



European Energy Network

A voluntary network of European energy agencies

Supporting SMEs in the Energy Transition

Insights from European Business Associations

December 2025

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About this report

This publication is a European Energy Network (EnR) study produced under the 2025 EnR Presidency. It aims at providing the best available knowledge on the support currently offered by business associations to SMEs towards net-zero goals, across EnR member countries, based on 50 responses to a survey aimed at business associations. Please note that the conclusions do not imply policy positions of individual countries. The European Energy Network or any person acting on behalf of EnR is not responsible for the use that might be made of this publication.

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Report Sub-Committee



ADENE, Portuguese Energy Agency



CRES, Centre for Renewable Energy Sources and Saving, Greece



EST, Energy Saving Trust, United Kingdom



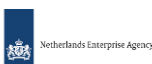
ENEA, Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development



EWA, The Energy and Water Agency, Malta



IDAE, Institute for the Diversification and Saving of Energy, Spain



RVO, Netherlands Enterprise Agency

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a 2025 survey conducted by the EnR Working Groups on Behaviour Change and Industry & Enterprises, aimed at understanding how European business associations support Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the transition to net-zero. With 50 responses from 16 countries, the survey highlights a growing commitment among associations to environmental sustainability. Notably, 67% have formal objectives to support SMEs in this area, and 62% perceive high interest from their members in sustainability issues. Despite this interest, only 38% of SMEs are believed to highly prioritise sustainability, revealing a gap between intent and action.

Closing this gap is often dependent on SMEs getting the right support and tools that will allow them to actually turn their sustainability concerns into concrete actions. This is where business associations can make a significant difference by providing different types of support which they reported as including advisory services, training and capacity building, awareness campaigns, online resources and information materials, technical expertise, advice in accessing funding and by promoting networking and community building through sector-specific events.

Out of the six categories of barriers which respondents were surveyed on, limited resources, the complexity of the topic as perceived by its members, and the lack of government support and regulation were identified as the most significant. Predictably, financial, policy and regulatory support as well as technical expertise rank as the types of support most needed.

Nevertheless, despite the acknowledgement of their shortcomings, over half of associations plan to expand their sustainability efforts in the next three years. Emerging approaches include digital innovation, circular economy practices, and enhanced advocacy.

The report concludes with recommendations for energy agencies and policymakers on how to strengthen the support offered to business associations across Europe, to help them support SMEs in their efforts to decarbonise their operations.

1 Introduction

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises represent over 99% of all businesses in the European Union (EU). They employ most of the private sector workforce and provide a relevant contribution to national economies. Despite their importance, SMEs often face obstacles in their efforts to participate in the green transition. These challenges include limited access to financing, a lack of knowledge about sustainable technologies, and difficulties in navigating and adapting to complex and ever-changing policy frameworks with demanding regulatory requirements.

National business and industry associations can help small businesses address these issues in several ways and at different levels:

- * **Policy level:** associations can play an active role in shaping policy discussions at both national and EU levels, advocating for the interests of smaller businesses and making sure that rules take into account their needs. Once the policies are defined, they can translate them into practical guidelines, and support SMEs in the uptake of related piece of laws, regulations, subsidies, and compliance requirements.
- * **Knowledge sharing:** they can share useful resources, such as training, technical support, and information to help SMEs adopt energy-efficient technologies, integrate renewable energy solutions, and innovate within value chains.
- * **Promotion of partnerships:** they can foster partnerships between SMEs and key stakeholders, including large industries, government agencies, research institutions, and financial organisations. This is helpful for knowledge sharing and to initiate joint projects.
- * **Aggregation:** many SMEs operate on tight budgets, making it difficult to invest in clean technologies or energy-efficient solutions and have access to technical expertise. In support of that, associations can aggregate enterprises demand to negotiate better prices for efficient technologies, energy services and/or energy audits. They can also coordinate actions of aggregation for enterprises and citizens to create energy communities or cooperatives.

During 2025 the two EnR Working Groups on Behaviour Change and Industry and Enterprises decided to join forces and carry out a joint activity on supporting SMEs in reaching net zero. As a first step, a small sub-committee was formed consisting of members from both Working Groups from the following agencies: ADENE (PT), CRES (GR), EST (UK), ENEA (IT), EWA (MT), IDAE (ES) and RVO (NL). A short survey was designed by the sub-committee and was sent to business associations in EnR member countries through the WG members and the EnR Regular members.

The aim of the survey was to reach the most relevant business associations in pre-defined business sectors in each EnR member country to help us to better understand what SMEs need in order to minimise their detrimental impact on the environment and work towards achieving net-zero carbon emissions.

The survey focused on the main challenges business associations face, and the kind of support they need to effectively help their SME members move toward sustainability and net-zero targets. Responses were collected through an online questionnaire using Questback.

The overview is complemented with a set of interviews to five key high-level stakeholders providing different perspectives on the topics of the assessment. Insights from both the survey and interviews have helped shape practical recommendations to support SMEs on their journey to net zero.

The main results of this work will be presented at the session entitled “Empowering SMEs on the road to net zero – Barriers, enablers and the role of business associations” on 11th December 2025 at the EnR BEHAVE 2025 Conference in Paris.

1.1 Methodology and profile of responding associations

The survey was primarily conducted, having in mind a target audience made up of business associations working with SMEs in the NACE C (Manufacturing) and NACE G (Distributive trade sector) Codes. Priority was given to reaching the business/industry associations of the manufacturing sector. The sectors were chosen according to their relevance in the EU landscape. NACE C is relevant also for Switzerland and both Codes C-G also look interesting for the United Kingdom (both Countries are EnR members). Based on Eurostat data:

- * The manufacturing sector employed around 30 million persons in 2022 – of which 15 million employed in SMEs – and generated €2.4 trillion of value added. The manufacturing sector contributed to one-quarter of the EU's business economy net turnover, being the largest of the NACE sections within the EU's business economy in terms of its contribution to employment (18.7%), as well as the largest contributor to the business economy value added with share of 24.1%. In terms of turnover, the manufacturing sector had the second highest net turnover within the EU's business economy after distributive trades, recording €9.8 billion, an increase of 18.3% compared with the previous year.
- * The distributive trade sector has an SME share of 99% with 29.8 million employees of which 20.2 million in SMEs. It accounted for around a fifth of the total number of persons employed in the EU's business economy in 2022. Most distributive trade enterprises serve a local market which consequently means this sector is characterised by a large number of enterprises: in total 5.8 million enterprises were classified under this sector in the EU in 2022, making it the largest enterprise population among any of the NACE sections within

the business economy (Sections B to N and P to R, as well as Divisions S95 and S96); the total number of distributive trades enterprises in the EU amounted to 18.2% of all business economy enterprises. The distributive trade sector generated a net turnover of €11.2 trillion across the EU, representing 29.2% of the EU's business economy net turnover.

The survey involved 50 associations from 16 countries: Austria, Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom. The country with the highest contribution was France, with 9 associations having taken part in the survey, while 75% of the respondents stem from 8 countries: Austria, Portugal, Italy, Netherlands, Greece, Lithuania, Malta.



Figure 1 | Countries with business associations which have responded to the survey.

(Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom)

Different associations are cross-cutting to different sectors, which shows an overlap in focus. A few of them are identified as Chambers or Chambers of Commerce, which may have a different scope than traditional associations, guaranteeing a good coverage on the SME sector. The food and agriculture sectors dominate in terms of sectoral representation. Several associations represent heavy industry, while others focus only on SMEs, reflecting both sectoral and company-size diversity.

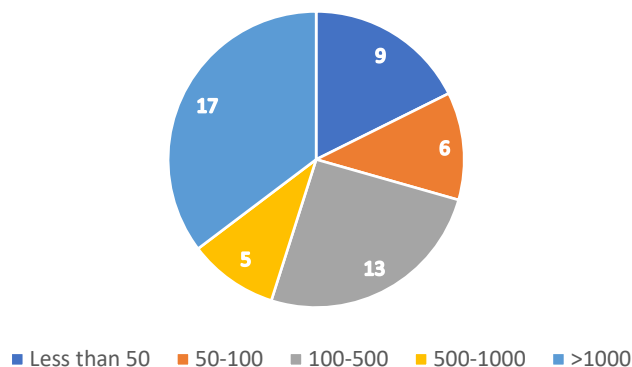


Figure 2 | Approximate number of SMEs affiliated to each association

Their main functions are summarised as follows:

- * **Representation and lobbying at national and EU level:** representation of their industries by advocating on their behalf on legislative and regulatory topics.
- * **Stakeholder engagement** building structured relationships with institutions, industry players, and civil society actors to contribute to policy development and public debate.
- * **Support for R&D and innovation:** Many associations promote innovation and digital transformation through joint projects and support programmes.
- * **Technical guidance:** Providing expert advice, training, and insights into market trends to improve member competitiveness.

Sustainability is a cross-cutting theme. Associations often promote low-carbon production, circular packaging (e.g., coffee capsule initiatives), resource efficiency, and biodiversity protection, with many aligning with the European Green Deal. Another cross-cutting theme is supporting enterprises and exporters in accessing new markets. Nearly all associations offer professional training, upskilling, and technical seminars to strengthen member capabilities, support digital/green transitions, and tackle labour market challenges.

It is important to note that over 95% of the respondent organisations have indicated supporting SMEs in their efforts to become more environmentally sustainable. Furthermore, more than half explicitly identify this support as a core objective of their activities.

2 Sustainability objectives and priorities

The below analysis of the data collected through the survey provides valuable insights into how associations are aligning their objectives with sustainability goals and how they perceive SMEs' interest and prioritisation of these issues.

2.1 Association objectives related to environmental sustainability

The survey data shows that 67% of associations have a specific objective to support their SME members in becoming more environmentally sustainable. This indicates that the responding associations have an organisational commitment to sustainability, suggesting that environmental concerns are becoming increasingly embedded in their strategic planning and the services that they offer their members. Additionally, 24.5% of responding associations support SMEs on sustainability issues without having it as one of their official objectives. This shows that even the associations that do not have a sustainability integrated into their formal objectives, do still engage and support their members on these issues. Only 4% of respondents indicated that they do not have any specific objectives on supporting their members with sustainability.

While the data cannot be generalised to all business associations across Europe, the responses show a positive trend. The majority of associations who participated in the survey are actively supporting sustainability. However, there may be a response bias, as associations more engaged in sustainability may have been more inclined to participate in the survey.

2.2 SME interest in sustainability and net-zero issues

The survey also explored SME interest in receiving support on sustainability and net-zero issues. Business associations were requested to assess the level of interest their SME members expressed regarding these matters. Responses were grouped into three levels of interest, as shown in Figure 3: highly interested (62%), moderately interested (28%) and low interest (10%).

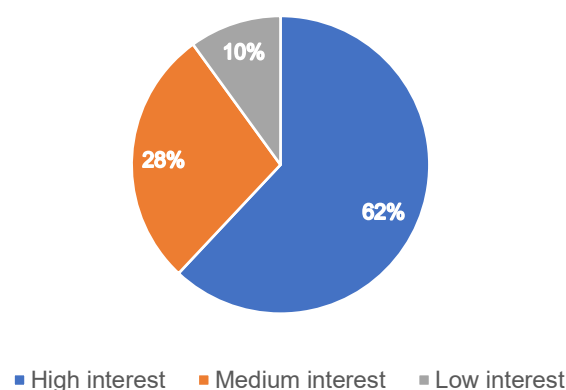


Figure 3 | How interested are your SME members in getting support on sustainability and net-zero issues?

It is encouraging to see that the majority of the responding associations, believe that their SME members are highly interested in sustainability and net-zero issues., whilst a further quarter of associations perceive that their members have a moderate interest in these topics and only 5% report low engagement.

This is particularly notable given the well-documented barriers SMEs face compared to larger enterprises when it comes to engaging with sustainability and net zero issues, including resource and financial constraints, and competing business priorities.

To help associations engage with their SME members who only demonstrate a lower interest, there is an opportunity to communicate the business case for sustainability, perhaps by showcasing cost savings, regulatory compliance, or market opportunities associated with green practices.

2.3 SME prioritisation of sustainability and net-zero issues

But beyond understanding the level of interest in receiving support on sustainability and net-zero issues, the survey also sought to assess how does intention translate into these matters actually being prioritised by SME's, ideally by being integrated into their business strategies and with practical impact on day-to-day operations. As such, associations were asked to rate how much of a priority they believed sustainability and net-zero issues are for their SME members, with responses ranked into three categories, as in Figure 4: high priority (38%), moderate priority (52%) and low priority (10%).

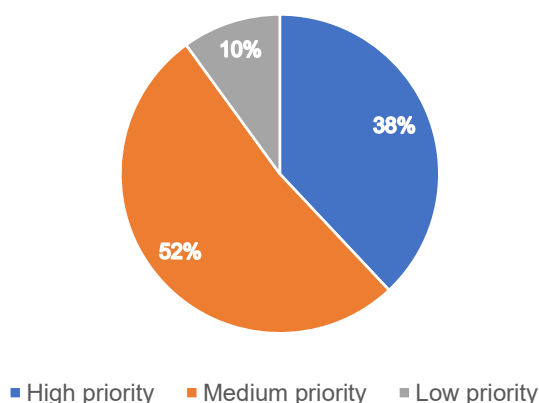


Figure 4 | How much of a priority are sustainability and net-zero issues to your SME members?

Although over a third of the responding business associations believe that their SME members, see sustainability and net zero issues as a high priority, the majority of respondents believed that their members view these issues as a medium priority. Only a low proportion of the associations believed that their members consider these to be a low priority.

The results do reveal a slight gap between interest in support and actual prioritisation, with over 60% of business associations believing that SMEs are highly interested in sustainability

but only 40% believing that their SMEs have these topics as a high priority. This disconnect suggests that while SMEs may be receptive to sustainability initiatives, they face challenges in making these issues a priority. This could be to the well-understood barriers that SMEs face, such as lack of time and resources to dedicate to these activities.

The survey results show a growing commitment among business associations to support SMEs in improving their environmental performance. It also shows that SMEs are increasingly interested in sustainability and net-zero issues, even if these topics are not always a top priority. To bridge the gap between interest and action, associations have an opportunity to tailor their support by demonstrating the tangible business benefits of sustainability and helping SMEs overcome practical barriers.

3 Types of support offered

Regarding the types of support offered, 37 out of 50 respondents indicated offering their SME members support on how they can minimise their environmental impact and work towards achieving net-zero carbon emissions, while 8 are planning to provide advice in the future. In analysing the responses, 19 types of support were identified and grouped into 6 categories as outlined in Table 1. According to the responses, the most common methods offered by the associations in supporting SMEs towards net zero fell into three categories, **training & capacity building** with workshops and webinars taking the lead, followed by newsletters, clear information and best practice sharing resources and sessions in **information & awareness** and one-on-one personalised consulting on specific topics waste reduction, sustainable transport, and eco- design) within the **advisory services** category.

When asked if associations have plans to ramp up their efforts in supporting SMEs in sustainability and net zero over half said yes and the rest were mainly undecided. When answering the question on whether associations offer tools or resources to help SMEs measure their CO₂ emissions or track their progress, this was more or less equally divided between yes and no.

Regarding the question on what would be most helpful in assisting associations to better support SMEs in achieving sustainability and net zero, financial grants and support scored the highest followed by policy guidance or regulatory support. Access to technical expertise or resources for measuring impact and partnerships with technology providers or with the public sector all scored around the same. When asked about organisational culture and leadership most agreed that this was (highly) significant.

TYPE OF SUPPORT	COUNTRIES WHERE IT'S OFFERED
ADVISORY SERVICES	
Guidance on EU sustainability policies, ESG integration, and carbon reduction strategies	DE, ES, IT, MT
Support for energy audits, environmental diagnostics, and compliance with regulations	IT, NL, PL, PT
Personalised consulting on topics like waste reduction, sustainable transport, and eco- design	AT, DE, FR, LT, MT, NL, PT
TRAINING & CAPACITY BUILDING	
Workshops, webinars, and technical days on sustainability, CSR, energy efficiency, and circular economy	AT, ES, FR, IT, LT, PT, MT, NL, UK
Development of guides and toolkits (e.g., for hotels, events, and food sectors)	AT, IE
Training on ISO standards (e.g., ISO 14001, ISO 50001)	FR, PT
INFORMATION & AWARENESS	
Newsletters, webinars, info sessions and forums to share best practices and regulatory updates	AT, FR, IT, LT, MT, NL, PT, UK
Production and dissemination of periodical reports/bulletins on sector specific topics/trends and regulatory updates	ES, IT, PL, UK
Public relations and awareness-raising campaigns and/or events	AT, FR, MT
Online platforms and toolkits for self-diagnosis (e.g. carbon footprint) and learning	AT, DE, ES, IT, NL, PT
Inspiration tours and technical visits to R&D and innovation institutions, enterprises, etc.	FR, NL
COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS	
Participation in R&D and innovation projects focused on decarbonization, clean tech, and eco-performance	AT, ES, FR, LT, PT
Sector-wide initiatives and programs to promote decarbonisation (e.g. Portuguese Chemical Industry's 2050 Carbon Neutrality Roadmap)	AT, FR, PT
EU-funded projects (e.g. AENEAM Life project for energy audit implementation)	FR
FINANCIAL & TECHNICAL SUPPORT	
Help with accessing subsidies, funding programmes (e.g. Moldova's SME Greening Programme), and government incentives	AT, FR, PL, PT
Support from energy national agencies or other key stakeholders with expertise on specific topics (e.g. circularity, ESG, etc.) for consultancy and implementation	FR, IT, MT, NL, PT
Monitoring tools for energy and waste management	AT, ES, IT, NL
NETWORKING & COMMUNITY BUILDING	
Creation of working groups and thematic committees (e.g., carbon, recycling, water resources)	ES, FR, MT
Events like "Green Value 4 Food" and "Journées de la Naturalité" (e.g. trade shows, congresses, etc.) for knowledge exchange and best practice showcase	AT, ES, FR, NL, PL, UK

Table 1 | Types of support offered by business associations

4 Barriers to Supporting SMEs

The following charts collectively illustrate how different barriers – ranging from financial or resource constraint to lack of governmental support – affect associations or organisations in relation to energy efficiency and sustainability. Each chart highlights the degree of impact perceived by respondents, classified from “Low” to “High,” with additional options like “I don’t know” or “Not applicable.” By examining them together, we can identify which obstacles are most influential and how their perceived intensity varies across contexts.

4.1 Financial or Resource Constraints

Financial or resource limitations are regarded as one of the most critical challenges. As shown on Figure 5, 50% of respondents identified the impact as “High,” the largest single category across all charts. A further 24% rated it “Middle-high,” and 12% considered it “Middle.” Only 8% (combined) viewed it as “Low” or “Middle-low,” and 6% indicated “Not applicable.” This pattern demonstrates that limited funding, staff, or material resources constitute a central barrier to implementing energy-related initiatives. Even when technical knowledge exists, the inability to allocate sufficient resources hinders progress. This factor likely overlaps with the perceived complexity, as higher complexity often requires additional investment in training or consultancy.

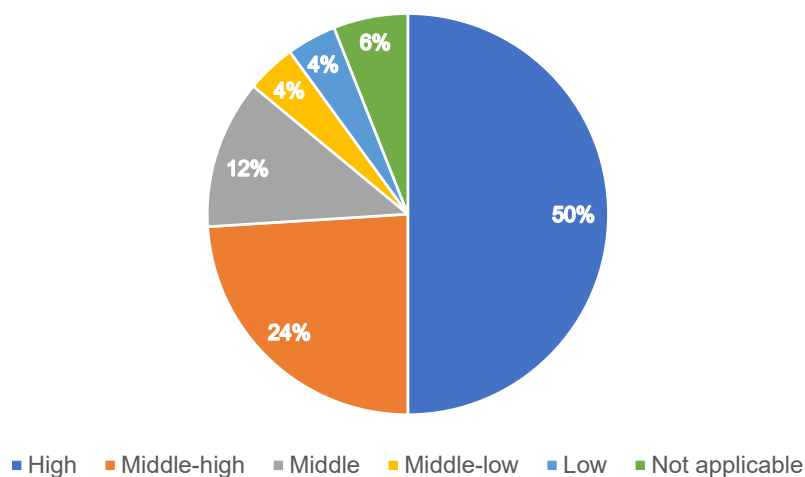


Figure 5 | Impact of financial or resource constraints within the association

4.2 Lack of Awareness or Knowledge

Figure 6 focuses on the lack of awareness or knowledge necessary to support its members. Here, responses are more evenly distributed: 30% identified the impact as “Middle,” 26% as “Middle-high,” and 16% as “Middle-low.” Only 4% considered it “High,” while 14% said “Low,” and 10% selected “I don’t know / Not applicable.” The results indicate that while knowledge

gaps exist, they are generally seen as moderate rather than severe. Many respondents acknowledge room for improvement in training or information-sharing but may feel that their organization already possesses a basic understanding of energy issues. Compared with financial barriers or perceived complexity, lack of awareness seems less decisive but still relevant, particularly for maintaining consistent support among members.

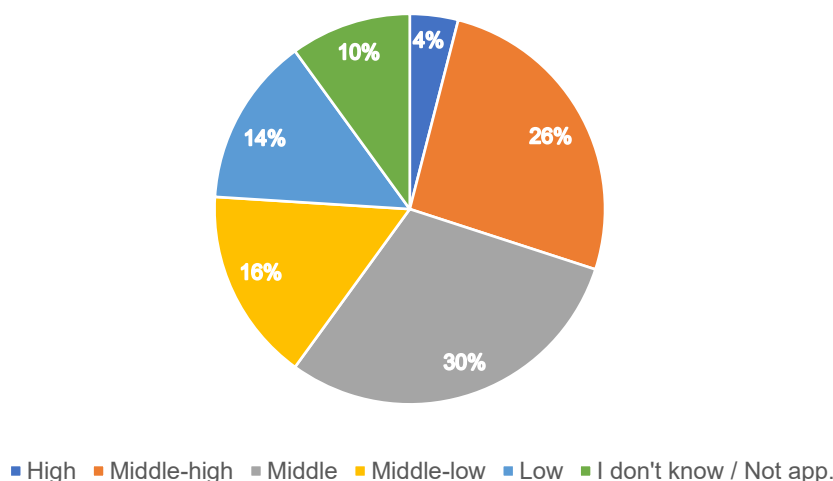


Figure 6 | Impact of lack of awareness or knowledge needed to support members

4.3 Limited Technological Options

The next chart examines the impact of limited technological options in the respondents' sector. 28% rated this factor as "Middle-high," 24% as "Middle," and 14% as "Low." The remaining categories – "Middle-low" (10%), "High" (8%), and "Not applicable" (16%) – show a moderate spread. This indicates that while technology limitations are recognised, they are not universally experienced. Some sectors may already have accessible energy-efficient solutions, while others struggle with outdated systems or lack of affordable alternatives. The relatively high "Not applicable" response could imply that certain respondents operate in contexts where technology constraints are not a pressing concern.

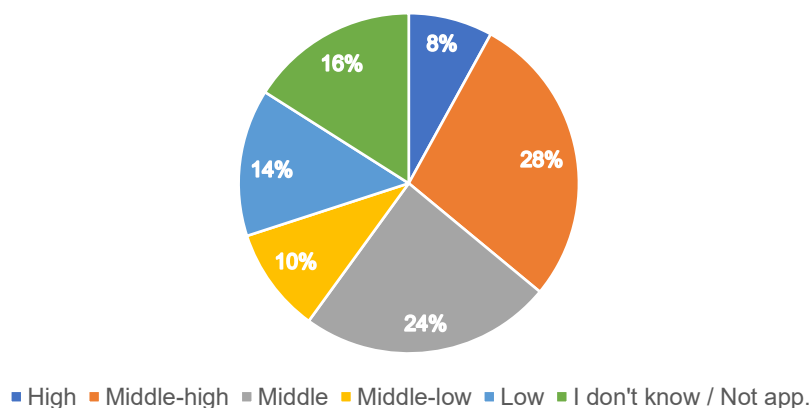


Figure 7 | Impact of limited technological options in the respective sector of activity

4.4 Resistance to Change Among Members

The fourth chart highlights resistance to change, a behavioural rather than technical factor. The most common response, 38%, falls under “Middle-low,” followed by 24% “Middle” and 22% “Middle-high.” Only 10% chose “Low,” and 6% “High.” This distribution suggests that while resistance exists, it is generally perceived as moderate or slightly below average in its impact. It may reflect that members are not necessarily opposed to energy improvements but may lack motivation or confidence to implement changes independently. Compared with more tangible barriers like funding or technology, behavioural resistance is less dominant but still noteworthy as a subtle, underlying constraint.

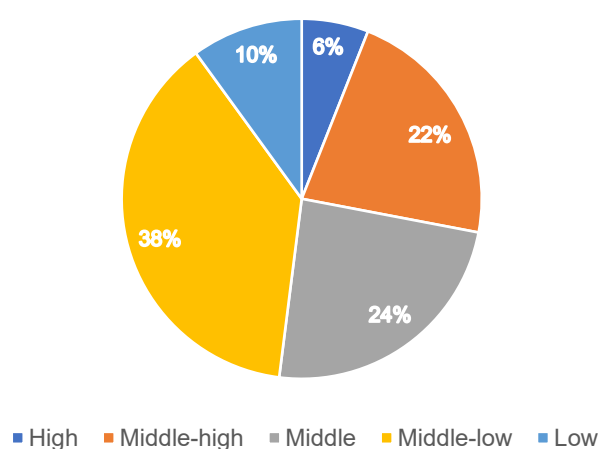


Figure 8 | Impact of resistance to change among members

4.5 Lack of Government Support or Regulation

Figure 9 demonstrates the role of governmental support or regulation, where 42% of respondents rated the impact as “Middle-high,” followed by 20% “Middle” and 18% “Middle-low.” Only 4% indicated “Low,” and 16% “High.” This pattern suggests that although government influence varies, it is generally perceived as significant. Many associations likely depend on supportive policies, funding programs, or clear regulations to promote energy efficiency. The relatively strong presence of “Middle-high” and “High” responses indicates a collective sentiment that greater governmental engagement could help overcome other barriers, such as financial constraints or technology access.

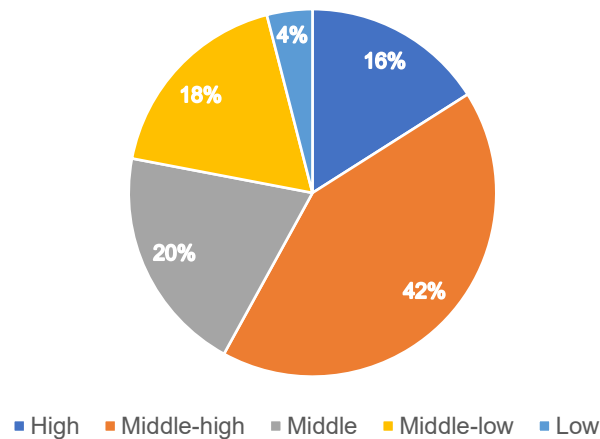


Figure 9 | Impact of lack of government support or regulation

4.6 Perceived Complexity of the Topic

Finally, on the sixth barrier that associations were inquired on, half (50%) rated the impact of perceived complexity at a middle-high level, making it the dominant category. Another 20% saw it as “Middle,” and the same proportion as “High.” Only a small share (8%) considered it “Middle-low,” while negligible percentages selected “Low” (0%) or “I don’t know” (2%). This distribution suggests that complexity is widely recognised as a significant barrier. Most respondents believe that understanding energy topics or technical matters requires considerable expertise, which may discourage smaller associations or less technically skilled members from engaging fully. The almost complete absence of “Low” responses underscores that complexity is rarely perceived as a minor issue.

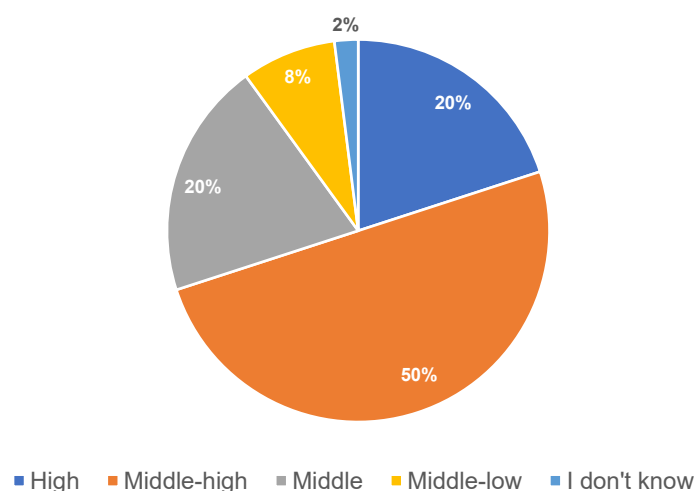


Figure 10 | Impact of perceived complexity of the topic

5 Future plans and opportunities

5.1 Planned increases in support over the next 1-3 years

Based on the survey responses, the majority of business associations (55.1%) indicated that they plan to increase their support to SME members on net-zero and sustainability issues over the next three years, which indicates a long-term commitment to supporting the SME sector in these matters.

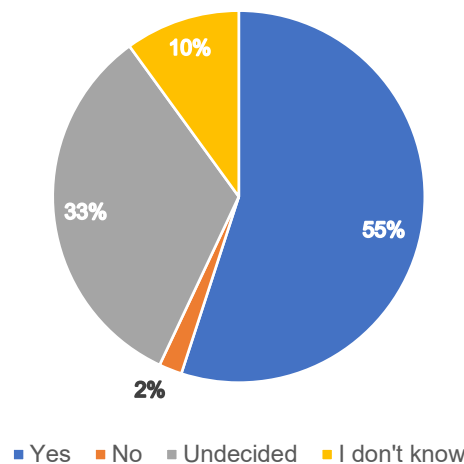


Figure 11 | Does your association plan to increase its efforts in supporting SMEs in the next 1-3 years?

The data also shows that 32.7% are undecided about whether to increase support, suggesting that while interest is growing, many associations may still be evaluating their capacity, resources, or strategic direction before committing to expanded efforts. Only 2% of respondents explicitly stated that they do not plan to increase support.

Overall, the results point to a positive trend, with most associations already planning or considering ways to enhance their sustainability support for SMEs. Yet, the high proportion of undecided responses highlights an **opportunity for energy agencies to engage with business associations to offer support and capacity building**, encouraging them to expand their ambitions and plans for future support.

5.2 New approaches under consideration

Business associations across Europe are planning a diverse range of new approaches to support their SME members with sustainability and net-zero goals over the next few years. Many are focusing on **expanding training and education**, including the development of new formats such as **virtual reality, mentorship programmes, and peer learning networks**. Others are investing in **technology adoption**, with initiatives to **measure Scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions**, promote clean and low-tech solutions, and support **digital innovation in production processes**.

Strategic planning is also a key area, with several associations developing **sector-specific sustainability strategies** and **long-term decarbonisation roadmaps**. Advocacy is another major focus, with associations aiming to strengthen their engagement with policymakers to improve regulatory frameworks and ensure SMEs benefit from available incentives. Financial support is being enhanced through **guidance on accessing green finance** and **participation in EU-funded projects**.

Circular economy practices are gaining traction, with associations promoting waste reduction, eco-design, and sustainable packaging. Communication efforts are being scaled up through **direct outreach, awareness campaigns, and improved information materials** tailored to SME needs. Overall, these new approaches reflect a growing commitment to helping SMEs overcome barriers and actively participate in the green transition.

5.3 Support needed by business associations

The survey also asked business associations to rate, in a scale of 1 to 5, which support measures would be most useful to them in helping more SMEs with net-zero and sustainability issues. The responses show a preference for **‘Financial support or grants’** which received the highest average rating (4.72). This indicates that funding remains an important enabler for associations to effectively support their members. This aligns with known barriers SMEs face, such as limited resources and capacity.

Policy guidance or **regulatory support** and access to **technical expertise** are seen as equally important (both rated 4.10), suggesting that associations also need clear policy and regulatory frameworks, as well as expert input to guide SMEs through the complexities of decarbonisation. Tools or resources for measuring impact scored moderately (3.92), showing that while these tools are also useful.

Lower ratings were given to partnerships with technology providers (3.67) and the public sector (3.63), which may reflect challenges in establishing effective collaborations or a perception that these partnerships are less immediately impactful.

Overall, the data highlights **a strong demand for financial and strategic support**, with technical and collaborative measures seen as complementary but less critical. This insight can guide energy agencies and policymakers in prioritising interventions that directly support business associations and their SME members.

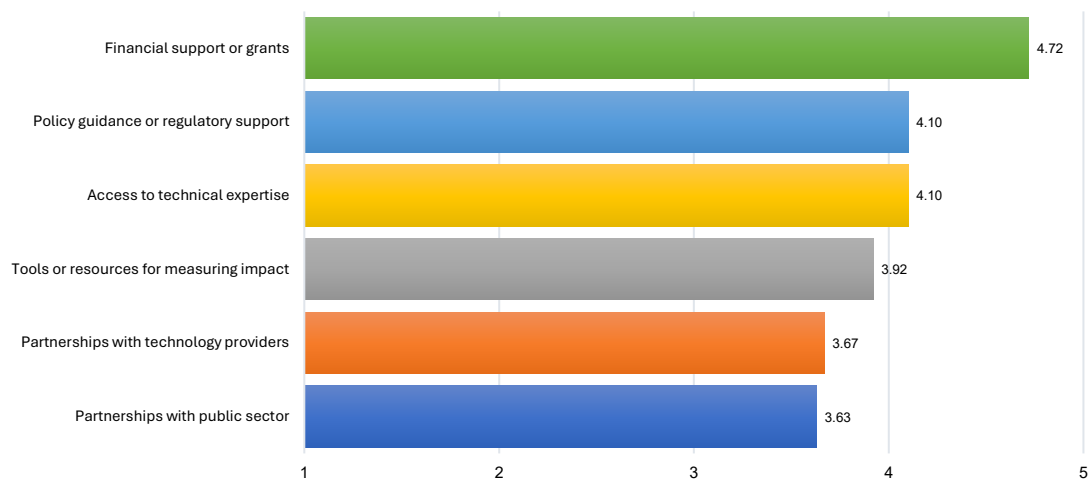


Figure 12 | Usefulness of measures assisting surveyed associations in better supporting its members
(1 not helpful – 5 very helpful)

6 Stakeholder consultation interviews

In addition to the insights provided by the business associations who took part in the survey, it was deemed relevant to include the perspectives from different stakeholders who can play a key part in the supporting and/or creating an environment conducive to SME's taking on net zero commitments. The following organisations representing five different sectors have been consulted:

SECTOR	International Organizations	European Institutions	European National Energy Agencies	Academia	Private Sector
ORGANIZATION					
	International Energy Agency	European Commission	Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (representing the 2025 Presidency of EnR)	University of Technology Sydney	Energy Efficiency in Industrial Processes
INTERVIEWEE	Emma Money Energy Analyst at the Office of Energy Efficiency and Inclusive Transitions	Tom Howes Adviser Green Transition and Market Regulation, Energy System Integration Unit, Directorate-General for Energy	Declan Meally Director of Business, Public Sector and Transport	Andrea Trianni Director of Research Programs at the Faculty of Engineering and IT	Rod Janssen President

Q1. From your perspective, what are the main challenges that business associations face when trying to help SMEs move toward climate neutrality?

Q2. Do these challenges tend to differ depending on the Sector (e.g. Industry, Tertiary, Transport)? Feel free to add experiences from your specific Country or Region.

Q3. In your experience, do current EU and national policies give SMEs the practical tools they need in becoming more sustainable?

Q4. What kind of limitations make it harder for associations to provide real support to SMEs on the topics of energy efficiency and carbon reduction?

Q5. Are you aware of any examples of successful partnerships that have helped business associations better support SMEs in reducing their consumptions or emissions?

The following five main challenges stood out from the interviewees' answers when speaking on the perceived main challenges faced by business associations in their quest to support SMEs move towards net zero:

- * **Getting the message across** to SMEs to make them aware of what climate neutrality means for their business as well as the importance and benefits of prioritising sustainability and decarbonisation.
- * Providing relevant information, support and common solutions considering the **very diverse SME landscape**, which means very different needs and challenges. It was particularly noted to be especially important to distinguish between energy intensive and other SMEs.
- * Interpreting and disseminating the practical implications of **complex policy and regulatory frameworks** while assuring continuously monitoring of evolving and new ones.
- * Operating on **limited budgets and resources** alongside the administrative complexity of securing external funding.
- * **Finding a balance** between promoting ambitious climate policies and advocating for the interests of their sector and ensuring its competitiveness.

These partly mirror the barriers outlined in Section 4, with particular emphasis placed on the financial and resource constraints which were identified by 50% of respondents as having a high impact on their ability to support SMEs. Also highly ranked, with 50% of respondents considering it as having a middle-high level impact, was the perceived complexity of the topic which is also aligned with the previous barrier, as understanding not only the technical aspects, but also regulatory ones, requires highly skilled and experienced staff members which are often not found in the ranks of these associations due to a lack of financial resources, which in turn, hinders their ability to provide actual useful and sector-specific support and information and to help their members navigate complex laws and regulations.

When asked to weigh in on how they thought the challenges differ depending on the sector, all interviewees considered the broad **challenges to be fairly the same, but the degree of the difficulties to differ across sector and region**. Furthermore, they highlighted the added challenges of energy-intensive sectors pointing out the need to provide highly technical guidance through the different process decarbonisation options, especially in cases where interventions imply a deep transformation.

Opinions diverged regarding whether they considered SMEs to have at their disposal the tools needed to be more sustainable, as made possible by EU and national policies. On the one side, some considered **a wide range of resources is available** (tools, guidance and best practice documents, funding through multiple channels, etc), **with the main issue being the**

lack of knowledge, awareness and willingness to engage, which all converge to prevent SMEs from accessing them. Associations can play a major role in overcoming this barrier through communications and dissemination actions. On the other side, it was also considered that tools available are often too complex and not well-suited to answer SMEs needs. It is the same case for **financing, where innovative and blended solutions are needed**, combining different instruments/schemes (grants, low-interest loans, and private capital). Also mentioned was the need for more **de-risking projects**, as competitiveness becomes a growing policy priority.

As for their take on the main limitations hindering business associations' ability to provide support that will result in actual increased energy efficiency and carbon reduction for SMEs, interviewees once again reinforced the **diverse nature of SMEs** which makes it harder for associations to provide detailed and sector-specific advice. Additionally, it was outlined how the **lack of financial and human resources** often means operating on small budgets and teams which limits, in particular, their ability to provide specialised and technical support. Also noted was the limited impact that can be achieved by supporting SMEs on a one-to-one basis given the very large number of existing businesses, with each being responsible for a very small amount of emissions.

Across the board all experts mentioned not being aware of any examples of successful partnerships that have helped business associations better support SMEs in their decarbonisation efforts. However, **SEAI did provide examples of how they have partnered with business associations and companies** to increase engagement of specific sectors in national programmes, as well as other initiatives and services they have launched that provide SMEs with technical and financial support.

Looking ahead, they mentioned several initiatives such as the energy efficiency tripartite contracts, one of the **EU's key actions foreseen in the Affordable Energy Action Plan** (February 2025), as well as the **European Commission's (EC) European Energy Efficiency Financing Coalition** with national hubs being set up in each member state. Finally, the role **energy agencies can play by promoting and engaging in such partnerships**, providing associations with valuable regulatory and technical knowledge was mentioned.

FULL INTERVIEWS AVAILABLE IN THE APPENDIX

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

This report shines a light on the strong commitment to sustainability from business associations in their support to SMEs, which does not necessarily match actual commitment from SMEs. While 67% of associations have formal sustainability objectives and 62% perceive high interest in the topic from affiliate SMEs, only 38% believe SMEs prioritise sustainability highly. Notably, although this is not always a part of their official mandate, 74% of associations offer sustainability-related support. The recognised relevance of sustainability objectives across sectors and the fact that business associations' support does not always translate into SMEs prioritising it in their strategies, highlights a gap between perceived interest and structured action, which is an opportunity to act, namely for national energy agencies. It is important to emphasise that just 4% of the business associations reported having no specific objectives in this area.

Support mechanisms offered to SMEs by European business associations are diverse, with the most prevalent being training and capacity building in the form of workshops or webinars. These are complemented by advisory services, such as guidance on sustainability policies, energy audits, and personalized consulting on topics like waste reduction and eco-design. Associations also provide information and awareness-raising through newsletters, online resources and tools and best practice sharing events, while collaborative projects and other community building initiatives further enrich the support landscape. Despite this broad array of services that associations are able to provide to its members, they rate financial and resource constraints as the barrier with the highest impact on their ability to support SMEs on their journeys towards net zero. Consequently, access to financial support was identified as a critical need, closely followed by technical expertise and policy guidance, with the effectiveness of these mechanisms being often constrained by sector-specific challenges and varying levels of SME engagement. Partnerships with technology providers and the public sector were considered to be of a lower priority. These findings underscore the importance of targeted funding and expert advice in enabling SMEs to meet their sustainability goals.

Looking ahead, 55% of associations plan to expand their sustainability support over the next one to three years. Their strategies include embracing digital innovation, promoting circular economy practices, developing sector-specific approaches, and increasing advocacy and policy engagement. These forward-looking plans suggest a growing recognition of the need for tailored, digital and scalable solutions to help SMEs transition effectively.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of tailored, practical support and the need for ongoing capacity building to help SMEs overcome barriers and accelerate their transition to sustainability.

Supporting SMEs in the Energy Transition | Insights from European Business Associations

Key Results

Commitment to Sustainability



BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS

67% have formal objectives to support SMEs sustainability journeys

Only **4%** reported having no such specific objectives

SMEs

62% of business associations perceive SMEs have high interest in sustainability issues

Only **38%** believe sustainability if highly prioritized by SMEs



Support Mechanisms



Most common formats:

- Workshops & webinars
- Newsletters & online resources
- Advisory services

Barriers



- Limited resources and capacity
- Perceived complexity of the topic
- Lack of government support or regulation

Top-Rated Support Needs



- Financial support/grants (**4.72/5**)
- Policy guidance & technical expertise (**4.10/5**)
- Access to technical expertise (**4.10/5**)

Future Plans



55% plan to increase sustainability support in the next 1–3 years

New approaches include:

- Digital innovation
- Circular economy practices
- Sector-specific strategies
- Advocacy and policy engagement

Figure 13 | Key results from the report based on the survey of 50 business associations across Europe

Based on the most relevant findings of the survey conducted and on the existing and lacking support mechanisms identified, a set of actionable recommendations is proposed in this section.

The following table (Table 2) presents these targeted recommendations for three key stakeholder groups – Energy Agencies, Business Associations and other SME support entities,

and Policymakers – with the aim of strengthening support for European SMEs as they advance towards sustainability and net zero.

These recommendations are based on insights gathered from the surveyed business associations across 16 countries and from the interviews with leading energy and business sector stakeholders. Only the recommendations marked as directly applicable (red icons in the table) for each group are highlighted, ensuring relevance and focus.

Energy Agencies

As key stakeholders in the energy sector, energy agencies are encouraged to play an active role in developing technical tools, capacity building, and strategic communication. Recommended actions include creating practical sector-specific guides, supporting digital self-assessment platforms, launching innovative training programmes, and facilitating networking initiatives. Their involvement is essential to ensure that support reaches SMEs in a segmented and effective manner, tailored to each company's level of readiness. It is recommended that energy agencies act in coordination with both business associations and SME support entities and policymakers for each task.

Business Associations and SME Support Entities

Business associations and SME support organizations should strengthen their ability to provide technical consultancy, promote peer learning, and disseminate best practices. It is recommended that they invest in communication materials adapted to different SME profiles, organize experience-sharing events, and act as bridges between companies, energy agencies, and policy makers. Their role as aggregators and facilitators is crucial to overcoming barriers such as limited resources, technical knowledge gaps, and resistance to change.

Policymakers

Policymakers are responsible for creating a simplified and SME-friendly regulatory framework, ensuring clarity in rules and incentives. They can rely on collaboration from national energy agencies to support them in this task. Recommendations include strengthening advocacy and feedback channels, fostering strategic partnerships across sectors, and developing dedicated funding streams for SMEs, with simplified application processes and a focus on high-carbon-intensity or high-innovation-potential sectors. Active engagement from policymakers is vital to ensure that public policies respond to SMEs' real needs and promote a fair and inclusive transition. Policymakers should also encourage the synergies between sectoral business associations, energy agencies and other stakeholders by providing tailored funding that benefits these agents and projects that foster this collaborative action.

This segmented approach is designed to foster synergies among stakeholders, promoting a coordinated and effective response to the challenges of SME decarbonization. The detailed recommendations in the following table provide a practical roadmap for each target group, supporting the implementation of concrete and context-appropriate measures.

	ENERGY AGENCIES	BUSINESS ASS. & OTHER SME SUPPORT ENTITIES	POLICY MAKERS
TECHNICAL SUPPORT			
Offer technical toolkits			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop clear and practical sector-specific guides and diagnostics tools, with templates to streamline compliance with sustainability rules and good practices. Support online platforms for carbon foot printing self-diagnosis and benchmarking. 			
Segment support by SME readiness			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer tiered support. Target low-priority SMEs with entry-level resources. 			
Promote networking and cascading support			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support business associations and consultants. 			
CAPACITY BUILDING			
Facilitate peer learning			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sponsor mentorship programs and “inspiration tours”. Promote best practice exchanges across regions. 			
Support capacity building			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-develop training modules with associations. Fund virtual reality or immersive learning formats. 			
RAISING AWARENESS & COMMUNICATIONS			
Demonstrate the business case			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlight energy and cost savings, market access, and risk reduction from sustainability (e.g. case studies, examples of cross-cutting direct solutions, ROI calculators, among others). 			
Invest in Communication			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop tailored materials for different SME profiles. Use storytelling and success stories to inspire change. 			

	ENERGY AGENCIES	BUSINESS ASS. & OTHER SME SUPPORT ENTITIES	POLICY MAKERS
STRATEGY AND POLICY MAKING			
Simplify Regulatory Frameworks			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure policies that are SME-friendly and easy to navigate. Provide clear guidance on compliance and incentives. 			
Strengthen advocacy channels			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage business associations in policy co-design. Create feedback loops between SMEs and regulators. 			
Build strategic partnerships			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build collaboration across sectors and supply chains. Set partnership models that connect SMEs with public agencies, large companies, universities, tech providers and peers, to share knowledge, reduce costs and drive innovation. Join EU-funded projects for innovation and funding access. 			
Tailored funding streams			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create SME-specific grant schemes with simplified application processes, giving priority to sectors with high carbon intensity or innovation potential. Provide targeted, sectoral or by-size funding to help SMEs decarbonise and innovate, namely by supporting business associations and investing in sectoral chambers that can offer better support, through training, advisory services, tools, etc. 			

Table 2 | Actionable recommendations for Energy Agencies, Business Associations & Other SME support entities and Policymakers, based on survey results.

About EnR European Energy Network



The **EnR European Energy Network** is a network of national energy agencies in charge of national research, development, demonstration and dissemination programmes in the fields of energy efficiency, renewable energies and the fight against climate change. Comprising 25 member agencies representing EU countries, Norway, the UK, Switzerland and Moldova, the EnR Network strengthens cooperation between member agencies and other European actors (European Commission, European Investment Bank, etc.) on all issues relating to sustainable energy. A network at the forefront of Europe's efforts to improve energy efficiency, increase the use of renewable energies and mitigate the effects of climate change, as part of a just transition approach.

EnR offers many advantages to its members, which it also makes available to other organisations, institutions and actors interested in sustainable energy at the European level:

- * A first point of contact for dialogue with national energy

agencies throughout Europe.

- * Practical experience in implementing government policies.
- * Deep understanding of market and consumer needs in our respective countries.
- * Unique, impartial, expert perspective considering issues through the prism of all our members.
- * Promotion of European leadership in energy transition on the global stage.

EnR activities are organised around 4 key areas:

- * Exchanging best practices in implementing energy management policies within the EU and internationally.
- * Exchanging information and experience to increase the effectiveness of members and the impact of their actions in terms of energy efficiency and the use of renewable energies.
- * Mobilising members' expertise to assess and analyse the implementation of European energy management directives and policies.
- * Providing a pan-European platform to support, assist and advise the European institutions on energy and climate issues.

9 working groups enable EnR members to discuss their respective issues and experiences and enhance their expertise in order to operate as effectively as possible at national and European level:

- * Building
- * Behaviour Change
- * Transport
- * Industry & Enterprises
- * Water-Energy Nexus
- * Renewable Energy
- * Monitoring Tools
- * Labelling & Eco-Design
- * Energy Efficiency



Further information


<https://enr-network.org/>


[@EnR_Network](#)


[european energy network \(enr\)](#)

Appendix 1 | Stakeholder consultation – full interviews

Appendix 1 contains the full answers which are analysed and presented in brief in *Section 6 - Stakeholder consultation interviews*. These were conducted to integrate perspectives from:

- International organisations (IEA, International Energy Agency)
- European institutions (EC, European Commission)
- European national energy agencies (EnR European Energy Network)
- Academia (UTS, University of Technology, Sydney)
- Private sector (EEIP, Energy Efficiency in Industrial Processes)

The name and position of the interviewees are in the table below:



Emma Mooney, Energy Analyst in the Office of Energy Efficiency and Inclusive Transitions at **IEA, International Energy Agency**



Tom Howes, Adviser Green Transition and Market Regulation at the Green Transition and Energy System Integration Unit, Directorate-General for Energy, **European Commission**



Declan Meally, Director of Business, Public Sector and Transport at SEAI, Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (as the 2025 Presidency of **EnR, European Energy Network**)



Andrea Trianni, Director of Research Programs at the Faculty of Engineering and IT, **University of Technology Sydney**



Rod Janssen, President of **EEIP, Energy Efficiency in Industrial Processes**

Q1. From your perspective, what are the main challenges that business associations face when trying to help SMEs move toward climate neutrality?



Climate Neutrality is not core to most SMEs business – so getting them interested in it and getting them to see the benefit.

Trying to target information to the SME, they are so diverse it can be difficult to get them relevant information.

If the SME does not own the premises, then they might not be in a position to make any changes – so may not want to engage.

Many SMEs lack the in-house resources (time, capacity, funding) to be in a position to commit to climate neutrality actions.



Communicating the essence or practical implications and impacts of EU laws, policies and access to funds.

Convincing SMEs of the need to change and receptiveness to change (in management/tech/practices/business model)

Sharing best practice solutions that are relevant and fit different types of SMEs.

Demonstrating how to comply with laws or policies in the least cost manner or even demonstrating how savings are achievable.



From the outset in Ireland SEAI considers SME the same as a small/micro business. In some cases the EU definition of SME includes some of the larger businesses in Ireland. For the purpose of this questionnaire SEAI is treating the SME definition as a small/micro business and with an annual energy bill from €10,000 up to €500,000 per annum.

In a lot of cases many of the small/micro businesses do not understand what climate neutrality actually means for their business. It is still considered an aspirational achievement as globally there are questions as to what it actually means and how it is being targeted. They do however consider sustainable business models and are keen to develop these business models.

The main challenges that organisations such as SEAI face is getting the focus of the management and time with the key decision maker in the SME (organisation).

For business associations and energy agencies alike the challenges are also linked to the fact that there can be thousands of small businesses in each sector (for example in Ireland there are 300,000 SMEs/Small businesses) and each business is only responsible for a very small amount of emissions so an Energy Agency will not have a major impact by dealing with these businesses on a one to one basis as the agencies do not have the resources. It can also depend on the sector, the size of the business and the ownership structure. If they are a family-owned small businesses, they tend to have a very close focus on sustainability and a very in-depth knowledge of the business including the emissions impacts.

Trying to target information to the SME, they are so diverse it can be difficult to get them relevant information. If the SME does not own the premises, then they might not be in a position to make any changes – so may not want to engage. Many SMEs lack the in-house resources (time, capacity, funding) to be in a position to commit to climate neutrality actions.



First SMEs often lack the human resources to navigate complex regulatory requirements such as the EU Green Deal, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive and similar regulatory frameworks, not to mention the national initiatives. In turn, associations must interpret and disseminate complex frameworks across diverse national contexts and sectors. This requires deep regulatory expertise and continuous monitoring of evolving policies.

Second, many SMEs have limited technical knowledge or data to measure emissions and identify decarbonisation opportunities. In this regard, associations are expected to act as knowledge brokers, developing training programs, emission-measurement tools, but they have limited budgets and staff, and securing external competitive funding might be administratively burdensome.

Third, coordinating collective action is difficult: SMEs are diverse in size, supply-chain position and market orientation, which limits the scalability of common solutions such as e.g. joint procurement of renewable energy.

Finally, associations face internal governance pressures to maintain credibility with both policymakers and members, needing to advocate for ambitious climate policies while safeguarding the short-term competitiveness of their sectors



The challenges for SMEs in the transition to climate neutrality are almost endless. SMEs need intermediaries to help design the course forward (a roadmap), to help identify the actions that are needed and to help develop business cases.

Yes, there are many stakeholders involved, and business associations are but one. However, they tend to have large networks that can identify support for SMEs. There has to be a distinction between national/regional associations and EU-wide ones. Obviously, for language and culture, the national/regional associations are much better placed.

There are also different needs for SMEs that are energy intensive and for SMEs that are export oriented. Business associations can play an important role for both. **For those that are energy intensive, EU-wide associations, in particular, can provide a major support.** For such as ceramics, steel, aluminium, chemicals, there are already roadmaps that can help. **All those associations can also play an important role in making the case for more support from national and EU financial schemes and the EIB and other development banks.**

Business associations can also play an important role in encouraging replication from EU-funded projects (from such as LIFE and Horizon).

Q2. Do these challenges tend to differ depending on the Sector (e.g. Industry, Tertiary, Transport.)? Feel free to add experiences from your specific Country or Region.



I don't think the challenges differ, however I think **they need to be addressed differently depending on the sector** and can, perhaps, only be addressed by segmenting SMEs.



I don't think the broad challenges differ, though the degree of difficulties, scale and access to information would differ across sector and region.



The **challenges are similar across each sector however there may be specific characteristics in each sector** and I believe that they need to be addressed differently depending on the sector and are best addressed by segmenting SMEs.

The following are some examples:

- The hotel sector has a significant heat use and this is increased if there is a swimming pool in the hotel complex. The actions in a hotel that make the most impact in Ireland are heating and cooling related;
- In Ireland the most significant transport sector challenges relate to overseas travel across Europe given the geography of Ireland as an island nation;
- For restaurants and bars a significant portion of the emissions come from refrigeration and lighting.



I would limit myself to what I observe in the **industrial sector**. Industry Associations representing broad industrial sectors—such as chemicals, steel, or cement—must navigate system-wide decarbonisation policies. **Their primary challenge is providing highly technical guidance on numerous options, such as e.g. process electrification, hydrogen adoption, etc.**

While for some sectors **process decarbonization options** are relatively less invasive, thus calling for better integration in existing processes, **in other cases (particularly for energy intensive processes) they require a deep transformation, thus with significant capital investments**. Such elements are very critical as they may conflict with short-term competitiveness.

In fact, and this is quite evident here in Australia, they also face strong lobbying pressures to protect competitiveness while supporting ambitious climate targets, creating a delicate balance between advocacy and credibility.



As said above, the challenges are different for energy-intensive and non-energy-intensive industries.

Some of these challenges were identified in the EU-funded RETROFEED project. For example, it included the **energy-intensive ceramics industry where most enterprises in Europe are SMEs**. There is also a **need to take a holistic approach**, when adding transport because **logistics play a key role**. This became apparent in such as the EU-funded project ICCEE (Improving Cold Chain Energy Efficiency).

And different sectors would have different concerns about costs and energy prices. For example, **those dependent on natural gas were heavily hit when prices skyrocketed after the start of the Ukraine/Russia war**. For example, many ceramics factories simply had to close.

Q3. In your experience, do current EU and national policies give SMEs the practical tools they need in becoming more sustainable?



I think this is very hard to answer, in one way yes – in many EU countries there are practical tools available that SMEs can use to become more sustainable (that have come from EU and national policies), however, this does not mean that the SMEs access these practical tools.

I think a key part that is missing in policy (at both EU and national level) is how to engage with SMEs to make sure that they can access the tools needed to become sustainable. One potential way to do so would be through the increased use of One Stop Shops.



Both at EU and at national (and even regional) level, there are tools, and significant funds available to help SMEs comply with EU laws and policies.

However, **awareness, knowledge and access to such tools and funds can still be inadequate.** The EU produces guidance documents, best practice documents, provides access to significant EU funding through multiple channels to help create energy savings, introduce low carbon technologies, materials or processes, or to encourage growth in new, low carbon goods and services.

But business associations play an important role in opening up access to such information and funds.



There are some practical tools available however many are developed locally or nationally and are seldom considered as having been provided by the EU.

Tools are generally viewed as financial tools and **the challenge for a micro business is usually finding time to engage** and – in the good times the businesses were too busy making money and in the bad times they are too business trying to survive.

In Ireland what we have seen is that the most useful tool is advice and guidance which are usually more practical help in the early stages and engage businesses once the advice and guidance is tailored to each sector.



While current EU and national policies provide important frameworks and incentives, in my experience **they just scrap the surface of what SMEs practically need to support their journey towards sustainability.**

I am still struggling to see the practical and easily accessible tools to support businesses in their decarbonization journey. For instance, **SMEs often lack simple, low-cost digital tools to calculate Scope 1–3 emissions** as the existing ones are frequently too complex, costly, or tailored to large enterprises, and also **usually not working well for companies operating simultaneously in multiple supply chains** (such in the case of lower tiers) and across different platforms for reporting.

When it comes to financing, **SMEs need more turn-key (or plug-and-play) funding packages to combine grants, low-interest loans, and private capital**, so to really boost their decarbonization efforts.

Finally, SMEs are struggling to rely on a skills and advisory infrastructure to fill their gaps in terms of technical knowledge, with programs mostly pilot-based or too fragmented across national agencies.



A lot of tools have been developed in EU-wide and national projects. As mentioned **above the lessons learned, the best practice cases identified and the tools developed get limited attention and so much valuable material gets misplaced and underutilized.** We at EEIP have worked with CINEA on these issues and are trying to improve implementation.

Looking at the EU policy development, it must be bewildering for SMEs to understand how they fit in and how the policies can help them. And to understand why they have to be more aggressive in reducing GHG emissions. We can see why there is a need for more administrative simplicity without losing sight of the long-term objectives.

There is the issue of competitiveness and it is good that this is a growing policy priority. SMEs understand full well what it takes to survive. And they know their context better than governments do.

There is a need for more de-risking projects. Projects such as the Investor Confidence Project, TrustEE, etc. were good and well-designed but never given the resources to go to scale. **They showed, however, the important role that intermediaries play for SMEs (engineering companies, ESCOs, consulting companies, business associations).**

It is really good to see the priority for SMEs and energy management in the revised Energy Efficiency Directive.

Q4. What kind of limitations make it harder for associations to provide real support to SMEs on the topics of energy efficiency and carbon reduction?



I don't have any real insight into this, other than **the heterogeneous nature of SMEs will always make delivering real support at any significant scale challenging**, there is no 'one size fits all' or even 'one size fits most'.



Indeed, whilst general information can be relatively easily transferred to SME members of business associations, **detailed knowledge, applicable to individual SMEs in very specific sectors and areas is limited by the scope and funding/staffing capacities of associations.**



As stated above, the challenge for energy associations is usually **trying to resource the programmes to enable support for the thousands of small businesses** and the small amount of emissions that each business emits.



First, resource constraints are significant: **most associations rely on membership fees and operate with small teams, limiting their ability to employ energy engineers or carbon specialists capable of delivering in-depth technical advice.** I have engaged in many experiences over the years (mostly in Italy and Australia) and this issue comes as recurrent and persistent.

Second, **fragmented expertise makes it difficult to design sector-specific programs.** Whilst energy-saving opportunities in cross-cutting technologies may find similarities across various manufacturing sectors, they differ widely when it comes for process-specific actions. However, **associations often lack the specialised knowledge or funds to commission tailored studies.**

Third, the complexity of EU and national funding schemes demands constant monitoring and administrative effort that exceeds many associations' capacity. This is also exacerbated by shifting eligibility criteria, tight application windows, and continuously evolving regulations. Finally, membership diversity complicates engagement, as SMEs vary in size, sector, and financial and sustainability maturity.



There are a lot of limitations on associations.

Scale is the issue. **There are a lot of SMEs and not that many associations.**

Associations need to help find enablers to go into the market to help SMEs. Most associations do not have a lot of technical expertise and that is not a problem.

Q5. Are you aware of any examples of successful partnerships that have helped business associations better support SMEs in reducing their consumptions or emissions?



I am not aware of partnerships that relate to business associations, generally the examples that we are aware of are targeted at helping businesses directly.

A related example would be **the use of banks to share information on energy efficiency options for SMEs as is the case in Japan and many other countries.**

There is also an **interesting case in Mexico, that was based on supporting supply chains.** Here is an extract on it from our report [Gaining an Edge - The Role of Energy Efficiency in Enhancing Competitiveness](#)

'Mexico: Improving efficiency across supply chains through strategic partnerships, awareness raising and capacity building

The essence of Mexico's [Programa Liderazgo Ambiental para la Competitividad \(PLAC, Environmental Leadership for Competitiveness\)](#) was to contribute to improving the competitiveness of businesses through pollution prevention projects, including energy efficiency. The programme operated from 2012 to 2019 and worked with more than 7 000 SMEs. It aimed to increase the environmental performance of SMEs' customer-supplier co-operation networks. Building on partnerships with education and research institutions, the programme delivered capacity-building and technical support and provided peer-to-peer learning opportunities. On average, for each dollar invested by the government, the enterprises invested **USD 3 and obtained savings of USD 4.60**, with a payback period of nine months. In total, savings of over USD 340 million and 1 478 GWh of energy were achieved, reducing participating companies' bills by USD 340 million. A positive outcome of the programme has been that it has strengthened the relationship and engagement between large companies and their supply chains, thereby contributing to supply chain resilience.'



No, but I **hope that the upcoming "tripartite contracts" will bring SMEs or their business associations to the table** to share information on how to better resource and mobilise SMEs in their pursuit of climate neutrality.



Yes, in Ireland SEAI have had several successful partnerships that have helped and are helping to engage SMEs business associations, generally the examples that have worked have targeted business sectors directly.

Example 1: The development of sectoral collaborative partnerships with particular influential champions in each sector:

- Partnership with the Hotel and Hospitality Federations and the National Tourist Association to work with hotels and restaurant sector. We tailored support for the sector and the Tourist association helped by delivering the programme and provided resources to support SEAI;
- Partnership with Diageo to access the Irish pub sector.

Each helped to drive up levels of engagement in the national programmes

Example 2: The piloting of a small business energy manager service which was very successful as an intermediary for small businesses. This enabled the training of Small Business Energy Managers (SBEM) hosted and resourced by larger organisations, with SBEM's being available to provide technical energy management support to the host organisation and the businesses in their supply chain.

Finally, SEAI has recently launched [SEAI Business Supports](#), an easy access grant for businesses to address climate action and approval can be received within 15 minutes.



As I am no longer directly involved into these type of projects in Europe, my information are somehow outdated.

In Australia I am unaware of such initiatives, unfortunately.



I will have to reflect on this. **There would be at the national level** and we at EEIP mainly work at the EU level.

The **Covenant of Companies was supposed to have done this but did not succeed.** It finally collapsed.

We are now **hoping that the European Energy Efficiency Financing Coalition national hubs will succeed.** There are upcoming meetings with the EIB and DG ENER on SMEs and how we can solve things.

I am a firm believer in the role of the national energy agencies. For this, I am pleased to see this survey.