakeholders in their interaction with users and beneficiaries	evaluation implemented by the Platform team, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Survey to beneficiaries
	How effective are the outreach, animation, mobilisation actions to wider stakeholders and potential beneficiaries of the Platform?		
		► Event attendance/occurrence ► Perception on usefulness of the Platform	► Desk review (events related documentation, results of the surveys and the evaluation implemented by the Platform team, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries, PoCs) ► Open questionnaire
Task 1.3: Communication strategy and selected communication activities	Is the implementation of the communication strategy effective and efficient?		
		► Budget usage for the communication strategy ► Perception of stakeholders on the communication strategy ► Adequacy of the implementation of the strategy	► Desk review (communication strategy, budget allocation, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC, PoCs) ► Survey to MC members ► Focus groups
	Are the digital/ online communication tools helping the Programme's operations to be implemented in an effective way?		
		► Use rate of the tools ► Perception of the usefulness of the tools	► Desk review (events related documentation, use rate of digital/ online communication tools, external audit data, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, PoCs, beneficiaries) ► Focus groups
	Do the Programme partners, especially the PoCs, contribute effectively to the implementation of the Programme's communication strategy?		

		► Evidence of Programme partner involvement / Use of the strategy by partners ► Satisfaction of beneficiaries	► Desk review (roles and responsibilities in communication strategy, data on PoCs activities, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries, PoCs) ► Survey to beneficiaries and MC members
	What is the level of satisfaction among the project implementors with the Programme support tools, such as seminars, tutorials, in person written guidance, templates?		
		► Use of the tools (attendance of seminars, etc) ► Satisfaction and perception of project implementors	► Desk review (evaluations of the past seminars, workshops, webinars organised by the Programme, etc) ► Quantitative analysis on usage of tools, if available ► In-depth interviews (beneficiaries) ► Survey to beneficiaries ► Focus groups
	Which communication activity is the most effective in helping the project implementors communicate on their project achievements?		
		► Perception of project implementors ► Usage rate of communication activities	► Desk review (support tools made available to project partners, data from external audit, data on tools used by project implementors, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Survey to beneficiaries ► Focus groups
	What are the recommendations for improving the Programmes communication strategy and/or selected activities, mainly for the project implementors?		
		► Issues identified ► Proposals for improvement	► Desk review ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries, PoCs) ► Focus group

5.2 Lot 2. Evaluation matrix

The overarching question this evaluation seeks to answer is the following: ***are we doing the right things?*** Still, for each task, evaluation questions reflect the areas of interest and are tailored to address the tasks' specific scope. The evaluation focuses on the following key criteria: effectiveness, coherence, relevance and the EU-added value of the actions supported by the Programme.

The evaluation matrix below lists the evaluation questions developed in the terms of reference and adds operational elements illustrating our understanding of the data to be collected. Listed below also the proposed data collection methods to help answer the questions.

Tasks	Operational questions	Indicators and/or descriptors	Data collection tools and Sources
Evaluation criteria: Effectiveness, Relevance, Coherence			
Task 2 – Overall questions Programme performance (to be addressed through all subtasks)	Is the Programme's intervention logic clear and coherent?	▸ Clarity of objectives and of causal links ▸ Consistency of activities and expected results ▸ Alignment across Programme documents ▸ Perception of stakeholders	▸ Desk review (Cooperation Programme, Evaluation plan, Programme manual, etc) ▸ Programme theory of change analysis ▸ In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members, beneficiaries) ▸ Surveys to beneficiaries and MC members
	To what extent does the Programme achieve its objectives?	▸ Achievement of Programme output and result indicators	▸ Desk review (performance review, progress report, etc) ▸ Quantitative analysis of project implementation data (output and result indicators) ▸ In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ▸ Case studies
	To what extent does the Programme contribute to territorial cohesion and reducing disparities?	▸ Changes in regional disparities ▸ Cohesion metrics ▸ Perception of stakeholders	▸ Desk review (performance reports, progress report, etc) ▸ In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries, MC members) ▸ Case studies ▸ Surveys to beneficiaries and MC members

	What are the success factors and barriers to achieving the Programme's objectives?	► Frequency and type of success and barrier factors ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (progress reports, good practice online module on the Interreg Europe Programme's website, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries
	What are the recommendations for improving Programme performance?	► Issues related to Programme performance identified ► Perceptions of stakeholders	► Desk review (performance reports, progress reports, previous evaluations, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members, beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries and MC members
	Does Interreg Europe bring added value to the EU/ Cohesion Policy?	► Number and diversity of regions that have strengthened their cooperation/capacities ► Synergies/complementarity with mainstream programs such as those under the "Investment for Growth and Jobs" objective ► Synergies/complementarity with national and regional support mechanism	► Desk review (cooperation programme, Programme manual, progress reports, previous evaluations, cohesion policy related documents, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members, beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries and MC members
Task 2.1 - Evaluation of the projects' performance and update (task 2.3)	Is the project's intervention logic clear and coherent?	► Clarity of objectives and of causal links ► Consistency of activities and expected outcomes ► Alignment across Programme documents ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (Cooperation Programme, Evaluation plan, Programme manual, etc) ► Programme theory of change analysis ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members)

	Are the new projects' features relevant and sufficient to achieve the project objectives?	► Use and perceived usefulness of new features ► Potential gaps in new features to achieve the project objectives ► Uptake rate of pilot actions and follow-ups ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (Programme manual, progress reports, previous evaluations, etc) ► Quantitative analysis on projects implementation ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries
	To what extent do project activities improve the professional capacities of the project beneficiaries?	► Self-assessed capacity of the organisations before and after project involvement ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (meeting documentation, training material, project outputs and results, etc) ► In-depth interviews (beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries
	To what extent does the increasing capacity of organisations lead to the improvement of the policy instruments addressed by the projects?	► Evidence of policy changes following capacity building activities or evidence of policy improvements attributed to capacity building activities ► Evidence of projects that have incorporated newly acquired skills into the revision or implementation of a policy ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (meeting documentation, training material, project outputs and results, etc) ► In-depth interviews (beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries
Task 2.2 - Evaluation of the Policy Learning Platform's performance and update (task 2.3)	Is the Platform's intervention logic clear and coherent?	► Clarity of objectives and of causal links ► Consistency of activities and expected outcomes ► Alignment across Programme documents ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (Programme manual, evaluation plan, Platform output and result indicators, etc) ► Platform theory of change analysis ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, MC members, beneficiaries)

	Are the Platform's services relevant for capacity building and policy improvement?	► Use and perceived usefulness of Platform's services ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (Platform's services data, results of the surveys and of the evaluation implemented by the Platform team, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries
	Are the Platform's services effective in achieving their objectives?	► Achievement of targeted outcome and result indicators ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (Platform's services data, results of the surveys and of the evaluation implemented by the Platform team, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries
	To what extent does the peer review service contribute to policy improvements?	► Evidence of policy changes following peer reviews or evidence of policy improvements attributed to peer reviews ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (peer reviews services data, results of the surveys and of the evaluation implemented by the Platform team, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries) ► Case studies ► Surveys to Platform users
Task 2.4 – Evaluation of the territorial effects (update 2028)	Is the follow-up phase effective in demonstrating the territorial effects of the policy improvements?	► Availability and relevance of territorial effect evidence collected during follow-up phase ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (project progress reports, follow-up phase summaries, etc) ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries, MC members) ► Case studies ► Surveys to beneficiaries
	To what extent does the policy improvement achieved by a project have a territorial effect?	► Evidence of impact on indicators like job creation, CO_2 reduction, protected areas ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (project progress reports, project outputs and results, external impact studies, etc) ► Analysis of regional statistics ► In-depth interviews (beneficiaries)

			► Case studies
	Can this territorial effect be measured and, if yes, how? Can the results of the 2014–2020 ex-post evaluation help in this regard?	► Existence of quantitative/qualitative methodologies for territorial effect measurement ► Perception of stakeholders	► Desk review (2014–2020 ex-post evaluation report, survey and interviews from the ex-post, project outputs and results, Programme monitoring data, external impact studies, etc) ► Analysis of regional statistics ► In-depth interviews (MA/JS, beneficiaries, MC members) ► Case studies

6. Annex 6 – Interview Guides

6.1 Interview guides for in-depth interviews

6.1.1 Beneficiaries

6.1.1.1 Context of the evaluation

The GEIE GECOTTI-PE, as the Managing Authority of the INTERREG Europe, has commissioned EY to conduct an operational and impact evaluation of this programme for the period 2021-2027.

The objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the Programme and its implementation structures in achieving the Programme's strategic objectives, measure the progress made since the Programme's launch in delivering its intended outcomes and provide recommendations to enhance implementation for the remainder of the programming period and prepare the development of the post-2027 Programme (2028-2034).

This interview will gather your feedback on the programme’s implementation and impact, identify any obstacles encountered, best practices observed, and potential improvement areas to enhance its effectiveness.

The results of this interview will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Any information you share will be anonymised in the reports, and your answers will only be attributed to your group of stakeholders.

6.1.1.2 Introduction

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself?
2. Can you describe your involvement in the programme activities (i.e. your cooperation project/Platform's activities)?

6.1.1.3 Questions related to operational effectiveness

<u>**Programme support to operations (task 1.2)**</u>

Questions related to projects

3. What support or advice did you receive during the application process (e.g., from JS, national contact points, the platform)? Was it sufficient and adequate to help you? To what extent did it help you improve the quality of your application? What could be improved to make the support more effective?
4. What is your experience with the project assessment and selection process?
    a. How long did it take between submitting your project to the call for proposals and its approval? Would you consider it reasonable?
    b. Did you find this process transparent and fair?
    c. Do you identify any areas of improvement?
5. How is your project monitored (tools and indicators)?
    d. Does this, in your view, allow for the effective control of your project’s implementation, its outputs and results?
    e. What could be improved?
6. What is your experience with the mid-term review process?
    f. Did it enable you to adjust or improve your project?
    g. Do you consider the procedure to be appropriate (in terms of time required, schedule, etc.)?
    h. What could be improved?
7. Is the procedure for deciding and supporting possible pilot actions clear? Do you consider it to be relevant?
8. What is your perception of the accessibility and clarity of programme information (rules, procedures, eligibility)?

9. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the electronic system tools developed by the Programme? Do you find them easy to understand and use?
10. Is the funding you have received for your project sufficient to enable you to achieve/produce the outputs planned in your application form? Please explain.
    i. Were you paid on time? Were there any obstacles related to the finance and/or audit of the project?
11. Do you identify any recurring challenges in project implementation? If yes, how could they be better addressed?

Questions related to the Policy Learning Platform

12. What is your perception of the accessibility and clarity of platform setup? Do you find it easy to navigate and use?
13. What support or advice did you receive in relation to platform activities?
    j. Was it sufficient and adequate to help you?
    k. What could be improved to enhance the effectiveness and usability of these support measures?

Communication strategy and selected communication activities (task 1.3)

14. How did you first learn about Interreg Europe? What motivated you to engage with the programme?
15. Do you think the programme communication tools (online tools, hosting project websites) help raise further awareness (to other potential project partners or to the wide public) on the programme?
16. What do you think about the role played by PoCs in communicating the program? Have you contacted or attended an event organized by your PoC?
17. Are you satisfied with the program support tools, such as webinars/seminars, tutorials, personalised written advice, and templates? Which support tools are the most effective and least effective in your view? Please explain.
18. In your opinion, what improvements could be made to enhance the Programme communication strategy and/or selected communication activities?

6.1.1.4 Questions related to impact

Overall questions Programme performance (task 2)

19. Are you familiar with other Interreg programmes? If yes, what do you think would differentiate the Interreg Europe programme from the others you may know?
20. Would you say that the Interreg Europe programme's objectives and intervention logic were clear from the moment you submitted your funding application? Or did they become clearer as the programming period progressed?

Evaluation of the projects' performance (task 2.1)

21. In your opinion, what will be the main added value of your project for your territory? And for the territories of the other project partners?
22. Do you anticipate that the results of the project will be equitable and shared among all project partners? Do you anticipate that these results will be sustainable in the future?
23. Do you anticipate that the project results will meet the needs initially identified? If not, what shortcomings do you regret?
24. In your opinion, to what extent has your participation in the project contributed to building capacity in your organisation?
25. In your opinion, in what ways should the support provided by the Joint Secretariat be strengthened in order to increase the impact of your project?

26. Are the performance reporting tools provided by the Joint Secretariat clear and easy to use?
27. Did you ever use the PLP during your project? Do you plan to use it or share best practices on it once your project is over?

<u>Evaluation of the Policy Learning Platform's (PLP's) performance (task 2.2)</u>

28. How did you use the PLP?
29. Using the PLP, did you find the content you were looking for? Were you satisfied with this content?
30. How would you define the added value of the PLP? Would you be likely to use an equivalent service that would provide you with the same service?
31. How does your use of PLP influence the policies you implement on a daily basis?

6.1.1.5 Conclusion

32. In your view, what are the main challenges that you are facing to increase the impact of your project? How could the programme support you in that way?

6.1.2 Managing Authority/Joint Secretariat/Thematic Experts

6.1.2.1 Context of the evaluation

[See context sections in the above Guide for Beneficiaries]

6.1.2.2 Introduction

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself?
2. What is your role in relation to the INTERREG Europe programme for the current programming period? Since when have you held this position?

6.1.2.3 Questions related to operational effectiveness

Programme management and steering (task 1.1)

3. In your opinion, is the division of responsibilities between programme bodies clear and the roles complementary? Is it well understood by the members of each body?
4. How would you describe the coordination between these organisations? Do you think it is effective? Can you give examples of good practices in terms of coordination?
5. What mechanisms are in place to resolve any conflicts or ambiguities in terms of responsibility?
6. In your opinion, are the decision-making processes clear and transparent? Do you think they ensure effective programme management and steering?
7. What resources (e.g., HR and financial) are available to the MA/JS? How have they changed since the start of the program? Are these resources sufficient to fulfil your responsibilities or are there gaps? Please explain.
8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of programme management? How do they affect the effective functioning of the programme steering?

Programme support to operations (task 1.2)

9. What is the role of each programme partner in implementing the support measures and communication strategy? What do you think of the involvement of these partners, and PoCs in particular? Do you identify any gaps in the role played by these actors, particularly PoCs?

Questions related to projects

10. Do you think that supporting tools are sufficient to help applicants during the project generation? How do they help generate high-quality applications? In your opinion, which ones are most relevant and least relevant? Do you identify any gaps? What could be improved?
11. What is the average time between the call for proposals and the approval of projects? Do you think it could be reduced? If so, how?
12. What measures have been put in place to ensure the soundness of the project assessment and selection process?
    a. How do you ensure transparency in the project evaluation process?
    b. How do you ensure fairness in project assessment and selection process?
    c. To what extent does this process ensure that projects are aligned with program objectives?
    d. Do you identify any gaps?

13. How is project monitoring ensured (tools and indicators)?
    a. Does this, in your view, allow for effectively control of the project's implementation?
    b. To what extent does it enable effective verification of project outputs and outcomes in particular?
    c. To what extent it allows beneficiaries to be paid on time? Does it have an impact on financial errors and risks related to the commitment? Please explain.
    d. What could be improved?

14. To what extent does the mid-term evaluation process help refocus projects on their objectives and enable them to achieve these objectives by the end of the project? Can you give an example where the mid-term review has enabled a project to be corrected or improved? Do you consider the procedure to be appropriate (in terms of time required, schedule, etc.)?
15. In your opinion, are the rules and procedures applicable to Programme's beneficiaries easily understandable for beneficiaries? Are they sufficiently clear and simple?
16. What are the strengths and weaknesses of electronic system tools developed by the Programme? Do you find them easy to understand and use?
17. Do you think the funding for the projects is sufficient for them to achieve their objectives? Please explain.
18. Do you identify any recurring challenge in project implementation? If yes, how could it be better addressed by project support?

Questions related to the Policy Learning Platform

19. What are the main support measures put in place by the JS to accompany the platform's activities?
    a. In your opinion, are they sufficient to meet the needs of the Platform's users?
    b. What feedback have you received from the beneficiaries of these measures? Please give examples.
    c. What could be improved to enhance the effectiveness of these support measures?

20. Can you describe the awareness-raising, outreach, and mobilisation activities implemented for a wider range of stakeholders and potential beneficiaries of the platform (i.e., their frequency, content, target audience)?
    a. In your opinion, which ones are most relevant and least relevant?
    b. Do you identify any gaps? What could be improved?

<u>Communication strategy and selected communication activities (task 1.3)</u>

21. Does the communication strategy enable the objectives set to be achieved (i.e. raise awareness of the program in general, raise awareness among potential project leaders and partners about the program and the support it provides, etc.)?
    a. Which actions are the most relevant and the least relevant?
    b. How do you measure the impact of the strategy?
    c. Are the human and financial resources allocated to communication sufficient?
    d. Is feedback from beneficiaries or the public taken into account to improve actions?
    e. Do you identify any gaps? What could be improved?

22. How are digital/online communication tools used to implement program operations? How do they contribute to effective implementation? Do you identify any best practices or areas for improvement to increase their usefulness?
23. How do you help project holders to communicate on their project achievements? Which communication activity is the most effective and least effective in helping them? Please explain.
24. In your opinion, what improvements could be made to the role of the MA/JS or other programme partners to enhance the Programme communication strategy and/or selected communication activities?

6.1.2.4 Questions related to impact

Overall questions Programme performance (task 2)

25. In your view, is the Interreg Europe distinct and unique compared to the other Interreg strands or other mainstream Cohesion Policy programmes?
26. What major changes have you brought to the programme's intervention logic since the previous programming period?
27. In your interactions with the programme's stakeholders, do you feel that its objectives and areas of intervention are always fully understood: Members Committee, Commission, project managers and partners, platform users, general public? If there are any areas of confusion, what are they in general?
28. What were the main lessons learned from the 2014-2020 programming period in terms of increasing the programme's impact on current programming period?

Evaluation of the projects' performance (task 2.1)

29. How has been justified the decision to focus more funding on "smart", "green" and "social" political objectives, rather than on "more connected" and "closer to citizens"?
30. How did you ensure that the selected projects are relevant to the programme's objectives? In particular: in terms of combination of the different territories covered, diversity of partners, and contribution of actors with varying degrees of development in the relevant areas?
31. What is your view on the quality of the projects funded so far for the current programming period? Would you say that the projects are qualitatively homogeneous across the geographical areas covered by the programme?
32. To what extent do project activities improve the professional capacities of the project beneficiaries?

33. Do you consider that the changes introduced by the new programming period effectively facilitate the monitoring of project performance, in particular the strengthening of pilot actions and of the follow-up phase?
34. Does the set of outputs and results indicators raise any particular difficulties? For example, in terms of data collection, data analysis, understanding by project leaders, etc.

Evaluation of the Policy Learning Platform's (PLP's) performance (task 2.2)

35. Can you give us some historical background on the creation of the PLP? Who came up with the initial idea, and what were their ambitions? How was it received by Member States and by the Commission?
36. Is the added value of the PLP clearly identified today by the Programme's governing bodies and by the beneficiaries themselves?
37. What role does the PLP play in achieving the overall objectives of Interreg Europe?
38. Are synergies between funded projects and the PLP effective? for example in terms of sharing results to enhance the database of best practices; participation in Platform activities; etc.
39. Are there technical issues, or at least areas for improvement, that currently limit the effectiveness of the PLP in certain respects?
40. Do you receive feedback from PLP users? What is their opinion on the added value of the PLP? What improvements have been suggested?
41. Before the end of the programming period, would you say that the PLP is likely to undergo major changes? And with a view to the next programming period?

6.1.2.5 Conclusion

42. In your view, what are the main challenges that the Programme is facing to increase its impact?

6.1.4 Monitoring Committee Members

6.1.4.1 Context of the evaluation

[See context sections in the above Guide for Beneficiaries]

6.1.4.2 Introduction

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself?
2. What is your role in relation to the INTERREG Europe programme for the current programming period? Since when have you held this position?
3. Questions related to operational effectiveness

Programme management and steering (task 1.1)

4. As MC member, is your role in steering the programme clear and complementary? Is the division of responsibilities between programme bodies clear? Do you think is it well understood by the members of each body?
5. Is the coordination between the programme bodies effective? Can you give examples of good practices in terms of coordination?
6. What mechanisms are in place to resolve any conflicts or ambiguities in terms of responsibility?
7. In your opinion, are the decision-making processes clear and transparent? Do you think they ensure effective programme management and steering?
8. Do you consider that you have the capabilities (access to information, contacts, etc.) to work effectively on project approval and, as the link with all relevant stakeholders in your country? What could be improved?
9. What are, from your point of view, the strengths and weaknesses of programme management? How do they affect the effective functioning of the programme steering?
10. In your opinion, what improvements could be made to enhance your work as MC members and the overall programme management and steering?

Programme support to operations (task 1.2)

11. How do you participate in the implementation of support measures? Please describe your activities in detail. Do you think they are effective in supporting applicants and beneficiaries? What could be improved?

Questions related to projects

12. Do you consider that supporting tools help generate high-quality applications? Please explain. What could be improved?
13. In your opinion, is the project assessment and selection process sound, transparent and fair?

    a. How do you ensure transparency in the project evaluation process?
    b. How is fairness ensured in the project assessment and selection process?
    c. To what extent does this process ensure that projects are aligned with program objectives?
    d. Do you identify any gaps?
14. In your opinion, are the rules and procedures applicable to program beneficiaries easily understandable for beneficiaries, including the one for possible pilot actions? Are they sufficiently clear and simple?
15. Do you identify any recurring challenge in project implementation? If yes, how could it be better addressed by project support?
16. In your opinion, what improvements could be made to enhance support to project implementation?

Questions related to the Policy Learning Platform

17. In your view, are the support measures put in place by the MA/JS to accompany the platform's activities adequate and effective? Please explain.
18. Do you consider the awareness-raising, outreach, and mobilisation activities implemented for a wider range of stakeholders and potential beneficiaries of the platform (i.e., their frequency, content, target audience) effective? Please explain.

Communication strategy and selected communication activities (task 1.3)

19. Does the communication strategy enable the objectives set to be achieved (i.e. raise awareness of the program in general, raise awareness among potential project leaders and partners about the program and the support it provides, etc.)? Which actions are the most relevant and the least relevant?
20. How do you participate in the implementation of communication strategy? Please describe your activities in detail. Do you think they are effective?
21. Would you suggest additional communication activities to serve the programme objectives?

6.1.4.3 Questions related to impact

Overall questions Programme performance (task 2)

22. In your view, is the INTERREG Europe distinct and unique compared to the other INTERREG strands or other mainstream Cohesion Policy programmes?
23. What major changes have been brought to the programme's intervention logic since the previous programming period?
24. What were the main changes made to the current programming period compared to the last programming period in order to increase the impact of the projects?

Evaluation of the projects' performance (task 2.1)

25. What is your view on the quality of the projects funded so far for the current programming period? Would you say that the projects are qualitatively homogeneous across the geographical areas covered by the programme?
26. Are you satisfied with how the programme's performance is measured and reported to you? To what extent does it enable effective verification of project outputs and outcomes in particular?

Evaluation of the Policy Learning Platform's (PLP's) performance (task 2.2)

27. How would you define the added value of the PLP? Is it playing a role in achieving the overall objectives of Interreg Europe?
28. If applicable, what areas for improvement can you identify for the PLP, in terms of increasing its impact and strengthening the programme?

6.1.4.4 Conclusion

29. In your view, what are the main challenges that the Programme is facing to increase its impact?

6.1.6 Points of Contact

6.1.6.1 Context of the evaluation

[See context sections in the above Guide for Beneficiaries]

6.1.6.2 Introduction

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself?
2. What is your role in relation to the INTERREG Europe programme for the current programming period? Since when have you held this position?

6.1.6.3 Questions related to operational effectiveness

Programme management and steering (task 1.1)

3. As a PoC, is your role in the programme steering clear? Is the division of responsibilities between programme bodies clear and the roles complementary? Do you think is it well understood by the members of each body?
4. How would you describe the coordination between these organisations? Do you think it is effective? Can you give examples of good practices in terms of coordination?
5. What mechanisms are in place to resolve any conflicts or ambiguities in terms of responsibility?
6. In your opinion, are the decision-making processes clear and transparent? Do you think they ensure effective programme management and steering?

7. Do you consider your resources (e.g., HR and financial) available to the MA/JS sufficient to fulfil their responsibilities or are there gaps? Please explain.
8. Do you consider that you have the capabilities (access to information, contacts, etc.) to work effectively as the link with all relevant stakeholders in your country and provide programme information? What could be improved?
9. What are the strengths and weaknesses of programme management? Do they affect the effective functioning of the programme steering?

Programme support to operations (task 1.2)

10. How do you participate in the implementation of support measures? Please describe your activities in detail. Are they effective? What could be improved?

Questions related to projects

11. Do you consider that supporting tools help generate high-quality applications? Please explain. What could be improved?
12. In your opinion, is the project assessment and selection process sound, transparent and fair? To what extent does this process ensure the selection of good quality projects? Do you identify any gaps?

13. In your opinion, are the rules and procedures applicable to Programme beneficiaries easily understandable for beneficiaries? Are they sufficiently clear and simple?
14. In your opinion, what improvements could be made to enhance support to project generation?

Questions related to the Policy Learning Platform

15. Can you describe the awareness-raising, outreach, and mobilisation activities implemented for a wider range of stakeholders and potential beneficiaries of the platform (i.e., their frequency, content, target audience)?
    a. In your opinion, which ones are most relevant and least relevant?

b. Do you identify any gaps? What could be improved?

Communication strategy and selected communication activities (task 1.3)

16. Does the communication strategy enable the objectives set to be achieved (i.e. raise awareness of the program in general, raise awareness among potential project leaders and partners about the program and the support it provides, etc.)?
    a. Can you detail the actions you have implemented as part of this strategy (i.e. national or regional events to inform or disseminate, aimed at project partners or first-level controllers)?
    b. In your opinion, are these actions effective? Which actions are the most relevant and the least relevant?
    c. How do you measure the impact of the strategy?
    d. Are the human and financial resources allocated to communication sufficient?
    e. Is feedback from beneficiaries or the public taken into account to improve actions?
    f. Do you identify any gaps? What could be improved?

17. Would you suggest additional communication activities to serve the programme objectives?
18. In your opinion, what improvements could be made to enhance the Programme communication strategy and/or selected communication activities?

6.1.6.4 Questions related to impact

Overall questions Programme performance (task 2)

19. Are you experiencing difficulties in explaining the objectives and rationale behind the Interreg Europe programme to potential beneficiaries in your territory? Do they frequently ask questions about what the programme funds?

Evaluation of the projects' performance (task 2.1)

20. Are you involved in identifying potential beneficiaries of the programme in your territory? If so, how do you target them and what are your analysis criteria?
21. Are you involved in disseminating the results of projects that have been held in your territory? If so, are you satisfied with how the programme's performance is measured and reported to you? Do you find it easy to highlight the impact of projects in your territory?

Evaluation of the Policy Learning Platform's (PLP's) performance (task 2.2)

22. Do you collect feedback from PLP users in your territory? If so, what is the most common feedback?

6.1.6.5 Conclusion

23. In your view, what are the main challenges that the Programme is facing to increase its impact on your territory?

6.1.8 Peer Review Beneficiaries

6.1.8.1 Context of the evaluation

The GEIE GECOTTI-PE, as the Managing Authority of the Interreg Europe, has commissioned EY Advisory Services to conduct an operational and impact evaluation of this programme for the period 2021-2027.

The objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the Programme and its implementation structures in achieving the Programme's strategic objectives. It aims to measure the progress made since the Programme's launch in delivering its intended results and provide recommendations to enhance implementation for the remainder of the programming period and prepare the development of the post-2027 Programme (2028-2034).

This interview will gather your feedback on the programme's implementation and first results, particularly with the Peer Review service offered by its Policy Learning Platform. It will identify any obstacles encountered, best practices observed, and potential improvement areas to enhance its effectiveness.

The results of this interview will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Any information you share will be anonymised and your answers will only be attributed to your group of stakeholders.

6.1.8.2 Introduction

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself and your role in your organisation?
2. How did you first learn about Interreg Europe, and specifically the Peer Review service offered by the Policy Learning Platform? What motivated you to engage with the programme and request a peer review?
3. Can you describe any other involvement you may have in the programme? Is your organisation a partner in an Interreg Europe project?
4. Are you familiar with other Interreg programmes? If yes, what do you think would differentiate the Interreg Europe programme from the others you may know?

6.1.8.3 Peer Reviews

Operational evaluation: programme support to operations (task 1.2)

5. What made you decide to apply for a peer review? To what extent do you believe the peer review process is relevant to policy makers?
6. What support or guidance did you receive during the peer review application process?
7. What is your experience with the application evaluation and selection process?
    a. How long did it take between submitting your application for the peer review and its approval?
    b. Did you find this process transparent and fair?
8. Did you receive any support or guidance from the Interreg Europe Platform's Thematic Expert(s) assigned to your peer review for its preparation (e.g. guidance on drafting the thematic background document detailing the policy challenges and main questions to be addressed)?
9. What is your perception of the selection process for peers? Were you consulted during the process? To what extent do you think that the peers assigned to your peer review were relevant to your specific policy issue?
10. During the peer review itself (fine-tuning and onsite/online meetings), did you find the level and modalities (conference calls, onsite visits/online meeting) of engagement with the peers and the Platform Thematic Experts to be sufficient, relevant and useful?
11. Do you have any other comments regarding the peer review methodology? Did you find it sufficiently clear and robust to address your policy issue?
12. Do you find the peer review follow-up actions useful to further support the implementation of the peer review recommendations?

13. What is your perception of the peer review process overall? Did you encounter any challenges? Would you recommend the peer review service to other policy makers?

Impact evaluation: performance of the policy learning platform (peer reviews) (task 2.2)

14. In your opinion, what will be the main added value of the peer review for your region? Did the results of the peer review meet the needs initially identified?
15. To what extent have your individual capacities in your policy area been strengthened by the peer review?
16. Have you observed any increase in institutional capacity within your organisation as a result of the peer review? Has the peer review led/is likely to lead to any policy improvements on the ground?
17. In your opinion, in what ways should the support provided by the programme (Platform's Thematic Experts in particular) be strengthened in order to increase the impact of the peer review? What improvements could be made overall?

6.1.8.4 Other questions related to the Policy Learning Platform

Operational evaluation: programme support to operations (task 1.2)

18. What is your perception of the accessibility and clarity of the Policy Learning Platform in general? Do you find it easy to navigate and use?

Impact evaluation: Policy Learning Platform's performance (task 2.2)

19. Using the Platform, other than peer reviews, what kind of service(s) were you looking for? How did you find this service and were you satisfied with it?
20. How would you define the added value of the Platform? Is there, and would you be likely to use, an equivalent service offered by another Programme that would provide you with the same support?
21. How does the Platform influence the capacities of your organisation? How can the Platform influence the policies you implement?

6.3 Interview guides for case studies

6.3.1 Projects

6.3.1.1 Context of the evaluation

The GEIE GECOTTI-PE, as the Managing Authority of the INTERREG Europe, has commissioned EY to conduct an operational and impact evaluation of this programme for the period 2021-2027.

The objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the Programme and its implementation structures in achieving the Programme's strategic objectives, measure the progress made since the Programme's launch in delivering its intended outcomes and provide recommendations to enhance implementation for the remainder of the programming period and prepare the development of the post-2027 Programme (2028-2034).

As part of the data collection activities in this evaluation, we are conducting several case studies of specific cooperation projects that focus on their impact on partners. We are interested in your experiences, the impacts you have observed, the challenges you have encountered, and any areas for improvement.

The discussion will be conducted in full confidentiality; insights will be anonymised and presented only at an aggregated level. We encourage you to share your views openly, including divergent perspectives, as they are all valuable for the evaluation.

6.3.1.2 Introduction

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself?
2. Can you describe your involvement in the programme activities (i.e. your cooperation project/platform's activities)?

6.3.1.3 Understanding the project's intervention logic

3. How would you describe the main objectives of your project in your own words?
4. Do you feel the activities carried out so far clearly connect to these objectives, as well as to your organisation's needs? Why or why not?
5. Are there any aspects of the project's design or approach that seem unclear or inconsistent to you?

6.3.1.4 Relevance and sufficiency of project design (including new features)

6. What made you decide to apply for an Interreg Europe Cooperation Project?
7. To what extent do you believe your project's objectives and design is relevant to you as a policy maker?
8. Has your project made use of any of the new features available in the Programme? (e.g. the possibility to apply for pilot actions from the start of the project)
    a. In your view, are these features relevant to the issues the project aims to address?
    b. Do you think that these features are sufficient to achieve the project's objectives? If not, what is missing?

6.3.1.5 Professional capacity-building

9. In your opinion, what will be the main added value of your project for your territory? And for the territory of other partners?
10. Do you anticipate that the project results will meet the needs initially identified? If not, what shortcomings do you regret?
11. In your opinion, how and to what extent has your participation in the project contributed to building capacity in your organisation (skills, knowledge, networks)? Can you give examples of how you have applied what you learned in your work?
12. Are the performance reporting tools provided by the Joint Secretariat clear and easy to use?

6.3.1.6 Policy instrument changes

13. Has your organisation's increased capacity (skills, knowledge, networks) led to any changes in your chosen policy instrument? Which mechanisms or strategies have been most effective in translating project insights into policy change?
14. Can you describe any specific improvements or adaptations in these policies that you attribute to the project?
15. What factors have helped or hindered translating capacity gains into policy changes?

6.3.1.7 Territorial cohesion and reducing disparities

16. From your perspective, has the project strengthened cooperation between regions and organisations at this stage?
17. Do you think that there is any evidence at this stage that the project has helped reduce disparities between more and less developed regions? How so?
18. Are there any examples of knowledge of practices being transferred across regions?

6.3.3 Peer Review

6.3.3.1 Context of the evaluation

The GEIE GECOTTI-PE, as the Managing Authority of the INTERREG Europe, has commissioned EY to conduct an operational and impact evaluation of this programme for the period 2021-2027.

The objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the Programme and its implementation structures in achieving the Programme's strategic objectives, measure the progress made since the Programme's launch in delivering its intended outcomes and provide recommendations to enhance implementation for the remainder of the programming period and prepare the development of the post-2027 Programme (2028-2034).

As part of the data collection activities in this evaluation, we are conducting several case studies of specific projects and peer reviews that focus on their impact on partners/beneficiaries. We are interested in your experiences, the impacts you have observed, the challenges you have encountered, and any areas for improvement resulting from your Peer Review.

The discussion will be conducted in full confidentiality; insights will be anonymised and presented only at an aggregated level. We encourage you to share your views openly, including divergent perspectives, as they are all valuable for the evaluation.

6.3.3.2 Introduction

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself and your role in your organisation?
2. How did you first learn about Interreg Europe, and specifically the Peer Review service offered by the Policy Learning Platform? What motivated you to engage with the peer review service?
3. Can you describe any other involvement you may have in the programme? Is your organisation a partner in an Interreg Europe project?

6.3.3.3 Understanding the intervention logic of the Peer Review

4. How would you describe the main objectives of the Peer Review you conducted in your own words?
5. Do you perceive the purpose and link between the beneficiary’s needs, the activities, outputs and outcomes of the Peer Review clear?
6. Do you think that the purpose and design of the Peer Review clearly connect to these objectives? Why or why not?
7. Are there any aspects of the Peer Review’s design or approach that seem unclear or inconsistent to you?

6.3.3.4 Relevance of the Peer Review

8. To what extent do you believe the peer review process is relevant to policy makers?
9. During the peer review itself (fine-tuning and onsite/online meetings), did you find the level and modalities (conference calls, onsite visits/online meeting) of engagement with the Platform Thematic Experts to be sufficient, relevant and useful?
10. Do you have any other comments regarding the peer review methodology? Did you find it sufficiently clear and robust to address the policy issue in question?
11. Do you find the peer review follow-up actions useful to further support the implementation of the peer review recommendations?

6.3.3.5 Effectiveness and impact of the Peer Review

12. In your opinion, what will be the main added value of the peer review in the region? Did the results of the peer review meet the needs initially identified?
13. Have you observed any increase in institutional capacity within the beneficiary organisation as a result of the peer review? Could you provide any examples?
14. Have you observed any factors in the Peer Review process that have enabled or hindered the translation of individual capacity gains into organisational capacity building?

15. If relevant, do you think that the capacities gained through the Peer Review process could or will contribute to improvements in policies on the topic? Could you explain how and provide any examples?
16. Have you observed any factors in the Peer Review process that would enable or hinder the translation of organisational capacity gains on the topic into policy improvements?
17. In your opinion, in what ways should the support provided by the programme (Platform's Thematic Experts in particular) be strengthened in order to increase the impact of the peer review? What improvements could be made overall?

6.5 Interview guides for focus groups

6.5.1 Focus Group 1 – Beneficiaries

6.5.1.1 Context of the evaluation

The GEIE GECOTTI-PE, as the Managing Authority of the INTERREG Europe, has commissioned EY to conduct an operational and impact evaluation of this programme for the period 2021-2027.

The objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the Programme and its implementation structures in achieving the Programme's strategic objectives, measure the progress made since the Programme's launch in delivering its intended outcomes and provide recommendations to enhance implementation for the remainder of the programming period and prepare the development of the post-2027 Programme (2028-2034).

The focus group is designed to gather your collective feedback on how the Programme communicates as well as how it supports your communication efforts. We are interested in your experiences, the tools and channels you use, what works well, the challenges you encounter, and any areas for improvement.

The discussion will be conducted in full confidentiality; insights will be anonymised and presented only at an aggregated level. We encourage you to share your views openly, including divergent perspectives, as they are all valuable for the evaluation.

6.5.1.2 Focus Group Questions

Digital / online communication tools, and Programme support

Digital tools

1. Thinking about the website, project pages, online guidance, templates, etc. — how well do these tools support your work on the project? Can you provide an example?
2. Which tools help you most in carrying out your project tasks? Can you provide an example?
3. Are there tools that feel difficult to use or could be improved?

Programme support

4. How satisfied are you with the programme’s support — such as seminars, tutorials, written guidance, storytelling training, Q&A sessions?
5. Which have been the most valuable for you and why? Which have been less helpful? Can you provide examples?

Role and contribution of Points of Contact (PoCs)

6. Have you interacted with your national Point of Contact? If yes, how helpful have they been in supporting communication and understanding the programme? How often do you speak with POCs?
7. In what ways do PoCs contribute effectively — and in what ways could their support be improved?

Overall effectiveness and recommendations

8. How well do you feel the Programme’s communication works for you in practice?
9. What parts of the communication feel clear and useful — and what feels less effective?
10. If you could change or improve one thing about how the Programme communicates or supports project communication, what would it be?
11. Are there new tools or approaches that would help you communicate your project’s results more effectively?

6.5.3 Focus Group 2 – Points of Contact

6.5.3.1 Context of the evaluation

The GEIE GECOTTI-PE, as the Managing Authority of the INTERREG Europe, has commissioned EY to conduct an operational and impact evaluation of this programme for the period 2021-2027.

The objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the Programme in achieving the Programme's strategic objectives, measure the progress made since the Programme's launch in delivering its intended outcomes and provide recommendations to enhance implementation for the remainder of the programming period and prepare the development of the post-2027 Programme (2028-2034).

Today's focus group brings together National Points of Contact to gather your perspectives as key actors in disseminating information, supporting beneficiaries, and ensuring national-level visibility of the Programme. We will discuss the effectiveness of the communication strategy, the usefulness of the Programme's digital and online communication tools, the relevance of communication activities, and your recommendations for strengthening communication efforts going forward.

The discussion will be conducted in full confidentiality, insights will be anonymised and presented only at an aggregated level. We encourage you to share your views openly, including divergent perspectives, as they are all valuable for the evaluation.

6.5.3.2 Focus Group Questions

Digital / online communication tools

1. Regarding the Programme's online tools (website, project pages, guidance, dashboards, templates, etc.), how well do they support Programme operations and objectives from your perspective?
2. Which digital tools are most useful for your work with applicants and beneficiaries? Can you provide an example?
3. Are there tools or features that are less effective or difficult to use? Can you provide an example?
4. Are there tools that you have never used so far?
5. Are there tools that should be enhanced/redesigned, or introduced?

Communication activities

6. Which communication activities (e.g. national info days, newsletters, social media campaigns, publications, EU-level events) do you find to be the most effective? Can you provide an example of an activity that was successful?
7. Are there communication activities that have limited or no impact? Can you provide an example? Could these activities be improved/redesigned?
8. Are there any communication activities that have not been organised yet which could have an impact?

Effectiveness of the communication strategy and recommendations

9. Overall, from your perspective as NPoCs, is the Programme's communication effective?
10. What improvements would you suggest to strengthen the Programme's communication overall?
11. What would help you, as NPoCs, to support better beneficiaries and promote the Programme at national level?

7. Annex 7 – Inventory of documentation analysed

Document type	Document name
Programme Main Features	▶ Cooperation Programme Document ▶ Interreg Europe Programme Manual ▶ Monitoring Committee rules of procedure ▶ Interreg Europe (2021-2027) Performance Framework ▶ Documents related to meetings of the monitoring committee and to the written procedures (supporting documents and decision notes) ▶ Management and control system description ▶ Documents related to the meetings of the national points of contact (preparatory documents and decision notes) ▶ Contact database of Programme bodies updated by the joint secretariat: list of projects partners, managing authority, members of the monitoring committee, national points of contact, Platform experts All on The Platform and Portal
Programme Communication	▶ Communication strategy described in the cooperation Programme ▶ Evaluations of the past seminars, workshops, webinars organised by the Programme ▶ Support tools made available to project partners, controllers and national points of contact: guides, online videos and tutorials, webinars, templates, presentations ▶ Briefings and updates made to the points of contact ▶ External audit of the Programme website carried out in 2023, and information on the progress in terms of follow up measures

Project Cycle	▶ Extractions from the Interreg Europe Portal's databased, covering:
	    • Submitted applications
	    • Interreg Europe Parnters
	    • Policy report results
	Database of project idea feedback from the JS to beneficiaries made over the three calls: 1) project idea feedback form; 2) questions about the call
	▶ Project selection: eligibility check and assessment information, conditions to fulfil by projects to be officially approved
	▶ Database of Pilot Actions
	▶ Statistics and project implementation including all output and results indicators as well as financial data, progress reports drafted by the beneficiaries with clarifications required by the JS, progress report status monitoring
	▶ Additional material produced by the projects and the Platform:
	    • Good practices identified by the projects and submitted to the Programme via the Programme's website
	    • News postings, event learnings
	▶ Projects' websites, all hosted by the Programme website
	▶ Other project-specific documentation analysed during case studies (e.g. updates on project partner websites, project brochures/magazines)

Policy Learning Platform	▶ Platform contract with annual work plans and content calendars (ToR drafts in the PS internal sharepoint) ▶ Platform implementation manual (Annex 8 of the programme manual) ▶ Platform monitoring and evaluation report and quality performance assessments + output and results indicators ▶ Results of the surveys and of the evaluation implemented by the Platform team ▶ Documentation related to the Peer Review conducted with the City of Tallin (27/09/2023): background paper, post-closure interview, presentations and meetings, final report, follow-up article
Previous Evaluations	▶ Programme evaluation for the 2014-2020 programming period
Audit	▶ System audit reports