

Everywhere International SMEs (EIS)

The ways COVID-19 impacted SMEs and their internationalisation activities.

**Report by the EIS project on
case studies in European regions
(August 2022)**

Disclaimer

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Glossary

B2B	Business to Business
B2C	Business to Consumer
BSO	Business Support Organisation
COVID-19	COronaVirus Disease 2019
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
DTP	DeskTop Publishing
EEN	Enterprise Europe Network
EIS	Everywhere International SMEs
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
EU	European Union
FFP2	Filtering Face Piece 2
HORECA	Hotellerie, Restaurant and Catering
IoT	Internet of Things
IPM	Integrated Pest Management
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
NFP	Not-For-Profit
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
R&D	Research and Development
SBCI	Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
TOV	Trading Online Voucher
UPS	United Parcel Service

Introduction

The main objective of the extension of the [Interreg Europe Everywhere International SMEs \(EIS\) project](#) is to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the internationalisation of SMEs.

In spring 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic began affecting European economies with widespread consequences on enterprises in all sectors. Business continuity was impacted by a large number of factors such as limitations imposed on workers' movements, restrictions on people gathering in workplaces, contagions and health issues of the labour force, changes in the demand for goods and services during lockdowns, occurrence of additional costs and finance-related challenges, and failures in supply chain logistics (OECD, 2020) (Zutshi et al., 2021) Priyabrata et al., 2021. The one-year EIS extension project (September 2021-August 2022) seeks to understand the impact of the pandemic on internationalising SMEs and the BSOs network in terms of the disruption to international supply chains, what strategies were used to overcome the pandemic, how resilient were the SMEs in continuing to export during the pandemic and how resilient was the business support network, was the uptake or transition to digital the panacea for the pandemic? The EIS partners designed and ran a survey of SMEs and BSOs during the early part of the extension project and reported these findings in a separate report.

The project held three physical workshops covering three key priority areas of focus: (i) disruption to international supply chains (Evora, Alentejo, 24-25 May 2022); (ii) impact of digital in alleviating the effects of the pandemic for exporting SMEs and BSOs (Winchester, Hampshire, 27-28 April 2022); and (iii) resilience of the international business support eco-system in the face of the pandemic (Aarhus, Central Denmark, 29-30 June 2022).

The pandemic affected internationalising enterprises in Europe in both a direct and indirect way. International supply chains suffered disruptions with effects on the availability of what enterprises needed for the production of goods or delivery of services (Juergensen et al., 2020). The digital uptake was then perceived and experienced as a means of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic (Klein and Todesco, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic tested the capacity of internationalising enterprises and their business models to adapt, but it also challenged the resilience of the territorial ecosystems supporting international business. An early activity of the EIS extension (2021-22) required the project partners (i.e., regional authorities, business support organisations and agencies)¹ to identify case studies on how internationalising SMEs across the seven EIS regions (i.e., Alentejo, Central Denmark, Donegal, Emilia-Romagna, Hampshire, Koprivnica, and Pomerania) addressed the challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report is organised as follows. Chapter One details the approach adopted by the project partners in identifying the case studies. Chapter Two, Chapter Three and Chapter Four present case studies by theme (i.e., disruption to international supply chains and effects on SMEs; digitalisation as a means of coping with the pandemic; resilience of the SMEs and of the international business support ecosystem in the face of the pandemic)². Lessons learnt from case studies in Chapter 5 close the report. References are in Annex I and indications on key information collected during the interviews and/or through desk research are in Annex II.

¹ The consortium of the EIS project extension is composed of eight partners: Hampshire County Council (lead partner)(UK), Central Denmark EU Office (DK), ENTER Koprivnica (HR), Donegal County Council (Local Enterprise Office) (IE), Emilia-Romagna Region (non-reporting observer partner)(IT), Pomerania Development Agency Co (PL), Regional Development Agency of Alentejo (PT), WSX Enterprise Ltd (UK).

² These themes were also investigated by means of a survey addressed to SMEs and BSOs across the seven EIS regions. The results of the survey (closed on 31 January 2022) are available in the report on ['The ways COVID-19 impacted SMEs and their internationalisation activities. Report by the EIS project on the consultation with SMEs and BSOs in European regions'](#) (Interreg Europe Everywhere International SMEs (EIS) project, 2022).

1 Case studies: the approach

A central aspect of implementing the extension of the [Interreg Europe Everywhere International SMEs \(EIS\) project](#) required EIS partners to identify SME case studies from their regions that have successfully adapted to the challenges brought about by the pandemic.

The EIS project partners were asked to: 1) identify successful cases of internationalising SMEs across the seven EIS regions (i.e., Alentejo, Central Denmark, Donegal, Emilia-Romagna as observer region, Hampshire, Koprivnica, and Pomerania), 2) share them within the consortium via interactive presentations at the three workshops, and 3) discuss the lessons learnt arising from the selected case studies or from interesting examples from their regions.

The project partners (i.e., regional authorities, development agencies and business support organisations and agencies) identified cases in their own regions using contacts in their Local Stakeholder Groups (i.e., formal and informal networks, members of the local business community, professional associations), and through desk research on different sources of relevant information (e.g., local news, websites of the SMEs).

A good deal of information regarding promising cases was also collected through short semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the SMEs (e.g., founders, directors). Key information was collected during the interviews (Annex II).

The 20 selected case studies focused on the three key themes investigated by the EIS project:

1. disruption to international supply chains and effects on SMEs;
2. digitalisation as a means of coping with the pandemic;
3. resilience of the SMEs and of the international business support ecosystem in the face of the pandemic.

Each of the three topics was addressed in the three thematic EIS Workshop organised from April to June 2022 (i.e., the First EIS Workshop held in Winchester, Hampshire, on 27-28 April 2022, the Second EIS Workshop held in Evora, Alentejo, on 24-25 May 2022 and the Third EIS Workshop held in Aarhus, Central Denmark, on 29-30 June 2022). During each workshop, the EIS partners were asked to identify, present and propose for the discussion at least one case study from their region or interesting examples related to the topic of the specific workshop.

The case studies are reported in the following sections by means of an EIS template which collects homogeneous and synthetic information for each of them. This information includes the name of the SME, its key message, the sector to which the SME belongs to or its products/services, the SME turnover, the number of employees, where the SME is located, the indication of the EIS partner that proposed the case study, a short description of the business, a short description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business (e.g., the extent of disruption, the mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised) and, the way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped.

2 Case studies on theme 1: disruption to international supply chains and effects on SMEs

The first set of (six) case studies attempts to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of international supply chain disruption for SMEs, understanding the SMEs' capacity to adapt international trade strategies, and assessing the BSOs' support to SMEs. The case studies, briefly reported here, were presented and discussed during the EIS workshop held in Evora (Alentejo) on 24-25 May 2022.

2.1 DSC01_Flavourtime (Alentejo, PT)

<i>Promoting agrifood as a cultural heritage of the territory.</i>	
Sector/products/services	Agrifood
Turnover	€173,481 (2021)
Number of employees	4 (2021)
Location	Evora, Mourão (Alentejo)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Regional Development Agency of Alentejo (PT)

Flavourtime, Indústria e Comércio Alimentar Lda, is an agrifood enterprise based in Évora with an industrial unit in Mourão established in 2010. Their products are packaged under the SME's own brands (NUTRISANUS and ALMENDRES) or under the customers' brand. They are suppliers to the AUCHAN, JERÓNIMO MARTINS and EL CORTE INGLÉS groups.

Their offer is very segmented and includes: dried fruits and nuts (e.g. peanuts, almonds, cashews, cashew nuts, pistachios, hazelnuts, walnuts, sultanas, figs, plums, dates, sunflower and pumpkin seeds, corn and fava beans fried with salt), herbs and infusions (e.g., anise hyssop, lemon balm, lemon tea, peppermint, thyme, lemon thyme, savory, pennyroyal, oregano, rosemary, horsetail, lemon pike), super foods (e.g., goji, hemp seeds, chia seeds, flax seeds, raw cacao, wheat grass, barley grass, chlorella, spirulina).

Their production also includes more than 30 varieties of jams, made naturally from fruit produced in the Alentejo, as well as rosemary honey from Serra de Portel.



Source: image from the Flavourtime webpage on the website of Fundación Tres Culturas del Mediterráneo

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- In response to the social needs arising due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SME decided to redirect part of its activity towards the production of personal protective equipment (PPE), e.g., surgical masks.
- On 20th November 2020, the first thousand units of produced surgical masks, certified by Infarmed and distributed under the ZeloTec brand, were offered to the Municipal Civil Protection of Mourão.
- The SMEs started selling masks in Portugal and in Spain.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Financial support of [PO Alentejo 2020](#)
- Technical support of BSO [NERE](#)

Sources: [Planicie article](#) about Flavourtime; interview with the representatives of the SME.

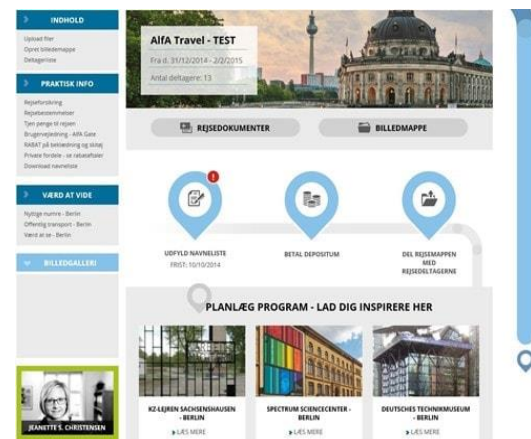
2.2 DSC02_Alfa Travel (Central Denmark, DK)

Arranging content-rich group trips and study trips by means of experienced travel advisors.

Sector/products/services	Tourism services
Turnover	n/a
Number of employees	Around 20 (2022)
Location	Holstebro (Central Denmark)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Central Denmark EU Office (DK)

Alfa Travel is a privately-owned Danish travel agency, specialising in group tours, especially study and company tours. Every year, they organise content-rich and professional trips for approx. 1000 groups and 30,000 guests per year.

Alfa Travel works through personal travel advisors with specific areas of expertise and with a limited number of travel destinations. The travel advisors follow the groups from the beginning to end of the trip. Additionally, any group at Alfa Travel is granted access to the Alfa Gate, an online customer portal, which accompanies the group throughout the planning process. It includes all relevant deadlines, documents and practical information and allows information sharing about the destination (e.g., program proposals and prices), 24-hour access to documents regarding the trip (also during the journey) and effective communication within the travel participants and with the travel advisor.



Source: image from the Alfa Travel website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- During the pandemic the tourism sector was frozen.
- Alfa Travel was supported by a business consultant in applying with a project for a national transition fund. This fund was addressed to businesses whose livelihood was significantly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The argument was that the tourism industry will not return to pre-COVID-19 pandemic conditions. If the behaviour of people travelling (for leisure or for business) changes, so must the business.
- The project aimed at defining the new needs of the target groups of Alfa Travel, at tailoring digital platforms to engage with target groups and at setting up digital marketing tools to reach target groups.
- The aim of the project's proposed transformation was not to produce immediate new business opportunities, but rather to become well-positioned in the future tourism market.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Advice on navigating the opportunities and framing the project in the right way.
- Special focus on the tourism sector during lockdowns.

Sources: [Alfa Travel website](#); [interview](#) carried out by Erhvervshus Midtjylland and talks with consultants at Erhvervshus Midtjylland.

2.3 DSC03_Greeble (Donegal, IE)

Digitalising events and experiences: new digital services.

Sector/products/services	Creative Industries
Turnover	Around €96,000 (2021)
Number of employees	1 (but increasing) (2022)
Location	Letterkenny (Donegal)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Donegal County Council (Local Enterprise Office)(IE)

Greeble was established by James Doherty in November 2019. After having worked abroad, he returned to Donegal to establish his business: design and animation for the world's largest musical acts, in the world's biggest venues. James Doherty specialises in animation and design for live events, tours, and concerts for worldwide renowned artists (e.g., Billie Eilish, Shania Twain, Khalid, Tame Impala). He is based in Letterkenny and 80% of his business is outside Ireland.

James says the move home would not have been possible without the development of infrastructure and broadband in Donegal: *'Ten years ago, I had to leave Donegal to find work, and until recently, I didn't think Donegal could ever be an option as a place to work for me. The nature of my business requires gigabytes of data, displayed on giant screens, so I didn't think we would have the infrastructure here or the internet speeds required to do that. However, the development of broadband in the county in recent years coincided perfectly with the shift in the industry towards remote working – fast-tracked by the pandemic – which made it possible for businesses like Greeble, traditionally based in cities, to thrive in rural settings like Donegal.'*



Source: image from the Greeble website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- As a result of the pandemic all major events and concerts were postponed – therefore the demand for Greeble's services was immediately impacted.
- The Greeble customer base was mostly in Los Angeles and with the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions trips to clients stopped.
- James developed a solution for managing online events and using different online platforms. He worked to create new solutions to support the acts he was working with to create unique experiences for the viewers.
- He also reviewed his pricing model to position himself better and in a more sustainable way on this brand-new market.
- The main challenge on the supply side was people – he needed to build a team that allowed him to take on more clients. This type of work is highly demanding time wise.
- He adapted to online meetings with existing clients.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Financial Management Development with mentoring
- [Business Priming Grant](#). To begin building a team Two employees supported.
- [Trading Online Voucher \(TOV\)](#). James applied for a TOV with the Local Enterprise Office Donegal after having followed an online seminar.

Sources: [Greeble website](#); [Donegal Daily article](#) about Greeble; interview with the representatives of the SME.

2.4 DSC04_Koolschools (Hampshire, UK)

Supplying ethical school uniforms made with Fairtrade Cotton.

Sector/products/services	Retail apparel
Turnover	Around £1,000,0000
Number of employees	8 (4 full-time, 4 directors) (2022)
Location	Southampton (Hampshire)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	EnterpriseM3 Growth Hub (UK)

Koolschools (Koolkompany Ltd.) supplies Fairtrade-certified cotton school uniforms to schools across the UK and Europe, provides Fairtrade garments to universities, not-for-profit (NFP) and business sectors. Garments are supplied from their Fairtrade-certified manufacturing partner in India. Koolschools ethical supply chain has a mutually reinforcing, sustainable relationship with the Fairtrade/Organic cotton growers. Cotton growers in three regions of India have converted the more harmful conventional cotton farming into organic farming. Garments are imported to the Koolschools embroidery facility in Southampton (UK), where they are badged, packed and shipped. Their mission is to trade fairly at both ends of the supply chain. All Koolschools-manufactured clothes contain Fairtrade certified cotton meaning that the cotton farmers receive a fair price for their crop plus a little extra to invest in their communities.

Since 2019 all of the polyester in the Koolschools Fairtrade core range garments has been recycled from human resource waste (e.g., plastic bottles).

Besides the cotton farmers, the Koolschools factories have all committed to Fairtrade Minimum Standards and the [Koolschools Ethical Trading Pledge](#), meaning that all of the factory workers are paid well above the national minimum wage; there is decent health and safety; there is no child labour or enforced overtime, etc.

Koolschools was highly dependent on an efficient and cost-effective supply chain from India to the UK. The schools and universities market make up a large proportion of total revenue.



Source: image from the Koolschools website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- The pandemic had a significant impact in Koolschools in 2020 and in 2021: the factory in India had shutdowns; the international supply chain was disrupted; transport costs increased tenfold; sales to universities almost ceased; and the regular schools' buying patterns became unpredictable.
- Koolschools had made use of Enterprise M3 Growth Hub support to help develop improvements in operational strategy and had applied these, along with their own initiatives, in the years preceding the pandemic.
- Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was significant, the company survived. In 2022, Koolschools is back on track and growing again with some structural changes in the business: strengthening the Fairtrade alternative sourcing; maintenance of UK stocks to match order forecast; definition of a cost model that accommodates shipping cost fluctuations; adoption of an online ordering channel; investment in internal IT systems; set-up of a responsive order-to-delivery process.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Enterprise M3 Growth Hub support was provided a business advice programme through an associate with considerable experience in supply chain, business and marketing strategy and IT systems.
- The reinforced business model based on the alternative sourcing 'Fairtrade Offset' initiative has structurally increased revenue by 25%-30% (even before the pandemic).

Sources: [Koolschools website](#); [Koolschools Vimeo video](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

2.5 DSC05_Wizz Pickups (Koprivnica, HR)

Reproducing vintage pickups and creating special tones for instruments.

Sector/products/services	Musical instruments
Turnover	€35,320.00 (2020); €79,066.00 (2021); €54,266.00 (1st quarter 2022)
Number of employees	1 (2022)
Location	Koprivnica
Proposed by (EIS partner)	ENTER Koprivnica (HR)

Wizz Pickups (Wizard Ltd.) is a small business located in the northern part of Croatia, specialising in the manufacture of the world's finest guitar pickups and parts. Wizz Pickups are top quality pickups professionally crafted by an experienced expert. Taking into account their unique qualities and the considerable length of time needed to make them, it is impossible for this type of pickup to be mass-produced. The Wizz Pickups primary objective and desire is to faithfully reproduce vintage correct pickups and parts from those great instruments of the past. In addition to the standard selection of Wizz pickups, each pickup can be custom made if requested.

Wizz Pickups baseplates are stamped in Croatia, and every segment is of vintage correct size and specifications. The material is custom-made nickel silver from the USA, the best quality on the market, with the correct percentage of nickel in its manufacturing, in order to replicate specifications of genuine '50-'60 PAF pickups.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic Wizz Pickups did not want to switch to the VAT system and closed its webshop for around four months a year. Since 2021 the SME has moved to the VAT system with a revenue increase of € 44,000.

80% of the Wizz Pickups are from the USA, 10% from the EU and 10% from other parts of the world. Wizz Pickups customers include Bon Jovi, Billy Gibbons (ZZ Top), Slash, Brad Whitford (Aerosmith), Josh Klinghoffer (Red Hot Chili Peppers), Ed King (Lynyrd Skynyrd), Steve Jones (Sex Pistols), Richard Fortus (Guns N' Roses), the blues-rock guitarist Joe Bonamassa and the American jazz guitarist Al Di Meola. In 2022 the Facebook group *Wizz Pickups Army* reached 1,800 members.



Source: image from the Wizz Pickups website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- The SME is not part of international supply chain. Wizz Pickups operates internationally directly either B2B or B2C.
- During the pandemic, the digital acceleration of the SME was primarily to comply with stay-at-home customers' orders due to the lockdowns.
- When passenger planes stopped flying during the COVID-19 pandemic, the delivery of goods from the USA suffered delays. The SME started shipping with UPS and procuring the needed wire from Europe (before the COVID-19 pandemic it was supplied by a US company).
- Since 2020, the shutdown and consequent rapid increase in people working from home provided more opportunities for hobbies (e.g., in the USA residents received \$800 for COVID-19 assistance).
- Wizz Pickups has also started doing business with UPS to ensure that deliveries to customers arrive on time. This new approach led to a three-time increase in shipping costs (with respect to the standard mail delivery).
- Prices of raw materials (e.g., copper, nickel) began to rise in November 2021, which resulted in a cost increase.

- The SME has also increased the use of local services (e.g., local craftsmen to inject plastic, drill and screw sheet metal) and has invested in making some of the materials needed to make the pickups available locally.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Online and in-presence training events/webinars on funding opportunities, innovation gains, digital marketing and customer experience.
- Regular communication through individual consultancy.

Sources: [Wizz Pickups website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

2.6 DSC06_EsotiQ (Pomerania, PL)

Sensual fashion underwear and classic forms designed for everyday comfort.

Sector/products/services	Women’s fashion underwear
Turnover	€39,680,000 (2020), 43,469.148 EURO (2021)
Number of employees	75 (2020), 85 (2021)
Location	Gdańsk (Pomerania)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Pomerania Development Agency Co (PL)

The SME has been operating in the textile market for over 20 years under three brands: EsotiQ – underwear and clothes for women; Henderson – underwear for men and women and EsotiQ Formula Cosmetics – cosmetics and perfumes for women. EsotiQ is an underwear brand for women. The goal of EsotiQ is to combine the functional benefits of underwear that should lead to well-being and everyday comfort with fashion.

Located in city centres and shopping malls, ESOTIQ has over 270 stores in Poland and Germany.



Source: image from the EsotiQ website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- Lockdowns led to the closure of large shopping centres which limited selling opportunities to small stores with a separate entrance.
- Problems with the availability of goods due to the fact that some factories in China temporarily closed and transport of goods from the Far East stopped.
- The SMEs addressed the issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic with a multi-faced strategy: giving up the seasonality of collections; giving up the seasonality of deliveries; expanding the list of logistics companies; redefining shipping periods (from every two months to one shipping period in the spring and one in the autumn); launching a second warehouse; starting cooperation with sewing manufactures outside the Far East; extending the use of custom warehouses (before clearing); increasing flexibility in contracts with suppliers.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped


- EsotiQ took advantage of the national pandemic shields and received funding for maintaining jobs.
- The SME is in the Pomeranian Export Broker project and participated in information meetings, fairs and economic missions organised and co-financed by the Pomerania Development Agency.

Sources: [EsotiQ website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

3 Case studies on theme 2: digitalisation as a means of coping with the pandemic

The second set of (ten) case studies focuses on digitalisation as a way of coping with the effects of the pandemic for SMEs in particular, on investments and support needed to increase the digital readiness of SMEs and on domains in which future actions can make SMEs digitally-prepared and able to operate in a more effective and efficient way on international markets. The case studies, briefly reported here, were presented and discussed during the EIS workshop held in Winchester (Hampshire) on 27-28 April 2022.

3.1 DIG01_Wearebond (Alentejo, PT)

<i>Together and step-by-step we walk towards a more sustainable world.</i>	
Sector/products/services	Cleaning products industry
Turnover	Around €600,000 (2021)
Number of employees	8 (2021)
Location	Lavre (Alentejo)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Regional Development Agency of Alentejo (PT)
<p>Clean Essence® (Wearebond Lda) is a 100% Portuguese brand, with the aim of creating innovative solutions that help make the day-to-day cleaning of the home easier, simpler and with a strong commitment to the environment.</p> <p>Clean Essence® also looks for solutions that favor reuse and whenever this is not yet possible, they are focused on using more ecological packaging, either through the incorporation of all, or a high percentage of, recycled materials and/or materials obtained from sustainably managed sources.</p>	 <p><i>Source: image from the Clean Essence website</i></p>
<p>Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wearebond was already aware prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that it needed to look for other markets. The pandemic provided this opportunity due to the specificity of proposed cleaning products. • Wearebond registered different brands (including Clean Essence®) on the national and international markets. • A website with all the product information in English was created. 	
<p>The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NERE QUALIFICA – FSE • ALENTEJO EXPORT – FEDER 	

Sources: [Clean Essence website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

3.2 DIG02_Inlife (Alentejo, PT)

A whole new world for mid-term rentals in Europe.

Sector/products/services	Accommodation (Online Housing Marketplace)
Turnover	Around €300,000 (2021)
Number of employees	10 (2022)
Location	Evora (Alentejo)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Regional Development Agency of Alentejo (PT)

Inlife (In Housing Life Lda) has changed the way to book a home in a new city, simplifying the visit process and turning it into an easy online experience. With a completely new approach – through live video calls – and several innovative products, finding and booking a new home with Inlife becomes cost-effective for customers and provides the maximum value for tenants and landlords.

Finding the right accommodation for students and professionals is at the heart of the InLife business model. The proposed approach makes wise decisions possible when choosing a new home from a distance. The traditional options available to finding mid-term accommodation – based on photos, recorded videos and descriptions of the houses – are not completely satisfying the expectations and needs of customers. Inlife is currently active in Lisbon, Porto, Madrid, Barcelona, Milan, Rome, Coimbra, Évora, Braga and Aveiro.



Source: image from the Inlife website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- The COVID-19 pandemic led to very small adaptations of the business as it continues to work exactly as designed.
- During the pandemic, in terms of customers, Inlife experienced an increase in the number of landlords focusing on the short-term rental market, an increase in national workers and students and a limited decrease in international students.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Alentejo 2020
- Portugal 2020

Sources: [Inlife website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

3.3 DIG03_Terrius (Alentejo, PT)

Flavours with history.

Sector/products/services	Food & Tourism
Turnover	n/a
Number of employees	3 (2022)
Location	Portagem (Alentejo)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Regional Development Agency of Alentejo (PT)

Terrius was established in the Serra de S. Mamede – Alto Alentejo – Portugal, one of the largest biodiversity reserves in the Iberian Peninsula. Its main objective is the sustainable production, preservation and commercialization of the region's wild products, including fruits and the vegetables of excellence. Terrius is located at Moinho da Cova, an old watermill next to the Sever River and a local beach, in the town of Portagem, in the municipality of Marvão.

The idea for the business was conceived at the beginning of 2011. It was driven by the desire to build a distinctive and innovative project in the agri-food sector, based on the establishment of local partnerships of trust and fair trade with small producers and industries within the region.

TerriuS uses simple transformation processes, such as the dehydration and the development of natural canned products, which preserves the unique characteristics of the raw materials, in order to bring the region's original flavours and aromas to customers.



Source: image from the TerriuS website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic caused a 50% drop in the TerriuS billing due to the closure of some shops and restaurants which delivered its products and due to the interruption of the region's international tourism activities.
- TerriuS decided to adapt its business to the new food consumption model and to count on digital opportunities for marketing and sales. An online shop providing promotional videos of recipes with products was created. It led to a 300% increase in online sales but corresponded to only 10% of the total turnover. TerriuS also increased the final consumer online sales in Spain and the retail sales in Germany. Online cooking classes were organised for a Food Tourism platform in the UK with delivery of TerriuS products to the participants.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Project Melhor Turismo
- [Association 'Lugares da Serra Alentejana'](#)
- 100% financed : Digital Marketing Training Program

Sources: [TerriuS website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

3.4 DIG04_OfficeFit (Central Denmark, DK)

Increase workplace well-being and health with a movement concept.

Sector/products/services	Health/ICT
Turnover	Around DKK 25,000,000 [expected] (around €3,300,000 [expected]) (2021); gross profit, around DKK 1,300,000 (around €175,000) (2021);
Number of employees	22 (2022, first quarter)
Location	Holstebro (Central Denmark)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Central Denmark EU Office (DK)

OfficeFit is a service company that supports workers in taking care of their physical health while at the office. It is proven that sedentary behaviors have major health and financial consequences for companies, employees and society. This has been the mission of OfficeFit since the Holstebro company was started in 2015. They believe that digitalisation has led to too much sedentary work and that office workers are moving too little which threatens their health.

OfficeFit started in a garage, and today it has 22 employees and collaborates with more than 150 doctors, psychologists, physiotherapists and nurses.

OfficeFit has clients worldwide (it began internationalising its services mainly with large Danish companies who had offices around the world, e.g., Lego). Currently, OfficeFit has been successful in meeting the needs of employees in more than 250 companies. In spring 2021 the WHO invited OfficeFit to participate in a webinar as a world leader in the prevention of sedentary behaviour.



Source: image from the OfficeFit website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge, but it was also a big opportunity. A large number of office workers started working at home. There has been huge awareness on the plight of the office worker during the COVID-19 pandemic, and OfficeFit took the opportunity to move their business to an online platform. They developed an app, initially to do live streaming sessions, and, later, to add more features. They started the development of the GetUpp concept and ActiveSupply trading platform with live sessions in which instructors offered morning exercise, yoga and mindfulness activities. It has created even more success.
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, OfficeFit had a turnover of DKK 11 million. A year after the launch of the new GetUpp international website, the expected turnover in 2021 went from DKK 18 million to DKK 25 million. This was a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- First and foremost, OfficeFit has used a business consultant from the Business Development Centre Central Denmark as a general business mentor, who has, for instance, supported them in applying for Innobooster (i.e., a national innovation support programme) to develop their app-concept.

Sources: [OfficeFit website](#); [interview](#) carried out by Erhvervshus Midtjylland and talks with consultants at Erhvervshus Midtjylland.

3.5 DIG05_HuKu (Donegal, IE)

Stay prepared and help prevent injuries with the perfect tool for the body and mind.

Sector/products/services	Health
Turnover	Around €220,000 (2021) (expected around €350,000 in 2022)
Number of employees	6 (2022) [1.5 in 2018 and expected 12 in 2024]
Location	Creeslough (Donegal)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Donegal County Council (Local Enterprise Office)(IE)

Huku is made up of talented designers, carpenters, and cabinet makers. HuKu balance boards have been in development since 2008, but it was only in 2018 that Cathal, a qualified carpenter and product designer, decided to turn his Birchwood creations into a business. HuKu creates sustainable and fine handmade balance boards for improving core strength, balance, co-ordination and reaction time. Each item is a custom piece of furniture designed and made to last a lifetime. Sustainability is also guaranteed by the FSC certification of the wood that is used for the production of the HuKu balance products.



Source: image from the HuKu website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- Cathal received support from the Donegal Local Enterprise Office (LEO) to develop the HuKu brand. HuKu immediately started selling worldwide. In 2018 export sales amounted for €20,000.
- In March 2020 a jump in product sales occurred. Surfers started searching for a way to keep on top of their skills during lockdown and people turned to home exercise.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

Key Interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic were provided by Donegal LEO to HuKu:

- The second TOV (90% grant aid for COVID) to develop strategy and user experience
- Support from the Export Development Programme based on virtual market visits and on a one-to-one mentoring service aimed at developing an export plan
- A grant aid to support investment in new staff and marketing costs
- A loan for micro enterprises focusing on process improvement and cost reduction
- Mentoring.

Sources: [Huku Balance website](#); [Donegal Daily article](#) about the HuKu balance products; interview with the representatives of the SME.

3.6 DIG06_ARCivate (Hampshire, UK)

A solution that transforms processes by reducing complexity, providing flexibility and enabling working practices to meet the challenges and change taking place in today’s world.

Sector/products/services	SaaS - Software as a Service
Turnover	Around £750,000 (2021)
Number of employees	9 (2022)
Location	Farnham (Hampshire)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	EnterpriseM3 Growth Hub (UK)

ARCivate was founded as a SaaS (Software as a Service) business in August 2010 and has grown rapidly for 12 years.

ARCivate provides an automated invoice processing solution, integrated with Oracle ERP Finance Applications. ARCivate has been an Oracle Gold Partner since 2010. To support Oracle's move to the cloud, ARCivate created its own SaaS platform called Mi Invoices. Currently, ARCivate is now a Cloud Build Track Partner and its Mi Invoices solution is published in the Oracle Marketplace.

Mi Invoices intelligent document recognition can adapt to all clients’ requirements. It supports multiple languages, currencies, and business rules.



Source: image from the ARCivate website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in the biggest change to working life ARCivate has ever known. It changed work routines. Most of the personnel moved from being at an office desk from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. to working from home (also overnight). After two years ARCivate has gone to a hybrid approach with benefits for both employees and employers. It terminated its lease and closed its office premises and all employees work fully from home. This required some extra IT Investment, but it was more than offset by the savings on premises and by the increase of staff productivity as satisfaction generally improved by working from home.

- All internal communication is currently done via email, through online video-conference tools and by phone. Face-to-face meetings have mainly been replaced by regular social online events and ‘catch ups’.
- Social Media Platforms are effectively used to increase the ARCivate customer base.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- ARCivate engaged with EM3 Growth Hub to receive additional support to target growth opportunities and to expand its market share overseas, especially in the USA, Europe and Far East.

Sources: [ARCivate website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

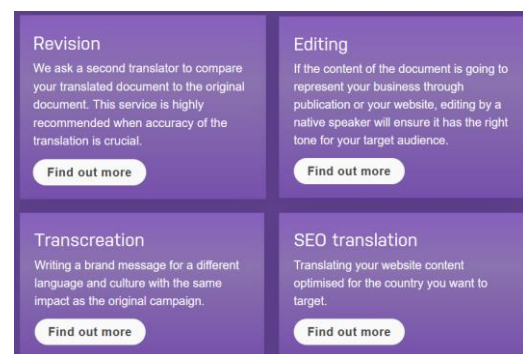
3.7 DIG07_Surrey Translation Bureau (Hampshire, UK)

<i>Giving your business a global voice.</i>	
Sector/products/services	Business Services
Turnover	> £1,000,000
Number of employees	Around 20 (2022) and an external team of more than 500 experts worldwide
Location	Farnham (Hampshire/Surrey Border)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	WSX Enterprise Ltd (UK)

Surrey Translation Bureau offers a professional translation service-based mix of languages across sectors/specialisms. They address translation needs of businesses (from small to large companies), professional organisations, public bodies, individuals and other translation agencies. In most cases they have long-term customers. Around 40% of their customers are outside the UK. Surrey Translation Bureau relies on a global network of expertise which makes it possible for them to translate any text into any language for any field (e.g., medical, legal, technical, marketing, financial, science, environmental and public sector).

In addition to translating, other related language services provided by the Surrey Translation Bureau include SEO translation, DTP, localisation, terminology management, transcreation and legalisation.

The business model of Surrey Translation Bureau is based on the idea that their services are not just about the translation of text pages, but they need to get learn about their customers, including how they operate, their principles, beliefs and culture. For example, a conversation with the customers (‘bit like dating’) is deemed necessary to understand the target audience.



Source: image from the Surrey Translation Bureau website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was difficult to have meetings with clients based in different parts of the world. With the wide-scope adoption of tools for virtual meetings pushed by the pandemic and its lockdown periods, Surrey Translation Bureau was facilitated in getting more regular conversations and team meetings with clients. Putting effort into an initial virtual conversation in order to develop a better understanding of the clients’ needs greatly improved the efficiency of the entire process.. The relationships with clients improved and clients were more amenable to resolving issues in online meetings rather than through e-mails.
- During the pandemic the smaller clients faced setbacks. The role of translation is crucial when a business is exporting. Export was one of the first activities that many companies stopped at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The workload of Surrey Translation Bureau also decreased because some companies were unable to afford translation costs.

- The SME started accessing Chambers of Commerce resources, understanding the government funding situation and participating in virtual networking events. Surrey Translation Bureau realised that it could improve its digital presence and benefit from online training without costs.
- Surrey Translation Bureau accessed export activity grants for improving their marketing and their international presence. They translated their website into different languages, implemented social media campaigns and created a list of contacts for marketing purposes.
- Surrey Translation Bureau personnel used the downtime to develop themselves. They seized the opportunity to upskill or to benefit from free digital training tools (e.g., Google digital garage).
- Concerning internal productivity, the SME moved to some digital processes (e.g., digitising invoices and time sheets).

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Surrey Translation Bureau benefitted from learning/export funding.

Sources: [Surrey Translation website](#); [Surrey Translation YouTube video](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

3.8 DIG08_Oprema (Koprivnica, HR)

Always cold and refreshing.

Sector/products/services	Manufacture of non-domestic cooling and ventilation equipment
Turnover	€14,812.999 (2021)
Number of employees	186 (2021)
Location	Ludbreg
Proposed by (EIS partner)	ENTER Koprivnica (HR)

Oprema d.d. is a producer of catering equipment, primarily units for cooling and dispensing beer and units for cooling and dispensing juices, wine, water, milk and cold coffee. Their professional cooling devices for non-alcoholic beverages, beer, wine and water are characterised by high performance features, high quality and top design. Proposed cooling devices, according to their capacity, are suitable for smaller restaurants and bars, but also for larger consumer sites such as sports halls and stadiums. The most significant part of the production range, with over 75% of the total volume, is taken up by beer cooling and dispensing devices. Oprema is a small local company that acts as a global producer in its field of business, and it is one of the five largest producers of cooling and dispensing drink devices in the world.

There are no competitors in Croatia and the list of their clients includes, for example, Carlsberg, Heineken and Monin.

The entire production process from concept, research and development; through construction, design, technology development and production; to marketing and sales takes place in the company itself. The SME assembly line is connected to an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, which allows monitoring and tracking of the production process in real time. Implementation of products is very quick through production processes and Oprema is ready to adapt to the customer as much as possible.



Source: image from the Oprema website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- Given that caterers are 95% of Oprema's clients, the COVID-19 pandemic affected their business in a significant way. From April to July 2020, Oprema did not receive orders. Also, suppliers from Italy were in lockdown and necessary material for production was not delivered.

- Oprema strives to industry 4.0, digitalisation and automation of all processes in order to be efficient.
- Demand has been normalised and orders are arriving, but the uncertainty is still significant as there is a lack of copper and semiconductors.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Oprema has used the Croatian Employment Service Support measure 'Support for protection of jobs in activities affected by coronavirus (COVID-19) – 2020'. This support provided employers whose business activities were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with a subsidy to maintain employment. The subsidy amounted to up to €433 per employee for March 2020, and up to €533 per employee for April and May 2020.

Sources: [Oprema website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

3.9 DIG09_Sonitus Acoustics (Koprivnica, HR)

World-Class Acoustics. From finest materials to finest products.

Sector/products/services	Manufacture of plastic panels, sheets, tubes and profiles
Turnover	€2,138,731 (2021)
Number of employees	17 (2021)
Location	Starigrad (Koprivnica)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	ENTER Koprivnica (HR)

Sonitus Acoustics was founded in 2009, as a result of a recording studio owners' hobby. It is a manufacturing company that controls its entire production process. Sonitus Acoustics currently produces 10 types of products divided into three groups: Sonitus Kicker, Sonitus Acoustics and OEM. Sonitus works for speaker stands, vocal cabins - mobile vocal recording booths and mobile walls – and freestanding absorption panels. The company's mission is to improve acoustic conditions whether it is a garage, studio or home cinema. For example, their innovative product Sonitus Acoustics Kicker is the world's first 'head to head' bass drum muffler. Its design and material give a drum a powerful and much focused sound.



Source: image from the Sonitus Acoustics website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sonitus had to reduce international operations as a temporary measure pending recovery.
- The acceleration of digital processes in Sonitus was primarily focused on responding to an increase market demand for products/services due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was facilitated by the digital readiness actions for businesses taken in the region.
- Since Sonitus acquired most of the equipment to digitize their business, improve productivity and speed up logistic processes, adjustments to the routine were required to make enterprise more resilient (e.g., to avoid inefficient execution of tasks, to reduce overspending on specific operations). Digitalisation helped the enterprise modernize business processes and improve accuracy/speed of delivery of ordered services and products.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Online and in-presence training events/webinars on funding opportunities, innovation gains and digital marketing
- Regular communication through individual consultancy

- With the help of Enter Koprivnica, Sonitus applied to different calls 'Internationalization of SME business - Phase 2', 'Strengthening the competitiveness of companies by investing in the digital and green transition'
- Administrative support from Enter Koprivnica to help Sonitus with implementation of the project activities from the "Internationalization of SME business - Phase 2" call (whose activities were stopped during the pandemic)
- Support from Enter Koprivnica to help Sonitus with implementation of activities funded by the 'Product certification to the market' call

Sources: [Sonitus Acoustics website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

3.10 DIG10_Proteh GlassDeep (Pomerania, PL)

Observing the underwater world has never been so easy.

Sector/products/services	Manufacture of underwater windows, hybrid catamarans, protection systems
Turnover	n/a
Number of employees	n/a
Location	Gdańsk (Pomerania)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Pomerania Development Agency Co (PL)

PROTEH GlassDeep is a start-up that was set up in 2016 to carry out research and development work on the invention 'contribution to the windows of underwater objects'. The idea was developed and patented by the owners of PROTEH.

The GlassDeep® brand is a protected trademark and is intended to revolutionise the market for windows used in underwater facilities, both floating and stationary, replacing the currently used soft acrylic glass with much harder and thus more scratch-resistant mineral glass.

The creators of the GlassDeep invention used the many years of experience they gained by developing and implementing the patented GlassWave multi-curve bending technology on an industrial scale.

Since March 2017, the shareholder of PROTEH GlassDeep is SAFE CO. LTD. Sp. z o.o. which, with its international experience in the construction of floating objects, guarantees the success of the invention's implementation.



Source: image from the Proteh GlassDeep website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- Adoption of virtual reality tools to sell products during the pandemic thanks to the collaboration with [Chronospace](#) (a Polish provider of virtual and mixed reality solutions)

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- European projects
- European funds

Sources: [GlassDeep website](#); [Gospodarkamorska article](#) about GlassDeep; interview with the representatives of the SME.

4 Case studies on theme 3: resilience of SMEs and of the international business support ecosystem in the face of the pandemic

The last set is composed of four case studies that focus on the resilience of international operations. They look at how SMEs reacted to the pandemic as well as at how they were supported in the most difficult phases of the COVID-19 pandemic by the actors of the ecosystem promoting internationalisation of businesses in their region. Instead of case studies, three EIS partners focused on evidence related to resilience issues drawn from the BSOs perspective. The case studies and the evidences, briefly reported here, were presented and discussed during the EIS workshop held in Aarhus (Central Denmark) on 29-30 June 2022.

4.1 RES01_Sharish (Alentejo, PT)

Drinks that have a story that deserves to be known.

Sector/products/services	Drink & Tourism
Turnover	Around €1,300,000 (2018)
Number of employees	9 (2022)
Location	Reguengos de Monsaraz (Alentejo)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Regional Development Agency of Alentejo (PT)

During a period of unemployment and thanks to an incredible capacity for entrepreneurship, António Cuco went from simply enjoying gin to creating an emblematic and internationally recognized brand, Shraish Gin.

Sharish uses traditional Portuguese stills, the live flame that makes the distillation process slow but of great quality.

Local products of extreme quality, such as orange, lemon, Lúcia Lima and Erva Príncipe, among others, are part of the composition of Sharish Gin. The distillery was established in 2014 and is the only Gin Interpretation Center in the Iberian Peninsula. Currently 70% of the production is exported outside Portugal.



Source: image from the Sharish website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- During the pandemic, António created gin that was also suitable as a disinfectant. He decided to redistill a gin, which was already bottled and prepared to be exported in international markets in spring/summer 2020. Bluer Gin was de-bottled and redistilled, in order to increase the alcohol content to 75% (from 40%). The resulting product could be used as either a gin or a disinfectant. The Bluer Gin 75% has been on sale since March 20th, for €13.86.
- António also made an agreement with the Évora Hospital to support them with the disinfectant supply.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Support for the investment
- Support for internationalization

Sources: [Sharish website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

4.2 RES02_Welditz Engineering (Donegal, IE)

Sheet metal laser fabrication with stringent dimensional tolerances and supreme edge quality.

Sector/products/services	Metalwork
Turnover	Around €1,300,000 (2021)
Number of employees	12 (2022)
Location	Churchtown, Carndonagh (Donegal)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Donegal County Council (Local Enterprise Office)(IE)

Welditz was established more than 25 years ago by James Cuddihy. The company started in London and then moved to Donegal 15 years ago. James has been in metalwork engineering all his life. Welditz is a sheet metal laser cutting and fabrication company, working mainly in stainless and mild steels, aluminium, copper and titanium.

They specialise in the design and making of 'small parts and assemblies' for clients who require stringent dimensional tolerances from their parts, as well as supreme edge quality - for example they make jigs wires for Integer who use them in the manufacture of heart stents, working to microns of accuracy.



Source: image from the Welditz Engineering website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the supply of steel and key consumables, like nitrogen, was uncertain. There was an expectation of long delays which had a direct impact on customer delivery dates. Welditz also feared a delay in payment from customers as a result of the uncertainty and they needed to plan for this.
- As a manufacturing business of essential materials, they continued to trade during the COVID-19 pandemic and to their surprise business was good, gaining new local and national contracts due to supply chain issues of other international providers into Ireland.
- In response to the issues, the business took advantage of key supports and focused on developing the customer portfolio to higher value sectors and also on building upon new opportunities in order to gain international contracts.
- Access to finance was critical to the business - to buy stock of steel, to focus on R&D and to continue business growth during the pandemic. Fear of the impact of finance and of non-payments during the pandemic was a key factor. Access to other sources of financing enabled Welditz to continue its activities. Among them were the design of new tollbooth cabinets (e.g., for [Tecside](#) and for [Eurolink](#)) and research, development and testing of new components along with customers.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Welditz utilised the Business Continuity Voucher. It was an immediate government response administered through the LEO offices. A fully-funded mentor would be allocated to a business to deal with specific challenges. Their objective was to identify key risks as a result of the COVID-19 situation in order to help the business plan and take action to ensure that the business continued to operate. Another objective was that if the business closed, mitigation plans would be in place in order to ensure that the business would reopen and continue to trade. It was used by Welditz for its working capital needs and Welditz also applied to the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland for a working capital loan. This allowed them to forward buy stock of steel to avoid potential lack of supply and delays.

- Welditz also utilised the Trading Online Voucher, the Export Development Programme (to develop export plans and strategy to identify growth opportunities) and the Business Expansion Grant, i.e., €47,500 (to invest in nitrogen generation on site in order to mitigate the issue of its cost and availability).
- Welditz engaged with EEN to get information on supply situations and to identify other potential suppliers.
- Welditz applied to SBCI for a large loan to enable future growth and investment in equipment and buying of stock.

Sources: [Welditz website](#); Vimeo video about Welditz; interview with the representatives of the SME.

4.3 RES03_Bioplanet (Emilia-Romagna, IT)

Developing integrated pest management and biological control in agriculture.

Sector/products/services	Agriculture
Turnover	Around €17,000,000 (2021)
Number of employees	70 (2022)
Location	Cesena (Emilia-Romagna)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	Emilia Romagna Region (IT)

Bioplanet (Bioplanet Società Cooperativa Agricola and Bioplanet Srl) is a group producing and selling Biological Control Agents (insects and mites) utilized by growers for protecting crops in Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

Bioplanet customers are a big growers group interested in producing fruits and vegetables of high quality and with a low level of pesticide residuals. The goal of Bioplanet is to develop IPM and Biological Control in agriculture, as an alternative to the pest management strategies exclusively based on chemical pesticides. Their products are used mainly in protected crops, but also in open fields, orchards and landscapes management. They provide technical support and customize application strategies for different crop conditions. Bioplanet dedicates extensive resources to specific experimental and demonstrative programs, in cooperation with national and international research institutes.



Source: image from the Bioplanet website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- As a matter of fact, Bioplanet is an 'animals' mass rearing so it is an enterprise registered in Italy as an agricultural company. During the first chaotic lockdown the biggest problem was maintaining a constant personnel presence because a temporary suspension of staff presence would have meant a total loss of the annual production. As an 'agricultural' enterprise, Bioplanet did not suffer from imposed mobility staff restrictions.
- As some mites and insects can cause allergic reactions, all the staff have been using FFP2 masks for years. Bioplanet did not have mask shortage issues and in the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic the company supplied masks to workers' families too.
- To reduce the risk of a simultaneous quarantine of many employees, the staff was organised in different production groups and in different hourly shifts. The lunch breaks were staggered and the spaces for breaks and meals were enlarged and moved outside, taking advantage of the mild climate and creating sheltered porches. The production did not decline due to COVID-19 issues.

- The Russian-Ukraine crisis is causing more problems than the pandemic. A large part of insects and mites are located in greenhouses, and they need heating during the winter for springtime production. Between September 2021 and March 2022 the compressed natural gas price increased by 500% destroying any possibility of gain. On the other side, it was impossible to increase the selling price because growers were experiencing the same difficulties due to increased prices of fuel and fertilizers.
- Bioplanet had also invested heavily in the Eastern European markets where interest in sustainable agriculture was growing. Turnover in Ukraine and Russia was growing during 2021 and this market is currently frozen. Ukrainian farmers are interested in continuing to use Integrated Pest Management but are blocked by the uncertain conditions of the war. Russian customers had to stop buying during 2022 because of the embargo.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

No support or funds received at the regional or national level.

Sources: [Bioplanet website](#); [Bioplanet YouTube video](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

4.4 RES04_Pampa-tea (Koprivnica, HR)

Herbal teas as tradition, culture and a way of returning to nature.

Sector/products/services	Production, research, processing of medicinal herbs and teas
Turnover	Around €70,000 (2020); around €100,000 (2021); around €50,000 (first six months of 2022)
Number of employees	2 (2022)
Location	Koprivnica (Koprivnica)
Proposed by (EIS partner)	ENTER Koprivnica (HR)

Pampa-tea is a family craft business founded in 2000 and engaged in the production, research and processing of medicinal herbs and teas. Herbal teas are a natural aid to alleviate health problems.

Herbs found in Pampa-tea include chamomile, elderberry, pomegranate, linden, lemon balm, mint, thyme, nettle, calendula, sage and yarrow.

Apart from producing mixtures of domestic teas, the enterprise is engaged in the cultivation of medicinal herbs. Medicinal herbs are grown according to quality standards, avoiding contaminating the environment or using harmful pesticides, herbicides, and other chemical substances.

Besides their tea mixtures' standard loose-leaf packaging, Pampa-tea also has a unique packaging of the best tea mixtures (five of them) in pyramid tea bags.



Source: image from the Pampa-tea website

Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised

- The company was not very active in promotional activities for the international market (using mainly LinkedIn). During the pandemic, the company started advertising on portals and magazines and invested heavily in social networks and in web channels (e.g., internet marketing, SEO, social networking and newsletter communication).
- The revenues increased from 2020 to 2022 thanks to stocks made in 2019 and an active presence on social networks. The increase in online orders has replaced the turnover made through presentations at trade fairs. In 2019 the fairs were equated with the web channels, and in 2021 the web channels surpassed the fairs.

- Pampa-tea has increased activity on social media and on the web, maintaining regular contacts with distributors (e.g., wholesalers, health food stores). In addition, in 2021 they started doing business with HORECA looking for quality products. During the pandemic the China market has completely shut down which created market opportunities.
- Most of the Pampa-tea customers are Croatian (80%). 20% of the turnover comes from the foreign market. During the pandemic different actions were taken to maintain the market share. Among these: sending samples of products to potential customers through distributors and online market channels; working with various courier services to deliver products to customers as soon as possible and increasing the inventory.

The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped

- Online and in-presence training events/webinars on funding opportunities, innovation gains, digital marketing and customer experience
- Regular communication through individual consultancy
- Pampa-tea participated in workshops organised by Enter Koprivnica on IoT. The knowledge gained helped them to plan investments for new packaging through new future technologies.
- The Chamber of Commerce gave Pampa-tea the mark (and visual identity) of the Quality of Croatian products and services. It recognises quality products and services on the basis of many years of experience and knowledge, research and development work and creativity and tradition.

Sources: [Pampa Tea website](#); interview with the representatives of the SME.

4.5 A focus on resilience taking into account the BSOs perspective

During the Third EIS Workshop held in Aarhus on 29-30 June 2022 on the resilience of businesses and the business support ecosystem in the face of the pandemic, three EIS partners proposed for the discussion specific topics taking into account the perspective of the BSOs.

4.5.1 Key elements for a resilient business-support eco-system (proposed by Central Denmark EU Office, DK)

The Central Denmark EU Office collected six discussion points put forward by different BSOs in the region about what makes a more resilient system:

- **'Be brave, and address business' needs. Do not wait for their demand'**. A specific need can be unknown to the business itself.
- **Publicly funded projects should not be too concerned with low hanging fruit but should be ambitious.** Such projects address larger societal challenges and bring together stakeholders, who usually do not collaborate.
- **Skills are the main challenges for a green, digital and resilient recovery.** There are different ways to raise the level of skills and competencies: formal training, informal training, skills and competencies mobility, social inclusion.
- **Attention should be on new solutions and on opportunities for development, but the best way to generate impact is continuity.** This implies: projects delivered on time, core staff staying on for longer and definition of priorities and/or potential scenarios rather than specific strategies and/or targets that lose relevance in case of unexpected events/crises and/or technological/market developments.

- **A role when businesses die.** For example, in case of bankruptcy, the business support ecosystem still can play a role in facilitating this comfortably for the company, its creditors and especially for the people (e.g., workers and their families) involved.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to prioritising the green transition.** Enterprises, employers and employees should make a radical shift in the way they conduct their businesses/work.

4.5.2 The experience of more resilient BSOs (proposed by EnterpriseM3 Growth Hub, UK and by WSX Enterprise, Hampshire, UK)

The representatives of EnterpriseM3 Growth Hub and of WSX Enterprise described the way their BSOs had to adapt operations during the pandemic and the impact these changes implied (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1 – Main changes carried out by EnterpriseM3 Growth Hub and their impact

Changes made	Impact
Sourced better IT Hardware (e.g., headsets & laptop with camera)	WFH more efficiently, increased productivity & reduced Office & Fuel Costs & Carbon Footprint
Met & sourced Clients from Online Events/ Webinars & “chatting” virtually post-event	Determined Client “suitability” for BSO support faster, using Online Data sources
Presented at more Online Events on a range of topics to promote Growth Hub & what we do	Improved Growth Hub Marketing to a wider & more “receptive” audience
Met Clients Virtually vs face-to-face using Microsoft Teams, Zoom etc.	Better use of time & greater productivity, less travel & more time spent engaged with clients
Improved use of our CRM (HubSpot) & persuaded our internal BSO Community (EM3 LEP) to use this	Better, more accessible Data for all, improving communication & swap of Information
Introduced new Diagnostic Tool (GROWTHmapper) as a structured aid to determine the issues	Enabled a consistent approach to identifying the common issues & key priorities to be addressed
Delivered our 1:1 Coaching/ Mentoring Support Virtually (through our Associate Network)	Improved efficiency for both Associate (delivering) & Client (receiving) support
Used Website more & increased regularity of Online Newsletters to send key messages to Businesses	Improved quality of Communications significantly to both Existing & New potential Clients
Specific focus was on Distress Coaching, Recovery & Long-term Planning & Low Carbon/ Sustainability	Clients received the most ‘appropriate’ support needed for their business with a Low Carbon Focus

Table 2 – Main changes carried out by WSX Enterprise and their impacts

Changes made	Impact
Superfast move to online & phone support	Immediate issues SMEs – ‘deconfuse’ & signpost Ultimately facilitating move to Hybrid support
Digital Strategy Team – Online Tools Pilot an online diagnostic tool for LEP Recovery Programme Start Up App – Soft launch & Pilot WSX Digital Support Platform 2.0	Set up for 21C delivery Better focused/purposed support, both doing the thinking first Positioning & more time on the important issues <200 tutorial videos (Start & Succeed in Business and Adapting with Video, Drop in sessions & 121 session.
Recover & Rebuild Programme	RECOVER - Online Diagnostic, Distress listening, short term actions REBUILD – Review Strategy, Short Strategy Action Plan & Support Brokerage
21C Business Support	More cost effective & focused support Real Client engagement Data/Intelligence & Reporting
SME INTERNATIONALISATION??	‘Accidental Exporters’ & ‘Intentional Exporters’ Recover – Domestic Market Rebuild - Timing – Future Impetus
POLICY INFLUENCE/OPPORTUNITIES – NEXT STEPS	EM3 LEP Strategy Shared Prosperity Fund Solent Freeport Hampshire Chambers

4.5.3 Changes needed in business support during the COVID-19 pandemic (proposed by Pomerania Development Agency, PL)

The representatives of the Pomerania Development Agency described the way the business support changed to address the COVID-19 challenges and provided an example of concrete support provided in the region to one of the sectors that largely suffered from the pandemic: tourism and leisure. The aim of the support is not only to save businesses but to induce digital and green transformation that can make SMEs more resilient in a fast-changing world.

The representatives of the Pomerania Development Agency highlighted five key elements of the adaptation of the business environment to COVID-19 issues in the Pomerania region:

- The way to carry out meetings changed. All meetings went online.
- There was limited interest in online business mission.
- New types of costs were included in the list of costs to be cover by grants to support SMEs (e.g., participation to online trade fairs, access to B2B platforms).
- Planning of support activities became more dynamic and flexible (e.g., organisation of business trips).
- Adoption of new approaches to promote businesses and their export (e.g., opening of a show room in Beijing instead of the participation to trade fairs).

Three main findings emerged:

1. **International business support ecosystems should become more flexible and able to react quickly to various changes** including:
 - The possibility to shift from activities in the real world to the online world.
 - The possibility to act with a long-term perspective (e.g., multiannual support programmes) to help SMEs' adaptation to a fast changing markets)
2. **Actions should be designed and implemented with a limited number of partners.** In a fast changing world it is necessary reduce complexity and inefficiency (e.g., favouring fast decision taking, clear allocation of tasks)
4. **Rules to access public funds** (and, as consequence, public calls) **should change to properly support business in non-ordinary situations** (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine).

For example, to address the needs of businesses in the tourism and leisure sector affected by the COVID-19 pandemic the Pomerania region made available €9 milion. The support was designed for businesses in the concerned sector (corresponding to 17 selected codes of economic activities in the Polish business classification), with at least a 25% reduction in the average 2020-2021 turnover compared with the turnover in 2019, with a maximum of 49 employees and established before 1 January 2019. The foreseen grants aim at favouring digital- and green-oriented projects, proving businesses with a 70% maximum cofinancing limited to the amount of €36,000.

5 Lessons learnt from case studies

We propose the following lessons learnt as a result of the evidence gathered through the analysis of the case studies proposed by the EIS partners across the three themes and the inputs from the discussions carried out during the three EIS workshops in which the case studies were presented.

5.1 Disruption to international supply chains and effects on SMEs

Disruption of the international supply chains imposed on some SMEs changes in their business. Some of these changes can be considered temporary adaptations to the unusual situation induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, others have to be considered as structural changes.

- **During the pandemic specific markets and/or sectors were frozen and alternative options were explored.** Through a project funded with a national transition fund (i.e., addressed to businesses whose livelihood was significantly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic), **Alfa Travel** (DSC02) started defining new needs of its target groups in the tourism sector, by tailoring digital platforms to engage with target groups and by setting up digital marketing tools to reach target groups. The SME was aware that the tourism industry will not return to pre-COVID-19 pandemic conditions. As a result of the pandemic all major events and concerts were postponed, therefore the demand for services provided by **Greeble** (DSC03) was immediately impacted. New solutions to support the acts proposed by Greeble were digitally based and aimed at creating unique experiences for the viewers through online events. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the **Koolschools** (DSC04) market: sales to universities almost ceased and the regular schools' buying patterns became unpredictable. Some intelligent structural business changes enabled Koolschools to survive and to become more resilient to future demand shocks: adoption of an online ordering channel; investment in internal IT systems; set-up of a responsive order-to-delivery process. For **EsotiQ** (DSC06) lockdowns meant the closure of large shopping centres which limited selling opportunities to small stores with a separate entrance. In response to the social needs arising due to the COVID-19 pandemic, **Flavourtime** (DSC01) decided to redirect part of its activity towards the production of personal protective equipment (PPE), e.g., surgical masks.
- **Some SMEs faced issues with the availability of raw materials imported from non-EU countries.** **Wizz Pickups** (DSC05) experienced an increase in demand and, at the same time, suffered delays in the traditional delivery of goods from the USA. To guarantee business continuity they changed the way of shipping goods (i.e., starting using UPS) and diversified the supply sources (i.e., procuring the needed goods in Europe rather than USA and investing to make some materials available locally). During the pandemic the factory in India experienced shutdowns and **Koolschools** (DSC04) strengthened its Fairtrade alternative sourcing and decided on maintenance of UK stocks to match order forecast. In the case of **EsotiQ** (DSC06) some factories in China temporarily closed and transport of goods from the Far East stopped. The SMEs addressed the logistical issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic with a multi-faceted strategy: giving up the seasonality of collections; giving up the seasonality of deliveries; expanding the list of logistics companies; redefining shipping periods (from every two months to one shipping period in the spring and one in the autumn); launching a second warehouse; starting cooperation with sewing manufactures outside the Far East; extending the use of custom warehouses (before clearing); increasing flexibility in contracts with suppliers.

- **The increase of costs of the input for the production of goods and of the delivery of services was not negligible and forced some businesses to modify their procurement and sales strategies.** In addition to the lack of raw materials, **Wizz Pickups** (DSC05) suffered from an increase of costs of raw materials (e.g., copper, nickel) and from the new approach to ship using UPS (i.e., roughly a threefold increase in shipping costs). **Greeble** (DSC03) reviewed its pricing model to better position itself in a more sustainable way in the brand-new market of digital events. For **Koolschools** (DSC04) during the COVID-19 pandemic transport costs of raw materials from India increased tenfold. For this reason, the SME adopted a cost model that accommodates shipping cost fluctuations.

5.2 Digitalisation as a means of coping with the pandemic

In some cases, the SME adaptation was something more than digitalisation. It was a digital transformation brought about by the challenges presented by COVID-19 that led to a ‘paradigm shift’ in businesses.

- **Some SMEs undertook a digital transformation of their business processes that increased both the productivity of the core activities and the efficiency in the business management.** **Surrey Translation Bureau** (DIG07) adopted digital instruments to support core translation activities and moved to digital solutions for internal reporting processes. **Sonitus Acoustics** (DIG09) acquired most of the equipment to digitize their business, improve productivity and speed up logistic processes. **Oprema** (DIG08) moved to industry 4.0 with the digitalisation and automation of all processes. during the COVID-19 pandemic, and **OfficeFit** took the opportunity to move their business to an online platform. For other SMEs the societal digital transformation induced by the pandemic was an opportunity to take stock and boost new products and services. The COVID-19 pandemic led to very small adaptations of the **Inlife** business (DIG02). The completely new approach (i.e., through live video calls) to find and book a new home made it possible for Inlife to experience an increase in the number of landlords focusing on the short-term rental market and in national workers during the pandemic.
- **Digital channels were also used to increase existing market share and/or to access new markets.** **Surrey Translation Bureau** (DIG07) improved its digital presence, through the translation of the website into different languages and, enhanced implementation of social media. Social Media Platforms were effectively used to increase the **ARCivate** customer base (DIG06). During the COVID-19 pandemic, **OfficeFit** (DIG04) took the opportunity to move their business to an online platform. Live sessions in which instructors offered morning exercise, yoga and mindfulness activities started to be managed in remote mode accessing more world-wide clients than before the pandemic. **HuKu** (DIG05) started its export activities thanks to the support of the Donegal Local Enterprise Office (LEO) to develop the HuKu brand and to the funds aimed to favouring online selling in response to the limitations to access traditional markets caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic **Terrius** (DIG03) decided to enlarge its international B2C market (i.e., due to the closure of shops and restaurants which delivered its products and due to the interruption of the region’s international tourism activities) and to count on digital opportunities for marketing and sales. An online shop also providing promotional videos of recipes with products was created. **Wearebond** (DIG01) registered a new brand, Clean Essence, to look for other markets in cleaning products. A website with all the product information in English was the main tool used to access international markets. **Proteh GlassDeep** (DIG10) adopted virtual reality tools to sell products during the pandemic.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic changed work routines with huge impacts on human resources management.** For **ARCivate** (DIG06) the pandemic gradually led to all employees work fully from home permanently. The needed extra IT Investment was more than offset by the savings on premises and by the increase of staff productivity (as satisfaction generally improved by working from home). As consequence, all internal communication is managed via email, through online video-conference tools and by phone.

5.3 Resilience of internationalising SMEs and of the international business support ecosystem in the face of the pandemic

During the pandemic SMEs and BSOs became aware that the lack of resilience may seriously threaten the existence of businesses during unexpected shocks. SMEs became aware that resilience of their business activity is a multifaceted challenge and BSOs realized that ad-hoc measures to address the pandemic were essential, but a more resilient business support ecosystem in general is a necessary condition especially for SMEs operating in international markets.

- **The availability of stocks/alternative sources of raw material prevented SMEs from not properly addressing the market demand during unexpected crises.** In the case of **Pampa-tea** (RES04) during the pandemic different actions were taken to maintain the market share (e.g., sending samples of products to potential customers through distributors and online market channels; working with various courier services to deliver products to customers as soon as possible, increasing the inventory) and the increased revenues from 2020 to 2022 were possible thanks to stocks made in 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Welditz** (RES02) suffered from the uncertainty of the supply of steel and key consumables, like nitrogen. There was an expectation of long delays which had a direct impact on customer delivery dates.
- **The availability of human resources was crucial for SMEs business continuity.** In the case of **Bioplanet** (RES03), a constant personnel presence was essential because a temporary suspension of staff presence would have meant a total loss of the annual production. As the SME is registered as an 'agricultural' enterprise, Bioplanet did not suffer from mobility staff restrictions imposed by the Italian government during the pandemic. In addition, to reduce the risk of a simultaneous quarantine of many employees, the SME organised the staff in different production groups and in different hourly shifts.
- **Disruptions of supply chains at the international level threaten the financial stability of SMEs.** **Welditz** (RES02) feared a delay in payment from customers as a result of the uncertainty of the delivery dates due to the lack of raw materials. Access to finance was critical to buy stock of steel, to focus on R&D and to continue business growth during the pandemic. Welditz utilised the Business Continuity Voucher (i.e., an Irish immediate government response administered through the LEO offices) and working capital loan of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland. For **Bioplanet** (RES03) the Russian-Ukraine crisis caused more problems than the pandemic. On one side, as large part of insects and mites are located in greenhouses, the compressed natural gas price increased by 500% between September 2021 and March 2022 thus destroying any possibility of profit for the SME. On the other side, the heavy investments made by Bioplanet in the Eastern European markets became unfruitful. Turnover in Ukraine and Russia was growing during 2021, but these markets are currently frozen: Ukrainian farmers are blocked by the uncertain conditions of the war, while Russian customers had to stop buying during 2022 because of the embargo.

- **The digital channels, adopted as mitigation solutions, opened strategic opportunities also for the post-COVID period.** During the pandemic **Pampa-tea** (RES04) has increased its activities on the web and its presence on social networks. The increase in online orders replaced the turnover made through presentations at trade fairs. In 2019 the fairs were equated with the web channels, and in 2021 the web channels surpassed the fairs.
- **SMEs as structural part of the international business support ecosystem contribute to the societal resilience in their territories.** During the pandemic **Sharish** (RES01) created gin that was also suitable as a disinfectant. The SMEs decided to redistill a gin, which was already bottled and prepared to be exported in international markets in spring/summer 2020 and, among the others, made an agreement with the Évora Hospital to support them with supply of disinfectant. In the case of **Bioplanet** (RES03), as some mites and insects can cause allergic reactions and staff need FFP2 masks, in the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic the SME supplied masks to workers' families too.

Annex I - References

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Annex II - Key information collected during the interviews/through desk research

- SME name
- Region (country) and location
- Sector
- Turnover
- Number of employees
- Information about the SME
- Description of the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the business: the extent of disruption, mechanisms to cope with it, the way the international strategy was reappraised
- The way business support organisations/instruments in the region helped