



*Press release - 16 November 2021*

## **SMEs vital to life of communities in Europe**

Speaking today in the context of the SME Assembly being held in Slovenia, Véronique Willems, Secretary-General of SMEUnited and Christel Delberghe, Director General of EuroCommerce underlined the role of SMEs as the backbone of vibrant town centres and rural communities, made a joint call for action to address the challenges facing small businesses and the communities they serve:

*“We have worked together for many years to highlight the importance of SMEs, making up 99,8% of enterprises in Europe, including in retail and wholesale. In cooperating today at a dedicated session on urban rejuvenation at the SME Assembly we aim to underline the difficulties faced by SMEs operating in town centres and look for action to help both businesses and local communities to maintain and build up lively town centres.*

*Town centres have seen increasing numbers of vacant shops and commercial premises, reflecting many factors and changes in the way people live. People in rural communities suffer if local services disappear. The COVID pandemic and the restrictions adopted to combat it have accelerated this negative trend, seeing shops, restaurants and other businesses close for good.*

*Our two organisations are calling for an ambitious revitalisation programme at EU, national and local level to reverse this trend, which undermines communities, hits employment and leads to an unsafe environment. In planning ways of making the towns and villages attractive places to visit, live, work and do business the whole community, including organisations of local businesses covering all economic activities (services, tourism, hospitality, retail, manufacturing, etc.) must be involved. We should look at how to balance a sustainable environment with mobility and access and investment in the urban fabric and infrastructure, drawing on regional funds. Additionally, we propose the setting up of a substantial Europe-wide programme targeting SMEs and micro businesses, raising awareness and providing expertise and support to entrepreneurs to go online to better reach their customers and transform their business models to succeed in the digital and sustainability transitions. And communities themselves should be brought together to share experience and exchange best practice.*

*We therefore ask the EU, and national, regional and local governments to dedicate funding to urgently address these challenges and secure the future of communities and the people living and working there.”*

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**SMEUnited** is the association of Crafts and SMEs in Europe with 65-member organisations from over 30 European countries. SMEUnited represents national cross-sectoral Craft and SME federations, European SME branch organisations and associate members. We speak on behalf of the 22,5 million enterprises with around 82 million employees across Europe. SMEUnited is a recognised employers’ organisation and European Social Partner. SMEUnited was formerly known as UEAPME.

**EuroCommerce** is the principal European organisation representing the retail and wholesale sector. It embraces national associations in 28 countries and 5 million companies, both leading global players such as Carrefour, Ikea, Metro and Tesco, and many small businesses. Retail and wholesale is the link between producers and consumers. Over a billion times a day, retailers and wholesalers distribute goods and provide an essential service to millions of business and individual customers. The sector generates 1 in 7 jobs, offering a varied career to 26 million Europeans, many of them young people. It also supports millions of further jobs throughout the supply chain, from small local suppliers to international businesses. EuroCommerce is the recognised European social partner for the retail and wholesale sector.