

CENTRES FOR EUROPEAN BUSINESS INFORMATION

Summary

The European Commission is planning to set up new channels of communication in the 12 Community countries. Centres for European Business Information are designed to provide material on Community activities which can be helpful to the smaller business.

The Centres, which complement the Commission's main Information Offices, are also expected to gather suggestions and requests from small businesses for specific services.⁽¹⁾

The Council of Ministers approved the broad lines of the strategy last November, which triggered the new measures for a business information network.⁽²⁾ Plans are in hand to prepare pilot schemes, the first to open in the autumn. Britain will have four Centres, in Scotland, Newcastle, Birmingham and London.

Objectives

Most owners of small firms are unaware of Community business policies. Backed by the recent Action Programme for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SME)⁽³⁾ the Commission has planned the new Centres as a means of establishing two-way communication between business and the Community institutions. While there is a general understanding of the importance of a barrier-free Community market, smaller businesses do not have at their disposal the information and services they need.

The Centres are, therefore, expected to:

1. provide SMEs with information on the Community that is likely to be of use in daily management, including market intelligence, public contracts, research and development programmes, financing, and training;
2. integrate Community information with national requirements.

Tasks

Business demands for information tend to concentrate on (i) the legal, social and technical aspects of the internal market and the aspects likely to follow the completion of the free market by 1992; and (ii) on Community policies affecting grants and loans, research, training schemes, regional policy measures, and trade relations with non-EC countries.

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(1) COM(87) 152 of 7 April 1987

(2) OJ C 287 of 11.11.1986

(3) COM(86) 445 of 7 August 1986. See also EC Bulletin 7/8 1986, pp.15-18

The Centres are meant to become local hubs of Community information. Their staff will be trained to deal with providing Community contacts, applications in Community programmes, and helping firms to complete necessary formalities. Where appropriate the Centre will be able to direct the firm to other bodies able to supply wanted advice or assistance. The Centres may also produce regular newsletters in co-operation with the Information Offices.

Places

The Centres have to work closely with national services relevant to local industry, such as the Department of Trade's Regional Offices, or semi-official bodies such as Enterprise Agencies and Boards or Chambers of Commerce. Ideally the Centres should be well dispersed with several in each of the 12 Community countries. At first there will be pilot schemes to test their relevance. The host country provides premises, equipment covering ordinary office supplies and communication software, suitable to two people. The Small Business Task Force, under Commissioner Abel Matutes, will provide basic and up-to-date Community documentation and allow the Centre access to certain EC data bases. The Commission will meet part of the marginal costs of opening the Centre up to 50,000 ECU (about £35,500) with a limited financial contribution in the first year. Centres will give priority to those firms under 500 people, and will particularly try to inform potential new entrepreneurs, including job-seekers and young people.

Results

The first Centres, at least one in each of the 12 countries, will open on 29 September 1987. In the UK there will be four Centres, one each in Scotland, Newcastle, Birmingham and London.* The Commission envisages 200 Centres in due course in the Community. The 44 tenders in Britain for the four Centres were an example of the interest in the scheme. The Commission believes that the new network should bring firms into closer touch with Community policies, and encourage small enterprises to engage in innovation.

* ANNEX

The addresses and telephone numbers of the four Centres are:

- The Scottish Development Agency, Small Business Division,
Roseberry House, Haymarket Terrace, Edinburgh EH12 5EZ
Tel.: (031) 337-9595 (Mr Willie Allan)
- Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, Birmingham Venture
Chamber of Commerce House, 75 Harborne Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 3HV
Te.l.: (021) 454-6171 (Mr D. Bullivant)
- Small Firms Centre,
Ebury Bridge House, 2-18 Ebury Bridge Road, London SW1W 8QD
Tel.: (01) 730 8451
- Northern Development Company,
Bank House, Carliol Square, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 6XE
Tel.: (091) 261-0026 (Mr M. Easteal).

Staff from each Centre are now training in Brussels. The Centres should open in September 1987.

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