



OPERATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE INTERACT PROGRAMME

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interact is operating effectively, meeting targets and delivering results.

The objective of the operational evaluation of the Interact Programme is to **assess whether the programme's management structure and programme communication are able to support the effective and efficient implementation** of the programme strategy. The evaluation covers: progress towards the achievement of programme objectives and its indicators; the programme management system; and the Communication Strategy and progress in its implementation.

The operational evaluation employed a robust mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection and evaluation methods tailored to each evaluation task. Key to evaluation is also an understanding of Interact's unique role and position in the family of Interreg programmes.

Interact aims to enhance cooperation of territorial cooperation programmes. Interact provides a large range of free-of-charge services to Interreg stakeholders that aim to support capacity building through the exchange of experience and inter-programme coordination. The programme has a decentralised governance structure with the MA and Secretariat located in Slovakia and four Interact Offices, as the single beneficiaries

of the programme, located in different parts of Europe.

The evaluation of programme progress finds that **Interact is meeting, and often exceeding, its targets and fulfilling its objectives**. Surveys of key stakeholder groups reveal that satisfaction levels are generally high, which reflects well on Interact's capacity to deliver results. Where the programme has faced challenges or barriers, it has put in place effective mitigation strategies or responses.

A particularly notable example is Interact's **capacity to respond to the operational challenges posed by the Covid-19 crisis**. Interact has been quick to adapt and move events and resources on line, thus providing ongoing support and engagement for key stakeholder groups. Internal systems and structures have proved adaptable and staff have been highly committed, responsive and skilled in adapting to such rapidly changing conditions.

Evaluation of the programme's structure and processes notes the **evolution of the programme over successive programme periods**, addressing challenges over time and demonstrating the capacity to grow and adapt. The current designation of roles and functions allows the effective implementation of the programme.



Programme management and implementation is highly professional, responsive, and adaptable.

The unique nature of Interact's role and structure presents on-going challenges linked to institutional and operational complexity and high demand/pressure on coordination. However, the **constructive attitude of staff towards virtual working across offices, staff skills, and new processes in place help address challenges and boost effectiveness.**

Evaluation of the programme's communication strategy highlights the **central role of effective and efficient communication in Interact's activities.** The Programme uses a wide variety of communication tools and approaches and has increasingly taken efforts to improve its brand and visual identity. Communications are relevant, robust and well delivered and largely appreciated by Interact's key target groups.

Interact's current work on communication is well-organised and internal capacity and the high demand for communications activities means that actions have had to be carefully prioritised. Crucially, **the work is responsive to new demands and effectively accommodates shifting priorities.**

The evaluation shows that Interact programme implementation is on track for delivering programme specific objectives and results. The programme is effective in its implementation systems and processes. In 2020, the Covid-19 crisis has posed some huge operational and strategic challenges but this, together with other examples, have highlighted the importance and

value of the highly committed staff and responsive and flexible systems.

The evaluation also notes **points of detail to address, or for the 2021-2027 programme to consider.** There are areas where Interact can continue to improve and smooth its approaches. However, the key message is that **Interact is a robust, well-managed, well-organised programme with highly skilled and committed staff.** Factors such as the complexity of regulations and tools, the changeable policy environment, and the evolving situation in relation to Covid-19 make Interact's role and the demand for its services all the more considerable.

For the upcoming 2021-2027 programme period, the evaluation proposes an **"evolution rather than revolution"** approach to refine the programme's operations and structures, preserving elements that have proved useful and striving for continuity. Nonetheless, besides the need to adapt to the new regulatory framework, Interact has picked up a number of lessons from the current programme period and can continue its evolution in the future.



1 INTRODUCTION

Interact occupies a unique position in the family of Interreg programmes due to its distinct role in *“reinforcing the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy by promoting exchange of experience concerning the identification, transfer and dissemination of good practices and innovative approaches in relation to the implementation of cooperation programmes and actions as well as to the use of EGTCs”* (Article 2 of the ETC Regulation¹).

The **objective of the operational evaluation** of the Interact programme is to assess whether the programme's management structure and programme communication are able to support the effective and efficient implementation of the programme strategy. The evaluation is divided into three parts:

1. evaluation of the progress towards the achievement of programme objectives and its indicators;
2. evaluation of the programme management system; and
3. evaluation of the Communication Strategy and progress in its implementation.

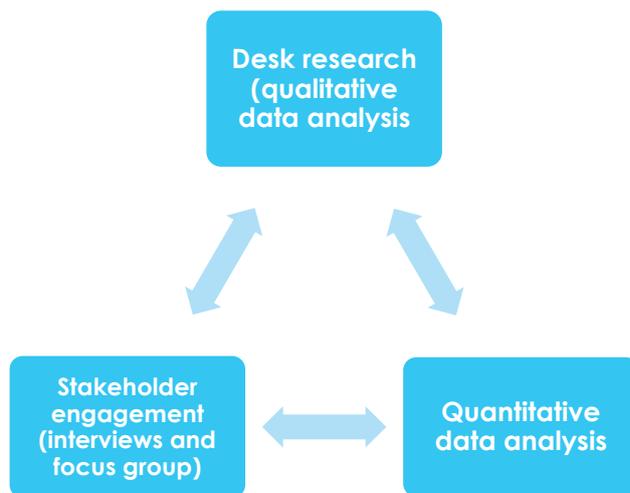
The following report provides an overview of three in depth reports on each of these elements and sets out key conclusions and recommendations.

2 METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

2.1 Methodology

The operational evaluation employed a robust method mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection and evaluation methods that are tailored to each evaluation task.

Figure 1: Triangulation of evaluation methods



By combining a range of data sources and applying different methods with equal rigour, triangulation of information and opinions becomes possible. This generates different vantage points from which to answer the evaluation questions and enhances the validity of the evaluation conclusions and results. Some aspects of the evaluation rely on gathering opinions on subjective issues that cannot be quantitatively measured. Where this is the case, particular care

was taken to ensure that interviewees were selected at random and reported opinions were not based on a single source.

2.2 Context

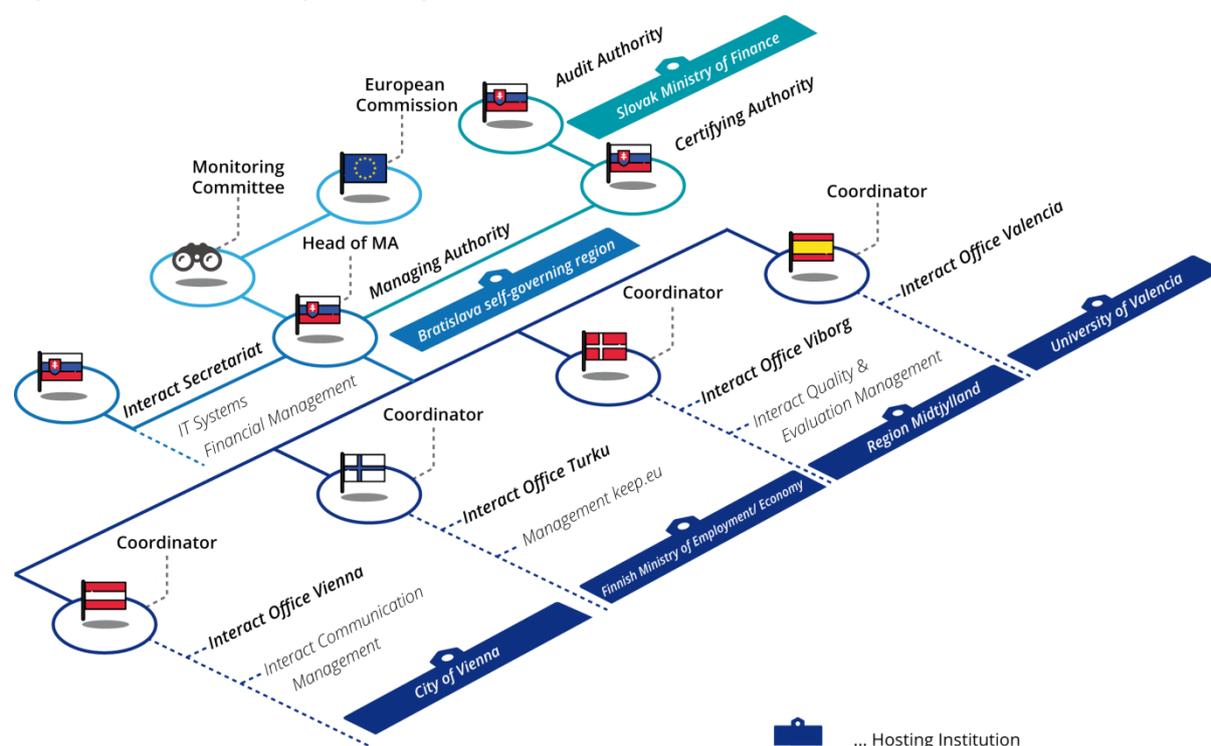
Interact occupies a unique position in the family of Interreg programmes. Its main target group are the Interreg/ETC programmes and it aims, primarily, to enhance cooperation between territorial cooperation programmes. Interact provides a large range of free-of-charge services to Interreg stakeholders that aim to support capacity building through the exchange of experience and inter-programme coordination. Interact products and services include, among others:

- the organisation of events, including learning events and network meetings for facilitated knowledge exchange;
- the development of standardised management tools, such as guidance documents and templates, but also IT applications for programme management and monitoring, web platforms, e-learning tools;
- the development of (thematic) studies;
- the provision of tailored advice, and
- the development of promotional products, e.g. videos or the coordination of awareness raising events such as the European Cooperation Day.

2.2.1 Governance Structure

Given Interact's special mission, its implementation provisions differ from that of other Interreg (interregional) programmes. The programme has a decentralised governance structure, with the MA and Secretariat located in Slovakia (SK) and four Interact Offices (IO), as the single beneficiaries of the programme, located in different parts of Europe: Vienna (Austria, AT); Viborg (Denmark, DK); Valencia (Spain, ES); and Turku (Finland, FI). Each office is under the direct supervision of a hosting institution. In practice, however, they operate very autonomously as hosting institutions delegate sufficient powers to office coordinators to manage their teams and implement work plans independently.² The entire programme is monitored by the Programme Monitoring Committee (MC), which agrees on the programme's strategic development goals and main spending axes. The European Commission acts as observer to the MC and has a supervisory role in the programme. The Certifying Authority (CA) draws up certified statements of expenditure and submits applications for payment to the EC. The Audit Authority (AA) verifies the effective functioning of the management and control system through audit opinions and control reports.

Figure 2: Interact's programme governance structure



Source: own elaboration

2.2.2 Programme processes

The implementation of the Interact III Programme **involves many complex workflows on the part of all programme bodies**. This includes the monitoring of programme indicators by the



MA/JS, with input from IOs, to the preparation of audit opinions by the AA, or the verification of expenditures by the national controllers and certification by the CA.

Programme processes are well organised and repeated workflows are standardised. In all programme bodies (Managing Authority, Audit Authority, Certifying Authority, Control bodies) clear process descriptions, guidelines and checklists are in place and followed. These include specifications of the tasks that are to be performed, by whom, when and how. The fact that the Programme has an error rate close to zero indicates that processes are well defined and contribute to an effective implementation of the programme. Most of the work of the Interact Offices, however, is creative and knowledge-based work - often one-time projects, which are difficult to structure in terms of fixed processes. Nevertheless, Programme process and quality management is well embedded in Interact operations.

Workflows that are carried out frequently have been standardised and, for many of them, process guidelines have been formulated. Examples include the organisation and management of Interact events, recruitment, the management of networks, and external experts. Process guidelines have been developed collaboratively in working groups to ensure that they are practical and enjoy broad acceptance within the team. New process guidance (e.g. on the delivery of online events) is developed whenever the need arises. The programme has also drawn up a detailed internal (process) guide and a joint quality strategy, which are also geared towards ensuring harmonious procedures and quality standards across the four IOs.

2.2.3 *Interact characteristics*

Being a programme, Interact is by definition a temporary structure. Nonetheless, Interact has many traits that make it resemble an organisation. An **organisation is defined as a social construct with a permanent or long-term perspective and a formal structure whose activities are geared towards a specific set of goals**. As a quasi-organisation, Interact shares many characteristics with the adhocracy-type of organisation.³ An **adhocracy** is a flexible and dynamic form of organisation that is defined by a relative absence of formal hierarchy and low standardisation of procedures due to the “ad hoc/project” type of work that prevails in the organisation. Interact offices are relatively autonomous units, headed by coordinators whose core task is to liaise with the other offices, the Managing Authority and the programme stakeholders, in particular the Monitoring Committee and the European Commission. Even though the MA and coordinators have a leading role in the development of the programme’s strategy (CP and the multi-annual work plans), in practice, Interact’s strategic focus is constantly evolving as new topics and projects come up based on emerging needs and *ad hoc* requests from Interact’s stakeholders. This is typical for adhocracies⁴. Interact’s staff have considerable discretion over the topics and projects that they wish to work on and thus their choice influences the direction in which the programme develops. Even though Interact has opted for a ‘market-based’ structure to be geographically close to its stakeholders (‘markets’),

the different offices have also developed distinct areas of specialisation (e.g. on different topics, such as macro-regional strategies, or in providing specific services such as the community monitoring system). The offices do not simply replicate the same expertise and offer the same services, which is typically the case in market-based organisational structures.

Adhocracies, as an organisational form, have been associated with a **high-level of ability to innovate and solve problems** on behalf of clients. They are particularly **suitable to dealing with a dynamic and complex environment** and demonstrated favourable conditions for becoming **learning organisations**. However, adhocracies also have some trade-offs as compared to more formalised, hierarchical organisations. These are due mainly to the significant effort associated with continuous communication required to organise coordination and collaboration to ensure uniform quality standards. On this basis, the **natural tendency of adhocracy-type organisations is to formalise some elements over time**. Success, aging, changing external conditions and growth encourage a metamorphosis, driving it to more stable conditions and, in some areas, a more bureaucratic structure. These insights on adhocracies from organisation research can serve as a **conceptual model to analyse the set-up of Interact's management and control system**, including processes.

2.2.4 Internal and external factors affecting Interact's operational performance

Another important analytical dimension for assessing Interact's operational performance is the environment in which it acts and with which it interacts.

Table 1: Environment influencing Interact's operational performance

Interact's environment		Influence over	
The global environment	The wider political-legal, economical, technical, etc. reality in which Interact operates.	↓	Interact has virtually no influence on its global environment.
The immediate 'outer' environment	Most notably, the framework conditions created by the EU's Regional Policy and the specificities of Interact's stakeholders ('clients'), e.g. their needs and constraints.	↓	The overall influence that Interact has on its immediate outer environment is limited even though Interact is an actor who actively shapes EU territorial cooperation policy. However, the impact evaluation has found evidence that Interact's products and services feed into EC implementing actions and guidance and have a clear effect on programme management practices in many Interreg programmes.
The inner environment	The specific setting that the organisation creates for itself, including its vision and strategy, leadership, structures and processes, human resources, organisational culture and power structures within the organisation.	↓	The programme has considerable, yet not total influence, over its inner environment as the programme's management set-up is strongly conditioned by the ERDF rulebook with which it has to comply.





Source: Evaluators based on Kleingarn H. (1997). *Change Management: Instrumentarium zur Gestaltung und Lenkung einer lernenden Organisation*, Dt. Univ.-Verl.; Wiesbaden.

The **impact evaluation of the Interact programme** has already identified a number of factors conditioning Interact's results performance that are beyond the direct influence of the Interact programme. They all relate to Interact's immediate outer environment.

- *Complex and multi layered management structures and decision-making in Interreg programmes* mean that many stakeholders have to be convinced of the utility of making changes to well-established management practices before they are introduced.
- *Large and diverse target groups* mean that Interact has to carefully navigate around different interests. Interact also increasingly engages with actors beyond its core target groups, which means that it needs to earn recognition among actors which are not yet used to regularly working with Interreg.
- *Interreg programmes have limited (staff & financial) resources* and may find it difficult to actively engage in Interact activities.
- *Some of the areas in which Interact engages, e.g. its support to the Macro-regional Strategies or the rebranding of Interreg, are strategically, even politically, sensitive.* As a result, Interact is sometimes faced with concerns, attitudes, or frustrations that do not fall within the remit of Interact, but which impinge on Interact's work by adding complexity and uncertainties.

An additional critical factor shaping current and future operations is the impact of the Covid crisis. This has had huge implications for Interact services in particular events and Interact operations, such as the opportunity for staff to meet in person. As will be highlighted in this report, while these factors are in some respects 'challenges' or 'barriers', how Interact has addressed them reveals much about the strength and adaptability of the programme.

3 TASK 1: EVALUATION OF PROGRESS

Achievement of Programme objectives is monitored and measured through output and result indicators. Data collection is a task shared by the Interact Offices and the Joint Secretariat. Annex 1 provides an overview of the indicators, 2013 and 2018 milestones⁵ and final targets for 2023. Building on the indicators, a more detailed analysis of progress and the intended 'direction of travel' towards expected results was set out in the Programme's Multi Annual Work Programme (MAWP) 2014-2020. The MAWP sets out a framework of Specific Objectives and accompanying medium term strategies, leading to intended results. These measures do not form part of formal reporting and have to be considered with this in mind. However, they do

offer additional insights into the types of activities undertaken. As will be illustrated, the programme is meeting targets and delivering results.

3.1 Progress on programme indicators and objectives

...Interact meeting targets and programme objectives

Programme indicators provide a basic overview of progress and a starting point for more detailed evaluation and **highlight the high level of progress in meeting targets.**



Events: Cumulative figures for 2019 show that a total of 438 events have been held. This figure far exceeds the milestone target of 197 by 2018 and is almost half of the 2023 target of 890 events.



Tools: Considerable progress has been made in meeting targets in relation to the delivery of tools (such as handbooks, studies, document and calculation spreadsheet templates, online information, databases, monitoring system software, training videos, EU-wide promotional campaigns). The milestone target of 55 by 2018 was already exceeded by 2017. By 2019, 75.3 percent of the final 2023 target had been met.



Participants: Targets for the number of participants at Interact events were exceeded in 2017 and, by 2019, 83 percent of the 2023 target had already been met.

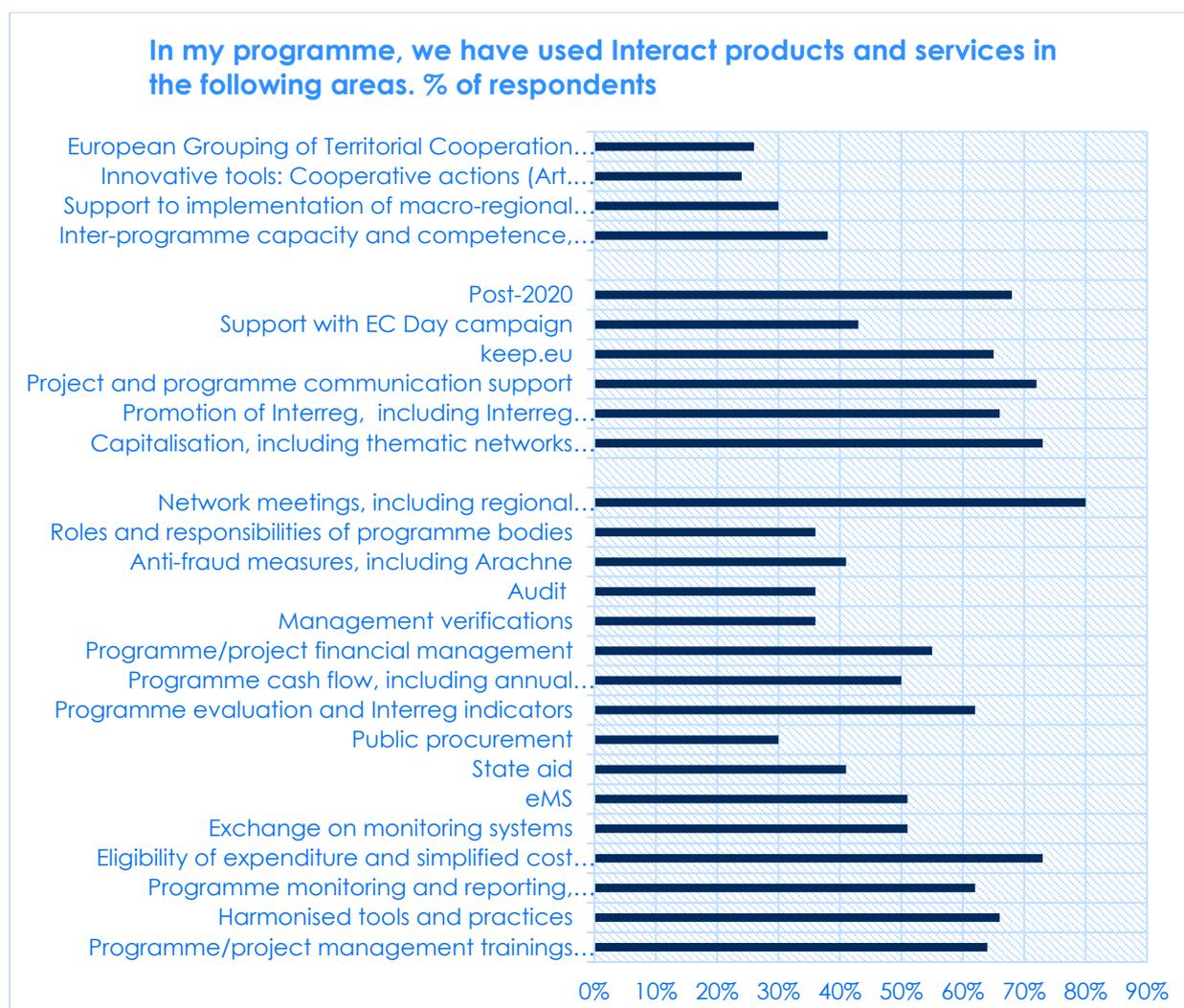


Survey Data⁶ shows that Joint Secretariats and Managing Authorities are the most heavily engaged institutions, but the use of specialist tailored services is also reflected in the participation of Audit Authorities, Certifying Authorities, and National Authorities.

Results for all three specific objectives are measured in terms of number of programmes using Interact products and services and the satisfaction with them. There is variation in the indicators, with measures in relation to capacity to implement innovative approaches lower, but this is not unexpected given the nature of the intervention.

More generally, the wide use of Interact services is an indication of the extent and range of Interact's results. Figure 3 illustrates the range of areas in which Interact services are used from specific tasks, such as the development of eMS, to the more strategic discussions on developments post 2020.

Figure 3: Use of Interact Products



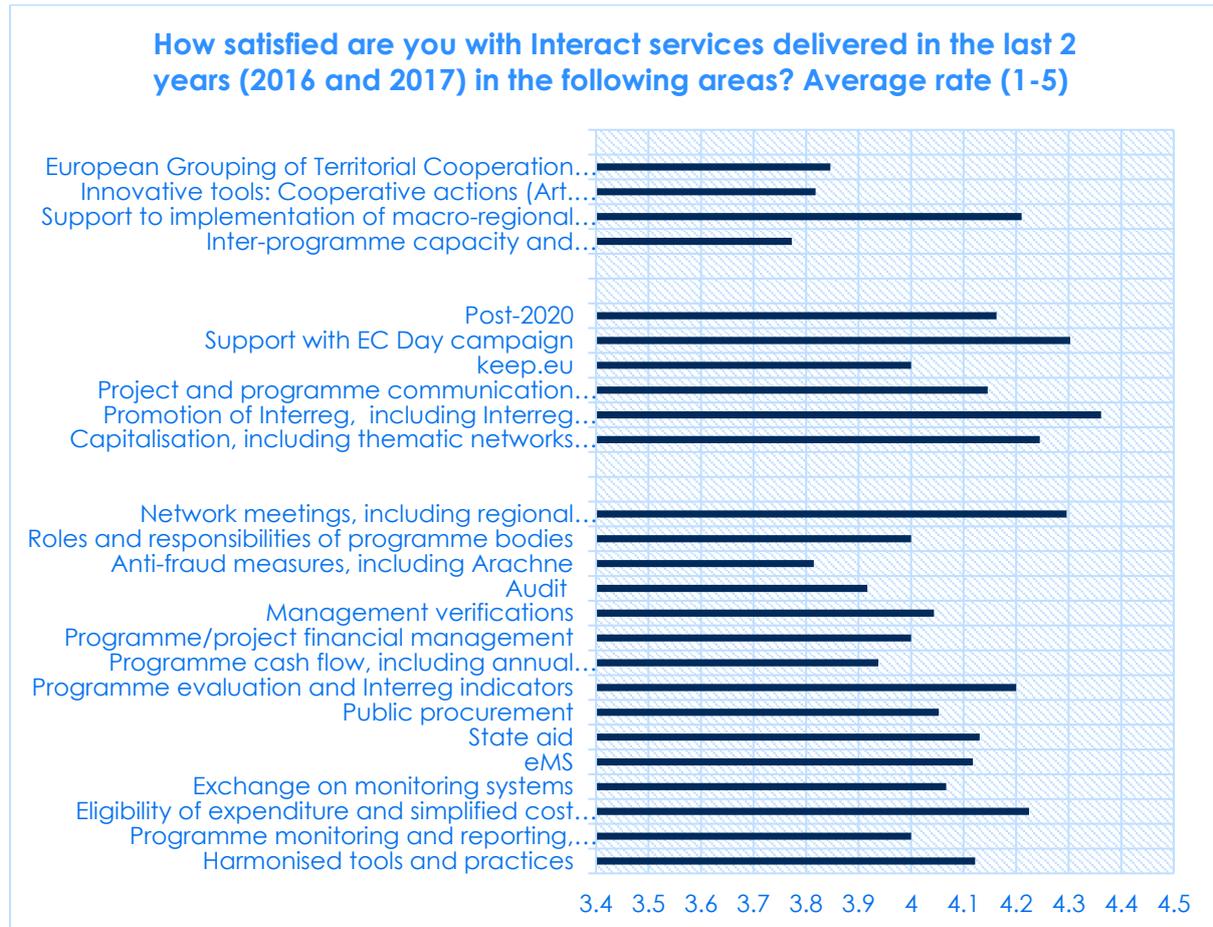
Source: Interact Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey





The fact that the **products and services are generally well used reflects positively on how Interact works in order to respond rapidly to stakeholder needs**. Across the services provided by Interact, user satisfaction levels are generally high, with no service area scoring below an average rate of 3.5 on a 1-5 scale. Levels of satisfaction were particularly highly rated in the areas of support on the implementation of macroregions, support with EC Day, promotion of Interreg, and network meetings (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Satisfaction with Interact Services



Source: Interact Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey 2018

The fact that **satisfaction levels are high** reflects well on Interact's capacity to deliver results. This finding is supported by the Interact mid-term impact evaluation, which found evidence that Interact products and services have **generated immediate results** in terms of:

- increased programme management capacities for management and control;
- capturing and communicating programme results; and
- implementing innovative cooperation approaches.



More detailed measures towards programme objectives are set out in the MAWP, and also support these conclusions. Annex 2 provides an overview analysis of progress against indicators and shows good progress in meeting targets. In some areas, the nature of the issue being addressed means outputs are less tangible and immediately impactful. In addition, some areas of intervention have fewer indicators, which means progress appear less 'numerous' in PO 2 than PO 1, but progress is nonetheless substantial. More generally, there are **many areas of notable achievement where targets have been exceeded** including, for example: building a more widespread application of simplified and harmonised approaches; achieving a more widespread use of identified good practice and quality standards; and establishing a repository of ETC/Interreg results.

3.1.1 Monitoring of Programme progress and quality of programme indicators

...Careful and thorough monitoring of outputs and expenditures

The achievement of programme objectives, as measured through indicators, not only depends on programme performance, but also on the quality of monitoring and appropriateness of indicators. **Interact has a robust and thorough system in place.**

Achievement of Interact Programme objectives is monitored and measured through output and result indicators. Data collection is a task shared by the Interact Offices and the Joint Secretariat. Each Interact Office (IO) provides the Managing Authority with half-yearly progress reports. A shared database is used for reporting on **outputs** to avoid double counting as most outputs are developed jointly between two or more offices. **Expenditures** are recorded on a continuous basis in the accounting systems of each IO's hosting institution. At least every half year, expenditures are submitted by each IO to its financial controller who issues the certificate of expenditures. Certificates are uploaded to the Interreg community monitoring system "eMS".

The monitoring of programme results rests on three pillars: (i) collection of data on the level of satisfaction with Interact events, gathered through online event evaluation forms; (ii) a bi-annual use and satisfaction survey, which is sent to all Interreg programmes; and can also draw on (iii) the case-based impact evaluation.⁷

In addition to official Programme indicators, Interact has also established an internal system of work planning and related targets. Building on the indicators, a more detailed analysis of progress and the intended 'direction of travel' towards expected results is set out in the Programme's Multi Annual Work Programme (MAWP) 2014-2020. Further detail on the processes involved is set out in Annex 3, along with specific comments and proposals based on the current system as well as with a view to the future. The comments are based primarily on the system in place, but it is recognised that Interact has already initiated valuable new



thinking on how to address many of the points raised in its preparations for the 2021-27 period. The evaluation team has also fed into this process.

A review of the quality of the current indicators and whether they are useful to informing programme progress shows the following factors to be beneficial.

- **Used lessons from past experience.** The set of indicators in place for the 2014-2020 programme drew on lessons from the 2007-2013 period. This has led to a significant improvement, using fewer, more coherent and more clearly defined indicators and leading to a significant simplification of monitoring and reporting.
- **Applied proportionality.** There are fewer indicators, which is more proportional to the programme's resources. The selected indicators also have the merit of working across the priorities and presenting a more holistic, less fragmented view of development.
- **Used SMART criteria.** SMART criteria are partly met.
- **Ensured continuity.** The system has been found to be easily replicable across the years, allowing for comparisons and change over time.
- **Indicators used and useful.** The current sets of indicators are used by Interact to plan activities, gauge performance, and address gaps, in particular the user satisfaction survey.

However, some issues emerged which are already being borne in mind for future planning.⁸

- **Only some aspects of activities are being captured.** The indicators are very strongly oriented towards events, but Interact's work covers a much wider range of activities.
- **The user satisfaction measure is not necessarily a good measure of change over time** as it is a snap shot in time. It can be useful for informing service/product development.
- **Some of the indicators are quite general.** The indicators are broad, which has led to definitional issues when trying to use them to inform more detailed planning.
- **The breakdown of indicators in the Multi Annual Work Programme is challenging:**
 - it is a good idea to operationalise the indicators, but the outcome was rather complex and open to varying interpretations; and
 - the indicators have not been monitored closely and followed up in 2018 as planned.

3.2 Programme progress – conditioning factors and responses

... Constructive and positive action taken to mitigate and respond to issues affecting progress

The achievement of programme objectives is also affected by the environments in which Interact is operating and a range of issues beyond the direct control of Interact.

3.2.1 Responding to Covid 19

...Huge and productive effort to ensure continuity of services and rapidly adapt to changed conditions

A very important factor in considering progress is the Covid-19 crisis. The crisis has fallen at a crucial time for programmes and programme stakeholders that are working to complete the delivery of the 2014-2020 programme and preparing for the new programming period in an already very uncertain regulatory context. As such, any major disruption to the support provided by Interact is particularly keenly felt. **How well Interact responded to the major practical issues raised by prolonged lockdowns, barriers to travel and associated planning and programming issues has been critical to retaining progress** towards Interact's own targets and says a lot about the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme.

- **Continuity and value of service.** Interact has already proved flexible in adapting to change and providing more online resources and services to ensure continuity of service. In addition, the shared resources available from the Interact website are even more valuable as travel continues to be limited.
- **Flexibility and responsiveness shown by Interact (and their stakeholders).** The commitment and engagement of Interact staff in adapting to rapidly changing circumstances was crucial to managing the response. Interact participants and stakeholders appreciate the challenges and problems faced and are very accepting of the challenges involved. Training on managing online events has been particularly valuable as the processes, approaches and resources for managing an online event are substantially different from those necessary for a physical event, e.g. requiring more active facilitation, more IT support, editing etc.
- **Know-how and experience applied.** Interact's dispersed structure means that its staff are used to working across distances and remotely. This is important in two respects: (i) Interact had some expertise in the more technical elements involved in remote working and service delivery; and (ii) Interact staff are used to working away from the office and carrying out contacts and meetings online, managing their work independently etc. More generally, Interreg stakeholders are also used to working remotely. Interreg programmes and projects have been active in highly relevant areas of activity such as the provision of remote care services, and the development of online and virtual resources. There is expertise and knowhow that can be widely shared and disseminated to support recovery and adaptation processes.
- **Interact more in demand than ever.** A period of considerable instability and uncertainty increases demand for support and advisory services. Pressure on resources could limit programme capacities to engage in physical Interact events, but online events are proving popular. This implies that the move online is likely to become a long term trend. Covid-19 highlights the importance and value of resilience and adaptive capacity in the organisation. While planning and processes are important, in an increasingly changeable global environment, the capacity to respond quickly and effectively to change is critical.



- **Dynamic response to the impact of travel restrictions on participation and engagement.** With staff not able to travel to their offices for a prolonged period, the issue of travel between offices or to central meeting points has not been of immediate concern. As some travel restrictions ease, the challenges of maintaining a multi-centre organisation could intensify, e.g. as travel restrictions and regulations vary from place to place. For the same reasons, the location of Interact's bases across different parts of the EU may mean that delivering regionally adapted support could become more relevant than it has been in the past. With this in mind, Interact may have to consider varying its approaches to suit different programmes, stakeholders, and places.
- **Importance of quickly capturing feedback and learning has been recognised.** The challenges raised by the Covid-19 crisis are huge. However, it has also forced some changes and put issues in a 'fresh light'. There is now an opportunity not just to 'try to return to normal' but, in many areas, move to something even better. With this in mind, it is important to review quickly what lessons can be drawn and look at how to adapt for the future.

3.2.2 Operational and regulatory environment - 'immediate external environment'

....Recognised efforts to address and manage its complex environment and deal with challenges

The overall influence that Interact has over its immediate external environment is limited, even though Interact is an actor who actively shapes EU territorial cooperation policy. Interact cannot control these factors, but how it responds and the relationships/networks it establishes to manage these conditions, are crucial to maintaining and building on progress. **Interact has gone to significant and worthwhile efforts to address and manage its complex environment and deal with challenges.**

The Interreg Impact Evaluation⁹ notes that the successful implementation of products or services is linked to a number of external factors that have to work together favourably to produce the desired result. On the one hand, issues can impinge on Interact's work, adding complexity and uncertainties but, on the other hand, the challenges accentuate an even greater need or role for Interact as a means to discuss and address the issues. In addition, the working relations built up between Interact and its key target groups are central to achieving progress and results. Interact can and does do a lot to support, widen and deepen these links.

However, Interreg programmes themselves vary in their levels of engagement due to a range of factors including: lack of staff time/resource; distance to travel for meetings/participation; access to services through 'other routes'; and resistance to change (see Annex 4).¹⁰ Given the generally high levels of participation and greater familiarity with the tools available, it may be possible to engage directly with the less involved programmes in the future. Equally, Interact has comparatively limited resources with which to fulfil an extensive role, and prioritising some issues/links may have to be considered. Thus consideration of 'evolving' the programme links that are already in place may be even more useful, e.g. widening and intensifying links with

thematic specialists such as Interreg staff working on Simplified Cost Options, state aid, programme synergies, policy actors (e.g. relevant DG's: Move, Climate, Social Fund, Home, etc.).



4 TASK 2: EVALUATION OF PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The objective of Task 2 is to evaluate Interact's management system against programme performance. In other words, it aims to answer whether the programme management system supports (or impedes) an effective and efficient implementation of the programme and the achievement of programme objectives. It looks into three distinct aspects of the management system: Programme structure; Programme processes; and Internal communication, decision-making and organisational culture. It is important to emphasise that the findings of Task 1 highlight that Interact is performing well and this informs the outlook for Task 2. The programme **management system is functioning well, it has proved flexible and responsive, and, crucially, there is vast expertise and knowledge in Interact's highly committed staff.** As with any organisation, particularly one operating in such a dynamic context, there are issues that could be considered in the future as Interact continues to evolve. The evidence (desk research, interviews and focus group) strongly points towards a **governance system that is resilient and effective in delivering results.**



4.1 Programme Structure

4.1.1 Strength of Programme Structures

...Structures are robust, flexible, and adaptive

The current programme set-up is the result of several restructurings and changes, preserving the elements that have proved effective and changing those which have not. This has resulted in a gradual and careful optimisation. At the same time, it has ensured sufficient continuity in the programme set-up for Interact to build up and maintain in-house expertise, and develop into a mature programme that is highly respected and valued by its stakeholders.

The Programme structure has proved more than once that it is **resilient and able to respond to new issues and challenges**. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, the migration crisis, or the temporary closure of the Valencia Office did not significantly impair the implementation of the Programme. In all incidents, the Programme proved to be flexible and able to quickly adjust its way of working, pick up new topics, or fill in for a closed IO. Also under normal conditions, the Programme has demonstrated its ability to flexibly adjust to new and variable tasks, topics, and stakeholders. Given the complex and dynamic environment of Structural Funds, and the volatility of today's world, preserving this adaptive capacity will be vital in the coming years.

Programme structures are compatible with Interact's customer-focus. The Programme governance structure has been shown to be **compatible with Interact's project-type of work, focus on stakeholder needs, and flexible ('adhocracy') implementation model**. The Programme is both receptive to *ad hoc* requests from stakeholders and anticipative to upcoming stakeholder needs arising from legislative developments at the EU level. The high degree of work autonomy positively supports the dedication of Interact's staff to work hard for its stakeholders.

The current structure (perceived) proximity to its target groups, allows Interact to maintain a close relationship with programmes in all parts of Europe and supports the development of regional networks and regional expertise, e.g. on the different institutional set-ups in programmes and national administrations. Interact's regionally dispersed structure, with two Offices located in small or middle-sized towns in rather peripheral locations, also fits well with the spirit of the EU regional development funds.

The long-standing partnership between MA and the IOs (and their hosting/housing institutions) provides a solid basis for collaboration built **on mutual trust and the joint commitment to making Interact a success**. Formalising coordination by creating a Coordination Board and organising periodic hosting institution network meetings, together with the strengthened role of the MA, have improved coordination and leadership in the Programme compared to previous implementation periods.

There is effective collaboration across programme bodies. The current decentralised structure does not impede effective collaboration across all Programme bodies and Interact Offices.

Evidence shows that the dispersed structure of the Programme (four IOs and MA/JS in five different locations) is not a hindrance to a coordinated service delivery as might have been expected (even though trade-offs have to be accepted regarding the efficiency of Programme implementation). This is because of a number of factors:

- **Functions and roles** are clearly defined and in line with regulatory requirements. All programme bodies and the Interact Offices are aware of their specific role within the programme system. Particularly positive are: the strengthened role of the MA; the transfer of the Quality Management and Communication horizontal tasks from the JS to the IOs; the stable relations with the hosting institutions; and the formalised coordination in the Coordination Board. Only the role of National Contact Persons is currently not clear and could be re-examined.
- **Virtual teamwork** is effective because of the positive staff attitude and functioning IT tools. Since the trend towards more online activities is likely to continue, the capacity to collaborate remotely will also be critical to future service delivery.
- **Collective Interact identity** is building, which reflects the increased and active promotion of collaboration in project teams involving two or more IOs, and the numerous team-building initiatives.

4.2 Programme processes

.... Effective programme processes leading to a smooth and correct programme implementation

Processes are designed to ensure sound programme implementation. Workflows are well defined in all programme bodies (Managing Authority, Audit Authority, Certifying Authority, Control bodies). They follow clear process descriptions, guidelines, and checklists. The fact that the Programme has an error rate close to zero indicates that processes management contributes to an effective implementation of the programme. In the IOs, programme process and quality management is well embedded in core business operations. Interact has incorporated quality management and process thinking into its core operations. This is the result of the strengthened role of 'quality management' in Interact in this period, which was achieved through the transfer of this role from the Joint Secretariat to one of the Interact Offices. The greater standardisation of some processes, where relevant, has achieved:

- greater harmonisation of service delivery and some internal processes (e.g. recruitment) across the four offices;
- enhanced efficiency (through automation of, for example, event registration and evaluation); and
- incorporation of a step of internal evaluation into a large number of processes.



Some management-related processes (e.g. recruitment, planning, and budgeting of activities/staff resources) are currently not fully streamlined between the IOs, and in some cases process guidelines are partly outdated and/or not consistently applied. This suggests a need for on-going review and discussion, which is something that Interact is very engaged in.

Processes are organised efficiently. In general, workflows are organised efficiently and repeated workflows have been standardised to a large degree in all Programme bodies. For example, CA and AA are providing their services to all Slovak ERDF-funded programmes and can therefore make use of economies of scale. Also in the IOs, processes have been streamlined and automated where possible (e.g. online event registration and evaluation). However, in some cases, actual practices can deviate from process descriptions, either because processes are complicated or have evolved, or because staff is not sufficiently aware of existing process definitions. The work planning process has been described as time-consuming, but this is an inevitable component of the participatory approach to work planning that the Programme has opted for.

4.3 Communication and coordination

...Open and productive discussion and communications

There is open and productive discussion and communications. In the current programme structure, communication and coordination between the five office locations is a key task and takes up a considerable amount of all staff members' working time. The evaluation found that, compared to previous implementation periods, **coordination and communication have significantly improved in this period.** Key developments include the following.

- **Institutionalised coordination in the Coordination Board (CoorB).** Regular Coordination Board meetings provide a fixed space and time for coordinating programme implementation. Overall, the Board meetings have intensified the exchange between the IOs and MA/JS and have positively contributed to a harmonised and coordinated service delivery.
- **Strengthened role of the MA.** With the reduction of the Joint Secretariat, the tasks of acting as the public face of the Programme and the umbrella for the four IOs have been transferred to the MA. Interviews show that the MA has grown into this role very quickly, taking up new tasks, being supportive of the Interact Offices, working well with partners, being quick to provide feedback/information and input, and capable.
- **Communication within and across the MA/JS and IOs is open, engaged and productive.** Interact has created an inclusive working environment in which everybody is invited to express his/her view and participate in decision-making. While it is a sign of an inclusive workplace culture that spurs continuous improvements, it is important to balance critical reflections with positive feedback on progress and achievements. Linked to the high demand for coordination is also the high need for internal communication. However, communication is to a great extent facilitated by the shared IT tools operated by the Programme which aim to simulate working in a shared office space.

- **Interaction between programme bodies is well managed.** There is a smooth flow of information between MC, MA/JS, CA, AA, control bodies and hosting institutions. The quality of information and data received from MA/JS has been praised in interviews. Shared tools for internal communication and collaboration are functional, user-friendly, and stable. A few IT tools are missing that would be needed to fully simulate the conditions that would exist in a shared physical office.
- **Importance of building of institutional memory is recognised.** Interact has built up considerable specialist expertise, which is can be tied to one or a few people. If staff leave the Programme, knowledge can be lost and has to be rebuilt. Nevertheless, to help address these issues new staff do benefit from knowledge transfer from experienced staff through active mentoring. The need to embed knowhow and learning within the organisation is recognised. The Programme has different learning mechanisms in place. For example, internal guidance foresees internal evaluation as a key step in many of the business and learning processes. Examples are the delivery of events, where the guidance requires a debriefing after each event, or the development of publications and an internal reflection on lessons learned from both the process and the finished product. In day-to-day operations, according to interviews, a challenge can be that there is too little time to routinely reflect on lessons learned. However, Brown Bag Lunch sessions and virtual coffee break are very valuable initiatives to promote the exchange of experience and transfer of knowledge within the Programme.

4.4 Building on strengths and addressing challenges

...Opportunities to continue to refine and develop systems

Evidence from the document review and interviews presents **some areas for consideration in order to maximise the efficiency of the systems in place** (structure, processes and communication). In many cases, these are already being addressed by Interact, e.g. as part of HR review or thinking for the next programme period.

- **Structure requires considerable management and administration effort.** The decentralised structure means that the functions of coordinator and administration officer are replicated in each office. Also with the growing number of staff in Interact, administration and management-related tasks have become full-time tasks.
- **Demands of coordination are important to recognise.** The structure requires a large amount of coordination across IOs, taking up a considerable amount of all staff time, but especially of the Office Coordinators and Head of MA. Coordinators have a complex role owing to their broad portfolio of tasks, which includes content-related, management-related, and strategic issues.
- **Structure in some respects enhances aspects of institutional complexity already inherent in Interreg programmes.** The dispersed structure of IOs means that each office has to work under different hosting/housing institution rules and national legislation. This creates some operational challenges, even though hosting institutions are extremely open and accommodating to the special needs of the Programme and actively look for solutions to problems that arise.
- **Structure and Programme's 'adhocracy' approach results in some perceptions of fuzzy hierarchies and chains of command.** The Programme has some complex, multi-layered



(reporting) hierarchies and chains of command where *de facto* responsibility is sometimes different from legal responsibility. Consequently, issue ownership is not always fully clear (e.g. regarding staff management) and some issues may therefore take time to get resolved. In some areas, more clarity on decision-making procedures in the Coordination Board would be valuable and could be formalised, e.g. in Coordination Board Rules of Procedures.

- **Structure and approaches pose some challenges to coordinated staff recruitment and management.** Building on progress made, particularly in the programme’s responses to Covid-19 and pooling resources, there are potentially further synergies to be explored if staff skill sets are better managed and recruitment coordinated. It would mean that staff resources and competences could, to a greater extent, be pooled programme-wide to ensure that: existing skills are best made use of; new staff is headhunted to fill programme-wide skill gaps; and shared measures aimed at retaining staff and promoting well-being are effectively employed to limit staff turnover. The Programme structure and nature of the work poses some limits to the flexible use of personnel resources across the IOs as IOs must strike a balance between prioritising the execution of projects allocated to the Office and accepting tasks that lie outside the Office’s remit.
- **Structure poses some challenges to the building of institutional memory.** Interact’s work is highly knowledge-intensive, but managing and maintaining knowledge in the Programme requires a constant effort, not least because staff is dispersed over five different office locations, and because of staff turn-over and related knowledge drain.



CONCLUSIONS:



RECOMMENDATIONS:



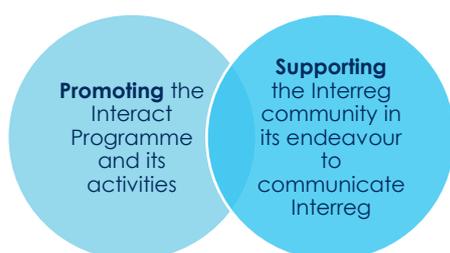
5 TASK 3: EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Task 3 assesses Interact's Communication Strategy and the effectiveness and efficiency of the operational implementation of Interact's communications, assessing how the Communication Strategy supports communication and the promotion of Interact. The main question to be addressed is: **what is the progress in the implementation of the Interact's Communication Strategy and achievement of the communication objectives?**

5.1 Interact Communication Strategy Communication Needs

Interact's Communication Strategy provides a general framework for its communication activities. Communication activities have **two purposes** (see Figure 5).

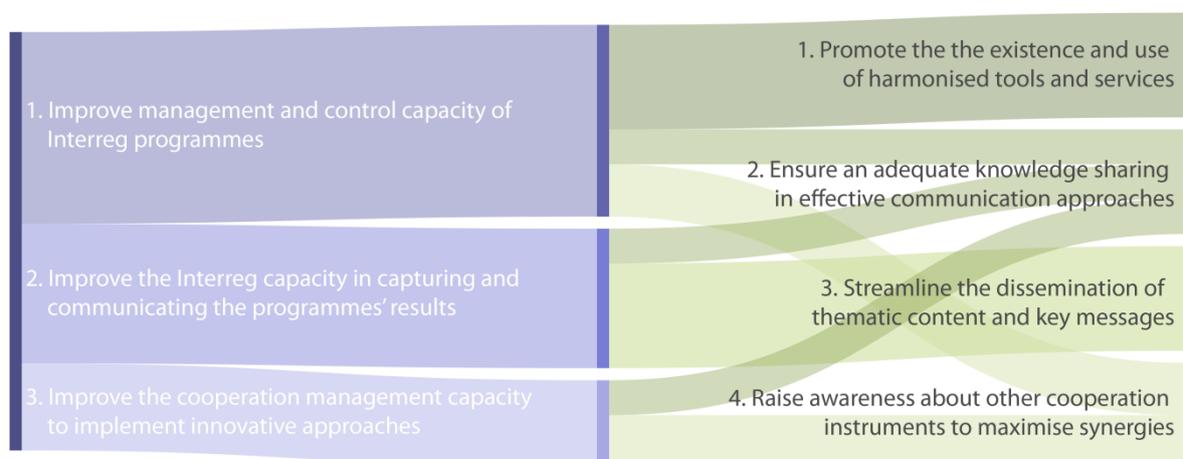
Figure 5: Interact Communication



The Communication Strategy is geared to support the achievement of Interact's programme objectives, and is broken down into four communication objectives that link back to the overall programme objectives in a range of ways. Figure 6 shows how Interact

communication objectives link to the programme objectives.

Figure 6: Link between programme and communication objectives



Source: Author elaboration based on Interact Communication Strategy



The Strategy largely serves as a **guideline for Interact communication efforts**, detailing communication objectives and target groups, key communication messages, main communication activities, budget and timeline. Medium-term plans are developed further in Interact's Multi Annual Work Plan (MAWP). Concrete communication actions are included in Interact's Joint Annual Work Plan (JAWP).

Communication targets a very the broad group of Interact stakeholders, including programme authorities, national/regional authorities (including, MC members), macro-regional actors, European institutions, notably, the European Commission, but also the wider group of programme beneficiaries and public.

Within Interact, there is one Communication Manager, who is responsible for developing and implementing the part of the Communication strategy dedicated to promoting Interact. Support for Interreg programmes is implemented by the communication specialists in each Interact Office who, collectively, are known as the Communication Group¹ (which usually meets to discuss ICON events). The communication specialists alongside other key Interact representatives [namely finance and content] form a so-called Communication Reference Group.

5.2 Strategy Progress and Implementation

...Wide range of communication tools and approaches used and appreciated by key stakeholders

Various actions, tools, and methods are used to deliver Interact's Communication Strategy and meet its objectives.

i. Branding and visual identity

INTERact



Maintaining a coherent, clear and unified 'brand'/identity is important for Interact which works with a dispersed organisational structure, across a variety of fora and target groups, and in a range of services. Maintaining a coherent approach not only helps to promote Interact's work, but also supports programmes by highlighting the integrated nature of the services. There are some standardised processes for communication measures to maintain a level of consistency in reporting and publicity. However, there has been a degree of variability in the branding of Interact across the various communication channels which have been identified and responded to. Variation includes: inconsistent definitions of Interact in the various sections of the website; lack of definition or reference to Interact's website; and other more detailed issues related to the use of colour, font and format

¹ Interact III, Programme Guide 2014-2020, Version 1.2, April 2016

etc. These issues highlight the importance of Interact's brand identity and the need for joint working to improve consistency of approach on Interact's visual identity in the future.²

ii. Website and social media

Interact's website (www.Interact-eu.net) is the main digital communication hub for Interact, with wider communication activities linking back to the website. Since its launch in 2016, the website usage has continually increased. Feedback on the website has been

INTERACT 

taken into

<



Stay up to date!

>

account and amendments have been made. Overall, the website is well received by the interviewees. However, some issues for future improvement have been suggested, such as the navigation on the website.



I feel well informed about Interact's activities. I receive the information almost exclusively from their website. I am familiar navigating their website and actively search for events and publications.

Representative of Interreg cross-border programme

Social media is now one of the main ways to disseminate up-to-date information and communications. The programme has active accounts on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and the audience on each platform has continued to grow. Social media has clear advantages, especially in terms of wide reach. Some interviewees would like this side to be developed further in the future, not least to keep up with the times. However, it also has specific limitations, such as lack of active and ongoing engagement by certain stakeholders. With this in mind, it is worth noting that there is still value in more 'traditional' communication strands, e.g. targeted emails, and developing contact databases linked to specific themes and stakeholder groups.

iii. Newsflashes and publications

Interact activities are also promoted through online newsflashes, which are sent out as mass emails (approximately ten times a year) and are seen as a solid means of communicating key 'headline' information to a large audience.³ The distribution of newsflashes is linked to a database in the Communities platform and includes new event attendees and new sign-ups

² Interact (2018) Branding issues, internal report, November 2018

³ Fulcher, K (2019) Update on Interact Communication activities, 8th Interact II MC Meeting 28-29 May 2019, Salzburg, Austria





(over 3,500 in November 2020). There is familiarity with the newsletter amongst the interviewees. The newsletter is fit for purpose as the channel for disseminating (and marketing) information more widely about Interact's activities. As such, it does not 'compete' with the other methods of communication, such as the website, which serves as the key hub for accessing all information.



It is interesting to read about what the Interact is up to, but when I need something, I find this information on their website.

Representative of Interreg cross-border programme

Interact's publications have become a very authoritative, useful and usable source of information and have developed over the years. Although the authors determine the content of the publications, communications has an important role to play in the presentation, approach, and dissemination aspects. Interviewees note the usability and accessibility of Interact's publications. Of particular note and value is the shift from lengthy reports to more concise material, targeted at practitioners. In terms of presentation, there could be scope for Interact to do more in terms of graphics and images. However, particularly as a programme with 'support' at the heart of its activities, Interact also has to avoid the perception of 'style over substance'. Interact has also presence in external publications, such as in the Panorama Magazine of the European Commission. The joint Panorama edition on transnational cooperation, for example, is viewed as a valuable means of disseminating and sharing information, but also one that reinforces links and connections between the programmes.

iv. Events and knowledge exchange

Interact organises, facilitates and participates in events which vary in size and themes. Communications is vital in the planning, delivery and dissemination of these events, helping them have maximum impact. Feedback from programmes on this element of the work is that the overall experiences have been very good. In addition, many small and well thought through points of detail are highlighted, e.g. getting well-timed reminders about participation/information requests. From within Interact, experiences have been similarly good, with effective communications playing a key role in drawing people to events (which had proved challenging for some events in the past).



“

It is much easier now that events are online. This is a real advantage because of time and cost savings.

Representative of Interreg cross-border programme

The recent shift to online events has meant there has been greater flexibility and opportunity to work across wider groups and improve communications. Furthermore, the online nature of events has made the attendance easier for a wider group of programme stakeholders

due to reduced time and cost implications. The virtual element is strongly supported in the organisation of future events. Interact is also active in participating in and facilitating specific Interreg events and other wider EU events (e.g. European Week of Cities and Regions). Through its high profile, Interact can attract and support participation and help promote Interreg programmes and projects at events to wider audiences. As with the other communication actions, there are some small points of detail that could be included in future planning, e.g. the need to maintain/increase close coordination with events organised through other 'relevant' platforms, such as Interreg Europe, ESPON and URBACT.¹¹ In the lead up to the launch of the new programmes, an informal meeting to build exchange of ideas could be a useful starting point.

Similarly, to Interact's work in leading events, work on wider knowledge exchange is at the heart of all Interact's work and is largely topic/thematically driven. To support work on effective communication and knowledge exchange, Interact has undertaken

“

Looking at developing the new website, the network has made it easier to ask around on this very important but pretty technical issue.

Representative of Interreg transnational programme

a wide range of training, most recently on communicating and managing online events. New tools have been adopted to support better communications and have demanded communications efforts, e.g. the Interact Communities resource and online learning portal. Interview respondents also highlight the value of the Interact networks for addressing specific questions and issues and pooling ideas in relation to communications specifically. Initially the role and work of these networks/groups was not clearly conveyed through Interact's website, due to lack of designated space. In response, changes to the website have been planned to accommodate more information on this topic.⁴

⁴ Interact (2019) Annual Report 2018



v. Internal Communications

Effective and efficient internal communications is central to the operational success of Interact. Looking broadly at internal communications, it is clear that: **communications has a role not only in building Interact's external identity, but also Interact's internal coherence.** Reinforcing this role there are many areas where significant progress has been made, e.g. through the introduction of the Communities system and Covid introducing new, accessible, ways of working. There are some challenging issues. For example, there are some administrative, and some technical, barriers to applying smooth delivery on all aspects of internal communications, e.g. differences between office IT systems and capacity. However, there may be scope for further efforts in improving the internal communication. As noted by one interviewee, *'something is needed to motivate people to communicate (e.g. acknowledging or rewarding the best communication effort etc.) and embedding the message that communication is worthwhile for Interact'*.

5.3 Meeting communication and programme objectives

...Robust, relevant, coherent, and well-delivered communications

An effective and efficient Communication Strategy is not simply about delivering a message. It must meet the requirements of the 'sender' and present the information in a way that is well understood by the relevant target groups. Key principles of **effective** and **efficient** communication are robust, relevant, coherent, and well delivered, which are reflected in the implementation of Interact's Communication Strategy.

- ✓ The delivery of the Strategy involves **working to clear targets and objectives**, effectively tailoring communications to different audiences, suitable activities and actions, delivery of coherent content, and clear roles and responsibility.
- ✓ The Communication Strategy builds on a **robust intervention logic**, with the objectives set in a way that contributes to the programme's overall objectives.
- ✓ The Strategy effectively builds on **lessons from previous programme periods**. The central importance of communication within Interact, and in relation to the support it offers, has been highlighted throughout Interact's development.
- ✓ **There are clear links between Communication objectives and programme needs**. A thorough analysis of needs was undertaken through PEST and SWOT analyses.⁵

However, many of the points raised in the development of the Strategy have become even more relevant as the programme has progressed.

⁵ Interact Communication strategy

- **Focus on communicating results** – As programmes come to close and initiate planning activities, support in communicating results are particularly relevant.
- **Greater expectations on communication** – Stakeholder expectations of communications have intensified and increased linked to shifts in the policy context, pressure on budgets and the rise of online communications.
- **More thematic and strategic engagement** - As a more established partner in the territorial cooperation process and as territorial cooperation arrangements have evolved into new areas, Interact is expected to operate in wider and strategic circles.
- **Extended target groups** - As Interact services have expanded and areas of activities widened, target groups extend and have differing communication expectations and needs.
- **The digitalisation of services and online events** - The Covid crisis has led to a step change in the provision of, and demand for, online services and events with related changing demands in terms of online presentation and communications.

This shifting and evolving position in relation to communication needs and demands does raise some issues in respect to the Communication priorities. The Strategy's objectives are broad and can cover a wide range of activities. As such, they can also be challenging to work with on an operational basis.

5.4 Communicating with target groups

...Effectively addressing target groups

“

Interact is very good at communicating and engaging with the Interreg community.

...difficult for Interact to target information beyond the Interreg community, but something that needs to be taken into account.

Representatives of the European Commission

The Communication Strategy highlights **different target groups**, noting opportunities and challenges in relation to communications needs. In the course of the implementation of the Strategy, the approaches taken to engaging with these groups has evolved, responding to deepening relationships and greater familiarity, wider

stakeholder reach, new communication tools, and changing target group needs. Linked to the Covid crisis, but also reflecting a wider trend, the main platform for communications has





shifted increasingly online, which in turn requires specific attention in order to ‘compete’ with the more traditional forms of communication (e.g. networking at physical events).

Challenges for the future:

- **to what extent does Interact have to address/consider a wider market in its communications.** This trend is already emerging in relation to its work on macro-regional strategies.



I know that we have the KEEP database, but it is not that attractive to the broader public. A common project portal that publishes info on the projects needs to be attractive and inviting.

Representative of Interreg cross-border programme

- **engagement with the wider stakeholder groups.** While many Interreg programmes may have media campaigns to disseminate information on project results to the wider public, there may be scope for further support, especially in terms of the content of the messages, to make them relevant and interesting also to the non-Interreg community. While the

rationale for increasing the connections and links to other areas is recognised, it is clear that this is only possible if sufficient resources are available for such purposes.

With these changes in mind and looking to the future, it may be possible to undertake a finer grained analysis of user needs, e.g. reflecting the stronger links with the European Commission, communication with the wider public and the transferability of messages to wider groups (e.g. work on SCOs could have a broader relevance to ESIF programmes).

5.4.1 Quality of content

...clear, coherent content

In relation to the content of communications, there are common principles to apply in relation to the delivery of clear, correct, and well-targeted messages. These messages are helpful not just for Interact planning its own work, but also for communicating with stakeholders about the role Interact plays in supporting Interreg. The latter role can be one of the less immediately apparent aspects of Interact’s role and one which can ‘get lost’ in the array of initiatives taken by programmes themselves and the European Commission.

The Programme has in place guidelines for publications and presentations and has done a lot in terms of staff development on clear and effective communication skills, most recently through training in online events. Having key messages in place and standardised approaches to content is helpful. However, a formalised, one-size-fits all approach is not always applicable for all activities. In some cases, concise messaging with a broad appeal is key, but in other instances, the strength of what Interact can offer lies in the detail and an awareness of specificities. Both are equally valuable and relevant and it is important that this is considered in future planning. In addition, ensuring that the various strands of activity and communication



are mutually reinforcing, build on each other and can link well to relevant external networks and fora, is increasingly important.

As a result of these efforts, the targeting of Interact's communications work is generally very clear and well focussed on key user groups. As has been noted, stakeholder views on their engagement with Interact communications were highly positive. Interview respondents noted the high quality of outputs, the fact that the communications were clear, well informed, well-targeted, timely, easily 'usable' and 'easy to manoeuvre'. Where feedback was provided and issues raised, stakeholders note and appreciate the changes and developments made by Interact in response, for example, to linking event outputs and the library on the website, or reducing the number of questionnaires being sent to programmes on services.

The Strategy has evolved, and the activities involved have become more numerous and diverse, to remain in line with the strategy objectives. **Communications efforts and approaches have proved flexible and adaptable** to change, covering new themes and responding to changing needs, such as the Covid-19 crisis. The approach to Communications has taken into account calls for greater emphasis on projects, case studies, and 'relatable' storytelling to convey results. The analysis also highlights valuable aspects of Interact's approach to Communications, which are **to initiate and facilitate and deliver activities and resources.** However, stakeholders also noted Interact's readiness to let others to take forward initiatives, and promote their own work, recognising when it was of value to facilitate the work of others.

5.4.2 Delivery and implementation

...Robust adaptable approaches to delivery and implementation

In order to deliver the Strategy effectively, roles and responsibilities not only have to be clearly defined, but also adopted, applied, and (if necessary) evolved. The Communication Strategy does not set out clear roles in relation to communication. However, roles have been detailed in subsequent discussions. The commitment of staff to delivering high quality, informed, timely communications outputs is well recognised. In addition to these general observations, a number of additional points in relation to the management and implementation of the Communication Strategy are as follows.

- **Work around the Communication Strategy has evolved in terms of the content and approach.** In line with Interact's wider approach to management and delivery, the role of the Communications Manager has evolved. Work linked to the Communication Strategy has been about **responding, supporting, and promoting**, as opposed to being directive and 'policing' communication efforts. Progression has been particularly notable in 2019-present following an initial period of staffing change and instability.
- **Direct engagement with each of the Interact Offices**, involving a visit by the Communication Manager, was received very favourably. This open and engaged approach has also resulted in productive and active engagement in issues such as Interact definition, brand consistency, and discussion on prioritisation of tasks and





identification of high priority areas. **Speed of feedback and input** has been vital in this. The Communication Manager is available to provide feedback and input on communication material, such as event information.

- **Much of how well the system is working relies on interpersonal relations and links.** This is common to much of Interact's work, but is especially the case for communications where so much of it relies on working across projects, offices, and levels.

While communication involves many staff members within Interact, the overall responsibility rests at the Communication Manager. Some of the interview feedback highlights the need for further resources to support the role of the Communication Manager and communication efforts more generally.

Within Interact, opportunities to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of communications have already been taken up, e.g. on the division of responsibilities on aspects of project vs. programme communications. In some areas of activity, this type of issue was addressed by bi-literal communications and working. **Some elements of the work have become more formalised**, e.g. with protocols developed for 'Online Events Communications'.¹² Harmonisation of the communication practices in programmes/projects is one aspect of communications that has been noted in past reports. It is recognised that addressing the needs of specific projects can be challenging to combine with the notion of having a single coherent Communication strategy. Building on this experience, **more formalised/documentated approaches could develop**, recognising that staff may change and informal *ad hoc* arrangements may not always be easy to replicate and carry forward in the future. Nevertheless, it is **also important to retain flexibility and responsiveness in Interact's communications work**.

Communication efforts are prioritised periodically. The day-to-day work of the Communication Manager focuses on agreed key priorities. A focussed approach working with key priorities at a given time is logical given the vast range of areas communication covers. In some of these areas, staff working closely with Interact projects can also take aspects of the communication work forward. This work happens independently to a large extent, but within the overview of the Communication Manager. To date, this has not been a 'formalised' agreement' but has worked on a practical basis. Going forward, there could be some scope in more formally recognising this type of arrangement, primarily for the purpose of building institutional memory in the event of staff turnover and to support consistency on some issues, such as logos.

The Communications Strategy has set out indicators in an effort to track progress. However, recent reporting on communication has also focussed on areas such as website usage and social media, as well as more traditional media. Looking to the future and drawing lessons from the current period, it could be useful to consider new ways to look at Communications, recognising its horizontal role across the programme, the new Communications and reporting requirements for 2021-2027, and the shifting demands/context for Interact activities. The precise direction and nature of the changes will depend on the wider modifications undertaken by the programme.

5.5 Addressing new demands and needs

... responding to the emphasis on communication in the new regulations

Improving the visibility of Cohesion Policy is a major priority for 2021-27⁶, with the European Commission committed to stepping up efforts in communicating the Cohesion Policy funds, including through cooperation. There is a commitment to communicate more widely and systematically, aiming communications at strategic functions of programmes.

For the final Interact programme, agreement on key messages, which can be used as the key communication anchors, will be important. Linked to these 'big questions', another issue for communication is the extent to which effort should be put into communication with groups beyond the key stakeholder groups (either directly or through multipliers) or whether should it continue to focus on specialist audiences. A number of other relevant questions also exist. Given the limited resources and the complexity of ETC, should Interact develop a communication strategy that, for a period of time, concentrates on only a few key priorities/target groups, rather than attempting to bring the whole of ETC closer to citizens across the EU equally? How much further can joint communication efforts be taken? Are there thematic areas where it would be particularly valuable to focus effort and extend networks?

The 'support' and 'promote' objectives of the current Communication Strategy are likely to be equally resonant in the future. However, it may be useful to address and discuss how to address some of the 'grey areas' and overlaps, e.g. balancing Interreg promotion vs. Interact visibility.

- Joint communication efforts have some challenges, but deliver wider communications reach and build networks and connections.
- Where should Interact position itself within the Interreg brand and more generally on the push towards the EU logo (i.e. branding so that there are better links across programmes and between Interreg and the EU).

Depending on the strategic direction of the Interact programme in the future, **more structured approaches may have to be set out in terms of how the Programme engages with different types of stakeholder groups** and which activities and channels are most valuable for those various groups (in particular the capacity to identify and communicate with decision-makers).

Ongoing consideration is needed on how best to support and capitalise on communications capacity for Interact projects. Each project will have its own specific communications needs,

⁶ European Commission, Communicating Cohesion Policy in 2021-2027 https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/informing/events/2711-ghent/comm_cp_2127_en.pdf



target audiences and a requirement for specialist thematic knowhow. Equally, the programme overall can benefit from exchange of information and support work in key areas.

Making Interact’s achievements visible is key to assuring the Programme’s results and impact.

In the future, digital media will continue to be a vital part of Interact’s communication with its key target audiences. In particular, the website has been, and should be, the key hub for the various connections, services and activities. Related to this are the **technical and design demands, and ongoing volume of work.** A number of points should be considered in relation to the rapid adaptation in communications content, style and delivery as a result of the shift online, linked to video editing, style guidance, events and web-site development.

Activity planning is valuable in order to prioritise objectives and efforts. However, this should not be so rigid that Interact cannot reflect changes to stakeholder demands, differing needs at various stages in the Programme/project lifecycle etc. **Clarification of communications roles** could be revisited. At present, the system relies heavily on excellent interpersonal skills and ad hoc agreements. If there is a change of staff, this system could be disrupted. The Communication Strategy could be a valuable tool in pulling Interact together, reinforcing the direction and meaning of what Interact is doing.



6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Implementation on track

Based on the above analysis, the upward trends in delivery of outputs, the fact that 2018 milestones have been largely achieved, the levels of satisfaction with Interact tools and services, and the findings of the mid-term impact evaluation, **it is clear that programme implementation is on track for delivering the programme specific objective and expected results.**

On track for delivering on targets

The final annual report for 2019 is not yet approved. However, indications are that this was another active year for Interact, with numerous events and activities planned and work on supporting planning for the post-2020 period increasing. For 2020, a raft of activities and actions were anticipated in what is a crucial time for programmes initiating programme planning and closure activities. As programme authorities tackle these combined challenges, demand for support seemed likely to increase rather than decrease. Looking forward, the JAWP for 2020 set out plans to deliver 144 events and 57 tools to target groups on 2020. This included areas of work which were expected to be resource intensive areas for 2020, fields where on-going support would be needed, and areas where additional resources would not be needed, but where previous efforts could be maintained or drawn upon. The programme very closely tracks its own progress, gathers feedback from stakeholders, and is sensitive to how it is perceived. These processes mean that issues in relation to meeting targets are picked up quickly.

Skills and capacity of Interact to address constraints and challenges

In 2020, the Covid-19 crisis posed some huge strategic and operational challenges. However, it also revealed the **strength, flexibility, and resilience that exists within the organisation, and its on-going capacity to achieve targets.** Looking beyond the Covid-19 crisis, the inherent challenges in Interact's institutional environment and the challenges of working across decentralised offices were noted by the evaluation. Where action could be taken to address specific barriers to progress, these issues were quickly identified and acted upon, e.g. working to engage more closely with specific groups of programmes.

Value of incorporating a flexible responsive approach

Interact has been flexible in how it works and addresses stakeholder needs, taking into account shifting and evolving interests and priorities, e.g. through changes in work plans and areas of activity. Annual work plans, for example, are carefully managed and planned. All the



decisions are based on a lengthy process of stakeholder needs assessment to see where people need new outputs and where some outputs may not be as relevant. This formal process is also complemented by feedback from MC meetings, and regular dialogues with the Commission. Furthermore, drawing on well-established stakeholder networks built up by each of the offices, feedback and communication can be effectively taken into account. In practice, it is anticipated that 80 percent of the work is being delivered as planned and 20 percent will still be delivered, albeit differently through *ad hoc* interventions. Annual planning is based on known needs at a particular point in time, and it is recognised that needs change.

Interact Capacity, Competence and Coherence

Although it is a programme, Interact has built a **strong role and presence in Interreg's institutional landscape**. Now in its third phase, rather than being a time limited single programme, Interact has a stability and coherence which allows it to draw on long-term expertise and experience, build durable relationships, links and awareness, retain skilled knowledgeable staff, look forward and plan long-term, all of which are vital in providing the type of support and information that programmes need.

Interact as a whole, and each of the offices, are close to the stakeholders and they have networks and links that are well-established and represent important channels for feedback and communication. The Interreg family is small so these relationships mean the organisation can effectively pick up on needs. Looking beyond solely Interreg programmes, Interact has also built valuable trust and relationships with the MC stakeholders. With a view to the next programme period, it is noted that there is a growing commitment and increased interest in Interact activities from the Member States, particularly linked to thinking about the new regulations. Links with the European Commission have also evolved and intensified, which has been noted in the Impact Evaluation.

Interact is also recognised as fulfilling a valuable role for Member States, the Commission and Programmes. In the development of the new 2021-2027 regulations, for example, Interact fulfilled a role of 'neutral' (i.e. not the Commission or an area-based programme) but informed base or host. Interact also hosted meetings for participants in advance of the Structural Measures Working Party (SMWP) meetings and offered an opportunity for participants to share ideas and exchange on key issues, develop joint positions, and common goals. Feedback from interviewees was that these helped the subsequent discussions to be more effective and better informed. Within the organisation, the relationships between the Interact Offices are good and working relationships, as well as ease of working between offices, has intensified linked collaboration on projects involving more than one IO, support from Coordinators and, more recently, some aspects of remote working linked to Covid-19. Interact does work in a structured and planned way. However, not only the Covid-19 crisis but also delays in the regulations and a lack of clarity on some technical issues, such as SCOs and State Aid, all highlight the need for flexibility as well as a focus on targets.

Opportunities to develop and draw lessons from current progress and monitoring processes

The capacity of Interact to continue to deliver on Programme objectives through a very complex and challenging programme period highlights its strengths and capacity. There is value in carrying this forward as the current programme progresses and into the next programme period.

Lessons can also be applied on how best to measure and record progress. The findings suggest that an evolution of the current approach would be more suitable than a revolution, and is in line with current thinking by Interact on the issue.

- Setting output and result indicators for Interreg programmes has been notoriously complex. It is valuable to have established some indicators that are proving not unduly burdensome to collect, are easy to understand, and are used. This would suggest building on the formal system that is in place and keeping the number of indicators to a minimum/proportional.
- Interact interventions are mostly producing intangible results which are difficult to measure and which may need longer time spans to materialise. Continuity in the indicator system, therefore, has the advantage of providing data for long-term monitoring and longitudinal studies, allowing the possibility to show change over time periods that stretch beyond single programming periods. This could deliver relevant evidence for the added value of the programme.
- While no radical changes to the indicators are recommended, changes could be made to the data collection and analysis methodology to avoid the methodological shortcomings observed in this period. The methodology should be carefully designed and consistently applied. This also includes developing clear-cut definitions for each indicator.
- For internal monitoring, and with regard to future programmes (as part of a long-term strategy to developing the current indicator system further), the 2021-2027 programming period could be used to test new data collection methods and indicators. For example, knowledge increase as a result of online courses could be easily measured by developing before and after knowledge self-checks/multiple-choice tests.
- The impact evaluation should be used to explore mid- and long-term change induced by Interact interventions that goes beyond the uptake of knowledge/skills or solutions, such as changes in programme practices, which lead to increases in programme management efficiency and effectiveness.

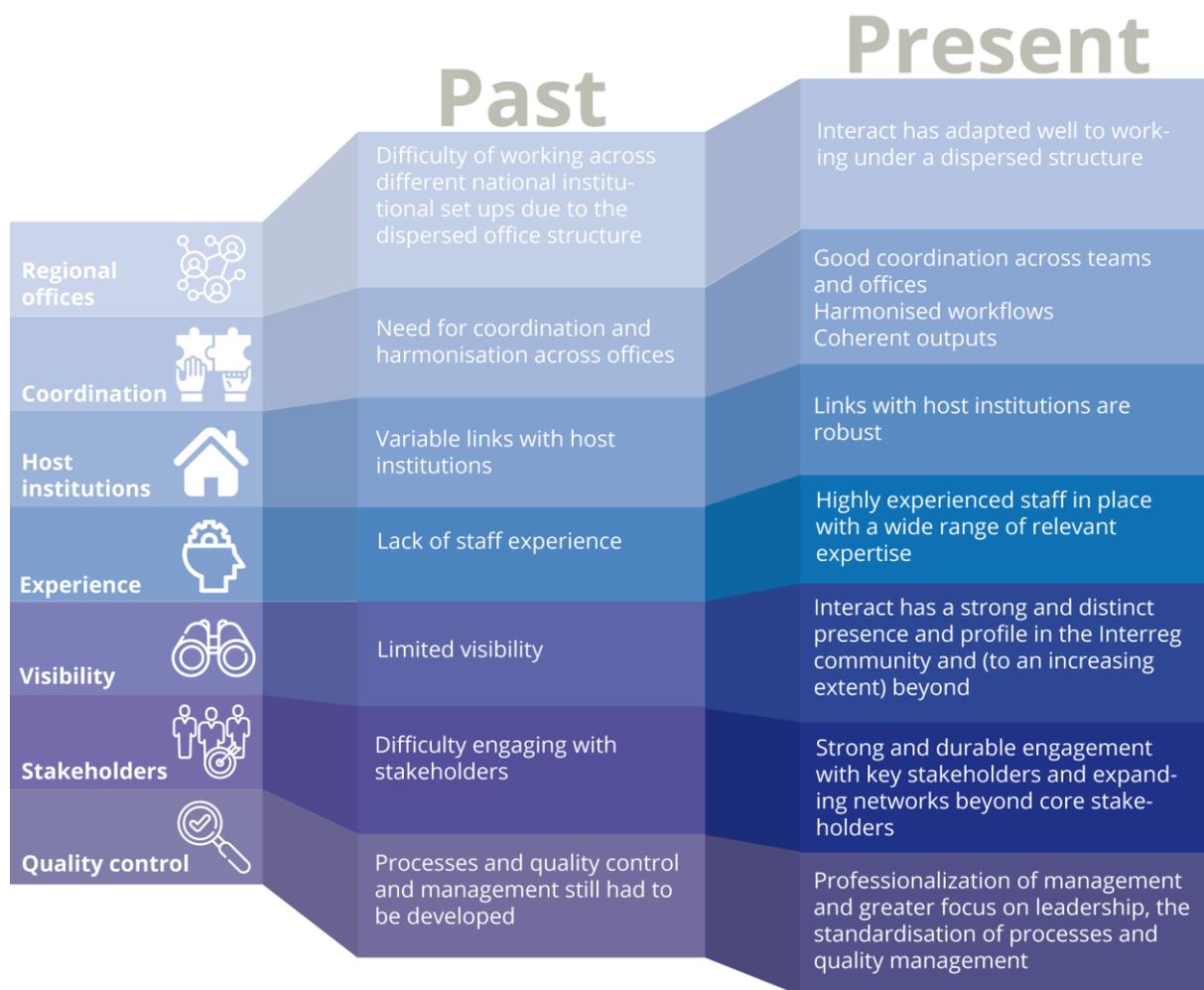
6.2 Governance structure effective and resilient

The Programme has addressed challenges and has demonstrated the ability to grow



The rationale behind Interact's current set-up, most notably the fact that the Interact Programme is implemented by a number of regional offices as the Programme's beneficiaries, is very much based on the historical evolution of its structure. The Interact Programme has gone through phases of restructuring over the past 20 years. Restructuring targeted the substantial issues that the Programme has faced from the outset. As a result, **the programme has managed to address these challenges over time and has demonstrated the ability to grow, adapt and progress** as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Interact's Evolution



Source: Author illustration

Supports the effective implementation of the programme, the successful delivery of results

Interact has set up a **Programme governance structure** (structure, processes and communication) which **supports the effective implementation of the programme, the successful delivery of results**, and which is resilient in the face of unforeseen challenges. Owing to the complexity of the structure, with the four Interact Offices and the MA and Secretariat all located in different parts of Europe and hosted by different institutions, some challenges in





Programme implementation have to be accepted. Examples are the need for on-going coordination and administration efforts or complexities, which result from the fact that each Office works under different institutional rules and national legislation.

In spite of challenges, the evaluation finds that the Programme has adapted well to its structure and performs well under it. The collective Interact identity is strong and there is great teamwork across the IOs. People and institutions involved in the implementation of the Programme are forged together by the shared goal of delivering a successful Programme. Hosting institutions show flexibility, as far as possible, to accommodate the needs of the Programme, and there is a communal effort to maximise the operation of current set-up.

The issues identified in this evaluation for further consideration concern **procedural (i.e. internal) issues, which do not directly affect Programme performance**. Nevertheless, interviews have shown that they do affect work satisfaction, which may in turn affect capacity in the mid- or long-run if not addressed. As part of the evaluation process, more in-depth analyses of each of the main tasks have been prepared covering points of detail and associated recommendations or issues to discuss. The more general points for consideration relate to:

- optimisation of internal workflows and communication, which could be still addressed in the ongoing programming 2014-2020 period; and
- strategic issues which could be tackled for the future 2021-2027 period and beyond.

Optimising workflows and processes

Role of the Coordination Board. As has been noted, in many areas the Coordination Board has been a valuable addition to Interact. However, in some respects, the clarity, transparency, and communication of decision-making in the Coordination Board could be developed (or at least better understood across the organisation). There are opportunities to progress work on, for example: the development of Coordination Board Rules of Procedure; active and rigorous moderation in Coordination Board meetings to ensure focused discussions; routine minute taking and access to minutes; and ensuring communications are conveyed clearly to teams. When required, the Managing Authority could provide additional supportive leadership in Coordination Board, i.e. identify what support is needed for a decision to be taken and, if necessary, have the final say.

Adjust and evolve the role of Coordinators. Coordinators have a broad portfolio of tasks which include *inter alia*: the bridging ('coordination') function between IOs and MA/JS, in particular the coordinated implementation of the workplan; tasks related to office management and reporting; and the management of the relations within the office, with the hosting institution and with the other Offices, MA/JS and MC. In other words, they have to split their work capacity between content-related, management-related, and strategic issues. To alleviate their workload, the role of Coordinators could be refocused. Greater emphasis could be placed on





supportive leadership within the Office team (supporting staff initiative/independence), on management-related (in particular, staff management) and strategic issues, but the delegation of day-to-day decisions to project leads, for example, could be increased.

Objective-oriented, supporting management approach. Under conditions of dispersed work, an objective-oriented, in combination with the already currently practiced supporting⁷ management style could be useful. Objective-oriented refers to a stronger focus on results, rather than outcomes, and the definition of clear and measurable objectives. Targets would be set for the individual, team and Programme level and would need to be monitored. It would also address current tensions that exist between long-term planning and the delivery of services to meet *ad hoc* demands. However, it is also important for Interact to maintain flexibility and the scope for staff to feel a strong investment and control in managing their own workloads.

Programme-wide staff management. Building on positive trends, greater focus could be put on more (Programme-wide) strategic staff management, while still being sensitive to the value placed by staff on autonomy, flexibility, and scope to manage their own workloads. This could support the:

- addressing of Programme-wide skill gaps through elements of strategic, harmonised recruitment;
- managing and pooling of key staff skill sets and competencies across the IOs;
- addressing of staff turnover and focus on well-being through a strategy of staff retention, support and addressing of the loss of knowledge/skills/networks when staff leave;
- mentoring of new staff/longer-term career management; and
- streamlining of elements of the planning and budgeting of activities/staff resources between the IOs.

Another dimension to this is ensuring that Interact takes time to reflect on its successes. The self-critical reflection that is promoted in the Programme has spurred it to improve continuously. On the downside, it places the focus on issues that are working less well, which may be demotivating if not properly put into the context of all the positive achievements of the Programme. Internal communication ought to be based on positives as well as negatives – it is equally important to celebrate achievements as it is to address and learn from issues needing improvement.

⁷ A supporting management style involves the managers' encouragement of staff autonomy to perform tasks independently and with great responsibility, while keeping an eye on not overloading staff with responsibility and not withdrawing completely from the staff's proximity (see Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Model (1969)).



Institutional memory. Making use of an already elaborate approach to knowledge management in place, even more time and effort could be dedicated to building up and maintaining institutional memory, e.g. through the use of knowledge management tools, internal evaluation processes, enhanced mentoring of new staff, etc.)

Strategic issues

Considering 'soft' restructuring. While a radical restructuring of Interact for the 2021-27 period would result in a major loss of expertise and experience, **in the mid- and long run, a soft restructuring could at least be discussed as part of an overall approach to change management**⁸. It could follow an internal process of reflection and consultation about how Interact's environment, mission and goals have changed over time and whether the current organisational model and governance structure are still the best possible option available.

More or less regionalisation. Strategic questions to be asked could include considering whether the regionalised structure is still a help or a hindrance for implementing Interact's mission, or whether it should be even further strengthened (e.g. through the revitalisation of regionalised services or inactive networks). In the wider context of the accelerated trend towards flexible working arrangements and telework, there is also the more general question of whether the factor of a 'physical work place' is altogether still as relevant or whether working conditions could become more flexible.

More or less formalised. Another strategic question that the Programme could reflect upon is the suitability of the 'adhocracy' model for Interact. Formalisation trends, a typical evolution in adhocracy organisations, can already be observed in Interact. These can be seen in a number of ways including: coordination became a full-time task as the programme grew; auxiliary tasks like quality and evaluation management were strengthened; job descriptions were standardised across the Offices; and repeated tasks like event registration and event evaluation were automated. Discussions with Programme representatives within a focus group meeting have shown that, in some areas, the need for greater formalisation is recognised. Yet different projects and tasks require different (project) management approaches – the approach ought to be either more or less stringent depending on the strategic importance of a project, the number of people involved, budgetary implications and so on. Nonetheless, any new structure will also have trade-offs, and it is important to recognise these and be clear about any limitations.

⁸ Change management is understood a systematic approach to dealing with the transition or transformation of an organization's environment, goals, or processes.



6.3 Effectively communicating efforts

Communications is an area of activity that cuts across all of Interact's activities: it is a thematic responsibility; it is an area of expertise for the programme; it is a pillar of programme management and implementation; it contributes to transparency and accountability in the programme; and, it has a wider role in promoting territorial cooperation. This evaluation focuses specifically on Interact's Communication Strategy and its remit to (i) promote the role of the Interact Programme and its activities and (ii) support the Interreg community.

Huge value of communications activities and actions

The programme continues to develop and actively manage its approach to Communications. Interact communications are clear, coherent, timely and well targeted. The 2014-20 programme is entering the 'achievement phase' of the programme cycle where activities to reflect, disseminate and capitalise on achievements are particularly valuable. This includes drafting of news articles and mini-campaigns to draw attention to key events and publications. In addition, work is ongoing in terms of encouraging the uptake of post-2020 tools (e.g. harmonised tools) and services. This will require innovative communication approaches.¹³ This is particularly relevant in the context where improving visibility of Cohesion Policy is a major priority for 2021-27⁹, with the European Commission committed to stepping up efforts in communicating the Cohesion Policy funds, including through cooperation.

Evolving communication needs and demands

The current Communication Strategy has served as a guideline for communications. The evolving communication needs and demands raise some issues with respect to the future Strategy, and it is clear that there needs to be discussion and agreement on what the future Communication Strategy should entail in order to deliver effective and efficient communication. The Communication Strategy can be an important tool in pulling Interact together, reinforcing the direction and meaning of what Interact is doing - Strategic Communication. All those involved need to communicate in a strategic manner to help maximise programme and project results and target specific aims. Key considerations for the future are:

- **Priorities.** Activity planning is valuable in order to prioritise objectives and efforts. In the current Strategy, the objectives are broad and cover a wide range of activities. As such, they can also be challenging to work with on an operational basis. An important consideration for the future is to keep the approach clear, correct and well targeted as well as sufficiently flexible to adapt to changes.

⁹ European Commission, Communicating Cohesion Policy in 2021-2027 https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/informing/events/2711-ghent/comm_cp_2127_en.pdf

- **Tools and actions.** The different tools and actions in use have been generally well received, but notably due to resources/needs, some tools are more prioritised than others. In the future Strategy, there may be scope to cover more explicitly the different tools and the related responsibilities in order to ensure better links and alignment of efforts.
- **Target audience.** Interact communicates well with its core stakeholder group, namely the Interreg community. Depending on the strategic direction of the Programme, decisions will need to be taken on whether communication should go beyond the key groups (which in turn may have different communication expectations and needs). The communication planning process could develop a hierarchy of target audiences, with key messages and approaches for each.
- **Resources and responsibilities.** With the increasing importance and expectations of communications, Interact needs to be clear about what needs to be delivered and by whom. Technical and design demands, and the ongoing volume of work, could require additional, dedicated staff resources. The communication roles could also be revisited and clarified. At present, the system relies heavily on excellent interpersonal skills and *ad hoc* agreements. If there is a change of staff, this system could be highly disrupted. In this context, some more clarifications on the role would be beneficial as well as a reinforcement of the fact that communications is a team effort.

6.4 Future

This report has highlighted the many factors that can impinge on/inhibit Interact's capacity to deliver results and how it operates. There are areas where Interact can continue to improve and smooth its approaches. However, **the key message is that Interact is a robust, well-managed, well-organised programme with highly skilled and committed staff.** Factors such as the complexity of regulations and tools, the changeable policy environment, and the evolving situation in relation to Covid-19 make **Interact's role and the demand for its services all the more considerable.**

The currently proposed regulations for 2021-2027 make no change to the Programme's status. This means Interact has to be self-aware and needs its highly experienced staff to navigate these complexities. Especially during a period of major pressure and substantial change, retaining committed experienced staff with well-established links and relationships with stakeholders will be essential for the successful carrying forward of Interact's work and the development of new solutions. As well as the conclusions presented in the report, the evaluation team have offered views on forward looking elements of Interact's work (see Annex 5).

Work has already been carried out in engaging with Programmes to identify what they need within their operational context. Interact itself is going to be in a good position to continue to address these questions, meet targets and carry its role forward in the future. For the upcoming 2021-2027 programme period, the evaluation proposes an "evolution rather than revolution" approach to refine the operations and structures of Interact, both preserving elements that



have proved useful and drawing on lessons from the current programme period to continue its evolution.



7 ANNEX

Annex 1: Programme output and result indicators

ID	Programme objective	Indicator type	Indicator or key implementation step	Measurement unit	Baseline (2013)	Milestone (2018)	Final target (2023)	Data source	Frequency of reporting
1	1, 2, 3	Output Indicator	Number of events	Number	0	197	890	AIR	annual
2	1, 2, 3	Output Indicator	Number of tools	Number	0	55	250	AIR	annual
3	1, 2, 3	Output Indicator	Participants to INTERACT events	Number	0	2,935	13,240	AIR	annual
4	1, 2, 3	Output Indicator	Amount of certified expenditure of the priority axis allocation	EURO	0	9,555,161	43,100,133	AIR	annual
5	1	Result Indicator	Satisfaction level of ETC programmes with INTERACT products and services aimed at improving the management and control capacity of ETC programmes	Number	4,19 / 5,00		increase	Surveys & Evaluation tools	Every 2nd year
6	1	Result Indicator	% of ETC programmes using INTERACT products and services aimed at improving the management and control capacity of ETC programmes	% of programmes	80%		increase	Surveys + Evaluation tools	Every 2nd year
7	2	Result Indicator	Satisfaction level of ETC programmes with INTERACT products and services aimed at improving the ETC capacity in capturing & communicating programme results	Number	4,19 / 5,00		increase	Surveys + Evaluation tools	Every 2nd year
8	2	Result Indicator	% of ETC programmes using INTERACT products and services aimed at improving the ETC capacity in capturing & communicating programme results	% of programmes	80%		increase	Surveys + Evaluation tools	Every 2nd year
9	3	Result Indicator	Satisfaction level of ETC programmes with INTERACT products and services aimed at improving the cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches	Number	4,19/5,00		increase	Surveys + Evaluation tools	Every 2nd year
10	3	Result Indicator	% of ETC programmes using INTERACT products and services aimed at improving the cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches	% of programmes	80%		increase	Surveys + Evaluation tools	Every 2nd year

Source: Interact Cooperation Programme, Annual Implementation Report 2017– Citizens summary, Open Data Portal for the European Structural and Investment Fund

7.1 Annex 2: Overview of results progress



Specific Objective 1	Expected Results	Medium Term Strategies	Analysis
<p>To improve management and control capacity of ETC/Interreg programmes</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more widespread application of simplified and harmonised approaches with the aim of reducing the administrative burden, attracting new types of beneficiaries (e.g. private) and mitigating the risk of errors. • A more widespread use of identified good practice and quality standards, which could serve as a benchmark for evaluating performance of the programmes across ETC/Interreg. • Improved communication between the ETC/Interreg programme management bodies and the Member States representatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A-ER 1.1.1 - Simplifying approaches for programme and communication management • B-ER 1.1.1 - Eligibility and simplified cost options • C-ER 1.1.1 - Monitoring systems, including eMS • D-ER 1.1.1 - Specialised legal issues • E-ER 1.1.2 - Evaluation as a learning process for programme management and programme communication • F-ER 1.1.2 - Programmes' Financial Management, including closure • G-ER 1.1.2 - Management and control systems, control and audit • H-ER 1.1.3 - Roles, responsibilities and decision making processes 	<p>AER 111 - Harmonised implementation tools (HIT) have contributed to a simplification of programme processes and a greater focus on reducing the administrative burden for applicants/beneficiaries. ^{xiv} 88% of satisfaction survey respondents confirm that they are able to use harmonised tools and practices in their daily work. Tools, training, exchanges and resources developed.</p> <p>B-ER 111 - The case-based impact evaluation finds that the harmonised budget lines have led to simplifications. 86% of satisfaction survey respondents confirm that they are able to use eligibility of expenditure factsheets and SCOs in their daily work. Working groups, exchanges and published materials developed</p> <p>C-ER 111 - ~35 cooperation Programmes are using eMS, increasing efficiency and effectiveness in programme management. 92% of satisfaction survey respondents confirm that they are able to use eMS and 82.3% the exchange on monitoring systems in their daily work. On going eMS development, training events and exchanges.</p> <p>D-ER 111 - 76.3% of satisfaction survey respondents confirm that they are able to use products and services on State Aid in their daily work, a minus of 3.7% as compared to the baseline value. Not all services could be delivered in 2017 due to the sabbatical of the main Interact expert on State Aid.</p> <p>E-ER 112 - 88.4% of satisfaction survey respondents confirm that they are able to use products and services on evaluation and indicators in their daily work, a plus of 8.4.% as compared to the baseline value. More events were implemented due to the high demand and Interact work on evaluation was able to translate regulatory requirements into practice guidance.</p> <p>F-ER 112 - 81.6 % of satisfaction survey respondents confirm that they are able to use products and services on financial management in their daily work, 81.2.1% on cash flow, both having increased moderately as compared to the baseline value. Effort in the area of financial management was flexibly redirected from the topic of closure to new topics on requirements in the new programming period in order to best meet programmes' demand. The Interact discussion forum has managed to build true peer support within the network of Certifying Authorities. Some disruption in service delivery due to the temporary closure of the Interact Office Valencia.</p> <p>G-ER - 82.5% of satisfaction survey respondents confirm that they are able to use products and services on management verifications in their daily work, 79.1% on Audit, a minus of 0.9% as compared to the baseline value, and 77.% on anti-fraud measures, a minus of 2.3% as compared to the baseline value. Some disruption in service delivery due to the temporary closure of the Interact Office Valencia. Interact work on State Aid contributed to the EC consulting Interact and proposing simplifications for Interreg.</p> <p>H-ER - MTS objective H-ER 1.1.3 is a horizontal objective which cuts across all Interact products and services. Progress towards the objective is therefore hard to measure. Interact work has opened an</p>

			active discussion with programme bodies about the definition of roles vis-à-vis regulatory requirements. 82.4% of satisfaction survey respondents confirm that they are able to use products and services on roles and responsibilities of programme bodies in their daily work.
Specific Objective 2	Expected Results	Medium Term Strategies	Analysis
2 To improve the ETC/Interreg capacity in capturing and communicating the programme results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased thematic expertise/competence within the ETC/Interreg programmes thanks to INTERACT support. A repository of ETC/Interreg results is established Leadership of integrated ETC/Interreg communication strategy established. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I-ER 1.2.1 - Capitalisation and Thematic Knowledge development and Communication J-ER 1.2.2 - Capturing and giving visibility to Interreg results K-ER 1.2.3 - Strengthening the visibility of Interreg results 	I-ER 121 AIR 2018 notes that capitalisation continues to require attention and work. At the same time, as a result of work carried out, thematic expertise within Interreg community have been intensified in key areas, e.g. state aid, macroregions, Cohesion policy reform, Interreg communications. Related, Interreg added value is promoted J-ER - AIR 2018 notes that Interreg visibility has improved in terms of: citizens hearing about Interreg and cooperation; social medial reach; organisation of network meetings which attract most of the Interreg communication community; and Interreg blog. It is also important to note the establishment and promotion of keep.eu. involvement in the Interreg portal, joint branding and EC day. K-ER – participation in joint events establishment and promotion of keep.eu. involvement in the Interreg portal, joint branding and EC day, involvement in the Communication managers network.
Specific Objective 3	Expected Results	Medium Term Strategies	Analysis
To improve the cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches (EGTC, Revolving Funds, macroregional strategies, Article 96, ITI, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased knowledge about new and existing tools. Workable models developed, Increased awareness in the ETC/Interreg programmes about other EU funding schemes and their complementarities with their strategies. Increased awareness of the mainstream programmes about the advantages of cooperation as an implementation tool. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> L-ER 1.3.1 - Building and communicating knowledge management base for new and existing tools M-ER 1.3.2 - Innovative tools and Workable Models N-ER 1.3.3 - Scaling up inter programme capacity & competence O-ER 1.3.4 - Awareness raising on cooperation approaches across funding sources and actors 	L-ER - continued efforts to inspire Interreg programmes to use innovative cooperation methods.eg. organisation of a workshop on 'cooperating for investment, investing for cooperation' (Nov 2018) which aimed to review current state of play for the use and implementation of these tools and identify future perspectives. M- ER - This field of work has two components: 1) identifying and collecting workable models & adjusting them to Interreg; and 2) supporting transnational cooperation programmes in improving their ownership and capacity to implement macro-regional strategies. AIR 2017 notes on component 1) that analysis and description of existing cooperation models and the development of new models has started. Key achievement was establishment of a Task Force on coordination and cooperation. The Task Force had two tasks: 1) to collect and describe experiences and ideas on how coordination and





			<p>cooperation across programmes is ensured; and, 2) to contribute to the development of new ways (workable models). The work of the Task Force contributed to closer coordination across programmes within macro-regional framework. Regarding component 2), the 2013 network for transnational programmes supporting the macro-regional strategies was noted as a highly valued forum, not just for the programmes but also for DG REGIO teams. AIR 2018 notes nothing on component 1) but for 2) says that the 2013 network had very active exchange on post-2020 developments.</p> <p>N-ER - Both AIR 2017 and 2018 note that majority of Interreg programmes are hesitant to coordinate and cooperate with other funding programmes. To address these stakeholders, Interact has developed an online learning course on inter-programme capacity and competence (introduced in 2018 with other online courses). This course will be used as the starting point for developing internal capacity building.</p> <p>O-ER AIR 2017: very similar points to AIR 2018. AIR 2018: services primarily devoted to raising awareness in various stakeholder groups on cooperation approaches. Interact has been active supporting and boosting cooperation spirit within the macro-regional strategies, but not only addressing services to the macro-regional actors. Services have been provided in different ways. Throughout the development process of the macro-regional strategies, thematic focus and exchanges across thematic experts within the strategies are increasingly important.</p>
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7.2 Annex 3: Monitoring and Reporting

7.2.1 Monitoring of outputs and expenditures

Each Interact Office (IO) provides the Managing Authority with half-yearly progress reports, as set out in the subsidy contract, which include a qualitative description of the activities carried out, outputs produced and the expenses incurred. A shared database is used for reporting on **outputs** to avoid double counting as most outputs are developed jointly between two or more offices. Each output is assigned to one specific Objective and Output Indicator. Keeping the database updated is the responsibility of the Interact Offices, which currently tend to feed the database periodically rather than continuously, as will be required in the coming programming period.

Expenditures are recorded on a continuous basis in the accounting systems of each IO's hosting institution. At least every half year, each IO submits expenditures to its financial controller, who issues the certificate of expenditures. Certificates are uploaded to the Interreg community monitoring system "eMS".

7.2.1 Monitoring of results

The monitoring of programme results rests on three pillars: (i) the collection of data on the level of satisfaction with Interact events, collected through online event evaluation forms; (ii) a bi-annual use and satisfaction survey, which is sent to all Interreg programmes; and (iii) the case-based impact evaluation. The data are quality-checked and results indicators calculated by the Programme Quality Manager.

The **event online evaluation form** is sent to participants shortly after an event. Around 50 percent of event participants, on average, complete the form. It includes questions on both the satisfaction with the event and on the use of the knowledge shared at the event. The satisfaction rate for events is currently calculated on the basis of answers to all questions listed in the form.

The **use and satisfaction survey** is carried out every other year and is sent to all contacts registered in the Interact contact database, as well as to all Heads of Joint Secretariats/Managing Authorities not registered in the contact database. The survey includes questions on the use and satisfaction with Interact products and services, distinguishing between 26 groups of products and services (including events and tools on, e.g. State aid or the support to the implementation of macro-regional strategies). The survey also goes one step further than the event evaluations by asking about changes resulting from the application of the knowledge gained (changing working practice, interpretation, perception, etc.). However, the share of programmes reporting a change of practices is not part of the official programme result indicators that are reported to the EC.



Two **impact evaluations** were planned for the 2014-2020 programme period: a case-based impact evaluation was carried out in 2019, looking into a selection of five distinct Interact projects; a second impact evaluation is foreseen for 2023 according to the Evaluation Plan.

7.2.2 Multi-annual and annual work plans

Besides official Programme indicators, Interact has also established an elaborate internal system of work planning and related targets.

Building on the indicators, a more detailed analysis of progress and the intended 'direction of travel' towards expected results is set out in the Programme's Multi Annual Work Programme (MAWP) 2014-2020. The MAWP sets out a framework of Specific Objectives and accompanying medium term strategies leading to intended results. These measures do not comprise part of formal reporting, and have to be considered with this in mind. However, they do offer additional insights into the types of activities undertaken.

The MAWP provides an elaboration of the CP's intervention logic and serves as a guide for the prioritisation of services and resources. The accompanying Joint Annual Work Plans (JAWP) are the lead documents for planning, implementing, and monitoring outputs on an annual basis.

7.2.3 Robustness of indicator methodology

Interact has a robust system and processes in place for monitoring Programme outputs, results and expenditures, which include quality-checks to ensure the accuracy of the figures reported. Responsibilities for data collection are clearly defined in the subsidy contract between MA and the Interact Offices (i.e. their hosting institutions). The method for results monitoring, i.e. event evaluations and the bi-annual stakeholder survey, is a proportionate and cost-effective method of collecting data for the monitoring of programme results. It is positive that the set of indicators used by Interact is not only to report progress to the MC and EC, but also to plan activities, gauge performance and address gaps.

In addition, the Programme has developed elaborate an internal intervention logic in the form of Multi-annual Work Programmes with targets outside the official Programme performance framework, which is monitored carefully.

Nonetheless, a few points can be raised and are already being borne in mind in relation to Interact's on-going work on this issue:

- **Limited usability of eMS for Interact.**

eMS is used as far as possible for reporting and monitoring. Its usability for Interact is limited by the fact that the system has been developed primarily in the Interreg context to fit the logic of programmes that are managing a large number of individual projects and beneficiaries. Unlike in Interact, where flexibility in the implementation of activities and outputs is key, changes to

projected activities outputs in Interreg projects (notably strand A and B projects) are kept to a minimum.

- **Different sources used for establishing baselines and updating the indicators.**

The baseline for both result indicators was set for 2013 based on the latest available data from the event evaluation forms. The satisfaction rate for events was calculated taking the average of all questions listed in the form. The baseline for the use of Interact products and services was calculated using evaluation of past events. The updated result indicators are calculated on the basis of both the event evaluation forms and the survey while the survey is intended to complement information on the satisfaction that is gathered through event evaluation forms. This creates issues regarding the comparability of baseline and follow-up data:

- *Different types of respondents:* the event evaluation forms measure opinions of individuals, while the survey collects feedback expressed per programme/institution (which is closer to the indicator, which measures the percentage of programmes using Interact products and services).
- *Different timeframe:* whereas the evaluation forms collect feedback directly at the end of an event, the survey introduces a longer time perspective between the service delivery and the satisfaction captured.
- *Different scope and questions:* the survey questions are different to the questions on the event evaluation forms. In addition, the event evaluation form was changed between 2013 to 2016 to an extent that, even though they are similar, the questions used for establishing the results indicator baselines and follow-up assessments are now no longer directly comparable. Furthermore, the survey aims at a general assessment of the use and satisfaction with Interact products and services (including events and tools), while the event evaluation questionnaire targets a specific event only.

In general, it can be concluded that the scope of the survey is closer to the definition of the result indicators and better suited to measure Interact's results performance than the event evaluations. The latter are, however, a very useful instrument for internal learning.

- **No-representativeness of survey responses.**

Participation in both the event evaluations and the survey is voluntary. This introduces a self-selection bias which occurs when the propensity to respond is higher for some respondents than for others. For example, stakeholders using Interact services regularly may be more likely to answer the survey and event evaluations than those who rarely do. In addition, some user groups of Interact products and services (e.g. Audit Authorities, macro-regional stakeholders) are more difficult to reach.¹⁵ As a result, certain target groups are underrepresented in the survey and event evaluations. On a positive note, the level of participation in the survey (50 percent of programmes) and geographic representation was high.

- **Method not sensitive enough in measuring a statistically significant increase in result indicators.**





For result indicator “Use of Interact products and services”, the baseline value of 80 percent of the corresponding result indicator and for result indicator “Satisfaction with Interact products and services” the baseline value of 4.19 were determined in 2013. Interact defined an increase in both indicators as a target for 2023.

The survey carried out in 2018 reports an increase in the use of Interact products and services for specific objectives 1 and 2 (100 percent and 94 percent respectively) and a decrease for specific objective 3 (60 percent), based on the sample of 50 programmes (out of 100) and 70 institutions represented in this survey. Even though these results are statistically significant, they point to the fact that an assumption of an equal share (80 percent) of use for the products and services under the three specific objectives was unrealistic. “Innovative approaches to cooperation” such as EGTC, Revolving Funds, MRSs, Article 96, ITI, etc. are used by only a small number of programmes, which is why Interact products and services are naturally used to a much lesser degree than, for example, those targeting management and control capacity. Further, the different degrees to which products are used are currently not factored in, but ought to be considered, e.g. by applying a weighing factor.

Regarding the satisfaction with Interact products and services, the survey reports an increase for specific objectives 2 (by 0.01 from 4.19 to 4.20) and a decrease for specific objective 1 (by 0.12 from 4.19 to 4.07) and 3 (0.28 from 4.19 to 3.91). Given the level of participation (50 percent), the survey results on the satisfaction with Interact products and services are not statistically representative, but lie within the margin of error (assuming a 95 percent confidence level). Further, the result indicator is measured based on the satisfaction with Interact events, captured by means of event evaluation forms.

In general, Interact has reached a level of saturation regarding both the use of, and satisfaction with, its services. Striving for a further increase may only be possible when putting a high (maybe even disproportionate) effort into appealing to those stakeholders who are not (yet) frequent users of Interact's services.

Following the recommendation of the *ex-ante* evaluation,¹⁶ result indicators should also capture the usefulness of Interact products and services. Two additional result indicators were introduced and the baseline set at 80 percent:

- application of the knowledge acquired through Interact products and services; and
- changes resulting from the application of the knowledge (changing working practice, interpretation, perception, etc.).

They are closer to the specific objectives, but it is not clear how the baseline was determined and results (increases, decreases) are not statistically significant.

- **Multi-annual Work Programme (MAWP) defines a complex intervention logic outside the cooperation programme.**



The MAWP is useful for providing a framework or narrative to the objectives and aimed to help better understand progress, recognising the limitations of relying solely on formal indicators. It was a good idea to try to make the specific objectives operationally clearer. It is also being used for coordination and monitoring meetings that take place three times year to see how the programme is performing and each office can see where they stand in the programme, although some teams follow the work plan more closely than others.

However, the level of detail in the MAWP is considerable and this can obstruct its role as a strategic document responsive to the dynamic and changing nature of Interact's role. There are challenges in how to allocate clear numbers to all the headings/indicators set out in the MAWP, avoiding double counting or varying interpretations of the indicators. Related to this, the view has been expressed that auditors found it hard to grasp the idea of what the document was really 'for'. Looking to the future, it is still important for Interact's work to have a 'strategic anchor' – but maybe not in its current form.

7.3 Annex 4: Engagement of Interreg programmes with Interact

Representatives from four Interreg programmes were interviewed as part of the Task 1, which covered the issue of level of engagement of Interreg programmes with Interact. The programmes were randomly chosen amongst those programmes that had been pre-identified by Interact as having more limited/less visible use of Interact products and services.

Familiarity with Interact.

All Interreg programmes interviewed are familiar with Interact and consider that they are generally well informed of the different activities (e.g. through the newsletter, own monitoring). This familiarity has increased in the past years through wider and deeper contacts and proactive approach/follow-up by Interact, as well as the improved access facilitated by online format.

Level of engagement may not always be visible.

All programmes note that they are engaging with Interact, but this engagement is not necessarily 'visible' to Interact and can take different forms.

- **Ongoing, but not necessarily regular engagement.** The level of engagement depends on the relevance of the theme/activity in question. In some cases, engagement has intensified in the past years (e.g. facilitated by the online format, shift in cooperation culture).

"I think Interact thinks that our programme does not engage with them, while we think we do. There are clearly different expectations as to what is considered to be a sufficient level of engagement."



- **Different expectations of what is active engagement.** Many programmes have limited staff resources, which is an important consideration in the level of engagement.
- **Online format facilitates engagement.** Online format of activities are viewed positively, as these facilitate wider and more regular engagement (more participants due to reduced cost and time). This is particularly relevant for smaller and more peripheral programmes.
- **Engagement through representative programmes/networks.** In some cases, engagement may take place through one 'representative' programme or through networks (rather than by each individual programme).
- **Engagement in other networks.** Many programmes also engage with their domestic or other relevant geographical/thematic networks, which allow discussion and sharing of experiences of relevant (day-to-day/tailored to their specific needs) issues. The added value of Interact is, however, recognised in providing a wider European perspective to cooperation.
- **Alternative systems in place, which has minimised the need for Interact support.** This was noted by one Interreg programme in relation to Keep and eMS in particular.

Key areas of interest

The programmes use a variety of Interact's services and outputs.

- Participation in networks (e.g. communication network), events, online learning platforms.
- Specific thematic interest, e.g. SCOs, information and publicity measures
- HIT, Keep.

In the future...

- **Continuation of online-based services and outputs.**
- **Relevance of support addressing immediate issues,** such as support in the programming process (e.g. guidance on how to implement regulations, indicators, evaluation criteria etc.)
- **Interest in tailored advice and support,** which may make the Interact support more relevant and engagement of programmes more active.

7.4 Annex 5: Inputs on Intervention logic and Indicators

This section provides comments on proposed intervention logic and indicators for Interact IV, which are still subject to approval by the Interact IV Programming Committee.

7.4.1 Proposed intervention logic

In the programming period 2021-2027, Interact will focus on Policy Objective “A better Interreg governance” and on the action (a) (i) “Enhance institutional capacity of public authorities [...] and stakeholders” for the effective implementation of Interreg programmes and other cooperation actions, as pre-defined in the draft regulation for ETC¹⁷.

For internal monitoring, the Objective has been divided into three distinct perspectives:

- **Strengthening the management capacity of Interreg programmes and other cooperation actors:** actions focusing on reducing inefficiencies (mistakes, bottlenecks, obstacles) for the management of and participation in Interreg programmes and in cooperation actions. It covers the harmonisation and simplification of programme management approaches and targets the efficiency of programme management.
- **Strengthening the capacity of Interreg programmes and other cooperation actors to work in cooperation programmes and context:** actions focusing on enabling actors involved in the management and implementation of Interreg programmes and cooperation actions to cooperate and to steer the programmes/actions and their human resources in an improved (or simply different) and more inspired/visionary way. It covers the building of institutional knowledge and competence, the intensifying of cooperation and coordination among Interact stakeholders and the increase in the use of innovative approaches.
- **Strengthening the capacity of Interreg programmes to capture and communicate programme results and to increase visibility:** actions focusing on increasing the evidence base of Interreg results and making Interreg achievements and the process of cooperation more visible to all target groups, including citizens and decision-makers. It covers the building of thematic knowledge and result awareness, the improved communication of results and the increased visibility of Interreg.

The three types of **envisaged perspectives**, and how they have been defined, do not differ very much from the three specific objectives of the 2014-2020 period. However, action 2 is new. It could be considered as an intermediate step (“strengthening the capacity to cooperate”) towards achieving action 1 (“strengthening the management capacity”), which may be viewed as the result of strengthened programme exchange and cooperation. **Actions 1 and 2 could be more sharply and clearly defined to highlight the difference between the two.**

Interact target groups are also not bound to change much in the upcoming period. However, there is likely to be a greater focus on support to national authorities in response to Art 3.4 of



the draft Interreg/ETC Regulation, which gives Interact a mandate to support the "implementation of investment for jobs and growth goal programmes, in particular with regard to interregional and transnational actions with beneficiaries located in at least one other Member State." Interact can support them with expertise on how to successfully set up inter-regional cooperation.

Concrete **deliverables** that are envisaged are the same as in the current programming period, even though the focus might shift towards more online resources and events. Experience from the COVID-19 crisis showed that often a higher outreach can be achieved with online resources, e.g. videos of Interact events, than with in-situ seminars as online resources can be consumed on demand by an unlimited number of people. Dealing with the pandemic has caused a rethink within the programme regarding the prevalence of physical events as the "automatic" first choice over other means of intervention (e.g. written briefs or guidance). It has triggered the realisation that other interventions are sometimes more efficient and effective and that virtual meetings are a feasible alternative to physical meetings. Also the large number of events organised by Interact has put a strain on Interact's resources and, **in the future, greater use should be made of synergies between different topics to organised combined events.**

Deliverables can be roughly divided into "products" and "services", even though this distinction is not clear-cut. "Tools" or "solutions" are also terms often used when referring to (segments of) Interact products.

Figure 8: Interact deliverables

Interact products	Interact services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted promotional campaigns/participation (online, in-situ) • Harmonised templates, guidance documents, clarification fiches, repositories of practices/ results • Web tools supporting programme management, communication and visibility • Tools for data collection and information on achievements on overall Interreg level • Liaison with European Commission (DG REGIO and other sectoral DGs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted events (in-situ, online) • On-demand advisories/tailor-made support services to programmes/MSs • Peer-to-peer exchange services • Exchange networks (experts, thematic) facilitated through online communities and/or meetings • Training schemes: in-situ/online events, learning courses • Working groups to harmonise approaches/test concepts/elaborate new methods • Testing of innovative concepts for management and implementation/set-up of programmes • Establishing links/nurturing connections with actors involved in the management and implementation of cooperation frameworks/ instruments

Source: Interact



7.4.2 Proposed indicators

For the future period, there is a requirement where possible to use the common indicators set by the European Commission. This will help the programme locate itself in the wider family of programmes and highlight the role of Interact in key areas. Interact has selected¹⁸ the following common **output indicators**:

- RCO81 – Participations in joint actions across borders;
- RCO116 – Jointly developed solutions; and
- RCO85 – Participations in joint training schemes

The selected indicators cover a number of important Interact outputs, i.e. collaborative actions between programmes, tools developed collaboratively by Interact together with programmes, and trainings. Indicators are similar to the current set of indicators but measure the number of participants rather than the number of single actions or events, which is more meaningful. **The key will be to clearly define what counts as “joint action across borders” and as “solution”. These should be defined broadly enough that the indicators can pick up the most important Interact outputs.**

More specific comments on each indicator are:

- RCO81 counts the number of participants in “joint actions across borders”, e.g. exchange activities or exchange visits organised with partners across borders. It seems more appropriate for component 1 and 2 programmes, which shows that the common output indicators have limitations, particularly for a unique programme like Interact. **Also, it requires a further definition in order to clarify what counts/does not count as “joint action” as, potentially, most Interact activities could be considered as joint actions involving participants from different Member States.**
- RCO116 is very similar to the current indicator “number of tools developed”, even though **what is considered a “solution” ought to be properly defined**. It is a very broad indicator that counts small-scale deliverables such as guidance fiches on a par with complex “tools” such as knowledge bases or the electronic monitoring system, which require much more resources to be developed. Also, related “solutions” (e.g. different HIT templates) could be either counted as one (e.g. a single set of HIT templates) or as separate solutions. **For internal monitoring and results communication, it could be interesting to distinguish and monitor different categories of solutions.**
- RCO85 covers participants joining training camps and online courses, which is a growing area of activity for Interact. RCO85 counts all participants who completed (at least parts of) the training, which is why there are considerable overlaps with the common result indicator “RCR81 - Completions of joint training schemes” (see below). **Since little extra burden is involved in monitoring both indicators, it does no harm to report on both indicators and contribute to the common Interreg indicators.**



The proposed output indicators are relatively easy to monitor as Interact has a well-established system in place to monitor event participation and the development of “solutions”. Also the common output indicators are not a radical departure from the previous indicators, so continuity is maintained to a large extent, which ensures comparability with previous programming periods, e.g. for longitudinal studies.

Result indicators that have been (pre-)selected include one indicator from the ERDF Draft Regulation and two Interact-specific result indicator:

- RCR81 - Completions of joint training schemes; and
- Institutions using knowledge/skills acquired through Interact services
- Institutions using solutions developed through Interact services.

This means a decrease in the number of indicators from currently six to three, reducing the complexity of the indicator system.

- **RCR81** - Completions of joint training schemes is more appropriate as an output indicator as it doesn't capture change. It also does not add much extra information to the proposed output indicator RCO85 – Participations in joint training schemes - which counts the number of registrations rather than completions. **However, since very little extra burden is involved in monitoring both indicators, it does no harm to report on both indicators and contribute to the common Interreg indicators.**

To avoid problems with the **method of data collection and analysis** observed in the current programming period, the methodology should be carefully designed and consistently applied. A periodical survey to Interact stakeholders is an appropriate method for data collection as it allows random sampling of survey respondents to ensure the representative participation of all different Interact stakeholder groups and avoids a self-selection bias. **A sufficiently large sample of randomly chosen stakeholders ought to be contacted so that responses are high enough to obtain results that are statistically significant. For the analysis of survey results, test statistics (e.g. Test of Equal Proportions such as the z-test) should be used to verify that the increase measured is statistically significant.**

Improvements should also be made to the **setting of targets**. These should be realistic yet sufficiently ambitious and based on experience from the current programming period. In addition, targets are being selected, consideration should be given to the minimum number of survey responses needed to be able to demonstrate that the result is outside the error margin

With a view to the future, the findings of this assessment suggest that an evolution of the approach, rather than revolution, is the most appropriate course of action.

- Setting output and result indicators for Interreg programmes has been notoriously complex. It is valuable to have established some indicators which are proving not unduly burdensome to collect, are easy to understand and are used. This would

suggest building on the formal system that is in place and keeping the number of indicators to a minimum/proportional.

- Interact interventions are mostly producing intangible results, which are difficult to measure and which may need longer time spans to materialise. Continuity in the indicator system therefore has the advantage of providing data for long-term monitoring and longitudinal studies, allowing the possibility to show change over time periods that stretch beyond single programming periods. This could deliver relevant evidence for the added value of the programme.
- While no radical changes to the indicators are recommended, changes should be made to the data collection and analysis methodology to avoid the methodological shortcomings observed in this period. The methodology should be carefully designed and consistently applied. This also includes developing clear-cut definitions for each indicator.
- For internal monitoring, and with regard to future programmes (as part of a long-term strategy to developing the current indicator system further), the 2021-2027 programming period could be used to test new data collection methods and indicators. For example, knowledge increase as a result of online courses could be easily measured by developing before and after knowledge self-checks/multiple-choice tests.
- The impact evaluation should be used to unravel mid- and long-term change induced by Interact interventions that go beyond the uptake of knowledge/skills or solutions such as changes in programme practices which lead to increases in programme management efficiency and effectiveness.





Notes

¹ Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal.

² See Interact Programme Guide, 2016

³ Adhocracy is a term coined by Toffler in the 1970s and which was made popular by Henry Mintzberger in the 1990s (Mintzberger H. (1993). Structures in Fives. Designing Effective Organisations, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs/New Jersey.).

⁴ According to the Programme Guide and findings from the Interact III Impact Evaluation, the flexibility of Interact's demand driven approach has been widely recognised by its target groups as one of the key assets and success factors for INTERACT.

⁵ Only relevant for output indicators.

⁶ Interact Use and Satisfaction Survey 2018-19

⁷ While not formally part of the monitoring process the evaluation provides valuable context with which to interpret indicators.

⁸ For development of this work and how Interact is already addressing many of these issues see Interact (2020) Methodology for Establishing the Interact IV performance Framework, First draft September 2020. This is a process that the evaluation team has also discussed and fed into

⁹ McMaster, I. Wergles, N. and Vironen, H. (2019) Case-Based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020, EPRC: University of Strathclyde

¹⁰ The evaluation carried out targeted research on this issue, as detailed in Annex. Although some practical issues around engagement can be highlighted, many of the programmes contacted were happy with their involvement with Interact and felt they were well served by the organisation.

¹¹ It is recognised that to undertake coordination requires effort and engagement on both sides, i.e. it is not all down to Interact to 'make it all happen'. However, Interact is well placed to act, has significant skills and knowhow and its efforts in this area are already appreciated and recognised.

¹² Interact (2020) Online event communications protocol, May 2020

¹³ Interact (2020) Interact III Joint Annual Work Plan 2020

^{xiv} McMaster, I. Wergles, N. and Vironen, H. (2019) Case-Based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020, EPRC: University of Strathclyde

¹⁵ Interact Use and Satisfaction Survey 2018-19

¹⁶ OAR VVMZ (2014) Ex Ante Evaluation Report, Operational Programme Interact III 2014-2020, https://www.adcoesao.pt/sites/default/files/cooperacao_territorial_europeia/interact/interactaval_ex_ante_final.pdf

¹⁷ CEC (2018) Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on specific provisions for the European territorial cooperation goal (Interreg) supported by the European Regional Development Fund and external financing instruments

COM/2018/374 final - 2018/0199 (COD) <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2018%3A374%3AFIN>>

¹⁸ Subject to confirmation by the Interact IV Programming Committee.