

IEMA Acorn Scheme: An Introductory Guide



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Turning over a new leaf in EMS



Environmental performance issues are fast becoming critical to business success across all sectors of industry. More environmental legislation and regulation, higher energy and waste disposal costs, increased pressure from business partners and other stakeholders; the drivers for companies to actively engage in positive environmental management have never been greater. The question for many is not can we afford to implement an Environmental Management System (EMS) but can we afford not to.

Alongside more pressing business issues, it is often felt achievement of accredited certification to the international EMS standard ISO14001 and registration under the EU's Eco-management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) can be onerous in practice. Understandably, the process can be daunting for many organisations; particularly small-medium sized enterprises hampered by time and resource restraints.

The IEMA Acorn Scheme, an officially recognised EMS standard recommended by the government, offers a convenient step by step approach to environmental management using the British Standard BS8555. Read on to find out how Acorn can benefit your business

Convenient Phased Approach

Acorn breaks EMS implementation down into a series of five logical, pragmatic phases. Each phase is further subdivided into a number of individual stage profiles which correspond to the Acorn achievement criteria.

On completion of all five phases, an organisation has a functional EMS. A further phase (phase six) is available. The initial stage profile focuses on preparing for external assessment against ISO 14001. Stages 2-6 outline the preparatory stages to meet the achievement criteria of EMAS.

By using a phased approach, organisations have more certainty over the different steps that are involved. Acorn's clear milestones allow organisations to set a manageable timeframe for development and spread the cost thus providing reassurance that implementation is on track.

The five phases are:

1. Commitment and establishing the baseline
2. Identifying and ensuring compliance with legal and other requirements
3. Developing objectives, targets and programmes
4. Implementation and operation of the EMS
5. Checking, audit and review

Flexible EMS

Organisations have flexibility in how they choose to participate in the scheme, with the rate and extent of performance improvement kept firmly in the hand of the individual companies.

The organisation may decide to be inspected after implementing all of the stage profiles of a particular phase, before progressing to the next phase. Alternatively, it might decide to implement two or more phases before being inspected, in which case achievement of all of the relevant phases will be inspected during one inspection.

There is no requirement for participating organisations to progress or provide a commitment to achieving higher phases of Acorn. They may remain at any phase for an indefinite period of time, provided that they undergo annual re-inspection and can demonstrate continual improvement in environmental performance.

UKAS Accredited Independent Inspection

A system of independent inspection is central to providing recognition that an organisation has met the requirements of a particular Acorn phase and continues to improve its environmental performance.

Independent inspection is provided by Acorn Inspection Bodies approved by UKAS (United Kingdom Accreditation Service) who also accredit the ISO14001 certification bodies and EMAS verifiers in the UK.

UKAS accredited recognition gives participants and their customers confidence that the environmental and business benefits are real and it gives assurance that companies are on-track if they want to progress to ISO14001 or EMAS.

IEMA Acorn Register

Successful inspection to the IEMA Acorn scheme will enable organisations to join a listing on a central register containing key data on all those participating. A unique benefit is that, in addition to promoting an organisation's environmental credentials, it will act as a valuable resource for sourcing suppliers who have demonstrated environmental performance improvement.

Supply Chain Engagement

The IEMA Acorn scheme provides an excellent opportunity for organisations to engage their supply chains in environmental management, an important issue for some organisations certified to ISO 14001 or registered to EMAS who want to reduce their indirect environmental aspects.

Organisations can set the phase that supplier companies should achieve, within a given time period, with the certainty that they can monitor their supplier's progress through the Acorn register.

Verified Environmental Information

In addition to setting the Phase level for your suppliers, you may also want to specify that certain environmental performance criteria have been achieved. Acorn provides an opportunity for environmental requirements related to a supplier's operational or product performance, to be validated as part of the Acorn inspection.

This is a unique feature of the scheme and will allow customers to set environmental requirements in supplier contracts and have a cost effective tool for ensuring that the requirements are being fulfilled, without the need to audit all of their suppliers themselves.

Examples could include the resource and energy efficiency of the supplier or the presence of hazardous materials in products.

Environmental Performance Evaluation

Acorn focuses on environmental performance improvements; an embedded feature of the BS 8555 standard is the use of environmental performance indicators. Guidance on which is found in the international standard ISO14031.

This enables organisations to provide tangible results at an early stage and ensure consistent reporting. The development of performance indicators in the initial phase helps to develop quick wins from the outset, which is fundamental in motivating staff and driving culture change within the organisation.

Acorn is different, it's a real sign of environmental performance improvement. It's not just about having a system in place, it's also about ensuring that there's a positive environmental and business outcome.

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Case Studies

Sarnel Services

Sarnel, specialists in technology staging, installation and secure disposal of redundant IT equipment achieved Phase 3 of Acorn, with inspection body Global Certification, at their site in Aldershot.

The Acorn Schemes convenient 'stopping off' points and ability to spread the inspection/consultancy costs appealed to the organisation and they wanted to have something to show for the work they had already done. By attaining Phase 3, environmental performance improvements have been tailored to vehicle fuel usage, awareness of energy usage and better control over hazardous wastes.

Greencore Group

Greencore are a leading supplier of convenience foods in the UK. The organisation is implementing Acorn phases across a number of sites with the Selby site successfully inspected to Phase 3 by Acorn Inspection Body LRQA.

The organisation chose Acorn since the scheme met their focused view on performance improvements and developing performance indicators that would drive business benefits.

The group has utilized the IEMA's Acorn planner (available to download from the website) which provides a descriptive, detailed action list making the EMS easy to plan and track. Greencore found this particularly useful for site managers with limited environmental experience and those with a predominantly health and safety background.

BPF Group

BPF Group, a small plastics recycling company based in Downpatrick Northern Ireland, were inspected by Acorn Inspection Body NQA to Phase 3 of Acorn.

Commented Roisin Maguire of BPF: "The benefits are significant. We are much more conscious of what is and what is not 'good practice'. BS 8555 is straightforward and simple and you can see right away the savings and other benefits".

