

**INTERREG VA IMPACT EVALUATION  
PRIORITY 2 – ENVIRONMENT – DRAFT FINAL**



Special EU Programmes Body  
Foras Um Chláir Speisialta An AE  
Boord O Owre Ocht UE Projects



**Cogent Management Consulting LLP**

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# INTERREG VA IMPACT EVALUATION

## PRIORITY 2 - ENVIRONMENT

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## List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
AFBI	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
AGM	Annual General Meeting
ASSI	Areas of Specific Scientific Interest
CABB	Conservation Across-borders for Biodiversity
CANN	Collaborative Action for the Natura Network
CAP	Conservation Action Plan
COMPASS	Collaborative Oceanography and Monitoring for Protected Areas and Species
DCC	Donegal County Council
EC	European Commission
EMS	Electronic Monitoring System
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
EU	European Union
FT	Full Time
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IW	Irish Water
LA	Loughs Agency
LoO	Letter of Offer
MarPAMM	Marine Protected Areas Management and Monitoring
MPAs	Marine Protected Areas
MSFD	Marine Strategy Framework Directive
NHA	National Heritage Area
NI	Northern Ireland
NIEA	Northern Ireland Environment Agency
NIW	Northern Ireland Water
OB	Optimism Bias
ROI	Republic of Ireland
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SACs	Special Areas of Conservation
SEUPB	Special EU Programmes Body
SPAs	Special Protected Areas
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
StT	Source to Tap
SWELL	Shared Waters Enhancement and Loughs Agency
SWIM	System for Bathing Water Quality Modelling
UCD	University College Dublin

## 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<sup>1</sup> Investment Priority Axis 2 – Environment to include 3 reports due by end of 2018, end of 2020 and early 2022<sup>2</sup>. This report provides a summary of the key findings emerging from the second, of three, formative evaluations of the Investment Priority. More substantive analysis and commentary can be found in the accompanying appendices.

The overall focus of the evaluation is to assess (at three stages of implementation), the impact of the interventions within the ‘Environment’ Priority Axis. 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 advised by SEUPB, the second of three evaluation reports was to provide an overview of each project’s achievements at this interim stage in its rollout and taking cognisance of the current COVID-19 pandemic, it was to reflect any effect that it may be having on each project, any steps that projects are taking to mitigate any risk to the project’s successful implementation and any support that projects may require from SEUPB to help ensure the project’s successful completion.

### 1.2 Priority Axis 2: Environment & its Objectives

#### 1.2.1 Introduction

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

It also states that two key challenges in the programme region will be tackled through this priority axis, namely the integrity of its:

1. Biodiversity; and
2. Water quality.

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

Investment Priority	Associated Objectives
2a - Protecting and restoring biodiversity and soil and promoting ecosystem services, including through Natura 2000, and green infrastructure.	2.1 Recovery of Protected Habitats and Priority Species
	2.2 Manage Marine Protected Areas and Species
2b - 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.	2.3 Improve Water Quality in Transitional Waters
	2.4 Improve Freshwater Quality in Cross-Border River Basins

<sup>1</sup> For Northern Ireland, Ireland and Western Scotland

<sup>2</sup> The report received in 2022 will include a summary of all previous findings and will contribute directly to the programme summary of evaluation findings, to be submitted to the EU Commission.

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

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

The need to protect the environment is one of the key themes in the EU 2020 Strategy. It is also one of the needs and priorities identified in the Socio-Economic Profile of the Region and the Position Papers from the European Commission (EC) for the United Kingdom and Ireland. The investment by the programme in this important area will be aimed at ensuring that designated habitat sites of cross-border importance and identified areas for priority species will achieve or be approaching favourable conditions. These 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 are not designated may also be considered where they are important to the ecological functioning of habitats within the designated site network. In many cases, sites will be close to or straddle the border. However other sites further from the terrestrial border, including those in Western Scotland, may be included, where the site is of cross-border significance.

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

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

To achieve this objective, it was anticipated that it would be necessary to invest in increased cross-border integrated planning and management of habitats and species, using best-practice methodologies. It is anticipated that this investment will 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 have prioritised 7 protected habitats and 7 priority species. These have been selected from habitats and species common to all three jurisdictions and include habitats that have an important role in connectivity between protected areas and protected species that migrate across the eligible region. All habitats and species selected for investment will be 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>

Only sites important to these protected habitats or priority species can be chosen for investment by the Programme.

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

The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) requires the EU Member States to co-operate in the management of regional seas with the objective of meeting Good Environmental Status by 2020. Increased co-operation in this area can mitigate climate change impact. The need for a coherent approach across the region is 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, 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 that will promote, sustain and conserve the marine environment. Investment by the programme in this area is aimed at increasing the capacity for integrated planning and management of marine resources and increasing the effectiveness of cross-border marine management strategies. It is anticipated that new cross-border cooperation strategies will be developed based on existing and newly acquired data. This will lead to an increase in compliance with the EU MSFD.

It is further envisaged that investment by the programme will lead to an increased understanding of and ability to capitalise on the marine resources in the region. This will 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.

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

To achieve this objective, it was considered 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 is anticipated that the sustainability of this activity beyond the lifetime of the Programme will be evidenced by the creation of a regional marine innovation centre that will provide a focal point for these activities. This will result in an increased contribution to the achievement of the targets associated with EU Marine strategies.

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

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 in Northern Ireland and County Donegal in Ireland.

According to the Programme’s Citizens’ Summary, cross-border collaboration is essential to improve the water quality of these shared transitional waters and thus efficiently address the requirements of the Water Framework Directive<sup>5</sup>. In particular, this specific objective will 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. Such modelling will identify the most effective interventions and improvements required for the sewage network and wastewater treatment works that impact upon the shared transitional waters.

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

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

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<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> 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.



In order to achieve this objective, it is stated that it will be necessary to invest in cross-border solutions and the joint management of water bodies that straddle the border. It is anticipated that this will result in long term impacts on the quality of water in the region beyond the lifetime of the Programme.

1.2.5 *Objective 2.4 – Improve Freshwater Quality in Cross-Border River Basins*

To improve water quality across the region, it is 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 is anticipated that investment by the programme will lead to an improvement in the baseline condition of water quality, physical structure and habitat in a number of cross-border catchment areas. This will contribute towards the achievement of targets relating to good water quality and ecological status of all water bodies (rivers, lakes, groundwater, transitional).

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

It is further anticipated that the investment will 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. There are also opportunities to share best practice approaches across the region. This will, 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 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 practice within the three jurisdictions.

The aim of Objective 2.4 is, 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>6</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, it is stated that it will be necessary to invest in cross-border solutions and the joint management of water bodies that straddle the border. It is anticipated that this investment will lead to an improvement in the baseline condition of water quality, physical structure and habitat in a number of cross-border catchment areas.

<sup>6</sup> As outlined in the Call Documentation issued for Objective 2.4.

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

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

<b>Table 1.2: Specific Objectives, Result Indicators and Targets</b>			
<b>Specific Objective</b>	<b>Result Indicator</b>	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>Target</b>
<b>2.1</b> To promote cross-border co-operation 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%
<b>2.2</b> 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
<b>2.3</b> 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%
<b>2.4</b> 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%

The anticipated Output Indicators 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 in order 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 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 contribution that each of the 9 projects is anticipated to make to the Priority's key Output Indicators is detailed below:

<b>Table 1.4: 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>COMPASS</b>	<b>SWIM</b>	<b>MarPAMM</b>	<b>Sea Monitor 2</b>	<b>SWELL</b>	<b>Source to Tap</b>	<b>Catchment Care</b>	
4,500 ha of habitats supported in order 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>

### 1.3 Overview of Projects Supported

Table 1.5 provides an overview of the **nine projects** approved by the INTERREG VA Programme Steering Committee.

Table 1.5: Summary of Projects Approved for Funding <sup>7</sup>					
Project Ref	Lead Partner	Project Name	Operational start date	Operational end date	Anticipated Project Cost (€)
<b>Objective 2.1</b>					
032	Newry, Mourne & Down District Council	CANN	01/01/2017	31/12/2021	€9,406,313
037	RSPB NI	CABB	01/01/2017	31/12/2021	€4,935,985
<b>Subtotal</b>					<b>€14,342,296</b>
<b>Objective 2.2</b>					
034	Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)	COMPASS	01/01/2017	31/03/2022	€7,726,441
038	University College Dublin (UCD)	SWIM	01/01/2017	31/12/2020 <sup>8</sup>	€1,393,075
5059	AFBI	MarPAMM	01/01/2018	31/03/2022	€6,361,317
5060	Lough Agency	Sea Monitor 2	25/07/2017	31/12/2022 <sup>9</sup>	€4,722,671
<b>Subtotal</b>					<b>€20,203,504</b>
<b>Objective 2.3</b>					
005	Northern Ireland Water (NIW)	SWELL	18/11/2014	31/12/2022	€35,047,604 <sup>10</sup>
<b>Subtotal</b>					<b>€35,047,604</b>
<b>Objective 2.4</b>					
029	NIW	Source to Tap	01/10/2016	31/03/2022	€4,909,921
027	Donegal County Council	Catchment Care	01/10/2017	31/10/2022	€13,792,436
<b>Subtotal</b>					<b>€18,702,357</b>
<b>Total</b>					<b>€88,295,761</b>

<sup>7</sup> The decision whether or not to fund a project rested entirely with the IVA Programme steering committee.

<sup>8</sup> NB: Original LoO end date was 30/06/2020. It was noted during consultation that a revised LoO was issued in April 2020 extending the project to December 2020.

<sup>9</sup> NB: Original LoO end date was 31/03/2022. It was noted during consultation that an extension was approved in May 2019.

<sup>10</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 €3,282,786.52 (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), towards total anticipated project costs of €3,282,786.52. This Letter of Offer was later superseded by a second letter of offer that incorporated both Phase I and Phase II of the project.

## 2. IMPACT OF COVID-19

### 2.1 Introduction

Given the unprecedented onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential to impact on both the implementation of the nine Priority Axis 2: Environment projects and ultimately their ability to achieve their aspirations, SEUPB asked the Evaluation Team to ascertain the impact that COVID-19 was having on the projects. Consequently, the Evaluation Team completed consultations with each of the project leads to understand the implications of COVID-19 on their organisation and project, which sought to help SEUPB:

- Identify any issues that the projects are facing and/or the risks to the projects' successful implementation;
- Ensure that projects have considered the implications of the pandemic and that appropriate plans have been put in place in response; and
- Identify any further support that the projects might require in order to ensure their successful implementation.

### 2.2 Summary of Key Findings

The table below provides a high-level summary of the key findings derived from those consultations:

Table 2.1: Environment Covid-19 Implications Survey Key Findings				
Project	Potential risk that the project will not achieve its aims and objectives	Suggested need for a time extension	Potential for budget underspend at the end of the project period	Adaptions to project activities, target groups and outputs
CANN	Some Risk	Yes (6 months)	No	No
CABB	No Risk	No	No	No
COMPASS	No Risk	No	No	Yes (Fieldwork put on hold and meetings held online).
SWIM	No Risk	No	No	Yes (No physical activities, only online promotion this Summer as well as the closing event moving online).
MarPAMM	Some Risk	Yes (6 months)	No	Yes (Had to cancel/ reschedule physical activities and instead have completed desktop work on models).
Sea Monitor 2	Some Risk	No	No	Yes (Will deploy equipment in March 2021 instead of March 2020).
SWELL	Some Risk	Yes (3-4 months)	No	Yes (school and stakeholder visits cancelled. SEUPB AGM cancelled. Moved the commissioning of projects online and AFBI used alternative techniques to service buoys and NI water closing events scaled down).
Source to Tap	No Risk	No	No	Yes (school visits to water treatment works were cancelled, journalists highlighting water treatment issues also cancelled. Unable to attend Agri-shows).
Catchment Care	Some Risk	Yes (6 Months)	Yes (not specified)	Yes (mid-term conference postponed until February 2021, events are either not happening or have been scaled back. Online conferences were considered but our partners felt it would not work).

Key points to note in relation to Table 2.1 include:

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

The following sub-sections provide the detailed analysis from the COVID-19 focused consultations with the nine project leads.

## 2.3 Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for project implementation

### 2.3.1 Likelihood of achieving aims and objectives as outlined in the LoO

Almost all (8 of 9) of the project leads considered that, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, their project was on track with no substantial risk to it fully achieving its aims and objectives as outlined within their LoO, with:

- 4<sup>11</sup> (of 9) projects stating that their project was, before COVID-19, fully on track with little risk to it fully achieving its aims and objectives; and
- 4<sup>12</sup> (of 9) projects suggesting that their project was, before COVID-19, mostly on track with no substantial risk to it fully achieving its aims and objectives.

Other salient points to note include:

- The MarPAMM project lead indicated that the project was behind schedule and there was a risk that it would not achieve its aims and objectives, as a result of a 6-month delay to the project start date.
- Pre-COVID, whilst being mostly on track one project<sup>13</sup> highlighted that the Land Incentive Scheme was behind schedule, due to issues with GDPR and securing SEUPB approval.

Table 2.2: Extent project was on track to achieve its aims and objectives (N=9)		
	Pre-COVID	Current Position
The project was (is) fully on track with little risk to it fully achieving its aims and objectives	4	1
The project was (is) mostly on track with no substantial risk to it fully achieving its aims and objectives	4	3
The project had been changed from that presented in the original project application but was (is) on track to fully achieve its new aims and objectives	-	-
The project was (is) behind schedule and there was (is) a risk that it would (will) not achieve its aims and objectives	1	5
The project was (is) behind schedule and there was (is) a <u>high</u> risk that it would (will) not achieve its aims and objectives	-	-
The project had been changed from that presented in the original project application, and there was (is) a risk that it would (will) not achieve its aims and objectives	-	-
The project had been changed from that presented in the original project application, and there was (is) a <u>high</u> risk that it would (will) not achieve its aims and objectives	-	-

<sup>11</sup> COMPASS, CANN, SWIM and SWELL

<sup>12</sup> CatchmentCARE, Source 2 Tap, Sea Monitor 2, CABB

<sup>13</sup> Source to Tap

However, per Table 2.2, the situation has changed considerably as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures with only 4<sup>14</sup> projects continuing to feel that their project is fully (N=1) or mostly (N=3) on track with no substantial risk to the project fully achieving its aims and objectives. The remaining five<sup>15</sup> project leads now consider that their project is behind schedule and potentially at risk of not achieving its aims and objectives.

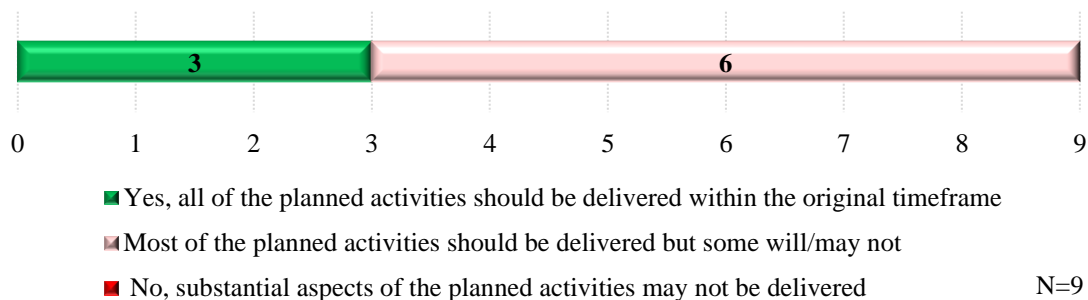
The project leads highlighted several impacts that COVID-19 has had (or that they anticipate it will have) on their ability to achieve the project's aims and objectives including:

- The disruption to site investigation visits, meetings, and retaining planning application;
- The disruption to education programmes; and
- The suspension of data collection and sampling.

### 2.3.2 Feasibility of delivering the project's planned activities within the original timeframe

3<sup>16</sup> (of 9) project leads suggested that it continues to be feasible to deliver all of their project's planned activities within the original timeframe. However, six<sup>17</sup> project leads were of the view that it may no longer be feasible to deliver all of their project's planned activities within the original timeframe. Specifically, these project leads indicated that most of the planned activities should still be delivered but some may or will not.

**Figure 2.1: Is it still feasible to deliver all of the project's planned activities within the remaining timeline?**



The project leads highlighted that the following activities have been (or will be) affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and/ may no longer possible to complete:

- Education programme;
- Stakeholder and community engagement;
- Data collection and sampling.

One-third (3<sup>18</sup> of 9) of the project leads consider that it would be feasible to make up for any delays (to August/September 2020) caused by COVID-19. However, 5<sup>19</sup> (of 9) project leads considered that it may not be possible to make up for the delays experienced as a result of COVID-19, as the project's work is seasonal, and the time lost as a result of the COVID-19/lockdown measures cannot be made up without an extension to the project's timeframe.

<sup>14</sup> SWIM, COMPASS, Source to Tap, and CABB

<sup>15</sup> CatchmentCARE, Sea Monitor 2, CANN, SWELL, and MarPAMM

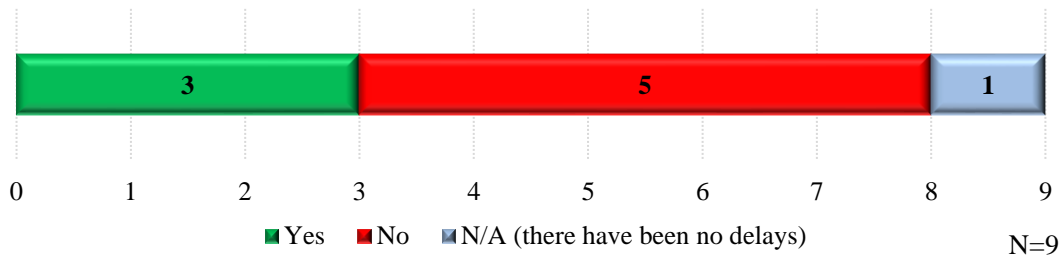
<sup>16</sup> COMPASS, CABB, and SWIM

<sup>17</sup> CatchmentCARE, Source to Tap, Sea Monitor 2, CANN, SWELL, and MARPAMM

<sup>18</sup> COMPASS, Source to Tap, and CABB

<sup>19</sup> CatchmentCARE, Sea Monitor 2, CANN, SWELL, and MarPAMM

Figure 2.2: It is feasible to make up for delays caused by COVID-19?



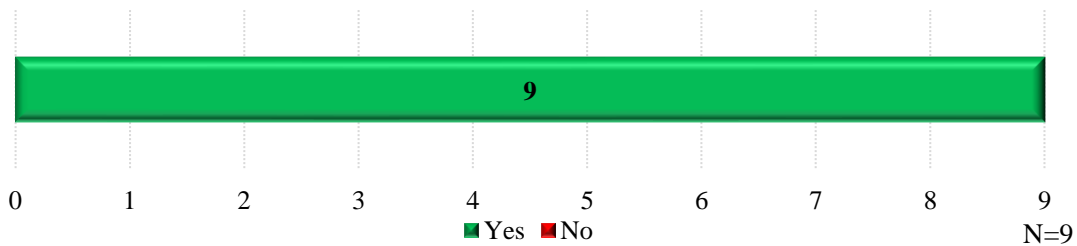
Other salient points to note include:

- One<sup>20</sup> project has not experienced any delays as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- One<sup>21</sup> project lead noted that whilst it would be feasible to make up for delays caused by COVID-19, the community engagement element may not be delivered to the same extent.

### 2.3.3 Ability to Deliver Project within Original Budget

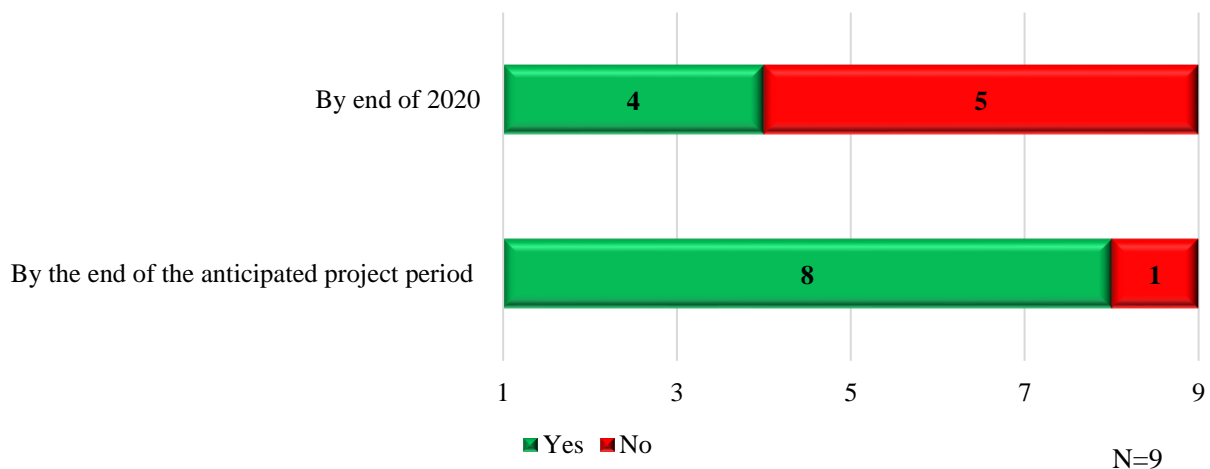
All (9 of 9) project leads stated that they will be able to deliver their project fully within its current budget.

Figure 2.3: Will you be able to deliver the project fully within its current budget?



Five<sup>22</sup> (of 9) of the project leads felt that they will not be able to reach their anticipated level of expenditure by the end of 2020. However, 8<sup>23</sup> (of 9) project leads were confident that they will spend the full budget allocation by the end of the anticipated project period.

Figure 2.4: Will your Project reach the anticipated levels of expenditure...



<sup>20</sup> SWIM

<sup>21</sup> Source to Tap

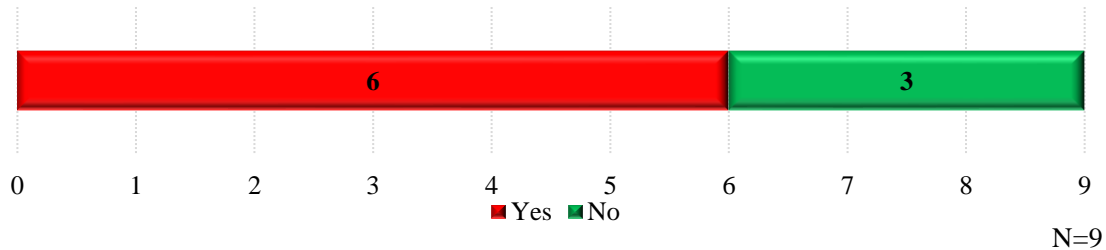
<sup>22</sup> CatchmentCARE, Source to Tap, CABB, SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>23</sup> COMPASS, Source to Tap, Sea Monitor 2, CABB, CANN, SWIM, SWELL, and MarPAMM

### 2.3.4 Risks to the Achievement of Project Results

6<sup>24</sup> (of 9) project leads were of the view that COVID-19 and/or the lockdown measures or matters related to it will jeopardise their project's expected results.

Figure 2.5: Risks to the achievement of the Project's results



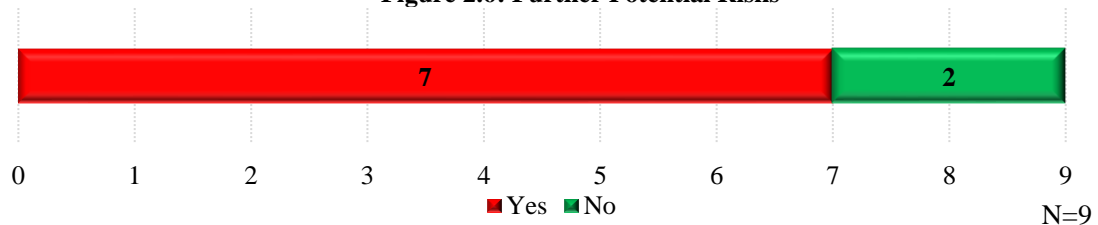
The six project leads foresee the reduced quantity of monitoring data as the main impact that might jeopardise their project's anticipated results.

### 2.3.5 Other Potential Risks

Most (7<sup>25</sup> of 9) project leads noted that there were further risks posed to their projects due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included:

- Limited stakeholder and/or community engagement as a result of government restrictions on the number of people allowed to meet; and
- Delays commencing fieldwork or sampling which may impact on the quantity and or quality of data available.

Figure 2.6: Further Potential Risks



Sea Monitor 2, who felt there were no further risks noted that this was, however, dependent on whether a second lockdown was introduced.

## 2.4 Measures Taken as a Result of COVID-19

Each of the project leads provided information to the best of their knowledge, on the specific measures their organisation, their project partners, and direct beneficiaries of the project implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common measures implemented were that their organisation, project partners, or direct beneficiaries had:

- Staff working remotely instead of at their normal place of work;
- Furloughed staff; and
- Decreased normal hours of operation.

<sup>24</sup> CatchmentCARE, Source to Tap, CABB, CANN, SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>25</sup> COMPASS, CatchmentCARE, Source to Tap, CABB, CANN, SWIM, and SWELL



## 2.5 Support requested from SEUPB

6 (of 9) project leads indicated that they had requested specific support from SEUPB relating to their project during the COVID-19 pandemic. These requests included:

- An extension to their project timeframe (N=3);
- Advice on furloughing personnel (N=2);
- Permission to claim without verification and additional time to produce reports (N=2);
- Permission to vary project activities (N=1); and
- Permission to use optimism bias costs for compensation events (N=1).

**Figure 2.7: Requested support from SEUPB**

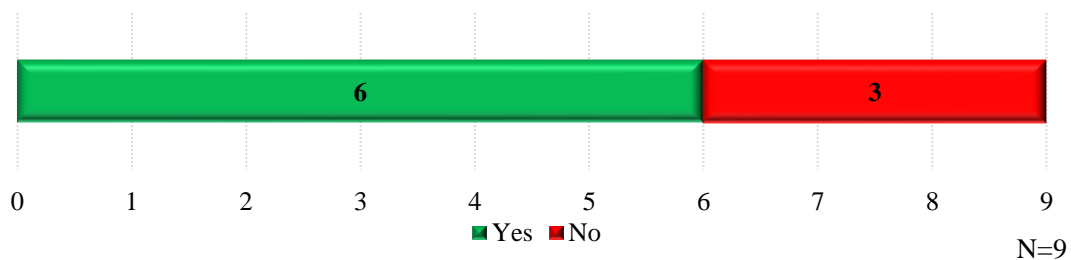


Table 2.4: Support from SEUPB		
	Requested Support (N=6)	Beneficial support (N=6)
An extension to your project timeframe	3 <sup>26</sup>	4 <sup>27</sup>
An increase in your funding allocation to cover unforeseen costs associated with the pandemic	-	-
Reduction in your project budget	-	-
Advice on furloughing project personnel	2 <sup>28</sup>	-
Permission to vary project activities	1 <sup>29</sup>	3 <sup>30</sup>
Permission to vary project targets	-	2 <sup>31</sup>
Permission to use Optimism Bias for compensation events	1 <sup>32</sup>	
Permission to claim without verification; and additional time to produce reports	2 <sup>33</sup>	

In addition to the support that had already been requested, 4 project leads stated that other forms of support from SEUPB would be beneficial to enable them to deliver their project as fully as possible, these include:

- An extension to their project timeframe (N=4);
- Permission to vary project activities (N=3); and
- Permission to vary project targets (N=2).

<sup>26</sup> CatchmentCARE, CANN, and SWELL

<sup>27</sup> COMPASS, CABB, SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>28</sup> CABB, and MarPAMM

<sup>29</sup> Sea Monitor 2

<sup>30</sup> COMPASS, SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>31</sup> COMPASS, and MarPAMM

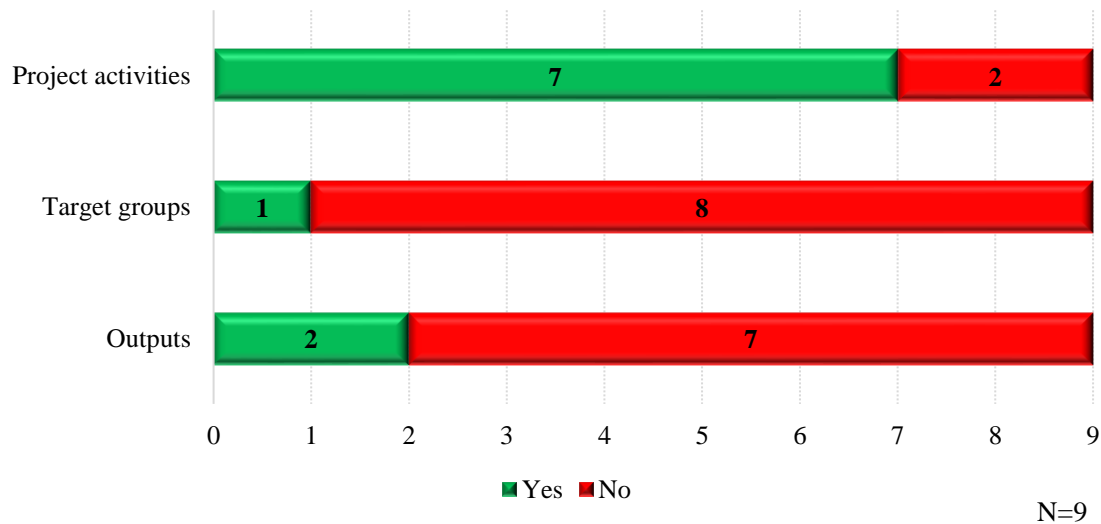
<sup>32</sup> SWELL

<sup>33</sup> Sea Monitor 2 and CatchmentCare

## 2.6 Potential Adaptations to project activities, target groups, or outputs

Seven<sup>34</sup> (of 9) projects suggested that they had adapted their project activities as a result of the pandemic. In addition, two<sup>35</sup> of these projects had adapted their project outputs, and one<sup>36</sup> had also adapted their target groups.

**Figure 2.8: Have you or do you intend to adapt project activities, target groups, and outputs?**



Projects made adaptations to their project activities and/or outputs by refocusing activities, cancelling, or rescheduling activities.

**Table 2.5: Changes made or intended to be made (N=7)**

	Adaptations already made	Intended adaptations
Rescheduled activities	6 <sup>37</sup>	
Cancelled activities	5 <sup>38</sup>	
Refocused activities	4 <sup>39</sup>	

Other points to note include:

- COMPASS stated that its report may refer to different species than initially planned; and
- Source to Tap indicated that it may need to adapt their information exchange, however, this will not be considered until closer to the time.

## 2.7 Cooperative Measures Implemented

Almost all project leads (8<sup>40</sup>, of 9) indicated that their project partnership had implemented cooperative measures to enable a more joined-up project response, whilst 5<sup>41</sup> (of 9) project leads also indicated that they had implemented cooperative measures to enable the individual project partners to better respond to the pandemic.

<sup>34</sup> COMPASS, CatchmentCARE, Source to Tap, Sea Monitor 2, SWIM, SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>35</sup> CatchmentCare and MarPAMM

<sup>36</sup> CatchmentCare

<sup>37</sup> COMPASS, CatchmentCARE, Source to Tap, Sea Monitor 2, SWIM, and MarPAMM

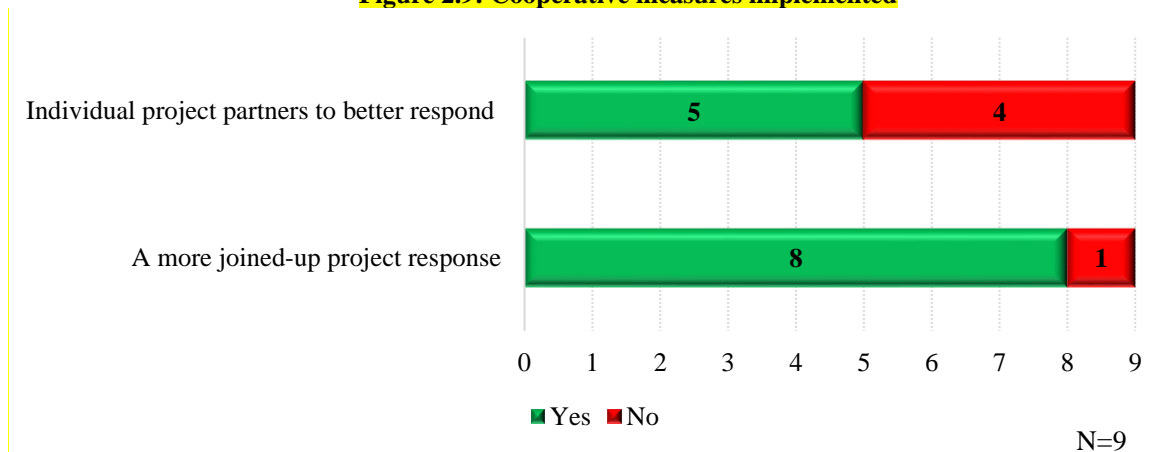
<sup>38</sup> COMPASS, CatchmentCARE, Source to Tap, and SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>39</sup> Source to Tap, SWIM, and SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>40</sup> COMPASS, CatchmentCare, Source to Tap, Sea Monitor 2, CANN, SWIM, SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>41</sup> COMPASS, CatchmentCARE, Source to Tap, SWIM, and MarPAMM

**Figure 2.9: Cooperative measures implemented**



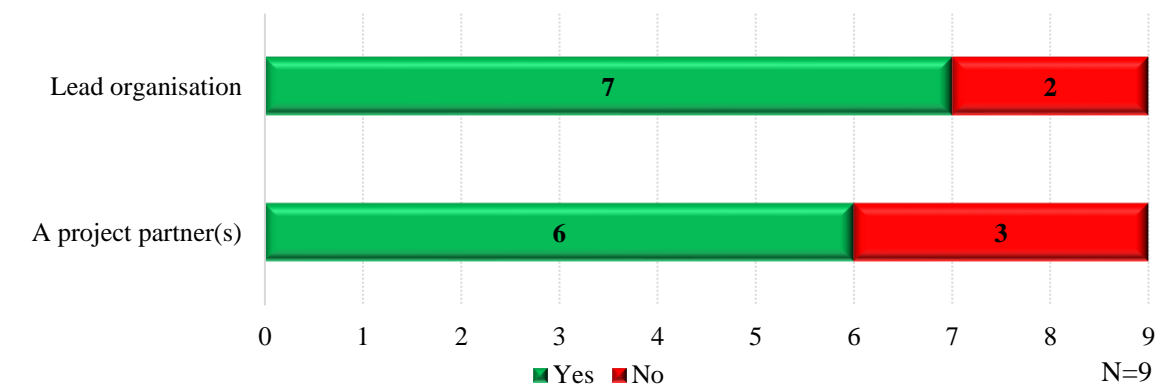
Examples of cooperative measures implemented include:

- Introducing regular online meetings; and
- Working collaboratively with other EU marine projects.

## 2.8 Direct Involvement in the Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most (7<sup>42</sup> of 9) of the project leads indicated that their organisation or one of their project partners had been directly involved in the response to the emergency (beyond actions relating to the project), with 6<sup>43</sup> of those project partners' organisations directly involved in the response to the emergency.

**Figure 2.10: Directly involved in the response to the emergency**



Examples of how the lead organisations and their project partners have been directly involved in the response to the emergency (beyond actions relating to the project) included:

- COVID-19 testing;
- Creating scrubs for care home staff; and
- Distribution of food packages and bottled water.

One<sup>44</sup> of the lead partners emphasised that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdown measures their focus remained on delivering the project.

<sup>42</sup> COMPASS, Source to Tap, CABB, CANN, SWIM, SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>43</sup> COMPASS, Source to Tap, CANN, SWIM, SWELL, and MarPAMM

<sup>44</sup> CatchmentCARE

## 2.9 Lessons Learned as a Result of the Changing Circumstances

The nine project leads highlighted a variety of lessons/best practice that they have learnt when adapting their project to the changing circumstances. Examples included:

- The importance of consistent and effective communication (i.e. using electronic means) to compensate for not being able to meet on a face-to-face basis to discuss project progress or issues encountered;
- The ability of online (via tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams) to ensure that project partners continue to feel involved in the project and to ensure that no one feels isolated;
- The importance of visuals/ infographics to communicate complex information to stakeholders during virtual discussions;
- To be flexible with timescales and amend a project where necessary to accommodate uncertainty;
- The importance of having an online presence e.g. as a means of communicating project aims and objectives and progress to external stakeholders.

## 2.10 A Future Programme's Potential Contribution to Recovery

The project leads identified the following ways in which a future programme could contribute to the recovery from the pandemic:

- Taking cognisance of COVID and the reflecting the changes implemented as a result of the pandemic including remote working;
- Ensuring there is a continued focus on improving the quality of the environment; and
- Ensuring there is adequate provision of outdoor space, such as pathways, to support the public's physical and mental wellbeing.

### 3. CURRENT POSITION OF THE PROJECTS

#### 3.1 Project Expenditure to Date

Table 3.1 provides a summary of the total estimated expenditure to December 2020 and also the proportion of ‘project time’ that has passed at December 2020.

Table 3.1: Project Costs – Anticipated and Estimated Actual December 2020 <sup>45</sup>						
Project	Anticipated Total (€)	Anticipated Total at December 2020	Anticipated % of total budget at December 2020	Total Estimated Expenditure in December 2020 (€)	% of total budget	Proportion of Timescale Passed at December 2020
<b>Objective 2.1</b>						
CANN	9,406,313	7,079,294	75%	4,672,218	50%	78%
CABB	4,935,983	3,714,628	75%	2,714,322	55%	78%
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>14,342,296</b>	<b>10,793,922</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>7,386,540</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Objective 2.2</b>						
COMPASS	7,726,441	5,784,871	75%	4,941,983	64%	78%
SWIM	1,393,075	1,338,912	96%	1,242,052	89%	98%
MarPAMM	6,361,317	4,144,696	65%	2,588,660	41%	69%
Sea Monitor 2	4,722,671	2,538,499	54%	2,152,762	46%	63%
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>20,203,504</b>	<b>13,806,978</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>10,925,457</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Objective 2.3</b>						
SWELL	35,047,604	25,689,105	73%	21,554,310	62%	75%
<b>Objective 2.4</b>						
Source to Tap	4,909,921	4,909,921	82%	2,585,108	53%	76%
Catchment Care	13,792,436	7,833,347	57%	3,653,957	26%	63%
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>18,702,357</b>	<b>12,743,268</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>6,239,065</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>88,295,761</b>	<b>63,033,273</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>46,105,372</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>-</b>

Key points to note in relation to expenditure (at December 2020) under INTERREG VA Programme<sup>46</sup> Investment Priority 2: Environment include:

- At an overall Axis level, the nine projects have incurred just over half (52%) of their total budget, which compares with a budgeted position of 71%. This may be of concern as projects are at least two-thirds (63%) of their way through their project period.
- However, whilst each of the nine projects are behind budget there are differences between them. For the SWIM and Sea Monitor 2 projects the differential is less than 10%. However, for the CANN (25%), Source to Tap (29%) and Catchment Care (31%) projects the differential is at least 25%.
- Of particular note is the CatchmentCARE project, which despite being 63% of the way through its project period, it has incurred only 26% of its budget, vis-à-vis the anticipated spend at this period of c. 68%. Whilst each of its individual cost categories is behind budget, the infrastructure and works category has only had minimal spend, equivalent to less than 2% of its budget. During a consultation, the project lead considered that there was potential for budget underspend at the end of their project period, albeit did not specify the amount, and also suggested the requirement for a 6-month time extension.

<sup>45</sup> Source: SEUPB’s EMS 14<sup>th</sup> December 2020

<sup>46</sup> For Northern Ireland, Ireland and Western Scotland

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

With the exception of the CABB project (which has achieved one of its two targets), discussion with each of the project partnerships indicates that their anticipated (approved) project outputs have, as of July 2020, not been achieved (albeit it was not expected of the projects at this stage in their implementation, as most have a 2023 delivery date). This is illustrated in the table below:

<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 July 2020)<sup>47</sup></b>
<b>CANN</b>			
Nature and biodiversity Surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status (hectares)	4,500ha	3,650ha	207ha
Conservation Action Plans	25	27	0
<b>CABB</b>			
Nature and biodiversity Surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status (hectares)	4,500ha	2,228ha	2,397ha
Conservation Action Plans	25	8	1
<b>COMPASS</b>			
A network of buoys for regional seas, including telemetry and oceanographic monitoring (e.g. for seals, cetaceans and salmonids)	1	1	0
Models developed to support the conversation of habitats and species	5	3	0
<b>SWIM</b>			
System for the prediction of bathing water quality and install real-time signage	1	1	0
<b>MarPAMM</b>			
Models developed to support the conversation of habitats and species	5	4	0
Marine management plans for designated protected areas complete	6	6	0
<b>Sea Monitor 2</b>			
Models developed to support the conversation of habitats and species	5	5	0
Marine management plans for designated protected areas complete	3	3	0
<b>SWELL</b>			
Additional population benefit from improved wastewater treatment	10,000	10,000	0
2 Sewage network and wastewater treatment projects completed to improve water quality in shared transitional waters	2	2	0
<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>47</sup> Source: Consultation with project leads at the end of August/start of September 2020

Given the fact that the projects have yet to achieve their anticipated (approved) project outputs, the nine projects are, therefore, at July 2020, have not yet achieved the Priority's Result Indicator Targets and Specific Objectives as illustrated below, but are understood making progress towards their achievement.

<b>Table 3.3: Progress towards the Priority's Result Indicator Targets and Specific Objectives</b>				
<b>Specific Objective</b>	<b>Result Indicator</b>	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Change between baseline and target (as of July 2020)</b>
<b>1.1</b> To promote cross-border co-operation 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%	0%
<b>1.2</b> 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	0
<b>1.3</b> 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%	0%
<b>1.4</b> 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%	0%

As a consequence of the ongoing COVID-19 related restrictions (at the time of writing – late December 2020), it will be important for SEUPB to continue to maintain close contact with the projects to assess on a real-time basis where individual projects are at risk of not substantially contributing to the Priority's Result Indicator Targets and Specific Objectives.



## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Conclusions

#### 4.1.1 *Impact of COVID-19*

The key findings from the Evaluation Team's consultation with project partners include:

- 5 of the 9 projects consider that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown and disruption to normal working practices have created a risk that their project will not fully achieve its aims and objectives.
- 7 of the 9 projects have made some adaptations to their project as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- 4 of the 9 projects consider that their project will likely require an extension to its originally anticipated timescales to complete successfully;
- 1 of the 9 projects considers that they will 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 writing (late December 2020) further restrictions are being implemented in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which may pose a significant risk to cross-border collaboration activities during their implementation.

#### 4.1.2 *The current position of the projects*

Specific project conclusions are detailed below:

##### CANN

Whilst the CANN project partnership indicates that the anticipated (approved) project outputs have, as of August 2020, not yet been achieved, progress has been made. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact and the associated restrictions may jeopardise the expected results of the project. In particular, the project partnership cited the reduced quantity of monitoring data, due to the loss of a field season, as having had a significant impact. The partnership also noted the threat of a second lockdown and associated restrictions, which may lead to further delays, as an additional risk to the project's expected results.

The CANN project is therefore behind schedule, with the project partnership of the view that there is a risk that the project may not fully achieve its aims and objectives and that it may no longer be feasible to deliver the project's planned activities within the original timeframe. The project lead also considered that it may not be possible to make up for the delays experienced as a result of COVID-19, as the project's work is seasonal and the lost time as a result of the COVID-19/lockdown measures cannot be made up without an extension to the project's timeframe.

The project lead noted that they would be able to deliver the project within its current budget and they were positive that they would spend the full budget allocation by the end of the anticipated project period. The Evaluation Team is of the view that there is a degree of risk that the project will not be able to deliver all of their planned activities within the original timeframe considering that as of December 2020, despite being more than three-quarters (78%) of the way through the originally anticipated project period the project has only spent 50% of its total budget (against a forecasted position of 75% at the same juncture).

It is understood that the CANN project will seek a project extension early in 2021.

## CABB

Despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the CABB project partnership had (in July 2020) exceeded its aspect of the '*Nature and biodiversity Surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status (hectares)*' output indicator achieving 2,397ha against a target of 2,228ha. However, it had only completed one of its 8 Conservation Action Plans.

The CABB project is of the view that the project is mostly on track with no substantial risk to the project fully achieving its aims and objectives. The project lead considers that it continues to be feasible to make up for the delays caused by COVID-19 and to deliver all of their project's planned activities, albeit a small (circa 3 months) project extension may be required. However, the partnership considers that there is a risk to the deliverability of some education deliverables as they cannot take place face to face.

Whilst it is noted that as of December 2020, despite being more than three-quarters (78%) of the way through their project period the project has only spent 55% of their total budget (against a forecasted position of 75% at the same juncture), the CABB project partnership anticipates that it will be able to deliver the project within its current budget provided the remaining large capital work is appointed to a contractor and does not have to go out for procurement again.

## COMPASS

The COMPASS project partnership considers that the project is mostly on track with no substantial risk to it fully achieving its aims and objectives, albeit a small (circa three months) project extension may be required.

Encouragingly, the project partnership does not consider that COVID-19 and/or the associated lockdown measures will pose a threat to the expected results of their project, albeit it has affected some aspects of the project's implementation. For example, the project was unable to complete fieldwork during lockdown, but instead completed work with data that had already been obtained. Positively, the project partnership consider that this early analysis may enhance the project.

In December 2020, the COMPASS project was more than three-quarters (78%) of the way through its originally anticipated project period, and had spent 64% of its total budget (against a forecasted position of 75% at the same juncture). Discussion with the COMPASS project partnership indicates that it considers that it will both be able to deliver the project within its current budget and be able to reach the project's anticipated level of expenditure by the end of the anticipated project period.

## SWIM

The SWIM project partnership considers that the project is mostly on track with no substantial risk to it fully achieving its aims and objectives with its originally anticipated timeframe (i.e. by December 2020). Indeed, the project partnership report that the project had faced no major delays as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the SWIM project lead was of the view that COVID-19 posed two potential minor project risks. The first relates to beach sampling - in NI less sampling was carried out than had been anticipated and in ROI sampling was delayed by a month due to restrictions. The second risk is that the erection of electronic signage may be delayed due to the furloughing of council staff, although it was not anticipated that this would affect the project's outputs;

The project partnership considers that it will spend the full budget allocation by the end of the anticipated project period. In December 2020, the project has only spent 89% of its total budget (against a forecasted position of 96% at the same juncture).

## MarPAMM

As a result of the COVID-19 related restrictions, aspects of the MarPAMM project's fieldwork activities could not be progressed and consequently the project is behind schedule. Discussion with the project partnership indicates their view that there is a risk that the project will not fully achieve its aims and objectives and that it may no longer be feasible to deliver all of their project's planned activities within the original timeframe. The partnership cited a lost fieldwork season and reduced monitoring and data collection activities meaning that their models to support the conservation of habitats and species are not as developed as they had envisaged at this juncture (i.e. December 2020). However, the project lead is hopeful that if the project were to be granted an extension (of circa six months), the project would be able to complete the required monitoring activity.

Nonetheless, the project partnership notes that if there are further periods of lockdown it may not be possible to make up for the delays. For example, the project has rescheduled some of its planned 2020 data collection cruises until 2021 but due to the uncertainty associated with the pandemic, the project is now unsure whether they will be able to proceed.

At December 2020, despite being more than two-thirds (69%) of the way through the originally anticipated project period, the project has only spent 41% of its total budget (against a forecasted position of 65% at the same juncture). Much of this underspend is understood to be as a result of having to reschedule the chartering of ships to 2021 and the lack of travel. However, the MarPAMM partnership continues to consider that it will reach the anticipated level of expenditure by the end of the anticipated project period, provided that any new lockdown restrictions do not materially slow the project's progress.

## Sea Monitor 2

As a result of the COVID-19 related restrictions, aspects of the Sea Monitor 2 project's fieldwork activities could not be progressed and consequently the project is behind schedule. Discussion with the project partnership indicates their view that there is a risk that the project will not fully achieve its aims and objectives and that it may no longer be feasible to deliver all of their project's planned activities within the original timeframe. The partnership cited being unable to complete a year's worth of marine research and data, with fieldwork and data collection not possible as the key impact of COVID-19 on the project. In addition, the project partnership notes that it may not be possible to make up for the delays caused by COVID-19 as species tracking is seasonal and there are only certain windows of the year where capturing, tagging, and tracking is possible. It is understood that the project will likely request an extension during early 2021.

In December 2020, despite being close to two-thirds (63%) of the way through the originally anticipated project period, the project has only spent 46% of its total budget (against a forecasted position of 54% at the same juncture). The Sea Monitor 2 project partnership believe that they will be able to deliver the project fully within its current budget, noting however that there will likely be underspend in the travel budget, albeit the partnership may submit a request for this budget to be reallocated to other aspects of the project.

## SWELL

As a result of the COVID-19 related restrictions, aspects of the SWELL project's fieldwork activities could not be progressed and consequently the project is behind schedule. Discussion with the project partnership indicates their view that there is a risk that the project will not fully achieve its aims and objectives and that it may no longer be feasible to deliver all of their project's planned activities within the original timeframe. In particular, it was noted that there has been delay concerning Irish Water's capital projects, which will have a knock-on effect by delaying post-improvement sampling activity.

Discussion with the project partnership indicates a concern that the ecosystem model may not be as comprehensive or robust as it might have been due to the reduced post-improvement sampling period. Furthermore, the partnership was concerned about the potential impact of a second lockdown (which

has now materialised) and its potential effect on NI Water's commissioning of capital projects, the sampling activity undertaken by AFBI and the Loughs Agency and the delivery of Irish Water's capital schemes. Irish Water may also face land issues and delays to planning approval or potentially refusal of planning. It is understood that the project will likely request an extension (of circa 3 or 4 months) during early 2021.

Nonetheless, the SWELL project partnership considers that it will be able to deliver the project fully within its current budget and will reach the anticipated level of expenditure by the anticipated project end date (albeit this is subject to SEUPB approving a budget reallocation request that has been submitted and a small extension being offered to the project).

#### Source to Tap

The Source To Tap project partnership is of the view that the project is mostly on track with no substantial risk to the project fully achieving its aims and objectives. However, they noted that it may not be feasible to deliver all of their project's planned activities within the original timeframe. For example, staff were not able to undertake sampling during 2020 as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

The Evaluation Team notes that as of December 2020, despite being three-quarters (76%) of the way through their project period, the project has only spent 53% of their total budget (against a forecasted position of 82% at the same juncture).

Nonetheless, the project partnership considers that if the project is granted an extension it continues to be feasible for it make up for the delays caused by COVID-19 and that they will be able to deliver the project within its current budget and reach their anticipated level of expenditure by the end of the anticipated project period.

#### CatchmentCARE

As a result of the COVID-19 related restrictions, aspects of the CatchmentCARE project's fieldwork activities could not be progressed and consequently the project is behind schedule. Discussion with the project partnership indicates their view that there is a risk that the project will not fully achieve its aims and objectives and that it may no longer be feasible to deliver all of their project's planned activities within the original timeframe. In particular, the project noted that the reduced levels of monitoring will be a risk to the anticipated project results and events will have to take place with much lower attendances, which will mean that they will be less impactful than originally anticipated. It is understood that the project will likely request an extension (of circa 6 months) during early 2021.

The Evaluation Team notes that as of December 2020, despite being almost two-thirds (63%) of the way through its project period, the project has only spent 26% of their total budget (against a forecasted position of 57% at the same juncture). Discussion with the project partnership indicates that it expects that it will not be able to reach its anticipated level of expenditure by the anticipated project end date. It was suggested to the Evaluation Team that the project planned to arrange a meeting with SEUPB to discuss how best to allocate the budget that will be underspent.

#### 4.1.3 Programme Expenditure Implications

Key points to note in relation to expenditure (at December 2020) under INTERREG VA Programme<sup>48</sup> Investment Priority 2: Environment include:

- At an overall Axis level, the nine projects have incurred just over half (52%) of their total budget, which compares with a budgeted position of 71%. This may be of concern as projects are at least two-thirds (63%) of their way through their project period.
- However, whilst each of the nine projects are behind budget there are differences between them. For the SWIM and Sea Monitor 2 projects the differential is less than 10%. However, for the CANN (25%), Source to Tap (29%) and Catchment Care (31%) projects the differential is at least 25%.
- Of particular note is the CatchmentCARE project, which despite being 63% of the way through its project period, it has incurred only 26% of its budget, vis-à-vis the anticipated spend at this period of c. 68%. Whilst each of its individual cost categories is behind budget, the infrastructure and works category has only had minimal spend, equivalent to less than 2% of its budget. During a consultation, the project lead considered that there was potential for budget underspend at the end of their project period, albeit did not specify the amount, and also suggested the requirement for a 6-month time extension.

#### 4.1.4 Progress towards Priority Axis Output & Result Indicators

Whilst, at July 2020, the nine projects are continuing to make progress towards the achievement of the eleven output indicators, tangible progress has only been recorded against two of them. The most progress had been under Objective 2.1, where 2,604 ha of habitats have been supported to attain a better conservation status, which is 42% and 57% lower than the programme target and combined project targets respectively.

With the exception of the CABB project (which has achieved one of its two targets), discussion with each of the project partnerships indicates that their anticipated (approved) project outputs have not yet been achieved (albeit it was not expected of the projects at this stage in their implementation, as most have a 2023 delivery date).

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<sup>48</sup> For Northern Ireland, Ireland and Western Scotland

**Table 4.1: Overview of progress made towards the Output Indicators**

Objective	Output Indicator	Programme Target	Combined project targets (based on project applications)	Total Actual Output for 9 projects	Variance from Programme Target	Variance from Combined project targets
Objective 2.1	4,500 ha of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status	4,500ha	5,878ha	<b>2,604ha</b>	-42%	-57%
	25 conservation action plans	25	35	<b>1</b>	-96%	-97%
Objective 2.2	1 network of buoys for regional seas, including telemetry and oceanographic monitoring (e.g. for seals, cetaceans and salmonids)	1	1	<b>0</b>	-	-
	5 models developed to support the conservation of marine habitats and species	5	12	<b>0</b>	-	-
	6 complete marine management plans for designated protected areas	6	9	<b>0</b>	-	-
	1 system for the prediction of bathing water quality and the installation of real-time signage	1	1	<b>0</b>	-	-
Objective 2.3	10,000 additional people benefiting from improved wastewater treatment	10,000	10,000	<b>0</b>	-	-
	2 sewage network and wastewater treatment projects completed to improve water quality in shared transitional waters	2	2	<b>0</b>	-	-
Objective 2.4	3 river water quality improvement projects completed	3	3	<b>0</b>	-	-
	50 cross-border groundwater monitoring wells installed	50	50	<b>0</b>	-	-
	1 cross-border drinking water Sustainable Catchment Area Management Plan	1	1	<b>0</b>	-	-

Given the fact that the projects have yet to achieve their anticipated (approved) project outputs, the nine projects have, therefore, at July 2020, not yet achieved the Priority's Result Indicator Targets and Specific Objectives as illustrated below, but are understood to be making progress towards their achievement.

As a consequence of the ongoing COVID-19 related restrictions (at the time of writing – late December 2020), it will be important for SEUPB to continue to maintain close contact with the projects to assess on a real-time basis where individual projects are at risk of not substantially contributing to the Priority's Result Indicator Targets and Specific Objectives.



## 4.2 Recommendations

1. Given the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be of great importance that SEUPB continues (as it has been doing throughout the pandemic) to regularly monitor the activity undertaken and progress made by each project. The Evaluation Team spoke with the projects at a time (the start of September 2020) when COVID-19 restrictions had been eased/lifted to some extent and projects may have been optimistic about their ability to achieve their aims and objectives within the original timeframe. However, at the time of writing (late December 2020), both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have announced new lockdown conditions that will last until at least mid-February 2021. The Evaluation Team considers that this will again impact upon the projects' ability to undertake fieldwork activities.
2. SEUPB should engage with projects as soon as possible to discuss potential changes to project activities, timelines or budgets (NB Subsequent discussion with SEUPB's Joint Secretariat during December 2020 indicates that it has 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 COVID-19 pandemic).