

EnviroHelp: A Support Package for EU Member States

David Williamson and Gary Lynch-Wood
Centre for Research into Corporate Responsibility and the Environment
Staffordshire University

Abstract

EnviroHelp is a support package for European small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It is the outcome of a three year research and development project that examined the environmental support needs of SMEs in the United Kingdom, Greece, Ireland and the Czech Republic. The research shows that European SMEs are compliance driven and that they urgently need regulatory compliance support. In responding to this identified need, EnviroHelp demonstrates that member states can provide valuable and user-friendly support to SMEs. It is argued that there is a pressing requirement to extend this service to all member states and that the EU should provide resources and assume responsibility for the on-going provision of this much needed service.

Introduction

With financial assistance from the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci programme, Staffordshire University (UK), the University of the Aegean (Greece), the National University of Ireland – Cork (Ireland) and the Technical University of Brno (Czech Republic) researched and developed an empirically grounded environmental support package for European SMEs. The support package is called EnviroHelp and it is designed around a real business need – environmental compliance. The importance of regulation to European SMEs is discussed in a separate paper by Lynch-Wood and Williamson (2005).

The European Commission (2003) defines an SME as a firm with fewer than 250 employees, with a turnover of less than €50m or a balance sheet total of less than €43m. Liikanen (2000) reported that there were almost 18 million SMEs in Europe prior to the accession of 10 member states in 2004. The European Commission (2003a) recognises the importance of SMEs for national economies. For example, 66% of the EU workforce is employed in SMEs. This is higher than both the United States (42%) and Japan (33%). SMEs also account for 60% of the EU's gross domestic product and are a major source of wealth creation and innovation (Arias-Aranda *et al*, 2001; PIU/SBS, 2001).

While the aggregate economic impact of SMEs is positive, there is little evidence of their environmental impact or of the environmental damage that they cause (KPMG 1997; Petts 2000). The Marshall Report (1998) estimated that SMEs accounted for 60% of total carbon dioxide emissions from business in the UK and that there was substantial room for improvement in energy efficiency and emissions reductions. It has been estimated that SMEs account for 70% of all pollution (Hillary 1995; KPMG, 1997; Groundwork, 1998). They are also reported to be responsible for 60 per cent of commercial waste (Environment Agency 2002) and 80% of pollution incidents (Environment Agency 2003). In the Netherlands, SMEs account for 36% of all CFC emissions and 24% of all waste (Hoevengel and Wolters, 2000). The environmental impact of SMEs is cumulative, with many small activities producing a significant environmental impact (Hillary, 1995, 2000; Welford, 1994; Schaper, 2002; Gunnigham 2002; Petts 2000). Gunningham (2002) also argues that SMEs have a greater environmental impact per unit than larger firms.

METHODOLOGY

There is a lack of empirical work on SMEs, especially work which compares SME environmental practices in different EU states. Using a semi-structured interview technique, the environmental behaviour of SMEs in the four participating nations were collated and compared. The interview questionnaire was divided into six parts - general background information, input monitoring practices, output monitoring practices, organisational commitment, regulatory issues, learning and support needs. Over a nine-month period the partners interviewed 66 SMEs: 20 in the UK, 17 in Ireland, 15 in Greece and 14 in the Czech Republic. The interviews were prearranged and carried out with senior personnel (e.g. directors or senior managers) so that respondents had the status, time and relevant knowledge of the subject. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. When interviews had been transcribed, quantitative data were analysed using the SPSS statistical software package while the qualitative data were analysed using N-Vivo. For the purpose of cultural comparisons each partner focused on a local, geographically dominant, industry. Selected SMEs from the UK and the Czech Republic were from the industrial manufacturing sector because of the relative importance of heavy manufacturing industries. Greek and Irish SMEs were drawn from the food production industry because of the significance of this sector to these local and rural economies.

RESULTS

General profiles

Table 1 gives a profile of the respondent firms. Most firms had between 11 and 250 employees. Only 11 firms were micro businesses, and the proportion of small (26) and medium-sized (29) firms was fairly evenly distributed.

Overall, respondent firms from Greece and Ireland tended to have fewer employees than those from the Czech Republic and UK. There was a greater number of Greek and Irish micro-business and fewer medium-sized firms than from the Czech Republic and the UK.

Table 1 SME profiles

State	No of employees			Total	Turnover (in € euros)							Total	Industry sector	
	Less than 10 small	10 to 49 med	50 to 250 large		Less than 2m	2m to 4m	4m to 8m	8m to 15m	15m to 30m	30m or more	Not stated		Manufacturing	Food processing
UK	0	8	12	20	2	4	4	6	3	0	1	20	20	0
CZ	1	5	8	14	2	4	0	2	2	1	3	14	14	0
IRE	5	7	5	17	10	2	2	1	2	0	0	17	0	17
GRE	5	6	4	15	9	1	2	0	2	1	0	15	0	15
Total	11	26	29	66	23	11	8	9	9	2	4	66	34	32

Respondents were asked to specify their firms' turnovers from a list of categories. The data shows that 23 (34.8%) firms had a turnover of less than €2m, making this the largest category within the sample. Most SMEs in this category were from Ireland and Greece, suggesting that firms in the food production sector have lower turnovers. This was predictable, given that there were more micro-businesses in the Greek and Irish samples. Only 2 firms had a turnover of greater than €30, with the remainder being distributed across the €2m to €30m bands.

Learning and support needs

Respondents were asked to comment on their experiences of existing environmental support mechanisms. They were also asked to consider their learning and support needs.

Respondents' experiences of support

In the past, firms have sought very little support to address their environment impacts – 39 (59%) respondents reported that their firms had never sought help. This supports Holt *et al* (2000), who suggest that SMEs are not “reaching out for assistance” to improvement their environmental performance. Indeed, levels of environmental support can be described as fragmented at best, but symptomatic of an unwillingness to address environmental practices at worst. A large number of respondents felt that their firms did not require support, as a General Director of a medium-sized fish producer in Greece commented: “We’ve not really sought for any support. I think we’re doing OK so far by ourselves”. On the few occasions when firms had received assistance, it was usually to address isolated issues relating to matters such as packaging or waste. There was little evidence that firms sought support to facilitate deeper and strategic environmental improvements. For example, an Economist for a small producer of olive oil in Greece commented “We’ve asked in the past for financial assistance from the state to solve our waste problems, but it’s difficult to get it as you know. That’s all really”, while the Managing Director of a small machine tooling firm answered “Other than contacting my suppliers over the plastic bags, nothing comes to mind”. An Operations Manager of a manufacturer of harnesses and cables in the UK stated: “When I was doing the Project Acorn I had the support of [company’s name], one of our prime customers so I sought their support in achieving ISO 14001. Apart from that we don’t seek any support”.

It was evident that the responsibility of the respondent could be a determining factor in a firm’s decision to seek (and take advantage of) support. Environmental managers may be more willing to seek support than financial or production directors. The Finance Director of a small manufacturer of ductwork in the UK took a largely economic perspective of his firm’s decision to seek assistance:

“We’ve thought about help but...If you want something done, there’ll be somebody there who’ll get paid to do it, whether it’s something to do with law, something to do with accountancy, and that’s all it is. It’s for their own ends and so you tend to sort of think you know, I don’t want him, he’s going to charge me too much. I suppose it all boils down to money reallyThis is why I think government should have some sort of department, if you like, where it’s totally free....where they just come along and say you need to do this, you need to do this so they don’t benefit and that sort of thing, you know, that’s what I feel would be advantageous personally. Somebody’s always after a fast buck...It used to be 5750, quality standards, and all that. You tended to think we need that. We’re still here and we’re still working, people are still employing us and you think, well, what was it all about?...I suspect lots and lots of companies threw thousands and thousands of pounds at it for nothing”.

Interestingly, an Environmental Manager of a medium-sized engineering firm in the UK took a different approach, arguing that the firm would benefit from support but that the finance department were opposed to getting help: “I’d

love to get consultants in to look at reducing energy...but [the Finance Department] they tell me there isn't any money.....personally, I don't think this is the case at all... I think they're missing an opportunity".

A range of support providers had been used. Public authorities and industry associations were the most common source of assistance, though some firms had used suppliers, environmental associations, training and consultancy agencies, colleges and universities. There was no evidence that firms had developed long-term or stable relationships with support providers, though this is not surprising given that firms sought help to address isolated issues. For example, a Production Manager of a chemical firm in the Czech Republic reported, "We've worked with a consultant on the disposal of chemicals, but that's it". Equally, a Director of a small UK-based machine tooling firm commented, "I'll go somewhere if I need to, but I couldn't tell you where I'd go – to be honest it'd depend on what I needed doing", while a manager of small producer of ouzo in Greece stated "We are collaborating with some environmental consultants over our wastewater. Nothing more". These comments also indicate that firms seek support as a reaction to specific issues – usually triggered by legislation.

Although there are many business support services, there is little empirical evidence that demonstrates whether such initiatives assist the majority of SMEs in moving towards sustainability (Holt *et al*, 2000). In the current research respondents were asked to comment on the standard and quality of support that was available. Their responses can be divided into three broad themes:

- They felt that existing support mechanisms were inadequate
- They could not comment due to lack of knowledge and experience
- They were not aware that support was available

It was clear from discussions that respondents had very little knowledge of available support. More importantly, the experiences of firms that had received support were not always positive or successful, as a Manager of a small producer of olive oil in Greece reported: "We've looked for technical solutions and financial assistance from the state, but it wasn't very successful". Also, a Production Manager of a small chemical firm in the Czech Republic stated that available support was "the minimum necessary to meet the legislation requirements". Common phrases included "inadequate", "poor", "not good", "insufficient" and "non existent". While it was difficult to find tangible illustrations of the problems that respondents had experienced, shared concerns included support being too difficult to access, too complicated (with too much form filling), too bureaucratic (too much administration) and too generic (not tailored to the actual needs of the business). Firms needed speedier and less bureaucratic solutions – as the manager of a traditional bakery in Greece stated, there is "a lot of bureaucracy. Companies need a simpler and quicker support system". Clearly related to this, the perceived inadequacy and existence of environmental support was exacerbated by the lack of time available to respondents to gain access to help, as one Manager of a small traditional producer of marmalades in Greece stated: "I just don't have time to look for support". Similarly, the Director of a small dairy producer in Ireland observed: "I can't really say. We've no time for looking around too much, the production's too demanding. We' haven't the time".

Respondents' support needs

Interestingly, most respondents (56: 84.8%) acknowledged that their firms could improve their environmental performance and that, relating to this, they would benefit from appropriate support. This finding may counter the view that SMEs believe they have no impact on the environment – as otherwise, there would be no environmental improvements to be made. Respondents were asked to state in general terms what support they required. They were not provided with prompts and could give more than one answer. Their interpreted responses are presented in Figure 1.

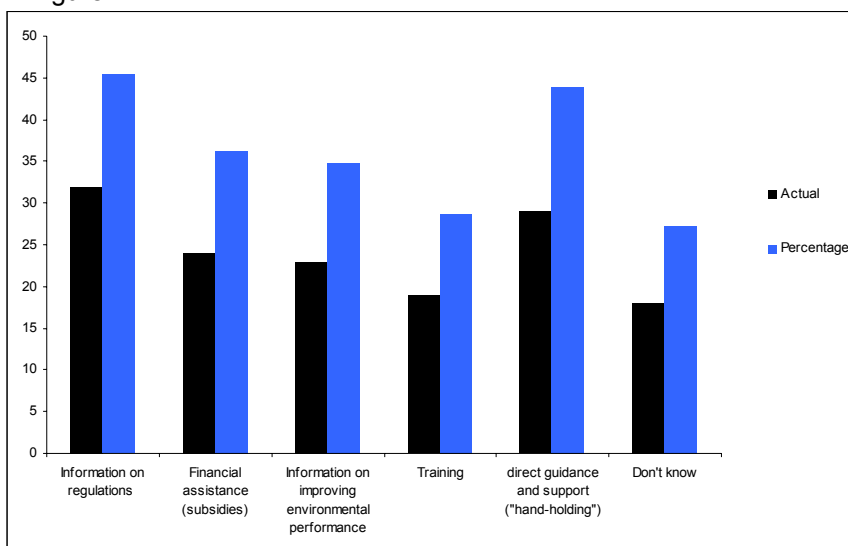


Figure 1: Support needs of SMEs

- **Information on regulations:** The most important need was clear information and guidance environmental regulations: Respondents in all states felt that legislation was difficult to understand, complicated and unclear. It was therefore difficult for respondents to be sure whether they were complying with their legal obligations – as a Manager of a machine tooling company in the Czech Republic stated: “The legislation is unclear, complex and continuously amended...there are too many controlling bodies.” Similarly, a manager of a small machine tooling firm in the UK also stated that “There’s just too much regulation and all that. It’s difficult to find and it’s difficult to read when you find it. It keeps lawyers in well-paid jobs though”. The finding that SMEs do not know whether they are fully compliant with environmental regulations supports other research, such as the study of SMEs undertaken by Williamson and Lynch-Wood (2001). Interestingly, some respondents felt that policy makers and regulators did not collaborate with the business community, as one general manager of a medium-sized fish producer in Greece commented: “it’s required....It’s also my impression that law makers don’t collaborate with the business community in all cases”. Respondents’ fear of prosecution for non-compliance meant that good quality information was vital, yet they considered existing information unreliable and disjointed, as one Operations Manager of a medium-sized manufacturer of harnesses and cables in the UK commented:

“Yes, it’s difficult to get reliable information on regulation issues. As an end user of information, I don’t know where to get it from, it’s all very fragmented. I think maybe where I might be able to get more information from is the [Engineering Employers Federation]. We do rely on them quite heavily for health and safety and personnel, legislative issues and that. I speak to them all the time, but I don’t know if they do anything on the environment. I’ve got a guy coming in soon to do some health and safety stuff so I’ll have a chat with him perhaps”.

- **Direct guidance and support:** a number of respondents said that they needed direct guidance and support. This supports Holt *et al* (2000) who suggest that SMEs must “receive clear, consistent and easily accessible guidance” from external organisations. Respondents suggested that support could take the form of reliable online or telephone advice or, preferably, in-company ‘hand-holding’ by an official consultant (the vast majority of respondents said they or their employees had the skills to access relevant online materials). It could relate to such issues as legislative compliance, auditing or technical advice and guidance. The comments of a Director of a small manufacturer of aluminium frames in the UK were interesting:

“I think we’d have to have an outside body to audit the business and the only way we would be able to realistically do any work on monitoring and waste and that would be to bring someone in to do it....we’d need someone to come in and start that off for us and work it out, and getting an awareness, I suppose we could drive it out from the audit”.

Importantly, however, this respondent felt that his firm may not have the resources to make improvements: “I think it would be a good thing to do... I’d like to see it happen but I just know...we haven’t got the resource to do it”. Advice and guidance was a common theme in firms from each state. A Manager of a small dairy firm in Ireland stated, “It’d be good to have someone to discuss specific issues”, while a Quality and Environmental Manager of a producer of alcoholic beverages in Greece commented: “We need direct scientific support. Consultants who can come in a show us on site. You know, how...where we should do something”. A Proprietor of a small producer of fruit juice in Ireland stated, “We could do with some technical assistance and some advice on energy issues”.

- **Financial assistance:** since SMEs have limited resources, it was not surprising that a large number of respondents talked of financial support. Terms such as ‘grants’, ‘subsidies’, ‘funding’, ‘finances’ and ‘money’ frequently entered discussions. Clearly, however, respondents felt that funding should assist the purchase of capital equipment and environmental technologies. Grants for training would not have had a high take up. Also, respondents had negative perceptions of current funding structures. These perceptions were possibly fuelled by respondents’ lack of knowledge and by the fact the some of them had attempted, without success, to access funding resources. Respondents found funding structures too bureaucratic and driven by naive administrative targets. As the Director of a medium-sized engineering firm in the UK commented: “Have you ever tried to get it? By the time you’ve filled in the forms it’s not worth it to honest”. There was a lack of understanding of how funding mechanisms operated, and this ignorance fuelled a high degree of cynicism. Respondents were under the impression that funding was only available for “other” types of firms. For instance, a respondent of a larger SME in the Czech Republic believed funding was targeted at smaller companies: “I think they give money to small companies don’t they?...So it’s not relevant for us”. In contrast, the Manager of a small traditional producer of marmalades in Greece thought that most funding went to larger firms: “I think most of the funding goes to the bigger companies. It doesn’t address companies like ours.” To compound the problem, a small number of firms in the Western European states felt that funding that had traditionally gone to the established EU states was being redirected to the new Central and Eastern European

accession members, as one Health, Safety and Environmental Officer of a medium-sized ceramic company in the UK commented: "It'd be good if there was some funding, but it's probably going to vanish in next few years because of all these other countries that are coming into the EU". Another view, which was expressed by the Operations Manager of a medium-sized manufacture of harnesses and cables, was that even with resources his firm would be unable to make extensive environmental improvement because their focus was on making a profit within a highly competitive market place: "Even given financial support we don't at the moment have the resources to focus on doing more than the minimum because of the marketplace at the moment". This firm was accredited to the ISO14001. Clearly, more information is needed to overcome the negative perceptions of existing funding structures.

- Information to improve performance:** this category was difficult to define: being something of a catch-all category. It generally encompasses information on production, supply chain, efficiency and performance issues. Respondents wanted information to improve their business and environmental performance. For example, a Manager of a small producer of traditional sauces and marmalades in Greece commented, "Yes, we could do with information on environment performance through all our supply chain", while a Managing Director of a small supplier of organic beef and lamb in Ireland said: "Some information on things like solar energy or creating extra value from waste". Other information related to issues such as general environmental management, new technologies, energy management, packaging and supply chain issues.
- Training:** training was clearly not a high priority. Indeed, without prompts it was only mentioned by 19 (28.7%) respondents, who tended to talk of general awareness training for the whole workforce. Nine firms felt that either the managers or those that dealt specifically with environmental issues should be trained. When respondents were asked to comment on training content, their responses ranged from regulatory and legislative issues, general awareness, efficiency, cleaner production processes, sampling and monitoring techniques and marketing. The lack of support for training substantiates the work by Hutchison and Chaston (1994) who suggest that SMEs do not have the capacity for, nor see the relevance of, environmental training. It also supports a study of micro-businesses by Lynch-Wood and Williamson (2005) who demonstrated that support agencies were failing their local micro business community by offering simple training packages

Respondents were also asked who they thought could provide support. Figure 2 reveals that there is a heavy dependence on government and public authorities (29: 43.9%), which supports Rutherford *et al* (2000) who showed that owner/managers feel the government should take the lead by providing an appropriate policy context.

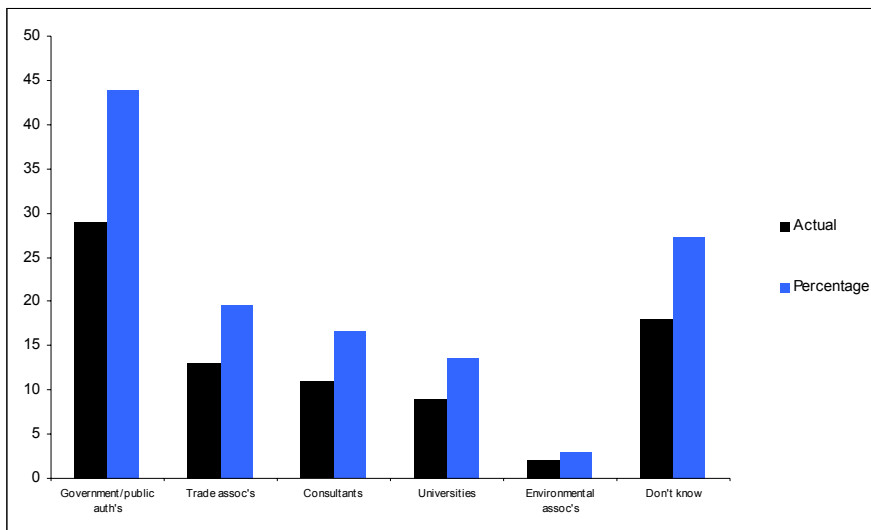


Figure 2: Sources of support

Firms need to be able to trust the person/agency providing support, which is why it was felt that official sources, acting as the voice of government, were the most appropriate source of support. As one Director of a medium-sized ceramic manufacturer in the UK commented: "a government body I'd suggest. Somebody that's not selling a product. There's got to be trust in the person telling you the information. They're just making sure that you abide by the law". Similarly, a manager of a medium-sized chemical firm in the UK stated: "What would be nice would be a government body or someone in an advisory capacity as an educational thing to come round and say you could be doing this and that or you need to look at the way you do that because in two years time the law will change." And a production manager of a small chemical manufacturer in the Czech Republic suggested that "I think it should come from the Ministry of Environmental Protection...and it should be funded". A manager of a

small producer of relishes, sauces salad dressings in Ireland also suggested that it would be 'happy' if Bord Bia [the Irish Food Board] was providing the support.

Respondents also referred to trade associations (13: 19.6%) and consultants (11 : 16.6%). Universities were mentioned by 9 (13.6%) firms, and 5 of these were in Greece (which can be explained by the strong relationship that the University of Aegean had with a relatively small number of local and homogenous food producers). When firms were asked what they would like support to achieve the responses were varied and showed no distinctive characteristics between states. The predominant theme was compliance with legislation – as Figure 3 shows 30 (45.4%) firms wanted any support to make them legally compliant.

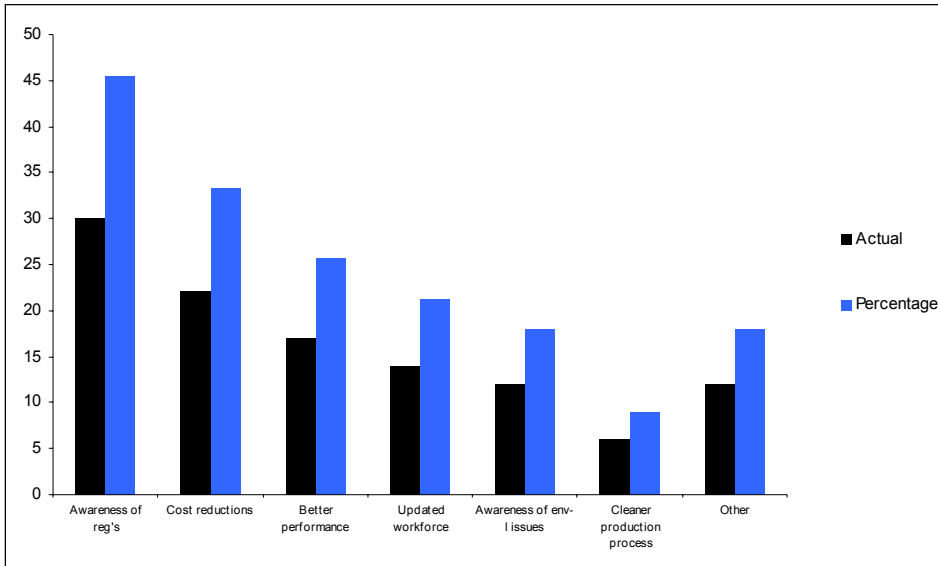


Figure 3: Results of support

As one manager of a small producer of dairy products in Ireland suggested, “As long as we were compliant with any regulations, we’d be happy. I wouldn’t like to be slapped with something that I wasn’t aware of.” Cost reductions were also mentioned by 22 (33.3%) firms. Legislative compliance and cost reductions are important priorities to many firms, as the following quote from a director of a small manufacturer of aluminium frames in the UK shows: “certainly information on regulations because of compliance and awareness of new legislation and we would be looking at cost reduction, cost benefits. These have to be the most important for any small firm I would think. If that then introduces a manageable level of investments and advice about maintenance programmes and things like that it would be good, but not as high a priority as the complying with the law and making savings I’m afraid”. Better performance was mentioned by 17 (25.7%) respondents, an updated workforce by 14 (21.2%) and awareness of environmental issues by 12 (18.1%). Disappointingly, only 6 (9%) respondents referred to cleaner production process. Indeed, it was quite clear that environmental improvements were a relatively low priority, as the manager of a small producer pastas, sweets, olive oils, vinegars and marmalades in Greece indicated: “As a company we would look at costs more than anything at the moment. That’s the way things are at the moment we would be looking for cost benefits... to increase our profits. If we become more environmental it’s an added bonus.” Similarly, a Director of a small ceramics manufacturer in the UK commented that “If there are no savings and it is an expense just to keep the environment, then it’s a no-go”.

Respondents were also asked about barriers to accessing support. Figure 4 shows that, not unexpectedly, the most significant barrier is costs (which were referred to by 29 (43.9%) respondents). This relates to a relatively consistent theme when looking at respondents’ support needs, which is that respondents generally felt that financial support was required and that help and advice should be funded or subsidised whenever possible.

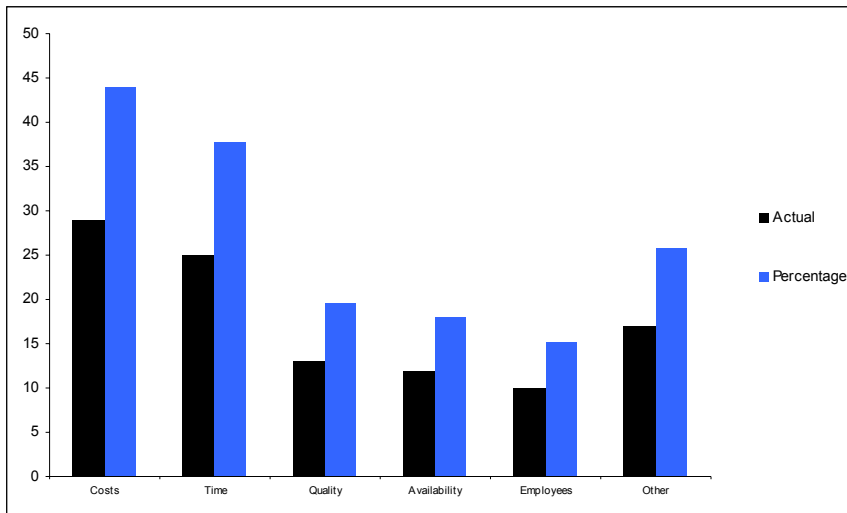


Figure 4: Barriers to training

Costs barriers were closely followed by time, as one manager of a small of a paint manufacturer in the UK said: “Time, I would say. Very, very difficult to spare the time. Just as an example; in January three of the managers, myself included, should have been going to a three day training course, a health and safety training course and I was the only one that actually attended”. Quality (13 : 19.6%) and availability (12 : 18.1%) are linked to respondents’ negative perceptions of the adequacy of available support - particularly in terms of it being too generic, difficult to access and too bureaucratic. To a lesser extents, as the following quote from small producer of marmalades in Greece demonstrates, employees could also provide a barrier to accessing support and (in particular) training: “I am not sure if the workers will participate on their own will. We’d have to motivate them in some way.”

In summary, the level of support provides to and accessed by SMEs can be describe as fragmented. Many firms had sought or received any support of environmental issues, and many thought that the support was either inadequate or that they had no knowledge of such support. Most firms, however, acknowledge that they do need some help and guidance. In particularly, they needs help and advice of complying with regulatory issues, and also direct guidance (hand-holding) and financial support where possible. Training was a low priority for most firms. A large proportion of firms felt that the support should come from the government or a public agency. The outcome of any such support should be compliance with regulations and costs reductions. Environmental protection seemed to be a low priority to most firms. Time and costs were the main barriers for mot firms.

Lack of existing ‘compliance’ support

A number of authors, such as Hooper *et al* 1998), Hutchinson and Hutchinson (1997) and Murphy and Bendell (1997) have shown that there are a choice of initiatives that have been developed to assist SMEs in making environmental improvements. While there are indeed many resources are available, Table 2 demonstrates that none of these resources are aimed at helping SMEs to comply with legislation and, moreover, they are not available across Europe. The Table shows some of the key resources that are available and outlines the main themes of the resources, the target audience and the costs involved.

Table 2: Supporting toolkits for SMEs

Toolkit/supports	Organisation/contact/url	Main theme	Target audience	Cost
Ecological Business Toolkit	www.ecobiz.org	Business checklist, recycling resources and resources for construction and auto industry recycling US bias	US construction and auto businesses	Free to download
NetRegs	Environment Agency	UK and EU environmental legislation; impact on sectors	UK SMEs	Free on internet
GreenBiz Primer – Greening your Business	www.greenbiz.com	Waste, energy, water, LCA. Summaries. Links and information.	(US) SMEs	Free to download
Self-Assessment Guide	West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum	Self assessment guide to environmentally sustainable commerce. Divided into 8 areas that affect business performance	All businesses	Free to download
GreenBiz Waste management	www.greenbiz.com	How to inventory your wastes for environmental compliance; zero waste training manual; environmental good-housekeeping guide	SMEs	Free to download
Business Environment Strategic Toolkit (BEST)	UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organisation)	“Translates company objectives into a coherent set of performance measures”	SMEs	Software – price on application

Energy and environment SME toolkit	Federation of Small Business in Scotland	"Reduce costs and maximise profits" includes case studies and sensible advice	SMEs (UK bias)	Free to download
Investing in Future Generations	Business in the Community www.bitc.org.uk/resources/toolkit/	Handbook on csr – a beginner's guide. Good Practice guidelines for environmental management and reporting	All businesses (UK bias)	Free to download
Sustainable Development Business Toolkit	International Chambers of Commerce www.iccwbo.org	Covers several themes including implementing environmental management systems and climate change	All businesses	Free to download
European Environmental Toolkit for Citizens	EU Environment DG	Quiz to test knowledge plus searchable database of toolkits	Students, "citizens" and teachers	Free on internet
Design for the Environment Toolkit	Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance www.moea.state.mn.us/berc/dfetoolkit.cfm	Tools needed to incorporate environmental attributes into product design	All businesses	Free to download
Measuring to Manage	Envirowise	Reducing waste costs	SMEs	Free to download

In addition to these supporting toolkits, there are alternative resources available that provide legislative guidance (Table 3), but as can be seen these are largely aimed at lawyers and other people that may possess advanced legal skills. They do not provide user friendly legal guidance to the European SME audience. SME owner/managers and employees will find these resources complicated and daunting.

Table 3: Legislative support resources

Name	url	Aimed at
NetRegs	http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/netregs/	UK SMEs
Ecolex	www.ecolex.org/ecolex/index.php	Lawyers
European Environmental Law	www.eel.nl/boven.asp	Lawyers
Eur-lex	http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/en/index.htm	lawyers

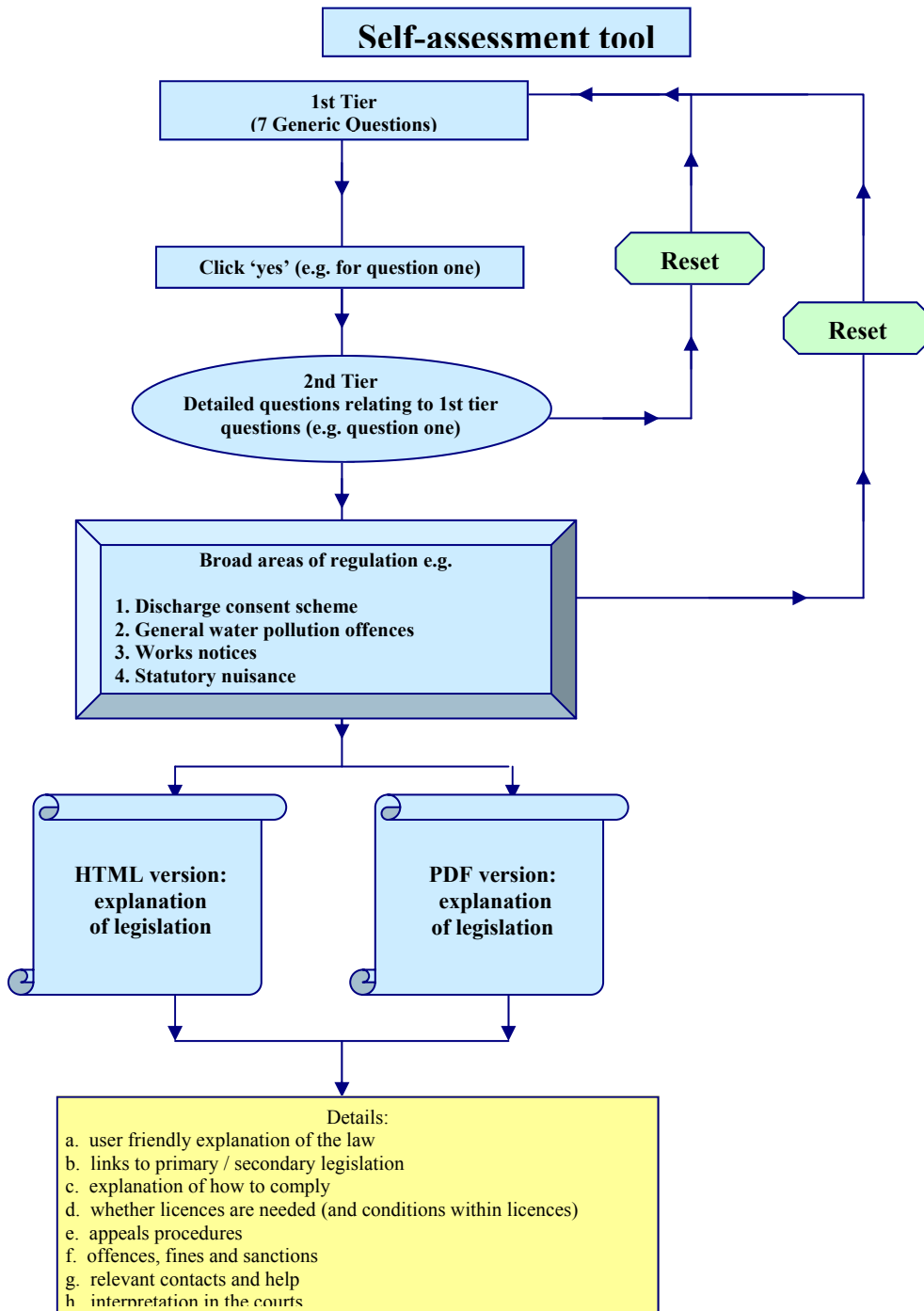
Explanation of EnviroHelp

EnviroHelp has been produced to address the shortfall that has been identified above. It is a web-based support facility that enables SMEs to identify the regulations that affect their business and what they then need to do to comply. SMEs can also use EnviroHelp as a platform to explore measures, such as environmental management standards and eco-labels, which enable them to go beyond compliance. Critically, it is grounded in the evidence-based approach where environmental and detailed regulatory knowledge is not assumed, and compliance is the most important requirement in SMEs. This resulted in a self-assessment tool that can be easily used by the SME audience. The structure of the self assessment tool is shown in diagram 1. The EnviroHelp web-based support facility asks seven questions that cover all potential impacts that an SME can make on the environment. When formulating these questions, we have tried to avoid the type of legalistic, intimidating or technical jargon that is found on many web-based resources (the type of jargon that may prevent users from progressing past the tier one questions):

- Do you think your firm emits any substances into the air?
- Do you think your firm places any substances into local waters (e.g. lakes, streams, rivers etc), or does your firm take water from local waters?
- Do you think your firm produces, handles, stores, collects or disposes of waste, packaging or oils?
- Do you think you handle or dispose of any substances that may be hazardous?
- Do you think that there is any possibility that your firm lets polluting substances to spill onto land?
- Is there anything that your firm that may create noise?

If a user answers 'yes' to one or more of the questions, they will be given a more detailed set of questions relating to that area. This approach enables users to move from a generic set of questions to a much more detailed set of questions that can be linked through to specific laws and regulations. By selecting one (or more) of these second tier questions, the user will be taken to a set, or number of sets, of regulations that may affect them. This information will avoid legalese and will cover important areas such as: basic explanations of what the law does and how it may apply, links to primary/secondary sources, explanations of what to do to comply, information on offences, fines and sanctions and, importantly, sources of help (contact details etc). This information will be made available in html or pdf format.

Diagram 1: structure of the self-assessment tool



Conclusion

The findings show that SME are primarily concerned with complying with environmental regulations. Most SMEs have not used exiting support mechanisms, and those that have find these resources inadequate and not relevant to their business needs. The support that SMEs require focuses on helping them with compliance. They also prefer direct guidance and support – usually in the form of in company hand-holding. It has also been shown that there is no centrally available resource at the European level that helps SMEs to comply with environmental regulations. It has been estimates that 80% of national legislation derives from the EU, yet there is no recourse at the European level that helps SMEs to comply with environmental legislation. These finding should provide the basis for a EU wide compliance support framework which would provide an effective mechanism for reducing the environmental impact of one of the most significant groupings within the Member States. Clearly, the EU needs to allocate sufficient resources to make this happen

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