

SME-nvironment 2007: Northern Ireland

The SME-nvironment 2007 survey was undertaken for NetRegs, a unique website that guides small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through their environmental obligations. The free site – www.netregs.gov.uk – includes specific information for more than 100 industry sectors and guidance on general environmental topics that apply to most businesses. NetRegs is run by the Environment Agency in England and Wales, the Environment and Heritage Service in Northern Ireland and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

Introduction

In 2005 and 2003, NetRegs conducted surveys of SMEs across the UK to reveal their environmental attitudes and behaviours. The SME-nvironment 2007 survey has been undertaken to assess what changes there have been since. The survey was conducted using a random sample of SMEs across the UK in 15 business sectors, stratified by country, business sector, and size of business. Response to the survey was good and out of a total of 4,489 telephone interviews, 1079 (24%) were achieved in Northern Ireland. A summary of key findings from the surveys undertaken in Northern Ireland is presented below.

Key Findings

- 10% of businesses in Northern Ireland thought that they undertook activities that could cause harm to the environment. This is an increase of 6% since 2005.
- When prompted with a list of activities that are potentially harmful to the environment, 44% of business in Northern Ireland stated that they undertook at least one of them.
- Just under half of businesses (46%) in the survey stated that they had introduced practical measures to reduce harm to the environment. Since 2005, 22% more businesses have introduced a practical measure to reduce their environmental impact.
- Just over two thirds of businesses in Northern Ireland (68%) who had taken some action to address their environmental performance were influenced by a general concern for the environment. Other influences were the need to comply with legislation (31%) and to reduce costs (13%).
- Only 7% of businesses had heard of the NetRegs website, this is in line with the UK average of 7%. However, when described in outline, 60% of businesses in Northern Ireland stated that they would find the website useful.
- Businesses in Northern Ireland find the most useful source of environmental information to be the Local Authority – a difference from the other UK countries where the Environmental Regulator was found to be the most useful source. In future their preferred method of receiving information on environmental matters would be via the internet.
- Overall, levels of environmental awareness and activity amongst SMEs across the UK were low, particularly among micro SMEs (0-9 employees). However the performance of businesses in Northern Ireland in terms of their environmental awareness has improved between 2005 and 2007.

Activities Harmful to the Environment

Only 10% businesses in Northern Ireland thought that they undertook activities that could cause harm to the environment. This is lower than the UK average of 15%. Between 2005 and 2007 there has been an increase in awareness (6%) of how business activities could cause harm to the environment. Businesses in Northern Ireland were the least likely of the four countries to consider that their activities could cause harm to the environment.

When prompted with a list of activities that are potentially harmful to the environment, 44% of businesses in Northern Ireland stated that they undertook at least one of them. This is slightly lower than the UK average (49%). The activities that businesses in Northern Ireland were most likely to undertake were producing or importing packaging (49%), storing chemicals, fuels or oils (41%), and storing waste (37%). Figure 1 presents these findings.

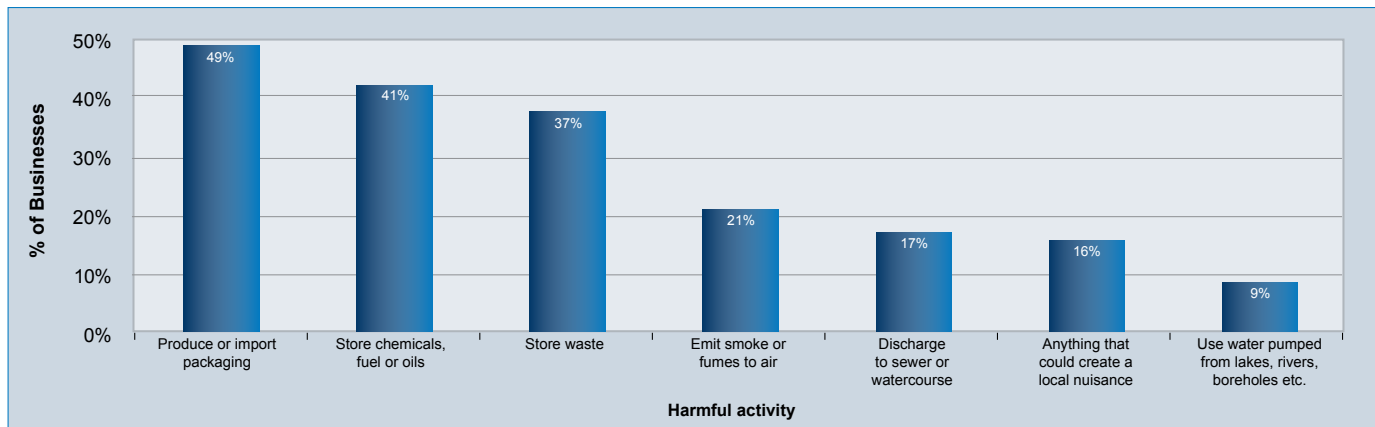
Of those businesses who mentioned storing chemicals, fuels or oils, 51% stated that they had banded an oil tank or chemical store.

Measures to Address Environmental Issues.

Just under half (46%) of businesses in Northern Ireland in the survey stated that they had introduced practical measures to reduce environmental harm. This is slightly lower than the average for the UK of 48%. Between 2005 and 2007 there has been an increase in the percentage of businesses who have introduced a practical measure (22%). The measure most frequently mentioned was recycling (73%). Recycling was the most frequently cited measure in all UK countries. Eighteen percent of businesses in Northern Ireland stated that they had carried out a waste minimisation survey, and a further 18% said they had implemented a programme of environmental improvements. Figure 2 represents these findings.

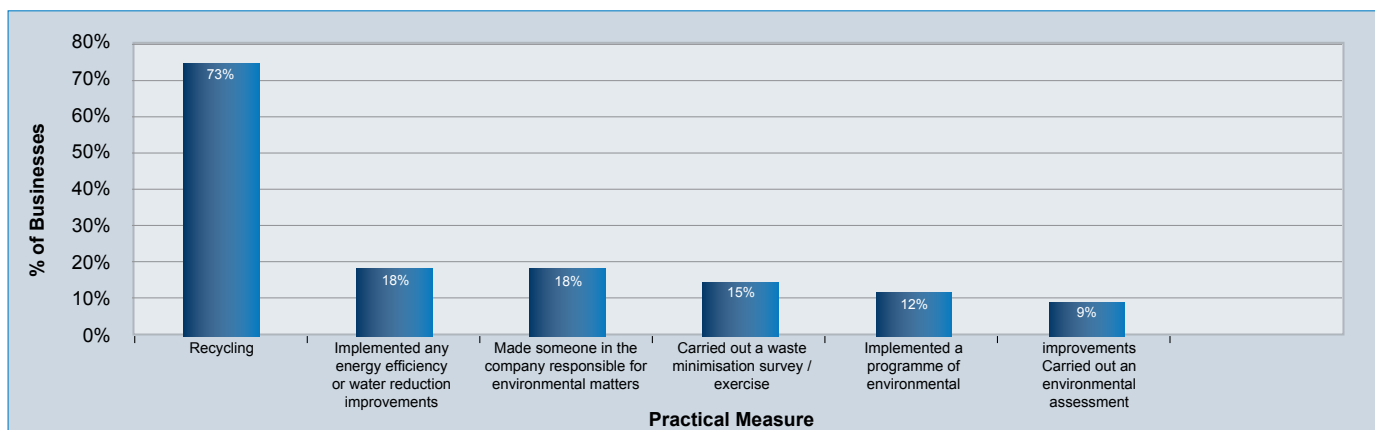


Figure 1
Potentially harmful activities undertaken by businesses in Northern Ireland (prompted)



N= 470. Base: All respondents who conduct at least one potentially harmful activity. (Multiple responses allowed)

Figure 2
Practical measures undertaken by businesses in Northern Ireland (unprompted)



N= 492. Base: Respondents that have introduced practical measures. (Multiple responses allowed)

Environmental Policy and Environmental Management Systems

Just over a third (35%) of businesses in Northern Ireland had an environmental policy in place. This is slightly lower than the UK average. Of those, over half (53%) had it as a formal separate written policy.

Between 2005 and 2007, there has been an increase of 18% in the percentage of businesses in Northern Ireland who have an environmental policy in place. The format of which this policy takes has changed over the reporting period - in 2005 the most popular format was an informal management plan, whereas in 2007 the most popular format was a formal separate written policy.

As illustrated in Figure 3, fourteen percent of businesses had an EMS in place and 7% planned to introduce one in future. The proportion of businesses in Northern Ireland with an EMS in place has gradually increased between 2005 to 2007. There has also been 2% increase in the number of businesses who propose to introduce an EMS in future.

Reasons for Addressing Environmental Issues

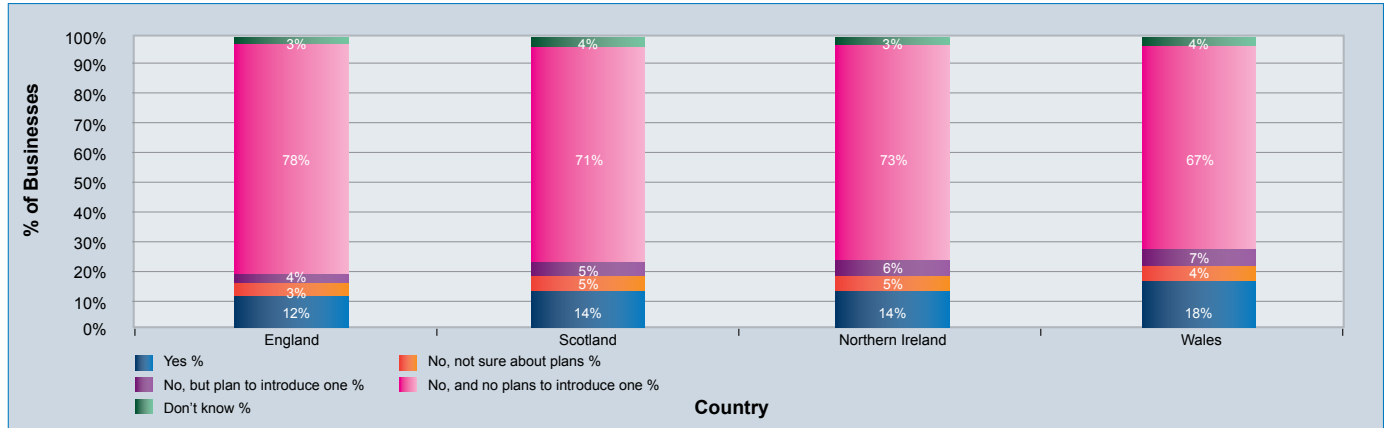
Almost two thirds (68%) of businesses in Northern Ireland who had taken some action to address their environmental performance stated that they were influenced by a general concern about their likely impact on the environment. Other influences mentioned were the need to comply with legislation (31%) and to reduce costs (13%). These were also the main drivers for businesses in England, Scotland and Wales.

Amongst Northern Irish businesses in both 2005 and 2007 the two main drivers for addressing their environmental impact was their general concern for the environment and the need to comply with legislation.

Around ten percent of businesses in Northern Ireland were involved in a business forum that discussed environmental issues. This is slightly lower than the UK average of 12%.



Figure 3
Businesses who have an environmental management system by country



N = 4,489. Base: All respondents

Environmental Awareness

There was a low level of environmental awareness, with only 23% of businesses in Northern Ireland able to name a piece of environmental legislation. This is slightly below the UK average of 24%. Businesses in Northern Ireland were most likely to be able to name the Packaging Waste Regulations (36%).

All businesses were then prompted with a list of nine pieces of legislation and asked if they had heard of any of them. Seventy-four percent of all Northern Irish businesses had heard of at least one of the nine pieces of legislation. Table 1 illustrates the level of awareness of pieces of legislation amongst Northern Irish businesses.

Table 1 - Level of Awareness of Legislation (Prompted)

Legislation	% of Respondents
Hazardous Waste Regulations (or special Waste Regulations if in Scotland)	68%
Waste Management Licensing Regulations	59%
Duty of Care Regulations	59%
Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations	51%
Packaging Waste Regulations	50%
Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive (WEEE Directive)	36%
End of Life Vehicles Regulations 2003	34%
Environmental Liability Directive 2004	33%
Water Resources Act 1991/The Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999	23%

N = 800. Base: All respondents who answered the question

The Hazardous Waste Regulations (68%) and the Waste Management Licensing Regulations (59%) were the most widely recognised pieces of legislation in Northern Ireland.

Benefits in Addressing Environmental Issues

Businesses considered that the three main business benefits of addressing environmental issues were:

- Reduced risk of prosecution (81% strongly agree / agree);

- Creates good relations with customers (67% strongly agree / agree); and
- Reduces operating costs (66% strongly agree / agree).

These were also the top three perceived benefits across the UK. Figure 4 shows the level of agreement amongst businesses for all seven key business benefits.

In both 2005 and 2007 Northern Irish businesses felt that the strongest links existed between environmental good practice and the reduced risk of prosecution, creating good relations with customers, and reducing operating costs.

NetRegs website

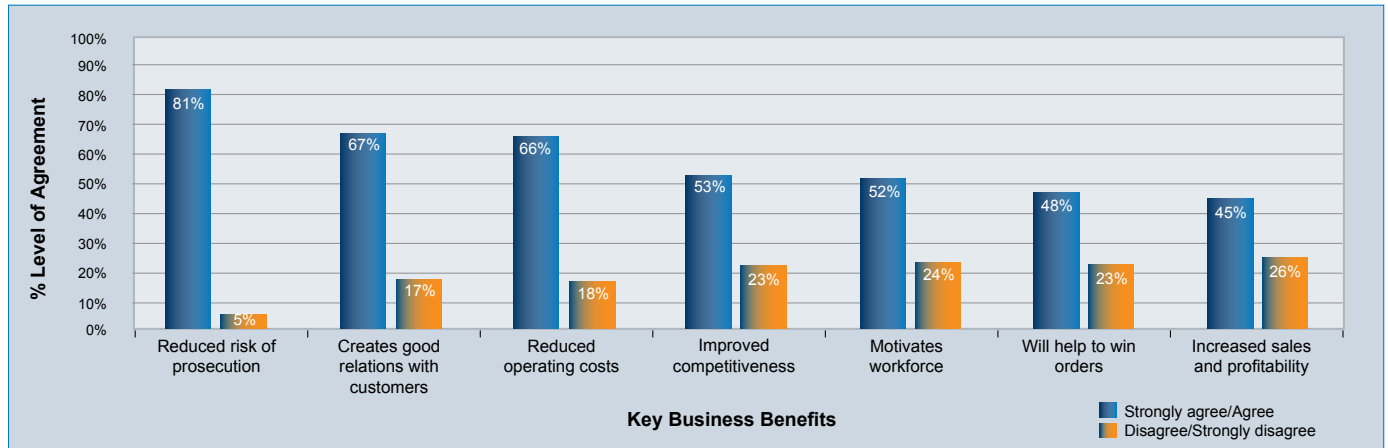
Only 7% of businesses in Northern Ireland had heard of the NetRegs website, in line with the UK average of 7%. However, when NetRegs was described in outline, sixty percent of the businesses surveyed in Northern Ireland said they would find such a website useful.

Between the 2005 and 2007 survey the percentage of businesses in Northern Ireland who had heard of the NetRegs website has increased slightly (2%). An increase of 12% was also found in the proportion of businesses who would find the NetRegs website useful.

Sources of Help

Businesses were asked which organisations (if any) they contacted on environmental matters. The survey found that businesses in Northern Ireland most often go to Local Authorities (24%), Waste Companies (19%), and the Environmental Regulator (15%) for environmental help and advice. Businesses in Northern Ireland identified their Local Authority as the most useful source of information; this is in contrast to the rest of the UK where the Environmental Regulator was found to be the most useful source of information.

Figure 4
Perceived business benefits of good environmental practice



N=1,079. Base: All respondents

Between 2005 and 2007 there has been no change in the organisations that businesses in Northern Ireland are most likely to contact for environmental help and advice, and consistent with the results of the 2005 survey the Local Authority was identified as the most useful source of information.

Information Requirements

Forty-two percent of businesses in Northern Ireland thought that they had received enough support from the Government and its agencies to deal with environmental issues, the highest level of agreement from the four UK countries. However, almost half (44%) of businesses said that they had not received enough information. Nearly 86% of businesses in Northern Ireland stated that they wanted the same amount if not more guidance in future. Nearly half (48%) of businesses in Northern Ireland stated that they would prefer to receive information on environmental issues via the internet, and 31% preferred printed materials. This pattern of preference was found in the other UK countries.

The preferred method of receiving information on environmental issues was via the internet, this illustrates a shift from 2005 where businesses in Northern Ireland stated that they would prefer to receive information via printed materials. However it should be noted that a high percentage of businesses interviewed in 2007 would still prefer guidance in printed form.

Conclusions

Many of the findings were consistent with the UK wide results, and it should be noted that overall levels of environmental awareness and activity among SMEs was low, particularly among micro SMEs (0-9 employees), who are most likely to think that environmental issues are not something they need to address. The one main difference compared to the rest of the UK was that businesses in Northern Ireland found their Local Authority to be the most useful source of information regarding environmental issues, whereas the rest of the UK found the Environmental Regulator to be the most useful source.

Overall, performance of the Northern Irish businesses in terms of their environmental awareness has improved between 2005 and 2007.

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Protect the environment.

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