

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

The FSB was a founding member of the European Small Business Alliance, which represents business bodies from 15 EU countries.

Today, it is a force to be reckoned with.

Tina Sommer reports

Since the UK joined the European Union in 1973, whether we like it or not, the EU's influence has increased significantly and more and more legislation affecting UK businesses originates from Brussels. In simple terms, for more than 50 per cent of the laws we have to comply with here in the UK, the train starts in the Brussels institutions. Once it arrives in London, few changes can be made. This means we need to put our views across even before the train is on the timetable.

As a national organisation we compete with thousands of organisations from 26 other EU countries, business associations large and small, trade associations, NGOs and regional interests. On any given day there are around 15,000 lobbyists active in Brussels. The competition is massive. The European Parliament and the Commission are on the receiving end of this interest and somewhat understandably prefer to talk to pan-European organisations, in which interests from a number of Member States have already been consolidated.

The FSB is part of such a pan-European organisation: the European Small Business Alliance (ESBA). Not only does the FSB have a leading role in that organisation, it was also a founding

member. In 1998, the FSB got together with a number of other national organisations and set up a new body. This is unusual in Brussels, as it takes a long time to be recognised and accepted as a leading voice.

After 12 years, ESBA has doubled its size to include member organisations from 15 EU countries. We have built a reputation as a highly effective organisation that many associations aspire to be a part of.

“The commission now ranks ESBA as among the most important bodies to consult”

The Commission ranks ESBA as the fourth most important organisation to be consulted and we are increasingly recognised as the voice of micro and small businesses.

The FSB and ESBA work extremely closely together with regular team meetings, combined campaigns and workload sharing. Staff of other member organisations contribute on a daily basis to ESBA and carry out agreed campaigns in their own countries. The Europe-wide co-operation not only gives ESBA credibility among the various institutions in Brussels, it

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also helps to spread our philosophies to other Member States.

Just as it is crucial that we stay in touch with our regions and branches across the UK, we need the ability to reach out to similar organisations across Europe that will support our interests in the Brussels arena.

And no, it has not always been easy to overcome the combined challenges of so many different languages, attitudes and experiences, but as the past few years have shown, we are much stronger working together than fighting on our own.

• In November 2010, ESBA was voted 'European Trade Association of the Year'. Visit ESBA's stand at the forthcoming FSB Conference to meet members from other countries and quiz them about their views and experiences.



TINA SOMMER

An FSB member for more than 13 years, Tina runs an IT consultancy in Wales and is the FSB's Chairman of International Affairs. She has lived and worked all over Europe, gaining extensive experience in a range of industries that has equipped her well for the role. She is also the President of the European Small Business Alliance.