



GUIDELINES FOR SUSTAINABILITY PROTOCOL AND SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

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1 INTRODUCTION

The following document provides a comprehensive framework for developing a sustainability protocol and a user-friendly self-assessment tool to support accommodation SMEs in their implementation of sustainable practices. The aim is to facilitate the adoption of sustainable practices and help businesses align with standards, particularly ISO 21401, while maintaining operational efficiency and competitiveness in the long term.

1.1 Foundation for sustainability protocol and self-assessment tool

To make the transition towards sustainable practices as simple as possible, it's essential to address some of the main issues that accommodation SMEs face when considering the implementation of sustainability protocols:

- SMEs often face difficulty in meeting general SDG requirements due to small-scale operations and resource constraints.
- There is a lack of knowledge on how to effectively integrate sustainability practices into day-to-day operations.
- Monitoring sustainability performance is often perceived as complex and time-consuming.
- Many SMEs lack the financial resources and infrastructure needed for the implementation of sustainable practices and for the necessary audits.

Therefore, the main components of an effective sustainability protocol and self-assessment tool for accommodation SMEs should include:

1. Clear objectives

Define specific sustainability goals that address environmental, socio-cultural and economic facets.

2. Baseline assessment

The self-assessment tool should help accommodation SMEs evaluate their current sustainability practices. This will then serve as a reference point for measuring their progress. The assessment should cover areas regarding environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability (e.g., energy and water consumption, waste management, community engagement, guest education etc.).



3. Actionable steps

Provide a sort of a roadmap for achieving specific sustainability goals by including detailed information on how to reach the objectives. Include step-by-step guides such as instructions on how to implement energy-saving technologies, strategies to improve employee engagement etc.

4. Metrics and monitoring

Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarks that accommodation SMEs can use to measure their progress. These benchmarks should be aligned with the industry standards and providers should be encouraged to track their progress regularly and readjust their strategies if needed.

5. Support systems

Offer access to resources, including seminars, workshops, consultations, and other programs to provide accommodation SMEs with the proper knowledge and help with the process.

2 COMMUNICATION

Research shows that accommodation providers seek guidance and simplified processes for integrating sustainability protocols. Effective communication is crucial to provide them with the necessary information. This chapter outlines practical ways to provide this information in order to help the SMEs understand all aspects and benefits of implementing sustainable practices.

2.1 Knowledge on “why”

Understanding the reasons for implementing sustainable practices and the benefits of doing so is fundamental. Employees who are well-informed about the advantages of sustainable practices are more likely to support their adoption. Educational initiatives can include:

- **Targeted education:** Workshops and webinars can be organised to provide expert knowledge on environmental and financial benefits of sustainable practices.
- **Case studies:** Share case studies of accommodation SMEs that have successfully implemented sustainability measures and show measurable results, such as cost savings and guest satisfaction.
- **Informative materials:** Distribute materials and fact sheets that emphasise growing guest demand for eco-friendly accommodation facilities.



2.2 Knowledge on “how to”

Accommodation SMEs require clear guidance on how to adopt and maintain sustainable practices. Specific guidance should include:

- **Support:** Provide hands-on support on how to adopt certain sustainability measures. Create detailed guides, include calculations on potential savings, instructions on how to apply for financial incentives and subsidies.
- **Employee training:** Offer information on employee-training programs, provide short instructional videos or other materials that they can use to help them in their work process (e. g. how to monitor water usage, how to communicate with guests ...).
- **Certification roadmap:** Provide simple roadmap to obtaining ISO 21401 certification. The roadmap should include the steps that need to be taken, timelines, and expected costs. Offer contact details for certification bodies and consultants that can be of assistance. Include tips on how to set achievable goals, how to prepare for audits, and how to monitor progress.

2.3 Knowledge on “where”

It is essential that SMEs have access to the right resources and should be provided with a **comprehensive online platform** where they can access important information, including a FAQ section with key information, such as information on financing initial sustainability investments or navigating certification regulations, information on local, regional and EU sustainability-related projects and grants to which accommodation SMEs could apply, lists of local suppliers of eco-friendly products, locally sourced food, energy-efficient appliances, etc.

2.4 Knowledge on “help”

- Set up an online support service where accommodation providers can ask for advice or offer a list of experts who can provide guidance regarding specific issues.
- Establish a collaborative approach where previously certified SMEs can share their experiences and offer first-hand advice on overcoming challenges.
- Suggest local community groups or NGOs that offer support in developing responsible tourism practices.
- Provide contacts of experts that can assist in certification processes, applying for subsidies and grants, or help secure financing for projects.



3 COMPLIANCE CHECK (SELF-ASSESSMENT)

3.1 User friendly

The SST should be intuitive and easy to navigate, ensuring that SMEs can easily measure their progress towards sustainability goals, as they often operate with limited time and expertise. The tool should include:

- Intuitive design: easy-to-navigate interface and icons that allow to move between sections smoothly.
- Help prompts: short explanations for metrics so users can understand which information is needed and why it is important.
- Customisable inputs: SMEs vary in size and capacity, so the tool should address various scales of operations, allowing SMEs to tailor responses based on their specifics.
- Monitoring and Reassessment: The self-assessment tool should encourage continuous improvement by allowing SMEs to regularly update their data and track progress over time. Features such as automated reminders and periodic reassessments will help SMEs stay on track with their sustainability goals.

3.2 Pre-assessment contact

Before starting the self-assessment, SMEs should have access to preparatory resources that ensure they are well-equipped to complete the assessment accurately. Pre-assessment support could take several forms:

- Online tutorials: Video tutorials or interactive guides explaining the process and benefits of sustainability.
- Step-by-step guides: Documentation that breaks down the assessment into manageable stages, helping businesses gather the necessary data in advance (e.g., energy use records, waste management practices, community engagement data).
- Consultation opportunities: An option for SMEs to have a brief consultation with sustainability experts, either in-person or virtually, to clarify questions or concerns.

3.3 Automated analysis

The SST should provide an automated analysis of entered data and provide immediate feedback, giving SMEs a clear picture of their current sustainability status. The feedback should include:



- Sustainability score: A quantifiable score that reflects the SME's performance across various sustainability dimensions (e.g., environmental, social, and economic).
- Recommendations: Tailored suggestions for improving sustainability practices, such as adopting energy-efficient technologies or enhancing waste management strategies.
- Comparative benchmarking: Allow SMEs to see how their sustainability performance stacks up against industry standards or regional averages.

Based on the analysis, the tool should generate personalized roadmaps for each SME based on their self-assessment results. These roadmaps would set achievable targets, provide short-term and long-term sustainability goals tailored to the SME's current performance as well as offer timelines for when certain practices should be implemented and when progress should be reassessed.

4 CLOSING THE GAP

After identifying gaps in sustainability performance through the self-assessment, the focus shifts to how SMEs can close these gaps and improve their practices.

4.1 Reliable data on positive impacts

Data collection is essential to measuring the benefits of sustainability initiatives. SMEs should be encouraged to collect empirical data that shows tangible improvements, such as:

- Energy savings: Monitoring energy consumption before and after the adoption of energy-efficient technologies to track cost reductions and environmental impact.
- Waste reduction: Measuring the amount of waste diverted from landfills through improved waste management practices like recycling and composting.
- Guest satisfaction: Tracking guest feedback to evaluate whether sustainable practices (e.g., offering eco-friendly amenities, promoting local experiences) contribute to higher guest satisfaction and repeat bookings.

The self-assessment tool could include templates for SMEs to easily log and report this data. Providing examples of positive outcomes from other SMEs in the accommodation sector could further motivate participants.

4.2 Empirically supported data on “how to close the gap”



SMEs need clear, actionable steps to improve their sustainability performance. The tool should offer:

- **Best practice guides:** Step-by-step instructions on implementing sustainable practices, with empirical evidence demonstrating their effectiveness. For example, providing case studies or research findings that show how installing solar panels reduced energy costs by a specific percentage.
- **Decision-making frameworks:** Help SMEs prioritize actions by showing the short-term and long-term financial and environmental benefits of each sustainability initiative.
- **Resource lists:** A comprehensive directory of funding sources, grants, and subsidies that SMEs can apply for to help finance the implementation of sustainable technologies or practices.

5 AUDITING

5.1 Online/pre-arrangements

By allowing businesses to handle much of the auditing preparation online, the tool makes the process more efficient and less time-consuming. Pre-assessment steps could include:

- **Documentation submission:** SMEs could upload necessary documents (e.g., energy audits, waste management plans) online for review before the on-site audit.
- **Preliminary evaluations:** Auditors could conduct initial evaluations remotely by reviewing the self-assessment data and the submitted documents, reducing the time spent on-site.
- **Virtual consultations:** An option for SMEs to have a virtual pre-audit consultation with auditors to clarify any uncertainties.

5.2 Final short/compliance visit

A certified auditor would conduct a short on-site visit to verify the self-reported data and ensure the SME meets the required sustainability standards. The visit should be efficient and focused on:

- **Spot-checking key areas:** Auditors can check crucial aspects of sustainability, such as energy systems, waste management processes, and guest engagement efforts.
- **Certifying compliance:** Once the auditor confirms that the SME meets the necessary criteria, they can provide certification or other forms of official recognition, adding credibility to the SME's sustainability claims.



6 PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

SMEs should have access to continuous professional support in order to maintain and improve their sustainability efforts, including:

- Sustainability consultants: SMEs can reach out to certified consultants who specialize in various aspects of sustainability, from energy efficiency to waste management and guest education.
- Online helpdesk: A centralized online support service where SMEs can ask specific questions and receive advice from experts in real-time or within a short response window.
- Workshops and Training Programs: Regularly organized workshops, seminars, or online training programs where SMEs can stay updated on the latest sustainability trends and technologies. This ensures businesses are not only meeting current standards but are also preparing for future challenges.

Fostering collaboration between SMEs, sustainability experts, and industry leaders can enhance knowledge sharing and create a network of support. The following methods could be implemented:

- Peer-to-peer mentoring: Connecting SMEs that have successfully implemented sustainability practices with those that are just starting, as well as facilitate communication among SMEs at similar levels to exchange knowledge, tips and experience.
- Sustainability forums: Online platforms or periodic in-person forums where accommodation providers can discuss challenges, share innovative solutions, and learn from industry leaders.
- Community initiatives: Encouraging collaboration with local NGOs, community groups, and governments to develop joint sustainability projects or take part in collective certification processes.

7 THE WAY FORWARD

The focus should be on:

- Building Evidence: Gathering and analysing data on the long-term benefits of sustainable practices is essential. This includes tracking financial savings from resource efficiency (e.g., energy and water conservation) and the positive effects on guest satisfaction and loyalty. Such evidence not only validates the efforts of accommodation SMEs but also demonstrates that sustainability leads to tangible business advantages, making it easier to secure stakeholder buy-in and attract eco-conscious customers.
- Continuous Improvement: Sustainability is not static; it requires regular reassessment and adaptation. SMEs should continually review their sustainability strategies to ensure they stay current with industry trends, regulatory updates, and new technologies. This approach helps businesses



improve operational efficiency, stay competitive, and enhance their reputation as responsible and forward-thinking enterprises.

- **Collaboration:** Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved in isolation. Collaboration between SMEs, industry leaders, and sustainability experts creates opportunities for shared learning, innovation, and resource pooling. By building a strong network, businesses can collectively overcome challenges, access expertise, and scale up their sustainability efforts. Collaborating also encourages cross-sector partnerships that can drive the development of innovative, sustainable solutions within the tourism industry.