

**INTERREG VA IMPACT EVALUATION – FINAL EVALUATION  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY DOCUMENT**

**PRIORITY 2 – ENVIRONMENT**



**Special EU Programmes Body  
Comhlacht na gClár Speisialta AE  
Special EU Skemes Boadie**



**Cogent Management Consulting LLP**

**17<sup>th</sup> November 2022**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY DOCUMENT**  
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## List of Abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Definition  |
|--------------|---|
| ACT          | Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust                          |
| AFBI         | Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute                                       |
| ABCBC        | Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council                        |
| AGM          | Annual General Meeting  |
| ALS          | Acoustic Listening Station  |
| API          | Application Programme Interface   |
| AR           | Augmented Reality   |
| ASO          | Assistant Scientific Officer  |
| ASSI         | Areas of Specific Scientific Interest                                     |
| AUV          | Autonomous Underwater Vehicles  |
| AWQMS        | Automatic Water Quality Monitoring Station                                |
| AWS          | Alternative Water Supplies  |
| BC           | Butterfly Conservation  |
| BGS          | British Geological Survey   |
| BODC         | British Oceanographic Data Centre   |
| BOQ          | Bill of Quantities  |
| BWI          | BirdWatch Ireland   |
| BWQ          | Bathing Water Quality   |
| CABB         | Conservation Across-borders for Biodiversity                              |
| CAFRE        | College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise                         |
| CANN         | Collaborative Action for the Natura Network                               |
| CAP          | Conservation Action Plan  |
| CCGHT        | Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust                                   |
| CENIT        | Central NITrogen  |
| CEO          | Chief Executive Officer   |
| CIS          | Community Incentive Scheme  |
| Cogent       | Cogent Management Consulting LLP  |
| COMPASS      | Collaborative Oceanography and Monitoring for Protected Areas and Species |
| DAERA        | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs                  |
| DAFM         | Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine                                |
| DAP          | Drainage Area Plan  |
| DCC          | Donegal County Council  |
| DEMs         | Digital Elevation Models  |
| DI           | Department for Infrastructure   |
| DM-QMF       | Data Management Quality Management Framework                              |
| DWD          | Drinking Water Directive  |
| DWPAs        | Drinking Water Protected Areas  |
| EBR          | East Border Region Ltd.   |
| EC           | European Commission   |
| ECI          | Early Contractor Involvement  |
| EMS          | Electronic Monitoring System  |
| ENGOS        | European Non-Governmental Organisation                                    |
| EPA          | Environmental Protection Agency   |
| ESB          | Electricity Supply Board  |
| EU           | European Union  |
| FLC          | First Level Control   |
| FT           | Full Time   |
| FWMC         | Flow-Weighted Mean Concentrations   |
| GAW          | Global Atmosphere Watch   |
| GDPR         | General Data Protection Regulation  |
| GES          | Good Environmental Status   |
| GET          | Golden Eagle Trust  |
| GLAS         | Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme                                  |
| GMIT         | Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology                                       |
| GSI          | Geological Survey of Ireland  |
| GW           | Ground water  |
| HSO          | Higher Scientific Officer   |
| IE           | Intestinal Enterococci  |

| Abbreviation | Definition  |
|--------------|---|
| IFI          | Inland Fisheries Ireland                                  |
| INHT         | Islay Natural History Trust                               |
| IOC          | International Oceanographic Commission                    |
| IODE         | International Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange |
| IUCN         | International Union for Conservation of Nature            |
| IW           | Irish Water   |
| JNCC         | Joint Nature Conservation Committee                       |
| KNIB         | Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful                           |
| LA           | Loughs Agency   |
| LAWCO        | Local Authority Water and Communities Office              |
| LIS          | Land Incentive Scheme                                     |
| LoO          | Letter of Offer   |
| MarPAMM      | Marine Protected Areas Management and Monitoring          |
| MCC          | Monaghan County Council                                   |
| MF           | Marsh Fritillary  |
| MFTF         | Moors for the Future                                      |
| MI           | Marine Institute  |
| MLA          | Member of the Legislative Assembly                        |
| MM           | Montiaghs Moss  |
| MMP          | Marine Management Plans                                   |
| MoU          | Memorandum of Understanding                               |
| MPAs         | Marine Protected Areas                                    |
| MSFD         | Marine Strategy Framework Directive                       |
| MS           | Microsoft   |
| MSS          | Marine Scotland Science                                   |
| N2K          | Natura2000  |
| NGO          | Non-Governmental Organisation                             |
| NHA          | National Heritage Area                                    |
| NI           | Northern Ireland  |
| NIEA         | Northern Ireland Environment Agency                       |
| NIW          | Northern Ireland Water                                    |
| NMDDC        | Newry, Mourne & Down District Council                     |
| NPWS         | National Parks and Wildlife Service                       |
| OB           | Optimism Bias   |
| OECMs        | Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures          |
| OTN          | Ocean Tracking Network                                    |
| PE           | Population Equivalent                                     |
| PM           | Project Manager   |
| PMO          | Programme Management Office                               |
| PO           | Project Officer   |
| POM          | Programme of Measures                                     |
| PSDP         | Project Supervisor Design Process                         |
| QUB          | Queen's University Belfast                                |
| RBMPs        | River Basin Management Plans                              |
| R&D          | Research and Development                                  |
| RHAT         | River Hydromorphology Assessment Technique                |
| ROI          | Republic of Ireland                                       |
| RSPB         | Royal Society for the Protection of Birds                 |
| SACs         | Special Areas of Conservation                             |
| SAMS         | Scottish Association for Marine Science                   |
| SCAMP        | Sustainable Catchment Area Plan                           |
| SDM          | Species Distribution Modelling                            |
| SEUPB        | Special EU Programmes Body                                |
| SESE         | Social, Environmental and Scientific Education            |
| Sligo IT     | Institute of Technology Sligo                             |
| SNH          | Scottish Natural Heritage                                 |
| SPAs         | Special Protected Areas                                   |
| SRC          | Short Rotation Coppice                                    |
| SSCT         | Scoring Training Course                                   |
| SSSI         | Site of Special Scientific Interest                       |

| <b>Abbreviation</b> | <b>Definition</b>                           |
|---------------------|---|
| STFG                | South Tyrone Farmers Group                  |
| STMB                | Scientific and Technical Management Board   |
| StT                 | Source to Tap                               |
| SWAT                | Soil and Water Assessment Tool              |
| SWELL               | Shared Waters Enhancement and Loughs Agency |
| SWIM                | System for Bathing Water Quality Modelling  |
| TRT                 | The Rivers Trust                            |
| TWMC                | Time-Weighted Mean Concentrations           |
| UCC                 | University College Cork                     |
| UCD                 | University College Dublin                   |
| UoG                 | University of Glasgow                       |
| UU                  | Ulster University                           |
| UW                  | Ulster Wildlife                             |
| UKWIR               | UK Water Industry Research                  |
| UWWTD               | Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive        |
| VR                  | Virtual Reality                             |
| WEMP                | Water and Environment Management Plan       |
| WFD                 | Water Framework Directive                   |
| WMP                 | Wildfire Management Plans                   |
| WTWs                | Water Treatment Works                       |
| WWTWs               | Wastewater Treatment Works                  |

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Introduction

The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) has commissioned Cogent Management Consulting LLP (Cogent) to undertake a longitudinal Impact Evaluation of INTERREG VA Programme (for Northern Ireland, Ireland and Western Scotland) Investment Priority Axis 2 – Environment to include three reports due by end of 2018, end of 2020 and early 2022.

This report represents the final in the series of three impact evaluation reports and provides an overview of the key activities and achievements of each project that was funded under Priority Axis 2. It also includes a brief summary of the previous evaluation findings and is anticipated to contribute directly to SEUPB's programme summary of evaluation findings, to be submitted to the EU Commission.

It is noted that as a consequence of the outworkings of the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant delays caused in the implementation of projects, it should be noted that only one of the nine individual projects supported under Priority Axis 2 has been fully completed at the time of this report (see Table 1.5 for further details). However, for SEUPB's reporting requirements to the EU Commission, it was necessary to develop the final evaluation report at this time.

This section of the report provides an overview of the Interreg VA Programme, Priority Axis 2 – Environment, its aims, and objectives and the nine projects supported.

### 1.2 Background to the INTERREG VA Programme

Launched in January 2016, the INTERREG VA Programme was one of over sixty funding programmes across the EU that had been specifically designed to address problems that arise from the existence of borders. Borders can reduce economic development, hamper the efficient management of the environment, obstruct travel and hinder the delivery of essential health and social care services.

The INTERREG VA Programme, therefore, aimed to promote greater levels of economic, social and territorial cohesion to create a more prosperous and sustainable cross-border region.

The Programme had a total value of €283m, which was funded as follows:

- 85% (€240m) via the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which is within the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF).
- 15% (€43m) via match funding from non-EU sources e.g. national, regional, local government, a project's own resources or private contributions. Contributions in-kind may be used as match-funding.

NB: arrangements for match-funding may have varied between priority axes of the Programme.

As depicted overleaf, the INTERREG VA Programme had four key priority axes, which were selected to address identified weaknesses in the programme region's economy, as set out in the Cooperation Programme for the INTERREG VA Programme 2014-2020<sup>1</sup>. The Cooperation Programme states that the priority axes are congruent with 'Europe 2020 - A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth' and the priority areas identified for European Territorial Cooperation within the EU Commission Position Papers for the UK and Ireland.

<sup>1</sup> Formally adopted in February 2015.

Figure 1.1: INTERREG VA Programme Priority Axes<sup>2</sup>



The following subsections provide further details of Priority Axis 2: Environment.

### 1.3 Priority Axis 2: Environment – Rationale & Objectives

#### 1.3.1 Introduction

The key aim of Priority Axis 2: Environment, as reflected in the Cooperation Programme, was to “encourage investment to achieve a resource-efficient, sustainable economy through the implementation of green infrastructure and environmental risk management strategies”.<sup>3</sup>

The Cooperation Programme also identified that two key challenges in the programme region were anticipated to be tackled through this priority axis, namely the integrity of its:

1. Biodiversity; and
2. Water quality.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Citizens’ Summary: INTERREG VA Programme (2014-2020).

<sup>3</sup> The Cooperation Programme identified that the financial allocation for Priority Axis 2: Environment was anticipated to be €84.71m (€72m from ERDF and €12.71m via national match funding).

The **selected investment priorities** under Priority Axis 2: Environment and their **associated objectives** are as follows:

| Investment Priority   | Associated Objectives   |
|---|---|
| <b>2a</b> - Protecting and restoring biodiversity and soil and promoting ecosystem services, including through Natura 2000, and green infrastructure.   | <b>2.1</b> Recovery of Protected Habitats and Priority Species<br><b>2.2</b> Manage Marine Protected Areas and Species        |
| <b>2b</b> - Investing in the water sector to meet the requirements of the Union’s environmental acquis and to address needs, identified by the Member States, for investment that goes beyond those requirements. | <b>2.3</b> Improve Water Quality in Transitional Waters<br><b>2.4</b> Improve Freshwater Quality in Cross-Border River Basins |

### 1.3.2 Objective 2.1 – Recovery of Protected Habitats and Priority Species

#### The Need for Investment

The need to protect the environment was one of the key themes in the EU 2020 Strategy. It was also one of the needs and priorities identified in the socio-economic profile of the Region and the Position Papers from the European Commission for the United Kingdom and Ireland. It was anticipated that investment by the programme in this important area would be aimed at ensuring that designated habitat sites of cross-border importance and identified areas for priority species achieve or be approaching favourable conditions. These were anticipated to include nationally designated areas, areas of specific scientific interest (ASSI), sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs), natural heritage areas (NHAs) and European designated areas (special protection areas (SPAs) and special areas of conservation (SAC)). Other areas for breeding wader species and marsh fritillary that were not designated were also considered where they were regarded to be important to the ecological functioning of habitats within the designated site network. It was envisaged that in many cases, sites would be close to or straddle the border. However, it was anticipated that other sites further from the terrestrial border, including those in Western Scotland, might be included, where the site was of cross-border significance.

It was anticipated that increased levels of integration in the planning and management of the environment across the region would result in the development of best practice methodologies and increased levels of public sector efficiency. It was also anticipated to lead to increased awareness of, and responsiveness to, the potential threats of climate change to habitats and species.

#### Aim of the Investment Priority & Specific Objective

The aim of Objective 2.1 was, therefore, to “*promote cross-border cooperation to facilitate the recovery of selected protected habitats and priority species*”.

To achieve this objective, the expected logic was that it would be necessary to invest in increased cross-border integrated planning and management of habitats and species, using best-practice methodologies. It was anticipated that this investment would lead to results beyond the lifetime of the Programme in the form of increased compliance with EU directives in the area of environmental protection.

The three jurisdictions had prioritised seven protected habitats and seven priority species. These were selected from habitats and species common to all three jurisdictions and included habitats that had an important role in connectivity between protected areas and protected species that migrate across the eligible region. All habitats and species selected for investment were taken from this priority list:



|                           |   |   |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Protected Habitats</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Alkaline fens</li> <li>2. Blanket bog</li> <li>3. Active raised bog</li> <li>4. Marl Lakes</li> </ol>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Calcareous fens</li> <li>6. Petrifying springs with tufa formation</li> <li>7. Transition mires and quaking bogs</li> </ol> |
| <b>Priority Species</b>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hen Harrier</li> <li>2. Marsh Fritillary</li> <li>3. White-clawed crayfish</li> <li>4. Breeding waders (curlew, lapwing, redshank and snipe)</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Golden plover</li> <li>6. Corncrake</li> <li>7. Red grouse</li> </ol>   |

### 1.3.3 Objective 2.2 – Manage Marine Protected Areas and Species

#### The Need for Investment

The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) required EU Member States to co-operate in the management of regional seas to meet Good Environmental Status by 2020. It was considered that increased cooperation in this area could help mitigate climate change impact. The need for a coherent approach across the region was considered to be particularly relevant in this area because of the shared waters. Maintaining biodiversity is a requirement to achieve Good Environmental Status and an inherent part of the delivery of MSFD is to develop an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas across Europe. With the marine environment coming under increasing pressure from human activity, it is envisaged that such a network will ensure that biodiversity is safeguarded.

Studies illustrate that the marine environment shared by Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland is regarded as having one of the greatest renewable energy resources in Europe, with the capacity to support economically viable wind, wave and tidal energy projects. Within the confines of a network of marine protected areas, developments need to be managed and mitigated in a manner which will promote, sustain and conserve the marine environment. Investment by the programme in this area was aimed at increasing the capacity for integrated planning and management of marine resources and increasing the effectiveness of cross-border marine management strategies. It was anticipated that new cross-border cooperation strategies would be developed based on existing and newly acquired data. In turn, it was envisaged that this would lead to an increase in compliance with the EU MSFD.

It was further envisaged that investment by the programme would lead to an increased understanding of and ability to capitalise on the marine resources in the region. This was anticipated to include an increase in the availability of comprehensive mapping programmes; the development and growth of a regional “blue economy” based on the maritime resource and the alignment of regional activities with the EU Atlantic Strategy and Action Plan.

#### Aim of the Investment Priority & Specific Objective

The aim of Objective 2.2 was to “develop cross-border capacity for the monitoring and management of marine protected areas and species”.<sup>4</sup>

To achieve this objective, the expected logic was that it would be necessary to invest in cross-border data capture and mapping for the development of joint marine management and development activities. It was anticipated that the sustainability of this activity beyond the lifetime of the Programme would be evidenced by the creation of a regional marine innovation centre that would provide a focal point for these activities. It was envisaged that this would result in an increased contribution to the achievement of the targets associated with EU Marine strategies.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Output Indicator Guidance document for Objective 2.2 (January 2016) states that Marine Protected areas (MPAs) or conservation areas are locations which receive protection because of their recognised natural, ecological and/or cultural values. Special Protected Areas (SPAs) with marine components are defined as those sites with qualifying Birds Directive species or regularly occurring migratory species that are dependent on the marine environment for all or part of their lifecycle, where these species are found in association with intertidal or sub tidal habitats.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Cooperation programmes under the European territorial cooperation goal, (Interreg V-A) United Kingdom-Ireland (Ireland-Northern Ireland-Scotland).

### 1.3.4 Objective 2.3 – Improve Water Quality in Transitional Waters

#### The Need for Investment

Within the Programme area, Ireland and Northern Ireland share the following transitional water bodies:

1. Carlingford Lough - between County Louth in Ireland and County Down in Northern Ireland; and
2. Lough Foyle - between County Derry~Londonderry in Northern Ireland and County Donegal in Ireland.

According to the Programme's Citizens' Summary<sup>6</sup>, cross-border collaboration was essential to improve the water quality of these shared transitional waters and thus efficiently address the requirements of the Water Framework Directive<sup>7</sup>. In particular, this specific objective was anticipated to seek to achieve a good or high-water quality status for these two shared transitional waters. Modelling of cross-border waters can identify the potential sources of pollution and the optimum way to achieve and maintain good water quality status. Consequently, it was considered that such modelling would identify the most effective interventions and improvements required for the sewage network and wastewater treatment works that impact the shared transitional waters.

It was also anticipated that the Programme would facilitate the implementation of common approaches to the management of water resources and the sharing of best practices and technical expertise across the eligible region, drawing on the relative strengths of the three jurisdictions.

#### Aim of the Investment Priority & Specific Objective

The aim of Objective 2.3 was, therefore, to “*improve the water quality in shared transitional waters*”.

To achieve this objective, the expected logic was that it would be necessary to invest in cross-border solutions and the joint management of water bodies that straddle the border. It was anticipated that this would result in long-term impacts on the quality of water in the region beyond the lifetime of the Programme.

### 1.3.5 Objective 2.4 – Improve Freshwater Quality in Cross-Border River Basins

#### The Need for Investment

To improve water quality across the region, it was considered necessary to promote the shared management of shared water resources and to invest in cross-border solutions to achieve the targets within the EU Water Framework Directives. It was anticipated that investment by the programme would lead to an improvement in the baseline condition of water quality, physical structure, and habitat in several cross-border catchment areas. In turn, it was envisaged that this would contribute towards the achievement of targets relating to good water quality and ecological status of all water bodies (rivers, lakes, groundwater, transitional).

Importantly, it was considered that such improvements in water quality might mitigate the need for capital investment and contribute to reducing operating costs whilst also protecting and enhancing biodiversity.

It was further anticipated that the investment would provide for an increase in the level of cross-border integrated management of river catchment areas and the development of shared solutions to meet EU targets concerning water quality. It was considered that there were also opportunities to share best practice approaches across the region and that this would, in turn, lead to an increased number of water bodies with the higher classification of moderate, good or high quality and a decreased number of water

<sup>6</sup> Source: Citizens' Summary: INTERREG VA Programme (2014-2020).

<sup>7</sup> Which is an EU directive that commits EU member states to achieve good qualitative and quantitative status of all water bodies (including marine waters up to one nautical mile from shore) by 2015.

bodies classified as poor or bad quality, in line with the designations contained within EU Water Directives.

It was anticipated that interventions supported under this Objective would focus on the following:

- The river catchment activities would be limited to river catchments where the area is on both sides of the Northern Ireland / Ireland border.
- The location of the groundwater wells would be on both sides of the Northern Ireland / Ireland border to support monitoring and pollution of the river catchment activities.
- The sustainable catchment area management modelling and plan would be a cross-border plan focusing on a freshwater capture area, encompassing activities in areas exclusive to some of the border counties of Ireland and the adjacent border counties of Northern Ireland.
- Knowledge transfer and exchange of best practices within the three jurisdictions.

#### Aim of the Investment Priority & Specific Objective

The aim of Objective 2.4 was, therefore, to “*improve freshwater quality in cross-border river basins*”. Within the Programme area, Ireland and Northern Ireland share the following 11 cross-border river basins<sup>8</sup>:

| Table 1.1: Cross-Border River Basins |                       |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Blackwater River                  | 7. Finn Foyle River   |
| 2. Burnfoot River                    | 8. Flurry River       |
| 3. Castletown River                  | 9. Foyle Deelee River |
| 4. Derg River                        | 10. Lower Erne River  |
| 5. Fane River                        | 11. Upper Erne River  |
| 6. Finn Fermanagh River              |                       |

To achieve this objective, the expected logic was that it would be necessary to invest in cross-border solutions and the joint management of water bodies that straddle the border. It was anticipated that this investment would lead to an improvement in the baseline condition of water quality, physical structure, and habitat in several cross-border catchment areas.

#### 1.3.6 Summary of Specific Objectives, Result Indicators and Targets

Table 1.2 provides a summary of the Specific Objectives, Result Indicators and Targets for Priority Axis 2: Environment:

| Table 1.2: Specific Objectives, Result Indicators and Targets  |   |                        |                        |
|--|---|------------------------|------------------------|
| Specific Objective   | Result Indicator  | Baseline               | Target                 |
| 2.1 To promote cross-border cooperation to facilitate the recovery of selected protected habitats and priority species | The percentage of selected protected habitats in or approaching a favourable condition                  | 1%                     | 10%                    |
| 2.2 To develop cross-border capacity for the monitoring and management of marine protected species in the region       | Cross-border capacity for monitoring and management of marine protected areas and species               | A little collaboration | A lot of collaboration |
| 2.3 To improve the water quality in shared transitional waters   | The percentage of shared transitional waters in the region with good or high quality                    | 0%                     | 100%                   |
| 2.4 To improve freshwater quality in cross-border river basins   | The percentage of cross-border freshwater bodies in cross-border river basins with good or high quality | 32%                    | 65%                    |

<sup>8</sup> As outlined in the Call Documentation issued for Objective 2.4.

The Output Indicators associated with Axis 2: Environment and its Specific Objectives are summarised below:

| <b>Table 1.3: Anticipated Output Indicators</b>   |                               |               |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Output Indicator</b>   | <b>Measures by Number of:</b> | <b>Number</b> |
| Surface Area of Habitats supported to obtain a better conservation status   | Hectares                      | 4,500         |
| Conservation action plans   | Conservation action plans     | 25            |
| The network of buoys for regional seas  | Networks                      | 1             |
| Models developed to support the conservation of marine habitats and species                                       | Models                        | 5             |
| Marine Management Plans for designated protected areas  | Complete plans                | 6             |
| System for the prediction of bathing water quality and the installation of real-time signage                      | Systems                       | 1             |
| Additional population benefiting from improved wastewater treatment   | People                        | 10,000        |
| Sewage network and wastewater treatment projects completed to improve water quality in shared transitional waters | Projects                      | 2             |
| Cross-border drinking water Sustainable Catchment Area Management Plans   | Plans                         | 1             |
| Cross-border groundwater monitoring wells installed   | Wells                         | 50            |
| River water quality improvement projects  | Projects                      | 3             |

The INTERREG VA Citizens' Summary suggested that the outputs featured above might be achieved through the following **indicative actions/activities**:

| <b>Table 1.4: Indicative Actions<sup>9</sup></b>  |
|---|
| <p><b>Objective 2.1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of mapping of protected habitats and sites of cross-border relevance;</li> <li>• Development and implementation of conservation action plans for protected sites of cross-border relevance;</li> <li>• Tangible conservation actions for protected habitats and species;</li> <li>• Conservation management and protection activities to encourage sustainable natural regeneration of species populations;</li> <li>• Development and sharing of best practices and enhancement of skills in ecosystem management;</li> <li>• Development and use of databases to assist conservation actions;</li> <li>• Removal of invasive species;</li> <li>• Research into species and habitats, including the impact of climate change, which supports the actions within the Programme; and</li> <li>• Education and outreach activities.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Objective 2.2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development and implementation of cross-border management plans for marine protected areas and species;</li> <li>• Mapping of marine/seabed environment;</li> <li>• Creation of a network of marine protected areas;</li> <li>• Research and development in the marine environment (including the impact of climate change);</li> <li>• Marine skills initiatives;</li> <li>• The coordinated research programme of direct relevance to the management challenges of the eligible area;</li> <li>• Knowledge and data sharing; and</li> <li>• Prediction model development and signage for short-term pollution and real-time management of bathing water quality in coastal waters.</li> </ul>  |

<sup>9</sup> Source: Citizens' Summary: INTERREG VA Programme (2014-2020).

**Table 1.4: Indicative Actions<sup>9</sup>**

| Objective 2.3  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research and development in wastewater treatment technologies, including the use of sustainable technologies with direct relevance to the shared transitional waters;</li> <li>• Creation of demonstration sites in the catchment areas to illustrate best practice wastewater treatment methodologies; and</li> <li>• Sewerage network and wastewater treatment projects to protect and enhance the Water Framework Directive classification of the cross-border catchment areas.</li> </ul>   |
| Objective 2.4  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development and implementation of integrated river basin management plans and actions;</li> <li>• Development and implementation of a management plan and projects for designated drinking water protected areas so that Water Framework Directive water classifications can be maintained and improved;</li> <li>• Activities related to the improvement of river water quality;</li> <li>• Activities related to freshwater quality management research; and</li> <li>• Activities related to establishing groundwater monitoring wells.</li> </ul> |

#### 1.4 Overview of Projects and Partners

There were five calls for applications under Priority Axis 2: Environment. A two-stage process was then initiated by SEUPB’s Joint Secretariat to assess applications submitted under each of the calls.<sup>10</sup> Full details of the assessment process, including admissibility criteria, were outlined for applicants in the ‘Call Documentation’ and the ‘Guide for Applicants’.

In total, ten projects were approved by the IVA Programme Steering Committee, however the Lead Partner for one of the projects approved under Objective 2.2 subsequently withdrew its application, leaving nine projects to go forward. As illustrated below:

- Two projects were funded under Specific Objective 2.1;
- Four projects were funded under Specific Objective 2.2;
- 1 Project was funded under Specific Objective 2.3; and
- Two projects were funded under Specific Objective 2.4.

Details of the **nine projects** approved by the INTERREG VA Programme Steering Committee (which excludes the project that withdrew under Objective 2.2) are included in the table overleaf. As illustrated, the Lead Partners for each of the nine projects were from the statutory and voluntary sectors across Northern Ireland and Ireland, and included a range of project partners, with an interest in the environment.

<sup>10</sup> Stage one - short application form and admissibility checks. Stage two – submission of full business plan and associated appendices (prepared in line with SEUPB’s Business Plan Guidance).

Table 1.5: Projects Approved for Funding – Named Project Partners (source: Letters of Offer issued by the SEUPB)

| Project Ref          | Lead Partner  | Project Name  | Named Project Partners   |   |
|----------------------|---|---|--|---|
| <b>Objective 2.1</b> |   |   |  |   |
| 032                  | Newry, Mourne & Down District Council               | Collaborative Action for the Natural Network (CANN)                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monaghan County Council</li> <li>• Argyll &amp; The Isles Coast and Countryside Trust</li> <li>• East Border Region</li> <li>• Agri-food and Biosciences Institute</li> <li>• Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NatureScot</li> <li>• Ulster Wildlife</li> <li>• Ulster University</li> <li>• Institute of Technology Sligo, now known as Atlantic Technological University Sligo</li> <li>• Golden Eagle Trust</li> </ul> |
| 037                  | Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) NI | Cooperation Across-borders for Biodiversity (CABB)                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Birdwatch Ireland</li> <li>• Butterfly Conservation</li> <li>• NI Water</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Scotland</li> <li>• Moors for the Future</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Objective 2.2</b> |   |   |  |   |
| 034                  | Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)          | Collaborative Oceanography and Monitoring for Protected Areas and Species (COMPASS) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scottish Association for marine species</li> <li>• Marine Scotland Science</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inland Fisheries Ireland</li> <li>• Marine Institute</li> </ul>  |
| 038                  | University College Dublin (UCD)                     | System for Bathing Water Quality Monitoring (SWIM)                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute</li> </ul>   |
| 5059                 | Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)          | Marine Protected Areas Management and Monitoring (MarPAMM)                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NatureScot</li> <li>• Birdwatch Ireland</li> <li>• University College Cork</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marine Scotland</li> <li>• Scottish Association for Marine Science</li> <li>• Ulster University</li> </ul>   |
| 5060                 | Loughs Agency                                       | Sea Monitor 2   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marine Institute (MI)</li> <li>• University of Glasgow (UoG)</li> <li>• Queen's University, Belfast (QUB)</li> <li>• Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)</li> <li>• Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)</li> </ul>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University College, Cork (UCC)</li> <li>• Ocean Tracking Network, Dalhousie University (Canada)</li> <li>• The University of California, Davis (USA)</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Objective 2.3</b> |   |   |  |   |
| 005                  | Northern Ireland Water (NIW)                        | Shared Waters Enhancement and Loughs Legacy (SWELL)                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• East Border Region</li> <li>• Loughs Agency</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irish Water</li> <li>• Agri-food and Biosciences Institute</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Objective 2.4</b> |   |   |  |   |
| 029                  | Northern Ireland Water (NIW)                        | Source to Tap   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irish Water Ltd</li> <li>• Agri-food and Biosciences Institute</li> <li>• Land-Incentive Scheme – farmers (beneficiaries not partners)</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Rivers Trust</li> <li>• Ulster University</li> <li>• East Border Region Ltd</li> </ul>   |
| 027                  | Donegal County Council                              | CatchmentCARE   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agri-food and Biosciences Institute</li> <li>• Loughs Agency</li> <li>• Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inland Fisheries Ireland</li> <li>• University of Ulster</li> <li>• British Geological Survey</li> <li>• Geological Survey Ireland</li> </ul>  |

As reflected in Table 1.6, as a consequence, largely of the outworkings of the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions, each of the nine projects received extensions to their original anticipated end dates.<sup>11</sup>

| <b>Table 1.6: Summary of Projects Approved for Funding<sup>12</sup></b> |                     |                               |                                      |   |
|---|---------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Lead Partner</b>   | <b>Project Name</b> | <b>Operational start date</b> | <b>Original Anticipated end date</b> | <b>Latest (in July 2022) Revised Operational end date</b> |
| <b>Objective 2.1</b>  |                     |                               |                                      |   |
| Newry, Mourne & Down District Council (NMDDC)                           | CANN                | 01/01/2017                    | 31/12/2021                           | 31/12/2022  |
| RSPB NI   | CABB                | 01/01/2017                    | 31/12/2021                           | 30/09/2022  |
| <b>Objective 2.2</b>  |                     |                               |                                      |   |
| Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)                              | COMPASS             | 01/01/2017                    | 31/03/2022                           | 30/09/2022  |
| University College Dublin (UCD)   | SWIM                | 01/01/2017                    | 30/06/2022                           | 31/12/2020  |
| AFBI  | MarPAMM             | 01/01/2018                    | 31/03/2022                           | 30/09/2022  |
| Lough Agency  | SeaMonitor 2        | 25/07/2017                    | 31/03/2022                           | 31/03/2023  |
| <b>Objective 2.3</b>  |                     |                               |                                      |   |
| Northern Ireland Water (NIW)  | SWELL               | 18/11/2014                    | 31/12/2022 <sup>13</sup>             | 30/04/2023  |
| <b>Objective 2.4</b>  |                     |                               |                                      |   |
| NIW   | Source to Tap       | 01/10/2016                    | 31/03/2022                           | 30/09/2022  |
| Donegal County Council  | CatchmentCARE       | 01/10/2017                    | 31/10/2022                           | 30/06/2023  |

<sup>11</sup> The most recent amendment is noted here, with further detail of previous extensions detailed in the respective project sections.

<sup>12</sup> Source (unless otherwise stated): Letters of Offer issued by the SEUPB.

<sup>13</sup> The SWELL Project was disaggregated into two phases. The original LoO taking into account only Phase 1 had a completion date of 30/04/2018. Further to this SEUPB issued a second Letter of Offer (dated 21 January 2019), inclusive of Phases 1 and 2 with an end date of 31/12/2022.

The nine projects that were funded received original Letters of Offer awarding cumulative ERDF and Government Match funding of c. €85.5m towards total projects costs of €88.0m.

| Table 1.7: Summary of Projects Approved for Funding |               |                                 |                    |                   |                                 |  |                    |                   |                    |
|---|---------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|--|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Lead Partner  | Project Name  | Per Original LoOs <sup>14</sup> |                    |                   |                                 | Per Latest LoO (July 2022) / SEUPB's EMS <sup>15</sup> |                    |                   |                    |
|   |               | ERDF                            | Govt. Match        | Other             | Total                           | ERDF   | Govt. Match        | Other             | Total              |
| <b>Objective 2.1</b>                                |               |                                 |                    |                   |                                 |  |                    |                   |                    |
| NMDDC   | CANN          | €7,995,366                      | €1,234,948         | €175,999          | <b>€9,406,313<sup>16</sup></b>  | €7,982,379 <sup>17</sup>                               | €1,228,435         | €180,220          | <b>€9,391,034</b>  |
| RSPB NI   | CABB          | €4,195,586                      | €575,145           | €165,254          | <b>€4,935,985</b>               | €4,195,586   | €575,145           | €165,254          | <b>€4,935,985</b>  |
| <b>Subtotal</b>                                     |               | <b>€12,190,952</b>              | <b>€1,810,093</b>  | <b>€341,253</b>   | <b>€14,342,298</b>              | <b>€12,177,965</b>                                     | <b>€1,803,580</b>  | <b>€345,474</b>   | <b>€14,327,019</b> |
| <b>Objective 2.2</b>                                |               |                                 |                    |                   |                                 |  |                    |                   |                    |
| AFBI  | COMPASS       | €5,362,299                      | €658,883           | €1,705,259        | <b>€7,726,441</b>               | €5,362,299   | €658,883           | €1,705,259        | <b>€7,726,441</b>  |
| UCD   | SWIM          | €891,530                        | €157,377           | €59,451           | <b>€1,108,358</b>               | €1,120,378   | €197,774           | €74,923           | <b>€1,393,075</b>  |
| AFBI  | MarPAMM       | €5,385,015                      | €608,158           | €368,144          | <b>€6,361,317</b>               | €5,381,268   | €607,948           | €371,641          | <b>€6,360,857</b>  |
| Lough Agency  | SeaMonitor 2  | €4,014,271                      | €627,166           | €81,234           | <b>€4,722,671</b>               | €4,014,271   | €627,166           | €81,234           | <b>€4,722,671</b>  |
| <b>Subtotal</b>                                     |               | <b>€15,653,115</b>              | <b>€2,051,584</b>  | <b>€2,214,088</b> | <b>€19,918,787</b>              | <b>€15,878,216</b>                                     | <b>€2,091,771</b>  | <b>€2,233,057</b> | <b>€20,203,044</b> |
| <b>Objective 2.3</b>                                |               |                                 |                    |                   |                                 |  |                    |                   |                    |
| NIW   | SWELL         | €29,790,464                     | €5,257,141         | -                 | <b>€35,047,604</b>              | €29,790,464  | €5,257,141         | -                 | <b>€35,047,604</b> |
| <b>Subtotal</b>                                     |               | <b>€29,790,464</b>              | <b>€5,257,141</b>  | <b>-</b>          | <b>€35,047,604<sup>18</sup></b> | <b>€29,790,464</b>                                     | <b>€5,257,141</b>  | <b>-</b>          | <b>€35,047,604</b> |
| <b>Objective 2.4</b>                                |               |                                 |                    |                   |                                 |  |                    |                   |                    |
| NIW   | Source to Tap | €4,173,433                      | €736,488           | -                 | <b>€4,909,921</b>               | €4,173,433   | €736,488           | -                 | <b>€4,909,921</b>  |
| Donegal County Council                              | CatchmentCARE | €11,723,570                     | €2,068,865         | -                 | <b>€13,792,436</b>              | €11,723,570  | €2,068,865         | -                 | <b>€13,792,436</b> |
| <b>Subtotal</b>                                     |               | <b>€15,897,003</b>              | <b>€2,805,353</b>  | <b>-</b>          | <b>€18,702,357</b>              | <b>€15,897,003</b>                                     | <b>€2,805,353</b>  | <b>-</b>          | <b>€18,702,357</b> |
| <b>Total</b>  |               | <b>€73,531,534</b>              | <b>€11,924,171</b> | <b>€2,555,341</b> | <b>€88,011,046</b>              | <b>€73,743,648</b>                                     | <b>€11,957,845</b> | <b>€2,578,531</b> | <b>€88,280,024</b> |

As illustrated above, as a consequence of project amendments, which led to the cumulative ERDF and Government Match grant awarded to projects increasing from c€85.5m to €85.7m. The rationale for changes in individual project budgets is discussed within the respective sections of this report that relate to individual projects (i.e. Sections 3 to 11).

<sup>14</sup> Source: Letters of Offer issued by the SEUPB.

<sup>15</sup> Total project costs have been detailed to reflect the latest LoO available to the Evaluation Team, however at the time of writing for some projects the latest LoO available on SEUPB's EMS had been superseded by costs outlined in project cost tables on the EMS Website. Therefore, in instances where the LoO had been superseded the latest project costs and funding split have been detailed using the most up to date materials available on EMS.

<sup>16</sup> The CANN project originally received a Letter of Offer (dated 20th June 2017) outlining total project costs of €8,349,688. However, this was later extended (LoO dated 25th October 2018) after the INTERREG VA Steering Committee approved (on 24th July 2018) an additional €1,056,625 following a secondary application for the inclusion of Cuilcagh Mountain as an additional site within the CANN project. The revised total anticipated cost at this point was €9,406,313.

<sup>17</sup> The Evaluation Team was unable to ascertain the funding split for the CANN project from SEUPB's EMS therefore the funding split was provided by SEUPB in an email received 26/08/2022.

<sup>18</sup> NB The SWELL project received an original Letter of Offer (dated 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017) offering a grant of up to a maximum of €3,282,787 (ERDF + Government Match Funding) to be expended and claimed by 30<sup>th</sup> April 2018 (The period of assistance was for 42 months starting on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2014 and completing on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2018). This Letter of Offer was later superseded by a second letter of offer that incorporated both Phase I and Phase II of the project.



## 1.5 Anticipated Project Contribution to Output Indicators

The contribution that each of the nine projects was anticipated to make to the Priority's Output Indicators is detailed below:

| <b>Table 1.8: Projects Approved for Funding – Stated Contributions to Output Indicators (source: Letters of Offer issued by the SEUPB)</b> |                                  |             |                 |             |                |                     |              |                      |                       |               |
|--|----------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|----------------|---------------------|--------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| <b>Output Indicator</b>  | <b>Objective and Project Ref</b> |             |                 |             |                |                     |              |                      |                       | <b>Total</b>  |
|  | <b>2.1</b>                       |             | <b>2.2</b>      |             |                |                     | <b>2.3</b>   | <b>2.4</b>           |                       |               |
|  | <b>CANN</b>                      | <b>CABB</b> | <b>COMP ASS</b> | <b>SWIM</b> | <b>MarPAMM</b> | <b>SeaMonitor 2</b> | <b>SWELL</b> | <b>Source to Tap</b> | <b>CatchmentCAR E</b> |               |
| 4,500 ha of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status  | 3,650                            | 2,228       |                 |             |                |                     |              |                      |                       | <b>5,878</b>  |
| 25 conservation action plans   | 27                               | 8           |                 |             |                |                     |              |                      |                       | <b>35</b>     |
| 1 network of buoys for regional seas, including telemetry and oceanographic monitoring (e.g. for seals, cetaceans and salmonids)           |                                  |             | 1               | -           | -              | -                   |              |                      |                       | <b>1</b>      |
| 5 models developed to support the conservation of marine habitats and species  |                                  |             | 3               | -           | 4              | 5                   |              |                      |                       | <b>12</b>     |
| 6 complete marine management plans for designated protected areas  |                                  |             | -               | -           | 6              | 3                   |              |                      |                       | <b>9</b>      |
| 1 system for the prediction of bathing water quality and the installation of real-time signage   |                                  |             | -               | 1           | -              | -                   |              |                      |                       | <b>1</b>      |
| 10,000 additional people benefiting from improved wastewater treatment   |                                  |             |                 |             |                |                     | 10,000       |                      |                       | <b>10,000</b> |
| 2 sewage network and wastewater treatment projects completed to improve water quality in shared transitional waters                        |                                  |             |                 |             |                |                     | 2            |                      |                       | <b>2</b>      |
| 3 river water quality improvement projects completed   |                                  |             |                 |             |                |                     |              | -                    | 3                     | <b>3</b>      |
| 50 cross-border groundwater monitoring wells installed   |                                  |             |                 |             |                |                     |              | -                    | 50                    | <b>50</b>     |
| 1 cross-border drinking water Sustainable Catchment Area Management Plan   |                                  |             |                 |             |                |                     |              | 1                    | -                     | <b>1</b>      |

## 1.6 The Evaluation – SEUPB’s Requirements & Methodology

To fulfil the requirement of Article 114(1) of the Common Provisions Regulation (EU No: 1303/2013), SEUPB’s Managing Authority has submitted to the Commission an Evaluation Plan for the INTERREG VA Programme<sup>19</sup>. The Evaluation Plan has been put in place to facilitate learning and maximise the proposed investments of the Programme<sup>20</sup>. The Plan outlines two types of evaluations:

1. **Implementation Evaluations** which will assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation mechanism established for the programme (these will not form any part of this assignment); and
2. **Impact Evaluations** will be carried out on each priority axis to test the intervention logic of that priority axis and form a view of the effectiveness and impact of the investment.

In relation to the Impact Evaluations, the Plan states that the evaluations will assess achievements as regards effectiveness (the attainment of the specific objectives set and of the intended results), efficiency (the relationship between the funding disbursed and the results achieved) and impact (the contribution of the programme to the end-objectives of the EU Cohesion Policy).

SEUPB has commissioned Cogent to undertake a longitudinal Impact Evaluation of Priority Axis 2 – Environment to include 3 reports due by end of 2018, end of 2020 and early 2022.

The overall focus of the evaluation is to assess (at three stages of implementation), the impact of the interventions within the ‘Environment’ Priority Axis. As a full implementation evaluation is being undertaken across INTERREG VA concurrently with the Impact Evaluation, **the Impact Evaluation does not seek to assess the implementation of projects nor how the Programme is operating. Rather than addressing financial and operational issues**, the purpose of the impact evaluation is learning, through an exploration of the contribution of the Programme to the movement of the Result Indicator, to inform the remainder of the INTERREG VA Programme and potential future programming periods.

As such, the Impact Evaluation Team is required to address the following:

- To what extent have the Specific Objectives been achieved?
- To what extent have the targets for the Result Indicators been achieved?
- Comment on the effectiveness and added value of cross-border collaboration in relation to the specific objectives?
- What external factors have impacted, positively or negatively, on the achievement of the Specific Objective?
- What new ways of working/partnerships/relationships have been created as a result of activities carried out within the priority axis?
- Identify key areas of best practice and learning;
- What level of mainstreaming has occurred for cross-border delivery of environmental work?
- Are there barriers to cross-border cooperation that the priority axis is not addressing?

<sup>19</sup> The Evaluation Steering Group (ESG), a sub-group of the Programme Monitoring Committees for the PEACE IV and INTERREG VA Programmes, was established to ensure the effective implementation of the Evaluation Plan for each Programme.

<sup>20</sup> Article 56(3) of Regulation (EC) No: 1303/2013 requires that an evaluation should assess how the support provided has contributed to the achievement of the objectives of the programme. Article 54 requires the impact evaluation to comment on the contribution of the priority axis to the EU 2020 objectives. In addition, Article 7 of the above regulation requires that Member States ensure equality between men and women and the integration of a gender perspective are taken into account and promoted throughout the preparation and implementation of the programmes, including in the monitoring and evaluation of the programmes. Article 7 also specifies that the programme authorities must take appropriate steps to prevent any discrimination on any of the specified grounds. Article 8 requires that the objectives of the funds shall be pursued in line with the principle of sustainable development and with the European Union’s promotion of the aim of preserving, protecting and improving the quality of the environment taking into account the polluter pays principle.

- What is the contribution of the priority axis to:
  - EU 2020 objectives;
  - The Atlantic Strategy; and
  - The horizontal principles of equality and sustainable development?

### 1.6.1 Methodology

Across the three distinct cycles of research, the Evaluation Team employed the following methodology:

- Consulted with SEUPB personnel both to identify report-specific requirements and to identify any project-specific issues encountered or developments of note;
- Extensive desk research activities that encompassed detailed reviews of materials such as:
- INTERREG VA policy and operational documents, such as the Cooperation Programme;
- Policy and strategy documents of specific relevance to individual projects and/or the eligible region;
- Project applications and supporting materials;
- Letters of Offers and subsequent amendments (where relevant);
- Analysis of all monitoring data available on the progress of projects supports including both activities undertaken and their financial expenditure against budget;
- Extensive engagement with the nine individual projects to assess project against targets and key achievements.

## 2. THE POSITION PRIOR TO THE FINAL REPORT

### 2.1 Introduction

As reflected in Section 1, the specification for the evaluation requested that this final report provide a brief summary of the findings featured in the previous evaluation reports. At a high-level, the first two reports considered the following:

1. The first report considered the mobilisation of the nine projects and their early progress towards achieving their output indicators. This early activity also naturally led to a detailed consideration of the intervention logic associated with the priority axis;
2. Given the considerable upheaval caused to many aspects of organisations' operations and people's lives, the second report placed a particular emphasis on the impact of the pandemic on projects, emerging risks and barriers to the successful completion of projects, and the identification of methods by which such risks or barriers could be minimised.

This section provides a summary of the key findings that featured in those reports.

### 2.2 The Mobilisation of Projects

At the time of the first report, each of the nine projects were, for the most part, at early stages in their rollout, and whilst some had encountered some operational issues, none reported any issue pertaining to their mobilisation that they considered, at that time, to be significant enough to ultimately affect the successful delivery of their project. At that time, the projects reported that good progress had been made, for example, in the creation of own internal (within the partnerships) management structures and the recruitment of key project personnel, but also importantly that substantive progress had been made with important external stakeholders, such as landowners and local communities. Across each of the projects, fieldwork, such as site surveys had also begun.

However, during consultation with the project partnerships, the uncertainty associated with the UK's pending withdrawal from the EU ('Brexit') was highlighted as an external factor that had (at that time – late 2018) the potential to impact on both project activity and the achievement of the Specific Objectives. It was noted by several of the project partnerships that the nature and extent of any future arrangements between the EU and the UK was not clear (at that time) and consequently they were of the view that there was a risk that future environmental legislation across Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland could diverge post 'Brexit', with different regulatory regimes and standards applying across the UK (Scotland and Northern Ireland) and the EU (Ireland). It was suggested that this had the potential to impact on the relationship between the project partners (and in turn, project delivery), as each would be required to adhere to the relevant legislation in their respective jurisdiction.

At that time, several of the project partnerships noted that the project monitoring requirements required them to report upon the progress that their project had made to the respective result indicator for their Specific Objective area, but they were unclear as to how they were meant to measure progress in practice, and to the extent to which SEUPB required their project to contribute to/achieve the result indicator.

Based on its review of the output and result indicators/targets established for the Investment Priority, the Evaluation Team was of the view that greater focus should have been placed on ensuring that all indicators/targets were Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound. For example:

- In relation to the Results Indicator associated with Objective 2.2, it was anticipated that the four projects (COMPASS, SWIM, MarPAMM and Sea Monitor 2) would enhance cross-border capacity for monitoring and management of marine protected areas and species by stimulating levels collaboration. However, it was unclear what constitutes either the baseline ('a little') or the target ('a lot of') levels of collaboration or how any change would ultimately be measured;

- In relation to the Result and Outputs Indicators associated with Objective 2.3, the SWELL project promoters noted that the result indicator anticipated that the percentage of shared transitional waters in the region with good or high quality would increase from a baseline of 0% to 100%, whilst the output indicator target envisaged that the SWELL project would contribute to (inter alia) 10,000 people benefiting from improved wastewater treatment. However, the SWELL project partnership noted that whilst the project intended to deliver a programme of measures to improve water quality and thus contribute towards the achievement of “good status” of the receiving waters:
  - The project could not guarantee that any improvement would be made to WFD status by 2023. They noted that there were several external reasons, beyond the control of the water companies, as to why this was the case, including diffuse pollution, industrial discharges, changes in catchment practices e.g. Rural Development Programmes, the Nitrates Directive etc. Based on these points, the project partnership and the Evaluation Team were of the view that greater attention could have been given to ensuring the result indicator target was more achievable (as a direct result of project activity) and realistic;
  - The results indicator target was not achievable for the SWELL project in isolation given the level of funding and external factors that also had the potential to impact upon achievement.

The points raised by the project partnerships were discussed with SEUPB and NISRA who advised that the approach adopted in setting specific the development of the Result Indicators was in line with guidance issued by the EU during March 2014 concerning monitoring and evaluation during the programme period 2014-2020.<sup>21</sup> The guidance document outlined the following advice:

- The intended *result* is the specific dimension of well-being and progress for people that motivates policy action, i.e. what is intended to be changed, with the contribution of the interventions designed.
- Once a result has been chosen it must be represented by appropriate measures. This can be done by identifying one or more result indicators. *Result indicators* are variables that provide information on some specific aspects of results that lend themselves to be measured.
- Different factors can drive the intended result towards or away from the desired change.
- *Outputs* are the direct products of programmes; they are intended to contribute to results;
- The values of result indicators, both for baselines and at later points in time, in some cases can be obtained from national or regional statistics. In other cases, it might be necessary to carry out surveys or to use administrative data, such as registry of enterprises or unemployment benefit recipient data.
- In relation to evaluation, the guidance notes that changes in the result indicator are due to the actions co-financed by the public intervention, for example by the Funds, as well as *other factors*. In other words, the difference between the situation before and after the public intervention does *not* equal the effect of public intervention:

**Change in result indicator = contribution of intervention + contribution of other factors**

As such, SEUPB and NISRA advised that the result indicators were not anticipated to measure the direct impacts of the projects supported and instead they were anticipated to measure changes in the characteristics of a given area due to programme interventions and / or other factors (i.e. external to the Interreg VA programme), and provided the following commentary concerning individual result indicators:

<sup>21</sup> Programming Period 2014-2020, Guidance Document on Monitoring and Evaluation of European Cohesion Policy, European Regional Development Fund (March 2014)

**Table 2.1 NISRA's Commentary on Result Indicators and Targets**

| Specific Objective   | Result Indicator   | NISRA Commentary   |
|--|--|--|
| 2.1 To promote cross-border cooperation to facilitate the recovery of selected protected habitats and priority species | The percentage of selected protected habitats in or approaching a favourable condition from a baseline of 1% to a target of 10%  | <p>The 2023 target of 10% was set on the following basis</p> <p>The anticipated recovery of habitat of an additional 4500 ha would increase the 2014 value of 1%, by approximately 4.5%, to 5.5% by 2023.</p> <p>It was also envisaged that mapping selected, protected sites, would contribute a further 4.5% towards the 2023 target.</p> <p>As the result indicator was utilised in the calls for applications and during project assessment. It was considered that proposing this baseline and target was the correct approach to direct the investment to the areas of greatest need and to optimise its impact.</p> |
| 2.2 To develop cross-border capacity for the monitoring and management of marine protected species in the region       | Cross-border capacity for monitoring and management of marine protected areas and species from a baseline of 'a little collaboration' to a target of 'a lot of collaboration'. | NISRA advises that it was recognised at the outset that the measurement of this result indicator might be considered somewhat subjective and difficult to measure in practice, but notes that no other suitable baseline indicator was available (or would have been available within the timeframes) at the time the INTERREG Result Indicators needed to be agreed for the Cooperation Framework document.   |
| 2.3 To improve the water quality in shared transitional waters   | The percentage of shared transitional waters in the region with good or high quality from a baseline of 0% to a target of 100%   | The 2023 target of 100% was set in agreement with Northern Ireland Environment Agency. NISRA noted that given that the investment was anticipated to contribute to a significant improvement in the elements of water quality it was agreed that the appropriate 2023 target for both transitional water bodies should be set at 'Good', albeit it was recognised that this may not be achieved due to the 'one out, all out' rule.  |
| 2.4 To improve freshwater quality in cross-border river basins   | The percentage of cross-border freshwater bodies in cross-border river basins with good or high quality from a baseline of 32% to a target of 65%                              | The 2023 target of 65% was set in agreement with Northern Ireland Environment Agency and is in line with the Water Framework Directive River Basin Management Plans. This result indicator followed the Water Framework Directives' one-out-all-out principle, where the overall status of the water body would be determined by the lowest status from any of the 40 standards that are assessed.   |

### 2.3 The Impact of the Pandemic on Projects (in December 2020)

Given the considerable upheaval caused to many aspects of organisations' operations and people's lives, the second report placed a particular emphasis on the impact of the pandemic on projects, emerging risks and barriers to the successful completion of projects, and the identification of methods by which such risks or barriers could be minimised.

The key findings from the Evaluation Team's consultation with project partners at the time (December 2020) of the second report included:

- 5 of the 9 projects considered that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown and disruption to normal working practices had created a risk that their project would not fully achieve its aims and objectives.
- 7 of the 9 projects had made some adaptations to their project as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- 4 of the 9 projects considered that their project would likely require an extension to its originally anticipated timescales to complete successfully;
- 1 of the 9 projects considered that they would likely not be able to spend their full budget allocation.

It should be noted that the Evaluation Team spoke with the projects at a time (end of August/start of September) when COVID-19 restrictions had been eased/lifted to some extent and projects may have been more optimistic about the project's ability to achieve its aims and objectives within the original timeframe. However, at the time of that the second report was being drafted (late December 2020) further restrictions were being implemented in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which created further risk to cross-border collaboration activities.

Given the uncertainty, the Evaluation Team recommended that SEUPB continued (as it had been doing throughout the pandemic) to regularly monitor the activity undertaken and progress made by each project. In particular, the Evaluation Team noted that it would be important to engage with projects to discuss potential changes to project activities, timelines or budgets.

It is understood that SEUPB's Joint Secretariat subsequently asked each of the projects to formally report back in early 2021 as to any further project amendments that might be required as a consequence of the pandemic.

The remainder of this report relates to the position of projects at the time of consultation concerning the development of this final evaluation report i.e. the period April to June 2022.

### 3. SUMMARY POSITION OF THE PROJECTS (AT TIME OF REPORT)

#### 3.1 Project Expenditure to Date

Table 3.1 provides a summary of the total estimated expenditure and the proportion of ‘project time’ that has passed in July 2022.

| <b>Table 3.1: Project Costs – Anticipated and Estimated Actual July 2022<sup>22</sup></b> |                              |   |                          |  |  |
|---|------------------------------|---|--------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Project</b>  | <b>Anticipated Total (€)</b> | <b>Total Estimated Expenditure in July 2022 (€)</b> | <b>% of total budget</b> | <b>Proportion of Timescale Passed at July 2022</b> |  |
| <b>Object 2.1</b>   |                              |   |                          |  |  |
| CANN  | 9,391,034                    | 7,971,255   | 85%                      | 92%  |  |
| CABB  | 4,935,984                    | 4,371,927   | 89%                      | 94%  |  |
| <b>Sub-total</b>  | <b>14,327,019</b>            | <b>12,343,182</b>                                   | <b>86%</b>               | <b>-</b>   |  |
| <b>Objective 2.2</b>  |                              |   |                          |  |  |
| COMPASS   | 7,726,441                    | 6,198,880   | 80%                      | 94%  |  |
| SWIM  | 1,393,075                    | 1,354,517   | 97%                      | 100%   |  |
| MarPAMM   | 6,360,857                    | 5,213,149   | 82%                      | 95%  |  |
| SeaMonitor 2  | 4,722,672                    | 3,876,815   | 82%                      | 87%  |  |
| <b>Sub-total</b>  | <b>20,203,045</b>            | <b>16,643,361</b>                                   | <b>82%</b>               | <b>-</b>   |  |
| <b>Objective 2.3</b>  |                              |   |                          |  |  |
| SWELL   | 35,047,604                   | 31,774,240  | 91%                      | 90%  |  |
| <b>Objective 2.4</b>  |                              |   |                          |  |  |
| Source to Tap   | 4,909,921                    | 4,666,547   | 95%                      | 96%  |  |
| CatchmentCARE   | 13,792,436                   | 8,562,928   | 62%                      | 83%  |  |
| <b>Sub-total</b>  | <b>18,702,357</b>            | <b>13,229,475</b>                                   | <b>71%</b>               | <b>-</b>   |  |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>88,280,024</b>            | <b>73,990,258</b>                                   | <b>84%</b>               | <b>-</b>   |  |

Key points to note in relation to expenditure (at July 2022) under INTERREG VA Programme Investment Priority 2: Environment include:

- At an overall Axis level, the nine projects have incurred more than four-fifths (84%) of their total budget.
- Except for the CatchmentCARE project, each of the seven remaining projects that have yet to complete have advised the Evaluation Team that they expect to spend most, if not all, of their project budget by the time the project has been completed;
- Discussion with the CatchmentCARE project partnership in March/April 2022 indicates that there is potential for underspend, but the project intends to explore with SEUPB the potential for a further modification in the project’s activities that might allow them to avail of the potential balance in the project’s budget.

<sup>22</sup> Source: SEUPB’s EMS 13<sup>th</sup> July 2022



### 3.2 The Extent to which the Priority Axis Output & Result Indicators have been achieved

The table below summarises the extent to which each of the nine projects has achieved its project outputs as of March/April 2022:

| <b>Table 3.2: Extent to which Approved Outputs have been achieved (by Project)</b>   |  |                       |   |
|--|--|-----------------------|---|
| <b>Name of Output (by Project)</b>   | <b>Programme Output Indicator Target</b> | <b>Project Target</b> | <b>Status (as of March/April 2022)<sup>23</sup></b> |
| <b>CANN</b>  |  |                       |   |
| Nature and biodiversity Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status (hectares)                     | 4,500ha                                  | 3,650ha               | 2,042ha   |
| Conservation Action Plans  | 25                                       | 27                    | 24  |
| <b>CABB</b>  |  |                       |   |
| Nature and biodiversity Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status (hectares)                     | 4,500ha                                  | 2,228ha               | 3,006ha   |
| Conservation Action Plans  | 25                                       | 8                     | 8 <sup>24</sup>                                     |
| <b>COMPASS</b>   |  |                       |   |
| A network of buoys for regional seas, including telemetry and oceanographic monitoring (e.g. for seals, cetaceans and salmonids) | 1  | 1                     | 1   |
| Models developed to support the conversation of habitats and species   | 5  | 3                     | 3   |
| <b>SWIM</b>  |  |                       |   |
| System for the prediction of bathing water quality and install real-time signage   | 1  | 1                     | 1   |
| <b>MarPAMM</b>   |  |                       |   |
| Models developed to support the conversation of habitats and species   | 5  | 4                     | 3   |
| Marine management plans for designated protected areas complete  | 6  | 6                     | 0   |
| <b>SeaMonitor 2</b>  |  |                       |   |
| Models developed to support the conversation of habitats and species   | 5  | 5                     | 0   |
| Marine management plans for designated protected areas complete  | 6  | 3                     | 0   |
| <b>SWELL</b>   |  |                       |   |
| Additional population benefit from improved wastewater treatment   | 10,000                                   | 10,000                | >10,000   |
| 2 Sewage network and wastewater treatment projects completed to improve water quality in shared transitional waters              | 2  | 2                     | 1   |
| <b>StT</b>   |  |                       |   |
| Cross-border drinking water 'Sustainable Catchment Area Management Plan' research and pilot project                              | 1  | 1                     | 0   |
| <b>CatchmentCARE</b>   |  |                       |   |
| Develop and implement cross-border groundwater monitoring wells  | 50                                       | 50                    | 0   |
| Establish 3 river water quality improvement projects   | 3  | 3                     | 0   |

<sup>23</sup> Source: Consultation with project leads in March/April 2022

<sup>24</sup> Albeit the project lead indicated that whilst NIEA/NPWS/Nature Scot were happy with the CAPs the project was awaiting on the SEUPB to sign off.

The following is noted:

- Whilst it has not yet fully achieved either of its targets, the CANN project anticipates that the targets will be achieved by the project's revised end date of December 2022;
- The CABB project considers that it has fully achieved both of its targets, albeit it was awaiting sign-off by SEUPB in April 2022;
- The SWIM project considers that it has fully achieved its target, albeit discussion with SEUPB at the time of writing indicates that further evidence and action are required regarding the signage network and model's future use;
- The COMPASS project considers that it has fully achieved both of its targets;
- Whilst it has not yet fully achieved either of its targets, the MarPAMM project anticipates that the targets will be achieved by the project's revised end date of September 2022;
- Similarly, the SeaMonitor 2 project anticipates that its two targets will be achieved by the project's revised end date of March 2023;
- The SWELL project is confident that it will achieve its one outstanding target by its revised end date of April 2023;
- The Source to Tap project advises that it has agreed with SEUPB that its proposed SCAMP will be in the form of a website and that this will be delivered by the project's revised end date of September 2022;
- The CatchmentCARE is confident that it will deliver its targets by the project's revised end date of June 2023.

Whilst recognising that each project is confident that all the Output Indicator Targets will be achieved by their stipulated end date, the Evaluation Team considers that there continues to be an element of risk associated with the full achievement and recommends that SEUPB continues to monitor the activities and outputs until each project's respective end date.

Unfortunately, whilst each of the nine projects is confident that the activities implemented have contributed positively to the achievement of Priority Axis 2: Environment's Specific Objectives, as reflected in Section 2, the projects have had difficulty determining the extent to which their projects have contributed to the respective Result Indicators and Targets. The rationale for this includes:

- The result indicators have too many influencing factors affecting their achievement, and consequently, it is difficult for a single project, in isolation, to determine whether it has measurably influenced performance on the metric;
- The method by which the result indicator was intended to be measured not being clear to the project.

As reflected in Section 2, discussion with SEUPB and NISRA indicates that whilst it was anticipated that the nine projects would contribute to the achievement of the four result indicators, it was not anticipated that the projects, in isolation, would be responsible for achieving the targets established. That is, the result indicators were not anticipated to measure the direct impacts of the projects supported and instead they were anticipated to measure changes in the characteristics of a given area due to programme interventions and / or other factors (i.e. external to the Interreg VA programme).

In addition, SEUPB has had exploratory discussions with the departments on the 'adjusted means' of measuring the success of the projects to ensure the project work can be correctly verified as complete. Whilst the adjusted means of measuring is not yet finalised (at November 2022), it is suggested that both the projects and the departments will be required to sign the project work off as complete.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Introduction

This report has considered the effectiveness and impact of the investment made under INTERREG VA Programme Investment Priority Axis 2 – Environment. This section of the report considers key conclusions and recommendations arising from the review of each of the nine projects supported.

It should be noted that this report represents the final in the series of three impact evaluation reports. As a consequence of the outworkings of the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant delays caused in the implementation of projects, it should be noted that only one of the nine individual projects supported under Priority Axis 2 has been fully completed at the time of this report (July 2022). However, for SEUPB’s reporting requirements to the EU Commission, it was necessary to develop the final evaluation report at this time.

### 4.2 Conclusions

#### 4.2.1 Overarching Conclusion on Activity Supported

Launched in January 2016, the INTERREG VA Programme was one of over sixty funding programmes across the EU that had been specifically designed to address problems that arise from the existence of borders. Borders can reduce economic development, hamper the efficient management of the environment, obstruct travel and hinder the delivery of essential health and social care services. The INTERREG VA Programme, therefore, aimed to promote greater levels of economic, social and territorial cohesion to create a more prosperous and sustainable cross-border region.

The INTERREG VA Programme had four key priority axes, which were selected to address identified weaknesses in the programme region’s economy, as set out in the Cooperation Programme for the INTERREG VA Programme 2014-2020. One of those was Priority Axis 2: Environment, which aimed to “*encourage investment to achieve a resource-efficient, sustainable economy through the implementation of green infrastructure and environmental risk management strategies*”.

It was anticipated that this priority axis would tackle two key challenges that were being experienced in the programme region, namely the integrity of its:

1. Biodiversity; and
2. Water quality.

The selected investment priorities under Priority Axis 2: Environment and their associated objectives were as follows:

| Investment Priority   | Associated Objectives  |
|---|--|
| <b>2a</b> - Protecting and restoring biodiversity and soil and promoting ecosystem services, including through Natura 2000, and green infrastructure.   | <b>2.1</b> Recovery of Protected Habitats and Priority Species     |
|   | <b>2.2</b> Manage Marine Protected Areas and Species               |
| <b>2b</b> - Investing in the water sector to meet the requirements of the Union’s environmental acquis and to address needs, identified by the Member States, for investment that goes beyond those requirements. | <b>2.3</b> Improve Water Quality in Transitional Waters            |
|   | <b>2.4</b> Improve Freshwater Quality in Cross-Border River Basins |

Ultimately, nine projects (with total costs of c€88.0m) were supported under Priority Axis 2: Environment, as summarised below:

- Two projects were funded under Specific Objective 2.1, with total costs of c€14.3m;
- Four projects were funded under Specific Objective 2.2, with total costs of c€20.2m;
- One project was funded under Specific Objective 2.3, with total costs of c€35.0m; and
- Two projects were funded under Specific Objective 2.4, with total costs of c€18.7m.

Across the nine project, Lead Partners were drawn from the statutory and voluntary sectors across Northern Ireland and Ireland, and included a range of project partners, with an interest in the environment.

At an overall level, the Evaluation Team's review of the projects supported under each Specific Objective area indicates the following:

| Specific Objective area   | Evaluation Team's Overarching Conclusions  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>2.1</b> Recovery of Protected Habitats and Priority Species</p> | <p>Two projects, CANN and CABB, were supported under this objective, with both undertaking a wide-range of actions that sought to protect and enable the recovery of a number of designated habitat sites of cross-border importance and identified areas for priority species. These included nationally designated areas, areas of specific scientific interest (ASSI), sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs), natural heritage areas (NHAs) and European designated areas (special protection areas (SPAs) and special areas of conservation (SAC)). Other areas for breeding wader species and marsh fritillary that were not designated were also included where they were considered to be important to the ecological functioning of habitats within the designated site network. In many cases, the sites chosen were close to or straddled the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, alongside some sites in Western Scotland, which are considered to be of cross-border significance (e.g. where priority species were known to migrate between the locations).</p> <p>As reflected further below, the Evaluation Team considers that it is evident that both projects have been considerably successful in achieving increased levels of integration in the planning and management of the environment across the region, the sharing of knowledge and the development of best practice methodologies.</p> <p>Despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic-related restrictions, considerable outreach activity was undertaken with landowners and local communities which has increased awareness of, and responsiveness to, the potential threats of climate change to habitats and species.</p> <p>Whilst the full impact of the work undertaken might not be fully realised for a number of years, the scale and nature of work undertaken suggests that the two projects have successfully promoted cross-border cooperation to facilitate the recovery of selected protected habitats and priority species.</p> <p>To achieve this objective, the expected logic was that it would be necessary to invest in increased cross-border integrated planning and management of habitats and species, using best-practice methodologies. It was anticipated that this investment would lead to results beyond the lifetime of the Programme in the form of increased compliance with EU directives in the area of environmental protection.</p> |
| <p><b>2.2</b> Manage Marine Protected Areas and Species</p>           | <p>Four project (COMPASS, MarPAMM, SeaMonitor 2 and SWIM) were supported under this objective. Each of the projects sought to enable enhanced cross-border co-operation in the management of regional seas to meet Good Environmental Status by 2020 in line with the requirements of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD).</p> <p>The Evaluation Team's review of project activity indicates the each of the projects facilitated substantially increased levels of cooperation concerning the management of marine protected areas and species. This occurred within project partnerships but also notably between the COMPASS, MarPAMM, SeaMonitor 2 project partnerships, which enhanced the overall outworkings of the three individual projects, and the quality of data captured. Discussion with the three projects indicates that the sharing of information and resources between the projects was a consistent feature throughout their implementation. The Evaluation Team considers that this level of cooperation will have considerably enhanced the potential for a more coherent approach to emerge across the region</p>   |

| Specific Objective area  | Evaluation Team's Overarching Conclusions   |
|--|---|
|  | <p>and its shared waters, and the individual efforts to safeguard biodiversity will have been further strengthened than would have been the case were the projects to have operated in isolation from one another. Such efforts should better position the region to achieve Good Environmental Status and to develop an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas.</p> <p>On an overall basis, it is clear that the projects supported have therefore achieved the aim of Objective 2.2 which was to “develop cross-border capacity for the monitoring and management of marine protected areas and species” and provided the information, methodologies and strategies with which the region’s marine protected areas can be managed and mitigated in a manner which will promote, sustain and conserve the marine environment.</p>   |
| <p>2.3 Improve Water Quality in Transitional Waters</p>            | <p>One project, SWELL, was funded under Specific Objective 2.3, with total anticipated costs of €35.0m. This project focused activity on the following transitional water bodies that Ireland and Northern Ireland share:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Carlingford Lough - between County Louth in Ireland and County Down in Northern Ireland; and</li> <li>2. Lough Foyle - between County Derry~Londonderry in Northern Ireland and County Donegal in Ireland.</li> </ol> <p>Given the shared nature of these waters, cross-border collaboration was considered to be essential if their water quality was to be improved, and thereby address the requirements of the Water Framework Directive.</p> <p>To inform the project’s activities, extensive modelling of the two water bodies was undertaken to identify sources of pollution and subsequently, the most effective interventions and improvements required for the sewage network and wastewater treatment works that impact the shared transitional waters.</p> <p>Discussion with the project partners indicates that the project represented the first time that the two key state-owned regulated water companies (Northern Ireland Water and Irish Water) with sole responsibility for wastewater services on both sides of the border worked together to such an extent, which helped them to prioritise and align works in a coordinated way through the implementation of common approaches to the management of the water resources. The project also allowed both organisations to share knowledge and best practices and technical expertise across the eligible region, drawing on their respective strengths and experience.</p> <p>Whilst it is anticipated that the outworkings of the actions implemented will be realised over the medium-to-longer term, and also reflecting the fact that both water companies advised that the water quality in the two shared water areas will be affected by factors that are also outside their control, the Evaluation Team considers it reasonable to conclude that the SWELL project will have contributed to improvement in the water quality of the two shared transitional waters, and will continue to do so beyond the lifetime of the Programme.</p> |
| <p>2.4 Improve Freshwater Quality in Cross-Border River Basins</p> | <p>Two projects, Source to Tap and CatchmentCARE, were funded under Specific Objective 2.4, with total anticipated costs of €18.7m. Both projects sought to improve water quality across the region, through the introduction of shared management approaches to shared water resources, and therefore support the achievement of targets featured in the EU Water Framework Directives.</p> <p>Whilst the extent to which both projects have been successful in achieving improvements in the baseline condition of water quality, physical structure, and habitats in the target cross-border catchment areas may only be measurable in the medium-term, it is evident that the actions implemented provide a very strong basis for achieving good water quality, enhanced ecological status of a variety of water bodies (rivers, lakes, groundwater, transitional waters), whilst also protecting and enhancing biodiversity.</p>   |

| Specific Objective area | Evaluation Team's Overarching Conclusions  |
|-------------------------|--|
|                         | Encouragingly, both project partnerships report that the extent of cross-border planning and management of shared river catchment areas has been considerably increased, as has the sharing of knowledge and best practice approaches. On that basis, the Evaluation Team considers that both projects have successfully served to achieve the aim of Objective 2.4 i.e. <i>“to improve freshwater quality in cross-border river basins”</i> . |

Taken together, the nine projects that were supported under Priority Axis 2: Environment have involved a very considerable range of actions that would not have been possible in the absence of INTERREG VA monies, and whilst the full outcomes and impacts of most of the actions implemented may only be observable over the medium-to-long term, it is evident that they have followed best-practice approaches, and consequently offer very significant potential to both:

- Protect and restore protected marine and terrestrial habitats and priority species; and
- Improve water quality in transitional waters and cross-border river basins.

#### 4.2.2 *The extent to which the Project Outputs have been achieved*

As a consequence of the outworkings of the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant delays caused in the implementation of projects, only one of the nine individual projects supported under Priority Axis 2 had been fully completed at the time of this report (July 2022). However, for SEUPB's reporting requirements to the EU Commission, it was necessary to develop the final evaluation report at this time.

At the time (circa March/April 2022) of the Evaluation Team's consultations with the nine individual projects there continued to be activity required before all of the project outputs were achieved. However, 6 of the 16 individual targets were reported as being achieved.

Whilst recognising that each project is confident that all the Output Indicator Targets will be achieved by their stipulated end date, the Evaluation Team considers that there continues to be an element of risk associated with the full achievement and recommends that SEUPB continues to monitor the activities and outputs until each project's respective end date.

#### 4.2.3 *The extent to which the Specific Objectives & Result Indicators have been achieved*

Unfortunately, whilst each of the nine projects is confident that the activities implemented have contributed positively to the achievement of Priority Axis 2: Environment's Specific Objectives, as reflected in Section 2, the projects have had difficulty determining the extent to which their projects have contributed to the respective Result Indicators and Targets. The rationale for this includes:

- The result indicators have too many influencing factors affecting their achievement, and consequently, it is difficult for a single project, in isolation, to determine whether it has measurably influenced performance on the metric;
- The method by which the result indicator was intended to be measured not being clear to the project.

As reflected in Section 2, discussion with SEUPB and NISRA indicates that whilst it was anticipated that the nine projects would contribute to the achievement of the four result indicators, it was not anticipated that the projects, in isolation, would be responsible for achieving the targets established. That is, the result indicators were not anticipated to measure the direct impacts of the projects supported and instead they were anticipated to measure changes in the characteristics of a given area due to programme interventions and / or other factors (i.e. external to the Interreg VA programme).

In addition, SEUPB has had exploratory discussions with the departments on the 'adjusted means' of measuring the success of the projects to ensure the project work can be correctly verified as complete. Whilst the adjusted means of measuring is not yet finalised (at November 2022), it is suggested that both the projects and the departments will be required to sign the project work off as complete.

Nonetheless, the Evaluation Team’s review of the activities implemented under each of the nine projects indicates that the suite of projects has served (where relevant):

- To promote cross-border cooperation to facilitate the recovery of selected protected habitats and priority species;
- To develop cross-border capacity for the monitoring and management of marine protected species in the region;
- To improve the water quality in shared transitional waters; and
- To improve freshwater quality in cross-border river basins.

In addition, each of the project partnerships has demonstrated that their respective projects are closely aligned (where applicable) with EU 2020 objectives; the Atlantic Strategy, the EU’s horizontal principles of equality and sustainable development and a variety of regional strategies, including:

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <b>Objective 2.1 projects</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU 2020 Strategy</li> <li>• EU Birds and Habitats Directive</li> <li>• EU Biodiversity Strategy</li> <li>• The Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs) of the three countries and in particular selected protected sites and species of cross-border relevance</li> </ul> |
| <b>Objective 2.2 projects</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU Atlantic Strategy and Action Plan</li> <li>• Marine Strategy Framework Directive</li> <li>• EU Marine strategies</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Objective 2.3 projects</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU Water Framework Directive</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Objective 2.4 projects</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU Water Framework Directive (including integrated river basin management plans)</li> </ul>  |

4.2.4 *Factors that have impacted on project delivery including the achievement of Project Output and Result indicators and the Priority’s Specific Objectives*

Each of the Project Partners in receipt of support under Priority Axis 2: Environment advise that they encountered issues that have impacted on the delivery of their respective projects. Examples of issues commonly cited by the projects’ partners include:

- **Covid-19** – The Covid-19 pandemic impacted each of the nine projects, for example the pandemic-related restrictions on the movement of people meant that:
  - Various staff across the lead partner’s organisation, project partners or direct beneficiaries started working remotely and/or had furloughed staff.
  - The project’s lost access to testing and fieldwork, which had a substantial impact on data collection and monitoring activities.
  - Onsite capital work had to be placed on hold.
  - Aspects of planned educational activities were reduced as they could not be carried out on a face-to-face basis.
- **Brexit** - A further marketplace factor of considerable significance that occurred during the project period was the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union on 31 January 2020. Several of the projects’ partners noted during consultation that the outworkings of Brexit resulted in the project facing difficulties, for example with exchange rate fluctuations, setting up its website as the domain had to be ‘.eu’, securing materials and equipment deliveries.

Whilst specific to individual projects, the following is noted:

- The Sea Monitor project partners advised (in March 2022) that the project had experienced some complications and delays associated with licensing requirements to legally deploy research equipment in the waters across the jurisdictions. The project also faced delays deploying equipment due to Ministry of Defence training being undertaken in the waters.
- On the SWELL project, Irish Water has found the timeframe to implement its infrastructure project to be challenging. Typically, a standard Irish Water WwTP construction project takes 5 years, whilst the SWELL Programme afforded approximately only three years from the Letter of Offer for the construction works.

In addition, Early Contractor Involvement (ECI) was not available to Irish Water at the time, and a standalone procurement exercise was required.

- The Source to Tap project's progress was affected by the Meenbog landslide incident in 2020 which caused tonnes of sediment to enter the rivers that the StT project had been working with local landowners and stakeholders to improve.

#### 4.2.5 *The effectiveness and added value of cross-border collaboration*

Each of the project partnerships has demonstrated that their respective projects were jointly:

- Developed;
- Implemented;
- Staffed; and
- Financed.

The project partnerships were uniformly of the view that the INTERREG VA funding received had enabled the projects to undertake projects that would not otherwise have been possible, and consequently achieved impacts that would not otherwise have been possible (or only a substantially lower level of activity or quality of operation) had a single jurisdiction attempted to undertake related works in isolation.

The Evaluation Team's review of the individual project's activities indicates a strong level of cross-border collaboration and sharing of resources and know-how. Whilst it is evident that there continues to be scope for further alignment of activity at a policy level, the activities undertaken by the nine projects have served to achieve a level of cohesion that did not exist in advance of their implementation.

Indeed, the effectiveness of the cross-border collaborative working, and engagement is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that each of the nine projects has, or anticipates, achieved its output indicator targets despite the considerable upheavals associated with both the pandemic and Brexit that have occurred during their implementation.

#### 4.2.6 *Key areas of best practice and learning*

Encouragingly, the projects partners in receipt of support under Priority Axis 2: Environment, cited a number of key areas of best practice and learning which have, in their view:

- Supported project delivery;
- Enhanced levels of cross-border and transnational knowledge transfer and collaboration;
- Created a joint sense of project ownership;
- Supported the potential for longer-term sustainability after the INTERREG VA funded period.

Specific examples of the good practice cited by the Projects Partners include:

- One of the main opportunities to establish and share best practice from the CABB project has been the coordination and facilitation (by the project partnership) of site visits to various locations being considered as part of the project e.g. the Irish Peatlands Conservation Group visited the Garron SAC, which served to identify what works well and could possibly be replicated elsewhere. This facilitated the project to help achieve increased levels of cross-border integration in the planning and management of the environment across the region.
- The COMPASS project considers that one of the main achievements of, or lessons learnt from, this project has been the successful interaction with stakeholders and civil society (or 'citizen science'). For example, as part of the project's Salmonid research, fishermen have played an important supporting role in catching trout and salmon for tagging and deploying equipment. The COMPASS project partnership notes that this results in a number of direct benefits:
  - Catching fish by fly appears to cause the least distress to the fish;



- Using fishermen at sea to deploy equipment brings additional knowledge and expertise to the project; and
  - This method provides an important opportunity to involve and engage a broader stakeholder group.
- The SeaMonitor 2 project tested a remote-operated "ocean glider", and their use as part of the project represented the first time it has been applied to Atlantic salmon in Europe. The SeaMonitor 2 project partners note that as the first mission was a success, autonomous remote-operated platforms will likely become a key method by which spatial data on cetacean occurrence will be acquired, as it is less expensive than chartering a research vessel and its crew. It is also more sustainable as autonomous remote-operated platforms do not require fuel, and emit less noise so are better suited to acoustic data collection, and the impact on the environment and disturbance to animals is likely reduced too.
  - The SWIM project partnership highlighted that a key learning for future projects is to ensure that sufficient engagement (and collaboration where appropriate) with the public is undertaken at the outset of a project to explain why the project is undertaking the work, which should help to minimise and/or mitigate any potential objections to the project's work.

#### 4.2.7 *New ways of working/partnerships/relationships created*

Across the nine projects, a myriad of new cross-border relationships have been developed and which are reflected, in part, in the earlier sections of this report. Most positively, each of the project partners has indicated that they hope to continue to work in partnership and share knowledge and good practice with both their project partners and stakeholders engaged with.

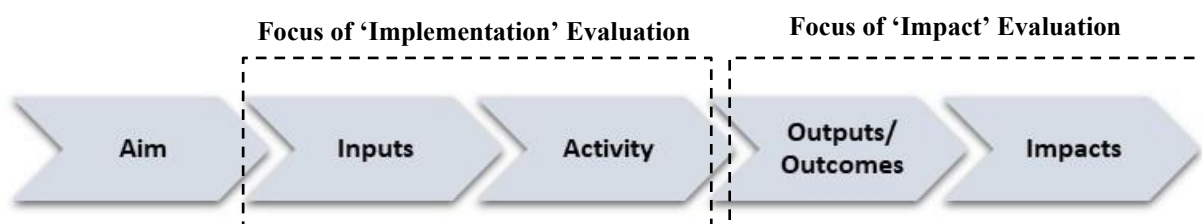
Whilst none of the nine projects have been mainstreamed in their entirety, each of the project partners advised that aspects of the across-border activity undertaken will be continued. Of note, at the time of consultation, some projects advised that they would be seeking Peace Plus funding to pursue their project activities further.

### 4.3 **Recommendations**

To help inform similar programmes of activity going forward, the Evaluation Team makes the following recommendations;

1. By way of aiding post-project evaluation, SEUPB should ensure that all objectives, outputs and result indicators established for all future programmes adhere to the 'SMART' criteria.
2. The 'logic chain' to Evaluation illustrates the intrinsic linkages between an intervention's aims, inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes (as depicted in Figure 4.1). However, the Evaluation Team understands that SEUPB has commissioned two separate evaluations – an 'Implementation' Evaluation and 'Impact' Evaluation - which focus on assessing the progress made by the Priority (and projects supported therein) at different stages of the logic chain.

**Figure 4.1: The logic chain to Evaluation**



However, given the interlinkages that exist between each stage of the logic chain, the Evaluation Team is of the view that a more rounded, holistic approach should be taken to Evaluation which would require the assessment of the implementation and impact made by the Priority axis as part of

one evaluation. For example, in a scenario in which an intervention does not achieve its anticipated outputs/outcomes or impacts, this would naturally lead to the question as to why such a scenario arose. Based on the logic chain to Evaluation, such a scenario could have arisen as a result of the implementation of the activities of the intervention which, in turn, may have been influenced by the scale and quality of inputs utilised to deliver the activities. Therefore, any rationalisation as to why an intervention's outturns are achieved (or otherwise) requires a 'joined-up' approach to Evaluation focused on each stage of the logic chain.

3. Most projects considered that aspects of the INTERREG VA programme were administration intensive and on occasion the level of work needed was not commensurate with the value offered to the project. SEUPB outlined that there were internal processes that affected this such as staffing shortages, projects being slower than required in uploading documentation, the covid impact on the frequency of Steering Committees (i.e. held less often), the self-training principal for eMS, audit requirements within the claims process etc. However concerning such aspects of the programme, the following is recommended:
  - Where possible, simplify both the procurement and claims processes used and ensure that the same processes are not overly prohibitive for partner organisations and inadvertently act as a deterrent to their participation;
  - If this is not possible, offer the projects and programme participations greater level of support to navigate and understand the processes used (including the use of eMS);
  - Seek to streamline SEUPB's own claims and verification processes so that projects are not placed under undue cashflow pressures;
  - Simplify the project monitoring requirements and ensure that monitoring is focused on key indicators;
  - Respond to project modification requests in a timelier fashion.