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## **Oireachtas Committee meeting with Regional Assemblies**

### **“Matters relating to Unlocking EU Funding”**

#### **Joint Committee on European Union Affairs**

Ref: JCEUA I-480

Wednesday 18th October 2023, 10am, Room LH 2000

### **Order of Presentation**

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Thank you Cathaoirleach, thank you Members. On behalf of the 3 Regional Assemblies in Ireland, The Northern & Western Regional Assembly, The Southern Regional Assembly and The Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly, I would like to thank you for inviting us to this morning's hearing. My name is Terry Connolly, and I am from the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly.

I am joined here today by:

- Dr. Travis O'Doherty National Contact Point for the Northern Periphery and Arctic Interreg Programme, and for the Atlantic Area Interreg Programme. Travis comes from the Northern & Western Regional Assembly.
- Dr. Karl Murphy National Contact Point for the URBACT Programme, and for the European Urban Initiative. Karl is also from the Eastern & Midlands Regional Assembly.
- And Rose Power, Programme Executive from the Southern Regional Assembly.

The 3 Regional Assemblies play a crucial role in the Administration, Management, Promotion and certification of EU Funds, ensuring compliance with all National and EU Regulations, achieving program objectives, and helping the promotion of sustainable regional development.

In our short time with you this morning, my colleagues and I wish to give you a brief overview of some of the work we do in this regard and also a briefing on the EU Programmes we work on.

Historically, Regional Assemblies in Ireland have been the Managing Authorities of the Regional Operational Programmes since the late 1990's and this will continue into the 2021 to 2027 programming Period.

The NWRA and SRA will act as the Managing Authority for the 2 ERDF Regional Programmes and EMRA will act as Managing Authority for the Just Transition Fund.

The Regional Assemblies also act as **National Contact Point** for Several European territorial cooperation (ETC) or Interreg Programmes. These programmes, within the family of Cohesion Funding, are designed to promote cooperation between regions and countries to help their economic and social development, to ensure that no region is left behind and no place feels forgotten. The National contact Point Role is a crucial link between EU Programmes and Irish Stakeholders across the country.

The National Contact role is varied: from providing Information and Guidance to potential applicants, the Promotion and Dissemination of Programme Information, Application Assistance during the call process, and assistance with partnership creation. They serve as a bridge between the programme management structures and potential applicants.



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The Assemblies also act as **First Level Control** or Auditor for Irish Partners looking to drawdown funds from EU Programmes. This role requires a deep understanding of EU and National Rules and Regulations to ensure only regular expenditure gets reported to the Programme and subsequently to the Commission.

**The Irish Regions European Office**, managed by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, is based in Brussels and represents the three Regional Assemblies and the 31 local authorities of Ireland. The Irish Regions Office focus is on bringing the EU closer to the wider local government sector and vice versa.

The IREO has four main functions by which it seeks to provide timely and relevant guidance and advisory services to stakeholders in order to inform and facilitate their individual and collective understanding of, and engagement in, European activities. These are:

1. Policy – to monitor and report on relevant EU policy developments and enable input into the policy-making process where possible.
2. Committee of the Regions – to provide the secretariat to the Irish delegation to the Committee of the Regions and to work to enhance the strategic linkages between their activities and the priorities of Irish local and regional government.
3. Funding and financing – to highlight opportunities and assist with the development of quality involvement in EU funding programmes and initiatives. And
4. Networking – to represent our stakeholders' interests by identifying and engaging with decision-makers and by participating in collaborative value-added activity including relevant European networks, associations and partnerships.

#### **Regarding the Interreg Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme:**

The NPA area consists of regions inside the EU Member States of Finland, Ireland, and Sweden, as well as regions outside the EU: such as Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland. Sparse population and extreme peripherality from the economic centres of the EU are defining characteristics of the territory. From 2021 to 2027, the Programme will allocate nearly €47 million to projects and is funded by the ERDF. Grant funding rates of up to 65% are available.



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The programme has three priorities:

Firstly: Strengthening the innovation capacity for resilient and attractive NPA communities

Secondly: Strengthening the capacity for climate change adaptation, and resource sufficiency in NPA communities

and Thirdly: Strengthening the organisational capacity among NPA communities to make use of cooperation opportunities.

Projects typically have a transnational partnership of between 5 to 7 partners, an average budget size of €1.5 million, and an implementation period of 3 years.

Smaller Scale Preparatory projects typically have a total budget of €50,000 to €100,000 and run for 6 to 12 months.

As of the end of 2018, Irish partners had drawn down €11.5 million in NPA funding.

Information and guidance materials about ongoing and upcoming calls for proposals can be found on the programme website, ([www.interreg-npa.eu](http://www.interreg-npa.eu))

#### A good example NPA Project is CIRCNETS

Blue Circular Nets supports the collection, treatment, and recycling of end-of-life fishing gear, so that nets are disposed of appropriately and will not end up in seas and degrade the marine environment.

The total budget is €1.5 Million.

Sweden is a pioneer in this field, and are sharing their best practices and policies between NPA regions.

The Irish partners are the Western Development Commission and the University of Galway.

#### **Regarding the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme:**

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021 to 2027 is an EU transnational cooperation Programme funded by the ERDF. The total Programme Budget is €113 million euro.

The Atlantic Area Programme covers the western part of the Atlantic Ocean and includes all regions of Ireland and Portugal, as well as several French and Spanish coastal regions. As a maritime territory, the Atlantic Strategy published in July 2020 (the Atlantic Action Plan 2.0), has been considered in the Programme design.



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There are 4 programme priorities:

Priority 1: Blue innovation and competitiveness

Priority 2: Blue/Green environment

Priority 3: Blue sustainable and social tourism & culture

Priority 4: A better governance for cooperation in the Atlantic Area

The total project amounts should be in a range between €1 million and €3.5 million, and will be co-financed up to 75%. Projects are expected to last up to 36 months and should involve 4 to 12 full partners.

As of the end of 2018, Irish partners had drawn down €12.4 million in AA funding.

Further information such as programme documents, a database of projects, news and events can be found on the Interreg Atlantic Area programme website (<https://www.atlanticarea.eu/>)

#### A good example AA Project is TRAILGAZERSBID

This project explores new technologies, such as Go-Pro cameras, drones and applications to showcase trails to Atlantic tourist visitors. There are eight pilot sites in the project, two in Ireland. The lead partner is Donegal County Council. The project has 10 partners, including Sligo County Council and has a total budget of €2.58 Million. The project will capture the Economic Impacts of Trails and will develop sustainable destination management plans.

The Irish National Contact points based in the Regional Assemblies have a high approval rate for Irish projects. ETC funding represents a considerable return on investment for the State. The NWRA provides a support network to assist organisations to avail of EU funding opportunities. Interested parties can subscribe to the NWRA EU Funding Newsletter on the NWRA website to keep updated.

**Regarding URBACT**, it is an EU funded programme (with up to 70% ERDF funding available). In Ireland, its target audience is principally the 31 local authorities across the state. URBACT's focus is on the exchange of learning and best practice in a transnational context, namely between European towns and cities joined together on a common urban challenge. The two more traditional types of networks are what's called Action Planning Networks and Transfer Networks. Action Planning Networks sees towns and cities work jointly to form an Integrated Action Plan during a 31-month period. There is approximately €850,000 available for the whole of the network.



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Following the most recent call for this network type, we have 7 Irish projects in place. Transfer Networks work similarly but a city with a pre-approved “good practice” leads the network, imparting their knowledge to other partners. A ULG, URBACT Local Group, helps ensure the projects are participatory and includes the most relevant stakeholders. From a capacity-building perspective, the URBACT toolbox is an online vault containing lots of resources about how to engage stakeholders and share knowledge. It also has a lot of other guidance, tools, templates, prompts and explainers around helping cities get funding and to help in integrated and participatory actions in a city or town. Anyone may wish to visit this online toolbox anytime free of charge.

**Regarding the European Urban Initiative (EUI)**, in its current form, it was launched at the Cities Forum in March this year. It seeks to consolidate what has gone before it in the realm of sustainable urban development, and to now work alongside the URBACT programme and the overarching Urban Agenda for the EU to deliver on objective 5 of European Cohesion Policy, namely bringing "Europe closer to the citizen" and in helping towards Member States' commitment to integrated territorial development and to fostering sustainable urban development. Its three main strands of assistance are Innovative Actions, Capacity Building, and a Knowledge Environment. For Innovative Actions, there is up to €5m available per project with co-financing of up to 80%. The themes are decided by the European Commission and the projects allow urban authorities to experiment with innovative and creative solutions to their urban challenges before transferring the scalable solutions to other EU cities. For the Capacity Building strand, it sees cities come together through exchanges and peer review to impart knowledge, good practice, and solutions. Finally, the Knowledge Environment, best seen through the recently launched Portico platform, permits a treasure trove of knowledge and knowhow to be accessed by policy makers and practitioners to enable the formation of evidence-based policy.

The above two programmes are committed to supporting our urban towns and cities in ways that are sustainable, integrated, and participatory. Please consider following the URBACT\_IE page for updates on the above and reach out to, Dr. Karl Murphy at EMRA ([kmurphy@emra.ie](mailto:kmurphy@emra.ie)) anytime with questions or for more information.



## Regarding the Interreg Europe Programme

Interreg Europe Funding aims to improve regional development policy instruments through exchange of experience, innovative approaches, and capacity building across all 27 EU member states, plus Norway and Switzerland.

The objective of Interreg Europe, is to enable public authorities and other relevant organisations to actively learn from the experience of other regions in Europe, to improve local and regional policies. This is achieved through study visits to each region, and the sharing of good practices which actively builds the capacity of partner organisations.

Projects can have a wide scope under 6 themes: A Smarter Europe, A Greener Europe, A more Social Europe, A More Connected Europe, A Europe Closer to Citizens and Better Regional Governance.

Currently over €379 million is available, and the co-financing rate is 80% which is reduced to 70% for Private non-profit bodies. As of the end of 2018, Irish partners had drawn down €5.8 million in Interreg Europe funding.

### Eligible partners include:

- Private non-profit bodies
- National, regional and local authorities
- And Public Institutions such as Universities, regional development agencies, and business support organisations

### A good Exemplar Interreg Europe Project is- INTENSIFY

INTENSIFY's objective was to reduce carbon emissions through intense community engagement and had a budget of €1.9m. This project had 8 partners including Cork City Council and led to the establishment of the Home Energy Upgrade Office located on Grand Parade, in Cork City which offers advice and information to citizens to reduce energy consumption in their homes, and assists with energy efficiency grant applications and home retrofits.

(<https://www.corkcity.ie/en/council-services/services/housing/developments-and-european-projects/home-energy-upgrade-office-he>)



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## Regarding the Interreg North West Europe Programme

It focuses on projects involving at least three different countries in the North West area of Europe.

Projects can have a wide scope, covering 5 key pillars: Climate and Environment, Energy Transition, Circular Economy, Innovation and Resilience and Inclusive Society.

A wide range of partners are targeted – Public, Private, Academia and Civil Society.

Projects are only 60% funded by the EU, and currently there is over €287 million available. When the 40% co-financing is added, this programme will offer around €478 million worth of investment in projects across North West Europe in the coming 4 years.

**Ireland has seen great success with this programme** – with 88 Irish partners receiving over €30 million during the 14-20 period.

We had 52 projects and 5 had Irish Lead Partners.

A good Project Example is HeatNet which had a pilot in Tallaght - where **waste heat** from the local Amazon data centre has been used to supply heat to new and existing South Dublin County Council buildings and the TU Dublin-Tallaght campus through a new local district heating network. The project has been a key example of low carbon energy options for Ireland and Europe.

**Regarding EU Just Transition Fund**, Just transition is the term used to describe the socio-economic transformation to a climate-neutral economy while securing the future and livelihoods of workers and their communities. In Ireland this applies to the move away from large scale peat harvesting for electricity generation, to more sustainable and diverse economic activities. The Fund is designed to do this in an area designated the “Just Transition Territory” which comprises of the counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath, and municipal districts of Ballinasloe (Co. Galway), Athy and Clane-Maynooth (Co. Kildare), and Carrick-on-Suir and Thurles (Co. Tipperary).

The Programme, which is 50% co-funded by the government, allocates a substantial €169 million to support the Just Transition. This is done through the delivery of three Priorities.





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Firstly, €87 million, over the half the fund, is dedicated to Generating Employment for Former Peat Communities. This will be achieved through the Fáilte Ireland Regenerative Tourism Scheme, the Local and Regional Economic Strategies Support Scheme, and the Bioeconomy Demonstration Initiative.

Secondly, €57million is dedicated to the restoration of degraded peatlands and the regeneration of associated assets. This will be achieved through schemes with the National Parks and Wildlife service, and the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine which will deal with sustainable land use.

Thirdly, €18 million is dedicated to smart and sustainable mobility. This will be achieved through the Department of Transport, who are running a community electric vehicle charger scheme, as well as initiatives to encourage the electrification of rural bus routes.

To give a flavour of what the fund is currently delivering, I'd like draw attention to a scheme that was just launched last Friday. The Local and Regional Economic Strategies Support Scheme, which is being run by Pobal, and developed through close cooperation with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, will award €24 million for the implementation of actions under Local Economic and Community Plans and Regional Enterprise Plans. Due it's bottom-up locally led nature, this scheme welcomes applications from local authorities, development companies, educational institutions, and various public entities. Funding is available for a variety of projects, from €200,000 up to €5 million.

Finally, I'd like to give you further information on **the ERDF Regional Programmes:** The delivery of the European Regional Development Fund through the Regional Programmes for the 2021 to 2027 programming period, will be managed by both the Northern & Western Regional Assembly and The Southern Regional Assembly.

Both programmes will focus on similar Schemes, with the Northern & Western Programme having a co-financing rate of 60% and the Southern Eastern & Midlands programme having a co-financing rate of 40%. The co-financing rate difference is reflective of the fact that the NWRA Region is considered a Region in Transition, or Lagging Region, by the European Commission.



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Both programmes will focus on 3 Priorities.

- Firstly, Smarter More Competitive Regions: This involves building RD&I capacity in regional public research institutions, accelerating commercialisation of cutting-edge research at regional level, supporting innovation diffusion and strengthening regional innovation ecosystems in line with Ireland's Smart Specialisation Strategy and Regional Enterprise Plans.
- Secondly, Greener More Energy Efficient Regions and a Just Transition: This involves scaling up investment to improve energy efficiency of residential homes, targeting homeowners at risk of energy poverty.
- And Thirdly, Sustainable Urban Development in our Regions: which is an integrated strategic approach to the regeneration of towns using a Town Centres First Framework.

The Total Budget for the Northern & Western Region is €217 million and for the Southern Eastern & Midlands it is €663 million.

The Regional Assemblies have been working very closely with Enterprise Ireland, Science Foundation Ireland, The Higher Education Authority, SEAI and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in the detailed design of the 8 Schemes for each of the Regional Programmes.

A good example of a recently launched scheme funded by both programmes is the Gateways Programme, the purpose of which is to increase the level of interaction between the Technology Gateways and industry in Ireland. Some of the intended outcomes will include:

- More companies engaging in R&D
- Pilot manufacturing capability for new product and process development
- Enhanced technology validation and testing capabilities
- Test bed generation
- And Enhanced training potential for key industry staff on emerging technologies

The European Regional Development Fund will boost innovation-based projects across the regions, assist those at risk of energy poverty by investing in home energy efficiency, and contribute to improvements in the heritage building stock across the county.



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**To wrap up our presentation,** we would like to again thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. As you can see there is a huge amount of work in relation to EU Funding happening at Regional Government Level.

The Regional Assemblies have now been managing EU Funds for a ¼ of a century, €4.7bn in total, and the level of expertise, knowledge and understanding of complex funding models in the Regional Assemblies is now second to none. Ireland punches above its weight with Interreg funding but of course we can do better, and a government funded co-financing pot would ensure much greater success in line with other Member States that have taken that route.

The Regional assemblies are looking forward to delivering our 2 ERDF Regional Programmes, our Just Transition Fund and assisting all regional stakeholders through the National Contact Point Roles and The First Level Control Roles in maximising all funding opportunities in the next and future EU Funding periods.

Again, thank you for the opportunity today and we look forward to answering any questions you may now have.