Interact | Co-funded by the European Union | Interreg

Interreg Programme Management Handbook

Guide to the 2021-2027 period

The Interreg Programme Management Handbook comprises a series of factsheets. They can be read individually, or collectively, to understand the relevance of certain aspects of Interreg management. They cover the relevance, legal basis, key challenges and approaches to the given subject.

Factsheet | Project implementation and monitoring

1. What is it? What is the definition of this work?

Introduction

Project implementation is the stage in the project lifecycle where the partnership carries out planned activities to achieve the agreed objectives, deliver outputs and results. In line with the lead partner principle, the lead partner holds overall responsibility for project implementation and monitoring.

Implementation can be further structured into key areas: project start-up, implementation monitoring and reporting, and project changes. This factsheet covers:

- Project start-up
- Implementation and project reporting
- Project changes
- Overarching principles guiding project implementation

Please note that project closure is addressed in a separate factsheet.

2. PROJECT START-UP

“Well begun is half done.” – Aristotle

This applies also to Interreg projects: success is determined to a large extent in the planning and start-up phase. Once a project is underway, most of what follows is a consequence of how well it was prepared at the beginning and, of course the changing environment. For this reason, the start-up phase is given particular attention in this fact sheet because investing resources early helps prevent difficulties later and ensures smoother implementation.

The project start-up phase is when contracts are signed, the management system is established (with key roles appointed), and arrangements for communication, quality and risk management, and monitoring are put in place. This phase sets the foundation for how the project will operate and deliver results.

It is also the moment to build a shared understanding of the project’s objectives, expected outcomes, and quality standards. The start-up phase is particularly important in Interreg, because partners come from different countries, cultures, and sectors, making alignment and early communication crucial for success

Nowadays, project implementation is understood as more than delivering results on time and within budget; it also requires ensuring quality, stakeholder acceptance, and alignment with broader societal goals. Recent PMI reports and other trends stress the importance of integrating sustainability and horizontal principles at every stage.

For Interreg projects, this means designing solutions that are environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, and durable beyond the project lifetime. Practical measures include reducing the carbon footprint of activities, organising online meetings where appropriate, and applying green procurement practices. Programmes also provide guidance to clarify their expectations in this regard.

Experience shows that risk management is essential but often underused in Interreg projects. While some programmes require risk reporting, real impact comes from a mindset change: risk management should not be treated as a formality but as one of the important factors in safeguarding project success. It means planning not only for the “optimal scenario” but sometimes also anticipating setbacks and allowing reserve time in the project timeline.

2.1. How does it work in practice: start-up phase

For programmes, the start-up phase provides both an opportunity and a responsibility to establish early communication and build trust with projects. It is the key moment to:

- get to know the project team,
- agree on communication flows,
- identify potential risks,
- ensure the partnership is aware of programme guidance,
- introduce programme expectations, and
- reinforce the focus on results, quality, and cooperation, etc.

Without early engagement, misunderstandings can arise, and implementation challenges may remain unnoticed for a long time, making later interventions more complex and resource-intensive. Even limited but well-targeted communication at this stage can help prevent issues and set a strong foundation for implementation.

It is essential to observe whether the partnership takes the necessary time to align and build a joint understanding of project objectives, expected results, and implementation approach. This alignment should also reflect the needs, expectations, and perspectives of stakeholders and end users. Particular attention should be given to defining clear, measurable criteria for project quality and success.

Programmes support the start-up phase and establish effective communication through several measures. The most common approach is to organise lead partner seminars, designed to familiarise projects with programme rules and expectations, strengthen cooperation, and provide guidance for a smooth start of implementation. Some programmes also organise implementation seminars (under various titles) involving a wider range of partners for training and exchange. In addition, many programmes encourage projects to exchange within thematic clusters, fostering synergies, awareness about the importance of capitalisation efforts.

Many programmes – especially cross-border ones or those with fewer projects to monitor – also attend project kick-off or initial monitoring meetings. It is considered good practice for programmes to agree internally on the role of project officers in these meetings, including whether they should present and which key messages to convey on behalf of the programme.

2.2. Challenges related to start-up phase:

Starting a cooperation project presents several challenges:

2.2.1. Limited resources available to project support at the start-up phase: it is not possible or sometimes even not feasible to attend kick off meetings/have initial meetings with all projects during the first months of the project implementation.

Ideas to reflect on when addressing challenge:

Portfolio-based reflection and targeted support based on risk assessment:

Project officers could reflect on their project portfolio from a risk perspective (e.g. large partnerships, new lead partners, high investment levels, new topics, weak work plans, or limited stakeholder involvement). Where a programme has a risk identification methodology or checklist, it should be applied. Based on the results, officers can prioritise communication with higher-risk projects. Experienced consortia with clear planning may need only minimal early interaction, freeing time and resources for more demanding cases. This allows officers to consciously decide which projects require intensive support and which require less. This assessment of risks and adjustment of resources could be a regular excercise.

2.2.2. Delayed project start

Any Interreg project faces the risk of a delayed start, which – if not identified and addressed early – can cause cascading delays throughout the project lifecycle, negatively affecting the quality and impact of project outcomes. Launching a cooperation project often takes more time and effort than expected - establishing cooperation structures, concluding agreements, and aligning on the project’s objectives, work plan, and communication approach are often underestimated in terms of time and effort.

A delayed project start or implementation can create programme-level challenges, as unmet spending targets may result in decommitment.

Ideas to reflect on when addressing challenge

- **Realistic time planning**

  During the application and contracting phase, provide clear guidance, based on programme experience, about the typical time needed to complete contracting, set up management structures, and launch activities. Sharing feedback or examples from previous projects can make these estimates more tangible. During the condition fulfilment stage**:** Use this moment to review project timelines together with the lead partner, adjusting where necessary. Remind applicants not to plan according to the “optimal scenario” only, but to include reserve time for administrative delays, staffing changes, or procurement procedures.

- **Set clear expectations in guidance materials**

  Programmes can support timely project start-up by clearly outlining expectations in their guidance – it should stress the importance of timely start-up implementation and provide a checklist of critical steps. This helps projects understand that delays at the beginning can affect both their own performance and programme-level targets.

  Some programmes go further by setting **specific spending targets** in the Subsidy Contract. For example, a check may be made on the third project report to ensure no more than 20% underspending. Larger underspending is accepted only if the reasons are beyond the control of the partnership. If targets are not met and no adequate justification or revised plan is provided, a reduction in allocated funding may follow.
  Such provisions send a clear signal that a timely start-up is a shared responsibility and that programmes expect projects to manage their early phases actively and realistically.

- **Proactive early-stage monitoring**

  Having participation in kick-off meetings, light check-ins (email, short call, etc.) etc, early in the implementation phase can be helpful not only to spot potential delays (e.g. unsigned agreements, repeatedly postponed kick-off meetings or steering group meetings) but also support partnership in addressing practical challenges related to this stage.

2.2.3. Delayed awareness of project challenges/hiding challenges from programme

One recurring difficulty in Interreg projects is that challenges are not disclosed early, either because the project lacks resources to establish timely communication or because the partnership hesitates to inform the Joint Secretariat.

To address this, programmes should encourage lead partners to see the JS not only as a compliance body but as a supportive resource that can help solve problems. Emphasising that raising issues early is not a sign of weakness, but a responsible, constructive step is key. Early disclosure allows the programme to provide targeted support, whether through guidance, additional monitoring, or connecting projects with peers that have faced similar challenges.

By fostering a culture of openness and trust, programmes can prevent minor obstacles from becoming major risks.

3. Project Implementation and Reporting

3.1. How does it work in practice: implementation and reporting

After the start-up phase, it is essential to ensure effective and efficient project implementation. On a project level the project implementation implies:

- Carrying out project activities according to the approved work plan
- Monitoring progress, risks, quality and changes
- Reporting internally in the partnership and externally
- Communication (internally in the partnership and externally to the programme, end users and stakeholders)

Communication plays a crucial role in project success. Internal communication within the project team ensures a shared understanding of objectives and approaches, clarity of tasks, alignment with the application plan, and timely sharing of updates, challenges, and adjustments – preventing miscommunication and delays.

Close communication with end users and stakeholders is equally important, as understanding their needs and securing their acceptance builds trust and supports the uptake of results. External communication with the wider society promotes transparency, demonstrates the responsible use of public funds, and strengthens the legitimacy of projects.

The approved application form is the basis for the project implementation. No matter how good the original plan is, changes are inevitable, Therefore, **monitoring** and keeping deviations and changes within the project scope are key elements of successful implementation.

At the programme level, **project monitoring** involves the systematic tracking and assessment of project progress and outcomes. Monitoring provides valuable information for both the project and the programme. For projects, it ensures timely and accurate feedback; for programmes, it supports overall programme implementation performance, financial progress, and strategic alignment.

Monitoring from programme side typically includes:

- Regular communication with the project lead partner
- Reviewing official project (progress) reports
- Participation in project events, having on spot visits
- Observing project presence on media/social media/websites
- Conducting mid-term meetings or reviews.

Many programmes have a **Mid-Term Project Review**, usually at the halfway of a project's implementation. The objectives of this structured meeting between the programme and lead partner are to assess overall progress towards the project's objectives and expected results, identify any challenges or bottlenecks, and plan any necessary adjustments for the remaining implementation period. Findings and agreed actions are documented in a **Mid-Term Review Form.**

Some programmes also require a Project Monitoring Plan to be developed during the start-up phase, particularly when continuous reporting is applied. This plan outlines the key reporting requirements and monitoring milestones, tailored to the specific characteristics of the project.

All programmes require **reporting** during project implementation. The purpose is to assess whether objectives are being achieved, resources are used as planned and observing programme rules, problems have been encountered, and whether the project is on track to be completed on time, within budget, and in line with agreed quality standards.

Reporting is done electronically, either via Jems or another programme/territory specific online monitoring system. Project reporting is based on the Harmonised Implementation tools (HIT).

The approved Project Report typically is the basis for payment, except in cases where continuous reporting applies. The standard process involves verification at the partner level by the national controller, consolidation by the lead partner, followed by approval by the Joint Secretariat (JS) and other relevant programme authorities.

With the increasing use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs), some checks have shifted from the national controller to the programme level. The extensive adoption of SCOs notably streamlines the reporting process, reducing the time required for both project partners and programme bodies to complete and verify reports.

Types of project reports:

Preparation Cost Report

Programmes having an eligible preparation cost often have a separate form for the reimbursement of preparation costs incurred prior to submission of project application, unless preparation costs are reimbursed as fast fast-track lump sum, directly incorporated in the electronic monitoring system and paid out e.g. after signing of the grant agreement (so there is no need to submit a separate report).

Project (Progress) Report

The process begins on the partner level where each project partner has to report to the national controller who approves the expenditure declared. The project (progress) report compiles aggregated information from all partner reports and provides an overview of the progress of the project toward objectives, implemented activities and outputs, financial performance, cooperation dynamics, as well as any challenges or deviations encountered.

Most programmes require projects to submit progress reports twice per year, covering six-month intervals. However, reporting frequency can vary – from one to four reports per year – depending on programme rules. While longer reporting periods reduce administrative burden, they can also lead to reduced information flow and delays in cost reimbursement.

Reporting schedules may follow:

- *Fixed periods* – the same reporting dates for all projects, or
- *Individualised periods* – based on the project's approval date or subsidy contract signature.

Submission deadlines typically fall within 2 to 4 months after the end of the reporting period. There is often some flexibility, especially for the first and final reporting periods, which may be slightly shorter or longer than standard intervals.

Lately, more attention has been given to the application of horizontal principles during project implementation and reporting. In most programmes, these are covered within the regular project report. In some cases, however, separate simple templates have been introduced to further promote inclusion and sustainability in project activities (for example, Interreg Northern Periphery and Arctic programme).

Final Report

The final report is the last report submitted to the programme, usually within three months after the project's end.

In some programmes it takes the form of a standard progress report with additional questions or annexes on achievements, durability of results, and feedback. More commonly, a separate final report form is used, focusing on overall achievements, durability of results, potential for capitalisation, and lessons learned. It also invites the partnership to reflect on its experience and provide feedback to the programme.

It is good practice for information from final reports to be reviewed not only by individual project officers but also analysed at programme level. This allows programmes to identify common challenges, use project feedback to update procedures for greater efficiency and simplicity, and apply the lessons learned when guiding future projects.

Continuous Reporting

Continuous reporting refers to the ongoing submission of project deliverables and outputs via the electronic monitoring system as soon as they are finalised (Interreg Central Europe). This approach allows for real-time monitoring, encourages continuous communication between project and programme bodies, and helps address cash flow challenges.

3.2. Challenges related to the reporting

3.2.1. Delayed and incomplete reports

For many projects, especially for newcomer partners, the reporting is quite complex and resource intensive. As a result, reports are often delayed or incomplete, with missing evidence, unclear cost links to the Application Form, or inconsistent information. These issues slow down payments, delay feedback, and make early problem detection more difficult.

Ideas to reflect on when addressing a challenge:

- **Be clear why reporting matters and foster a good reporting culture** – timely, accurate reports enable faster payments, quicker JS feedback, and earlier correction of mistakes. Promote reporting as a tool for learning and risk detection. One way to support this is by providing feedback on aspects to consider for the next steps in project implementation after each report is approved.
- **Set expectations early and clearly** – highlight that reporting requires resources and skills; partnerships should plan for this from the start.
- **Provide clear guidance and support** – ensure that key reporting principles, tips, and checklists are easily available and understandable. Support newcomers with examples of good reports and lists of common mistakes and good practices.

3.2.2. Administratively demanding reporting

Reporting is one of the most administratively demanding aspects of project implementation. Progress reports typically require input across multiple sections (activities, finances, indicators, communication), consolidation of contributions from all partners, and the collection of supporting documents. It requires coordination, accuracy, and significant time.

Ideas to reflect on when addressing a challenge:

- **Simplify and streamline** – review reporting forms and procedures; encourage exchanges among colleagues working together on joint understanding of checks and the requirements, have regular yearly exchanges with national controllers to have a common understanding of programmes rules,
- **Use simplified cost options** – that is a good way to reduce administrative burden whenever possible.

- **Apply risk-based checks** – consider requiring more details in the report from high-risk or high-budget projects while applying lighter checks for smaller or lower-risk ones (for example, "lighter" reporting is quite often applied for the small-scale projects).

Most importantly, JS officers should balance reporting requirements with a focus on results. Regular communication with projects helps to minimise surprises in reports, allowing reviews to concentrate on eligibility and quality rather than clarifying overall progress or project approach.

3.2.3. Quality of outputs and results

Another recurring challenge is how to assess and report on the quality of outputs and results. Quality is often subjective, rarely defined in formal agreements, and therefore difficult to measure or argue during reporting. This can lead to situations where projects consider their outputs satisfactory, while the programme struggles to confirm whether they truly meet expectations or provide sufficient value.

Ideas to reflect on when addressing a challenge:

- **Agree on quality features early** – encourage projects to discuss and note down what constitutes “quality” for specific outputs and results at the start of implementation. These features can serve as guiding principles for both project self-assessment and programme monitoring.
- **Reference examples** – search for sample outputs or good practices from other projects to illustrate the expected standard and make quality less abstract.
- **Stakeholder feedback** – where relevant, encourage projects to involve end users or stakeholders in validating whether outputs meet their needs. This provides an external perspective.

3.2.4. Generic reporting not adapted to project type or timeline

Reporting is often applied uniformly, without considering the project’s nature, complexity, or timeline. While this reduces administrative load, it risks overlooking critical implementation issues such as delays or procurement challenges.

Ideas to reflect on when addressing a challenge:

- **Officer-level measures** – encourage projects to share early alerts, use informal check-ins around milestones, and detect issues before formal reporting.
- **Programme-level measures** – consider **continuous online reporting** for real-time updates and adapt reporting schedules to project type or critical milestones.

4. Project changes

4.1. How does it work in practice: project changes

Interreg projects are, at their core, about creating change – moving from an existing state to a desired future one. Managing that change effectively is not just beneficial; it’s essential. Change management has become a discipline in its own right and is now a critical part of delivering change within a project, e.g. one of the important factors when reaching project success.

For this reason, it is important that project partners are familiar with the key principles of change management, possess the necessary skills, and remain open to learning how to manage change effectively.

In fast-paced and constantly evolving environment we operate in, changes during project implementation are unavoidable – even with the most careful planning. That’s why it is important that related programme procedures are designed to be efficient and effective, to avoid creating unnecessary administrative burden to projects.

To manage changes successfully, project partnership must assess them carefully and communicate openly and in a timely manner with the Joint Secretariat. Any potential changes should be discussed with the responsible project officer as early as possible. Transparent, trust-based communication supports smoother processes and leads to better outcomes.

In Interreg programmes, project changes are often categorised into different types (see table below), each requiring a specific procedure.

Minor changes	**Major changes**
Administrative modifications (e.g. change of contact information, change of bank account) **Budget** modifications **below the flexibility rule**	Modifications to the **partnership** (e.g. partner drop-out, new partner) **Budget** modifications **above the flexibility rule**
Minor modifications of the project content (e.g. activity modifications, time-schedule related modifications)	**Significant modifications of the project content** (e.g. considerable extensions of project duration, indicator target modifications, objective modifications)

Minor changes are typically adjustments that are in line with the approved application and do not have any significant impact on the project implementation. In most programmes, they do not require a formal modification procedure – some may simply require notifying JS or obtaining email approval. In contrast, others can be reported in the next project report.

Major changes usually have a significant impact on project implementation. Such changes require the submission of a project modification request, which has to be approved by the programme bodies (JS, MA, MC or SC) before coming into force. Major changes often include amendments to the subsidy and partnership agreements, which can be time-consuming. In response, some programmes (for example, Interreg Central Baltic) process amendments electronically through the monitoring system, thereby reducing the administrative burden for both programmes and projects.

To encourage more strategic and well-planned change management, some programmes set restrictions on how often and when project modifications can be made. For example:

- major modifications are only possible once or twice during the project duration,
- no modifications are allowed during the final six months of project implementation.

Many programmes have a **budget flexibility rule**, which means that projects are allowed to reallocate a certain budget amount between budget lines, work packages and sometimes also project partners without having to request for a change. In most programmes these types of budget modifications can be up to 20 % (sometimes only 10 %) and are considered as minor (no need for approval).

4.2. Challenges related to project changes

Despite being a normal part of project implementation, changes often create challenges for both projects and programmes. The most common issues include:

4.2.1 Mindset shift and delayed communication of changes

Many project partners and programme staff still see changes as failures rather than a normal part of improvement in project implementation. Combined with complex procedures, this makes change management demanding and stressful. In addition, projects sometimes wait too long before informing the Joint Secretariat about emerging issues, often due to a lack of trust, which results in late interventions and higher risks.

Ideas to reflect on when addressing the challenge:

- Promote change as a normal and constructive process, not a weakness.

- Raise awareness about the need to be aware of the change management processes and improve the skills.
- Encourage early and transparent communication through regular check-ins or “early warning” mechanisms. Make it clear that timely reporting helps secure support and reduces risks.

4.2.2 Administrative burden of change procedures

Programme rules for modifications are often rigid, requiring multiple levels of approval. This can cause delays, discourage proactive change management, and create unnecessary workload for both projects and programme staff.
Ideas to reflect on when addressing the a challenge:

- Apply proportionality – streamline procedures, expand budget flexibility rules, and reserve formal approvals for changes with significant impact.
- Highlight to applicants that detailed requirements at the application stage may increase the need for formal modifications later. Provide advice on the level of detail acceptable to your programme.
- Consider delegating decisions on changes without significant impact to project officers, who hold the most accurate project information.
- Consider limiting contract amendments to exceptional cases. Some Interreg programmes already treat changes made in the monitoring system as legally binding, which considerably reduces administrative workload.

4.2.3 Delayed communication of changes

Projects often wait too long before informing the Joint Secretariat about emerging issues, leading to late interventions and higher risks.

Ideas to reflect on when addressing the challenge:

- Encourage early and transparent communication through regular check-ins or “early warning” mechanisms.
- Emphasise that timely reporting is not a weakness but a responsible step that helps secure programme support and reduces risks.

Overarching Principles Guiding Work during the Project Implementation

In supporting Interreg projects, programmes tend to follow a set of principles that help support delivering quality results, while also fostering trust-based cooperation and keeping administrative requirements proportionate.

1. Balancing control and administrative efficiency

Ensuring compliance, transparency, and proper use of public funds is essential. At the same time, it's equally important to remain aware of the administrative load placed on project partnerships. Excessive or overly complex and demanding requirements can unintentionally take time and resources from what matters most:

- Achieving meaningful, high-quality results.
- Engaging stakeholders effectively.
- Staying adaptive to evolving needs and challenges.

Finding the right balance – between accountability and flexibility – helps focus on results, not just procedures.

2. Commitment to continuous improvement and simplification on the programme level

While finding time can be challenging, it is valuable for programmes to regularly reflect on their procedures, guidance, and ways of working to explore opportunities for simplification – particularly where certain requirements may no longer be necessary or could be handled more efficiently.

3. Commitment to continuous improvement on a personal level

Even in programmes with well-designed procedures, the role of the project officer remains central – **a key link between the programme and the project**. This role requires a careful balance between support and monitoring, which can be both rewarding and complex

Ongoing development in this role often comes through regular reflection and a willingness to learn. In addition to technical expertise related to programme requirements and procedures, programme and project management, qualities like emotional intelligence, leadership, and adaptability can make a real difference in how project officers communicate, monitor and support projects.

Opportunities to explore different ways of working – adapting communication styles, experimenting with new tools, or reflecting on past interactions – can offer helpful insights.

Peer exchange can also play a meaningful role. Sharing experiences and challenges with colleagues often brings new perspectives, reinforces good practices, and supports learning in a way that's both relatable and practical.

4. Trust and effective communication with projects

Trust and clear communication are often at the heart of meaningful support. They can help spot challenges early, strengthen focus on results and project quality. When trust is in place, projects tend to feel more comfortable sharing challenges, are more receptive to guidance, and remain better aligned with programme objectives.

Some elements that can contribute to building trust and effective communication include:

- Clear and consistent communication
- Timely and respectful responses
- Understanding of the project's context and constraints
- Communication emphasizing shared goals and support, not just control
- Regular, structured opportunities for communication

Tailoring the support to the projects

Project needs and capacities can vary significantly. Lead partners and partnerships differ in their experience, available resources, and preferred ways of working. Some projects are relatively simple, while others are more complex and require more structured support.

Acknowledging these differences can help ensure that support is relevant and proportionate. When support aligns with a project's context and communication preferences, it may be easier for teams to stay focused on cooperation and achieving sustainable results.

Disclaimer: Cooperation can be complex, and while Interact's job is to make it easier, Interact cannot offer assurances on the accuracy of our pan-European information in any specific context.

Furthermore, understanding and knowledge evolves throughout the programming period. If you spot something out of date or inconsistent, please contact us at communication@interact.eu

Copyright: This product is licensed under Creative Commons, under the 'Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International' license (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

You are permitted to share and adapt this work. You are required to attribute the work, indicating if changes were made. You are required to offer revised work on the same license basis. The material cannot be used for commercial purposes.

For more information about this license please visit creativecommons.org

Publisher | Interact programme
Date | 18.09.2025
Author | Monika Balode
Contributors | Sana Erkko

Co-funded by the European Union
Interreg