

ANNEX

As a first operational initiative of the Environmental Compliance Assistance Programme for SMEs the Commission has commissioned a study to select existing good practices in compliance assistance at national and regional level in 15 EU Member States and Japan and the USA, selecting 17 case studies. The selection is based on an inventory of 104 SME environmental compliance and performance initiatives. The selection criteria were: whether the initiative is considered to be a best practice, whether it is innovative, the likelihood that it could be transferred, the availability of evaluation information and the need to contain variety in type, objectives and target audience. A closer analysis of seventeen selected case studies provides insights in the effectiveness and transferability. Transferability is a crucial factor since the initiative should remain as effective in the new context as in the one within which it was developed. The specific local context in which SMEs operate greatly influences the transferability and can be considered from three perspectives: public awareness and preferences, the type of structure of industry and the administrative context.

Following an approach that classifies the initiatives according to how the objectives are delivered, six main ‘types’ of support and services have been identified:

- Passive information and advice tools (e.g. website, campaigns);
- Active/direct support and advice (e.g. helpdesks, on-site visits);
- Training;
- Network approaches (e.g. environmental management at cluster level);
- Incentives: economic and market incentives;
- Voluntary schemes.

A general conclusion from the case studies is that a common motivation for SMEs to participate in support programmes is to gain non-environmental benefits, such as cost-savings on energy, access to a network and business opportunities. This should be taken into account in designing initiatives for SMEs. Understanding networks is also important when considering the formation of SME assistance programmes because SMEs are particularly dependent on their network to compensate for the lack of resources and limited knowledge in-house.

From the assessment of existing compliance assistance initiatives at national, regional or local level, some important lessons can already be drawn:

- Public authorities or bodies tend to be best suited to delivering initiatives which are one-way and information based; whereas for more hands-on support initiatives the preference is for an independent deliverer, such as a private organisation or sector/business association. Partnership approaches appear to be highly successful, combining the respective expertise and merits of both public and independent organisations.
- The most effective initiatives for influencing behavioural change in SMEs are delivered at a regional level, due to advantages in terms of the accessibility of support,

advice tailored to specific regional issues, participation in local business networks, and ease of developing relationships in the region. Certain types of initiatives (such as national information campaigns and information provision tools, i.e. websites and help lines) can benefit though from the efficiency gains of taking a national approach.

- For the provision of regulatory information passive assistance is effective, while, where the objective is to secure a greater behavioural change, or where the target audience needs a greater level of support, direct assistance is more effective.
- Trust and confidentiality are important, given that information shared between the SME and deliverer can be sensitive – especially when dealing with environmental compliance.
- Greater benefits are achieved from longer-term initiatives, due to the time taken to develop relationships and trust, to influence behavioural change, and to realise environmental outcomes.
- Some source of public funding is needed in most cases, especially to fund the start-up of initiatives or without clear competitiveness benefits for SMEs taking part.
- Marketing efforts should never be underestimated, with appropriate funding and a solid communication strategy.
- Building on existing relationships and utilising ‘gatekeepers’ such as sector or business associations already well connected to the SME community, can enhance levels of engagement and participation.
- Involving SMEs in networks with large companies and product-chains can have the advantage of influencing supply chains. Networks can also bring non-environmental benefits to SMEs and therefore motivate SMEs to participate in such initiatives.
- One type of network often mentioned in relation to innovation and competitiveness are ‘clusters’. Clusters can be defined as concentrations of competing, collaborating or interdependent companies and institutions which are connected by a system of market and non-market links. SMEs rely to a large extent on external support and relationships and participation in clusters can be important to the success of SMEs.

