

Sharing Expertise in Energy Advice Across Europe (SErENADE)

Case study contact	Severn Wye Energy Agency
Programme	Intelligent Energy Europe (SAVE) - 2005 Call
Total Budget	€540,000
EC Contribution	€270,000
Consortium	8 partners from 7 Member States with UK coordinator; consortium is mainly energy agencies
Project duration	26 months



SErENADE aimed to enhance the range, scope and quality of energy advice provision in the EU by reviewing existing provision and enabling an effective exchange of knowledge, experience and tools.

It sought to:

- obtain information for the first time about the scope of energy advice provision throughout the European Union;
- increase awareness of the benefits of energy advice, the skills and tools required, and the methodologies that may be used;
- create a resource to enable quality provision of energy advice to be extended throughout Europe by provision of a toolkit and links to established and successful services; and
- establish an ongoing platform for exchange of information and experience on energy advice.

The outputs of the project were:

- A report on the existing state of the art in energy advice in Europe, covering advice to households and businesses in the EU27;
- An online energy advice toolkit; and
- The basis for an energy advice network or thematic partnership.

The coordinator

Severn Wye Energy Agency (SWEA) is a registered charity employing 41 people. It operates as an energy agency in the south west of England and south/mid Wales. It was established as a SAVE agency with the support of Forest of Dean District Council, and is now an autonomous non-profit SME. SWEA is a member of the FEDARENE (European Federation of Regional Energy and Environment Agencies) network, more information at www.fedarene.org/.

Role in project

SWEA coordinated the project. They had previously participated in SAVE, ALTENER and IEE projects, but this was their first experience as coordinator. The SErENADE proposal was modified after being unsuccessful in an earlier call and resubmitted. Another proposal led by SWEA was successful in the same 2005 call, so SWEA coordinated another IEE project (SHARE) at the same time.

Proposal preparation

SWEA estimate that preparing and submitting the proposal took around 20 days for their organisation, with a further 10 days being used in negotiations and other preparatory work before the project began. Work dealing with questions after the end of the project and chasing payments took another 15 days. They also found that they needed to give more time to the project itself than was allowed for in the funding (about 20% more). This is a considerable investment of unfunded effort which, combined with cash flow problems due to late payments from the Executive Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation (EACI), means that proposers should take a very hard and realistic look at whether they have the resources to see a project through to completion.

SWEA found that membership of a European network was helpful in identifying potential partners and provided some useful leads and contacts. However, this does not provide a 'ready made' consortium, and care should be taken in selecting partners. The fact that an organisation is excellent at what it does, and is well known to you, does not necessarily mean they are well suited to the particular tasks envisaged. Even if partners are chosen with great care, problems can still arise; in SErENADE one partner went through major organisational changes in the first year of the project, and did almost no work in that period. They resurfaced in about month 14, just in time to rescue their part of the project.

Project implementation

As with most IEE projects, the written outputs of the project (reports etc.) were in English. Although all the partners were fluent in spoken English, SWEA found that their written work needed a good deal of editing and 'translating' into good English. This task was additional to the work foreseen as necessary to edit a report produced by many authors. This additional work has to be done with tact and diplomacy. UK partners should be prepared to review English texts, even if they are not the coordinator.

Experience with EACI was generally good, at least during the operational phase of the project, with the same project officer throughout, and the involvement of a DGTREN representative in a project conference. EACI were sometimes slow to respond to queries, but SWEA perceived this to be due to the heavy work burden on EACI officials rather than a lack of interest.

Unfortunately the end of the project coincided with the departure of the project officer with whom they had been working. The new project officer made a number of very detailed demands after the contractually allowed period for questions on the final report had elapsed. The situation was further complicated by the outcome of an audit on one of the partners on a completely different project. EACI sought to recover overpayments to that partner from the final payment for SErENADE. This meant the rest of the consortium did not initially receive all the money due to them. Although the matter was finally settled amicably, the final payment was not received until nearly one year after the end of the project.

Lessons learnt

SWEA learnt a number of lessons from the SErENADE project on tasks which they would either not repeat in future projects, or do differently. SWEA tried to run an online forum, but this was abandoned due to technical difficulties (either they got lots of 'spam', or set up barriers which put people off using it). SWEA underestimated the quantity of material that they wanted to put on the online toolkit, and

the amount of time taken to upload it. They felt that the website was not professionally enough presented; in retrospect the consortium should have been more assertive and insisted that this be improved.

SWEA found that coordinating a project gives the opportunity to organise it in your own way and steer the direction of the work. It also raises the profile of the organisation and gives it a track record in project management. In the case of SErENADE, the time spent in developing the project and planning the coordination meetings helped to generate a good sense of cooperation and mutual support. Visiting each others' countries and taking turns to act as host was a good experience in terms of learning about other EU countries and cultures, both with regard to the subject matter of the project and more generally.

Key benefits

SWEA have gained many benefits from their participation in IEE projects - new contacts; a better understanding of how things work in other European countries; an improved profile for SWEA; and increased personal and organisational confidence in managing trans-national projects. They have also got ideas for further development of the theme of the project and picked up a number of useful lessons from others in the operation of an energy agency. They have also gained much practice at understanding and editing euro-English. The funding is seldom sufficient for all the work and should never be seen as the main benefit to be gained.

Advice for anyone submitting a proposal and delivering a project

- Only work on topics about which you have genuine enthusiasm and expertise.
- Try to work with a majority of experienced partners, so that you are able to support those who are less experienced (a maximum of two).
- Choose partners with relevant skills for the topic in hand (not just familiar companies who are good to work with).
- Be prepared to spend much more time on the project than has been funded.
- Be absolutely clear that this type of work rarely pays for itself fully, and cannot be core income for a small organisation due to the poor cash flow.
- Be realistic about the availability of matching funds, or make the decision to use your own funds. If the latter, know why you would want to co-finance the work (for example it may be an area of work you wish to invest in to develop experience or because it is particularly important for non-profit objectives).
- Think carefully about what you and your organisation will gain from it, and how you can ensure both local/regional/national and EU relevance.
- Be aware that the personnel in other partner organisations may change and you may have to help them, as 'handover' is often imperfect, and in some cases non-existent.
- Always be aware of language and cultural differences. Double check on understanding. Be conscious of how tiring long meetings in English can be for some partners. Do not take offence if others seem rude, especially by email. Try to talk by phone or in person if things are going wrong.
- Set out the timetable clearly and set internal deadlines needed to achieve project deliverable dates, and be assertive (especially about deadlines) with your partners. Do not get angry when they are missed but insist on agreeing secondary deadlines at that stage, rather than letting things drift.
- Be scrupulous in meeting all EACI deadlines but anticipate delays in payment in your cash flow plans, even if all goes well in your work.
- Do not be afraid to remind the EACI if they forget to reply.

Key summary points

- Only work on projects where you have a major interest, recognising that the funding you receive will almost certainly be insufficient to cover all your costs.
- Choose partners who have some real expertise or other contribution to make to the project, not on the basis of their general reputation.
- Always be aware that the great advantage of working in your mother tongue brings with it the obligation to be considerate and helpful to those who are not.
- Your performance in meeting deadlines, producing deliverables etc. must be exemplary, but you must anticipate that others will not meet all deadlines and be prepared to adapt your plans.

More information about SWEA and its projects can be found at <http://www.swea.co.uk/>

This case study was produced in conjunction with Severn Wye Energy Agency and focuses on their experience of preparing a proposal and participating in an IEE funded project. The views are those of the participant and not the Executive Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation nor the Energie Helpline UK. If you have queries on the IEE Programme please contact the Helpline.