



Greater North
Sea Basin Initiative



Antwerp Declaration on the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative as a cross-sectoral platform for the joint development of the Greater North Sea Basin

The Ministers of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK, in the presence of the competent European Commissioners,

Considering:

The Ministerial Conclusions, adopted on 21 November 2023 by Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom regarding the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI).

The non-binding and informal nature of the initiative.

The increasing impacts of climate change on the sea, coasts, and marine ecosystems, in combination with the increase in human activities.

The marine environment of the Greater North Sea Basin provides services and benefits to society that need to be protected for current and future generations. The cumulative pressures of existing and new human activities have and may continue to change the nature of the Greater North Sea Basin, which is regarded as one of the most biologically productive seas in the world.

The marine ecosystem of the Greater North Sea Basin is significantly affected by human activities, with declining biodiversity and continued habitat degradation. It is now clear that the need to address these drivers of degradation and biodiversity loss, as recently described in OSPAR's 2023 Quality Status Report, is ever-more pressing. It is therefore crucial that the Greater North Sea Basin countries manage the combined uses following an ecosystem-based approach, while also meeting the needs of the peoples around the Greater North Sea Basin; providing environmental, economic and social benefits.

The historic outcome reached in Paris in December 2015 where the world adopted the first-ever global and legally-binding climate agreement with the aim of keeping global warming well below 2°C and of pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C.



That anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere constitute pollution of the marine environment, State Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea have the specific obligations to take all necessary measures to prevent, reduce and control marine pollution from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and to endeavour to harmonise their policies with this obligation.

The political declaration of 6 June 2016 on energy cooperation between the North Seas countries; along with the political Declaration of 6 December 2021 on energy cooperation between the North Seas Countries and the European Commission on behalf of the European Union (“North Seas Energy Cooperation”); and the Memorandum of Understanding of 18 December 2022 on offshore renewable energy cooperation between the participants of the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), of the one side, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, of the other side.

The Ostend Declaration of Energy Ministers on The North Seas as a Green Power Plant of Europe: Delivering cross-border projects and anchoring the renewable industry in Europe, adopted on 24 April 2023 by Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom.

The commitment to nature restoration as set out in target 2 of the Global Biodiversity Framework and to the OSPAR North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy (NEAES) 2030.

CONSIDERING The importance of maintaining sustainable economic activity in the Greater North Sea Basin to support food security, in particular fisheries and aquaculture.

International, national and EU legislation and policies to protect the environment, conserve and restore nature, address climate change and reduce pollution, as well as those that provide frameworks for the protection of the marine and coastal environment and biodiversity, manage fish stocks sustainably and promote the Sustainable Blue Economy.

Recognising :

The importance of securing strong and integral political commitment at the national level for developing regional, sea-basin cooperation on a pragmatic, step by step, bottom-up basis.

The work of existing regional cooperation forums.

The need for a concrete, flexible and realistic work programme for regional cooperation around Maritime Spatial Planning and other efficient management processes, Nature, Fisheries and Energy, whose progress should be evaluated periodically and implementation should be cost-effective and efficient.

The importance of the European Commission as a strategic partner to GNSBI.

Set as objectives:

To build on existing mechanisms to strengthen and renew the cooperation in the Greater North Sea Basin agreed by the GNSBI participating countries in 2023, based on lessons learned from previous experiences through a pragmatic, step-by-step approach, to support national marine spatial planning (MSP) and efficient management processes through the GNSBI whilst avoiding duplication of work.



To enhance informed national decision making and cross-border, cross-sectoral collaboration by acting as a forum for facilitating early dialogue, and engaging early with all parties¹ with the aim to, where possible, ensure the optimal use of limited available physical space in the Greater North Sea Basin within its ecological carrying capacity, while acknowledging the environmental, economic and social perspectives.

To be a platform for cross-sectorial and cross border knowledge sharing.

To build trust among all involved decision-makers, experts, and stakeholders in the different policy domains and to enhance knowledge and data sharing.

To support the development of the Sustainable Blue Economy, including amongst others offshore renewables and energy infrastructure in the Greater North Sea Basin.

To contribute to the protection and restoration of the marine ecosystems of the Greater North Sea Basin to support the health and improved use of our shared sea basin.

To contribute to a long term perspective for sustainable fisheries and marine food production, to help ensure that marine food sources from the Greater North Sea viable for future generations.

Agree to:

Set as an objective the implementation the work programme, as indicated in Annex I and cooperate to this end in coherence with the governance rules set out in Annex II.

Review progress on a regular basis in coherence with the governance rules set out in Annex II.

And express their commitment to:

Communicate the interim results of the working tracks regularly and thereby provide a basis for an open and transparent regional dialogue.

Take stock of progress in the implementation of the working programme, as indicated in Annex I, three years after the signing of this declaration and revise the work programme as necessary.

Have an open dialogue with all stakeholders, including developers, manufacturers, food and fisheries entrepreneurs, institutional investors, relevant funding and financing bodies, system operators, civil society, research institutions, NGOs and regulatory authorities as well as other regional and international organisations and authorities when drawing up and implementing a work programme and further shaping regional cooperation in the Greater North Sea Basin.

¹ Where possible and appropriate, all parties refers to decision makers and experts involved in nature, energy, fisheries, MSP and effective management processes from the GNSBI countries, along with the European Commission



Nature of the Political Declaration:

This document records a political intent alone. It is not intended to establish any new legal commitments or to replace or modify any existing legal obligations or national government policy.

Signed in Antwerp, Belgium on 24 November 2024

The Minister ... of
the Kingdom of Belgium

The Minister of
the Kingdom of Denmark

The Ministerof the French Republic

The Federal Minister ...of the Federal Republic
of Germany

The Minister ...of Ireland

The Minister ...of the Kingdom of Norway

The Minister ... of
the Kingdom of the Netherlands

The Minister...of the Kingdom of Sweden

The Secretary of State ..of United Kingdom of
Great Britain and Northern Ireland





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Annex I: Work programme 2025– 2027

Acknowledging the efforts and deliverables put forward by the working tracks, the following work programme for 2025-2027 was developed based on their contributions. Before implementation, funding and resource requirements must be fully considered.

The work programme will be monitored annually by the Director Generals of the GNSBI countries, with the possibility of reassessing when deemed necessary.

The intent of the working program is for the working tracks and deliverables to complement one another.

Regarding their participation in the working tracks, countries are free to focus on the work areas of their interest. The approval of the work programme doesn't entail the obligation to participate in all work tracks or agree to all outputs. However, it is strongly recommended that countries engage in as many areas as possible to ensure alignment with the GNSBI's shared goals.

- Steering group
 - Give strategic guidance to the working tracks and report to DGs, ensuring coherency and consistency between tracks.
 - Set up a budgetary framework in 2025, based on a thorough assessment of needs and available resources and mechanisms to ensure a sustainable and effective financial structure for the GNSBI.
 - Develop a stakeholder strategy that guides stakeholder involvement in the development and implementation of the GNSBI's work, based on the findings of a stakeholder analysis.
 - Periodically reassess and update the work programme.
 - Coordinate the establishment of a secretariat or other coordinating mechanisms.
 - Develop terms of reference for the overall initiative, including for the working tracks.
 - Consider and make recommendations to the Executive Board on proposals for new working tracks and changes to existing ones

- Working track Nature Restoration and Conservation

Working, where appropriate, with other relevant initiatives, will:

- Strengthen the political will to regard nature as a basic requirement for marine spatial planning and other effective management processes, including developing a vision on the priorities for nature conservation and restoration.



- Map nature related benefits in the Greater North Sea Basin, connecting the benefits to different sectors.
- Develop narratives on the consequences for the environment/ state of nature in the future if it is not effectively mainstreamed into the decision-making process.
- Conduct a pilot study to demonstrate the benefits of biological value and sensitivity maps to help inform cross sectoral, cross border discussions.
- Develop proposed actions to strengthen cooperation on nature restoration and conservation planning between countries.

While considering existing frameworks for the protection of marine and coastal environment and biodiversity and OSPAR.

- Working track Cumulative impacts assessments (CIA)

- Seek collaboration with OSPAR, ICES and NSEC and other Working Tracks in GNSBI to align and improve development and application of CIA tools to assess the impacts of human activities and propose advice for preventive and mitigation measures.
- Support collaboration in ecological knowledge development, data sharing and data collection in line with an adaptive management approach (as promoted in the Ecosystem-based approach) to improve decision making on the management of the marine environment.
- Strive for an alignment of CIA approaches, where appropriate, on regional sea level (that support MSFD and N2000 obligations).
- Develop recommendations on how to use CIA results and develop a vision on the application of working track outputs, including; CIA, hotspot maps, nature enhancement, etc, where appropriate.
- Develop specifications of the decision tools in collaboration with the Working Track Nature (mainly focusing on Cumulative impact assessment, and more specific topics like hot spot maps) and develop recommendations for the application of these tools.

- Working track Multi-use

- Prepare a definition of multi-use for the GNSBI context.
- Define and agree on the ambition of multi-use taking into account the policy domains with their respective national constraints and restrains and the individual levels of national cooperation of GNSBI countries
- Develop a showcase for the added value of multi-use, particularly in a cross-boundary setting.

- Working track Long Term Perspective of Fisheries^{2;3}

- Finalise the fisheries study and from there develop new knowledge/ understanding and share information for a long-term fisheries perspective.
- Develop a proposal for an institutionalised regular study conduction, including institutionalised data collection, analysis and storage which conforms with the high sensitivity of the data needed

² The United Kingdom is currently not involved in the Working Track Long Term Perspective on Fisheries

³ Considering the non-binding and informal nature of the initiative, the work done in this working track does not impede upon the exclusive competence of EU COM regarding fisheries policy.



- Discuss definitions of when/how fisheries can be considered significantly affected by other spatial uses – and when not.
- Discuss developed proposals with stakeholders
- After the fisheries study institutionalisation, analyse what the collective impact of other economic sectors is on the availability of space for the fishing fleet on the level of the GNSBI.

- Working track Knowledge sharing

- Consider developing and implementing a map-based knowledge sharing platform and aligning data-sharing and workflow procedures between countries, with the aim to enhance informed national decision making and cross-border, cross-sectoral collaboration and dialogue among the countries bordering the Greater North Sea Basin, in the preparation and execution phase of maritime spatial planning and other effective management processes, where appropriate.
- The Working Track Knowledge Sharing will continue to work closely together with the other working tracks in 2025 and beyond: iteratively feeding their products into the knowledge sharing platform, if/when developed, and facilitating their discussions while using it. The knowledge sharing platform would be aligned with and build upon existing portals such as developed by the EMODNET community and the Common Sharing Environment (CISE). The existing North Seas MSP Collaboration Group would be involved as end users reflecting on the usability of the platform in practice.
- After having completed phase 1 in 2024, phase 2 (2025-27) could result in the further development and implementation of the knowledge sharing platform 'Compendium' as an online (and, if deemed necessary, secluded) working space where the GNSBI countries can share both public and confidential information in the preparation and execution phase of maritime spatial planning and other effective management processes.
- The European Digital Twin of the Ocean (EDITO) seems the most suitable environment to implement such a secluded online working space: this will be further explored.
- Phase 2 could also include the exploration of an information service tool for the Greater North Sea Basin (within the EDITO environment). The aim would be to produce a prototype, including and combining digital twins, models and tools that are under construction in other relevant (EU) projects.





Greater North
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Annex II: Governance

1. Structure

- **Ministers' Conference**

Ministers shall meet on a regular basis in line with the initiative's development and political goals, and when sufficient progress on content has been made.

These meetings, involving participating countries' Ministers and the competent European Commissioners, will be established in order to provide political guidance and support to the initiative and its tracks.

Ministers, in the presence of the competent European Commissioners shall

- Give political guidance and support;
- Take stock of the implementation of the multi-annual working program and revise priorities as necessary;
- Take note of the progress reports of the working tracks.

- **Executive Board**

The executive board, consisting of Directors General or Directors from the participating countries and from the competent Directorate-general of the European Commission, shall meet at least once a year or sooner when deemed necessary or appropriate, either in person or online in order to oversee, guide and monitor the work of the working tracks and to review the overall progress of the initiative. They report to the Ministers and the competent European Commissioners and will ensure continuity and progress between ministerial engagements.

The Directors General or Directors shall

- Review and provide guidance on the overall direction and management of the initiative;
- Define the main objectives and deliverables, oversee, guide & monitor the work of the working tracks;
- Guide the work of the Steering Group;
- Prepare the groundwork for ministerial meetings, ensuring that ministers are well-informed and aligned with the broader agenda; and
- Maintain coherency between their respective policies.



- **Steering Group**

The work carried out at technical level by the working tracks will be guided and interlinked through a steering group that consists of country coordinators, a representative of the European Commission, and tracks leads on invitation. The composition of the group may change depending on the subject of the meeting.

The steering group is responsible for the overall coordination and strategic management of the work of the different working tracks, guiding the initiative and ensuring alignment with its overarching objectives. They will report to the Directors General or Directors.

The steering group shall

- Oversee the day-to-day operation of the initiative;
- Coordinate efforts between countries and tracks;
- Deliberate on the direction the GNSBI should take and the message it aims to convey;
- Define the planning and resources needed;
- Prepare, monitor and review the implementation of the multi-annual working program, intermediate targets and outstanding issues;
- Monitor and approve all major deliverables produced by the working tracks, prior to their endorsement by the executive board;
- Consider and make recommendations to the Executive Board on proposals for new working tracks and changes to existing ones
- Sign off the completion of each stage and authorize the start of the next stage;
- Ensure that the deliverables of the working tracks are made in consistency and coherency with each other;
- Identify the main issues and/or activities that need the involvement of existing regional cooperation forums and other stakeholders and engage with them on a regular basis, particularly when topics of relevance to them or areas within their expertise are discussed.
- Communicate on a periodic basis the progress of the initiative to the Directors General.

- **Working Tracks**

The multi-annual work program will be implemented by voluntary working tracks, consisting of experts designated by national administrations, the Commission and relevant stakeholders.

Tracks may be adjusted, closed or consolidated as necessary, and new ones may be established based on new and emerging issues. To avoid silos, it is crucial to ensure continuous communication and interlinkages between tracks.

The working tracks will implement the work programme as indicated in Annex 1. They will retain the possibility to engage on a regular basis with stakeholders, civil society and other organisations, particularly when topics of relevance to them or areas within their expertise are discussed, in order to ensure the smooth implementation of the work programme.

GNSBI countries will strive to maintain a minimum level of engagement in responding to or contributing to working track outputs to ensure continued progress

The Working Tracks are chaired by 1 or more representatives of and/or experts designated by the participating countries.



- **Secretariat function**

The secretariat function is responsible for the day-to-day operational, logistical, and administrative tasks that support the Minister's, Directors General, Steering Group and, when required, Working Track meetings. The secretariat function reports to the presidency and the steering group.

The secretariat function shall:

- Be responsible for day-to-day operational, logistical, and administrative tasks. This covers the preparation of meetings, documentation and secretarial duties;
- Be resourced to exploit and deploy best available technology, engagement and facilitation tools in support of GNSBI to ensure efficient working and decision making between dispersed representatives, including through seamless hybrid meetings.
- Coordinate & participate in meeting organisation (including agenda management, reporting, archiving, and conference call organization);
- Facilitate the preparation of periodic progress reports;
- Ensure the different high-level guidelines and recommendations are taken into account within the groups' deliverables;
- Ensure good internal and external communication, coordination and consistency.

2. Management

- **Rotating Presidency**

The Ministers', Directors General and Steering Group meetings are co-chaired by 2 participating countries on a voluntary and annually rotating basis, with at least one of the chairs being from the participating EU countries. Participating countries are committed to sharing the burden of the co-presidency in a fair and balanced manner, where possible, while taking into account each country's resources and capacity.

The chairpersons are responsible for ensuring there is communication & coordination between the participating countries and the working tracks they are participating in, in order to produce the required deliverables, with the required standard of quality and within the specified constraints of time and cost.

The chairpersons shall

- Maintain the procedural order;
- Manage the overall schedule to ensure work is assigned and completed on time;
- Prepare meetings and manage agendas, with the support of the secretariat;
- Oversee the interlinkages and further development of the deliverables of the working tracks;
- Facilitate communication and information exchange within the initiative and with external stakeholders;
- Organise high-level events taking place during their tenure.



- **Track leads**

The Working Tracks are co-chaired by 1 or more representatives of or experts designated by the participating countries. They will consider and develop proposals for implementation of the deliverables of their respective tracks mentioned in the working program.

Track leads shall:

- Guide Work Track members in finding common agreement on a work plan to fulfil their respective deliverables;
- Aim to reach the objectives of the working track and the overall goal of the initiative;
- Monitor and manage the overall timeline and progress of the goals and deliverables in their respective tracks;
- Proactively seek interlinkages with the other working tracks;
- Signal challenges and/or risks towards the steering group;
- Identify, track, manage and resolve risks and issues;
- Proactively share information with stakeholders.

3. Communication

- The GNSBI shall engage with stakeholders and inform them of its work and progress through a clear stakeholder and communication plan.
- All official communication to stakeholders shall be first agreed by the Steering Group.

4. Resources

Costs for participants, including travel expenses and accommodation for meetings, will be covered by their respective delegating institutions. The host country will bear the direct costs associated with hosting meetings.

GNSBI countries will aim to find fair and, where possible, balanced financing options for the functioning of GNSBI, including its secretariat function. This process will be subject to each country's specific circumstances and national and constitutional procedures.

