Terms of Reference for Operational evaluation of Interact Programme

1.   Background

1.1. About Interact

Interact is an experienced international team who support cooperation programmes to harmonise the development across the EU.

Cooperation programmes under the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) also known as Interreg, are implementing projects to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion among the EU Member States, third countries, candidate and neighbouring countries as per the objectives of the Cohesion Policy. Their outcomes contribute to improving the lives of EU inhabitants.

Interact supports Interreg to be more efficient and more effective, in order to achieve more with EU funds. Over the past 20 years, this has been achieved through offering targeted interventions to address the key challenges facing programmes and other cooperation actors. Interact ensures the exchange of experience, information and innovation in order to promote best practice and make cooperation easier.

Interact is a decentralised organisation with a horizontal team structure. The Managing Authority and the Joint Secretariat are based in Bratislava. In addition, there are four Interact offices in Turku (Finland), Valencia (Spain), Viborg (Denmark) and Vienna (Austria). The team comprises of approximately 55 individuals who work in various groups across offices to support and provide Interact services.

1.2. Interact's objectives

The Interact Programme is a cooperation programme under the ETC objective of the Cohesion Policy 2021-2027, and is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). In line with Article 3 (3) (c,) of Regulation (EU) No. 2021/1059, Interact was designed to reinforce the effectiveness of cohesion policy by promoting exchange of experiences, innovative approaches and capacity building with the aim of:

- harmonising and simplifying the implementation of Interreg programmes as well as contributing to the capitalisation of their results;
- harmonising and simplifying possible cooperation actions;
- supporting the setting-up, functioning and use of European groupings of territorial cooperation (EGTCs).

Interact IV builds on the successful implementation of the previous programming period and continues with the thematic objectives of:

- To strengthen the management capacity of Interreg programmes and other cooperation actors;
- To strengthen the capacity to work in cooperation programmes and context;
- To strengthen the capacity to capture and communicate programme and project results and to increase visibility.

These 3 objectives define the rationale behind Interact services; i.e., events, training programmes, and tools implemented for the benefit of Interreg programmes of all strands (cross-border, transnational and interregional). The geographical area targeted by Interact services includes all Member States, Norway and Switzerland. In addition, the programme supports cooperation at the external borders of the European Union (Interreg-IPA CBC and, Interreg NEXT).

Further information and relevant documents concerning the Interact Programme can be found on the programme website: www.interact.eu.

1.3. State of play of programme implementation, May 2024

Interact III ended its service delivery activities by the end of November 2022 and on 1 December, the implementation of Interact IV started, with no interruption of services to our target groups. Our service delivery activities to date were based on our 2023 and 2024 work plans.

Our main outputs include events of different kinds (e.g. seminars, workshops, network events, working groups), tools (e.g. factsheets, short online courses, harmonised templates, online databases, software) and certified training programmes. Please find in the below table an overview of our main outputs from the start of the programme until the end of May 2024[1].

Table 1: Interact IV main outputs 1 December 2022 – 31 May 2024

Output	Achieve-ment
Interact events	139
Interact support to external events	11
Tools	53
Certified training programmes launched / cohorts completed	4 / 6
Short online courses	6

Interact IV selected in its programme document three common Interreg output indicators to capture its performance and to indicate its contribution to the achievements of Interreg as a whole. The above outputs resulted in the below indicator achievements:

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[1] Please note that these are indicative numbers.

Table 2: Output indicator milestones and targets 1 December 2022 – 31 May 2024

ID	Indicator	Measurement unit	Milestone (2024)	Achievement	%
RCO81	Participations in joint actions across borders	Number of participations	4 590	3 800	82.8%
RCO85	Participations in joint training schemes[2]	Number of participations	612	136	22.2%
RCO116	Jointly developed solutions[3]	Number of solutions	90	54	60.0%

The spending (at the paying authority level) reached 4 244 273.83 euro (ERDF), i.e. 9.43% of the programme allocation (45 million euro ERDF).

1.4. Regulatory framework for the evaluation

The main EU legal provisions that regulate the evaluation process and are relevant for the scope and contents of this assignment are:

- Regulation (EC) 2021/1059, in particular Article 35 specifying requirements concerning evaluation during the programming period; the responsibilities of the managing authority with regards to drawing up the evaluation plan.
- Regulation (EC) 2021/1059, and Article 36 covering the responsibilities of managing authorities and partners with regard to transparency and communication with includes the publishing of evaluation findings.
- Commission Staff Working Document (SWD (2021) 198 final): Performance, monitoring, and evaluation of the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund, and the Just Transition Fund in 2021-2027, Brussels, 8.7.2021.

A key component of the evaluation task, as required by the regulations, is to assess the programme operational implementation and management, including operational aspects related to the implementation of the programme's communication strategy. With reference to the above-mentioned legal provisions, the Interact Programme prepared an Evaluation Plan that specifies how the programme evaluation, including operational evaluation, will be organised during the 2021-2027 period. The Interact Evaluation Plan can be found in Annex 1 to this tender document.

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[2] Until end of April 2024

[3] Please note that 'tools' is a broader category than 'jointly developed solutions'. Only tools that meet the criteria in the Methodology for establishing the Interact IV performance framework document are counted as 'jointly developed solutions'

2. Evaluation purpose and target audience

2.1. Evaluation purpose

In May 2023, the Interact IV Monitoring Committee approved the programme's Evaluation Plan. The plan foresees that an evaluation will be carried out with the aim to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme implementation and management, including the evaluation of the programme's Communication Strategy.

The Interact Communication Strategy was prepared at the start of the programme, in order to steer the implementation and management of the communication activities throughout the 2021-2027 period. The strategy defines the approach to communication, sets objectives, defines target audiences, and details the communication channels; both with regard to communications about the programme and its promotion, as well as services provided by Interact to Interreg programmes in the field of communication. In December 2023, the strategy was approved by the Interact IV Monitoring Committee and can be found in Annex 2 to this Terms of Reference.

The purpose of this operational evaluation is to assess if the programme is being implemented and managed effectively and efficiency in order to achieve the programme objectives. Specifically, this entails:

- **Evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the operational implementation of the programme,** in view of the progress in achieving the programme specific objectives, outputs and result indicators. The Interact performance framework document defines the programme-specific result and output indicators, and it sets targets to accomplish by 2029. The document can be found in Annex 3 to this Terms of Reference. The aim of the evaluation is to assess how the programme is progressing in attaining the target values, identify any deviations and recommend changes to ensure best delivery of the programme by the end of the period.
- **Evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management system**, by looking at how the organisational set-up and management structures support the programme implementation and achievement of the programme objectives.
- **Evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the operational implementation of the Communication Strategy**, in view of the progress in reaching the communication objectives. The aim of the evaluation is to assess how the Communication Strategy supports communications about Interact and the programme promotion. Even though references are made in the strategy to Interact services provided to Interreg programmes in the field of communication management, they are not to be covered by this assignment (this aspect is being assessed as part of the programme impact evaluation).

While the programme's strategic documents foresee Interact to run until 2029, it must be noted that the programme may finalise sooner. This possibility should be taken into account by the evaluators, and specifically when assessing the programme's performance and building recommendations in relation to the management system.

2.2. Target audience

Results of this operational evaluation shall help the Interact programme bodies (i.e., Interact Monitoring Committee, Managing Authority/Interact Secretariat, Interact Offices and their Hosting Institutions) to gain better understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme implementation and management, in view of the progress in achieving the programme objectives, suitability of the Interact management system, and soundness of the Communication Strategy. It is expected that the evaluation will provide evidence of what works and what does not work, thus enabling informed programme decisions on the basis of the evaluation findings. This includes observations and suggestions to consider by the programme bodies when deciding on the Interact strategy and its set-up in the period post 2027.

The Interact programme bodies will be the main target audience of the conclusions deriving from this evaluation.

3. Evaluation tasks and questions

This operational evaluation shall look at how the programme is being implemented and managed in view of the progress towards achieving the programme's objectives. With this in mind, it should address the following three evaluation tasks:

- **Task 1**: Evaluation of the progress towards achievement of the programme objectives and its indicators;
- **Task 2**: Evaluation of the programme management system;
- **Task 3**: Evaluation of the Communication Strategy and progress in its implementation.

With regard to the first task, the evaluation is expected to appraise the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme's operational implementation. The leading question to be addressed by the evaluator is:

Main question of Task 1: *Is the programme implementation well on track for achieving the programme objectives?*

The main question of Task 1 shall be approached by providing answers to the following sub-questions:

1. Where is Interact in terms of achieving the result and output indicators? Are there any deviations (positive/negative) in how Interact progresses in the achievement of the result and output indicators?
2. Are there any changes necessary in terms of the focus of the programme's activities? If so, what will be the consequences in view of reaching the programme objectives if they are not implemented?
3. To what extent do the products and services of Interact, especially OSIs, meet the needs of the intended users?
4. What could/should be done to increase the use of products and services provided by Interact? Are the methods of service delivery aligned with the needs and expectations of our stakeholders?
5. What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the programme thus far and what are the recommendations for the future? Specifically, for the performance framework

(output and result indicator system), what improvements can be recommended to better capture the programme's impact?

The second task concerns the Interact management system and is expected to appraise the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme design and management structures. The leading question to address by the evaluator is:

Main question of Task 2: *Is the programme management system designed and used in an effective and efficient way in order to allow reaching the programme objectives?*

In order to elaborate on the main question of Task 2, the evaluator is expected to answer the following evaluation sub-questions:

1. How does the programme organisational set-up and related management structures (their design and use) support an effective and efficient service delivery?
2. To what extent the processes and procedures to develop products and services are involving Interact programme bodies? (e.g. MA, EC, MC and Interact Offices). To what extent are the processes and procedures for monitoring the implementation of operations transparent, effective and compliant?
3. To what extent the processes and procedures to develop products and services are involving Interreg programmes?
4. To what extent and how does the Joint service delivery principle (referred to Strategic Implementation document section 6) support an effective and efficient delivery of the programme? What improvements can be recommended to optimise the collaboration across offices?
5. How effective and efficient is the decision-making process involving the programme bodies? How decisions are made, communicated, implemented and followed-up?
6. Is the internal and external feedback collected and followed up in a way that ensures the programme objectives are reached?
7. What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the programme in the 2021-2027 period and what are the recommendations for the future (post 2027)?

The third task assesses the Communication Strategy and effectiveness and efficiency of the operational implementation of the programme communications. The leading question to be addressed by the evaluator is:

Main question of Task 3: *What is the progress in the implementation of the Interact communication strategy and achievement of the communication objectives?*

The main question of Task 3 shall be answered following evaluation of the aspects asked by the sub-questions:

1. Are the objectives of the Communication Strategy set in a way to contribute to the programme's overall objectives and the three perspectives defined in the Interreg programme (Strengthening the capacity to work in cooperation programmes, Strengthening the management capacity of Interreg programmes, Strengthening the capacity to capture and communicate programme and project results and to increase visibility)?

2. Do they sufficiently expand Communication Chapter 5 of the Interact Programme Document?
3. How effective are the communication approaches, tools, and activities for reaching the communication objectives? What communication actions have been more effective and why? Which ones have failed and why?
4. How effective are Interacts' communication flows with its main target audiences, set out in 5.1 of the Communication Strategy? Are the programme's communication measures effective in reaching the relevant target groups? How effectively are the various channels of communication used?
5. How effective and efficient are the communication approaches in reaching other target audiences (Communication Strategy Chapter 5.2 and 5.3, and Interact Programme Document 2.1.1.3)? How does the programmes communication approach support those more directly involved in these activities?

The above main questions form the overarching frame for the operational evaluation. The sub-questions further specify topics that are of particular interest to the Interact programme bodies; answers to these are expected to contribute to assessing the programme effectiveness and efficiency along the evaluation tasks. Still, these sub-questions may be adapted, further detailed and/or additional sub-questions can be included by the evaluator in the offer, if considered relevant and useful. The detailed list of main questions and sub-questions once finalized should be presented to the Monitoring Committee as part of the inception report.

4. Evaluation approach and methodology

Tools and methods for this evaluation should be specified by the tenderers in their offers. The proposed methodology should be the most suitable and effective in order to allow provision of comprehensive answers to the evaluation questions, conclusions and recommendations.

The use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is encouraged and the approach can vary depending on the evaluation questions. The tenderers should, however, ensure that the collection of data includes consultation with a representative sample of Interact stakeholders; both internal (Interact programme bodies) and external (Interreg programmes and other external stakeholders). In order to answer the sub-questions 1.3 and 1.4 on the use of Interact services, a representative sample of Interreg programmes, Bodies working on Macro Regional Strategies (MRS), Sea basin strategies, Bodies performing Accounting Function (BAF), Audit Authorities (AAs), Controllers and National Contact Points should be consulted. The sample must also include programmes who use Interact services less frequently. IPA and NEXT Programmes shall be taken in duly account. It is expected that methods such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, and/or similar will be applied, in addition to desk research of relevant documents, data analysis, etc.

The proposal presented by tenderers should suggest the most appropriate methods and out-line how different methods will be combined in order to reach goals of the evaluation.

The chosen tenderer will be provided with access to all necessary and available data and information for the purpose of the evaluation. Information included in the Annexes of this Terms of Reference and on the Interact website (www.interact.eu) is already at the disposal of tenderers. Other relevant information available at the programme level, as well as internal documents and data regularly collected by Interact as part of the programme implementation

and monitoring will be made accessible to the evaluator through a dedicated Interact contact person(s).

Examples of the available data and information that will be provided include:

- programme statistics exported from the programme monitoring system, in particular status updates on the programme indicators and financial data;
- data collected based on Interact surveys and feedback forms, including surveys on stakeholder needs assessment, event evaluation forms, etc.;
- data pooled from different communication tools (i.e. social media and web statistics);
- stakeholder contacts included in the Interact contact database for sampling for interviews;
- implementation and communication documents and other programme level material relevant for the evaluation.

5.   Services and timing

During the assignment, the evaluator is expected to build up reliable evidence of the effectiveness and efficiency of the Interact implementation and management, as specified by all three evaluation tasks. Based on the evidence presented and analysed, the evaluator should provide answers to the main evaluation questions and all sub-questions. Conclusions of the evaluation should be concise analytical observations and they should incorporate the evaluator's judgement based on recognised management frameworks/theories/experiences, as opposed to being a pure summary of the collected facts and opinions. Recommendations should be presented as concise actionable items. While drafting recommendations, the evaluator will also be expected to discuss the recommendations with dedicated Interact contact persons in order to understand the feasibility of different solutions.

The following compulsory deliverables are to be submitted by the evaluator:

- Inception Report (minimum 10 standard pages)
- Draft Final Report (minimum 50 standard pages). The final draft report has to contain summary of recommendations of max. 2 pages and infographic for each of the task, i.e. 3 infographics.
- Presentation of the Draft Final Report, main findings and recommendations to the Interact Monitoring Committee
- Final Report (taking into account Interact Monitoring Committee comments).

Apart from the above, tenderers may include in their proposals other deliverables in accordance with the proposed methodology, including those related directly to the main evaluation questions and/or individual sub-questions. The offer and deliverables must be submitted in English.

The provisional timeframe for delivery of the required reports is presented in Table 1 below. In addition, before the end of the contract, the evaluator shall hand out to the Interact all documents and contents developed.

Indicatively, the operational evaluation will take place from the notification of the contract until January 2026. Three phases are planned during this period: inception phase, implementation phase, and final phase.

5.1. Inception phase

- A kick-off/inception meeting is expected to take place shortly after the contract has been signed. At this meeting all relevant elements of the evaluation assignment will be discussed, particularly the evaluation sub-questions, methodological approach and tools, detailed time plan, as well as specific contents of the tasks to be implemented. The kick-off meeting will be attended by representatives of the Interact Managing Authority/Joint Secretariat, Head of Interact offices and relevant managers (quality and evaluation, communication) and interested members of the Interact Monitoring Committee. Given the representation from the Interact side, it is foreseen that the evaluator will use the kick-off meeting as an opportunity to start collecting information as a first input for the evaluation.

- Following the inception meeting, the evaluator will be requested to provide an Inception Report within a month within one month of the entry into force of the contract. This document must state in detail what is expected from this assignment, the points in time at which the different activities will be performed, and the process through which the evaluation reports will be produced. The Inception Report shall describe among others the following:

  - the evaluation questions and sub-questions for each task (listed and elaborated);
  - detailed information on the activities that will be carried out, together with deliverables resulting from these activities;
  - proposed source of information (including a list of available data to be useful for the evaluation) and data collection procedure;
  - detailed work plan of the tasks that will be undergone;
  - role and responsibilities of each member of the evaluation team;
  - description of the workflows and interactions with the Interact programme bodies;
  - expected intermediary and final outputs.

5.2. Implementation phase

- The stage of data collection is planned to run between February and August 2025, where different methods will be applied to source necessary information for the evaluation. Data available at the programme level will be made accessible to the evaluator through dedicated Interact contact persons. This includes documentation and statistical data provided by the Managing Authority/Interact Secretariat and the Interact Quality and Evaluation and Communication Managers, as well as access to information at the level of individual Interact Offices as relevant and needed for the evaluation.

- Regular online coordination meetings with Interact should be foreseen by the evaluators to enable a close exchange on the progress of the work and intermediate results of the evaluation.

5.3. Final phase

- Approximately 2 weeks before submission of the Draft Final Report, a Coordination Meeting will be organised in order to discuss conclusions of the evaluation, how they answer the evaluation questions, and to better steer the evaluator on the feasibility of possible solutions/recommendations deriving from the evaluation.

- The Draft Final Report is expected in due time before the Interact Programme Monitoring Committee meeting. The evaluator is expected to present the report, main findings and recommendations to the Monitoring Committee at this meeting. Any comments and suggestions by the Monitoring Committee shall be incorporated as relevant to the Final Report, to be submitted in July 2025. The final reports should include among others the following:

    o executive summary;
    o evaluation purpose and methodology;
    o findings and conclusions;
    o recommendations, including recommendations for the post 2027 period;
    o proposed follow up measures, if relevant
    o infographics outlining the findings and recommendations.

Table 3: Foreseen provisional timeframe

Phase	Deliverable	Indicative timeline
Inception phase	Signature of contract and start of assignment	December 2024
	Inception meeting (Online)	December 2024
	Inception Report	January 2025
Implementation phase	Data collection	February 2025 – August 2025
	Coordination meetings (Online)	February 2025 – August 2025
Final phase	Coordination meeting (Online)	August 2025
	Draft Final Report	September/October 2025
	Presentation (in-person) of the Draft Final Report, findings and recommendations to the Interact IV Monitoring Committee	November/December 2025
	Final Report	January 2026

Meetings will be organised online with the exception of the final presentation to the Interact Monitoring Committee. In addition to the planned meetings, additional phone/video conference meetings should be foreseen as relevant to communicate on the progress of the assignment. These meetings are in addition to any other meetings required to collect data, as requested by the evaluators according to the evaluation methodology.

6. Annexes

1. Interact IV Programme Evaluation Plan
2. Interact IV Communication Strategy
3. Interact IV Methodology document
4. Interact IV Strategic Implementation Document
5. Interact IV Programming Document