



Understanding the Net Zero Challenge for SMEs in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse

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Executive Summary

- SMEs within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse have a high level of awareness of the Net Zero intentions of the UK, with 64% reporting that they were aware of and understood the Government's intentions for the UK to be net zero
- 32% of respondents say that they are aware but do not understand the intentions for Net Zero, while 4% reported that they were unaware of the UK Government's intentions
- Most small businesses report being active (70%) or wanting to be active to address emissions (24%)
- 70% of businesses said they were likely or very likely to be doing more to reduce their carbon emissions over the next 2 years
- Access to finance is the top reason that businesses are not taking action (66% of respondents), followed by lack of time (34%) and lack of internal resource (28%)
- Support that SMEs reported would be most helpful towards their sustainability journey included ear-marked grant financing (89%), access to a platform that signposts sustainability actions and resources (53%) and 1-2-1 mentoring (51%)
- We recommend a blended approach to the support provided, particularly while the efficacy of each approach is evaluated



1. Introduction

In 2019, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils (hereafter referred to as South and Vale) declared a climate emergency and committed to achieving Net Zero by 2030 - ahead of the national government target of achieving Net Zero by 2050. To achieve this target, it is important to unlock action towards Net Zero across the different stakeholder groups in the area, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs). While small businesses are typically not involved in heavy emitting industries, the cumulative effect of small amounts of emissions are important to consider. The British Business Bank suggests that small businesses make up around half of the UK's business greenhouse gas emissions¹.

South and Vale have received UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF) from the UK Government, and intend to use this funding to support SMEs to progress on their Net Zero journey. To better understand how this funding could be spent, South and Vale commissioned Oxford Brookes Business School to conduct a survey of local small businesses. The following report is based on the survey conducted between November 2023 and February 2024 and shares findings from 131 responses to the survey.

In the following section, we give an overview of the survey method and descriptive statistics on the respondents to the survey. We then go on to report on the current actions of small businesses in the area, outlining their future ambitions before discussing the support they report as necessary to progress their Net Zero ambitions. We then outline some ways in which South and Vale can respond to the different support mechanisms requested, before closing with our recommendations.

2. Overview of method and survey responses

Our survey is designed to gauge the current awareness, understanding and actions, and future ambitions of SMEs in the South and Vale area. While the focus was firmly on the two local authority areas, we did allow for a handful of responses from the wider Oxfordshire

¹ British Business Bank (2021). *Smaller Businesses and the Transition to Net Zero*. Available at https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/J0026_Net_Zero_Report_AW.pdf (Accessed 24/02/2023).

County area. Table 1 below shows that 93 per cent of our responses were from South and Vale.

Table 1: Location of respondents

Location	Freq.	Percent
South Oxfordshire	68	52%
Vale of White Horse	54	41%
Oxford City Council	5	4%
Cherwell	4	3%
Total	131	100%

The survey respondents spanned a diverse range of sectors from organisations representing charities or with a community focus, to cafés, restaurants and retail, arts and recreation, professional and scientific, administration and support services, accommodation, construction and so on. The diversity of the respondents' sectors provides us with a rich perspective from across South and Vale and is broadly in line with the Business Register and Employment Survey² of 2021, which provides a detailed breakdown of the broad industry sectors that workers in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse are employed in.

In terms of targeting the SME population, the majority of survey respondents could be considered SMEs, with 24 per cent being sole entrepreneurs, 49 per cent being micro businesses employing between 2-9 people, 21 per cent as small businesses (employing between 10-49 people, and 5 per cent as medium businesses, according to number of employees.

Table 2: Business sector of respondents

Sector	Freq.	Percent
Community or Charity	21	16%
Café, Restaurant or Retail	19	15%
Arts and Recreation	18	14%
Professional and Scientific	16	12%
Administration and Support Services	12	9%
Accommodation	9	7%
Construction	7	5%
Tourism and Travel	7	5%
Transport and Storage	7	5%

² Source: Office for National Statistics, (2022); Business Register and Employment Survey 2021.

Information and Communication	5	4%
Health and Beauty	4	3%
Manufacturing	2	2%
Primary (fishing, farming, mining, etc)	2	2%
Finance and Insurance	1	1%
Wholesale Trade	1	1%
Total	131	100%

Table 3: Business size of respondents

Size	Freq.	Percent
Just me	32	24%
2- 9	64	49%
10 - 24	17	13%
25 - 49	11	8%
50 +	7	5%
Total	131	100%

3. Current actions

To unlock action towards Net Zero, it is important to understand how aware businesses are of the Government’s intentions for Net Zero. Within South and Vale, SMEs have a high level of awareness of the Net Zero intentions of the UK, with 64 per cent reporting that they were aware of and understood the Government’s intentions for the UK to be net zero. This is far higher than awareness at the national level, where only 46 per cent of SMEs reported they were aware and understood the Government’s net zero intentions (le Roux et al, 2021).³

However, 32 per cent of respondents say that they are aware but do not understand the intentions for Net Zero, while 4 per cent reported that they were unaware of the UK Government’s intentions. This demonstrates that there is still work to be done to make clear what Net Zero is, and how small businesses can begin to address it in their own businesses.

³ Source: le Roux et al, 2021 <https://smallbusinessbritain.uk/downloads/Small-Business-Britain-Sustainability-Basics-Insight-And-Implications.pdf?v=2>

Table 4. Business' awareness of the Government's intentions for the UK to be net zero on carbon emissions by 2050

	Freq.	Percent	South Oxfordshire	Vale of White Horse
Aware, and I understand what it's about	84	64%	38	40
Aware, but I don't understand what it's about	42	32%	27	12
Not aware	5	4%	3	2
Total	131	100%		

Similarly, when we explore how SMEs perceive their actions towards Net Zero, most small businesses report being active (70 per cent) or wanting to be active to address emissions, with only 5 per cent saying they did not intend to do anything to lower their emissions. A large section of the respondents are either looking to do more (51 per cent), or looking to start lowering emissions (24 per cent). Working with those who are already interested is likely to be the best way forward to scale impact on emissions, over trying to convince a small sceptical handful.

Table 5. Business' current activity towards lowering carbon

	Freq.	Percent	South Oxfordshire	Vale of White Horse
The business is fully active in lowering our emissions, and is actively investing in ways to do so	25	19%	11	11
The business is doing several things to lower its emissions, but could do more	67	51%	38	24
The business is not doing anything around lowering emissions, but would like to start	32	24%	17	14
The business is not doing anything around lowering emissions, and does not intend to	7	5%	2	5
Total	131	100%		

When we dig further into the actions that businesses are typically engaged in to lower emissions, we see that 50 per cent of respondents are improving their business processes to lower emissions and 24 per cent report having already completed this optimisation. Reducing plastics and packaging was also an area many businesses were taking action on, with 44 per cent saying they were currently working on this and 15 per cent saying this was complete for their business. A third of businesses reported that they were currently installing energy efficiency measures (insulation, LED lighting and/or efficient air conditioning systems), with a further 24 per cent of businesses having already completed this action. Communicating with customers, the local community and staff also proved to be an action many respondents were currently taking, or had already taken. Finally when it comes to actions already complete, 28 per cent of respondents said they had moved to a renewable energy supplier already. See table 6 below for a full breakdown of actions taken.

Table 6. Business' current actions towards lowering carbon

	Already completed		Currently doing		Likely to do in the future		Unlikely to do in the future		Total
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	
Install energy efficiency measures (insulation, LED lighting, efficient air conditioning systems)	32	24%	43	33%	34	26%	22	17%	131
Improve business processes (optimising energy and resource use within the business operation, reusing, recycling waste)	28	21%	66	50%	21	16%	16	12%	131
Move to a renewable energy supplier	37	28%	11	8%	49	37%	34	26%	131
Produce renewable energy (such as using solar panels)	9	7%	9	7%	55	42%	58	44%	131
Reduce transport emissions (fleet and vehicle management, and/or business travel, travel to work, sourcing a local supply chain)	15	11%	42	32%	34	26%	40	31%	131
Create projects, products or services that lower emissions	13	10%	31	24%	40	31%	47	36%	131
Encourage our supply chain to reduce their emissions (e.g. selecting suppliers on the basis of their carbon credentials)	6	5%	27	21%	50	38%	48	37%	131
Reduce plastics and harmful materials for packaging	20	15%	58	44%	23	18%	30	23%	131
Consider the carbon impact of our suppliers	11	8%	40	31%	41	31%	39	30%	131
Measure the business' total emissions	12	9%	15	11%	63	48%	41	31%	131
Offsetting carbon emissions	7	5%	16	12%	49	37%	59	45%	131
Communicating environmental commitment to customers and local community	14	11%	51	39%	47	36%	19	15%	131
Creating a green/climate aware culture amongst staff	24	18%	56	43%	35	27%	16	12%	131
Reporting on environmental performance	4	3%	25	19%	62	47%	40	31%	131

4. Future ambitions

We asked respondents how likely it was in the next 2 years that they would do more to reduce their carbon emissions. We found that 70 per cent of businesses said they were likely or very likely to be doing more to reduce their carbon emissions over the next 2 years. Similar to those that report they are inactive and unlikely to become active, those that are not looking to take action in the future make up a small percentage (9 per cent) of the overall sample. Those that are neither likely nor unlikely make up an interesting group (21 per cent), where there is currently scope to persuade SMEs to take action.

Table 7. Likelihood to take more action towards sustainability in the next 2 years

	Freq.	Percent	South Oxfordshire	Vale of White Horse
Very likely	51	39%	27	19
Likely	41	31%	19	19
Neither likely nor unlikely	27	21%	17	10
Unlikely	7	5%	3	3
Very unlikely	5	4%	2	3
Total	131	100%		

When it comes to actions SMEs in the area are likely to be taking in the future, measurement and reporting are high on the agenda. 48 per cent of respondents are looking to measure their emissions in the future, and 47 per cent are planning on reporting their environmental impacts (See Table 6). This could be related to the expectation that businesses think they may be required to do these actions in the near future.

When it comes to funding potential future sustainability actions (See Table 8), 76 per cent of respondents reported that they would look to local government grants to do so, with 61 per cent also seeking national government funding. While 45 per cent of respondents would fund changes with funds from within the business, only 22 per cent are currently considering passing costs on to customers, and/or reviewing prices accordingly. While this might be suitable for one-off costs, this will need to be balanced when it comes to actions which may continually cost more (e.g. alternative packaging) and would in the long run need to be

passed on to customers. This could be related to comments that suggest the cost of living is having an impact on sales from the general public.

Table 8. Funding future sustainability projects

	Freq.	Percent	South Oxfordshire	Vale of White Horse
Local Government grants	99	76%	49	45
National Government grants	80	61%	43	34
Funds within the business	59	45%	32	20
Passing cost on to customers/price review	29	22%	12	16
Specialist funder or lender	24	18%	10	12
Private funder or lender	19	15%	9	8
Sharing resources or funds with other businesses	18	14%	9	7
Business loan	17	13%	8	8
Crowdsourcing	9	7%	3	6
Respondents	131	100%		

5. Support required

With access to finance being a top reason that businesses are not taking action (66 per cent of respondents) and lack of time (34 per cent) and resource (28 per cent) being secondary reasons, it's important that we carefully consider the support put in place for small businesses to enable them to take action towards becoming more sustainable. Clearly since finance is a key issue, grant financing is a popular option (89 per cent of respondents). Participants also favoured access to a platform that signposts you to sustainability actions and resources (53 per cent of respondents) and 1-2-1 mentoring (51 per cent). We explore these different options in more detail in the sections that follow.

Other factors preventing businesses from taking action on reducing carbon emissions included business' mistrust of the issue/government policy, planning systems in place,

landlords preventing action and building limitations, to name a few. Please see Appendix A.1 for a full list.

Other types of support that respondents felt would have value included grants towards solar panels, reduced bureaucracy in funding, reduced rates for sustainable businesses, databases that collated information on sustainable suppliers and support for working with landlords on green issues. Please see Appendix A.2 for a summary of comments.

Table 9. Factors preventing business from taking action on reducing carbon emissions

	Freq.	Percent	South Oxfordshire	Vale of White Horse
Access to finance	87	66%	43	39
Lack of resource internally	44	34%	25	15
Lack of time	37	28%	18	18
The return on investment is not sufficient	30	23%	14	15
Other (please specify)	22	17%	10	10
As a business, we do not understand what action to take	20	15%	13	7
Ensuring our supply chain also meets our sustainability standards	16	12%	6	6
Lack of best practice/standard across the sector	15	11%	10	2
Technological barriers	10	8%	6	4
It is low on the list of priorities for the senior leadership team	8	6%	6	2
None of these	7	5%	4	1
Lack of interest	4	3%	3	1
I don't understand the benefits	0	0%	0	0
Respondents	131	100%		

Table 10. Support to progress businesses' sustainability journey

	Helpful		Neither helpful or unhelpful		Unhelpful		Total
A small grant that is ear-marked towards capital investment in green technology/innovation/change business processes	116	89%	12	9%	3	2%	131
Be given access to a sustainability platform that signposts you to sustainability actions and resources	70	53%	43	33%	18	14%	131

Receive 1-2-1 mentoring from a sustainability expert that supports you in putting a sustainability plan in place	67	51%	44	34%	20	15%	131
Participating in an online 6-week action-oriented sustainability programme	46	35%	45	34%	40	31%	131
Participating in a face-to-face 6-week action-oriented sustainability programme	32	24%	58	44%	41	31%	131

5.1 State of Current Provision

A recent review of provision by the Enterprise Research Centre suggests that there are only 17 national Net Zero support programmes for SMEs. Within the South East region, their research found 36 programmes with 79 interventions. Scanning the list of programmes identified those relevant to South and Vale were incorporated into the profile of platforms in section 5.3.⁴

This research makes a series of recommendations for local and national governments.

These included:

- Local authorities should consult with a diverse range of local businesses when designing programmes on net zero, to ensure that the needs of all businesses are met and that they are able to see benefit from programmes
- Local authorities should share more information about net zero support programmes with neighbouring local authorities and allow them to participate. This will ensure that regions are able to provide more comprehensive offerings to businesses
- Local authorities should - where possible - offer businesses a combination of audits and grants
- Programmes – where possible – should aim to offer one-to-one support from an adviser who understands the challenges and constraints of running a small business

These generic recommendations are broadly in line with the findings from our own tailored survey. Specific support suggested as requested by our survey participants included small

⁴ Mole, K & Belt, V, 2023. A report by the Enterprise Research Centre for the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) Available: <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/publications/the-less-than-1-club-mapping-net-zero-support-for-small-businesses-across-england/>



grants earmarked for green projects, digital platforms which signpost to action and 1-2-1 mentoring.

5.2 Grant programmes

It is unlikely that, if offered a grant, someone will say that it is not needed, however the way in which that grant is provided and administered is important. We profile three areas which have used UK funding to provide support for green business initiatives.

Sevenoaks – UK Shared Prosperity Fund: Green Business Grants: There are two types of grants available - one specifically for Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Economy (LCREE) businesses to “build short-term resilience and provide the foundations for future growth” and another for lowering business premises’ carbon footprint, open to all local businesses that operate from a commercial property. Both grants cover 40 per cent of eligible costs; the LCREE grant is up to £8,000, while the premises carbon reduction grant is for up to £5,000. They have listed types of business eligible under each category.

West Midlands Combined Authority – UK Shared Prosperity Fund: Business Energy Advice Service (BEAS) Business Support: Support consists of a free energy audit for 400 businesses and funding of up to £100,000 to take action on recommendations. Funding needs to be matched. The grant could cover investments such as new equipment, improvement in processes, lighting/insulation etc.

Glasgow City Council (City Deal) - Green Business Programme: SMEs can claim up to £10,000 to reduce their energy bills. The grant will cover 50% of project costs and can be used for anything that will help reduce energy use in the long term for a business, and as such reduce their emissions. Staff costs are not eligible. They are encouraging match funding for energy and renewables through the Scottish Government’s SME Loan Fund and cashback to maximise the impact.

It is worth considering ways in which to maximise potential grants given, as most of the grants provided here suggest match-funding; however, this might prove unpopular based on the verbatim comments received in our survey. It could be that formalising blended finance



options could be a way of doing this. Some of the large banks are already offering specific green/Net Zero loans. An example can be found below:⁵

NatWest Green Loans: from £50,001 to £10 million for spending under one of the following categories: Clean Energy, Clean Buildings, Clean Transport and Agriculture. Fixed interest rate or no upper limit on a variable rate, subject to approval. For any businesses with an annual turnover of less than £25 million. Repayment terms from 3 months up to 25 years.

Opportunities to Experiment

Providing grants can also open avenues for interesting experimentation to understand the efficacy of support.

Opportunity 1: There is scope to combine grants with mentoring and track the outcome of the spend towards different types of green initiatives in the business to check if there is a difference compared to if grant funding is combined with a sustainability platform, i.e., if the spend is different. This could also be compared to a final group who receive no other intervention, only grant funding.

This would generate insight on what combination of support is most successful for different types of action and activities. This is something that Innovation Growth Lab has trialled before.

Opportunity 2: We have seen some examples run in collaboration with the Innovation Growth Lab, looking at understanding applications for oversubscribed funding. It is important that the fund is kept open to the final dates as those who are the first applicants might be the least in need of help. Then you can randomly allocate funding, rather than use an unproven assessment process.

This creates a treatment and control group and we can better understand the effect of the funding on the businesses. Some incentive would need to be provided to fully engage the control group who do not receive funding - perhaps access to the platform. Something similar was conducted with Innovation Growth Lab and Innovate UK.⁶

⁵ While some large businesses offer their own support programmes and information too, feedback from other research we have conducted suggested that big businesses are better to work through trusted intermediaries than provide direct support therefore signposting SMEs to large counterparts may not be productive outside of finance options.

⁶ See Innovation Growth Lab working papers for examples e.g. <https://www.innovationgrowthlab.org/igl-working-paper-no-2004-0>



5.3 Profile of Platforms

There are many platforms available that provide slightly different offerings. Carbon accounting platforms, for example, are easy to come across. We have curated a list below that focuses on platforms that provide more than a carbon accounting tool.

Platform name & description	Core components	Costs
UK Business Climate Hub UK Government Focus: All Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Database of actions by industry and theme ● SME Climate Commitment ● Database of finance ● Guides to actions 	Free
Planet Mark Independent Business Focus: All Businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Accreditation ● Accurate and transparent carbon reporting across Scope 1, 2 and core Scope 3 emissions ● Trusted sustainability certification ● Over a decade of expertise ● Anti-greenwashing assurance ● Net Zero Programme ● 6 stage programme including Baseline and Upskilling, Strategy & Planning, Action & Delivery ● Guides and toolkits ● Scope 3 - deep dive into mapping supply chain emissions ● Supply Chain Engagement ● Supplier segmentation ● Access to data ● Supplier seminars 	Can inquire about particular costs if helpful

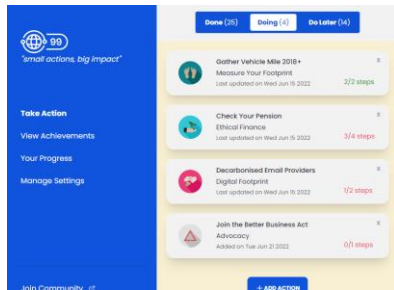


	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Supplier Communication strategy● Science-based Target Setting● Net Zero Strategy and Action Plan● Stakeholder engagement● Defining strategic approach● Net Zero governance● Communicating progress● Clean Energy Procurement● Reverse auction (SMEs) – force up to 20+ suppliers to bid against one another to win your business● Net Zero Pledge● Training & Upskilling	
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Small 99

Independent Business

Focus: Net Zero Small Business




Extract from Hero

- Carbon Reduction Action Box (CRAB)
- An introductory 1 hour workshop that gives a small business everything they need to get started, with a carbon reduction plan
- Overview of business opportunity from climate action
- Carbon Footprint Estimate of their business
- Set of reduction action cards to build a plan
- Certificate of reduction actions
- Access to accountability sessions
- CPD Accreditation
- A 'train the trainer' programme available
- Full day workshops, which typically cover:
 - Climate Risk Overview
 - What is Net Zero?
 - How to Measure your footprint Measurement
 - How to build a carbon reduction plan
 - How to communicate your journey
- Free Small Business Carbon Footprint Calculator, including personalised actions
- Hero - Free Carbon Reduction Plans for Small Businesses
- Includes action checklists
- Badges for completions
- Aligned with BCorp and other standards
- Tailored for 4 industries
- Support from other businesses and consultants
- Consultancy packages
- Plan: detailed carbon footprint and action plan
- Lead: as above, plus sustainability page written, certification recommendations and a press release
- Accelerate: as above, plus regularly updated marketing materials and supply chain engagement
- Accountability sessions

CRAB: £50 per business

Full day: £150 per business

Plan: £3,000
Lead: £6,000
Accelerate: £6,000 up front +
£1,500 p/month
Free first session, £50 for members

<p>Sustainable Pathways</p> <p>Independent business</p> <p>Focus: Sustainable Small business</p>  <p>Extract from SatNav output</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pathways ● Strategy and workshops ● Leadership development ● Net Zero and carbon reduction advice ● 'Become a BCorp' advice ● Sustainable branding and marketing advice ● Diversity, Equality and Inclusion advice ● SatNav ● An ESG assessment mapping tool that spans across all sustainability dimensions ● Toolkits to take action with ● Coaching calls ● Monthly accountability check-ins ● Acceler8 ● 8 short modules ● 10 sustainability experts ● 25+ tools and resources 	<p>Free access to SatNav £5 month for slack channel, social media posts and maintenance check-ins</p>
<p>SME Climate Hub</p> <p>Nonprofit associated with Oxford University</p> <p>Focus: Net Zero Small Business</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Carbon emissions calculator ● Free course on small business climate action ● Climate Hub pledge and badge ● Action Guides and Resources ● Annual update scheme ● Other free resources 	<p>Free</p>



<p>Zellar</p> <p>Independent Business</p> <p>Focus: Net Zero all businesses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses business data to create SMART behavioural and operational recommendations that drive sustained action, cost savings and tangible climate impact • Connect to a network of action partners • Build a simple sustainability score 	<p>£29/month £299/year</p>
<p>Eco Act</p> <p>International Independent Business</p> <p>Focus: All Businesses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measurement and Net Zero Strategy • Read more about Measurement and Net Zero Strategy • Climate Risk Assessment • Read more about Climate Risk Assessment • Net Zero Targets and Sustainability Reporting • Read more about Net Zero Targets and Sustainability Reporting • Voluntary Carbon Offsetting • Read more about Voluntary Carbon Offsetting • Climate Mitigation • Read more about Climate Mitigation • Digital Climate Solutions • Knowledge Hub 	
<p>Energy Solutions Oxfordshire</p> <p>Environmental Information Exchange</p> <p>Nonprofit associated with Oxford Brookes</p> <p>Focus: Energy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free Workplace Energy Efficiency Checklist • Workplace Energy Efficiency Assessment • Free webinars • Free case studies • Free resources 	<p>£1,500 (approx) per assessment</p>

5.4 Mentoring support

While there is little academic evidence on the effectiveness of mentoring and coaching on the environmental outcomes of businesses, there is some related evidence that can help design a Small Business Net Zero mentoring programme.

Strong relationships between mentor and mentee that create trust are more likely to create positive outcomes. To facilitate these relationships, mentors should be trained, as although experience level matters, it has been suggested that trained mentors build more successful relationships, leading to a more trusting relationship and therefore increased learning and more autonomy in the mentee (St-Jean & Mitrano-Méda, 2016).⁷

Mentors who have been entrepreneurs in the past are most effective in mentoring other entrepreneurs towards opportunity recognition, creating founding teams, fundraising, creating realistic career expectations and connecting to important stakeholders, including investors (Eesley & Wang, 2017).⁸

Research suggests that online platforms to match mentors are most effective when they come with some kind of personalised introduction or video of the mentor. This increases the likelihood of mentees reaching out to a mentor, but does not improve chances of a strong relationship between mentor and mentee (Lall et al., 2023).⁹

Values-based mentoring also might support small businesses towards long term change towards Net Zero. Hampton et al (2022) found that engaging through values-based support can unlock lasting change within SMEs toward environmental goals¹⁰. This is supported by our recent (as yet unpublished) research that suggests that most small businesses are

⁷ St-Jean, É., & Mitrano-Méda, S. (2016). Should mentors of entrepreneurs be trained or their experience is enough. *Entrepreneurship-practice-oriented perspectives*, 39-61.

⁸ Eesley, C., & Wang, Y. (2017). Social influence in career choice: Evidence from a randomized field experiment on entrepreneurial mentorship. *Research policy*, 46(3), 636-650.

⁹ Lall, S. A., Chen, L. W., & Mason, D. P. (2023). Digital platforms and entrepreneurial support: A field experiment in online mentoring. *Small Business Economics*, 61(2), 631-654.

¹⁰ Hampton, S., Blundel, R., Wahga, A., Fawcett, T., & Shaw, C. (2022). Transforming small and medium-sized enterprises to address the climate emergency: The case for values-based engagement. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 29(5), 1424-1439.



motivated by their own personal values on this issue over other motivators such as government agendas, customers and supply chains.

We have profiled two organisations that provide tailored environmental mentorship/coaching below:

Sustainable Pathways¹¹: is a group of sustainability experts who can provide mentorship towards sustainability in small businesses. They are currently delivering mentorship as part of the Small Business Green Skills programme delivered by Oxford Brookes Business School and Small Business Britain, which has so far been very successful. Sustainable Pathways is also listed under Platforms as they also provide support through a digital platform.

Climate Change Coaches¹²: are an Oxfordshire based BCorp aiming to create change in organisations to help them combat climate change. Carly Cox, the founder of Climate Change Coaches, is an entrepreneur in residence at Oxford Brookes Business School and has written a book on climate change coaching.

6. Recommendations

We conclude the report by summarising some recommendations for South and Vale when seeking to support SMEs towards Net Zero:

- Firstly, the three core support mechanisms most sought by small businesses are grants, an online platform and 1-2-1 mentoring
- We recommend a blended approach to the support provided, particularly while the efficacy of each approach is evaluated
- There is opportunity to experiment with the way grants are allocated/combined with other support, in order to evaluate which support-mix is most effective in achieving maximal reduction in carbon emissions

¹¹ <https://www.sustainable-pathways.com/sustainable-business-services>

¹² <https://climatechangecoaches.com/>

- There are a variety of digital platforms available; choosing the right platform depends on the functionality needed, but specialised knowledge is advisable, so that SME owners can be provided with ‘actionable information’¹³
- Mentoring has been shown to be effective in other entrepreneurial contexts and choosing mentors who have entrepreneurial experience, as well as training, is seen as most effective
- Motivations for small businesses in becoming more sustainable typically centre around values, and it is important to consider how to engage personal values and unlock action through values-based support

Appendix

A.1 Other factors that prevent business from taking action on reducing carbon emissions

¹³ Mole, K. & Ri, A., 2023. Actionable Information enables SMEs to Journey towards Net Zero. Available: <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/publications/actionable-information-enables-smes-to-journey-towards-net-zero/>

Theme	Comments
Unsure of relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Not relevant to most of our activities ● Not relevant to our charitable operation ● We are a desk based business and hire office space with very small carbon footprint but will always look to lower (EG: Elec cars for personal use) ● We don't have business premises and don't produce a product ● As a primarily virtual business offering a face to face service in rented accommodation our ability to make changes to our carbon footprint is limited and many of the options offered in the previous question are simply not relevant
Unsure of next steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We have done the things we could see to do and now don't know what to do next. Nothing else seems viable ● Done as much as I can ● As a services company with no office or production facilities, it is hard to know how much more we can do, beyond the measures we have put in place. Data is our biggest carbon issue and this is managed by Google! ● I wouldn't be aware as for example mt landlord includes my electric usage within my rent I don't have access to the information as were based on a industrial estate
Mistrust of issue/government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Don't believe in it ● Distrust in government Net Zero policy
Planning systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Planning System ● Limitation and cost of planning permission in a conservation area
Landlords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Landlord will not spend ● Our landlord is incharge of our premises so are limited with what we can do ● We are bound by our using preferred suppliers/ service provided by our landlord
Building limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listed grade 2 star building ● We don't own the buildings we operate, or have long enough leases to enact all the change we would like to make ● We don't own our premises
Economic needs prioritised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I would say it is not low on the list of priorities for senior leadership but it is not actively practised by leadership. The priority is cost over environmental impact ● It's important but not an immediate priority based on business needs

Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are a very small operation
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current legislation regarding the taking of motorcycle tests

A.2 Other types of support that would be helpful for your business on its sustainability journey towards lowering emissions

Theme	Quote
100% grant funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We would need a 100% grant, not matched funding as we just do not have surplus cash. We wholeheartedly want to do more but are not in a financial position to do so
Solar panel grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We have extremely limited internal funding but would like to investigate solar panels if funding could be provided Solar panel grant
Reduced bureaucracy in funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Realistic levels of grant funding to match-fund projects, and without the endless red tape/long application forms/time needed to apply!
Reduced rates for sustainable businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incentivise local businesses to take action towards lower emissions by giving lower Business Rates to those that due
General funding/financing comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main thing that would help is funds The costs of implementation have to have a cost and environmental benefit as does the impact of downtime during installation. My landlord is a national charity and any 'hard' changes eg . changing of boiler , insulation would require their approval and during installation they would still require their full open commercial market rent to be paid whilst I'm not receiving any income. I have implemented many 'soft' changes to adopt efficiencies and also working practices to make significant improvements but can not afford to find any additional investment with no return/cost benefit as any investment I could have invested has been wiped out by an £800 a month rental increase in a fragile

	<p>economy post covid so am now looking to find ways of being even more inventive to increase business growth whilst keeping within the parameters of local regulations and my lease</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We have had a visit, survey and reports made by Oxford Brookes and Energy Solutions Oxfordshire so we know what needs doing. But without funding we are unable to progress and of the recommended projects. We have now surplus funds to invest so would have to rely on grants ● The Pavilion is superb but unfortunately the finance was insufficient to allow for Solar Panels and also allow rain water capture for use on the pitches during dry weather when water is needed to ensure the turf survives ● I am a mobile bicycle mechanic, based in Didcot. I am reasonably content with my carbon footprint but getting the message out to others by encouraging cycling / their active travel is where I think that I can make the biggest difference. I attend approximately 68 hours of free events each year where I repair bicycle for free (or spare parts only), encouraging those who may not get on their bikes to get them working. Unfortunately this is taking away from work for which I would normally be paid, reducing my income. A small grant to cover these costs would ensure that I was able to maintain these services, being generally free to end users ● Large grant instead of small? ● We are a Grade 1 listed building and heritage visitor attraction which has secured stage 1 National Lottery Heritage Funding to renovate and enhance the buildings (and make them more energy efficient and sustainable in the process). Becoming energy efficient and sustainable is a key reason for undertaking the project. The most important contribution the Shared Prosperity Fund could make to us is a funding contribution to enable us to undertake this project ● Funding is a significant limiting factor to support resource, planning and capability ● We need finance. The business has no surplus cash and is not in a position to borrow money. We therefore need 100% funding, specifically for solar PV panels which could make a massive difference. Oxford Brookes has already conducted a study for us. It's all down to money ● grants to be able to pay for the standards required ● "Re Introduction of ""Green Deal"" type funding ie. Loans to property irrespective of owner in a simple
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	<p>format, charged to property, repaid via electric meter. Previous system was too complicated for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● getting a grant to fund purchase of electric or hybrid wheelchair accessible vehicle ● Cash ● Funding ● Financial support to afford recycling schemes within the hair and beauty industry. EG recycling waste such as foils and colour tubes ● A large grant! ● Grants and donations ● We are a sports club and are an officially registered charity. We are all volunteers and are always short of funds. We could do more on sustainability (eg install LED lighting, better insulation, more efficient heating, etc) but our main limitation is funding. If we had funding, we could employ contractors to undertake a variety of improvement works. But we don't, so we can't! ● "As a Charity we would need to raise funds to make changes ● We currently use Green Salon Collective. They're very expensive so a grant would be much appreciate <p>Thankyou</p>
<p>Tailored information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A micro-business toolkit - I've done some of the initial work using the Race to Zero site but the data is so generic I don't think it fully reflects my situation. e.g. carbon assessment tools don't take into account that I've chosen Net Zero suppliers for IT, or that all my subsistence claims are vegetarian, or that I am home based so any changes to heating and energy are both a personal and a business cost ● I think all the tools I've used have far over-estimated my carbon impact, as I've already made careful choices about suppliers. I've been working on reducing my carbon costs for over 10 years, starting with work done with Low Carbon Kent. I buy office furniture that has a long life span can be almost fully recycled, use public transport for almost all my site visits and numerous other steps but all the scoring systems put me above average, which seems unlikely for a home-based sole trader who has worked hard to reduce their impact ● Specialists who are able to guide and make recommendations based on the type of premises you operate from ● Sector specific advise

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would attend a one-day event or, even better, a zoom conference if I thought I could find out more about the possibility of electric vehicles for our business. At the moment, from the research we have done, we are under the impression that our payloads are too heavy to make electric vehicles suitable for us • Access to pro bono consultants and list of approved suppliers of renewable energy technology • Workshops explaining Governmental objectives
General information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just guidance on what to do to to be able to reduce our emissions • Understanding how to realise opportunities, related regulations and then find the funds to deliver • Centralised sources of information and signposting Jargon busted / clear communication in the sustainability arena. Standardised levels of attainment • Just practical support from someone who isn't trying to sell you something • Identifying sources of support - financial or otherwise
Case studies/Sharing examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case studies. Examples • Case studies of similar businesses and the action they have taken and how they have used it in their marketing to attract customers
Sourcing sustainable suppliers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think it would be helpful to all businesses in the region to create a database of who supplies what to aid people buying locally. We manufacture non-domestic seating and i found out my daughter's school in Oxford bought some of our chairs from a dealer in manchester. The chairs travelled from Thame to Manchester to Oxford and they paid 40% more than had they bought direct from us. Bonkers! • We are a paperless business that is primarily geared towards scientific/medical communications, hardware is always our biggest and most costly investment along with sourcing sustainable third party suppliers...so any guidance there would be helpful • Access to list of recommended suppliers of green solutions, eg insulation • I run a private vehicle hire company and there are not the options currently from vehicle manufacturers in terms of choice required for the business • Access to pro bono consultants and list of approved suppliers of renewable energy technology

<p>Support for working with landlords on green issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help in persuading the landlord to put his hand in his pocket - he refuses to spend a penny on the building which is incredibly energy inefficient • People to understand. Current owner approves for Loft Insulation, internal and external wall insulation, ground or air source heat pumps, Solar Panels, Floor insulation, controlled ventilation, double glazing, draft proofing, Gov long term commitment to scheme, practical application • We are limited as we rent an office and so don't control energy supplier etc • Guidance, support and a process from OCC, as our landlord, towards supporting sustainability action • I work in a leased property in a Conservation Area. My biggest issue currently is that the 2nd floor is in the eaves and is very hot in the summer and cold in the winter. I have installed 'energy' blinds to help with cold and 'Heat deflective' blinds to reduce heat but the top floor needs to have a sustainable type of airconditioning unit installed in the roof and it is unaffordable for my small business. I am responsible for the inside repairs of the building. The landlady is not prepared to join hands in the cost. If I install anything through the roof, she wants me to sign responsibility for the whole of the roof should there be any repairs and I don't want to do this. The building may become unusable as a result in the future. I am sure there are many old buildings that need specialised renewable energy units of varying kinds to keep them usable • We rent from a private landlord and are limited to the changes we can make to the building so some insulation measures we are not currently able to take. Not sure how we can get round this
<p>Transport</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We run Private Hire Wheelchair Accessible Transport. to be able to contribute to net zero, we need electric WAVs. these should be able to run smoothly for the day without having to charge them as this might affect bookings. also the price of these vehicles and we do not anticipate any profit from customer income • I think for my personal self in my business would be my driving emissions, the deliveries and mileage we do is crazy and I feel that's the worse part about a bakery! • Our biggest carbon footprint is caused by transport, which is why we now only work in a 30 mile radius of Thame, we would like more electric infrastructure to be

	<p>able to use electric vehicles. A grant to increase our premises to 125/3 phase from 40/1 amps would be helpful in making going electric viable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improved public transport infrastructure to lower our need to use cars to get to our venues ● Encouragement from Local Council to the public to use electric mopeds and motorcycles
VAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Convince the government to make taxis VAT exempt just like busses we are also public transport but no subsidies from ● Governments policy, such as charging VAT on insulation, seems very unhelpful. Some political support for green measures would be welcome
Other (specific)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support from the planning system to encourage and facilitate traditional timber building projects using locally grown and supplied timber in the AONB ● Not lowering emissions as we don't have any emissions to speak of. We are a small charity enabling disabled and elderly people to opportunity to get out on the river Thames in the Wallingford area. We do need funding help by way of grants ● Support with technical and financial advice in diversifying the business ● To partner potentially with a solar panel manufacturer to install some of their product on our existing boats Pure Boating operates 13 electric boats for rental and charter some of which have canopies which could be adapted for solar ● To be more involved locally
Other (generic comments)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We don't own our premises so we are limited on making changes to the building or structure. We already are a sustainable business, we don't really need to be told what to do, we are already well informed and motivated ● We have already done a number of actions in the past year which have reduced our carbon footprint including Not offering fireworks as part of the Extravaganza (Abingdon Lights Switch On event). This was a move we were scared about and thought we would get howls of protest online but actually it was not a real problem as far as we can tell. It is an interesting case to show other businesses that sometimes your customer is not as hooked on carbon as you might think they are! We dispensed with the use of a petrol generator at the Abingdon Traditional Craft Fair this year and again

	<p>were very nervous about customer reaction but all turned out ok (-ish!) in the end. We have found a re-purpose for gazebo roofs that are no longer suitable for use (when they start leaking badly) at our events. They are now taken by a farmer for covering dung and other heaps that need to rot down without getting too wet. Our main issue is that we have now run out of ideas. As I said above we have looked into electric vehicles and it looks like this is no good for us. We don't have a heated premises</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● We are a village Sports Association, combining Kingston Bagpuize Cricket Club and Kingston Colts Football Club. We have a long term Licence to use a Brand New Pavilion (opened in October 2022) which is 'owned' by the Parish Council on a 130 Year lease, and was built with funding from S106 finance. We have no employees and everything is run by volunteers giving their free time. Income is limited to some small sponsorships, grants whenever available, membership fees and bar income so very little is available for the things we would need to be come more eco friendly● None that I can currently think of except encourage piano/voice students to spend less time on electronic items and more on non electrical musical instruments.?● Council needs to lead by example and communicate what actions they are taking to be more efficient and cost effective (rather than just passing the cost onto Business Rates)● Balance. Clarity on the negative impacts of net zero policies (grid stability, critical minerals sourcing etc). The role of nuclear. Honesty about human-derived impact on climate - unsettled science. Climatology science and policy-making: the relationship, the facts, the levels of misunderstanding out there
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