

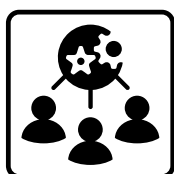
**Interreg
Europe**



Co-funded by
the European Union

Peer review

**a fast track to
policy solutions**



**Interreg Europe
Policy Learning Platform
expert service**

The peer review had a direct impact in several areas. It helped to speed up the development of our hydrogen strategy and ensured that we were addressing the right issues. To organise a peer review in our region and benefit from the Platform's and the peers' very professional support in this endeavour has been a very memorable and beneficial experience.

Dr Wilhelm Benfer
Head of Office of Sustainable Development
Barnim District

We've gained practical insights and ideas that we can turn into pilot actions, this was one of my best experiences with European programmes ever.

Krista Kampus
Executive Director
Tallinn European Green Capital 2023

This peer review has given us the tools and the inspiration we need to move forward with greater confidence. Together, we can help more young people find their path and build a better future for La Réunion.

Huguette Bello
President of the Regional Council
of La Réunion

March 2025

Interreg Europe is an interregional cooperation programme co-financed by the European Union. With a budget of 394 million euros for 2021-2027, Interreg Europe helps local, regional and national governments across Europe to develop and deliver better policies through interregional cooperation projects and its Policy Learning Platform services. The programme promotes good practice sharing and policy learning among European regions in 36 countries – the EU27, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Ukraine.

Interreg Europe contributes to the EU cohesion policy together with the other European Territorial Cooperation programmes known as Interreg.

www.interregeurope.eu

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Interreg Europe peer review – a fast track to policy solutions

Regions in Europe face rapidly evolving global challenges that demand cooperation across internal and external borders. Sharing solutions across borders reflects the very essence of the European project.

Now more than ever, local and regional policymakers need effective and impactful policies that build on existing solutions. To support this, the European Commission and its co-funded cooperation programmes have developed tools that facilitate the sharing of solutions and build policymakers' capacities to resolve today's pressing challenges. Some of the key peer-to-peer capacity-building tools for policymakers are the Smart Specialisation Community of Practice (S3 Community of Practice), the Peer-2-Peer Communities, or Interreg Europe's peer review service.

The peer review is a cornerstone of Interreg Europe's strategic services. Interreg Europe is an interregional cooperation programme co-financed by the EU, which helps policymakers from 36 countries develop and deliver better regional development policies. The programme is dedicated to capacity building through the exchange of experience and good practice either in interregional cooperation projects or via Policy Learning Platform services. By fostering cooperation and policy learning among regions at different levels of development, Interreg Europe enhances cohesion across Europe.

Interreg Europe's peer review is a capacity-building service which puts concrete challenges at the heart of cooperation. During a peer review, the Policy Learning Platform's thematic experts invite peers from other countries to share their solutions and provide a public authority with tailored-made recommendations for solving their specific policy challenge. Relevant local stakeholders and decision-makers also take part in peer reviews. This unique approach offers easy access to a rich repository of policy knowledge and tested good practice identified in Interreg Europe projects.

I am proud to be able to introduce the examples in this brochure of Interreg Europe peer reviews providing solutions to the regions. You can find out about solutions for hydrogen strategy in Germany, centres of excellence in Bulgaria, addressing early school drop-outs in one of France's outermost regions, or sustainability governance in Estonia.

If you are involved in regional development policies, the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform can help you access relevant knowledge, good practice, expertise and peers from across Europe through this peer review service. I invite you to explore these inspiring examples and consider asking for a peer review for your own policy challenges.



Moray Gilland
Head of Unit for Macro-regions, Transnational/ Interregional/ External Cooperation, Enlargement, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy at the European Commission

Interregional cooperation – the fuel for policy learning

Interreg Europe provides opportunities for sharing solutions and an environment for policy learning. Its goal is to help develop and deliver better regional policies across Europe. The programme offers public authorities two tools to achieve this goal:

1. Co-funding for interregional cooperation projects
2. The Policy Learning Platform's services

As in other Interreg programmes, Interreg Europe's core activity is supporting projects. Almost 90% of the programme's budget goes towards projects. This funding supports the sharing of experience and good practices between participating organisations. Our projects work on policies in various fields of regional development. They all involve organisations from different European regions with different levels of development. 90% of Europe's regions are represented in our projects. The variety and richness of knowledge that our projects accrue constitutes an exceptional source of experience and expertise that we are determined all regional development practitioners should be able to access.

More than 2,200 organisations from our 36 Partner States have been involved in Interreg Europe projects. The participating organisations engage their local stakeholders in the exchanges and sharing activities. Each project identifies, on average, 20 regional development good practices, each with a potential for transfer to another region.

Altogether, our Platform experts validated 3,500 good practices. Gathered and generated by our projects, this policy knowledge is the main fuel - and the unique strength of - the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform. Through a set of policy-learning services, the Platform ensures that the projects' knowledge is shared with all regions and anyone interested in regional development policies.

One of the best ways to tap into the Platform's resources is the peer review service. Our experts draw on the Platform's knowledge base to prepare and facilitate every peer review. Each peer review is tailored and personalised according to the specific policy challenge defined by the peer review host organisation. The purpose of the peer review is to respond to the challenge and the questions with the help of peers who have relevant experience.

In short, a peer review is a fast track to tailored policy advice and practical recommendations on how to design and implement better regional policies addressing a particular challenge.



Nicolas Singer
Head of Unit –
Projects & Platform,
Interreg Europe





Peer review: a practical and solution-oriented methodology

The dynamics and pace of developments requires responsive local and regional policy action that works. However, the resources of local and regional authorities are limited. Very often, time and knowledge are lacking. With the peer review methodology developed by Interreg Europe, we aim at tapping into the demand for fast, tailor-made and contextualised policy solutions.

The peer review process is built around the concrete challenges regions and cities are facing at their doorstep. Though, instead of sending an external expert to tell the region what to do, we offer teamwork, collective intelligence and the power of co-creation to jointly find answers and ways forward. At eye-level, we enable regional policymakers and their stakeholders to team up with like-minded colleagues from across Europe, the peers. They work on similar challenges and speak the same policy language. At the same time, their different backgrounds and contexts can bring fresh views, new ideas and unbiased reflections to the table.

To make this approach work, the methodology has to strike the right balance. On one hand, we have to keep the service agile, easily accessible and unbureaucratic. Local and regional authorities can apply at any time. Our team supports the preparation of their requests. Responses are given quickly.

At the same time, the different steps of the peer review process must allow for in-depth learning and actionable results that can directly feed into the daily work of the cities and regions under review. Consequently, all steps of the peer review process – from the application and preparation stages to the two-day peer review sessions and the follow-up – are actively moderated and facilitated by our team of Thematic Experts. Key milestones include the identification of potential peers from Interreg Europe's community of policy practitioners and the thorough thematic preparation of all participants. Usually, between 4 and 6 peers with different organisational, regional and geographical backgrounds are chosen to work with the beneficiary region during the peer review, the latter having the final word on their selection.

As soon as the peer review team has been established and briefed, the process turns to the heart of the methodology: the peer review sessions over two days held onsite or online. Designed as genuine working sessions in an informal and safe environment, they allow for open and honest exchanges on the policy challenges at stake.

Listening – exchanging – co-creating – presenting: along the red thread of four stages, our team guides the participants towards the co-creation of hands-on policy recommendations. The unbiased moderation by our team allows the participating beneficiary representatives, peers and stakeholders to stay focused on content, and to address “hot potatoes” such as stakeholder governance and policy commitment.

As our qualitative evaluation method of follow-up interviews has shown, the supported policy learning journeys trigger momentum for concrete policy action on the ground. To keep the drive in the weeks and months after the peer review, we amended our methodology with the possibility to benefit from additional interregional learning support during the follow-up process, if desired by the beneficiary region.

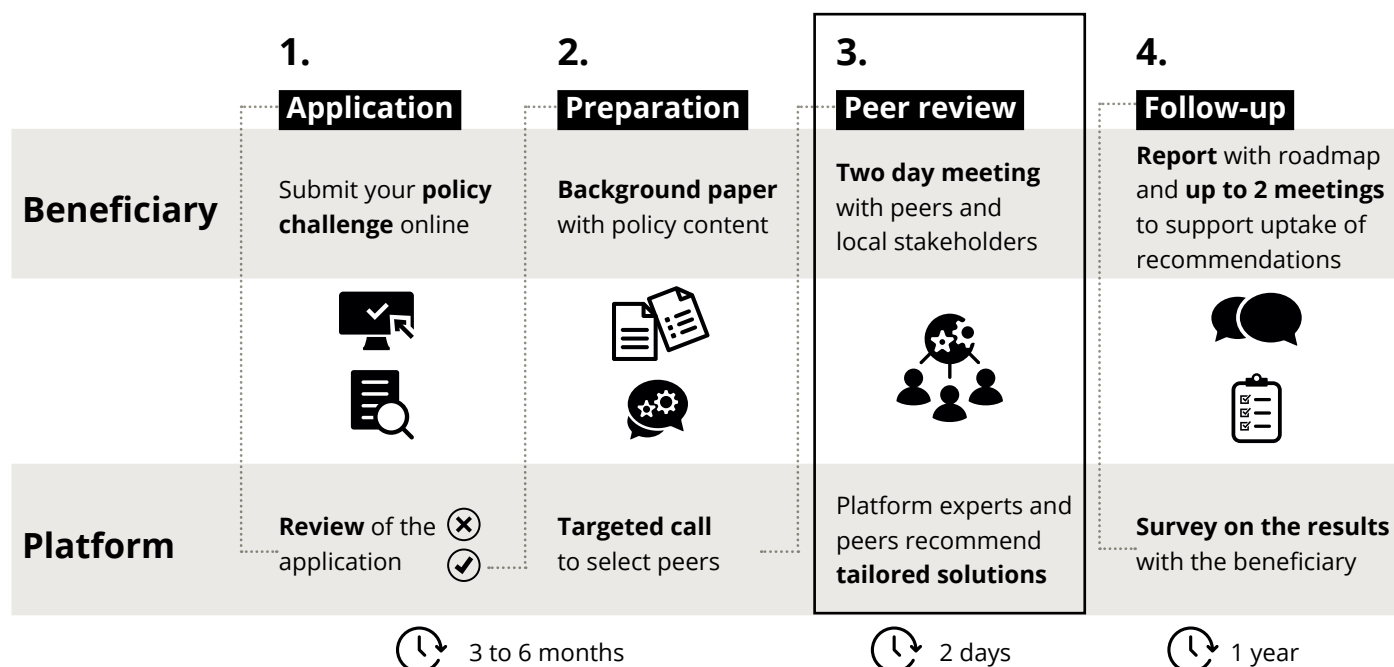
Indeed, the needs of regions and cities are evolving dynamically. Therefore, we keep on working with our community on the further evolution of the platform's portfolio of expert support, for interregional cooperation that works.



Thorsten Kohlisch
Project Manager,
Interreg Europe
Policy Learning Platform

Our methodology

Discover the different steps of our peer review



Three reasons to apply

1. Benefit from the expertise of carefully selected peers who will share their knowledge, provide inspiration and give feedback on your policy challenges in an open and constructive atmosphere.
2. Gather your local stakeholders around the table with international guests and spark new dynamics and active stakeholder involvement.
3. Experience an easily accessible turnkey service for better policymaking, facilitated by the Policy Learning Platform team from A to Z and centred on your needs.



Elena Ferrario
Senior Thematic Manager,
Interreg Europe Policy
Learning Platform

How it works

1 Apply

Get in touch

Contact us to find out how the peer review service can support the development of your region. In a dedicated online meeting, you can get to know our Platform experts who will help you define the right questions and focus for the peer review.

Apply

Submit a short online application to request a peer review.

2 Prepare

Start to prepare

Discuss your peer review content with us and draft a 4-8 page thematic background document outlining your policy challenge and the strategic questions for the peer review.

Select peers from a list of 3-6 candidates identified through a targeted call by our Platform experts. As like-minded policy practitioners from different parts of Europe, the peers will have relevant knowledge and experience to address your challenge.

Finalise your peer review agenda in close collaboration with our experts and your selected peers through dedicated online briefings.

Identify, invite and brief your relevant stakeholders to engage them in the discussions.

Ensure a venue for the peer review. As a peer review beneficiary, you will be responsible for arranging the meeting in your region. Interreg Europe can cover the related catering and translation costs if needed. You can also organise a study visit to enhance the exchange and learning process.

3 Host your peer review

Make the most of the two days of exchanges with European peers, colleagues from your organisation as well as key decision-makers and stakeholders from your region. Our thematic experts will take care of the meeting moderation and facilitation.

Day 1: You, your peers and your stakeholders share experiences and discuss your challenges and possible solutions.

Day 2: Together with you, your peers and our experts co-create draft policy recommendations with tailored solutions for your region and present them to your region's key decision-makers for feedback and discussion.

4 Follow up

A roadmap with the next steps

After the peer review, you will prepare a report detailing the solutions that have been identified as well as a roadmap with the follow-up actions you intend to take. When relevant, these could be endorsed by the policymakers in your region. With your consent, we will publish the report and the learning outcomes of your peer review on our website.

Follow-up meetings

Within a year, 1 onsite and/or 1 online follow-up meeting can be requested to support the uptake of the recommendations and foster continued collaboration with your peers and stakeholders. The formats and timelines of these meetings are flexible according to your needs. The related costs can be covered by the Platform.

Survey on the results

A few months after the meeting, our Platform experts will contact you for a follow-up survey about the actions and improvements introduced in your region as a result of the peer review.

How to apply for a peer review

Who can apply?

- Regional and local authorities, including city administrations and the managing authorities of European Structural Funds from the EU, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, and Ukraine are eligible.
- Other public authorities responsible for regional or local development policies in the programme area can also apply.

When to apply?

You can submit an application **any time**.

Join the Interreg Europe community:

www.interregeurope.eu/user/register

Log in and submit your application at:

www.interregeurope.eu/peer-review/submit

How to apply?

- First, join our community on Interreg Europe website to get access to the online application.
- Then, briefly describe your needs, motivation, and the policy challenge to be addressed by your peer review (max. 2 pages).
- Share your draft peer review request with our Platform experts. They can help you define the right focus and questions and assist you with your application.
- Submit your application online.

What can a peer review address?

- A peer review can address any regional development policy challenge at any governance level (local, regional or national).
- The challenge could, for example, be linked to policies on energy efficiency, new ways to support SME internationalisation, digital rural mobility solutions, or innovative governance arrangements for stronger stakeholder engagement.

How your application will be assessed

Each peer review application is assessed regarding:

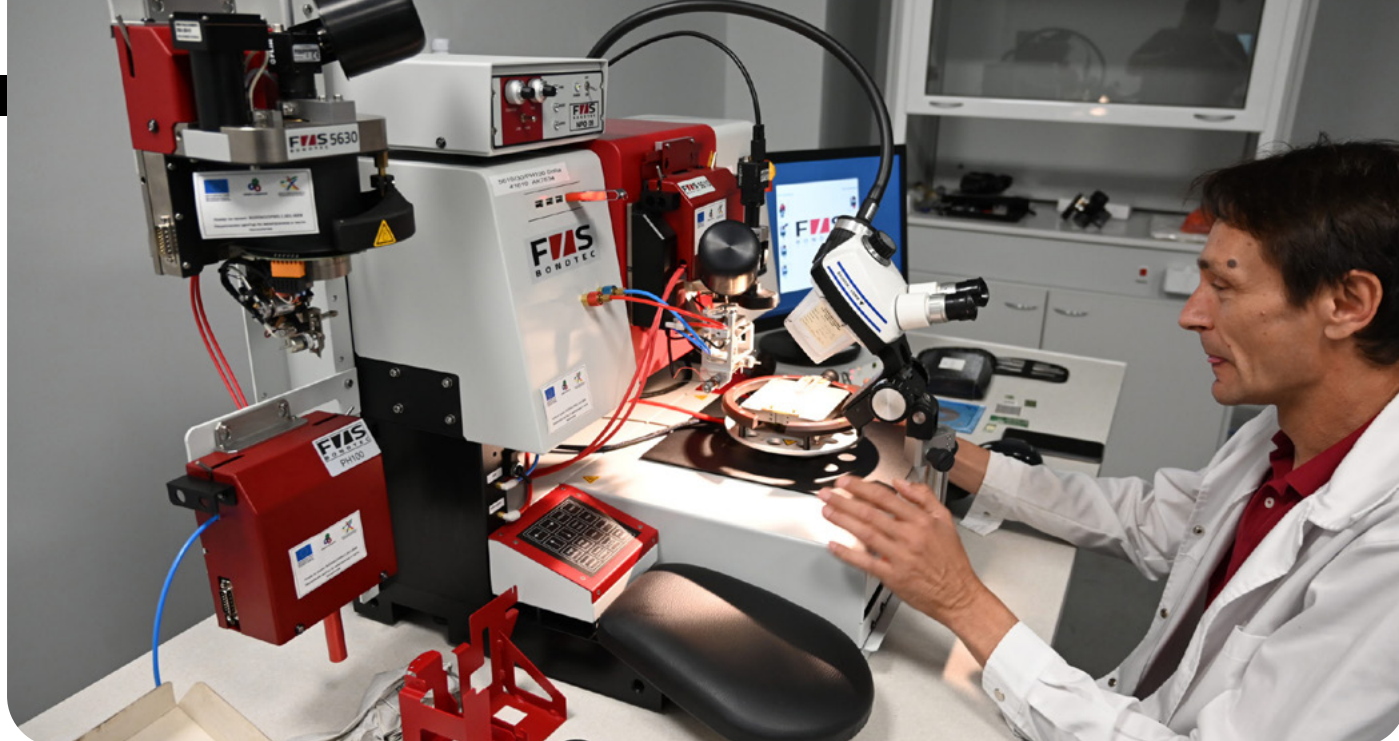
- the relevance of the challenge to local, regional or national development policies covered by Cohesion policy
- the direct involvement of the policy-responsible institution for the addressed policy in the peer review
- the motivation of the beneficiary region to participate in an interregional peer review and undertake follow-up actions by involving local stakeholders in the peer review
- the clarity and completion of the application
- in case that the applicant is a partner in a currently running Interreg Europe project, the clear difference of the policy challenge addressed by the peer review from the policies addressed in the project.

Language considerations

- The application should be submitted in English.
- At least one contact person in the applicant organisation must speak English to facilitate the preparation and coordination of the peer review.
- The peer review meeting can be carried out partially (for example the discussions with the local stakeholders) in your local language. Interreg Europe can cover the related costs for simultaneous translation, if required.

Post-selection steps

- If your application is selected, we will contact you within 3-4 weeks of your request.
- You can choose the date for the peer review keeping in mind the relevant phases of the policy cycle in question.
- It takes 3-4 months to prepare the meeting with our Platform experts. This work will involve drafting the background paper, identifying peers, preparing contributions, and ensuring the availability of your key stakeholders.
- If your application is not recommended for a peer review, you will nonetheless receive tailored policy advice from our thematic experts with a more adapted format.



Bulgaria's future in innovation

Bulgaria has a growing research infrastructure with centres of excellence and centres of competence thanks to EU funding. However, these centres are struggling to match their research with the market needs. To address this challenge, Bulgaria's responsible agency turned to Interreg Europe for a peer review of their innovation ecosystem. Good practices from Finland, Spain, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands suggested the way forward.

The centres of excellence and the centres of competence were set up in Bulgaria with the support from the European Regional Development Fund. These centres play a crucial role in supporting applied research, experimental development, and technological innovations. Their activities are aligned with Bulgaria's Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation (RIS3) in areas such as mechatronics, clean technologies, informatics, or ICT.

Host:
Executive Agency 'Programme Education',
Ministry of Education and Science, Bulgaria

Peers:

- **Leena Sarvaranta**, former Head of EU Affairs at VTT, Finland
- **Markus Dettenhofer**, CEITEC, former Executive Director, Czech Republic
- **Alaitz Landaluze**, Basque Innovation Agency "Innobasque", Spain
- **Pieter de Jong**, Wetsus European Centre of Excellence, Netherlands

Despite these innovation developments, the country has been struggling with effective transfer of innovation from the research sector to the industry. To address this challenge, Bulgaria's Executive Agency 'Programme Education' reached out to Interreg Europe for external expertise through a peer review.

The peer review was held in December 2021. Experts from Finland, Spain, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands joined online, to share their good practices linked to technology transfers and the centres of excellence and centres of competence. They addressed the following key policy questions:

- How to foster stronger links between the scientific community and businesses to facilitate technology transfer?
- How to ensure that research outputs from the centres of excellence and the centres of competence meet the needs of Bulgarian industries?
- How to increase the sustainability and international recognition of Bulgarian research centres?

The peer review helped the Executive Agency define specific measures to enhance technology transfer activities in Bulgaria. These included:

- Establishing stronger connections between research centres and local industries;
- Improving the management of intellectual property; and
- Creating a more business-friendly environment for research commercialisation.

The peers' recommendations shaped the new Bulgaria's Research, Innovation, and Digitisation for Intelligent Transformation Programme for 2021-2027. The peer review therefore contributed to drafting concrete requirements for the centres of excellence and centres of competence to receive funding, such as requirements to prepare comprehensive strategic agendas and human resources organisation strategies. For instance, the strategy encompasses the identification of a manager with a strong business and industry background. It also encourages centres to identify an officer dedicated to technology transfer who can ensure daily communication with companies, but also coordinates the technology transfer activities of the centres. They were included in the new programme guidelines. Additionally, the peer review has highlighted the significance of evaluation and monitoring across the governance structure of the centres.

After the peer review, several new initiatives in Bulgaria aimed at increasing the capacity of the centres of excellence and the centres of competence to collaborate with businesses. For example, the Agency set up a digital platform to map existing research capabilities and facilitate connections between research institutions and potential industry partners.

Building on expertise from other corners of Europe, Bulgaria made significant strides towards ensuring that its centres of excellence and centres of competence become competitive players on the European stage.



Interview with a peer review beneficiary

Ivan Popov

Executive Agency

'Programme Education', Bulgaria

The peer review beneficiary is the host of the peer review. The beneficiary explains the specific regional challenge addressed by the peer review and is in charge of the organisation of the peer review. The beneficiary is the main contact between their organisation, the key local stakeholders, and the Policy Learning Platform experts.

What does the beneficiary have to think about when requesting and preparing for a peer review?

First of all, the request for a peer review should stem from the organisation's internal need to address a specific challenge. In our case, this challenge was quite complicated as it directly concerned not only us, the Executive Agency 'Programme Education', but also our stakeholders, the research organisations benefiting from projects for creation of centres of excellence and centres of competence. Through the peer review, the Agency wanted to receive recommendations to ensure its successful future functioning, and also to accelerate the knowledge and technology transfer of the centres to meet the needs of the research organisations. So, it was crucial to look at the problems from both perspectives and clearly define the needs and support required.

In addition, we had to consider carefully the key questions to be addressed by the peer review. The clearer the formulations and focus, the more specific and practically-oriented the feedback on the specific needs from the peers from other European regions.

It is also important to invite and involve all key stakeholders in the peer review. Stakeholders' presence helps in common understanding of the policy setup and faced policy challenges. It also helps the peers to provide appropriate recommendations and ensures the stakeholders' commitment to implement the peer recommendations.

What did your organisation gain from the peer review experience?

The peer review provided our Agency and the beneficiaries with the opportunity to look at the issues related to technology transfer from the perspective of practitioners in the field. The research organisations benefited from good examples of operationalised policies and procedures for strengthening capacity to identify and manage technologies serving the interests of the science and business from similar centres in other countries.

Following the peer review recommendations, the focus of the Agency shifted to evaluating the activities of the funded centres of competence and centres of excellence, leading to enhanced monitoring and stronger foundations for them.

The practically-oriented feedback and advice helped us build the next initiatives to ensure successful implementation and functioning of the centres of excellence and centres of competence. The policy recommendations were integrated in the guidelines for the centres included in the Research, Innovation, and Digitization for Smart Transformation Programme 2021-2027.



Green hydrogen for Barnim District

The Barnim District, Germany, is rich in wind energy available for green hydrogen production. To develop a sustainable green hydrogen value chain, the District teamed up with their neighbour and applied for an Interreg Europe peer review. Peers from four countries helped the two Districts develop a green hydrogen strategy to harness the wind power and secure reliable energy future for their inhabitants.

The Barnim District in north-east Germany has excess electricity from wind power. To convert this electricity into green hydrogen, the District decided to team up with the neighbouring Uckermark District and develop a green hydrogen value chain. The Districts wanted to use the local energy resources and create a sustainable hydrogen economy beneficial for the environment, local population, and local industries.

Host:
District Administrations of Barnim and Uckermark, Germany

Peers:

- **Fernando Palacin**, Hydrogen Foundation Aragon, Spain
- **Julien Jimenez**, Energy and Climate Department – Regional Government Nouvelle-Aquitaine, France
- **Nikolaos Ntavos**, CluBE-Cluster of Bioeconomy and Environment of Western Macedonia, Greece
- **Kevin Schalk**, Fraunhofer Institute for Wind Energy Systems & Bremerhaven local hydrogen network “H2BX, Germany
- **Florian Widdel**, German Renewable Energy Federation BEE, Germany

The two Districts had several challenges to address. They needed a coherent strategy that would align their stakeholders, secure funding, and build the necessary infrastructure for green hydrogen. Additionally, the communication and collaboration with local businesses and public sector were also crucial for success.

To find out how to address these challenges, the Barnim

District turned to Interreg Europe and applied for the peer review service. The peer review took place in November 2022 and brought to Barnim peers from Spain, France, Greece, and Germany. The peers shared their experiences in renewable energy and hydrogen production, relevant to the Districts' ambitions. The peer review addressed the following policy questions:

- How to utilise excess wind energy for the local production of green hydrogen?
- How to build a green hydrogen value chain that involves local companies and customers?
- How to raise awareness about hydrogen's potential and engage stakeholders in the energy transition?

The peer review provided the Districts of Barnim and Uckermark with guidance on how to leverage their renewable energy resources to build a green hydrogen economy. The peer review contributed to the development of a comprehensive strategy paper, endorsed in early 2023 by both District Parliaments. This document set clear goals and outlined the necessary measures to enhance the use of green hydrogen in the region. It laid the foundation for the Districts' hydrogen initiatives, including measures for creating a green hydrogen infrastructure.

The peers highlighted the importance to focus on specific areas, for example, on the transport sector. As a result, Barnim District initiated projects to build two hydrogen filling stations: one for the local buses and another for the trains.

The peers also stressed the need for effective communication and stakeholder engagement. They advised the Districts to prioritise outreach efforts, both to inform the local population about the benefits of hydrogen, and to involve local businesses in the energy transition. In response, the Districts organised workshops and launched a website dedicated to providing information on hydrogen and its local applications.

The peer review also raised new questions that the Districts had not considered. For instance, a critical issue of water supply for hydrogen production prompted the Districts to further investigate sustainable water management as part of their strategy.

The peer review brought to Barnim technical expertise and sped up the process of strategy development. It also fostered a sense of collaboration among local stakeholders, ensuring that the renewable energy initiatives of the two Districts continue developing.



Interview with a peer review Platform expert

Katharina Krell

Thematic Expert - Greener Europe and Connected Europe, Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform, France

The Policy Learning Platform thematic experts guide the peer review process by coordinating the preparatory works, selecting the most relevant peers, moderating discussions, ensuring a structured and productive exchange of ideas, and providing expert input relevant to the policy challenges. They facilitate the co-creation of targeted policy recommendations for the peer review beneficiary.

What are the key steps to make an interregional peer review a success?

Good communication lines with the peer review beneficiary are key to success. Beyond the formal application for a peer review, it is crucial to get a broader understanding of the challenges a beneficiary organisation is really facing. Therefore, we always start with a clarification of the true pain points.

Then we ask the beneficiary to write a background paper that presents the beneficiary territory, the policy and institutional context. The beneficiary also needs to prepare detailed set of questions for the future peers.

With this at hand, we recruit the best possible peer experts for the exchange. This is typically done both bottom-up, through a call for peers, and top-down, by direct contacting of experts. Very often, these are cold calls to make, and the process can be quite challenging. But the attention to the suitability of peers for a given peer review pays off for all sides and leads to relevant and valuable exchanges.

During the peer review itself, it is important to never lose the focus and keep the discussions to the point. It is a very intense two-day meeting. But we have a solid and well-tested methodology that helps us get results.

You have already facilitated many peer reviews. Is there a special 'peer review moment'?

Peer reviews involve a co-creation process that demands concentration and energy. The special moments typically come later, when the beneficiaries have had time to digest the input received.

However, sometimes already during the peer review you feel that the work could actually lead to a policy change. For example, in the peer review in May 2023 for the Cyprus Energy Agency and the Union of Cypriot communities on energy communities, the beneficiary managed to get a group of relevant stakeholders in the room for the peer review, including the energy regulator and the relevant ministry. Everybody stayed until the end. For this group, we organised a follow-up study visit to see first-hand some German villages with local energy communities. On 7 December 2024, the Cypriot President announced the first energy community in the Tylliria of five small local authorities, following all suggestions proposed by the beneficiary and the Ministry of Energy who took part in the study visit as a stakeholder.



Advancing sustainability governance in Tallinn

The City of Tallinn, Estonia, is committed to a greener future for their citizens. The City's development strategy 'Tallinn 2035' aligns with the European Green Deal and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The City asked for the Interreg Europe peer review to find out how to bridge the gap between their high-level sustainability ambitions and the practical implementation. Peers from four countries came to share their good practices.

Estonia's capital Tallinn set on a journey towards a greener and more sustainable future in 2020, when they outlined their ambitions in the 'Tallinn 2035' development strategy. In 2023, the City applied and won the European Green Capital award. Even as a frontrunner in sustainability and green development in the region, the City searched for more inspiration and ideas on how to turn their high-level plans and strategic goals into concrete actions with actual outcomes.

Host:
City of Tallinn, Estonia

Peers:

- **Marcus Ljungqvist**, City of Malmö, Sweden
- **Prof. Dr. Louis Meuleman**, Public Strategy for Sustainable Development (PS4SD), Brussels, Belgium
- **Jeremy Williams**, International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) and UCL, United Kingdom
- **Nicolas Gharbi**, City of Madrid, Spain

To get new ideas, Tallinn City turned to the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform for a peer review. They asked for external expert feedback to improve their sustainability governance and close the implementation gap in their Tallinn 2035 strategy.

In September 2023, peers from Belgium, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom went to Tallinn. They had a close look at the City's sustainability governance concept and model. People from the City's Strategic Development Department worked with the peers for two days on recommendations on how the City could:

- Strengthen its governance framework,
- Enhance multi-level and multi-actor collaboration, and
- Embed sustainability principles into public administration processes.

The peers saw the existing strong political commitment, solid vision, and new specific structures in place as important for Tallinn City to reach their objectives. They confirmed that the City was a frontrunner in sustainability governance.

Still, the peers had some ideas for improvement. For example, they recommended involving both internal and external stakeholders through inter-departmental cooperation and participatory processes in co-creating their green, sustainable city. Consequently, the City started a cross-departmental pilot. The pilot ensured better planning and maintenance of the city's green spaces through closer collaboration between the City's different departments.

Another tip from the peers was to engage both citizens and internal stakeholders in the city's sustainability goals and develop a clearer communication strategy. The City held the first citizen assembly in November 2023 about the city's green spaces and facilitated citizens' participation in urban design and planning processes. They also prepared a strategic document on citizens' engagement as a complement to the 'Tallinn 35' strategy.

The City revised and amended the internal training and capacity-building initiatives to improve the internal stakeholder engagement as well. They integrated the aspects of sustainability governance, gender equality, and the principle of 'leading by example' into the training courses for the staff in the City's departments.

The peers also suggested better integration of the sustainable development goals into the City's policy planning and budgeting. They recommended to better connect the annual action plan of the Tallinn 2035 strategy with the City's annual budget. The City started developing an impact assessment methodology for investment and development projects based on the sustainable development goals to make better decisions when prioritising investments.

The sustainability governance framework the City developed prior to the peer review is certain to help with the implementation of the high-level goals and close the action gap on the ground. The peer review inspired the City to focus more on people, partnerships, and communication. With that, the City can turn their sustainability vision into reality, leaving no one behind in the process.



Interview with a peer

Louis Meuleman

Director, Public Strategy for Sustainable Development, Belgium

A peer is the main contributor to the peer review with good practices coming from her/his country or region. The peer reads the background paper prepared by the peer review beneficiary to understand their policy challenge and selects the best examples of solutions to that challenge. During the peer review, all peers discuss with the beneficiary and the local stakeholders and prepare hands on recommendations tailored to the policy needs of the reviewed region. They are selected by the Platform experts through targeted community calls and confirmed by the beneficiary. Their participation costs are covered by the Platform.

What was your motivation to become a peer? Was your time invested in it worth the effort?

Exchanging experiences with practitioners in other countries is one of the most rewarding, fast and cost-effective roads towards learning. Being a peer has been a very good investment for me. I could share my experience and learn from others.

Would you say there is also something in for the peers?

During the peer review for the City of Tallin, I learned from the other peers and also from the Tallinn team about their successful practices and ideas. I continue sharing them on other occasions, with other cities. One of these insights was about the power of pilots: when innovation is met with resistance, a pilot often leads to a breakthrough because it convinces people that change is beneficial and feasible.



New paths to the youth's success in La Réunion

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The French island of La Réunion is in the Indian Ocean. Due to its geographical isolation, it faces significant socio-economic challenges. It struggles with high youth unemployment and school dropout rates. To address this challenge, the Regional Council of La Réunion asked Interreg Europe for a peer review. Peers from seven countries shared their good practices in reducing school dropouts and fostering youth employment.

La Réunion is one of the French outermost regions. Those regions are an integral part of the European Union but geographically very distant from the European continent. Due to their remoteness, insularity, small size, difficult topography and climate, as well as economic dependence on a reduced number of products, the outermost regions often face major challenges.

One of La Réunion's greatest challenges is high school dropout rate. The French law requires children under 16 to attend school. Yet, many leave the school system without any qualifications every year before that. In 2021, La Réunion had 26% of youths between 15 and 28 neither in education, nor employed, nor in training, a share twice as high as in continental France. Young people without qualifications

Host:
Regional Council La Réunion, France

Peers:

- **Raphael Scerri**, Jobsplus, Malta
- **Marco Costantino**, Apulia Region, Italy
- **Indre Lauciene**, Lithuanian Employment Service, Lithuania
- **Jana Rozac**, Employment Service of Slovenia, Slovenia
- **Alexander Grit**, Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
- **Francisco Caparros**, Balearic Islands Government, Balearic Islands, Spain
- **Chantal Fijalkowski**, IAWM Institute for Training and further education in SMEs, Belgium
- **Dany Meessen**, Ministry of the German-speaking Community, Job Creation Measures and Social Economy, Belgium

struggle to enter the labour market and reinforce the cycle of poverty on the island.

To address this major challenge, the Regional Council of La Réunion turned to Interreg Europe for a peer review. The Council, responsible for overseeing educational policies and vocational training on the island, was interested in good practices addressing school dropouts and youth unemployment from other European countries.

In November 2023, peers from Belgium, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Spain, joined the peer review to provide La Réunion with recommendations based on their own experiences with youth employment and education systems. The peers discussed with the Council

and relevant local stakeholders from the education system, employment services, local authorities, and other interest groups the following policy questions:

- What actions could reduce dropout rates without certification?
- Which solutions demonstrated success in preventing dropouts and fostering youth employment?
- How can academic resilience be linked to better employment rates?

Some of the key recommendations from the peer review were:

- Developing a strategic plan tailored to the region's needs to ensure clear leadership and governance, focus on key sectors, and continuity of planning and funding;
- Institutionalising the culture of collaboration and co-creation to foster closer work among different stakeholders, including the youth and their parents as beneficiaries of the services; or
- Systematically evaluating the youth programmes to ensure continuous improvement, alignment with the users' needs, and better governance.

The peers acknowledged that many young people struggle with conventional education systems. They suggested some concrete 'out-of-the-box' pilot projects, such as weekend camps to connect students with professionals, or soft skill programmes that emphasise teamwork and creativity. Such projects could offer more flexible and individualised solutions for young people not in education, employment or training. The idea was to meet young people where they are, not force them back into systems that did not work for them in the past.

The peers also suggested using the region's island profile as a testbed for innovative approaches. For instance, Malta shared their national employment policy which supports people in acquiring the needed and industry-demanded skills for tomorrow's world. For example, La Réunion could consider developing stronger economic sectors such as the blue economy and the agri-food sector. Its geographical location in the Indian Ocean could provide specific opportunities for new jobs.

The Regional Council of La Réunion is working on putting the recommendations in practice. To accelerate the implementation, the Council invited the peers back to the island in April 2025 for a co-creation event with key stakeholders from the Northern and Southern parts of

the island. Together they will define the key guidelines for a multi-year action plan aimed at strengthening the contribution of educational alliances to the academic perseverance of young people in La Réunion.



Interview with a peer review stakeholder

Caroline Squarzoni

Apprentis d'Auteuil Océan Indien
France

The peer review beneficiary identifies and invites stakeholders from other departments or other institutions who are key to the solution of the policy challenge. The stakeholders briefly present themselves to the peers and then learn from the peers' good practices. At the end of the peer review, they discuss the policy recommendations and the actions plans prepared by the beneficiary, the peers and the Platform experts.

As a regional stakeholder, how did you experience the peer review hosted in La Réunion?

I was impressed by the choice of peers and by the similarity between our territories and our thinking. In their presentations, the peers were very careful to make the links with our reality and were open to our probing questions. Being inspired by similar approaches is very stimulating, all the more so when associations, mainstream operators and institutions are brought together.

Ranging from the governance of public policies to deployment on the ground, the presentations spoke to each type of organisation, illustrating how our roles are linked. These insights may well lead to more open and inclusive thinking in the future.

Was it good for your organisation to take part in the peer review? If so, why?

Yes, it helped us identify the complementarities across our actions. We could also share our experience from the ground with those who rarely hear from us, and highlight points for them to consider.

We work directly with the youth, so the exchanges with the European peers opened new perspectives for us and gave us feedback on our own ideas. The Apprentis d'Auteuil Océan Indien is the only campus in La Réunion combining secondary education, training and employment access. On top of this, you can add cooperation with associations and enterprises helping the young people to find the best solutions.

We found inspiration in the solutions the peers shared. They helped us identify the necessary levers and tools to better support our young people. Thanks to the peer review we have more legitimacy to bring other institutions on board and open access to work for the youth outside the usual places. We are already introducing some lessons learned from the peer review into our activities. We are ready to play the facilitating role and help the young get employed.

Learning through mock peer reviews

It's never too early for future policymakers to get to know the peer review process. Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in Maastricht, the Netherlands, has included the Interreg Europe peer review methodology in their European Studies curriculum.

Zuyd University of Applied Sciences aims to turn theoretical knowledge about regional policy issues into practical solutions, teaching 14,000 students communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills in undergraduate and master's degree programmes. They have been running sessions on EU funding and project management for years. In 2020, the university decided to trial the peer review concept in a new EU Competitiveness course.

In the course, students follow the path of a real-life Interreg Europe peer review. They form small focus groups, each representing a specific regional authority in a different country. After researching their region and identifying relevant stakeholders, the groups present their region's challenge. Then, drawing inspiration from Interreg Europe's good practice database, the students share relevant, workable solutions to address the identified challenge. And finally, each team drafts a set of policy recommendations proposing creative solutions adapted from other regions, as well as governance issues.



The course has evolved with AI-related assessment elements, written policy action plans, and newly introduced recommendation presentations. Topics are updated annually, aligning with emerging policy challenges and policy briefs from the Interreg Europe's Policy Learning Platform. The mock peer review explored solutions to challenges ranging from futureproofing cultural and natural heritage tourism to improving public transport accessibility in a low-carbon economy.

Since the first course in 2020, over 450 students have participated in the mock peer reviews. Despite the course's demanding nature, the high passing rate reflects strong preparation and professionalism of the students. Thanks to the course simulating real policy-making scenarios, stakeholder coordination, and action plan presentations, students gain transferable skills in problem solving, teamwork, policy writing, and communication. These skills are essential for internships and career advancement. Top-performing students have opportunities for internships at the Policy Learning Platform in Lille, gaining valuable first-hand experience.



More policy-learning services

Interreg Europe's peer reviews offer hands-on policy advice from practitioners to practitioners. As a well-established and personalised service, they provide a valuable opportunity for cooperation and practical policy learning, especially for newcomers to cooperation. In early 2025, we reached an important milestone – the 100th peer review. Since the launch of the service in 2018, 100 beneficiaries have already hosted a tailored review of their policy challenge, and more than 450 peers have contributed with their insights, good practices, and expertise. Participants' feedback on the peer review highlights their added value, strengthened professional skills, and new perspectives. In a fast-changing world, peer reviews continue to support policymakers in adapting to emerging challenges and trends.

Yet, the Policy Learning Platform, with its team of European thematic experts, analyses continuously the good practices and results of the interregional cooperation projects and offers more policy learning and capacity building opportunities. Its mission is to facilitate the exchange of inspiring policy solutions and practices through events and expert support services to help policymakers and practitioners with their daily work in improving regional policies. These include policy learning in practice through:

- **Access to knowledge:** Take a look at our online [policy solutions](#) and explore our wide range of expert-validated and tested [good practices](#), policy briefs and success stories depicting results of our projects, news on latest EU trends, thematic reports on regional policies and other sources of inspiration.
- **Access to people:** Join the [Interreg Europe community](#) and meet like-minded people at our in-person workshops with interregional cooperation projects and EU networks, thematic webinars on topics high in the EU agenda and targeted discussions upon demand.
- **Access to expertise:** Besides the tailored peer review service, you can also request other [expert support](#) to address your specific policy challenge. You can ask any question related to regional development policies to our Policy Helpdesk operated by our Platform experts, or request a matchmaking meeting to team up with selected peers from other regions and discuss your policy needs.

Continuous learning can help you build your knowledge and skills. Our services and the Platform team are there for you. Start your policy-learning journey now by joining our interregional cooperation community!



Magdalini Anagnostou
Coordinator –
Policy Learning Platform,
Interreg Europe

Challenges tackled to date

(March 2025)



Beneficiary

Austria

Austria Wirtschaftsservice (Austrian promotional bank).....

Austria - Italy

EGTC European Region Tyrol – South Tyrol – Trentino

Belgium

The Ministry of the German-speaking community of Belgium

City of Antwerp

Province of East Flanders

Bulgaria

Executive Agency 'Programme Education', Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science

Stara Zagora Regional Economic Development Agency

Burgas Municipality

Croatia

JURRA (Karlovac County Development Agency).....

Zagorje Development Agency

Town of Korčula

Cyprus

Cyprus Energy Agency

Czech Republic

City of Prague

Usti Region

Ministry for Industry and Trade.....

Energetické centrum Ústeckého kraje.....

Estonia

City of Tartu.....

City of Tallinn

Estonian Environmental Investment Centre

Põlvamaa County Development Centre.....

Finland

Åland Government.....

Regional Council of Päijät-Häme

Topic and year

Trustworthy AI in business (2020)

Governance of cross-border mobility (2023)

SECAP governance and implementation (2019)

Cultural heritage: fortress belts (2021)

S3 design (2024)

- Set up of research infrastructures: Centres of excellence and centres of competence (2019)
- Technology transfer in research infrastructures (2021)

Economic diversification and clean power production (2020)

Waste management (2020)

Establishing a regional competence centre for SMEs (2020)

Digital transformation strategy (2021)

Smart island and smart tourism (2022)

Renewable energy communities (2023)

Green bonds (2022)

Financial instruments for SME support (2023)

Smart City testbeds (2023)

Energy community one-stop shops (2025)

Green Deal accelerator and impact investment fund (2021)

- Smart city services (2022)
- Sustainability governance (2023)
- Blue economy roadmap (2023)
- Improve regional branding for attracting tech-savvy visitors(2023)

Innovation and integration support for local businesses (2023)

Regional innovation governance (2023)

Beneficiary

France

Region Hauts de France

Region Sud

Conseil régional de La Réunion

Lille Metropole

Valenciennes Metropole

Region Centre Val de Loire

Institution des Wateringues

Amiens Métropole

Région Bourgogne-Franche-Comté

Germany

Berlin Senate Department for Economics, Energy and Public Enterprises

Ministry of Economics, Energy, Transport and Housing, State of Hessen

City of Greifswald

County of Barnim

Ministry of finance and EU affairs - Brandenburg State

City of Magdeburg

Saarland Ministry of the Environment

Ministry of Economic Affairs, Energy, Transportation, and Housing from German State of Hesse

Ministry of Economic Affairs, Transport, Agriculture and Viticulture Rhineland-Palatinate

Heide Region

Schleswig-Holstein Institute for Vocational Education and Training

Senatsverwaltung für Wirtschaft, Energie und Betriebe Berlin

Thuringian Ministry of Environment, Energy and Nature Protection

Duisburg Municipality

Greece

Region of Western Macedonia

Regional Development Fund of Central Macedonia

Region of Central Macedonia

Hungary

City of Szombathely

Hungarian Development Agency

Topic and year

- Energy efficiency in social housing and public buildings (2018)
- Strategic port development and smart ports solutions (2020)
- Regional climate resilience against floods and droughts (2024)
- Corporate social responsibility and circular economy (2019)
- AI in health for RIS3 (2019)
- Students entrepreneurship (2021)
- Creative and Cultural Industries and RIS3 (2023)
- Mobility governance (2023)
- NEETs (2023)

Thermal renovation of private housing (2024)

Gender inclusive urban planning (2024)

Regional deal to meet the challenges of public health (2024)

Developing greater climate resilient water management for the Delta of the Aa River and its polders (2024)

Cultural and Creative Industries (2024)

Strategy for employment and skills (2025)

Start up internationalisation (2019)

SME digital transformation (2021)

Rehabilitation of former landfills (2021)

Green hydrogen (2022)

ERDF for cross border innovation projects (2023)

Governance and digitalisation of fortress heritage (2023)

On-demand transport in rural areas (2023)

CO₂ impact assessment methodologies for applicants and funding program owners (2024)

Cooperation between public authorities and Open Street Map (2024)

Designing governance to support regional transformation (2024)

Prevention of school-dropout and integration of NEETs in the labour market (2024)

Updating the Foreign Trade Strategy (2024)

Reintroduction of the lynx (2024)

Revitalisation of the city center (2025)

Energy efficiency: skills and SME programmes (2020)

Fashion and the circular economy (2021)

Designing open innovation calls (2023)

Economic diversification in the health sector (2021)

Strategy for Strengthening Hungarian Micro, Small and Medium-sized enterprises (SME Strategy) (2024)

Beneficiary

Ireland

Kilkenny County Council

Leitrim County Council

Italy

Province of Trento

Emilia-Romagna Region

Municipality of Genoa

Veneto Region

Latvia

Vidzeme Planning region

Luxembourg

Nature Parkour

Netherlands

Province of Fryslân

Province of North Brabant

Province of Zeeland

Province of Noord-Holland

Norway

County of Vestland

Kristiansand Municipality

Poland

Marshal Office of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship...

City of Warsaw

Upper Silesian Agency for Entrepreneurship and Development

Marshal Office of the Pomorskie Voivodeship

Portugal

LIPOR – Intermunicipal Waste Management Service of Greater Porto

Intermunicipal Community of Coimbra Region

CCDR Alentejo

Azores region

Romania

Municipality of Rasinari

Ministry of Regional Development and Public works

Slovakia

Košice Self-governing Region

Slovenia

City of Maribor

Topic and year

Sustainable urban mobility (2021)

- Cultural and Creative Industries in rural areas (2024)
- Sustainable mobility in rural areas (2025)

Turn Val di Fiemme into a green community (2022)

Decarbonisation of fisheries and aquaculture (2024)

Connecting the Municipal Urban Planning and the incentive programmes focused on new and existing enterprises (2024)

Innovation procurement policies (2024)

Governance and funding mechanism for the Vidzeme Open Innovation Hub (2025)

Governance and management of Natura2000 park (2020)

Resilient communities (2022)

Biobased circular economy (2023)

The use of biobased materials in construction (2024)

Water management (2024)

Sector prioritisation and entrepreneurial discovery process (2020)

Labour market integration of immigrants and more specifically of Ukrainian refugees (2024)

Sustainable waste management in a circular economy (2020)

Urban logistics (2020)

- University-industry collaboration (2022)
- Voucher schemes for SMEs (2022)

Support for EU-funded innovation and research programmes (2022)

Biowaste management (2022)

Integrated territorial development to fight depopulation (2023)

Mobility as a service for low-density areas (2023)

Challenge-driven innovation to promote university-industry collaboration (2024)

- Governance and finance for protected areas (2022)
 - Creating a star gazing destination (2023)
- Implementing Low Emission Zones (2024)

Circular economy and sustainable waste management (2020)

Engaging citizens in the circular economy (2022)



Beneficiary

Spain

Government Agency Catalonia Trade and Investment

Government of Catalonia

Regional Development Agency (IAF)
of the Government of Aragon

Municipality of Quart de Poblet (Valencia)

The Andalusian Ministry of Sustainability, Environment
and Blue Economy

Municipality of Ascó

Delegation of the Basque Country to the EU

Sweden

Region of Gävleborg

Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

Region Jämtland-Härjedalen

Region Västernorrland

United Kingdom

Norfolk County Council

Topic and year

SME internationalisation support (2019)

Talent attraction and retention, start-up monitoring (2020)

Digitalisation in traditional economic sectors in depopulated
areas (2020)

River restoration and blue green infrastructure (2022)

Digitalisation of environmental permits (2022)

Local renewable energy communities (2023)

Financing innovation cooperation through mainstream
programmes (2024)

Innovation governance (2019)

Antimicrobial resistance in water (2022)

European Value Chains for the green transition (2023)

Enhancing the effectiveness of business promotion systems
through mapping and interregional cooperation (2025)

Protecting and recovering local biodiversity (2023)



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