ANNUAL REPORT
2019-2020

A year of challenges

15 October 2020
The past year has been a year of challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic reached Europe in the beginning of 2020. The double impact of the health crisis and the economic crisis is affecting all regions around the North Sea and will continue to do so for long time. Travel restrictions have, for better or worse, catapulted the North Sea Commission into the digital world of virtual meetings. Climate change remains a dominant long-term threat to the North Sea Region and the world. The new European Commission shows a higher ambition with its Green Deal package, presented early 2020, but more efforts are needed. Another major game-changer in the North Sea Region is the United Kingdom’s farewell to the European Union by the end of January 2020, leaving many question marks about the future cooperation framework.
1. Priority areas

The North Sea Region 2020 strategy is implemented through an Action Plan that is revised on a yearly basis and adopted by the ABM. The Action Plan consists of activities related to each of the four strategic priorities and with one thematic group responsible for each priority.

1.1. Managing Maritime Space

This section is a report on the key actions from the NSC action plan 2018-19 priority “Managing maritime space” and the Marine Resources Group (MRG).

Key actions

- Use maritime spatial planning (MSP) as a tool to promote dialogue between different governmental levels and stakeholders
- Ensure sustainable and innovative exploitation of marine resources
- Ensure a skilled workforce to meet the needs of the future and livelihood in coastal communities

The Marine Resources Group

Åshild Kjelsnes, Sogn og Fjordane (NO) was the Chair of the Marine Resources Group until the end of 2019 and was succeeded in June 2020 by Erik Kursetgjerde from Møre og Romsdal (NO). Henk Staghouwer from North Netherlands/Groningen (NL) is a Vice Chair. Richard Thomson from Aberdeenshire was the other Vice Chair and he was also the acting Chair for the first meeting in 2020, but had to leave when he was elected member of the UK Parliament. He was replaced as a Vice chair by Otto Kjær Larsen (Nordjylland, DK). Yolanda Schmal, Province of Noord-Holland (NL), is the group’s advisor.

Group meetings

- 9-10 October 2019, Stavanger
  The group was welcomed with a presentation of the economic development in Greater Stavanger, an area heavily dependent on the oil and gas industry and now striving to diversify the economy. It was agreed to table an amendment proposal to the final declaration of the CPMR general assembly, stressing the need to protect the marine environment. Reports were given on the work with marine litter in Norway and in Scotland. The group also made a study visit to Strand, a new upper secondary school focusing on aquaculture.
- 18 February 2020, Aberdeen: Joint meeting with the Transport Group
  19 February 2020, Aberdeen
  Almost 50 people attended this meeting, which was the first joint meeting between the two groups. The meeting heard a presentation of a method for making low-carbon/emission diesel from plastic waste which has been developed in the Port of Amsterdam. The Secretary General of KIMO made a presentation on the issue of pollution from lost containers from cargo vessels. The groups discussed a draft statement on this issue, which will be tabled for adoption by the ExCom. Then followed an excursion to the Aberdeen Harbour extension project and a refuelling station for hydrogen.
The Marine Resources Group meeting was attended by 21 participants from 11 member regions and the focus of the meeting was an interactive session about the new Action Plan 2020-2022.

• **10 June 2020 online**

On June 10th 2020 the first ever online meeting of the Marine Resources Group was organized, including a unique “eyes on site” experience through a virtual site visit. A Norwegian company “eSEA solutions” organized the visit. They focus on seabed and coastal cleaning. It aims to be a pioneer in the use and development of new sustainable technology and innovative marine solutions. As 94% of marine litter sinks and remains on the seabed, it is a huge challenge to clean it up. The eSEA company is able to efficiently remove marine litter from the seafloor in harbour areas with minimum disturbance of the natural seabed. The joint resolution on “safe cargo shipping” was approved with much appreciation for the work done in collaboration with KIMO.

• **5 November 2020 online**

The meeting will discuss a possible resolution on the reuse of resources from sewage water.

Update on the development in the EU, CPMR and North Sea Region related to the priority area

The MSP collaboration group is an initiative which started during the “Connecting Seas” conference from the NorthSEE and Baltic Lines projects (Hamburg, 2019) in which the President of the North Sea Commission and the advisor of the MRG contributed. From then on, MSP authorities in the North Sea and Baltic Sea Region have developed Terms of Reference and way forward for the new transnational MSP collaboration group. In January 2020, the North Sea Commission was invited to a high level meeting in Malmö for national authorities on maritime spatial planning. All countries around the North Sea were represented. It was decided to continue close cooperation, especially after several EU projects (for instance SEANSE and NorthSEE) will end in the near future. Important steps were therefore discussed to work towards a structured transboundary cooperation on MSP. A letter from the President of the North Sea Commission was sent in June 2020 to support the work of this group and to emphasize the importance of a multi governance approach in MSP.

During a [CPMR Political meeting on Fisheries](https://example.com), Cllr. Jan Nico Appelman (Flevoland) from the Marine Resources Group, joined the discussion. A delegation of CPMR elected officials from all European sea-basins met with MEP Pierre Karleskind and Stylianos Mitolidis, Head of Unit at DG MARE to discuss the recovery of the Fisheries and Aquaculture sectors after the COVID-19 crisis. Participants shared the impact of the confinement measures on the seafood industry and especially on small-scale fisheries and aquaculture due to the closure of the catering industry.

Regional minister Zita Pels from Noord-Holland joined a meeting of the SEARICA intergroup in the European Parliament on October 13th to talk about marine litter from a North Sea perspective. In her speech she mentioned the plans for a River Clean Event + Conference in 2021. She also spoke about the progress in developing a resolution on circular use of sewage water. European rivers flow through many countries before finally emptying into the sea. Both the prevention of litter as well as better reuse of recourses needs our focus if we are to effectively address these problems.
1.2. Increased Accessibility and Clean Transport

This section is a report on the key activities from the NSC action plan 2018-2019 priority “Increased accessibility and clean transport” and Transport Group (TG).

Key actions

- Ensure good access to the TEN-T Core Network for peripheral and maritime regions through funding instruments (the CEF) and governance mechanisms (Core Network Corridor Forums)
- Facilitate modal shift from road to rail and sea
- Support measures and incentives to promote clean, efficient and inclusive transport, including clean shipping

The Transport Group

Preben Friis-Hauge, Syddanmark (DK), chairs the Transport Group, with John Reynolds, Aberdeen City (UK), and Kåre Pettersen, Vestfold (NO) as Vice Chairs. Jon Halvard Eide, Vest-Agder (NO) is the adviser.

Group meetings

- **22 November 2019: TEN-T seminar in Brussels**
  
  The group organised a seminar in Brussels as part of the extended consultation, with participation from European Commission DG Move and the European Coordinator for Motorways of the Sea. Vice Chair Kåre Pettersen presented the links and nodes which are being promoted by the NSC in the context of the revision. A link to an article about this seminar is included here: https://cpmr-northsea.org/uncategorized/nsc-transport-group-ten-t-seminar-22-november-in-brussels/2658/

- **18 February 2020, Abderdeen: Joint meeting with Marine Resources group** (see above)

- **19 February 2020, Aberdeen**

  24 persons from 12 member regions including the NSC Secretariat and the Presidency attended the meeting. The host Aberdeen City presented current projects and initiatives on sustainable transport. A draft final version of the report on "alternative fuels in public transport and other transport services" was adopted. The meeting decided to launch a mapping of the uptake of intelligent and new mobility solutions which member regions now have been invited to contribute to. Members from Møre og Romsdal and Vestland were welcomed as new task holders for clean shipping. They informed about recent policy developments and shared some ideas about relevant activities the group could perform. The meeting discussed how to progress with the work of contributing to the TEN-T revision.

- **19-20 October 2020**

  An online meeting of the group will be held in two separate sessions – the first one with presentations of projects and initiatives in member regions and the second one on developments related to the topics in the action plan.
Meetings with task holder teams

Between the full Transport group meetings, work on specific topics is carried out by teams, coordinated by taskholders. Online meetings have been held in these teams:

- **TEN-T**

  The team has met on several occasions since May 2020, and has discussed a first draft work and communication plan for the promotion of NSC priorities in the context of the TEN-T revision. It also talked about how to progress the work on refined criteria for definition of network. The team also discussed where to find relevant data to support the argument to include fishing ports in TEN-T.

- **Clean and intelligent transport 19 May 2020**

  The meeting decided on the final version of the report on Alternative fuels in public transport, which has then been distributed to NSC members, the CPMR and to a selection of external stakeholders, such as DG Move, the NSR Programme and to various external stakeholders within transport. After this meeting, a survey on intelligent and innovative transport solutions among NSC members was launched. Deadline for response has been set to 30 June.

- **Clean shipping 27 May 2020**

  It was decided that the function of task holder for clean shipping (CS) will be integrated with the team for Clean and Intelligent transport. The new integrated team will have “sub-teams” for sea-based and land-based transport. This will allow for a more holistic perspective on sustainable transport and for exploiting synergies between land- and sea-based modes. The work with CS is as a main rule confined to clean and intelligent sea-based passenger transport services, in line with the remits of most NSC member regions.

- **Update on the development in the EU, CPMR and North Sea Region related to the priority area**

  The Communication on the Green Deal is addressing issues related to sustainable and smart mobility – including emissions performance standards, review of the Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Directive; initiatives to increase and better manage the capacity of railways and inland waterways from 2021; as well as a strategy for sustainable and smart mobility.

  A legislative proposal for a revision of the TEN-T Regulation is expected by June 2021. It is supposed that stakeholders will have an opportunity to respond to the proposal. On 11 September 2020, the Transport group submitted a letter with comments and messages to the EP “Own Initiative Report” on the TEN-T revision. The letter was signed by the political chairmanship of the group and distributed to the EP TEN-T rapporteur and selected MEPs from NSR countries.

  The letter expresses support for the call to take over all adjustments laid down in the revision of the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) – including the proposal that the Scan Med corridor in Jutland, Denmark, should be prolonged from Taulov to the ports of Hirtshals and Frederikshavn (ref. to NSC ABM resolution from 2018). Besides, the letter calls for additional sections of the Stockholm-Oslo corridor to be incorporated or upgraded in the Core TEN-T network in the context of the CEF revision.
The letter furthermore calls for strengthening the interconnection between the core and comprehensive network. In line with previous NSC positions on the TEN-T revision [see link to seminar on 22 November 2019 above], the letter argues for adding new and upgrade the status of certain sections and nodes in the network. The letter furthermore highlights the need to enhance the ambition in terms of the maritime dimension of the TEN-T.

The European Commission is in the process of preparing a strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility.

The task holder teams in the Transport group prepared a response to the consultation. The response provides views on the impacts of and lessons from COVID-19 on the transport sector. It highlights concerns for achieving a full decarbonisation of transport without deteriorating territorial accessibility for peripheral regions through disproportionately increasing the costs. The main role of the EU should be to define targets, set standards and adopt regulations, as well as to fund investments in green multimodal infrastructure and ensure interoperability of infrastructure and facilities across borders and transport modes.

1.3. Tackling Climate Change

This section is a report on the key activities from the NSC action plan 2018-2019 priority “Tackling climate change” and the Energy and Climate Change Group (ECCG).

Key actions

- Facilitate climate change adaptation and mitigation through local, regional and national levels
- Facilitate for a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions
- Promote energy efficiency as well as innovation and green growth in low-carbon technologies
- Foster strong regional, national and European support for the development of the North Sea Grid

The Energy and Climate Change Group

The Energy and Climate Change Group is chaired by Jimmy Gray, Highland (UK). Vice Chairs are Tjisse Stelpstra, North Netherlands/Drenthe (NL) and Jon Olav Strand, Aust-Agder (NO). Claudia Cowie, Aberdeen Council, is the group advisor. Claudia is on maternity leave since May 2020 and temporarily replaced by her Aberdeenshire colleague Tara Murray.

Group meetings

- 2-4 October 2019, Inverness
  - Regions: Highland, Østfold, Hordaland, Aberdeenshire, Northern Netherlands/Drenthe, Vest Agder, Västra Götaland
  - Focus: Renewable energy and draft Strategy 2030 update
27-28 February 2020, Florø
- **Regions:** Highland, Provincie Drenthe, Agder Fylkeskommune, Rogaland Fylkeskommune, Orkney, Aberdeen, Vestland County Municipality, Province of Groningen.

12 May 2020, online/virtual meeting
- **Regions:** Aberdeenshire Council, Fife Council, Agder County Council, Province of Drenthe, Province of Groningen, Province of Zuid-Holland, Vest-Agder County Council, Vestland County Municipality, Viken County Council
- **Focus:** Climate-Neutral North Sea Region section of the Action Plan, planning of future group meetings and arrangements for Executive Committee, Annual Business meeting and CPMR committee due to COVID-19

29 September 2020, online/virtual meeting
- **Focus:** Climate-Neutral North Sea Region section of the Action Plan, planning of future group meetings

Update on the development in the EU, CPMR and North Sea Region related to the priority area

- **EU:**
  - EU Climate Law
  - European Green Deal
  - Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) and Just Transition Fund
  - EU to produce Adaptation Strategy in early 2021
- **CPMR:**
  - CPMR Climate Change Task Force
  - Draft CPMR Policy Position on Climate – in relation to the EU Green Deal
  - Will prepare a position on the Just Transition Mechanism

1.4. Attractive and sustainable communities

This section is a report on the key activities from the NSC action plan 2017-2018 priority “Attractive and sustainable communities” and the Smart Regions Group.

**Key actions**

- Promote knowledge transfer and cross-overs between different sectors in the North Sea Region
- Support the development of cultural heritage based tourism, nature, outdoor and health tourism in coastal areas
- Support the development of permanent networks for cultural actors
- Improve policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges
• Promote maritime clusters to continue to play an important role as provider of blue growth, jobs and innovation
• Support the development of a more sustainable tourism sector
• Support the diversification of tourism offers in coastal areas as well as in cruise tourism

The Smart Regions Group

Beate Johnsen, Agder (NO), chairs the group. Birgitta Adolfsson, Västra Götaland (SE), and from June 2020 Philip Bell, Aberdeen City (UK) are Vice-Chairs of the group. Geir Sør-Reime, Rogaland (NO) was advisor until June 2020, when he retired after 23 years of service as an advisor of the North Sea Commission. He was succeeded by Dawn Syvertsen, Vestfold og Telemark (NO).

Group meetings

• 30-31 October 2019, Kristiansand

10 participants from five member regions. The first day of the meeting was a mini conference on how to address the challenges in the health and care sector related to demographic changes. Examples from Agder covered policies for equality, diversity and inclusion; how to make jobs in the health and care sector more attractive; welfare technology; inclusion of immigrants in education and training and how regional restructuring meets societal challenges.

• 15 May 2020 online

Taking account of the current Covid-19 situation and the almost total drop in travels and tourism, it was decided to focus on the situation of the tourism industry, and with a shorter session on migration, the originally planned theme for the meeting. Presentations were made by VisitAberdeen on how they plan to make tourism industry recover from the current lockdown, by NECSTouR (Network of European Regions for a Sustainable and Competitive Tourism), a European network of tourist destinations on how European regions have been working to influence the EU Commission’s recovery plan for European tourism and by West Sweden Tourism Board in Västra Götaland, who reacted quickly to the new situation and offered a for-free online training course for small tourism enterprises.

The second theme of the meeting was migration. Davide Strangis and Claire Street from the CPMR Secretariat gave an in-depth analysis on the current state of play and the work of the CPMR Migration Task Force. They invited all North Sea Commission members to join the work of this task force and also to contribute to the mapping of migration policies that the CPMR has developed.

• September 24, 2020, digital meeting.


The Smart Regions Group underwent a merger in 2017 with the joining of the Culture & Tourism Group and Economic Development Group into one to make up the current group. As a result, it has taken some time to develop prioritized focus areas.

The group is currently working on narrowing its focus areas to become more attainable and realistic in order to be able to carry out the tasks specified in the action plan. The Advisor and one Vice Chair are new from July 2020 and it will take some time considering the Covid-19 pandemic for them to become well integrated with the other group members and the on-going and planned work ahead.
The group has started the work of mapping out existing smart specialization strategies in member regions. We will use this information to build upon a status for our group members and where we can then set the path for the tasks related to smart specialization initiatives and areas of cooperation across member regions. We plan to also gain knowledge about smart specialization (as this is at diverse levels amongst the group members) and exchange experience between members. We will use this period to get to know each other in the group better as well as each other’s regions. We will also gain more knowledge about the EU programs that are relevant and can be used as tools to fulfill our focus area objectives.

Update on the development in the EU, CPMR and North Sea Region related to the priority area

The EU Commission has released several new initiatives of relevance to the group during the spring of 2020. This concerns the new circular economy roadmap, the new industrial strategy with associated SME strategy. Briefing versions of these have been circulated to all group members. The Commission’s Communication on tourism and Covid-19 is particularly relevant now.

EU is also working on a new Asylum and Migration Pact, and the CPMR has been very active in lobbying for a progress in this matter.

2. Other activities

2.1. Annual Business Meeting

The 2019 Annual Business Meeting was held in Marstrand, Västra Götaland (SE). Councillor Peter Argyle, Aberdeenshire (UK), was elected Vice President succeeding Councillor John Lamb, Southend-on-Sea (UK) who served in this position for many years and even a period as the acting President. President Kerstin Brunström, Västra Götaland (SE) and Andreas Lervik, Viken (NO) continued for the second year of their mandates. The Marstrand declaration was adopted. Three youth participants from Aberdeenshire, Aust-Agder and Groningen took part in the meeting. A report from the North Seas Energy cooperation was given by a Danish government representative.

2.2. Executive Committee

The Executive Committee (ExCom) met briefly immediately after the ABM in Marstrand, in November 2019 in Brussels, and in June and October 2020 online. Members of the Executive Committee in 2019-2020 were, in addition to the President and Vice Presidents, Councillors Elisabet Babic (Halland, SE), Jean de Bethune (West-Vlaanderen, BE), Marianne Chesak (Rogaland, NO), Antje Grotheer (Bremen, DE), Nienke Homan (Noord-Nederland/Groningen, NL), John Lamb (Southend-on-Sea, England), Otto Kjar Larsen (Nordjylland, DK) and John Reynolds (Aberdeen City, Scotland). At the October meeting 2020, Cllr Lamb was replaced by Cllr Carole Muironey, Southend-on-Sea. Chairs of the thematic groups have attended the meetings.

2.3. Member base

One former member region, Orkney (UK), left in 2019. In Norway a regional reform resulted in the merger at the start of 2020 of Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder into Agder, of Vestfold and Telemark into Vestfold og Telemark, of Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane into Vestland, and of Buskerud and Ostfold together with former non-member Akershus into Viken. These new entities all decided to
remain members of the CPMR and NSC, making the total number of member regions 27. With the exception of the UK the NSC covers roughly the same geography today as it did in 1999 with 71 members.

2.4. Youth project

At the 2019 ABM, it was decided to involve youth in the work of the North Sea Commission. With the assistance of Highland Council and the organisation Highlife Highland a youth advisor, Esme Leitch, was recruited and started working in December 2019. One of her tasks is to organise a youth conference, which was scheduled for June 2020, but due to the virus situation has been postponed and will be held online in November. Her second task is to propose a structure for permanent youth involvement in the work of the NSC. This will be done after discussions in the youth conference.

2.5. President

President Kerstin Brunnström has represented the NSC as a speaker in several workshops in the European Week of Regions and Cities in 2019 and 2020, at CPMR Political Bureau and task force meetings and in Interreg programme conferences. She has held meetings with MEPs Jan-Christoph Oetjen (Renew Europe, DE), who represents the North Sea Region in the SEARICA intergroup and Jytte Guteland (S&D, SE), rapporteur on the EU’s climate law, and with the Benelux secretariat for an update on the North Seas Energy cooperation. In the internal activities of the CPMR she has chaired ABM and ExCom meetings; held online meetings approximately every two months with the NSC Vice Presidents; a planning meeting with Vice Presidents, secretariat and advisors; individual phone/skype meetings with members of the ExCom and Chairs of thematic groups to discuss how to develop the work of the NSC, and attended several meetings of the NSC thematic groups.

2.6. Secretariat

The Secretariat is hosted by Västra Götaland (SE) and located in Gothenburg and Brussels. The secretariat consists of Executive Secretary Magnus Engelbrektsson and Assistant Executive Secretary Anneli Weinholt. She was replaced by Clara Zakariasson during a maternity leave. Activities:

- organised ABM and ExCom meetings and assisted the President in her activities;
- represented the NSC at the final conference of SEANSE, a North Sea project on strategic environmental assessments in Maritime Spatial Plans, where the CPMR has been a partner
- participated in an online stakeholder workshop on BANOS, the future research and innovation programme for the Baltic Sea and the North Sea
- planned, together with the Interreg Secretariat, the Province of South Holland and the City of Rotterdam, for a joint North Sea conference, which then had to be postponed due to the coronavirus crisis and will now be a shorter online event in November
- developed the draft NSR 2030 Strategy together with the Strategy task force; attended a German stakeholder meeting; compiled responses from consultation
- attended all thematic group meetings
- compiled information on how member regions and their countries meet the economic effects of the coronavirus crisis
- communicated with members through emails, newsletter, twitter and web updates, and worked on the development of NSC communication (new ppt, video reports from meetings)
- organised the transfer of the NSC reserve to the CPMR
- provided input to CPMRs policy work and attended CPMR work group meetings, staff meetings and coordination meetings with other Geographical Commissions
2.7. Advisors

The thematic group advisors have, in addition to managing their respective groups, been involved in the joint development of the NSR 2030 strategy and preparations for the North Sea conference.

2.8. CPMR

North Sea regions are active in CPMR’s task forces/groups on climate, transport, cohesion, fisheries and migration. NSC held a member meeting at the CPMR General Assembly in October 2019. Representatives of the CPMR secretariat have attended NSC Annual Business Meetings, ExCom meetings and thematic group meetings. In January 2020, the NSC’s financial reserve was transferred to the CPMR secretariat, who is now managing the accounts.

2.9. Interreg North Sea Region Programme

The NSC maintains close contact with the Interreg North Sea Programme secretariat. Preparations have been made jointly for the North Sea conference. The Director or other representatives of the programme secretariat attend ABM and ExCom meetings. The NSC communicated in 2019 with the European Commission to support the preservation of the programme in the 2021-2027 period. Since then, the NSC has followed the development of the new programme and sent a letter to the Programme Preparation Group to express its priorities.