

Greater North Sea Basin Initiative

Ministerial conclusions

Adopted 21 November 2023 by Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom

The Greater North Sea basin is in transition. As the nine Greater North Sea countries, we are facing common challenges with the impacts of climate change on the sea, coasts, and marine ecosystems. There are two main challenges. The first is spatial: how to ensure there is space for all uses and transitions in our shared sea. The second is ecological: the marine ecosystem of the North Sea is significantly affected by human activities and in a dire state, as recently described in OSPAR's 2023 Quality Status Report.

The Greater North Sea countries are already closely collaborating and have high ambitions for the development of wind farms and other modes of renewable offshore energy in order to make the North Sea the renewable energy engine of the region. This is of great importance for our climate change ambitions and our strategic independence. Physical space is needed to create the related infrastructure necessary to meet these aims.

Simultaneously, many other uses of the sea require space. Fisheries face multiple challenges: declining fish stocks, a changing sea as a result of climate change, the spatial impacts of wind farms and other uses of the sea, areas set aside for habitat and species conservation, and changing fuel prices. Additionally, in the blue economy, new uses of the Greater North Sea, such as mariculture, are appearing alongside existing uses, such as oil and gas extraction, sand and gravel extraction, coastal protection, and zones set aside for military exercises. Security concerns are now more prominent, too, due to growing geopolitical tensions, and necessary security measures may have their own spatial impact as well. Moreover, with some of the largest ports in the world, the Greater North Sea also has busy shipping routes leading to high volumes of maritime traffic. Clean and safe passage of ships is essential.

Meanwhile, nature does not adhere to jurisdictional borders and the Greater North Sea is a biodiverse region that we have agreed to protect and foster. The cumulative pressures of existing and new human uses have and will continue to upset the ecological balance and endanger the natural world of the Greater North Sea, which is regarded as one of the most biologically productive seas in the world. It is therefore crucial that the countries of the Greater North Sea manage the impact of these combined uses in such a manner that they stay within its ecological carrying capacity.

The Initiative

A cross-sector and international response is necessary to achieve our shared ambitions. Different interests at sea are thoroughly intertwined and a solution in one sector or one country could positively or negatively affect other sectors, countries, or the overall ecological balance of the North Sea. This is why we have initiated the Greater North Sea Basin initiative (GNSBI). The GNSBI will provide a regional platform for spatial integration of all uses by making proposals for better aligning maritime spatial planning and effective management processes, efficient management processes and coordinating sectoral interests

across boundaries. This will allow for optimal use of our shared sea and protecting and improving the marine ecosystem of the Greater North Sea. The initiative will:

- Include all nine Greater North Sea countries and act across the full geographical scope of the Greater North Sea.
- **Liaise and coordinate** between existing fora and organisations for international cooperation on environment, fisheries, shipping, nature, and energy – including the North Sea Energy Cooperation (NSEC) and OSPAR. It will therefore establish deeper collaboration between ministers and competent authorities of all relevant sectors and stakeholders. The Initiative will build upon, create linkages between and reinforce these pre-existing structures.
- Make proposals for **better alignment of maritime spatial planning and effective management processes between countries taking an ecosystem-based approach**. This is done by enhancing informed decision-making and cross-border collaboration, data sharing, and knowledge sharing between relevant sectors, in order to achieve optimal use of the limited physical space. The initiative will improve our insights into **cumulative pressures** on the marine environment resulting from all human uses to ensure that the ecological carrying capacity is not surpassed. It will, at the level of the entire sea basin, allow for **optimal design of strategies for conservation and restoration of the marine ecosystem**. It will do so while taking the sovereignty and sovereign rights of countries into account.
- Be a **platform for communication and the sharing of knowledge, data, and best practices**. It will engage with the wide range of **national and regional stakeholders** in the Greater North Sea and facilitate common understanding of their individual needs in the present and the future.

Working Tracks

The participating countries agree to set up working tracks in order to enhance cooperation on a technical level and specify steps to be taken. For now, six voluntary working tracks have been established, focusing on governance, multi-use and co-use, nature conservation, cumulative impacts, long term perspectives fisheries and knowledge sharing. These are the most important areas for cooperation to achieve the objectives mentioned above (see Annex).

The Way Forward

The GNSBI member countries commit to steering the dialogue between sectors, countries, relevant stakeholders, and citizens. By cooperating on the areas mentioned above with an integrated and transversal approach, in collaboration with the European Commission, we will work towards the transition to a sustainable, resilient, decarbonised and competitive blue economy, while achieving a good environmental status of the North Sea. This is also the goal of relevant legislation, including European Union legislation. The GNSBI countries will identify common challenges and priorities, such as through reflection of cross-sea basin policy dialogue, and it will encourage pilot projects. The countries, conscious of limitations of resources, will optimize the allocation of capacity and means to the initiative.

The GNSBI is a work in progress and countries will continuously reflect on the next steps and actions to take to achieve the goals of the GNSBI. In 2024 a comprehensive ministerial summit will be set up in Belgium with the ministers responsible for nature, energy, fisheries and maritime spatial planning. The ministers will reflect on the actions taken and decide on further refinement of targets and next steps. From 2024 onwards, the GNSBI will also actively foster stakeholder engagement and set up an event to collect feedback from stakeholders and other interested parties.

The Greater North Sea is in transition. As Greater North Sea countries, we can seek and pursue the best possible outcomes through international and intersectoral cooperation, which is the foundation of the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative.

Annex Working Tracks

The participating countries agree to set up working tracks in order to enhance cooperation on a technical level and specify steps to be taken. For now, six voluntary working tracks have been established, focusing on the most important areas for cooperation to achieve the objectives mentioned above.

Governance: The GNSBI's organisational arrangements must take into account the existing international setting, the requirement to build upon existing initiatives, be in line with European Union rules on international cooperation and take into account legislation and policies of non-EU member states including the United Kingdom and Norway. The governance track will assess the current framework and develop options and recommendations for the governance of GNSBI, a proposal for which will be presented in 2024.

Multi-use and co-use: Multi-use and co-use create opportunities for more efficient spatial use of the Greater North Sea. This could reduce the human impact on the Greater North Sea and offers opportunities to combine human activities with nature restoration and conservation activities. The GNSBI will exchange best practices, including design solutions and processes to foster a more coherent approach on multi-use and co-use in the Greater North Sea.

Nature conservation: The GNSBI countries share the Greater North Sea and, consequently, the common challenges of nature conservation in a heavily pressured marine environment, which is significantly affected by human activities and in dire ecological shape. Given that nature is borderless, GNSBI aims to better align current and future conservation, enhancement, mitigation and compensation measures, explore synergies in national policies, and upscale regional cooperation.

Cumulative impacts: Cumulative Impact Assessments assist countries in determining the collective impact on the marine environment across sectors and across countries. A common approach to the Greater North Sea will help to enhance the coherence and consistency of its application and as such underpin spatial decision-making and ecosystem-based maritime planning. Building upon existing methods and work in, inter alia, OSPAR, NSEC and ICES, GNSBI will work towards a common approach for cumulative impact assessments that includes all human pressures on the ecosystem.

Long term perspectives fisheries: Fisheries are heavily impacted by transitions on the Greater North Sea. Therefore, GNSBI will aim to formulate recommendations on long term perspectives for fisheries based on effective maritime spatial planning while taking into account the various transitions and the carrying capacity of the North Sea. One of the first steps GNSBI will take is to create a common evidence base by mapping out key fishery areas, other uses of the sea, and maritime protected areas.

Knowledge sharing: Exchange of knowledge helps better decision-making and planning for the Greater North Sea. A lot of data and information is available, but a knowledge-management platform for international, cross-sector maritime spatial planning is missing. The GNSBI countries agree to take a first step to develop such a platform, to share data and knowledge, and to support data standardisation.