

GreenWorks Toolkit



WHY THIS POLICY BRIEF?
KEY FINDINGS OF THE GREENLEAD RESEARCH
KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE GREEN TRANSITION FOR SME
EU GREEN TRANSITION PRIORITIES
CURRENT POLICIES ACROSS EUROPE
BEST PRACTICES ACROSS EUROPE
WHAT DID EUROPEAN SMES TELL US?
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
CONCLUSION

Supporting SMEs in the Green Transition



Co-funded by
the European Union

PART 2 POLICY BRIEF



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WHY THIS POLICY BRIEF?

The transition towards a sustainable and climate-neutral economy presents both significant opportunities and challenges for European small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While SMEs are expected to adopt more sustainable business models, improve resource efficiency, and comply with evolving EU legislation, many still face barriers related to limited financial resources, insufficient sustainability competences, and lack of practical guidance.

The GreenLead project was developed to support SMEs and VET providers in addressing these challenges. This Policy Brief summarises the main findings of the GreenLead research activities and presents key recommendations for policymakers, training providers, business support organisations and SMEs to accelerate the green transition.



99% of all European businesses are SMEs.



Green transition requires new green, digital and leadership competences.



Evidence-based recommendations are based on desk research, best practices and field research conducted in four European countries.



GreenLead supports SMEs through practical training, digital tools and competence development.

THIS DOCUMENT AIMS TO:

- summarise the current state of SMEs' green transition;
- highlight the main challenges and opportunities;
- present evidence-based policy recommendations;
- support policymakers, VET providers and business support organisations in strengthening sustainability competences across Europe.



WHO SHOULD READ THIS DOCUMENT?

- Policy makers
- VET providers
- SME owners and managers
- Chambers of commerce
- Business support organisations
- Researchers and innovation agencies



KEY FINDINGS OF THE GREENLEAD RESEARCH

- 1.  SMEs are central to Europe's green transition**
 Small and medium-sized enterprises account for almost 99% of all European businesses and therefore play a crucial role in achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal.
- 2.  Sustainability creates opportunities but also new challenges**
 The green transition enables innovation, improved competitiveness and access to new markets, while simultaneously increasing the need for investments, regulatory compliance and new competences.
- 3.  Green and digital competences are increasingly interconnected**
 Successful implementation of sustainability strategies requires employees to combine environmental knowledge with digital skills, data analysis and informed decision-making.
- 4.  SMEs need practical support rather than complex regulations**
 Many SMEs struggle to translate EU sustainability policies into everyday business practice and require accessible guidance, practical tools and accessible methodologies.
- 5.  Cooperation is essential**
 Collaboration between SMEs, VET providers, business support organisations and policymakers is essential for accelerating the green transition and sharing good practices.
- 6.  Lifelong learning is becoming a strategic necessity**
 Continuous upskilling and reskilling are required to help SME managers and employees adapt to evolving environmental legislation, ESG reporting requirements and emerging green business models.
- 7.  Practical tools increase implementation capacity**
 Digital tools, sustainability assessment methods, ESG frameworks and structured training programmes can significantly support SMEs in implementing sustainability measures.
- 8.  GreenLead provides practical solutions**
 The GreenLead project contributes by developing competence frameworks, learning modules, digital resources and practical guidance tailored to the needs of SMEs and VET providers.

DESK RESEARCH



Review of EU priorities, legislation, policy frameworks and scientific evidence related to the green transition of SMEs.

BEST PRACTICES



Analysis of successful European initiatives and innovative practices supporting sustainable business transformation.

FIELD RESEARCH



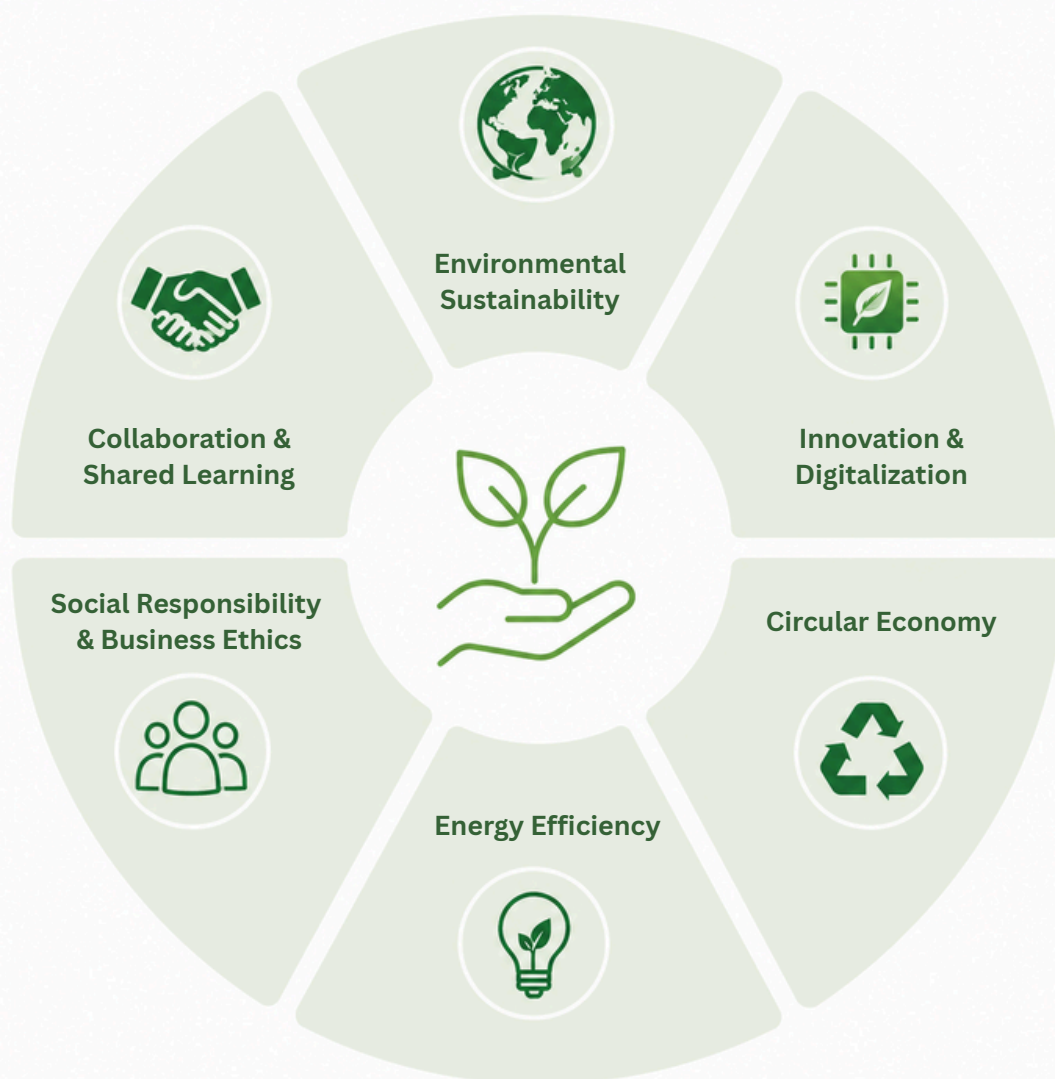
Survey-based assessment of SMEs' and VET providers' needs, challenges and competence gaps across four European countries.



The GreenLead research demonstrates that the green transition is not only an environmental challenge but also a business transformation process. SMEs require practical tools, accessible training and strong cooperation between education, industry and policymakers to successfully build green competences.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE GREEN TRANSITION FOR SMEs

The Green Transition is the process of transforming the economy towards a sustainable, low-carbon and resource-efficient model by reducing environmental impacts, promoting circular economy principles, adopting clean technologies and renewable energy, and supporting inclusive economic growth.



Together these principles provide the foundation for building competitive, resilient and environmentally sustainable SMEs.



EU GREEN TRANSITION PRIORITIES

The European Green Deal provides the strategic framework for Europe's transition towards a climate-neutral, resource-efficient and competitive economy. It combines legislation, funding instruments and policy initiatives that support businesses, including SMEs, in adopting more sustainable business models.

1



CLIMATE ACTION

- Climate neutrality by 2050
- At least 55% emission reduction by 2030
- Support for decarbonisation and climate adaptation

2



RESEARCH & INNOVATION

- Sustainable technologies
- Digital transformation
- Horizon Europe and innovation funding
- Research supporting the Green Deal

3



INDUSTRY

- Resource efficiency
- Circular economy
- Sustainable manufacturing
- Green industrial transformation

4



ENERGY

- Renewable energy
- Energy efficiency
- Hydrogen technologies
- Integrated energy systems

5



TRANSPORT

- Zero-emission transport
- Alternative fuels
- Smart mobility
- Cleaner logistics

6



ENVIRONMENT

- Biodiversity conservation
- Zero pollution
- Circular economy
- Sustainable use of natural resources

What does this mean for SMEs?

The European Green Deal creates new opportunities for SMEs while also requiring investments, new competences and adaptation to evolving sustainability requirements.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Green innovation
- Access to EU funding
- Digital transformation
- New business models
- Circular economy
- Energy savings
- Competitive advantage

CHALLENGES

- Initial investments
- Regulatory compliance
- Skills gaps
- ESG reporting
- Technology adoption
- Workforce upskilling



EU priority

Main objective

Benefit for SMEs

Climate Action

Climate neutrality

Lower emissions & green competitiveness

Research & Innovation

Green technologies

Innovation funding

Industry

Circular economy

Resource efficiency

Energy

Renewable energy

Lower operating costs

Transport

Clean mobility

Sustainable logistics

Environment

Biodiversity & pollution reduction

Sustainable products

A climate-neutral, competitive and resilient European economy by 2050.

The green transition is a strategic opportunity for SMEs to innovate, grow and stay competitive.

CURRENT POLICIES ACROSS EUROPE

Country	Policy / Legislation	Official source	Short description
	Integrated Framework for Waste Management and Circular Economy (Law 4819/2021)	Government Gazette A' 129/23.07.2021	Establishes Greece's main circular economy framework, introducing waste prevention, recycling obligations, packaging waste management, and resource-efficiency measures relevant for SMEs.
	Reduction of the Environmental Impact of Certain Plastic Products (Law 4736/2020)	Government Gazette A' 200/20.10.2020	Transposes the EU Single-Use Plastics Directive and introduces restrictions on single-use plastics, encouraging businesses to adopt sustainable alternatives
	National Waste Management Plan (NWMP) 2020–2030	Cabinet Act – Government Gazette A' 185/31.08.2020	Defines Greece's strategic targets for waste reduction, recycling, landfill diversion, and circular economy implementation until 2030.
	National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP/ESEK)	Revised national strategy (not a single FEK law)	Sets national targets for renewable energy, energy efficiency, decarbonisation, and green investments, guiding funding opportunities available to SMEs.
	ESPA 2021–2027 Green Transition Actions	EU Cohesion Policy Funding Programme	Offers financial support to SMEs for green innovation, sustainability improvements, resource efficiency, and environmental upgrades.
	Slovenian Industrial Strategy 2021–2030	Government of the Republic of Slovenia (2021), 31000-2/2021/3	Promotes green and digital industrial transformation, innovation and resource efficiency.
	Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (NEPN 2024)	Government of the Republic of Slovenia (updated 2024)	Sets national targets for renewable energy, energy efficiency and climate neutrality.
	Slovenia's Smart Specialisation Strategy (S5) 2021–2027	Government of the Republic of Slovenia (in progress)	Supports innovation, green technologies and sustainable business development.
	Slovenian Development Strategy 2030	Government of the Republic of Slovenia (2017)	Defines Slovenia's long-term vision for sustainable and inclusive development.

Country	Policy / Legislation	Official source	Short description
	Climate Change and Energy Transition Law – Law 7/2021	BOE-A-2021-8447	Establishes Spain's framework for climate neutrality, renewable energy, energy efficiency and sustainable mobility.
	Royal Decree 1055/2022 on Packaging and Packaging Waste	Real Decreto 1055/2022, de 27 de diciembre, de envases y residuos de envases	Strengthens packaging waste prevention, reuse, recycling and producer responsibility.
	Royal Decree 184/2022 on Electric Vehicle Charging Services	BOE-A-2022-4361	Supports the deployment and operation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure.
	Law 7/2022 on Waste and Contaminated Soil for a Circular Economy	BOE-A-2022-5809	Promotes waste prevention, recycling, circular economy and sustainable production and consumption.
	Royal Decree 244/2019 on Electricity Self-Consumption	BOE-A-2019-5089	Regulates administrative, technical and economic conditions for electricity self-consumption. It supports distributed renewable generation and states that self-consumed renewable energy is exempt from certain charges and tolls.
	Law on Environment	Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia No. 44 dated 19.03.2015	The fundamental law on every aspect of environment protection.
	Law on Waste Management	Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 9, 25.01.2011	Regulation on general waste management policies and procedures. It implements the Directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council dated 18 th of November (CELEX No. 32008L0098); It sets the rules and procedures for the reuse of waste.
	Law on packaging and Packaging Waste Management	Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 161/2009, 17/11, 47/11, 136/11, 6/12, 39/12, 163/13, 146/15 и 39/16	Regulation covering the fundamentals of managing packaging and procedures of packaging waste.
	National Registry of Environment Indicators	The Law on Environment	Monitor and report on the environmental condition, covering the following areas: water, soil, waste, air climate change, agriculture, energy, and others.

BEST PRACTICES ACROSS EUROPE

The GreenLead research identified successful examples of SMEs implementing sustainable business practices across Europe. Although operating in different sectors, these organisations demonstrate common approaches that improve environmental performance, competitiveness and long-term resilience.

KEY LESSONS FOR SMES

- Sustainability creates business value.
- Innovation strengthens competitiveness.
- Collaboration accelerates green transition.
- Employee engagement drives long-term success.
- Digital technologies support sustainability.

COMMON SUCCESS FACTORS

- Circular Economy
- Energy Efficiency
- Digitalisation
- Collaboration
- Innovation
- Sustainability



SPAIN

Sustainable Industry & Resource Management

- ✓ Sustainable production
- ✓ Environmental innovation
- ✓ Circular business practices
- ✓ Green competitiveness



SLOVENIA

Manufacturing & Chemical Industry

- ✓ Circular economy
- ✓ Material recycling
- ✓ ISO 14001
- ✓ Energy efficiency
- ✓ Hydrogen innovation



NORTH MACEDONIA

Waste Management & Green Manufacturing

- ✓ Recycling
- ✓ Waste reduction
- ✓ Energy optimisation
- ✓ Sustainable production



GREECE

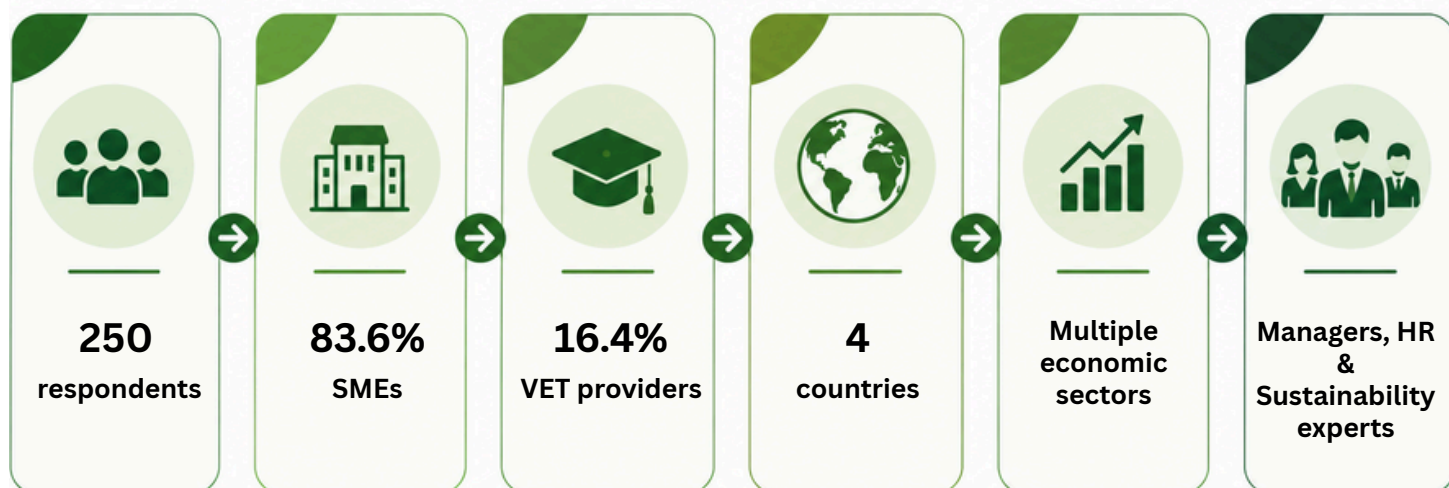
Renewable Energy & Sustainable Agriculture

- ✓ Renewable energy
- ✓ Sustainable food production
- ✓ Resource efficiency
- ✓ Climate resilience

Successful SMEs combine sustainability, innovation and collaboration to create long-term business value while contributing to Europe's green transition.

WHAT DID EUROPEAN SMEs TELL US?

The GreenLead survey gathered insights from SMEs and VET providers across four European countries to better understand their needs, challenges and expectations regarding the green transition. The findings provide the evidence base for the Green Leader competence framework and training programme.




KNOWLEDGE
Environmental knowledge is generally moderate, highlighting the need for practical training.



SUSTAINABILITY
Sustainability is recognised as a strategic priority by most organisations.



DIGITALISATION
Digital tools are essential for implementing sustainable practices.



TRAINING NEEDS
SMEs need practical and easy-to-apply training.



BARRIERS
High costs, skills shortages and regulatory complexity remain key barriers.



SUPPORT
SMEs require practical guidance, digital tools and expert support.

The survey confirms that SMEs are highly motivated to embrace sustainability but require practical competences, accessible tools and targeted support to successfully implement the green transition.

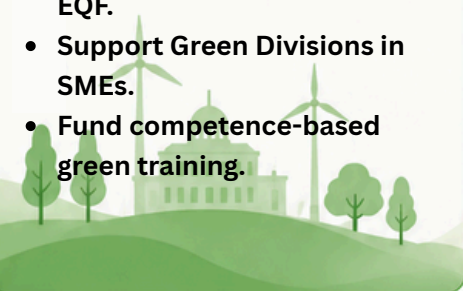
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing European and national policies already define sustainability objectives. GreenLead complements these policies by proposing how SMEs can implement them through the introduction of the Green Leader professional profile, Green Divisions, a harmonised competence framework and practical competence-based training.



FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Recognise the Green Leader profession.
- Align national skills policies with GreenComp, ESCO & EQF.
- Support Green Divisions in SMEs.
- Fund competence-based green training.



FOR VET PROVIDERS

- Develop Green Leader training programmes.
- Offer modular microcredentials.
- Use real SME case studies.
- Combine green and digital competences.



FOR BUSINESS SUPPORT

- Help SMEs appoint Green Leaders.
- Provide green competence assessments.
- Help SMEs establish Green Divisions.
- Support ESG digital tools.



FOR SMEs

- Appoint an internal Green Leader.
- Establish a Green Division.
- Monitor sustainability with digital tools.
- Invest in continuous green upskilling.



Europe's green transition depends on translating sustainability policies into practical competences, organisational capacity and everyday SME practice.

CONCLUSION

The GreenLead research demonstrates that the green transition is no longer only an environmental ambition—it is becoming a key driver of innovation, resilience and long-term competitiveness for SMEs. Successfully implementing sustainability requires not only supportive policies but also practical competences, digital tools and strong collaboration between education, business support organisations and industry.

Towards a greener and more competitive SME sector

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Sustainability

is becoming a business necessity.



Digital & Green Skills

must develop together.



Lifelong Learning

drives successful green transition.



Collaboration

accelerates innovation and change.



Competitiveness

is strengthened through sustainability.

FINAL MESSAGE

Building a sustainable future requires more than new technologies—it requires people with the right skills, organisations ready to innovate and strong partnerships across Europe.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE GREENLEAD PROJECT



PROJECT WEBSITE



LEARNING PLATFORM



VIDEO GUIDE