Straits Committee: Launch conference and future perspectives

Arras, 5th February, 2020

The Straits Committee launch conference brought together over 200 delegates drawn from business, civil society and the public sector coming from the Straits area: Kent, Pas-de-Calais, Nord, West Flanders and Zeeland.

The event began with a word of welcome from the President of the Pas-de-Calais Department, followed by a panel discussion involving the designated representatives of the founding partners. As the United Kingdom and European Union move towards a new relationship, each underlined the importance they attached to working together and their expectations for the Straits Committee. They then demonstrated their commitment by signing the Memorandum of Understanding for the Creation of the Straits Committee.

After a networking lunch, the delegates each took part in one of three parallel workshops to identify challenges and opportunities for working together in the Straits area. The themes chosen for the workshops reflected priorities identified in the Straits Committee Memorandum of Understanding: economic development; climate change and green growth; and supporting young people.

Common needs, expectations and challenges for the Straits Committee were raised in all the workshops:

- → Build a roadmap: focus on common goals and challenges
- → Organise workshops
- → Stimulate better knowledge of stakeholders, practices and opportunities for cross-border working, as well as the establishment of a relationship of trust
- → Set up local "contact points" to serve as a gateway for other regions seeking a partner or an opportunity for co-operation and build on existing network and resources
- → Act as a facilitator or an accelerator of innovative projects by offering opportunities to co-develop products, schemes and services based on shared expertise
- → Set up a database/ good practice and lessons learned guide to help develop initiatives
- → Provide institutional and legal expertise to ensure the terms of implementation of cross-border initiatives
- → Create a one-stop-shop which could organise joint events, national and regional campaigns
- → Help to finance new projects
- → Lobby governments and the European Commission

Several specific recommendations were also captured in each workshop:

1. ***Climate change and green growth***

- → Encourage actions that support the push to get to zero emissions, zero waste, greater resource efficiency (water; circular economy), energy transition and cleaner mobility: encourage joint working at all levels, looking for exemplary projects.
- → Protect biodiversity and make use of natural capital: knowledge exchanges and joint initiatives on the use of nature-based solutions such as using wetlands for carbon capture and natural coastline management techniques.
- → Start sector dialogues on whole-sector transition: for example in tourism and farming where many adaptations will need to be made, such as to adapt to changing mobility (e.g. electric vehicles) and the spread of smart farming techniques and technology.
- → Foster behaviour change initiatives: these could include clean-up days; initiatives to encourage energy saving and switching to renewables; supporting businesses to change their models and practices. Young people could be encouraged to take a lead.
- → Renew public procurement to drive change through public bodies' supply chains.

2. ***Economic development***

Innovation:

→ Facilitate the building of stronger networks between economic stakeholders (businesses, private incubators, accelerators…), academia and research, and local and regional authorities (the so-called triple helix) to maximise full innovation potential in the cross-border ecosystem. The aim is to address interregional concerns and common societal challenges in the cross-border region by sharing knowledge and putting expertise together. Exemplary projects like Interreg project "GoToS3" (France-Wallonie-Vlaanderen programme) could serve as inspiration.

Entrepreneurship:

→ Encourage actions to help businesses get ready for the new trading relationship between the EU and the British markets. This could include voucher systems to support SME's, extending existing awareness-raising campaigns to cover the whole Straits area...

→ Help to encourage entrepreneurship by building a network of cross-border business owners to facilitate the creation of new partnerships, the sharing of knowledge and best practices during networking events.

Labour Market:

→ Focus on building closer links between the labour market and education such as using dual learning concepts and actions on lifelong learning or through sharing good and bad practices. Exemplary projects such as the Interreg project Smart Services Bridges (Vlaanderen-Nederland programme) could serve as an inspiration.

Territorial development:

→ Promotie the development of sustainable tourism-slow tourism products.

→ Stimulate and implement solutions to tackle mobility and accessibility issues and find a more sustainable way to manage the growing number of people and volume of goods crossing -borders.

3. ***Young People***

Autonomy and citizenship:

→ Encourage young people's mobility by organising cross-border exchanges. These exchanges could be built on an broad network of stakeholders who would be accredited by local authorities. They will encourage open mindedness and engagement of young people with the local community by finding common environmental or societal challenges.

Education:

→ Increase the language learning offer, starting at day nursery facilities

→ Create an alliance of schools and youth services that offer enhanced educational vocational experience aiming to improve cross-cultured awareness and acceptance both for pupils and educators.

Prevention, social integration and well-being:

- → Encourage cross-cultural initiatives to fight absenteeism, dropping out of school and to prevent radicalisation. Working with both youth and families is fundamental here.
- → Support initiatives about young people's well-being: screen addictions, media education, school bullying, mental health, healthy nutrition…

⇒ Organise special days to share best practices between stakeholders in the youth sector : teachers, educators…

To follow up this important collaborative work, a first Executive Committee, bringing together the representatives of the Straits Committee, and welcoming the Province of East Flanders as a new member, was held on 11th March 2020.

This Executive Committee agreed to:

- → Set up a network of "contact points" in each partner authority. These contact points would serve as a gateway to the Straits Committee for local stakeholders who would like to participate in a cross-border project in the Straits area. These contact points will facilitate knowledge of stakeholders interested in taking part in Straits Committee initiatives; help with finding partners; identify opportunities for co-operation or help with project building.
  (Contact details for the Straits Committee are already available and attached to this report; please feel free to contact them.)
- → Work together to develop a small project support initiative as a means of supporting the emergence of new networks in the Straits area: more details on this will be shared in the course of the year.

- → Set up working groups in three specific areas:
  - Tourism;
  - a knowledge network connecting the universities of the Straits area with the other local stakeholders
  - Cross-border initiatives for young people: mobility, internships, exchanges of experience

The Covid-19 crisis means that the launch of these working groups may be delayed until the relaxation of the current restrictions. Nevertheless, if you would be interested to take part in one of these areas, please let us know.