



GOVERNANCE IN THE NORTH SEA BASIN



Please note that this document is intended to present a snapshot of the current governance of EU Sea basins as of November 2024. However as highlighted by the sections that follow, this can be dynamic and is subject to change.

As a common good, for decades sea basins have been areas for cooperation between States. In the first instance, cooperation was driven by environmental aspects since marine ecosystems do not know legal borders, and their environmental status is dependent on the pressures/stressors from all around the sea basin. As a result, regional sea conventions (e.g., OSPAR, HELCOM, Barcelona Convention, Bucharest Convention) were set up in each sea basin with dedicated organisations to assess human impacts and to propose actions to recover a good environmental status for the marine ecosystems, notably under the policy framework of the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

In parallel, and in line with EU integrated maritime policy (IMP), various maritime policy frameworks have been established and endorsed to support cooperation on maritime affairs in sea basins. Most of them have been engaging EU MSs and the non-EU neighbouring countries across whole sea basins (Mediterranean, Atlantic, Black Sea, Baltic, North Sea) or subsea basins (WestMED, Adriatic & Ionian Seas).

Considering the local, regional and sea basin specificities, this framework contributes to the Sustainable Blue Economy (SBE) in line with the European Commission's communication on "a new approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU" ([COM\(2021\)240 final](#)). Ministerial declarations, roadmaps and dedicated governance have been designed/anticipated to catalyse cooperation.

After a detailed review of the North Sea basin strategies, marine conventions and macroregions, this study provides an overview of how SBE and Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) have been considered within the North Sea basin by each initiative, and by recalling their objectives and governance, how each initiative can therefore be an enabler for SBE via MSP. It highlights the cooperation between EU MS and non-EU MS. This first edition will be published on the EU MSP Platform and updated accordingly following any related update.

In summary, it states that MSP has been a long-standing topic in certain Regional Sea Conventions (e.g., HELCOM) while in others, it is just emerging (e.g., Barcelona Convention) along with other concepts such as land-sea interactions and Integrated Coastal Zone Management. In addition, it highlights that the EU Mission "Restore our ocean and waters", the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership but also projects under regional programmes and funding instruments (i.e. EMFAF) have a strong regional dimension with MSP playing an important role. Even if it is not a "governance framework" in the strict sense, it can steer cooperation amongst member states and beyond.

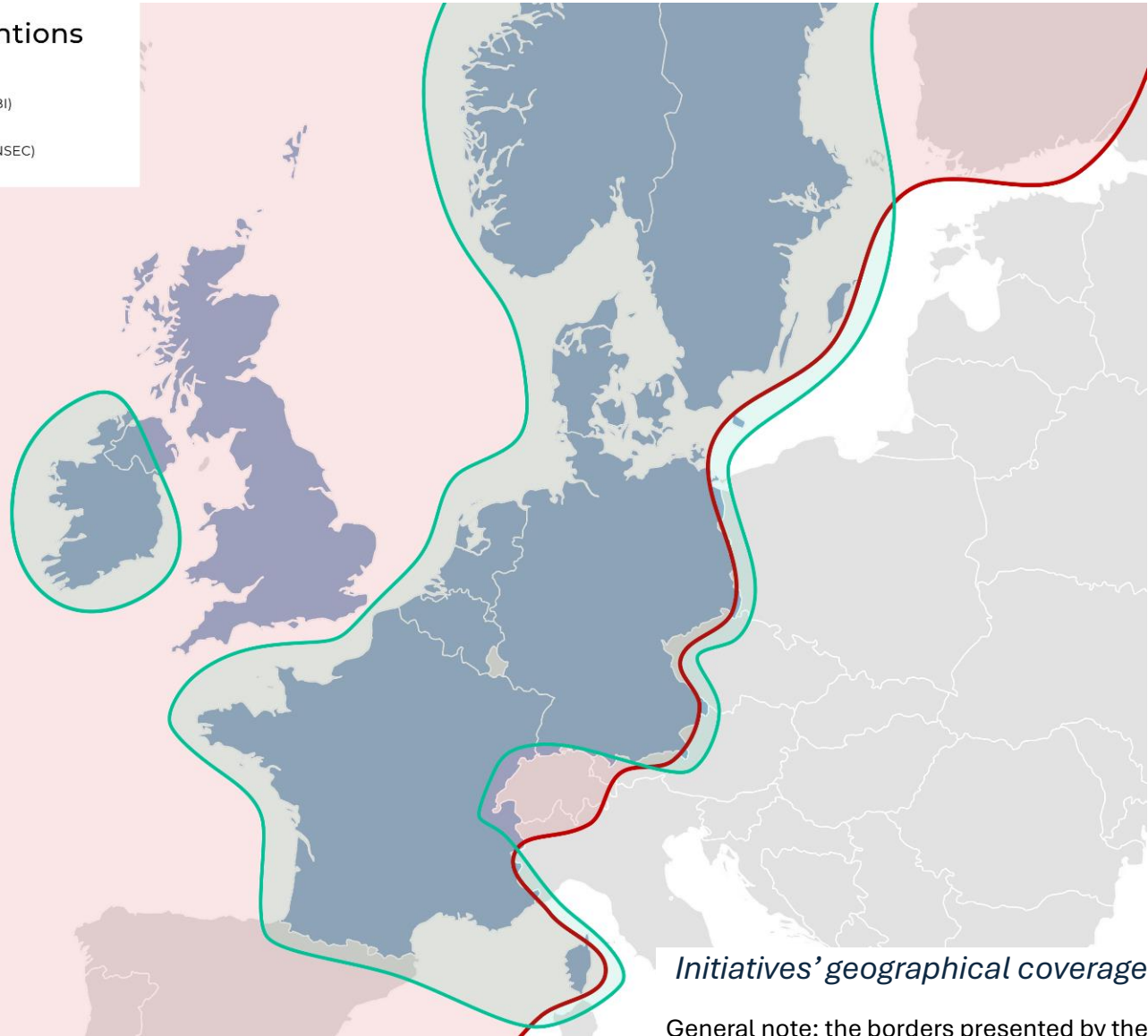
All the frameworks and initiatives included have declared an interest or have been implementing concepts and tools related to MSP to meet their respective objectives. All of them should enable the implementation of the future EU Oceans Pact via the cooperation framework that they constitute in each sea basin.

International Conventions North Sea Basin

- Great North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI)
- Oslo-Paris Convention (OSPAR)
- The North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC)

Existing and endorsed initiatives which are linked to the Blue Economy or Integrated Maritime Policy (an extensive approach where MSP could be implemented/promoted)

- Sea basin cooperation: Greater North Sea basin Initiative (GNSBI)
- Marine regional convention: Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR) and North Sea Conferences
- North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC)



Initiatives' geographical coverage

General note: the borders presented by the map are the ones agreed by the UN.












European
MSP Platform



European
Commission

The Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI)

PARTIES	EU MEMBER STATES						
	IRELAND	BELGIUM	DENMARK	THE NETHERLANDS	SWEDEN	FRANCE	GERMANY
							
	NON-EU MEMBER STATES						
	NORWAY	UNITED-KINGDOM					
							

Nota Bene: European Commission is a strategic partner not a member.

Date of endorsement – legal context if any : on 21 November 2023, Ministers of the 9 North Sea countries signed the [Ministerial conclusions](#), including a roadmap and six work tracks. Their collaborative commitment was confirmed by the [Ministerial declaration](#) which was endorsed in [Antwerp on 24 November 2024](#).

MAIN GOALS AND TOPICS

The main goal is to cooperate in dealing with the spatial and ecological squeeze in transitions such as climate change mitigation, countering biodiversity loss, offshore renewable energy, sustainable food production and clean and safe operations at sea. As a cross-sectoral and holistic platform focused on spatial integration within the ecological carrying capacity of the Greater North Sea, the GNSBI aims to enhance the alignment of maritime spatial planning and effective management processes.

GOVERNANCE

The GNSBI governance has been set resulting from meetings between the Ministers of the Initiative's Parties and their associated director general. The Antwerp Ministerial declaration defines in its Annex II the GNSBI governance which is structured with ministerial meetings, an executive board and a steering group. The Executive Board consists of Directors General or Directors from the participating countries and from the competent Directorate-general of the European Commission.

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.

INTERACTIONS AND SYNERGIES WITH OTHER FRAMEWORKS IN THE SEA BASIN OR BEYOND

GNSBI is to liaise and coordinate between existing fora and organisations for international cooperation on environment, fisheries, shipping, nature, and energy – including the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC) and OSPAR. It aims to establish deeper collaboration between ministers and competent authorities from all relevant sectors and stakeholders.

STATEMENT ON MSP PROMOTION, IMPLEMENTATION, COOPERATION UNDER THE INITIATIVE BETWEEN EU MS (MSPD) AND ICZM

The GNSBI provides a regional platform for spatial integration of all uses by making proposals for better alignment of MSPs, taking an ecosystem-based approach, efficient management processes, and coordinating sectoral interests across boundaries - to tackle the spatial and ecological challenges of the Greater North Sea Basin.

Various working tracks address the sea-basin issues of nature conservation, cumulative impacts assessment, future of fisheries, co-existence and multi-use. It aims to create opportunities for more efficient spatial use of the Greater North Sea basin. This could increase policy coordination and coherence, reduce the spatial pressure on the region and offers opportunities to combine human activities with nature restoration and conservation activities. ICZM is not mentioned as an area of interest within GNSBI.

















REFERENCES

- [2023 Ministerial declaration](#)
- [2024 Ministerial declaration](#)

ANY BEST PRACTICES OR RELATED ACTIONS IN THE SEA BASIN

- [Emerging ecosystem-based Maritime Spatial Planning topics in North and Baltic Seas Region \(eMSP NBSR\)](#)
- [MSP-TRANS](#)
- [A North Sea Perspective on Shipping, Energy and Environment Aspects in MSP \(NorthSEE\)](#)
- [Cooperation Governance for Next-Level Maritime Spatial Planning in the North Sea \(Norsaic\)](#)

Oslo - Paris convention (OSPAR)

PARTIES	EU MEMBER STATES									
	European Commission	BELGIUM	DENMARK	SPAIN	FINLAND	FRANCE	GERMANY	ICELAND	IRELAND	LUXEMBOURG
										
	EU MEMBER STATES			NON-EU MEMBER STATES						
	THE NETHERLANDS	PORTUGAL	SWEDEN	NORWAY	SWITZERLAND	UNITED-KINGDOM				
										

Date of endorsement : the [Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic](#) (the 'OSPAR Convention') was open for signature at the Ministerial Meeting of the [Oslo and Paris Commissions](#) in Paris on 22 September 1992. It was adopted together with a Final Declaration and an Action Plan.

Prior to the OSPAR endorsement and to share the concern among North Sea states related to pollution which could cause irreversible damage to the North Sea ecosystems, the [Bremen Declaration](#) was endorsed in November 1984 which set the [North Sea Conferences \(NSCs\)](#).

GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE

OSPAR covers five regions: Region I (Arctic waters), Region II (greater North Sea), Region III (Celtic Seas), Region IV (Bay of Biscay and Iberian Coast) and Region V (Wider Atlantic). For the North-East Atlantic Sea basin, Regions III, IV & V are considered.

MAIN GOALS AND TOPICS

The OSPAR Convention is dedicated to protecting the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic. For the ongoing decade, the Convention has been implemented through OSPAR's [North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030](#).

GOVERNANCE

The OSPAR Commission is the forum through which Contracting Parties cooperate. It normally meets once a year, usually at the end of June. The annual meeting is hosted by one of the Contracting Parties. Under the Rules of Procedure, the OSPAR Commission consists of representatives of each of its 16 Contracting Parties. The Commission elects a Chair and two Vice-chairs by unanimous vote of the Contracting Parties present at annual Commission meetings. The Commission is supported by five main committees, some of which are in turn supported by working groups (biological diversity, hazardous substances & eutrophication, human activities, offshore industry, radioactive substances). In addition, the Heads of the Delegations of the Contracting Parties meet regularly to prepare the meetings of the Commission, to advise on management and to oversee the development and implementation of the agreements made by the Commission.

In addition, several observers of the OSPAR Commission and its working groups are listed on [OSPAR website](#) among which can be found intergovernmental organisations working in similar fields, and international non-governmental organisations but also non-governmental organisations related to environmental protection, nature conservation organisations, industry and trade organisations and organisations of regional and local authorities. The OSPAR Commission Secretariat facilitates the work of the Contracting Parties by supporting and organising an annual cycle of meetings together with intersessional work programmes.

For the North Sea, The Ministers at the NSC in Gothenburg in 2006 noted that, at present, there is no plan for another North Sea Conference or Ministerial Meeting. The Ministers declared that many of the issues that have been discussed over the years are now being notably treated in OSPAR. **Since 2006**, the OSPAR Commission has been regularly reviewing progress in the implementation of commitments from the North Sea Conference to inform the North Sea Ministers, as in 2010.

INTERACTIONS AND SYNERGIES WITH OTHER FRAMEWORKS IN THE SEA BASIN OR BEYOND

The OSPAR Commission is an observer of the steering committee of the Atlantic Maritime Strategy.

The OSPAR Commission is an active member of the global group of Regional Management Organisations and cooperates closely with its partner organisations such as the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) for the Baltic Sea and the different programmes established under the UNEP Regional Seas Programme. To further strengthen cooperation the OSPAR Commission has agreed Memoranda of Understanding or Agreements of Cooperation with a number of relevant international or regional organisations related to marine environment protection or sectoral issues (i.e., Fisheries).

STATEMENT ON MSP PROMOTION, IMPLEMENTATION, COOPERATION UNDER THE INITIATIVE BETWEEN EU MS (MSPD) AND ICZM

MSP is not directly mentioned as an axis of work of the OSPAR Commission.



Nevertheless, as reiterated in its last ministerial declaration, the Commission is committed to “facilitate, for those Contracting Parties that are also EU Member States, the coordinated and coherent implementation of the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive and other EU marine related policies and legislation”.











The ministers committed to “**take** action to promote and facilitate the sustainable expansion of renewable energy developments while respecting our commitments to a healthy and biologically diverse marine environment”. Under the lead of a group on [Offshore Renewable Energy Developments](#), OSPAR aims to develop guidance to promote and facilitate sustainable development and the scaling up of offshore renewable energy in a way that cumulative environmental impacts are minimised.

REFERENCES

- [Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic](#)
- Last [Ministerial declaration](#) endorsed in 2021 in Cascais (Portugal)
- [Previous ministerial declarations](#) (on OSPAR website)
- [North Sea conferences – ministerial declaration \(until 2006\)](#)



The North Sea Energy Cooperation (NSEC)

PARTIES	EU MEMBER STATES									
	European Commission	BELGIUM	DENMARK	THE NETHERLANDS	SWEDEN	FRANCE	GERMANY	IRELAND	LUXEMBOURG	
										
NON-EU MEMBER STATES										
	NORWAY									
										

Date of endorsement – legal context if any: The NSEC is a continuation of the cooperation stated in the “Political Declaration on Energy Cooperation between the North Seas Countries” on 6 June 2016. At the NSEC ministerial meeting on 4 December 2019, the member countries and the Commission agreed that the meeting conclusions allowed the NSEC to continue and reinforce the cooperation under a new 3-year work programme.

MAIN GOALS AND TOPICS

The North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC) supports and facilitates the development of the offshore grid development and the large renewable energy potential in the region. This is a long-standing energy priority for the EU and the countries concerned.

Its 2020-2023 work programme puts a particular emphasis on developing concrete cross-border offshore wind and grid projects (hybrid projects), with the potential to reduce costs and the space of offshore developments.

GOVERNANCE

The NSEC governance and support structure consists of a high-level group, ministerial meetings and the coordinators committee. More details on its governance are available via on [OSPAR website](#). The work programme is implemented by four Support Groups (SG 1: Hybrid and joint projects, SG 2: Maritime Spatial Planning, SG 3: Support framework and finance, SG 4: Delivering 2050). Support Groups comprise experts from national

administrations, the EU Commission and relevant stakeholders including, where appropriate, system operators, regulatory authorities, business, institutional investors and civil society.

INTERACTIONS AND SYNERGIES WITH OTHER FRAMEWORKS IN THE SEA BASIN OR BEYOND

Direct link with GNSBI (see below) as most of the parties are the same

STATEMENT ON MSP PROMOTION, IMPLEMENTATION, COOPERATION UNDER THE INITIATIVE BETWEEN EU MS (MSPD) AND ICZM

The Renewed Political Declaration on energy cooperation 2021 signed by the Ministers of Energy set an objective to cooperate on MSPs that include offshore wind energy deployment and grid development including from a regional perspective especially on cross-border aspects.

As mentioned in the workplan 2020-2023, the SG2 (MSP) has been working, notably, on developing concepts (i) for coordinated planning and development of offshore wind of the North Seas countries and beyond national borders including area mapping and (ii) for a more coordinated offshore grid planning of the North Sea countries, which is better synchronised within maritime spatial planning, in order to facilitate the increased deployment of offshore wind generation capacities until 2050. SG 2 aims at increasing the availability and interoperability of marine data for planning, impact assessment, licensing and operation. It also addresses the potential of innovation and multi-use of the maritime space, shared experiences and best practices.

REFERENCES

- [The North Seas Energy Cooperation](#)
- [NSEC workplan 2020-2023](#)
- [NSEC workplan 2025-2027](#)



Conclusions at sea basin level

The North Sea region is addressing its specific spatial issues and the food-nature-energy nexus with the GNSBI, while the marine environment and energy cooperations are coordinated by the OSPAR and NSEC, respectively. Proposed by EU MSs, the cross-sectoral GNSBI could be the fourth EU sea basin strategy associating both with EU Member States and non-EU States.

A governance mechanism for GNSBI is being discussed at the moment to ensure an efficient functioning of the initiative in the long term with the strategic partnership of the EC.

GNSBI is to relay the dynamics which have been developed on energy with the NSEC but also via the Mission Ocean for the North Sea and the Baltic (cf. [BlueMissionBANOS](#)) to reach carbon neutral and circular blue economy. Beyond the sea basin and its liaison with OSPAR for environmental matters, interactions with the Baltic Sea and the Atlantic are also considered, to learn from their experiences and to develop synergies taking into account their physical and socio-economic connections.

