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## Background

This document outlines the current importance of online meetings for the work of the different HELCOM bodies. It is also a proposal regarding online collaboration as a more permanent feature of HELCOM work in the future, specifically a post-pandemic “new normal”.

The first part of the document explains the benefits of online meetings but also the limits. The second part contains suggestions for each HELCOM body for future meetings.

The implementation of the proposals suggested here would enable HELCOM to make considerable savings on its travel-related budget lines.

Decisions on the future of HELCOM meetings need to be taken without delay, as the Secretariat needs to be in a position to prepare accordingly and allocate the required resources for a successful shift to online meetings already in the 2021/2022 budget.

This document was prepared collaboratively by the Secretariat staff.

## Action requested

The Meeting is invited to consider and endorse the future mode of HELCOM meetings based on the proposal by the Secretariat.

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## Meeting plan for HELCOM bodies

### 1. Going online

#### 1.1. Background

Despite having caused disruptions to the work processes and workflows in HELCOM, the various restrictions due to COVID-19 have also raised awareness of and opened up new possibilities and opportunities.

Overall, HELCOM has adjusted fairly quickly and easily to a radically changed situation by shifting its meetings online, without any noticeable detriment either to the quality of its work or to its schedule as established pre-COVID.

At this stage, short-term uncertainties on regional travel and work arrangements do remain, however, and in the long-term, a change of work practices across the entire Baltic Sea region can already be foreseen, with online collaboration bound to become a permanent feature.

Moreover, independently of the current pandemic, the HELCOM Contracting Parties have asked the Secretariat to look into ways of increasing process efficiencies, notably by addressing the issues of travel and meetings.

As global work practices are shifting, HELCOM should now consider new working arrangements for its meetings, taking into account the overall efficiency gains of online formats while adapting to a new reality. This document proposes online collaboration as a more permanent feature of HELCOM work in the future, specifically a post-pandemic “new normal”.

#### 1.2. Why we should partially shift online

Overall, online meetings are one of the primary tools at our disposal for enhancing process efficiency as well as generating further benefits within HELCOM. Broadly speaking, there are four major advantages to shifting the emphasis of HELCOM meetings from physical to online:

- a) The **ecological footprint** of physical meetings, in particular through CO2 emissions, is reduced in the process, with a significant number of participants not needing to travel to attend the physical meetings of the various HELCOM bodies in 2020. Due to the geography and travel infrastructure of the Baltic Sea region, most previous journeys were done by air – often short distance and contrary the ecological principles HELCOM is mandated to uphold and the [HELCOM Green Workplace guidelines](#);
- b) Increasing the number of online meetings is an effective way of **reducing meeting-related operational costs**. Moving from physical to online meetings has already had a significant impact on HELCOM’s budget. Budgeted travel costs for the financial year 2020-2021 were 161.000 €. If the proposal in this document was approved, the savings in the travel costs per year would be around 56.000 €, representing 35 % of the entire budget for meetings and travels. Reducing the number of physical meetings in favour of online meetings even in the post-COVID era would therefore enable long-term economies of scale, freeing up scarce financial resources that could be allocated to other HELCOM budget lines where they would yield more immediate benefits for the work of the organization;

c) A generalized use of online meetings would contribute to the health **and well-being** of staff and delegates. It would reduce travel time, allowing for more physical presence at work and more efficient use of time while, at the same time, cutting travel-related stress and reducing times of absence from families;

d) Online meetings have also **facilitated the attendance of participants that would not have been able to participate in person**, for instance due to calendar or financial constraints.

### 1.3. Meeting types: online, hybrid, in person

In light of the clear efficiency gains and advantages, HELCOM should strive to hold more of its meetings online, making this format the norm rather than the exception. Physical meetings should not be fully ruled out, but only be organized when an online arrangement is deemed unfeasible or impractical or where the advantages of a physical meeting would prevail over those of a virtual event.

The Secretariat therefore proposes to categorize the meetings of its various bodies as follows:

1. **Online meetings:** these meetings are exclusively held online
2. **Hybrid meetings (both online and in person):** these meetings are primarily held online, with the possibility to attend this meeting in person at the HELCOM Secretariat in Helsinki;
3. **In person meetings:** these meetings require physical attendance, for one or more of the following reasons, but the possibility to participate online is also offered:
  - The long-term efficiency of a group would benefit from a physical meeting, such as for kick-off meetings of new groups, the arrival of a new chairperson, or when a group has not physically met for a longer period of time and this is required in order to boost its dynamics.
  - Security: groups dealing with sensitive information such as from military or ministry of interior bodies.
  - Practical work: when outcomes of a meeting depend on practical work.

#### **In person meetings: at the Secretariat**

It is proposed that whenever possible physical meetings are needed ad hoc in addition to those provided for in the meeting plan, they should primarily be held at the HELCOM Secretariat in Helsinki. While these meetings are in principle organized as face-to-face meetings, the possibility to participate online should be offered as a fallback position for those participants who may not be able to travel and attend in person. Holding meetings primarily at the Secretariat would reduce travel expenditure for the Secretariat and therefore contribute to cost-efficient-operations. Shifting to more online meetings would in turn decrease the travel budget for Contracting Parties and stakeholders. This should not preclude holding ad hoc meetings hosted by Contracting Parties occasionally, but this should become the exception rather than the rule.

### 1.4. Alleviating the shortcomings of an online format

Online meetings do have clear advantages but also differ from in-person gatherings that, in the HELCOM setting, have allowed for an informal exchange – often for the benefit of formal processes. Moreover, the Secretariat is aware of the numerous benefits of meetings organized by the Contracting Parties and held in locations around the Baltic Sea region. Nevertheless, the advantages of a shift to more online meetings outweigh the disadvantages, especially given that many of the shortcomings of virtual meetings can be alleviated through tools, methods and procedures in order to guarantee the best possible outcome of a

meeting, on a par with physical ones. In that context, rapid technological advances and an increased familiarity of participants with online formats will likely continue to ameliorate the situation in the future.

The Secretariat has already started to equip itself to conduct both online and hybrid meetings, and would further allocate resources to alleviating the current shortcomings of online formats, notably with improvements to:

- Technical resources, such as tools, equipment, software;
- Human resources, such as increasing the capacity of the Secretariat staff on online meetings through training; and
- Processes and procedures, to ensure online meetings are conducted in the most efficient way.

## 2. In conclusion

A permanent shift towards more online meetings in HELCOM and online participation in other relevant meetings and events appears both inevitable and, overall, advantageous.

In order to maintain the quality of HELCOM work while, at the same time, improving overall efficiencies within the organization – of benefit for the Secretariat, the Contracting Parties, HELCOM observers and stakeholders – decisions on the future of its meetings need to be taken without delay, as the Secretariat needs to be in a position to prepare accordingly and allocate the required resources for a successful shift to online meetings already in the 2021/2022 budget.

### 3. Specificities of various HELCOM bodies

The table below provides more detailed indications on the specific needs of each HELCOM body. The Secretariat is aware that ideally these arrangements should be discussed within the various HELCOM subsidiary bodies. Due to the exceptional situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant need to reflect related measures in the 2021-2022 budget, which needs to be adopted as soon as possible, the Secretariat regrettably sees no other option, however, than to seek a decision by the Contracting Parties without prior consultation of the bodies concerned.

HELCOM body	Sub-groups/ Networks/ Correspondence groups	Current meetings	Suggestion for the future meeting plan	Remarks
<b>Helsinki Commission</b>		1 physical meeting per year	1 physical meeting per year	
<b>Heads of Delegation</b>		2 physical meetings per year	1 physical and 1 online meeting per year	
<b>Gear Group</b>		2 physical meetings per year	2 meetings per year, 1 physical and 1 online	
	Economic and Social Analyses (ESA) network	2-3 meetings per year, online and physical	2 meetings per year predominantly online, with every third meeting/first meeting of new chair physical.	
	Correspondence Group on Marine Strategy Framework Directive (CG MSFD)	2-4 online meetings per year	2-as needed online meeting per year	
<b>Maritime Working Group</b>		1 physical meeting per year	1 physical meeting per year. Intersessional meetings to be organized online, if needed.	
	Expert Working Group for Mutual Exchange and Deliveries of AIS & Data (AIS EWG)	1 physical meeting per year	1 online meeting per year	
	Group of Experts on Safety of Navigation (SAFE NAV)	1 physical meeting per year	1 online meeting per year	

	Sub-group on green technology and alternative fuels for shipping (GREEN TEAM)	1 physical meeting per year	1 physical meeting per year	GREEN TEAM is organized in conjunction with various maritime events in order to ensure participation of stakeholders representing maritime and technology industries.
	Joint HELCOM/OSPAR Task Group on Ballast Water Management Convention Exemptions (HELCOM/OSPAR TG BALLAST)	1 physical meeting per year	1 physical meeting per year	Proposed to be kept as a physical meeting due to participation of OSPAR representatives
	Cooperation Platform on Special Area According to MARPOL Annex IV (CP PRF)	1 physical meeting per year (with some exceptions)	1 online meeting per year.	
<b>Pressure Working Group</b>		2 physical meetings per year	1 physical and 1 online meeting per year	
	Reduction Scheme Core Drafting Group (RedCore DG)	Up to 8 meetings per year mainly online. Physical meetings back to back with PLC-8 project meetings or other events	Keep the same	
	Expert Network on dredging/depositing operations at sea (EN DREDS)	2-3 online meetings per year	Keep the same	
	Correspondence Group on Pharmaceuticals (CG PHARMA)	1-2 online meetings per year	Keep the same	
	<i>ad hoc</i> Group to draft the regional principles and risk assessment framework for management of internal nutrient reserves (MINUTS)	Up to 6 online meetings per year. One physical meeting in the beginning to set the scene	Keep the same as the mandate most probably lasts until July 2021	
	PLC-8 Project	4 physical meetings per year	2 physical and 2 online meetings per year	
	Expert Network on Marine Litter (EN-Marine Litter)	1 to 6 online meetings and 1 physical meeting (on the implementation of the RAP ML) depending on the year since 2016.	1 physical meeting per year for the implementation of the RAP ML. Online meetings as needed.	

	Expert Network on Underwater (EN-Noise)	1 to 8 online meetings and 0 to 1 physical meeting depending on the year since 2015.	1 physical meeting per 2 years. Online meetings as needed.	
<b>Response Working Group</b>		3 physical meetings in 2 years	1 physical meeting per year and 2 <sup>nd</sup> meeting online.	Some organizations represented in the Response WG may have security restrictions for participating in online meetings.
	Expert Working Group on Oiled Wildlife Response (EWG OWR)	2-3 online meetings per year since 2014	1 online meeting per year or more often if needed	
	Informal Working Group on Aerial Surveillance (IWGAS)	1 physical meeting per year since the 90s	1 physical meeting per year	Online security issues are a concern for representatives of IWGAS.
	Expert Group on Environmental Risks of Hazardous Submerged Objects (SUBMERGED)	0-2 physical meetings per year since 2014	1 online meeting per year	
	Expert Coordination Network on Response on the Shore (SHORE network)	1 physical meeting per year since 2017	1 online meeting per year	
	Correspondence Group on revising the HELCOM Response Manual Volume 2 (CG HNS MANUAL)	Working by correspondence only	Online	
<b>State&amp;Conservation Working Group</b>		2 physical meetings per year, up to 4 intersessional meetings per year which take place online.	2 physical meeting per year, intersessional meetings as needed, to take place online.	State & Conservation meetings are arranged so that one of the annual physical meetings focus on monitoring issues and the other annual physical meeting focuses of conservation issues.
	Expert Group on Marine Mammals (EG MAMA)	1 physical meeting per year, team meetings (1 physical health team meeting per year, the other teams online)	1-2 meetings per year, 1 physical, 1 online	
	Expert Group on Monitoring of Radioactive Substances in the Baltic Sea (MORS EG)	1 physical meeting per year	1 meeting per year, every other year physical, every other year online	

	HELCOM-OSPAR-ICES Joint Working Group on seabirds (JWG BIRD)	1 physical meeting per year  The Baltic team meets online as needed.	1 physical meeting per year  Ad hoc meetings online.	Shared group, changes in approach would require separate approval from all three organisations.
	Task Group on HELCOM Marine Protected Areas (MPA TG)	0-5 online meetings per year	As needed, online	
	Expert Network on Hazardous Substances (EN-HZ)	2 meetings per year, 1 physical, 1 online	1-2 online meetings per year, with the option of targeted physical meetings/workshops by request	
	Expert Network on Benthic Habitats (EN BENTHIC)	1-2 meetings per year, 1 physical, 1 online	1-3 online meetings per year, with the option of targeted physical meetings/workshops by request	
	Intersessional Network on Eutrophication (IN Eutrophication)	3-4 meetings per year, 1 physical meeting, 2-3 online	3-4 meetings per year, 1 physical in Helsinki, the remaining online.	
	Expert Network on Climate Change (EN-CLIME)	1-12 meetings per year, 1 physical, the rest online	1 physical meeting per year, online meetings as needed.	This is a very large group (120+ members), with a large number of teams on a very wide range of topics. It is a shared group with BalticEarth and changes in the meeting structure agreed in the ToRs would require separate approval processes in both organizations.
	Expert Group on Sturgeon Remediation (EG STUR)	1 physical meeting per year, online meetings as needed.	1-2 online meetings per year, with the option of targeted physical meetings/workshops by request	
	Network for Marine Protected Area Management (MPA MANET)	1 physical meeting per year	1 physical meeting per year (in the form of a workshop)	

			In addition, online options will be explored.	
	Correspondence Group on Foodwebs (CG FOODWEB)	(new group)	1-4 online meetings per year, with the option of targeted physical meetings/workshops to support HOLAS III	
	Phytoplankton Expert Group (PEG)	1 physical meeting per year	1 meeting per year, every other year physical, every other year online (if feasible)	The meetings include intercalibration exercises and thus require lab access and occasional physical meetings.
	Zooplankton Expert Network (ZEN)	Currently inactive	1-2 online meetings per year, with the option of physical workshops to tackle specific issues.	
	Baltic-wide assessment of coastal fish communities in support of an ecosystem-based management (FISH-PRO III)	1 physical meeting per year	1 physical meeting per year Ad hoc meetings as needed online.	
<b>Agri Group</b>		2 physical meetings per year	1 physical and 1 online meeting a year	
<b>Fish Group</b>		3 physical meetings per 2 years	1 physical meeting per year, and 2 <sup>nd</sup> meeting online	
	Task Force on Migratory fish species (FISH-M)	0 to 2 physical meetings per year since 2014	0-1 physical or online meeting a year, depending on content and needs	
	Environmental Practices (BAT/BEP) descriptions for sustainable aquaculture in the Baltic Sea region (CG AQUACULTURE)	0 to 1 physical/online meeting per year since 2017	Mandate to be considered within 2020. Could be online in the future if mandate is extended.	

	Expert Group for fisheries data (EG FISHDATA)	3 physical meetings per 2 years since 2014 (when FISH/ENV Forum was changed to Fish Group)	Mandate to be reviewed (current ToR 2019-2020). Could be online in the future if mandate is extended.	
<b>HELCOM-VASAB MSP Working Group</b>		2 physical meetings per year	2 physical meetings a year	
	Baltic Sea Region Maritime Spatial Planning Data Expert Sub-group (BSR MSP Data ESG)	2-3 physical meetings per year	1 physical meeting per year Online meetings as needed	