



CONSULTATIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS AND CITIZENS

Interreg Flanders – The Netherlands



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Preface

The European Commission has asked every Interreg programme to conduct public and stakeholder consultations to identify priorities for Interreg post-2027. In response, Interreg Flanders-The Netherlands has carried out extensive consultations with stakeholders and citizens in the programme area. This report explains the methodology used for these consultations and presents the findings.

Flanders and the Netherlands have long been interwoven with each other. A shared language, culture and traditions have created a strong sense of mutual understanding and connection. This bond has created opportunities for cooperation across various themes and sectors, even before the establishment of Interreg. Indeed, as the consultation findings reveal, some citizens in the programme area feel a stronger connection with their cross-border neighbours than with citizens from other parts of their country. Here, cooperation with their neighbours feels natural.

Despite these strong cultural and historical ties, there is room for improvement in cross-border cooperation. The historical connection between citizens often stands in contrast to the practical challenges they face, such as lack of mobility and administrative burdens. Interreg Flanders-The Netherlands has been working to address these challenges and foster cooperation between the two regions.

This report presents the data gathered from the consultations to improve Interreg in the next programming period.



Summary

The European Commission has asked every Interreg programme to conduct public and stakeholder consultations to identify priorities for Interreg post 2027. In response, Interreg Flanders-The Netherlands has carried out extensive consultations with stakeholders and citizens in the programme area.

We presented the stakeholders with the questions from the survey, which they answered jointly. We engaged with the citizens in three ways: Street talks in which we had in-depth discussions with citizens on the street on what the difficulties are of living in the border area and what opportunities they see for cooperation; an online survey; a session at the Dutch European Youth Parliament. In total we gathered data from 89 people during the street talks and 17 during the online survey. The European Youth Parliament wrote a resolution which was accepted.

Stakeholders highlighted limited access to services, education, health care and recreation across the border as disadvantages. They also emphasized the need for a focus on economic development, social policy and environmental action. Positive feedback was given regarding the combinations of business types that are often fostered in Interreg projects and the implementation of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs). They identified further opportunities in promoting labour mobility, target group engagement, and knowledge-sharing mechanisms.

Based on the consultations, we found that while the majority of the respondents enjoyed living in the border region in general, they experienced disadvantages as well. The increasing shortage of available public transportation and other facilities, the lack of job opportunities and over-tourism were mentioned as drawbacks of living near the border. Cross-border workers stated the complexity of navigating two bureaucratic systems as disadvantages and business entrepreneurs have experienced a gap in knowledge of how to do business of the borders. Moreover, the respondents felt that climate change and the energy transition were important themes where more cooperation was necessary, as well as the support of small and medium enterprises. Additionally, employment, education and health care were repeatedly mentioned.

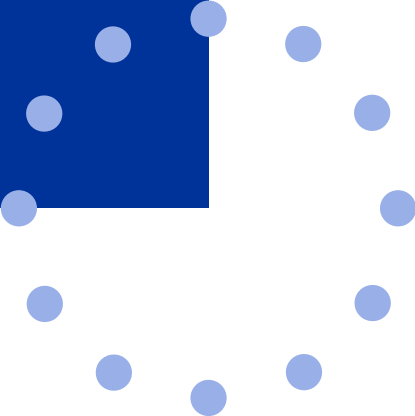
Based on this input, the program joint secretariate formulated several recommendations¹. Firstly, to preserve that which is going well, such as a cost-based delivery mechanism working with Simplified Cost Options, cooperation among different types of organisations, and initiatives to improve the liveability of the border regions. Secondly, to continue to prioritize green and social initiatives, and projects that aid cross-border workers in the next programme period. Thirdly, to introduce optional structures for capitalisation and knowledge sharing between projects. Lastly, while many of the respondents had knowledge of the existence of several Interreg projects, they did not know that they were in fact Interreg projects. Therefore, we recommend to put even more focus on enhancing the visibility of Interreg.

With these recommendations, we are certain that Interreg will continue to be a success in the next programme period.

¹ These represent the common elements the joint secretariate of Interreg Flanders-The Netherlands sees in the citizens and stakeholders consultation. The viewpoint and recommendations of the programme as such are presented in chapter 1. On the citizens input it of course has to be noted that no conclusions can be made about the opinions and priorities of all of the inhabitants of the border region as such (the small number of respondents can never be regarded as a statistically valid sample).



1. Consultations of stakeholders



1.1 Main stakeholders consulted

In order to prepare for Interreg post-2027, it is important to listen to and take into account the views of stakeholders and citizens. That is why DG Regio asked the Interreg programmes to survey their stakeholders and citizens in 2024 and to share the results. The following pages set out the combined vision of the members of the Interreg Flanders-Netherlands Programme Monitoring Committee, representing central, regional and local governments, labour and employers' representatives, nature organisations and knowledge institutions.

The Interreg Flanders-Netherlands Monitoring Committee consists of:

- The Kingdom of the Netherlands (Ministry of Economic Affairs)
- Flanders (Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship)
- Province of Antwerp
- Province of Belgian Limburg
- Province of Dutch Limburg
- Province of East Flanders
- Province of Flemish Brabant
- Province of North Brabant
- Province of West Flanders
- Province of Zeeland
- Association of Dutch Municipalities
- Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities
- Representation on behalf of the Southern Netherlands knowledge institutions
- Flemish knowledge institutions, represented by VLIR and VHLORA
- Dutch environmental federations (represented by the ZMF)
- Flemish environmental organisations (represented by BBL)
- Social and Economic Council of Flanders (SERV)
- Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER)
- United Associations (umbrella organization for Flemish NGO's)
- The Dutch College for Human Rights
- Unia (Flemish equal rights NGO)

1.2 Summary of the input on the key questions

The following is their combined input to the 'post-27'-questions from DG REGIO.

1.2.1 Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

Living near a border is not always seen as a disadvantage by people who are used to it. However, the border exists and creates the factual situation that on both sides of the border there is a different labour market, a different education system, a different tax system, etc. These different systems can sometimes prevent access. This is not in line with the basic ideas of the European Internal Market.

Living near the border is therefore mainly a disadvantage. Although the border offers people and organisations an opportunity to come into contact with each other and learn from each other, this is often not obvious. Border areas are often sparsely populated and the range of services, suppliers, education, health care, recreational facilities across on one side of the border are often not easily accessible for citizens on the other side of the border.

The European cohesion policy is important for all regions as a means of tackling the challenges that individual European regions face due to their specific location. For border regions, the cohesion policy and the attention it pays to cross-border cooperation are of paramount importance. Thanks to the cohesion policy and the position of the Interreg



programme in it, the opportunities near the border are exploited and the disadvantages compensated. The mental threshold of the border is removed, thanks to people-oriented projects, among other things.

Border regions are disadvantaged in more developed areas as well, and there are opportunities for economic development, stronger social policy and more sensible responses to environmental challenges in cross-border cooperation. Certain challenges are substantial in more developed (border) areas, e.g. in the environmental domain. While solutions are generated and innovations are carried out in core areas, they can only find their way into society, government and business through exchange and learning from each other, across borders.

1.2.2 Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

When companies and knowledge institutions on both sides of the border join forces and innovate together, the productivity of the entire area increases. Especially when this collaboration focuses on innovation to the benefit of social challenges, added value is created for the entire area.

In the field of environment (water, air, nitrogen, soil), collaboration is not only useful but necessary. After all, nature cannot be controlled by national borders. The management of nature reserves, the preservation of biodiversity, tackling the consequences of global warming (e.g. freshwater availability, flood risks and the rising sea level) as well as its causes, all benefit from an approach that is coordinated across the border. Although the differences in the legal systems between both sides of the border means that problems may arise at different intensities (as is the case for the nitrogen problem).

The potential for collaboration within the Flemish-Dutch border region is especially high when it comes to important environment-related social challenges, such as the energy transition, raw material security and the circular economy. The good projects that are currently being realised here are evidence of this.

In addition to the benefits to environment and nature, people benefit from cross-border cooperation as well. When employment across the border runs more smoothly, education and further training can be taken up jointly. People can learn from each other, fewer people will fall by the wayside on the labour market and bottlenecks on both sides of the border can be solved more easily.

In the field of higher education, the potential for territorial cooperation is very great. When universities join forces in a cross-border region, a powerful cross-border education system can emerge. Working from an economically integrated ecosystem is relevant, but is more difficult if a national border runs through it. Nevertheless, connection based on the strengths of the higher education institutions is important in order to be able to capitalise on the economic potential of an area as a whole.

1.2.3 What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?

The Interreg programme enables projects that otherwise would not be feasible. The powerful connection between knowledge institutions, SMEs, public institutions and more contributes to an extra boost for innovation, especially because the different ways of working on both sides of the border gives an extra dimension to innovation. One of the strengths of Interreg is that there is room for broadly composed partnerships (ecosystems) and a wide range of specific objectives.

The Flanders-The Netherlands programme has been very successful in involving SMEs in (green) innovation and demonstration projects. This is an aspect that we are proud of and that we certainly want to continue to focus on. This undoubtedly also applies to agricultural entrepreneurs who are facing a green transition, for example in the area of nitrogen emissions.



Moreover, the increased possibilities for Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) have been received as a great relief. They significantly reduce the administrative burden, especially on SME partners who are poorly equipped to declare all kinds of often small real costs. It is vital to retain the essence of these instruments (without underlying control). It is positive that regional governments play an important role in the implementation of the Interreg programmes. As an intermediary authority, provinces have knowledge of and a feel for the field.

1.2.4 What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?

Collaboration in our projects is going well. Results are often achieved through co-creation and these results from the projects are implemented on both sides of the border.

Public transport across the border (and mobility in general) is a sore point. The national border seems to be an insurmountable barrier for trains and buses. In the 30 years that Interreg has existed, cross-border public transport even seems to have deteriorated.

Labour mobility has remained a sore point as well. Although the programme has facilitated great projects, they sometimes take a little longer to get off the ground. Even in a border area that shares a language, it is difficult to coordinate supply and demand on the joint labour market, to increase cross-border mobility and to ensure that people with a distance to the labour market also have opportunities. Realizing a real 360-degree labour market with optimal labour mobility remains difficult.

The same applies to legal border obstacles. This theme is new in the current program period and we are hopeful that we can make an effective difference, but for the time being we are not yet in a position in which border obstacles and problematic legal differences can be easily resolved.

In various environmental dossiers such as PFAS and nitrogen, there are challenges in cross-border cooperation, which obstruct cooperation.

A final challenge lies in the area of (citizen and target group) participation. We want to continue to focus on involving target groups and implementing project goals in co-creation.

1.2.5 What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?

There are of course the known obstacles: limited knowledge within organisations about the possibilities across the border, differences in regulations and frameworks, limited cross-border public transport and mobility (as a result of which parties are less likely to seek each other out), sometimes also cultural obstacles. These are obstacles that we are trying to remove via Interreg, but this requires a continuous effort. Cross-border cooperation offers numerous advantages, but incentives for this remain necessary.

The biggest obstacles are in the various legal systems on both sides of the border. For example, in the field of education; the organisation, funding and certification. Furthermore, aspects in the field of healthcare, taxation, pensions, and more. In concrete terms, we see a number of practical obstacles in the project-based cooperation that is pursued via Interreg. We have identified these practical obstacles in other forums (e.g. Interact) as well, in preparation for a new Interreg programme.

1.2.6 Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?

Interreg works on a project basis and in many cases this approach works fine. But in specific domains this also forms a limitation. For example, for public transport, operating subsidies could be a better instrument. This will not be directly possible via Interreg, but another form of EU stimuli for sustainable cross-border public transport could mean enormous added value for stimulating cross-border interaction and thus also support the Interreg objective.



1.2.7 What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future of Interreg?

A positive innovation in the next Interreg period could be to create more connections between similar projects across cross-border programme areas. Projects can still learn a lot from each other: how do they approach the cross-border theme, which bottlenecks do they tackle, how can their insights be included in a similar project in other cross-border areas. We therefore advocate a stronger impulse for capitalisation between projects and programmes, but without mandatory elements.

1.2.8 Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?

In areas such as climate adaptation and mitigation, sustainable tourism, biodiversity and research infrastructure, infrastructure projects are certainly useful. In particular, we notice that cross-border jointly-used research infrastructure and cross-border innovation ecosystems facilitated by Interreg, create a great added value and lasting impact on the programme area. Knowledge infrastructure such as the realisation of a laboratory environment for educational innovation, healthcare innovation or technology innovation is very valuable.

1.2.9 What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country?

The governance structure of the programme works well. A continued focus on simplification (technical aspects, e.g. SCOs) is needed. Within the governance of the programme and in the programme partnership it is important to continue to invest in sufficient external orientation and mutual knowledge regarding the priorities of the partners.

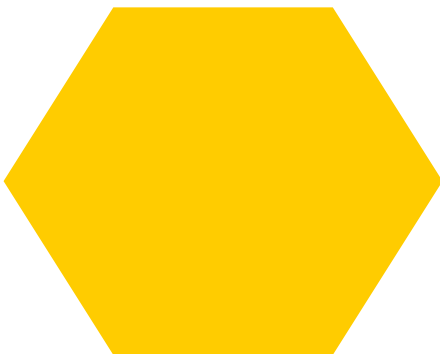
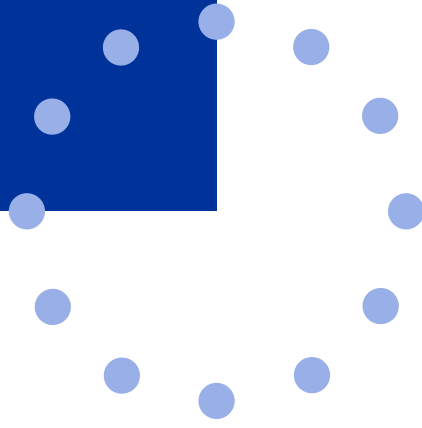
1.2.10 What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

Projects that actually create a lasting connection to strengthen each other; projects that stimulate something that then continues to have an impact on the entire programme area.

There are still so many dream projects to be realised in such diverse domains and with such diverse target groups and partnerships that listing them all is an impossible task. Interreg Flanders-The Netherlands is prepared to put in the work to make all these dream projects come true!



2. Citizen Consultation



2.1 Methods of consultations

In order to discover the needs and preferences of the citizens in our project area, we have used three methods. Through this multi-faceted approach, we gathered a wide range of perspectives from people of different ages, locations and backgrounds. This chapter will explain these methods, describe the citizens consulted and summarize the gathered data.

The methods we used are: street talks, where we spoke with citizens in longer, in-depth conversations; an online survey; a break-out session at the Dutch European Youth Parliament.

2.1.1 Street Talks



Rather than relying solely on traditional surveys that often skim the surface of issues, we sought to engage citizens in more personal, in-depth and open conversations. This was a way for us to go deeper into what citizens of the project area are missing in the border region. This semi-structured interview approach allowed for guided yet free-flowing conversations. It provided the flexibility to ask clarifying questions and to go deeper into responses, whilst also providing a safety net of questions to keep the conversation on track. This way, we garnered more detailed responses than if we had used a set survey with predetermined choice-options. This allowed us to uncover not only what people thought, but also why they felt certain ways and pinpoint specific challenges and opportunities that we might not have thought of ourselves.

Furthermore, these street talks provided an opportunity to raise awareness about Interreg. During the conversations, we explained the programme's objectives and activities, giving examples of Interreg projects that were realised nearby. This increased awareness of Interreg and the EU's presence in the region.

In preparation of these consultations, we prepared a semi-structured conversation guideline, using the questions from the 'Guide for consultations to shape the future of Interreg – toolkit' as a basis. The flexible framework ensured we could gather the needed information while also allowing conversations to flow naturally, giving the research a qualitative focus, rather than a quantitative one.

In order to do these street talks, we enlisted the help of two IVY-volunteers and ordered an inflatable landmark. Armed with the guideline and the landmark, one IVY and one Interreg employee would go to different locations near the border, both in the Netherlands and in Flanders, and scout for possible respondents. The locations were chosen to ensure equal representation of both Dutch and Flemish citizens, between cities and villages, and often near an Interreg project (from our programme but also from overlapping Interreg programmes) to bring up during conversation. The majority of these outings were done between June and September. The sun and the summer vacation meant that many people had time and were in a good mood. The inflatable landmark ensured that we caught their interest as well.



At these locations, we engaged in the semi-structured conversations. These talks often lasted around 10 to 15 minutes, but some lasted more than half an hour with the longest conversation lasting for two hours. One of the 'street' conversations was a presentation and following in-depth discussion with a group of citizens in the village of Udenhout, not too far from the border (on the Dutch side). In this case the group of approximately 20 citizens, mainly small local entrepreneurs, were asked the questions from the interview guideline and discussed their opinions which each other and with our program director.

2.1.2 Online survey

While the street talks provided high-quality, in-depth information, they were very time intensive. To complement these efforts and increase our reach, we created an online survey, using the same questions. We distributed a QR-code linking to the survey at events in the border region and promoted the survey through the newsletter and on LinkedIn.

2.1.3 The European Youth Parliament

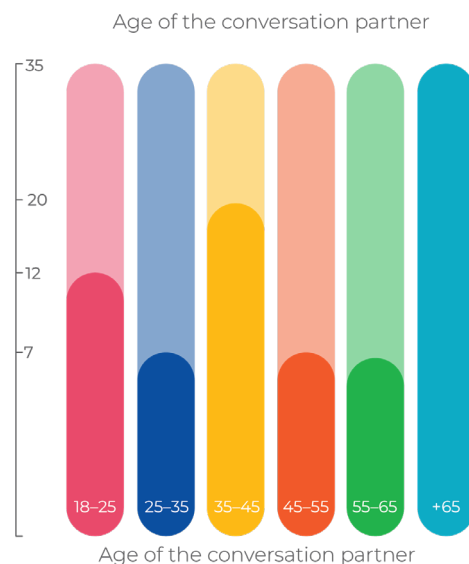
Understanding the perspectives of young people was an additional priority. In May, we therefore attended an event of the Dutch European Youth Parliament. There, their REGI-committee, comprising 9 members aged 15 to 25 – discussed the future of Interreg. Their discussion led to a resolution on the topic, which was then approved by the entire Parliament, consisting of 100 young participants.



2.2 Main citizens consulted

To properly gauge the needs and wants of the people in the border region, we focussed on **in-person, qualitative conversations**. During the consultation period, we have spoken to 89 people, of whom 44 were women and 45 who were men. Their ages ranged from young adults (18) to those well into their 90s. We approached them in border towns and cities, often not far from where they lived. This increased the representation-value of the sample, as we have gotten to speak with a diverse mix of people, including but not limited to:

- Young people having to decide whether to stay in their hometown or moving to the big city for better career opportunities;
- Cross-border workers having to navigate two administrative systems;
- Small business-owners, such as restaurant and shop owners;
- Residents with deep roots in the region, as well as newcomers with fresh perspectives on life near the border.



We held these interviews in both larger cities and smaller towns ensuring a range of perspectives. The places we have been to are:

Belgium: Antwerp, Baarle-Hertog, Essen, Ghent

The Netherlands: Sas van Gent, Baarle-Nassau, Etten-Leur, Maastricht, Middelburg, Sluiskil, Terneuzen, Udenhout

Through **the online survey**, we gathered information from 17 additional people, who were located across the programme area of Interreg Flanders-Netherlands. Of these 17 people, nine were men, six were women, and two people indicated 'other' on the survey. Their ages ranged from under 18 to over 65.

Lastly, at **the European Youth Parliament**, we gathered direct input from 9 members of the REGI-Committee, aged between 15 and 25. Their resolution was then approved by the entire Parliament, consisting of 100 young participants, reflecting the voice of the next generation.



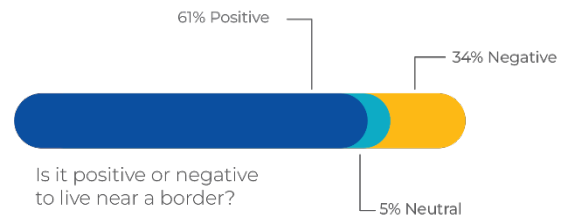
2.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

The street conversations and the online survey were designed around the 5 questions provided in the consultation toolkit. This section combines the insights of both the street conversations (89 respondents) and the online survey responses (17 respondents). Together, there were 106 respondents in total.

2.3.1 Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

64 people out of 106 respondents stated that it was an advantage to live close to the border. Their most common reasons are:

- Enjoying cultural exchanges and interactions with their cross-border neighbours;
- Enjoying going to the other country for leisure activities such as shopping, cycling, visiting friends and family;
- Taking advantage of the price differences for goods such as groceries and fuel by doing groceries on the other side of the border;
- Increased business generated from visitors from across the border;
- and the feeling of connection through shared history and culture.



Indeed, several citizens of the smaller towns on the Dutch side of the border stated that their region has always been more focussed on Belgium than on the rest of the country, and vice versa. Historically, the provinces close to the border have always been connected, in their experience, and they felt this connection through their shared culture and shared history. *“Before the euro, half of the money in circulation were Belgian Franks”* said an elderly man from Maastricht. *“Secretly, we are a little bit Belgian”* said a Dutch woman in Terneuzen. The Dutch respondents stated that they frequently go shopping, visit nature and seek medical care in Belgium, as Belgian facilities are often closer in proximity than their Dutch variant. Belgian citizens from smaller villages stated a higher focus towards the Netherlands when searching for job opportunities.

This focus away from their own country towards their neighbour is further stimulated by the feeling of being ignored or overlooked by their central government, which is mentioned as a negative consequence of living near the border by several of the respondents from the smaller villages. Their location is often isolated from the rest of the country, either physically or through a lack of road infrastructure and public transportation. *“It is easier to cross the border and go to Ghent than it is to get to the rest of the Netherlands. Cheaper too.”* Said a respondent from Sluiskil. Sluiskil lies near the Belgian border. Leaving Sluiskil requires paying a toll to cross the water separating them from the rest of the Netherlands, symbolizing the area’s disconnectedness with the rest of the country.

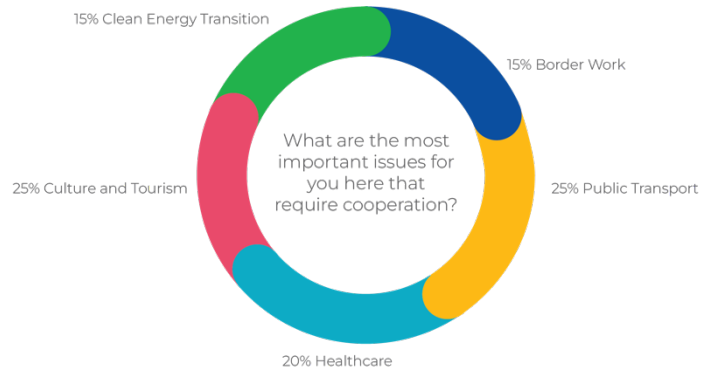
Indeed, while the vast majority of the respondents enjoyed living at the border, they still had their concerns and needs when it comes to the disadvantages. Twenty-five respondents considered living near the border completely disadvantageous. In addition to feeling overlooked, they mentioned challenges, such as:

- The complex bureaucratic processes of cross-border living and working. Often, the border workers we spoke with had had a difficult time understanding what they needed to take care of regarding their taxes, health care and pensions.
- Limited public transport options, both for cross-border travel and travelling within their own country. This issue is especially significant for young people, those without a car, and the elderly. Respondents experience using public transportation to be difficult and time-consuming, if it is possible at all. Moreover, through the years, they have seen public transportation deteriorate even further, cementing the feeling of being deemed as less of a priority by their governments.
- Over-tourism, with Dutch tourists crowding Antwerp and Ghent, and Belgian tourists flocking Middelburg. During the summer, citizens of these cities often see their city centres being overcrowded and sometimes vandalized by tourists.



- The knowledge gap in possibilities to do business across the border was felt as the most pertinent problem for local entrepreneurs.

16 of the 106 respondents had no strong opinions about living near the border. These were mostly citizens of bigger cities, such as Antwerp and Ghent, where all facilities are nearby. For them, the border played a minimal role in their day-to-day lives. Several expressed a diminished sense of living in a border region.



2.3.2 In the place where you live, what are the main topics where cooperation is needed?

The respondents have proven themselves quite ambitious in their wishes for the area. The range of themes indicated of needing more cooperation were as diverse as the project area itself, ranging from health care to telecommunications to harmonizing tax systems and fostering cooperation between the harbours of Antwerp and Rotterdam. The topics of climate change, mobility, and assistance to border workers were most frequently mentioned. The following summarizes their wishes for cooperation.

- **Climate change and the energy transition**
26 people mentioned that they would like to see more cooperation in mitigating climate change or facilitating the energy transition. Climate change is a topic that is on a lot of people’s minds, and they see chances both in both the development and implementation of new technology. Interreg Flanders-The Netherlands already has several projects in both categories and it is good to know that that is something citizens truly want. One couple specifically highlighted the need for more cooperation between the harbours of Rotterdam and Antwerp to make them more sustainable. They encompassed what cooperation could do for the climate best: *“They should not compete with each other to be the biggest but work together to be the most efficient.”* This is not only true for the harbours, but for Flanders and the Netherlands as a whole.
- **Border workers**
The second most mentioned theme concerns border workers. Several respondents shared their experience as border workers, expressing their frustrations with the administrative hurdle involved in working across the border. They explained that they found it rather difficult to navigate the administrative routes they had to take to pay their taxes and enjoy the benefits they were entitled to. When notified that there were several cross-border information points for the administrative hurdles, they were positively surprised but also frustrated that they did not know about them.
- **Public transport**
Quite a few mentioned that while they loved visiting the neighbouring country, it was difficult and expensive to do so using public transportation. Over time, citizens have seen the offer of public transportation becoming less and less, restricting their access to the rest of the country. They would like to see this matter solved.
- **Health care**
Healthcare was another prominent theme. For example, many Dutch residents already seek medical care in Ghent. While specific solutions were not proposed, respondents felt that healthcare deserved greater attention, particularly as both regions face staff shortages and aging populations. Through projects such as CrossCare and StimulanZ, Interreg Flanders-Netherlands has already been stimulating health care innovation and promoting solutions to reduce the staff shortages and keeping the quality of care for the elderly, which respondents reacted positively towards.
- **Employment**
Lastly, several of the younger people and parents stated that they are worried about employment in the region. Many of the young people would like to stay in the region but move away from the border to find work. One 23-year-old mentioned: *“There is less economic activity at the border, which leads to less jobs and facilities. As a result, young*



people move to bigger cities like Rotterdam and Amsterdam.” Several respondents stated that they would like to see more opportunities in the region, not only for young people, but also for small and medium enterprises. Currently, there are several projects to connect young workers and people with a distance to the labour market to work in the area. Moreover, Interreg focusses on supporting SMEs in their projects, creating more jobs. However, there are still things that can and need to be done.

Additional suggestions for projects were cultural exchanges between schools, an international dance class, enhanced cooperation during pandemics, streamlining grocery and gas prices, and even very ambitious ideas like merging Flanders and the Netherlands to become one country. We will take these ideas under advisement.

2.3.3 Can you name an Interreg project that you find useful in the place where you live?

Fourteen respondents knew what Interreg was and could name a project. Eleven of them had been involved in an Interreg project before. The other 92 respondents did not know Interreg. However, once informed about Interreg's role in funding local projects, respondents reacted positively, with many expressing surprise: "I didn't know Europe does this kind of useful work." This highlighted the need for increased visibility of Interreg's contributions, but also demonstrating the value of the two-way street conversations.

While most did not know what Interreg was, many recognized projects like Brabant Kust de Kempen, the Einstein Telescope and the different projects at the 'De Oude Dokken' site in Ghent. They had not connected these projects with Interreg, but they did appreciate their existence. When informed about other Interreg projects nearby, the reactions were positive as well. This indicates to us that while we are funding the right projects, the visibility of Interreg requires more attention.

2.3.4 In the daily life, what are the biggest difficulties for cooperation?

Citizens themselves mostly did not experience cooperation difficulties firsthand. However, they reiterated their concerns about the lack of public transportation, the administrative obstacles, and price differences between supermarket and gas stations. The last of which, they feel are unfair to shop owners on the more expensive side of the border. They also mentioned difficulties they had during Covid. Different Covid regulations created a lot of confusion and inconvenience for those that had to cross the border often, especially in Baarle-Hertog and Baarle-Nassau where they had to adhere to different regulations every 100 meters. Two respondents proposed projects in which pandemic regulations are more coordinated in border areas.

2.3.5 What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

None of the respondents could come up with a "cooperation project of their dreams", despite our attempts to brainstorm together on the spot. They did reiterate, however, that they would like to see projects around the themes named in question 2.

Moreover, they stated that they find cooperation in and of itself important and that it should continue to exist, as it promotes mutual understanding and brings people closer together. *"International cooperation is a good way to counter nationalism. We can work on that together."*



2.4 The European Youth Parliament

The resolution written by the European Youth Parliament can be found here: [REGI - European Youth Parliament the Netherlands](#).

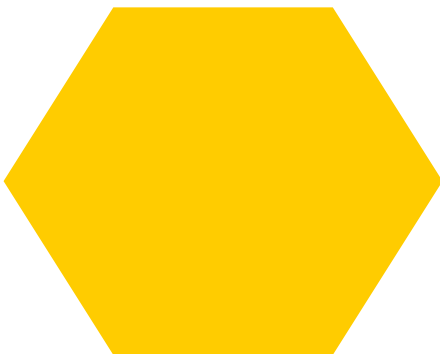
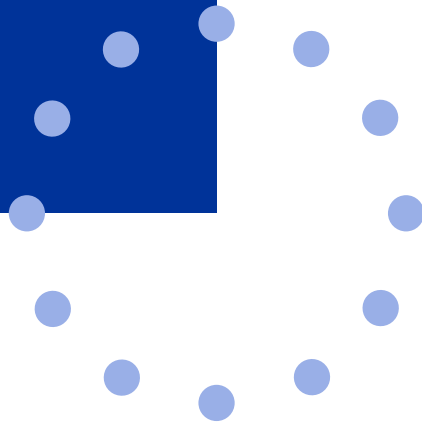
In its resolution, the Parliament reiterates the need for increased mobility across the border and the administrative difficulties for border workers. Moreover, the participants expressed concern for the ability of Emergency Medical Services to easily provide care on the other side of the border. The Parliament did, however, approve of the Cross Border Coordination Points that are being set up and would like to see the application procedure for NGOs and small businesses simplified when applying for Interreg funding.

2.5 Interesting quotes

During our conversations and through the online survey, we have heard many interesting and inspiring quotes. Here are some of the things that were said to us during the consultations that embody the spirit of Interreg:



3. Recommendations for post-2027



The following remarks represent the common elements the joint secretariate of Interreg Flanders-The Netherlands sees in the citizens and stakeholders consultation. The viewpoint and recommendations of the programme as such were presented in chapter 1. On the citizens input it of course has to be noted that no conclusions can be made about the opinions and priorities of all of the inhabitants of the border region as such (the small number of respondents can never be regarded as a statistically valid sample).

Interreg enables cross-border cooperation across Europe, connecting people and supporting projects that enhance cohesion within the EU while stimulating economic activity in border regions. To optimize its focus for the next programming period, we gathered input from stakeholders and citizens about their needs and wishes for the programme. Based on this feedback, we conclude that in many ways, Interreg is already on the right track. Interreg would, therefore, benefit from building on its existing strengths and addressing areas needing improvement. Below are our recommendations for ensuring continued success beyond 2027.

3.1 Build on successes and preserve what works

Stakeholders highlighted several aspects of Interreg that are functioning effectively and should be retained. For instance, the introduction of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) is widely regarded as a success and should remain. The biggest simplification for the next programming period would now be to keep our focus on the SCO-based delivery system, which works. Interreg also facilitates projects that provide significant community benefits but might not have received sufficient funding otherwise. Additionally, the diverse mix of organizations within these projects fosters innovation. These two aspects need to be preserved.

3.2 Prioritize climate, social cohesion, and cross-border workers

Stakeholders and citizens alike expressed strong support for ongoing efforts in areas such as climate change, social activities, and support for cross-border workers. This indicates that Interreg is on the right track and should continue prioritizing these areas post 2027.

Climate and Energy Transition: Respondents underscored the importance of green projects that mitigate climate change and advance the energy transition. Interreg Flanders-the Netherlands already supports initiatives in climate research, nature restoration, and renewable energy. We recommend retaining Policy Objective 2, "A Greener Europe," or a similar objective for the next programming period.

Social Inclusion and Labour Mobility: Stakeholders emphasized the need for greater focus on labour mobility and education. Citizens expressed a desire for diverse job opportunities beyond IT and healthcare, alongside stronger support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Current efforts connecting individuals with a distance to the labour market to relevant employers are highly valued.

Additionally, an emerging issue highlighted by citizens, particularly in larger tourist cities, is the overwhelming number of visitors. Interreg Flanders-Netherlands has already initiated projects that promote sustainable tourism by preventing overcrowding and distributing tourists more evenly across regions. Although these initiatives are still in their early stages, they represent a promising approach that aligns with community needs. Having the opportunity to fund projects such as these, is appreciated.

Support for Cross-Border Workers: While Cross-Border Coordination Points provide valuable guidance, not all workers have access to them or find the process straightforward. Additional efforts are required to simplify and expand these services. It should therefore remain possible to support projects like these in the next programming period.



3.3 Facilitate knowledge sharing and capitalization

To enhance the long-term impact of Interreg projects, we recommend introducing structures that facilitate knowledge sharing and project capitalization. Encouraging communication between similar projects would allow participants to learn from each other, reducing inefficiencies and promoting collective progress. Currently, much valuable knowledge remains isolated within individual projects.

3.4 Enhance visibility of Interreg

Visibility remains a challenge for Interreg. While many citizens express enthusiasm once they learn about the programme, widespread awareness is still lacking. Feedback indicates that many desired themes are already being addressed by Interreg projects, but this is not widely recognized. We recommend continued efforts to improve communication and outreach, ensuring that citizens understand the programme's contributions and opportunities for involvement.

3.5 Address cross-border mobility through broader collaboration

Cross-border mobility emerged as a major concern for stakeholders and citizens, who highlighted the high costs and time demands associated with travel across borders. This limits access to facilities and opportunities on either side of the border. While this is an important issue, it lies beyond the authority of Interreg Flanders-the Netherlands usual project partners. We recommend that the Commission engage with different forms of EU stimuli for sustainable cross-border public transport.

3.6 Conclusion

The feedback gathered reaffirms the crucial role of Interreg in fostering cross-border cooperation and improving the quality of life in border regions. By building on successes, addressing identified challenges and adapting to evolving needs, the Interreg Flanders-Netherlands programme can continue to make significant contributions beyond 2027.

