



**ESSPO**  
Interreg Europe



# European Union European Regional Development Fund

# Efficient support services portfolios for SMEs

# EFFECTIVE SME SUPPORT

The background features a dark blue grid of smaller blue squares, each containing a white icon related to business support. The visible icons include a handshake, a house, a lightbulb, a target, a fist, a person, a gear, and a checkmark.

# ACTION PLAN FOR WESERBEGLAND+ REGION



Landkreis  
**Hameln-Pyrmont**



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## PART I – GENERAL INFORMATION

Project: **PGI00087 ESSPO; Efficient support services portfolios for SMEs**

Partner: Landkreis Hameln-Pyrmont (District, NUTS 3)

Territory concerned: 4 Districts: Hameln-Pyrmont, Holzminden, Nienburg and Schaumburg, working together since 1999 / 2005 within “Regional Development Cooperation Weserberglandplus”

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## PART II – POLICY CONTEXT

The Action Plan aims to impact:

- Investment for Growth and Jobs programme
- European Territorial Cooperation programme
- Other regional development policy instrument

Name of the policy instrument(s) addressed:

**Knowledge and Technology Transfer (KTT) scheme for SMEs (Richtlinie Beratung von KMU zu Wissens- und Technologietransfer, WTT). See Annex 1.**

The Action plan of Weserberglandplus is designed to improve and further develop the policy instrument. The main goal is to intensify the involvement of SMEs in innovation activities, especially in information exchange with regional scientific institutions. Funding is foreseen for “qualified consultancy” for SMEs to motivate them to

- develop new products or services resp. to improve them
- implement new technologies, process- or organizational innovations
- cooperate with scientific institutions, preferably regional ones
- join innovation networks

To achieve this, districts in Lower Saxony, namely the departments for business development, can apply for a budget to hire a consultant, who provides the KTT services to the SMEs on behalf of the district.

## PART III – DETAILS OF THE ACTIONS ENVISAGED

### ACTION 1: MAKE RESULTS VISIBLE - A COMMON EVALUATION TOOL AND PROCEDURE TO ASSESS THE OUTCOMES OF THE INSTRUMENT

#### ESSPO LESSONS LEARNT APPLIED IN THE ACTION

Lesson learnt	Source of the lesson
<b>Make results visible</b>	
a. Create an own, wider evaluation	Peer review
b. Define simple indicators	Tartu-meeting
c. Use a short, simple questionnaire	Draft questionnaire of Christian Saublens

#### THE POLICY LEARNING PROCESS THAT LED TO THE ACTION

Peer Review recommendations adopted by regional stakeholders are: "work for involvement of districts and SMEs in programming and evaluation process in the future; increase transparency of the monitoring process in the Ministry of economics; publish official report of achieved results and indicators; (...) Create a new set of indicators ... the set of indicators should be developed and implemented before the first interim evaluation of the tool; ...".

Appropriate indicators have been discussed with the ESSPO partners at the Task Force meeting in Tartu. The recommendation was to ask simple and short questions about the satisfaction with the counseling results and the concrete implementation of counseling recommendations.

#### NATURE OF THE ACTION

Core element is to develop and implement a common – to be used by the beneficiaries (districts) and the managing authority, evaluation tool and procedure to assess the outcomes of the instrument. This has been prepared whilst the Tartu-meeting and will be done in cooperation with other beneficiaries/districts of this scheme. Results will be communicated to convince responsible persons to continue this scheme post 2020.

A systematic overall assessment and evaluation of this specific policy instrument is not known or at least not accessible. However, the donor requires extensive data for monitoring and documentation purposes. In addition, individual regions regularly conduct surveys among the addressed SMEs that support a qualitative assessment.

According to own perception, the companies rate the instrument as very good and helpful. However, with a view to a lasting continuation also in the next funding period "post 2020", there is no qualified and independent proof of this.

#### STEPS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION

Together with other interested regions in Lower Saxony, which also use this policy instrument, a procedural proposal and a short questionnaire were initially developed. Subsequently, a pre-test was

carried out involving 37 SMEs / users of the instrument. In principle, the questionnaire has proven itself, but it was followed by a clarification of individual questions.

After reflecting the survey results with interested regional stakeholders, the following actions were planned:

- Invitation to all regions / project promoters in Lower Saxony to participate in the implementation of the monitoring / evaluation concept
- Addressing / integration of the network of economic development agencies in Lower Saxony
- Online survey of the advised SMEs within three months after the end of the consultation
- Online survey of the advised SMEs after 12 months from the end of the consultation on the successful implementation of consulting results / recommendations
- Annual summary and preparation of survey results and development of suggestions for improvement, if required
- Ongoing lobbying for the continuation of the "post 2020" instrument vis-à-vis the state government
- Summary of results and input from expected participation processes in the preparation of the relevant Post-2020 Operational Program

### STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

We aim to involve as many beneficiaries / regions as possible in Lower Saxony. As other partners, the regions of Jadebay, southwestern Weser-Ems and ARTIE have already agreed to cooperate. This means that more than 50% of the districts and independent cities in Lower Saxony are involved. The attention of further project promoters is expected with the support of the network of business development agencies in Lower Saxony (NeWiN).

### TIMEFRAME

The surveys are to be carried out continuously until the end of the funding period or until the operational program "post 2020" (2019/2020?). An annual summary of the online surveys is planned.

### COSTS

According to the current status, the evaluation will not incur additional costs. The organization of data collection and evaluation is carried out by the respective consultants or districts.

### FUNDING SOURCES

Not applicable, as costs are covered within the standard reporting procedures of the policy instrument and the regular business development activities of the participating districts.

## ACTION 2: ENLARGING THE SCOPE OF THE CO-OPERATION COVERED IN THE KTT INSTRUMENT

### ESSPO LESSONS LEARNT APPLIED IN THE ACTION

Lesson learnt	Source of the lesson
<b>Enlarge regional innovation community</b>	
d. Don't limit KTT to (regional) universities	Peer review
e. Include skilled companies in KTT	Peer Review; study visit to Gabrovo
f. Provide a database to facilitate B2B	Peer Review; study visit to Gabrovo

### THE POLICY LEARNING PROCESS THAT LED TO THE ACTION

Peer Review recommendations adopted by regional stakeholders are:

„...encourage business to business transfer of technologies in the future. (...) To enhance the capacity of SMEs in the districts through provision of professional consultancy not only by Universities but also from private companies (B2B technology transfer). ... To encourage SMEs to be more proactive in the tool by development of a new platform with a database of the existing companies in the districts (profile and data from the companies), presentation and best practices and possible joint projects.“

### NATURE OF THE ACTION

Based on outcomes of the Peer Review and best practice from / study visit to Gabrovo, the core objective is to develop a database, which facilitates B2B cooperation to achieve the goals of the scheme. Up to now, the focus is on Business to Science cooperation only.

Point 2.1 of the SME Guidance on Knowledge and Technology Transfer requires to motivate SMEs to cooperate with scientific bodies, in particular research institutes / universities from Lower Saxony. As the instrument is focusing at SMEs / first time innovators and as the number of universities in our rural region is “limited” we should use all available sources – preferably from near by - to provide assistance to SMEs. Up to now, transparency was limited.

Databases containing information on research institutions and universities are existing in Lower Saxony for years. However, a database on companies that are suitable for the transfer of knowledge and technology does not yet exist for the whole of Lower Saxony. The database created here is the tool that can be used to improve the ongoing implementation of the policy instrument according to ESSPO recommendations. In addition, the knowledge gained from the use of this tool will be incorporated into the development of future knowledge and technology transfer in Lower Saxony, which has now begun. For this purpose, representatives of PP 9 actively participate in various working groups in Lower Saxony.

### STEPS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION

For the practical implementation of this task, a cloud-based data infrastructure is used. The software implemented for this purpose combines the capabilities of a CRM (Customer Relationship Management / Database), BI (Business Intelligence) and ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) systems and provides interfaces to external applications, enabling the integration of external Internet Portals as well as the connection of the social networks.

On this basis, transparency of the business processes for all players under the provisions of the **EU DSGVO** as well as problem-free integration of the projects under a central administration is possible. At the same time, there is a consistent focus on the interests of the customer, which is documented not only in the development of new but also in the agile optimization of existing offers. For example, this covers event management with follow-up and needs-based and target group-specific offer placement). By connecting people, objects and systems, dynamic, real-time optimized and self-organizing, cross-company value networks can be created according to different criteria such as cost, availability and resource consumption.

## STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

The development and operation of the database is carried out by Weserbergland AG, an economic development institution, which is supported as a PPP by three districts and the regional economy. In addition, support by the economic development offices of the districts involved is provided for the establishment of the database.

## TIMEFRAME

The development of the database was completed in 2018. The technical functionality and usability are secured. The registration of interested and competent companies and experts is an ongoing process. At present approx. 3,700 companies and approx. 6,000 experts are registered (status 7/2019). Whenever possible, the information is incorporated in the ongoing implementation of the policy instrument as part of the advisory activity.

## COSTS

Development and operation of the database are carried out within the framework of the running costs of Weserbergland AG. Additional costs do not accrue according to the current state of planning.

## FUNDING SOURCES

Not applicable, as costs are covered within the running costs of Weserbergland AG and the regular business development activities of the participating districts.

## ACTION 3: DIFFERENTIATION OF THE PROMOTION STRATEGY AND REMOVING LIMITATIONS FOR SMES' PARTICIPATION

### ESSPO LESSONS LEARNT APPLIED IN THE ACTION

Lesson learnt	Source of the lesson
<b>Differentiate the promotion strategy</b>	
g. Don't limit assistance to RIS3 only	Peer review
h. Consider implementation of consultancy	Peer review

### THE POLICY LEARNING PROCESS THAT LED TO THE ACTION

The recommendations in the context of the peer review were: „make conditions more widen in future programs; ... to put on the scene more widen conditions, not oriented especially for RIS3 important companies. ... put more widen conditions for eligibility of projects and SMEs out of RIS3 ... influence to Ministry of economics for the next programming period to renew the policy and to put attention back to the implementation phase...”

### NATURE OF THE ACTION

Objective of Action 3 is to develop a differentiated innovation promotion strategy and present it to the responsible ministry, which pays special attention to all micro and small enterprises doing their first steps in KTT. According to Peer Review recommendations, for this target group the limitation of KTT services only to RIS3-sectors is hardly applicable.

The SME Guidelines on Knowledge and Technology Transfer aim to increase the involvement of SMEs in innovation, and in particular to support the exchange of information and cooperation with regional scientific institutions. For this purpose, first of all, the implementation of informal discussions to record the need for support as well as the provision of information and the placement of contacts is planned. It is therefore primarily about unlocking SMEs for innovation and cooperation.

Point 4.3 of the regulation stipulates that the respective projects must be carried out in one of the specialization fields of the Lower Saxony RIS3 strategy.

This limitation has repeatedly proven to be problematic in the past, because it creates an additional hurdle, in particular for those SMEs that are being introduced for the first time to knowledge and technology transfer.

The recommendations in the context of the peer review were: „make conditions more widen in future programs; ... to put on the scene more widen conditions, not oriented especially for RIS3 important companies. ... put more widen conditions for eligibility of projects and SMEs out of RIS3 ... influence to Ministry of economics for the next programming period to renew the policy and to put attention back to the implementation phase...”

The concrete output of this action should be a memorandum or strategy paper for the state government in order to lobbying for a differentiated promotion of knowledge and technology transfer for SMEs.

## STEPS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION

If the primary objective of the instrument is to unlock the SMEs' fundamentals for innovation and the use of knowledge and technology transfer, then, from the point of view of the Peer Review, unnecessary restrictions to RIS3 should be avoided.

Such restrictions only make sense if projects are large and cost-intensive and in which the country has a substantive interest as a donor. Anyway, a subsidy concept differentiated in this way does not currently exist in Lower Saxony.

Against this background, it should not be argued that the RIS3 link should be abolished on a standard basis, but that a proposal for an "Innovation Promotion Strategy for SMEs" should be drawn up, integrating all the components of this Action Plan and, to that extent, providing an integrated proposal for the next operational Program.

To achieve this, representatives of PP 9 are participating in respective working groups of the responsible ministries.

## STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

We aim to involve the largest possible number of beneficiaries in Lower Saxony. Again, the regions of Jadebay, southwestern Weser-Ems and ARTIE are the important partners.

The vote will also be carried out with the support of the network of business development agencies in Lower Saxony (NeWiN).

The strategy paper is addressed to the program-managing authorities.

## TIMEFRAME

A first draft strategy paper has been presented in autumn 2018. at present it is supplemented with the first results of the online survey (Action 1) and the identified best practice examples. It has been presented to the state government resp. the program responsible ministries and working groups recently.

## COSTS

At the moment, no additional costs are expected for the development of a corresponding policy paper.

## FUNDING SOURCES

Not applicable, as costs are covered within the regular business development activities of the participating districts.

## ACTION 4: FUNDING FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF KTT COLLABORATION

### ESSPO LESSONS LEARNT APPLIED IN THE ACTION

Lesson learnt	Source of the lesson
<b>Promote the implementation of outcomes</b>	
i. Assure sustainability of KTT	Peer Review
j. Create new local support system	Peer Review, Study visit, best practice

### THE POLICY LEARNING PROCESS THAT LED TO THE ACTION

Peer review recommendations in this context are: „discover the real potential of SMEs and develop more successful projects, guaranteeing their implementation phase as well. ... districts have to find local mechanisms to support the process and make it sustainable. ...guaranteed sustainability of the projects through funded implementation phase; improved capacity of SMEs; ...Create a new system for local support of the implementation phase through introduction of PPPs principle ... create opportunities for implementation of projects ...”.

### NATURE OF THE ACTION

To make sure, that the outcomes of KTT-consultancy can be implemented in concrete products, services or improvements easily, respective new instruments will be developed and proposed to policy makers. Based on own experience and best practice from other regions “regional sub-budgets” for small innovation and / or investment projects, an “Innovation Assistance Program” to support hiring new or interim staff and finally a “Voucher-System” as a flexible support system for these offers. The SME Guidelines on Knowledge and Technology Transfer aim to increase the involvement of SMEs in innovation, and in particular to support the exchange of information and cooperation with regional scientific institutions. For this purpose, first of all, the implementation of informal discussions to record the need for support as well as the provision of information and the placement of contacts is planned. It is therefore to be ensured that (also) the valorization or implementation of the information and consultation results is actively supported. Within the regional stakeholder workshops, the main obstacles to this were highlighted by the lack of human resources capacity in SMEs and very limited opportunities to finance "small" innovation or investment measures.

In the past funding period, a "regionalized sub-budget" was available to the regions of Lower Saxony from the ERDF, with which they were able to promote small-scale SME projects within their area of responsibility (using own co-financing). Despite a comparatively low budget, the instrument in the area of the Weserberglandplus region has proved very successful, as the self-evaluation carried out has emphatically demonstrated.

A special strength is the unbureaucratic, quick handling and the close regional relation. So it complements other country instruments to promote investment and innovation.

Against the background of the very positive assessment of the "regionalised sub-budgets", regional actors have decided to use this instrument in the current funding period even without ERDF support – that means only with their own municipal funds.

## STEPS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION

The ESSPO Action Plan seeks to evaluate the impact of the further reduction in the budget for regionalised sub-budgets, due to the disappearance of ERDF resources, in good time before the next operational program (2019) is going forward, in order to reassert the country's case to win this instrument.

At the same time, the evaluation of the "regionalized sub-budgets" should also serve as an argumentation aid to the regional actors for a new municipal co-financing; the implementation of the knowledge and technology transfer could be effectively supported in the sense of the recommendations from the peer review.

The second major obstacle to implementing the results of consultations - a lack of human resources in SMEs - should be eliminated by designing an "Innovation Assistance Program". A so-called "innovation assistant program", which funds the personnel costs for the hiring of graduates in SMEs for a limited period, has already existed in various regions in earlier years, but it is long finished.

In the interest of the implementation of the results of the knowledge and technology transfer, it should be reissued and expanded. In addition to promoting new hires, however, the use of existing personnel and / or the deployment of an external interim manager should also be supported for a limited time. Corresponding best practice should first be identified and then put together in one concept.

The third step is to check whether the individual components of the concept can be linked together in the form of a voucher system. Again, appropriate best practices have been identified.

## STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

(please indicate the organizations in the region who are involved in the implementation of the action1 and explain their role)

We aim to attract the highest possible number of beneficiaries in Lower Saxony as supporters of the proposals. As partners, the regions Jadebay, southwestern Weser-Ems and ARTIE are also suitable. This would already involve more than 50% of the districts and independent cities in Lower Saxony.

The contact to further project promoters should be made with the support of the network of business development agencies in Lower Saxony (NeWiN).

The addressees of such a concept are the program-managing authorities.

## TIMEFRAME

The compilation of best practice examples took place in 2018 and will be incorporated into the planned strategy paper (Action 3) in a conceptual format in 2019.

## COSTS

As of today, there will not be any additional costs to compile and present best practices.

## FUNDING SOURCES

Not applicable, as costs are covered within the regular business development activities of the participating districts.

## COMMITMENT

This Action plan has been developed by Landkreis Hameln-Pyrmont / Regional Development Cooperation Weserberglandplus, who commit themselves to implement the actions envisioned within their respective capabilities

Date:

30.09.2019

Name of the organisation(s):

Landkreis Hameln-Pyrmont

Signatures of the relevant organisation(s):

**Andreas Manz**

### Endorsement of the policy responsible organization

Name of the organisation:

Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Bundes- und Europaangelegenheiten und Regionale Entwicklung / Lower Saxony Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development

Signature of the relevant organisation:

**Sissi Eklu-Natey**

**Hannover, 11.10.2019**

## Dieter Meyer

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**Von:** Eklu-Natey, Sissi (MB) <sissi.eklu-natey@mb.niedersachsen.de>  
**Gesendet:** Freitag, 11. Oktober 2019 10:52  
**An:** Dieter Meyer  
**Cc:** Beckmann, Karin (MB-RL'in 104)  
**Betreff:** WG: ESSPO Action Plan  
**Anlagen:** Finale Fassung dt.docx; Finale Fassung engl.docx

Sehr geehrter Her Meyer,

mit dieser Mail drückt das MB/Referat 104 seine Zustimmung zur Durchführung des von Ihnen formulierten Aktionsplans im Rahmen des Interreg Europe Projekts ESSPO aus.

Nach Rücksprache mit dem Interreg Europe Joint Secretariat (Laurenzio David) können Sie diese Mail relativ formlos an das Joint Secretariat weiterleiten. Mehr ist als „endorsement“ zu Ihrem Action Plan nicht notwendig.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

Sissi Eklu-Natey

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Dear Mr Meyer,

by this email the Lower Saxon Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development (Ref. 104) is expressing its endorsement to your proposed action plan for the Interreg Europe Project ESSPO . Please transfer this email to the joint secretariat as proof of our endorsement.

Best regards,

Sissi Eklu-Natey

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**Sissi Eklu-Natey**

Project Manager, Interreg Europe - DIALOG

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