

REPORT

Meeting: **MSP FG: “Advancing Maritime Spatial Planning in the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean: Challenges, Drivers, and Future Pathways”**

Parties: **MS administrations, stakeholders, NSAC (KSF, TT)**

Date: **16 September 2025**

Location: **online**

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This focus group was part of a study on the **evaluation of implementation of Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) Directive**. MSP and related national implementing measures are progressing in line with the EU Directive, with increasing attention to the broader policy landscape, including the **European Green Deal**. The study will inform the Commission’s forthcoming evaluation of the Directive and contribute to the second report to the European Parliament and Council, due in March 2026. The objectives are to assess the state of implementation, lay the foundation for the Directive’s evaluation, and examine how MSP aligns with the Green Deal. **Sea Basin Strategies** have been acknowledged as requiring future reflection and alignment with the **Ocean Pact**, which must be integrated into ongoing and future MSP-related work.

It was suggested that coherence be enhanced between maritime spatial planning and other directives. For instance, alignment of calendars and principles across the **MSFD** and **Strategic Environmental Assessments** for MSP was suggested to ensure a consistent environmental approach in planning. OSPAR and other regional seas conventions, while lacking a formal MSP mandate, were acknowledged as contributing indirectly to planning. Their integration into sea basin strategies, such as the **Mission Atlantic** framework, was considered a promising avenue for breaking down silos between environmental and economic approaches. The need for stronger links with EU initiatives, such as the Ocean Mission and Horizon Europe programmes, was also underlined.

The need for enhanced collaboration between **MSP, MSFD, fisheries, and energy sectors** was emphasized. It was noted that differences in mindset and approaches between directives, such as **scientific versus planning-driven methods**, require improved dialogue. A workshop was proposed to bring together representatives from environmental conservation, fisheries, and energy sectors to foster holistic planning and better inter-service coordination.

It was further suggested that **co-design frameworks** be developed to guide governance and stakeholder engagement, including regional authorities and other stakeholders, in line with objectives outlined in the Ocean Pact and the future Ocean Act.

Effective MSP requires not only strong national plans but also cross-border alignment and collaborative governance. Strengthening existing regional platforms, such as the **Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI)**, and exploring new mechanisms for coordination, joint data sharing, and harmonisation of legal and procedural approaches were seen as essential steps.

In the Atlantic, a **Community of Practice on MSP** is currently being developed in the framework of the Atlantic Strategy. In the North Sea, **early MSP dialogue** has been initiated within GNSBI, complemented by the establishment of the **North Sea Collaboration Group**. Opportunities for stronger synergies and networking between existing Communities of Practice across sea basins have been identified. The potential for creating an **EU MSP Community** has been noted, though it has not yet been fully established. Support from the **EU MSP Assistance Mechanism** has been highlighted as a means to provide a link between these communities and ensure better connectivity.

The persistence of siloed approaches has been attributed to rigid thinking developed over several decades. Reconciling the three pillars of sustainability has been identified as a further challenge. It has been noted that, while possible, such reconciliation remains extremely difficult. Coalition-building has been emphasised as one possible strategy, but it has also been underlined that leadership is required to promote holistic thinking.

The need for **political will** has been identified as a driver **for advancing shared commitments**, with reference made to international agreements such as the Paris Agreement, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and broader biodiversity goals including living in harmony with nature and ensuring food security.

Through the MSP Directive, emphasis has traditionally been placed on establishing a plan as the ultimate objective. Research has indicated, however, that a preliminary step is necessary before the plan itself: information gathering, collaboration, and consultation. Opportunities and objectives should first be discussed in accessible terms to build a shared vision. This preparatory phase has been termed the **Early MSP Dialogue**. Planning decisions have been recommended to be **transparent in terms of costs and benefits for each stakeholder**. Transparency is considered essential for achieving buy-in, legitimacy, credibility, and relevance of MSP plans.

Emerging priorities include planning for the energy transition, addressing climate change impacts, and incorporating cybersecurity and maritime safety into MSP. National case studies highlighted shifting priorities, such as the Netherlands' increased focus on balancing fisheries and marine food supplies with offshore energy demands. Lessons from projects like **MEDIGREEN** in the Mediterranean underscored the value of regional cooperation models, though participants cautioned against reducing MSP to a tool for advancing narrow sectoral agendas (an example of the **North Sea Energy Cooperation (NSEC)** was given).

Stakeholders stressed the importance of **bottom-up approaches and meaningful regional authority engagement**. In Finland, regional-led MSP has shown success in balancing diverse

interests, while in other contexts, engagement remains limited to procedural consultation rather than proper co-development.

Communities of practice have been recognised as important tools for enabling stakeholders to learn from each other's realities and to gain buy-in for collaborative processes. These structures have been described as contributing not only to engagement but also to the development of **shared understanding across sectors**.

Persistent challenges include the difficulty of applying ecosystem-based approaches, integrating land-sea interactions, addressing cumulative impacts, and overcoming fragmented governance. Data gaps, limited sharing between Member States, and inadequate cross-border mechanisms hinder progress. Participants called for improved **data interoperability** through standardisation, common digital tools, and regional platforms to facilitate knowledge exchange, while stressing that authorisation and safeguards against data misuse are essential. It has been recommended that **baseline data** on fisheries, stocks, and habitats be systematically collected, established, and made accessible to all relevant parties, including Member States and developers. This ensures that planning decisions are evidence-based and that affected stakeholders are fully informed.

It has been recommended that **data sharing** should be framed within a broader early discussion at the sea-basin level, defining challenges to be addressed collectively. Project-specific data sharing should be prioritised, rather than indiscriminate access to all databases. The rationale for sharing specific types of data should be clearly justified to support collaborative planning and informed decision-making. Ongoing projects, such as REMAP, have been identified as examples working on this topic.

The use of **digital tools**, including **digital twins of the ocean** and **governance analytics platforms**, has been proposed to support a common vision and approach across regions. Implementing **robust authorization and control mechanisms** has been identified as essential to ensure trust and confidence in data sharing among stakeholders. It has been noted that data gaps exist for future planning, and in some cases, **artificial intelligence** could be developed to predict scenarios and support planning decisions.

It was stressed that **monitoring capacities** should be increased, particularly regarding climate change and offshore wind developments, which have uncertain environmental and ecological impacts. Investments were suggested in **real-time monitoring devices**, which could be deployed on water surfaces, offshore wind infrastructure, and potentially defense assets. The use of artificial intelligence was highlighted as a potential tool to predict fish movements, pollution trends, and other ecological changes.

It was also cautioned that funding should not be tied to rigid indicators or mandatory quantifications that could steer planning towards achieving predetermined European objectives, as this would undermine holistic maritime spatial planning.

The second cycle of MSP plans is confronting growing pressures: **biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, and competing demands for limited marine space**. Fisheries face particular challenges in engaging with multinational fleets and aligning with **offshore**

renewable energy development. The integration of MSP with the Common Fisheries Policy and other EU legislation, including the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, was seen as a priority to ensure coherent and ecosystem-based planning.

A **diversity of competencies** between national and local authorities has been identified as a key challenge. Each Member State has been given the discretion to design its own MSP framework and associated governance structures. Variations in public authority responsibilities and institutional arrangements have been recognised as factors that complicate cross-basin cooperation and the development of synergies.

The **capacity and willingness of local authorities** to participate in MSP processes have been highlighted as additional challenges. Effective engagement of local actors has been recognised as essential for addressing both local and basin-wide issues

Differences in legal frameworks, planning cycles, and administrative processes among Member States have been highlighted as key considerations for cross-border collaboration. In **Denmark**, for example, local governments hold no planning authority over the sea, which differs from the system in **Finland**, where MSP plans are developed by regions under the coordination of one Finnish region. These plans are subsequently submitted to the Member State for final decisions and validation. This bottom-up approach has been considered effective in balancing diverse interests, including environmental, economic, and traditional activities. In France, national strategies form the core framework for MSP design, with links to local activities established through specific processes. Existing regional governance structures have been identified as underutilised resources. For example, regional sea parliaments or regional assemblies for coastal areas have been established in **France** to coordinate stakeholder input and define territorial strategies. Other countries have been observed to implement the MSP Directive in a more uniform or centrally coordinated manner.

Flexibility in funding, streamlined administrative processes, and enhanced monitoring capacities were also identified as necessary improvements. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of leadership, political will, and independent champions of holistic approaches to ensure that MSP remains a cross-sectoral and future-oriented process rather than fragmented by competing interests.

The **involvement of stakeholders** has been identified as critical in avoiding ambiguous or subjective designations. Stakeholders can provide essential data and evidence to support decision-making. Stakeholders should be positioned as proactive contributors rather than as respondents to pre-determined plans, and government feedback on how input has been used should be systematically provided.

Finally, **engagement with non-EU states** was recognised as vital for effective basin-wide cooperation. It was suggested that any revised MSP Directive should explicitly emphasize the need for, and opportunities to, engage with non-member states, particularly Norway and the United Kingdom, due to their strategic importance in regional cooperation.

The study team will integrate contributions and prepare draft conclusions for discussion at the validation workshop in Limassol on 23 October 2025, with the final report due in December.