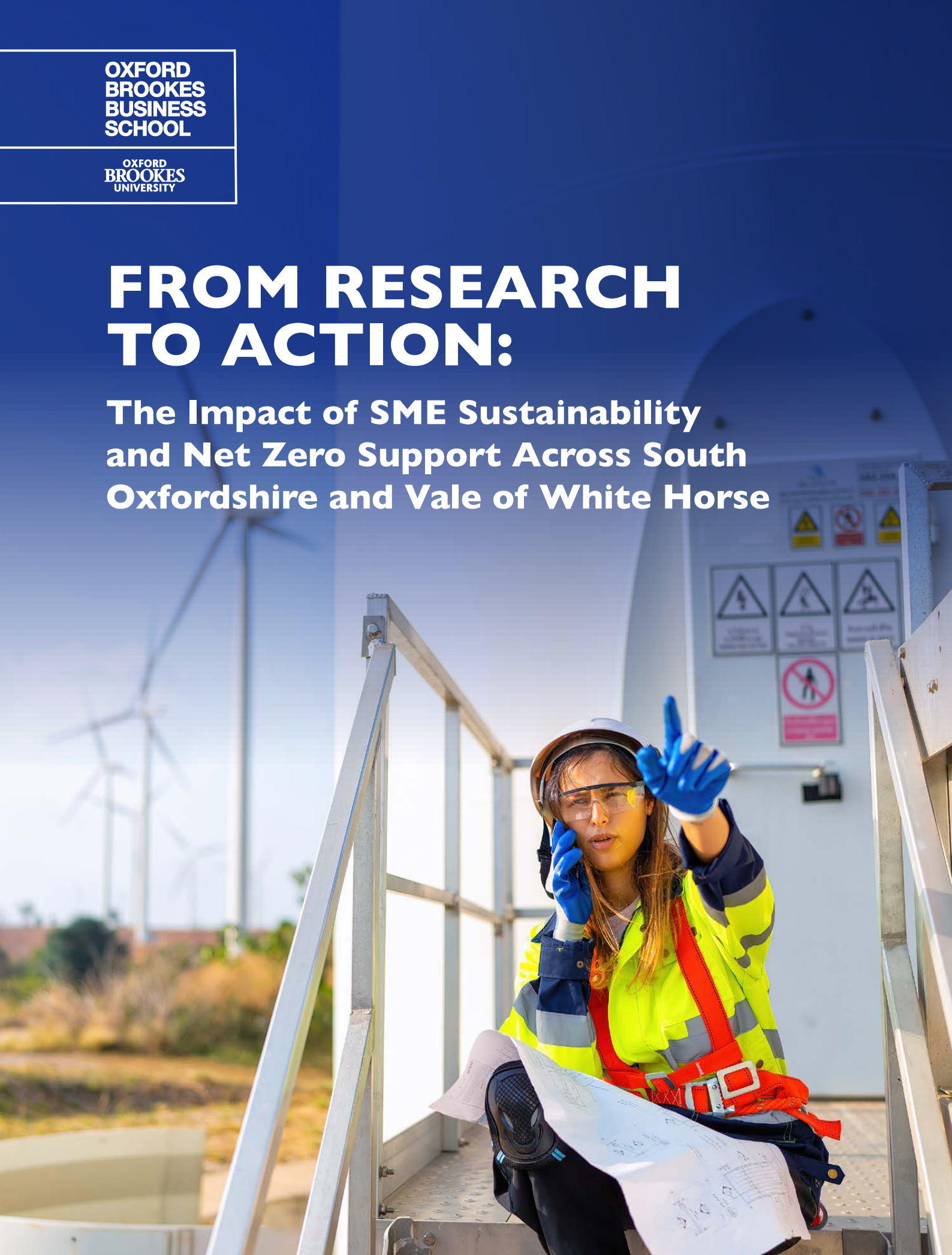


FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**The Impact of SME Sustainability
and Net Zero Support Across South
Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse**





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finally, we would like to thank all the businesses, social enterprises, charities, community organisations and individual participants who generously gave their time, shared their experiences, and provided the insights that form the foundation of this report. Their openness and willingness to reflect on their sustainability journeys have been invaluable to the research.

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FOREWORD

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils are committed to supporting the transition to net zero. Engaging SMEs, alongside other organisations such as community groups and charities, is especially important because they are integral to the local economy and have a vital role in helping our districts respond practically and collaboratively to climate and economic challenges.

To better understand both the opportunities and challenges facing SMEs, the Councils commissioned Oxford Brookes University to undertake research into how local businesses were engaging with sustainability and decarbonisation, the barriers they faced, and the types of support most likely to enable meaningful action.

The resulting research provided valuable evidence and practical recommendations that directly informed the design and delivery of a range of sustainability-focused initiatives across South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.

The Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund enabled the councils to commission a range of support for local businesses and organisations. This included investment in business decarbonisation initiatives such as decarbonisation grants, green skills training, free energy assessments, business engagement programmes, sustainability guidance, and support for purpose-led enterprises and low-carbon innovation. REPF funding also provided capital grants to help rural businesses improve productivity, resilience and sustainability.

Delivered in partnership with a range of local organisations, these programmes sought to provide practical, locally grounded support to help businesses take achievable steps towards reducing emissions, improving resilience and building future capacity.

This report captures the impact of these interventions and showcases the experiences of businesses, learners, delivery partners and community organisations that engaged with them. The findings demonstrate the value of research-informed policy development and highlight the importance of collaboration between key stakeholders in responding to sustainability challenges. They also provide valuable insight into how best to engage SMEs in sustainability action, particularly in identifying cost-saving measures and understanding the barriers businesses face on their decarbonisation journey.

We are confident that these findings will help shape our future approach to supporting SMEs and local organisations, whether they are starting or continuing their decarbonisation journey.



Karen Tolley

Principal Economic Development Lead

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils

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I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils (hereafter referred to as South and Vale) have set ambitious targets to reduce carbon emissions across the region and support the transition towards Net Zero. Achieving these ambitions requires action across multiple sectors, including meaningful engagement with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and local organisations, which collectively represent a significant proportion of the local economy and business-related emissions.

Recognising the need to better understand how local organisations were engaging with sustainability and decarbonisation, South and Vale commissioned Oxford Brookes Business School to undertake a research project funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), entitled Understanding the Net Zero Challenge for SMEs in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils. Conducted between November 2023 and April 2024, the study explored SME awareness of Net Zero policy, current sustainability practices, barriers to action, and the forms of support businesses believed would be most valuable in enabling further progress.

The research revealed a strong willingness amongst SMEs to engage with sustainability. Two-thirds of respondents reported that they were aware of and understood the UK Government's Net Zero ambitions, while 70% stated that they were already taking action to reduce emissions. A further 24 per cent expressed a desire to become more active in addressing sustainability challenges. Most organisations (70%) also indicated strong intentions to continue progressing sustainability action over the following two years.



However, the research identified several key barriers preventing SMEs and local organisations from advancing their sustainability ambitions. Access to finance emerged as the most significant challenge, followed by lack of time, limited internal resources, and uncertainty around where to begin. Businesses consistently highlighted the need for practical and accessible support mechanisms, particularly grant funding, tailored guidance, mentoring, and support that translated sustainability ambitions into achievable and actionable business decisions.

Based on these findings, the report recommended a blended and locally grounded approach to SME sustainability support, combining financial assistance, practical guidance, mentoring, networking, and skills development. The research also highlighted the importance of working through trusted local delivery partners capable of engaging businesses in ways that were practical, accessible, and relevant to local contexts.

The findings and recommendations from the research directly informed a broad programme of sustainability and decarbonisation activity delivered by South and Vale District Councils in partnership with organisations including Thame Town Council, One Planet Abingdon, Low Carbon Hub, ALP Synergy, Abingdon & Witney College, OSEP CIC, Enterprise Oxfordshire, Tourism South East, and Oxfordshire Greentech.

These interventions included:

- **decarbonisation grants for SMEs**
- **Rural England Prosperity Fund sustainability projects**
- **free energy assessments and bespoke decarbonisation plans**
- **business sustainability engagement initiatives**
- **green skills training programmes**
- **sustainability webinars and mentoring**
- **practical Net Zero guidance resources**
- **support for purpose-led enterprises**
- **sustainable tourism and visitor economy initiatives**

Collectively, these initiatives sought to address the barriers identified in the original research while enabling SMEs and communities to engage with sustainability in practical and economically achievable ways.

This report presents the next phase of the work: the systematic collection of evidence demonstrating the impacts and outcomes emerging from these interventions. Drawing on interviews, testimonials, stakeholder reflections, and case studies, the report explores how research-informed policy and programme activity translated into practical outcomes for SMEs and communities across the region.

The report focuses particularly on emerging evidence relating to:

- **business behaviour change**
- **sustainability engagement**
- **green skills development**
- **adoption of low carbon technologies**
- **energy and cost savings**
- **business resilience**
- **and wider economic and environmental benefits**

In doing so, the report not only demonstrates the value of research-informed local policy development, but also identifies lessons and approaches that may support the future scaling of similar SME sustainability initiatives across other local authority areas.

2. FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION: PROGRAMME RESPONSES

The original Oxford Brookes Business School research commissioned by South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils identified a strong willingness amongst SMEs to engage with sustainability and decarbonisation activity, but also highlighted a number of practical barriers preventing businesses from progressing their Net Zero ambitions. The research particularly identified challenges around access to finance, lack of time and internal resources, limited practical guidance, and the need for tailored support mechanisms that translated sustainability ambitions into actionable business decisions.

In response to these findings, South and Vale District Councils used UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Funding (REPF) to develop and deliver a broad programme of sustainability and business support initiatives in partnership with local organisations, training providers, and delivery partners. These initiatives were intentionally designed to address the barriers and support needs identified through the original research.



The table below outlines how the research findings directly informed subsequent policy and programme responses.

RESEARCH FINDING IDENTIFIED THROUGH SME RESEARCH	POLICY / PROGRAMME RESPONSE
Access to finance was the most significant barrier preventing businesses from taking sustainability action	Introduction of Decarbonisation Grant Schemes and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) grants to support measures such as solar PV, EV charging infrastructure, energy efficiency upgrades, and sustainability improvements.
SMEs requested practical mentoring, guidance, and local engagement support	Delivery of business engagement initiatives delivered through Thame Town Council and One Planet Abingdon, and Oxfordshire Greentech membership, providing “boots on the ground” sustainability support, workshops, networking and action planning.
Businesses needed practical, tailored support to understand where to start	Delivery of free energy assessments and bespoke decarbonisation plans delivered through Low Carbon Hub and ESOx.
Businesses highlighted the need for accessible information and actionable resources	Development of Green Savvy’s practical Net Zero business guides and sustainability toolkits.
SMEs identified skills and internal capacity as barriers to action	Delivery of 82 funded Green Skills training courses through Abingdon & Witney College, covering retrofit, renewable technologies, energy efficiency and sustainability awareness.
The research highlighted the importance of supporting long-term behavioural and organisational change	Ongoing mentoring, peer networking, sustainability champions programmes, and purpose-led enterprise support through OSEP CIC.

Collectively, these initiatives formed a regional ecosystem of support aimed at enabling SMEs and local organisations to better engage with sustainability, improve resilience, reduce emissions, and build green skills capacity across South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.

The following sections present case studies and impact evidence across four thematic areas that emerged strongly from the interviews and stakeholder engagement undertaken as part of this impact collection exercise.

THEMATIC AREAS EXPLORED THROUGH THE CASE STUDIES

Theme A – Business Engagement and Behaviour Change

This theme explores how locally delivered engagement activities helped businesses begin or progress their sustainability journeys. Case studies focus particularly on the work of:

- **Thame Town Council**
- **ALP Synergy**

The programme provided workshops, webinars, and tailored one-to-one advisory support focused on carbon footprinting, carbon reduction planning, and adoption of low carbon technologies and practices.

A total of 38 businesses across South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse engaged with the programme, exceeding initial participation targets. Support was delivered across a broad range of sectors, including manufacturing, hospitality, retail, transport, professional services, recycling, and community organisations, reflecting strong cross-sector engagement.

Businesses received over 123 hours of support in total, including 22.5 hours of intensive one-to-one guidance. Six businesses produced formal Carbon Reduction Plans aligned with recognised standards, while a further 10 were supported to adopt or trial new low carbon processes and technologies.

Collectively, participating businesses identified estimated carbon reduction commitments totalling 3,952 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, significantly exceeding programme expectations.

Evaluation evidence highlights strong demand for practical, accessible Net Zero support, particularly among smaller SMEs with limited internal capacity. Participants reported improved understanding of carbon reduction, increased confidence in taking action, and clearer pathways for integrating sustainability into core business decision-making.

Theme B – Skills and Workforce Development

This theme examines the role of green skills training and workforce development in supporting the transition towards Net Zero. It focuses primarily on:

- **Abingdon and Witney College**

South and Vale used UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF) to support a Green Skills training programme delivered by Abingdon & Witney College. The programme exceeded its original targets, with 83 learners directly enrolled across South and Vale, surpassing the combined target of 82 completions by March 2025. The wider reach extended further through participants employed within the districts but living elsewhere.

Training was delivered across Levels 1–3 and included domestic retrofit, heat pumps, solar PV, renewable technologies, and energy efficiency measures. Participants ranged from younger entrants to experienced professionals upskilling within existing roles, with most learners already employed within SMEs across construction, building services, estates, and technical sectors.

Evaluation findings showed that learners were directly applying their training within workplace settings, particularly in retrofit and low carbon technologies. Employers benefitted through increased internal capability and expanded service offerings linked to decarbonisation requirements, while learners reported improved confidence, employability, and career progression opportunities within the growing green economy.

Theme C – Decarbonisation and Energy Reduction

This theme explores the practical implementation of decarbonisation measures and energy efficiency improvements across SMEs and community organisations. It includes:

- **Low Carbon Hub / Energy Solutions Oxfordshire**
- **Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) projects**

The initiatives supported businesses through energy assessments, tailored decarbonisation plans, grants, and implementation support. Quantitative evidence gathered through programme reporting demonstrated measurable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, projected energy savings, and adoption of new technologies and processes.

Low Carbon Hub / Energy Solutions Oxfordshire

Across South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, Low Carbon Hub and Energy Solutions Oxfordshire delivered 23 free energy assessments and bespoke decarbonisation plans to SMEs operating across sectors including accommodation, catering, manufacturing, retail, tourism, and professional services. Participating organisations received tailored recommendations designed to reduce energy consumption, improve efficiency, and support longer-term sustainability planning.

Reported outcomes included:

- **14.96 tonnes of annual greenhouse gas reductions already implemented through supported measures**
- **Over 980,000 kWh of potential energy savings identified across supported businesses**
- **More than 230 tonnes of potential carbon savings identified through recommendations**
- **Six businesses adopting new technologies or operational processes**
- **Additional businesses progressing into grant funding or implementation support**

The case studies within this section illustrate how businesses translated recommendations into practical operational changes, investments, and longer-term sustainability planning.

Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF)

The Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) provided capital grants between 2023 and 2026 to support business growth, community infrastructure, innovation, and decarbonisation across rural areas and market towns in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse. Delivered over three funding rounds, the programme focused on enabling organisations to make capital investments that would otherwise have been difficult to fund, particularly where high upfront costs presented a barrier to action.

Across South Oxfordshire, the programme awarded 41 grants, distributing £841,101 and leveraging a further £707,813 of private and match investment. The programme supported 19 businesses and 22 community projects, including 10 decarbonisation projects that delivered measures such as solar PV, LED lighting, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and energy efficiency improvements.

In the Vale of White Horse, 32 grants were awarded, distributing £624,001 and generating an additional £433,873 of investment. The programme supported 24 businesses and 7n community projects, with 10 decarbonisation projects delivering renewable energy installations, equipment electrification, and other carbon reduction measures. Many recipients reported that these investments would not have been financially viable without grant support.

Across both districts, REPF acted as an important catalyst for capital investment, enabling organisations to accelerate decarbonisation, strengthen organisational resilience, create new income opportunities, and leverage additional external funding. The case studies presented in this report demonstrate how relatively modest capital grants generated impacts extending well beyond the initial investment, supporting long-term sustainability, business growth, and community benefit.

Theme D – Innovation and Purpose-Led Enterprise

This theme focuses on the development of purpose-led businesses and socially driven enterprise activity through:

- **OSEP CIC**

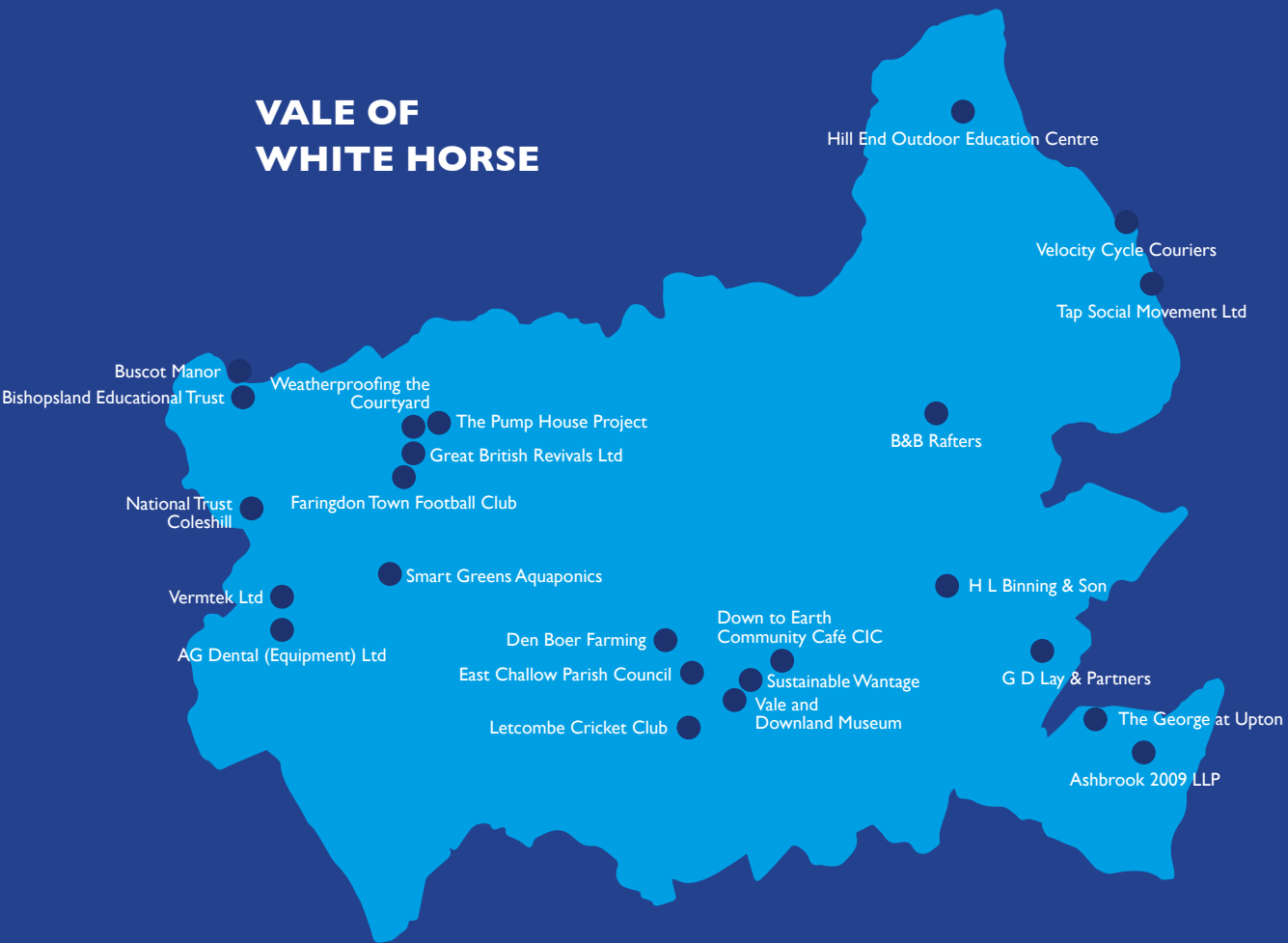
The programme strengthened the local social economy through tailored support for purpose-led enterprises delivering environmental and community impact across South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.

Over six months, the programme supported 45 enterprises and entrepreneurs in South Oxfordshire and 38 in Vale of White Horse through specialist one-to-one support, training, and peer learning activity. Support focused on helping organisations develop sustainable business models, strengthen governance, improve financial resilience, and build long-term operational capacity.

More than 390 hours of tailored support were delivered covering governance, financial planning, organisational sustainability, funding readiness, and partnership development. The programme supported a range of sustainability-focused and community-led initiatives including environmental organisations, food resilience projects, creative community spaces, circular economy activity, and enterprises promoting local wellbeing and inclusion.

Evaluation findings demonstrated improved organisational confidence, stronger financial and operational planning, increased readiness for growth and investment, and the development of more sustainable income models. Peer learning networks also strengthened collaboration across sectors including community assets, sustainable food initiatives, and creative enterprises, helping build a more resilient and locally rooted social economy.

Together, these thematic areas demonstrate how the original research informed a diverse but interconnected programme of interventions designed to address the practical realities facing SMEs and local organisations working towards sustainability and Net Zero objectives.



SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE



3. CASE STUDIES AND EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Building on the evidence presented in the previous section, this section presents a series of qualitative case studies that illustrate how the sustainability support programmes have translated into action on the ground. Drawn from interviews with participating businesses, social enterprises and charities, the case studies provide insight into participants' motivations, the support they received, the changes they implemented, and the outcomes achieved.

Organised around four thematic areas, the case studies demonstrate the diversity of support available and the different pathways through which organisations are reducing carbon emissions, building capability, strengthening resilience, and creating wider economic and social value. Together, they show that while programmes differ in focus and delivery, they share a common outcome: enabling organisations to move from ambition to action and laying the foundations for longer-term sustainability transitions.



PARTICIPANT NAME: Billy Stone and David Matthews

COMPANY NAME: Rhubarb Seating

INITIATIVE: Business Engagement Events by Thame Town Council

THEME A: Business Engagement and Behaviour Change



Introduction

David Matthews is a co-owner and director of Rhubarb Seating, a furniture designer and manufacturer based in Thame. The business designs and produces all its soft seating on-site, with almost all sales being within the UK. As with many SMEs, the owners are involved across all areas of the business, including procurement and sustainability.

The company initially became involved with the Thame Town Council Business Forum, a long-running quarterly meeting that connects local businesses. The business continued to engage with Thame Town Council's initiatives when a more sustainability-focused programme was launched, featuring a series of themed workshops and a bronze Sustainability Champion Award for participating businesses. Although sustainability was already embedded in the business, David found the programme helpful in connecting with other businesses at various stages of their own sustainability journeys.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

The company was already well advanced in its sustainability journey before participating in the programme, so the events did not introduce a significant amount of new technical knowledge. However, the participant identified specific areas of learning that proved valuable. The most impactful was a session on waste, which prompted engagement with the Surfers Against Sewage, Plastic Free Champion initiative. This led to a focused audit of single-use plastics within the business, and subsequent actions to minimise plastic waste.

The programme's approach of breaking sustainability down into its constituent parts, e.g. water, air, energy, waste, helped the business to develop a more structured approach to sustainability. Moreover, the programme played an important role in increasing confidence and reinforcing the belief that the business was on the right track with its sustainability efforts. Having credible experts present at workshops, combined with honest conversations with peers, provided reassurance in a landscape where there is currently a lot of misinformation around sustainable practices.

Actions Taken

The most distinctive outcomes from the programme relate to inter-business collaborations. Through the forum and the sustainability events, the company formed a local buying group with other businesses. This collaboration led to the discovery that waste materials from one business could serve as inputs for another: for example, packaging boxes discarded by the business are now used by a local auto recycler for distributing car parts. Another notable example involved the design of bench seating for a local school's garden. Rhubarb designed the seating, a neighbouring company contributed waste pallets, and prisoners at a local facility manufactured the benches. David emphasised that this cross-community collaboration would not have happened without Thame Town Council creating an environment in which schools, businesses, and other local actors could talk to each other.

Additional actions included sharing warehouse space and parking facilities with local businesses to reduce congestion and transport emissions, establishing a collaborative logistics arrangement with a local distribution company to fill spare vehicle capacity. The business had an electric car charging point installed four years ago and encourages staff to consider electric vehicles.

Outcomes and Benefits

Cost savings and emissions reduction: The local, collaborative logistics model has delivered both cost savings and reduced emissions. By sharing spare capacity on lorries with a local transport company, the business pays significantly lower delivery rates while contributing to fuller, more efficient loads. Moreover, local sourcing and shared procurement through the buying group have generated considerable savings for the company, while also minimising overall emissions.

Staff engagement and culture: The programme reinforced the importance of involving the entire workforce in sustainability with some staff volunteering for initiatives such as tree planting run by the Council. Regular team discussions now take place, staff actively think about waste management and resource use, and employees bring forward their own ideas. The team describes this as an embedded culture rather than a top-down directive.

Networking and mutual support: The participant identified this as the single biggest benefit of the programme. The ability to build genuine personal relationships with businesses within a five-mile radius, to exchange knowledge and ideas without commercial agendas, and to learn from peers at different stages of the sustainability journey was described as invaluable.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The participant would strongly recommend the programme, particularly for smaller or newer businesses that lack the resources for a dedicated sustainability role. The events were described as an excellent entry point, offering access to credible expert knowledge that would otherwise be costly. The group setting also provides accountability, making it harder for businesses to let sustainability slip down the priority list.

Looking ahead, the company's primary focus is working through a structured sustainability action plan, making progress measurable and tangible. In this respect, the participant expressed a strong commitment to only claiming what can be genuinely evidenced, with concerns about widespread greenwashing in the industry.

In terms of wider community influence, the programme's most significant contribution has been the creation of a supportive local network. The connections formed through the forum and the sustainability events have enabled businesses to share resources, exchange materials, collaborate on logistics, and reduce costs collectively. These practical collaborations demonstrate what becomes possible when local businesses and community organisations are given a space to connect, share ideas, and work towards common sustainability goals.

"If you do it for any other reason, do it because of the engagement, because you will get to meet people, you will get to talk to people, and it will put you so much further ahead than you ever would be by yourself."

"One of the big things that came out of it was that dialogue, talking to each other and sharing ideas."

PARTICIPANT NAME: Jenny Shaw
COMPANY NAME: Lightfoot Solicitors
INITIATIVE: Business Engagement Events by Thame Town Council
THEME A: Business Engagement and Behaviour Change



Members of the Lightfoot Solicitors ESG Committee volunteering with 21st Century Thame, helping care for young hedges around the Thame Skate Park and Triangle during the Thame Sustainability Awards volunteering week.

Introduction

Jenny Shaw is the head of marketing and chair of the ESG committee at Lightfoot Solicitors, a law firm based in Oxfordshire with over 170 years of heritage, operating across six offices. The firm provides personal legal services, business services, and specialist lending services for major banks. The main office is housed in a listed medieval building, which presents significant challenges for energy efficiency and modernisation.

The firm already had a strong track record of community engagement, sponsoring local events and supporting community groups. However, the participant recognised that sustainability was an area where the business could be doing more but did not know where to start, particularly given the complexity of managing multiple offices in listed buildings. When Thame Town Council launched its sustainability-focused business engagement programme, including a series of workshops and a bronze Sustainability Champion Award, the firm saw it as the ideal opportunity to begin making small but meaningful changes.

“We knew we could be doing better with sustainability, and it was something we wanted to do... but we didn’t really know where to start.”

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

Prior to the programme, the firm’s ESG committee already included several enthusiastic individuals with a good personal understanding of sustainability. However, Jenny noted that while sometimes sustainable practices feel achievable in personal life, applying them within a large, multi-site business with established ways of working can feel considerably more daunting.

The programme provided both practical day-to-day knowledge and, more importantly, a broader understanding of how businesses within a community can connect and support each other on sustainability. The participant described the experience as empowering, noting that hearing how other local businesses were making changes gave the team the confidence to do the same. The programme also helped overcome choice fatigue, since businesses can often feel overwhelmed by different information, by offering clear, credible recommendations and advice from trusted sources. Sharing experiences with other local businesses proved particularly valuable, demonstrating how common challenges could be addressed collectively.

Actions Taken

The most impactful change following the programme was a complete overhaul of the firm’s waste and recycling processes. For example, in the open-plan offices, all individual desk bins were removed and replaced with central recycling stations, requiring staff to sort food waste, recycling, and general waste more effectively. The participant described this as a small change that made a huge difference. Plans are underway to extend this approach to the remaining offices. Another example of how the firm is successfully minimising single-use plastic is replacing plastic cups in the reception with paper alternatives. In addition, the firm decided to also replace artificial hired plants with real ones, a change that also delivered direct cost savings.

The firm also created a new operations role, moving an existing employee into a dedicated position to oversee operational matters, including many ESG aspects. This was recognised as an important step towards having centralised oversight of sustainability across all six offices.

In terms of procurement, the marketing team now actively reviews suppliers' sustainability credentials before making purchasing decisions, a practice directly influenced by the programme.

At the moment, energy management remains the biggest challenge. The complexity of the firm's property arrangements, with listed buildings and leased, or shared, spaces, makes it extremely difficult to access energy data or implement changes such as solar panels.

Outcomes and Benefits

Cost savings and emissions reduction: The programme has contributed to cost savings in several areas, including the elimination of a recurring contract for hired artificial plants in reception, reduced purchasing of single-use plastics, and lower paper consumption following the firm's move to a paperless system. While precise figures are not available, the combination of improved waste sorting, reduced material consumption, and increased energy awareness communications to staff is expected to have contributed to a reduction in the firm's overall emissions.

Staff engagement and culture change: A quarterly Sustainability Newsletter has been introduced, combining practical reminders with engaging stories about the firm's sustainability successes. The ESG committee itself has evolved shifting from a logistical, problem-fixing focus towards a more educational and engaging approach, with activities such as litter picking and Earth Hour events designed to involve and empower the wider workforce.

Community engagement and visibility: The firm's volunteering programme has also been influenced by the Thame Town Council events, with staff participating in tree planting as part of the award. The firm's sustainability activities have been shared on social media and the firm's website, and there has been a noticeable increase in staff taking up their paid volunteering day.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

Jenny described the programme as hugely impactful and empowering. Having monthly commitments, incredibly supportive organisers, and a clear award to work towards provided the structure and motivation needed to persist through challenges and busy periods. Moreover, the programme created a sense of accountability that ensured sustainability remained a priority.

Lightfoot Solicitors is continuing their sustainability journey by signing up for the Silver level award of the programme. Additional key priorities for the firm include gaining better visibility of energy data across the office estate, with the new operations manager expected to make significant progress in this area. The participant also expressed a long-held ambition to introduce green features, such as a living wall and a small garden in the courtyard of the main building, creating a greener and more pleasant environment for clients and staff, while also giving something back to the local community.

"The events are a really gentle introduction to the world of sustainability in a very supportive way. It's very educational, it's very empowering, and it's meaningful as well [...] It definitely made all of us appreciate even more the community we have around us, and how valuable it is, and it's making us want to give back even more."

PARTICIPANT NAME: Donna Rogers
COMPANY NAME: Rogers Metal Management LLP
INITIATIVE: Carbon reduction plan by ALP Synergy Ltd
THEME A: Business Engagement and Behaviour Change



Introduction

Rogers Metal Management is a metals recycling business that buys materials from both households and businesses, processes them, and sells them to foundries or other merchants for reuse.

Donna, who is a partner in the business, decided to join the Synergy-run carbon reduction plan programme because, with government regulations increasingly focused on carbon reduction, the organisation wanted to better understand the practical steps towards reducing carbon emissions. Carbon reduction had also been raised through various industry accreditations the business is involved in, making it a growing priority. In this respect, the programme offered a practical starting point.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

As part of a metals recycling business, Rogers Metal Management's employees already had a solid understanding of the circular economy and the role of recycling in sustainability. However, the technical side of carbon measurement was less familiar. Donna described having a general understanding of what the end result should look like but was unsure how to get there. At first, the science behind carbon calculation, including different formulas and data requirements, felt quite technical and complex.

The programme addressed this through a series of webinars and helped to build the technical skills needed to use carbon calculators: understanding what data to collect, how to input it correctly, and how to identify where the business's biggest emissions lie. Some of these tools were already available within the industry, but Donna explains that, without the right guidance, they can be difficult to navigate.

"I had a basic understanding of what the end result should be, but I had no idea how to get there."

Beyond the technical skills, the programme encouraged a broader shift in thinking. It helped reframe expectations around Net Zero, making it clear that proactively working towards reducing emissions is what matters, rather than the pressure of achieving absolute zero. This changed how the business approaches decisions, from replacing equipment to everyday choices like switching off lights, embedding sustainability thinking into the way the company operates.

Actions Taken

The carbon reduction plan helped to identify the business's main source of emissions: fuel and transport. With this clarity, a series of targeted actions followed. For example, anti-idling policies were introduced, driver behaviour monitoring was put in place through telematics, and fuel efficiency measures such as tyre pressure checks and speed management became part of standard operations.

The confidence gained through the programme also enabled Donna to take on the environmental requirements needed to progress from bronze to silver level in the Fleet Operator Recognition Scheme (FORS), which included completing a carbon calculation for fuel emissions. This accreditation was achieved in May 2025 and successfully re-audited with no remedial action required. Staff engagement was central to the process: regular toolbox talks, training, and interactive e-learning modules were used to build a culture of awareness and shared responsibility around carbon reduction.

Outcomes and Benefits

Professional credibility and new business opportunities: Achieving FORS Silver has strengthened the business's professional standing. The accreditation, combined with the carbon reduction plan, has enabled Rogers Metal Management to meet the requirements of highly regulated clients, including government-funded institutions. This has translated into new business opportunities: the company estimates gaining six to eight new key regular customers in the past 12 months.

Cost savings: While direct cost savings are difficult to quantify precisely, improved fuel efficiency through driver behaviour policies, vehicle telematics, and the five-year plan for renewing plant and equipment with more efficient alternatives is expected to contribute to savings over time. Newer vehicles and machinery offer better fuel economy and lower maintenance costs, contributing to gradual savings as equipment is replaced over time.

Emissions monitoring and baseline: The programme gave the business an established carbon emissions baseline. Quarterly fuel emissions are now monitored and reported, with written commentary explaining any variations. This ongoing tracking means the business is well prepared for any future mandatory reporting requirements. Moreover, all the actions taken so far are expected to contribute to a significant reduction in overall emissions over time. For example, over the past 12 months (since March 2025), total GHG emissions decreased by almost 3%.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The programme's impact has reached beyond the business itself. Donna was invited to take part in a panel discussion at the Resource and Waste Management Expo at the NEC in Birmingham, representing small businesses as part of an industry carbon reduction project. The experience provided an opportunity to share the company's journey and encourage other small businesses to take sustainability actions, explaining that even small changes, such as anti-idling, switching to LEDs, or updating equipment, count towards reducing carbon.

Donna would recommend the programme to other businesses, describing it as an accessible and well-structured starting point that breaks carbon reduction down into manageable steps. The group format of the webinars was particularly valued, as hearing other businesses' experiences helped put the company's own challenges into perspective.

“Being on the webinars with other businesses, you could hear their story, and it helped you understand your own.”

Future priorities include continuing to monitor and reduce fuel emissions, exploring additional accreditations such as ISO, and reviewing emerging alternatives for processes such as oxypropane cutting as these become more cost-effective.

PARTICIPANT NAME: Nikki Lambert

COMPANY NAME: Lambert Home Builds

INITIATIVE: Green skills training by Abingdon and Witney college

THEME B: Skills and Workforce Development



Introduction

Nikki Lambert co-directs a small construction company with her husband, based in Oxfordshire. The company specialises in construction work for private clients, with a particular focus on heritage projects, thermal upgrades, and retrofit work, alongside more conventional building services such as extensions and renovations. In recent years, growing client demand around climate and environmental concerns has driven the business to expand its retrofit offering. Motivated by this shift, the participant enrolled in a Level 3 Retrofit Advisor course through the green skills programme led by Abingdon and Witney college. The primary goals were to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to provide clients with accurate, well-informed advice on the benefits and risks associated with sustainable construction. The participant also sought to better recognise business opportunities linked to sustainability, understand how sustainability principles could be applied across different project scenarios, and strengthen the company's credibility and client recognition in this growing sustainability area.



Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

Prior to the course, the participant explains that the understanding and perception of sustainability was largely shaped by media coverage and based on personal assumptions. The programme provided not only foundational knowledge but also, most importantly, the correct terminology required to engage in more professional conversations with the clients around sustainability. This improved the ability to advise clients and identify and use credible sources of information. In this respect, a significant area of development concerned client communication. The course equipped the participant not only with verbal skills but also with practical tools, such as flowcharts and diagrams, to be able to explain sustainability concepts more effectively. This fostered more informed conversations with clients and contributed to more successful project outcomes. In particular, the participant explained that, after the course, felt more confident when advising clients.

Beyond individual skill development, the course facilitated valuable networking with like-minded professionals, opening doors to new learning, business, and engagement opportunities within the sustainability field. For example, the organisation started to explore new ways of communicating sustainability to stakeholders. For example, the participant describes how they have recently been involved in a podcast to share their experience with retrofit, an initiative that would not have been pursued otherwise.

Actions Taken

Following the course, several changes were implemented across the business. In terms of marketing and client communication, the company developed a more structured approach to engaging customers on retrofit-related projects and adjusted how it promotes its services to better reflect the sustainable direction of the business.

The company has also increased the use of sustainable materials, particularly natural insulations such as wood fibre, moving away from petrochemical-based alternatives. The participant acknowledged that spreading awareness of these practices can be challenging, particularly when engaging with professional groups resistant to change or regulators who may lack understanding of certain sustainability-driven product choices. The course proved especially valuable in building the communication skills needed to secure buy-in from diverse stakeholders. The participant noted that developing more informed consumers and stakeholders would help the wider industry progress more effectively.

Outcomes and Benefits

Reputation and credibility: While no direct cost savings were identified, the participant recognised that the investment in upskilling is having a positive effect on the company's reputation and credibility. Therefore, the benefits are less linked to immediate financial savings and more about how the business positions itself for the future.

Carbon footprint reduction: The shift towards natural insulation and sustainable materials has contributed to a reduction in the company's carbon footprint. Additionally, the company has been exploring the installation of solar panels to charge tools and batteries during the day, a decision directly informed by the course.

Waste reduction and new processes: The transition to wood fibre insulation has eliminated insulation waste. The company has also adopted a broader practice of repurposing and reusing materials wherever possible, resulting in a notable reduction in overall construction waste.

Staff and customer engagement: The participant has focused on educating employees about the company's sustainability goals and the reasoning behind these practices. This has led to greater staff motivation.

Business growth and exposure: Improved marketing and enhanced credibility in sustainability practices have attracted new clients interested in the company's retrofit services. Furthermore, the company's involvement with the Federation of Master Builders has led to it being featured in promotional work highlighting retrofit, providing additional exposure and business opportunities.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The participant described the programme as personally beneficial in providing the credibility and accreditation needed to steer the business in the desired direction. The course also opened opportunities to network and engage with other professionals in the sustainability space. Importantly, the participant noted that while this direction may have eventually been pursued independently, the programme significantly accelerated the process. In the future, the company is considering exploring the integration of renewables, including solar energy and electric vehicles, and is actively seeking funding opportunities to support these initiatives. Emerging government schemes such as the Warm Homes Plan are also being monitored, although the participant acknowledged that there is still a lot of uncertainty around these programmes. The participant also expressed a strong interest in deepening community engagement, emphasising the importance of local workers and the social value linked to sustainability practices. The course reinforced the interest in this area and the desire to find ways in which the business can contribute to and benefit from stronger community connections. Finally, the participant highlighted the significance of feeling part of a wider community of sustainability-minded professionals, rather than working in isolation, and stressed the importance of sharing success stories to inspire and support others on a similar journey.

“The opportunity to undertake the funded course, the Level 3 in Domestic Retrofit Advice was an amazing stepping stone into the world of Retrofit, opening my eyes to the opportunities available and the importance of communication with our clients as the key to gaining their trust in us. Having this certification has given us credibility and facilitated further learning in the field and offered opportunities to expand our services too, growing as a business.”

PARTICIPANT NAME: Anonymous (individual participant)

INITIATIVE: Green Skills Level 2 course - Retrofit Practical Workshops

THEME B: Skills and Workforce Development

Introduction

The participant does not currently run a business in the construction or retrofit sector, but is in the process of a career change, considering a potential move into retrofit. The participant is already qualified as a domestic energy assessor and carries out Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs). Several motivations drove the decision to join the Green Skills Level 2 course (Retrofit Practical Workshops) run by Abingdon and Witney college. The participant had previously started a master's degree in Green Building at the Centre for Alternative Technology and wanted to continue learning in this field. There was also a strong personal interest in retrofitting the participant's own home, combined with a desire to gain practical expertise in the sector. There was also a financial motivation to join the course: undertaking retrofit work independently would be significantly cheaper than relying on external contractors. In this respect, the participant also expressed a generic distrust towards contractors' work.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

The participant described their understanding of sustainability and net zero prior to the course as "average". However, unlike other participants, the participant already benefitted from a solid theoretical foundation gained through previous academic study (master's degree). As a result, the theoretical components of the course were less impactful for this individual. The real value consisted in the practical, hands-on elements of the programme, which the participant identified as a key strength.

By the end of the course, the participant reported gaining confidence in practical skills related to retrofit installation, including work on floors, walls, insulation, and airtightness. This experiential learning component gave the participant the confidence needed to tackle these tasks independently, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application.

Actions Taken

At the time of the interview, the participant hasn't put any sustainability actions into practice yet. However, the course helped to boost and accelerate existing plans rather than creating entirely new motivations. The participant explained that, at the end of the course, gained the confidence and ability to order the right materials, assess what is suitable for the specific property, and carry out insulation and airtightness work as trained. Financial and time constraints were highlighted as the primary reasons for not yet implementing retrofit measures. The participant also noted that additional training on the funding aspects of retrofit projects would be beneficial, suggesting a gap in the programme's coverage of the financial and practical realities of undertaking this type of work.

Outcomes and Benefits

Cost savings: The participant identified significant potential cost savings as a direct outcome of the course. The knowledge gained has built confidence to carry out aspects of the retrofit independently, which is essential given that the overall budget does not cover the cost of the planned work. In fact, quotes from external contractors for the entire project amounted to approximately a quarter of a million pounds, with professional day rates running into hundreds of pounds. By developing the skills necessary to undertake the work independently, without external contractors, the participant expects substantial savings on labour costs.

Emissions reductions: The participant tends to express the benefits of the course and retrofit implementation in holistic terms, looking beyond energy savings and reduced fuel bills to the broader picture of reducing reliance on fossil fuels in general. The long-term intention includes transitioning from a gas boiler to an electric heat source, such as a heat pump, as part of a comprehensive approach to lowering the property's carbon footprint.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

Networking and connections: The programme provided valuable contacts and resources. The participant found this particularly helpful, as one of the key challenges in retrofit is knowing where to start and where to source appropriate materials. The course also offered opportunities to connect with local individuals who share similar interests and goals, though the participant noted that not all connections are necessarily collaborative, as some participants may be at different stages and potentially competing for the same opportunities in the retrofit sector.

Knowledge sharing and future plans: The participant expressed a strong desire to pass on the knowledge gained through the course, whether through formal training settings or informal, community-based initiatives. Future plans include pursuing a retrofit coordinator qualification and potentially building a career in the sustainability sector.

Wider community impact: The participant did not observe significant wider community impact from this specific programme. However, broader reflections on the programme included the need for council-led initiatives to educate young people about retrofit and green careers. The participant highlighted a disconnect between the national conversation around green skills and the lack of joined-up thinking in terms of the national curriculum, suggesting a knowledge gap among educators that limits young people's exposure to what could be rewarding career paths in sustainability.

The participant would recommend the training to others, emphasising the unique value of hands-on learning. While online courses and talks can provide theoretical knowledge, the programme's practical component offered something rarely available elsewhere: the opportunity to develop real skills and the confidence to apply them. The participant expressed a wish that such training could be made available to more people, and especially to younger people.

PARTICIPANT NAME: Annabel Nicholls
COMPANY NAME: ASM Auto Recycling
INITIATIVE: Energy audit by Low Carbon Hub
THEME C: Decarbonisation and Energy Reduction



Introduction

Annabel is the Environmental and Sustainability Coordinator at ASM Auto Recycling, where she leads the company's Net Zero and ESG projects. ASM is a car recycling and salvage business operating across three main areas: a fleet of car transporters that collect non-roadworthy vehicles; an online auction for vehicles that can be repaired; and a dismantling and green parts operation, where reusable components are removed and stored in a dedicated warehouse before vehicles reach end-of-life and are passed to a sister company for further processing.



Annabel first heard about Low Carbon Hub's energy audit initiative at a local business forum and the motivation to engage was twofold: the potential carbon savings and the cost savings, both of which aligned with the organisation's net zero goal of 2040. The energy audit focused on the larger, older building on site, where an external expert's perspective was felt to be most valuable:

"It's just nice to have an expert that comes in, sees everything with fresh eyes, and gives us a clear and physical plan to be able to move forward."

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

Given Annabel's dedicated sustainability role in the business, her understanding of net zero and sustainability was already comprehensive prior to the energy audit. The most valuable contribution of the programme was therefore not foundational knowledge but the technical knowledge and the structured analysis the auditors provided. In this respect, the business particularly valued the strategic dimension of the recommendations, that helped to identify, for example, which parts of the building would yield the greatest savings. Each recommendation included both payback periods and quantified carbon savings, removing the need for in-house calculations and providing transparent, credible, third-party evidence to support business cases put forward to higher management. This has increased the overall business confidence in making investment decisions on sustainability actions.

Actions Taken

The most significant action prompted by the audit is a full LED lighting upgrade with motion and light sensors across the older building. Beyond the expected carbon and energy savings, this upgrade will also transform the working environment, bringing modern, brighter lighting to dark areas of the building and creating a more pleasant space for everyone. The audit report played a key role in enabling ASM to successfully secure a green grant to fund the upgrade, allowing the work to be completed in one phase rather than incrementally over several years.

The audit also sparked a series of further improvements across the site. In one outbuilding, conversations triggered by the audit led to the discovery of an unused electric heater, which has now replaced the previous, less efficient heating arrangement and is working effectively even during the coldest days. Moreover, a thermal imaging survey of the warehouse, inspired by the audit's recommendations, identified valuable insights into heat loss that will inform future improvements. Following guidance from Low Carbon Hub, a tailored alternative heating solution is now being trialled in the main warehouse, representing a more environmentally friendly option than the previous gas heaters. Timers on office air conditioning and heating systems have also been optimised. More broadly, the audit accelerated existing plans, opened up new conversations across the business, and provided a structured framework for prioritising sustainability actions.

Outcomes and Benefits

Energy and emissions reduction: Energy use in the audited building was reduced by 5% between 2024 and 2025, with a corresponding 5% reduction in associated emissions. This was achieved before the major LED upgrade, suggesting further significant improvements are still to come.

New processes and supply chain: The supply chain has been expanded locally. Moreover, new operational practices have been introduced around heating in outbuildings and timer settings on office systems, making the business more energy efficient.

Staff engagement and awareness: Audit recommendations have been shared with relevant team members, and carbon literacy training has since been introduced internally. Information about the audit and the partnership with Low Carbon Hub has been included in the company's internal newsletter. In this respect, the staff have been very engaged with this type of training, with colleagues noticing energy waste, taking interest in sustainability initiatives, and drawing connections between workplace and home energy use.

External recognition and visibility: The Thame Sustainability Champions Initiative was referenced in the organisation's successful application for the Enterprise Oxfordshire Environmentally Sustainable Business of the Year award. As part of the initiative, Low Carbon Hub presented to the group and shared insights from its work on energy audits and sustainability initiatives, reinforcing ASM's ongoing commitment to reducing its environmental impact. The strength of the application led not only to ASM winning the Environmentally Sustainable Business of the Year category, but also receiving the overall winner award across all categories. ASM has also communicated its sustainability work, including its partnership with Low Carbon Hub, through social media channels.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The programme was successful in providing a clear, structured plan for moving forward on sustainability. For example, Annabel valued the way the recommendations were broken down by impact, cost, and payback period, making it straightforward to distinguish quick wins from larger long-term investments. The audit gave the sustainability work a credible, evidence-based foundation that has supported decision-making and unlocked funding opportunities.

Looking ahead, sustainability priorities include completing the LED upgrade, installing the new compressor, and tracking the resulting energy and carbon savings. The organisation has achieved Bronze Carbon Literate status and is working towards Silver, which requires training around 40 staff members. ASM is also exploring options to decarbonise its vehicle fleet, including a recently paused HVO trial that they hope to resume once fuel market conditions stabilise.

In terms of wider influence and impact, Annabel noted that local council meetings have actively encouraged other businesses to undertake similar audits, and that conversations at networking events frequently come back to sustainability topics. Engagement with the audit has also led to new connections with local sustainability champions and other businesses, opening up opportunities for collaboration and shared learning that would not otherwise have arisen.

"I think the programme was really important, because it gave us a very clear plan on how we should be moving forward, and identify where the big savings were, but also the little wins."

PARTICIPANT NAME: Alastair Dick-Cleland
COMPANY NAME: Hardwick Estate
INITIATIVE: Energy audit by Low Carbon Hub
THEME C: Decarbonisation and Energy Reduction



Introduction

Hardwick Estate is an estate of around 1,000 acres in South Oxfordshire, currently privately owned but in the process of transitioning to a community-owned charitable trust, potentially becoming the first of its kind in England for a privately owned landed estate. The trust will ultimately hold all the estate's assets, including the land and 27 tenanted houses. Alastair is the property manager, responsible for the estate's property portfolio and for ensuring the houses are well maintained, repaired, and improved.

The estate joined the Energy Solutions Oxfordshire (ESOX) programme through its membership with Low Carbon Hub. With a housing stock that is largely pre-20th century, including Hardwick House, a grade-one listed 16th-century mansion that is expensive and difficult to heat, the estate was keen to access expert input in order to better manage energy costs and gather information to guide future decisions on making these complex, traditional buildings more energy efficient.



Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

With a background in building conservation and the care of historic buildings, Alastair already had a good understanding of sustainability, Net Zero, and of the best suited approaches to improve traditional houses. The programme did not include formal training, but it supported ongoing, practical learning: the energy action plan provided a range of external links to companies, experts, and innovative products to explore, which encouraged further research into options such as high-temperature heat pumps.

Overall, Alastair felt the programme increased confidence in taking energy-efficiency actions. One area that remains genuinely complex is the question of moisture movement and vapour permeability in traditional buildings where high-performance foam insulation can deliver low U-values but may not always be the most appropriate choice for old houses. This is an area where more specialist advice would be valuable, reflecting the careful, considered approach the estate takes to its heritage buildings.

Actions Taken

The action plan provided a long list of recommendations, ranging from simple, low-cost measures to more substantial investments. From the outset, it was understood that these would be worked through steadily over time rather than all at once. Progress has been real and ongoing. The estate has rolled out secondary glazing across the east wing of Hardwick House, replaced electric panel heaters with an extended wet central heating system running off the biomass boiler, and reorganised the biomass system to release capacity for the main house.

Beyond the specific buildings covered in the energy report, the estate has carried out wider improvements aligned with the plan's recommendations. A pair of cottages in need of re-roofing were insulated throughout during the works, and the estate has rolled out draught-proofing measures supported by additional grants from Low Carbon Hub.

Outcomes and Benefits

Improved comfort and cost savings: Because most properties are tenanted, precise cost-saving data is difficult to capture. However, a clear and immediate outcome of the secondary glazing and draught-proofing has been improved comfort, with tenants reporting that their homes feel noticeably warmer, which is also likely to reduce energy use and costs over time.

Emissions reduction: While the estate's primary motivation is comfort and affordability for tenants, reducing emissions remains an important part of the picture. Several measures contributed to this, and further plans are in progress, including exploring a solar array and battery storage as part of a building redevelopment, and a longer-term ambition to replace oil boilers in around eight properties with heat pumps, where these prove suitable and cost-effective for tenants.

Customer engagement: Engaging tenants has been central to the estate's approach. The draught-busting grants have been promoted through newsletters, and tenants are encouraged to report any issues with energy or draughts. This collaborative relationship is helping to ensure the right solutions are found for each individual building.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The Hardwick community is already energy-aware, with many residents interested in sustainability, nature, and conservation. As the estate becomes a community-led charity, the hope is that the community itself will increasingly lead on estate-wide initiatives; the transition is also expected to open up new funding streams. Notably, the estate deliberately offers housing below market rent to support local people in land-based work, a social commitment that shapes how it balances sustainability investment across its priorities.

Alastair's main sustainability priority is improving the energy performance of the estate's housing, particularly in light of forthcoming energy performance certificate requirements, with recent works on vacant properties including loft and underfloor insulation. There is also an aspiration, as part of the charitable vision, for the estate to act as an exemplar to similar organisations, and to broaden public access to the land, including welcoming community groups to experience nature and farming.

Alastair would recommend the ESOx support to others, valuing the way the report brings specific and general advice together in one place, along with useful links to follow up. The flexibility of the approach was also appreciated, allowing the estate to work through the recommendations at its own pace and according to what it can afford.

“Hardwick Estate has a wide range of historic buildings and traditionally constructed houses, and in the main, all are challenging to retrofit in practical, affordable and appropriate ways. The input of ESOx looking in detail at several of the properties on the Estate has been of great help.”

PARTICIPANT NAME: Lisa Gale
COMPANY NAME: Vale and Downland Museum
INITIATIVE: Rural England Prosperity Fund
THEME C: Decarbonisation and Energy Reduction



Introduction

Lisa Gale is the museum manager of the Vale and Downland Museum, an independent museum based in Wantage. The museum was founded approximately 50 years ago by local community members who wished to preserve and share the town's history. It opened formally in 1982 and has been running continuously since. The museum is open all year round with free entry, relying on donations, a small amount of council funding, and ongoing fundraising to supplement its income. It attracts around 55,000 visitors per year and offers a wide range of activities including for example family events and book groups.

The organisation received funding through the Rural England Prosperity Fund to install solar panels on the museum building. The motivations to apply for the funding were twofold: to reduce the museum's environmental impact by generating its own energy, and to address a pressing financial concern due to rising energy costs. The funding helped to achieve what would otherwise have remained a longer-term aspiration, as the museum did not have the resources for a large one-off investment in clean energy:

"I don't think we would have done it without the funding. It certainly would've been a longer-term priority."

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

Lisa explains that the journey towards sustainability has not followed a conventional order and describes how a learning-as-you-go approach has been part of the whole process, with knowledge and understanding of sustainability developing incrementally as new opportunities arose.

The programme, combined with additional carbon literacy training, significantly improved the understanding of the broader sustainability picture. Practical skills and knowledge were also gained around the logistics of implementing sustainability measures on a listed building, including navigating planning permission, liaising with neighbouring institutions such as a preschool and a secondary school, and coordinating with trustees and contractors. Overall, Lisa now feels considerably more confident in taking sustainability actions as a result of the funding programme.

Actions Taken

The main sustainability action funded through the Rural England Prosperity Fund was the installation of solar panels on the museum. Additional match funding was secured from Museum Development Southeast through their Going Green grant, in order to cover the total cost. The installation required careful logistical planning due to the building's listed status and its proximity to a children's nursery and a secondary school, which restricted when and how the work could be carried out.

The solar panel funding acted as a catalyst for further sustainability actions. Following the installation, the museum commissioned an energy assessment that identified a list of potential additional improvements. For example, subsequent actions included the installation of secondary glazing in the older part of the building, replacement of all halogen lighting with LEDs throughout the museum, the fitting of more energy-efficient boilers, and small practical measures such as replacing the letterbox to improve thermal efficiency. Lisa explains that, without the initial participation in the funding programme, all these actions would probably not have taken place. For this reason, the funding initiative was particularly important for the sustainability journey of the museum.

Outcomes and Benefits

Cost savings and emissions reduction: The museum achieved a 54% reduction in energy spending between 2024 and 2025. The solar panels generated 15.3 MWh in 2025, accounting for 56% of the museum's overall energy consumption. Because the installation was externally funded, the financial benefits were immediate, with no need to offset costs against the investment.

“We’ve reduced our energy spending by 54% between 2024 and 2025. And in the last year (in 2025), 56% of our consumption, so more than half, was generated by the solar panels.”

Staff and visitor engagement: All staff have been kept informed of the sustainability changes so that they can better engage with visitors who have questions in this area. The museum is also developing a visitor-facing interactive touchscreen, in collaboration with the University of Reading, which displays live solar panel data alongside accessible comparisons, quizzes, and tips for energy savings at home. The sustainability journey has been communicated through the museum's mailing list and social media.

Community engagement: The museum has integrated sustainability themes into its programming, including, for example, a family fun day focused on environmental sustainability and an upcoming exhibition on fast fashion. The initiatives have prompted conversations about sustainability with the community members that would not otherwise have taken place.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The funding programme played a pivotal role in shaping the museum's sustainability journey. The initial solar panel project provided the kickstart needed to begin exploring what was possible, and since then the organisation has continued to identify and pursue further sustainability opportunities. The local nature of the grant was particularly valued, as it offered a closer working relationship and practical guidance on how to shape applications effectively, an advantage not typically available when competing for national grants.

The museum has also joined the Green Arts Oxfordshire Network as a direct result of the recent involvement in the project funded by the Rural England Prosperity Fund, connecting with other arts organisations and heritage sites to share learning and best practice.

The next priority is to extend sustainability efforts to the museum's café and shop, for example looking at waste reduction and potential ways to reduce the carbon footprint of supplies and products. Lisa explains that once the sustainability journey began, with the Rural England Prosperity Fund, it opened doors to further possibilities and support, and that the programme provided the essential starting point for what has become an ongoing commitment to sustainability:

“This funding opportunity introduced us to the possibilities of what was available and got us started on that journey of sustainability that we’re still working on. It was very important for us because although solar panels would have been on our list, I’m not sure we’d have still done it if we hadn’t had that funding.”

PARTICIPANT NAME: Becky Reid
COMPANY NAME: Her Land
INITIATIVE: Rural England Prosperity Fund
THEME C: Decarbonisation and Energy Reduction



Introduction

Her Land is a volunteer-run social enterprise focused on improving the health and wellbeing of women and girls through different projects based on the heritage-rich Manor farm just outside Thame. The organisation runs programmes centred on biodiversity, connection to the land, and climate-friendly food growing, with a long-term vision of creating a truly healing space. Becky Reid, one of three directors, leads much of the day-to-day work alongside a small team of dedicated volunteers.



As a first-time social enterprise founder with a background in the charity and public sectors, Becky was drawn to the OSEP programme for the support it could offer during a critical early stage of the organisation's development. The motivation was clear: running a social enterprise can feel like navigating without a map, and having access to people who had been through it before felt like an invaluable opportunity. As a social enterprise, the organisation did not always feel it fitted neatly into conventional business support settings, making OSEP's tailored approach particularly relevant.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

While the funding did not include a formal training component, it unlocked new skills and capabilities for the organisation. Since the funding enabled new partnerships with independent practitioners, Her Land has been able to facilitate activities for example around food growing, foraging, yoga and meditation, all rooted in nature connection and sustainability. As Becky, one of the directors, described it, the funding allowed the organisation to bring in people with specialist knowledge and create a space where that knowledge could be passed on to the wider community. In particular, this is centred around the belief that nature connection drives behaviour change. When people have the opportunity to be in a natural space, growing food, foraging or cooking, they develop a deeper care for the environment. In this way, the funding has given Her Land the practical means to offer these transformative experiences at scale.

Actions Taken

The capital funding covered two key investments. The first was equipment for an outdoor kitchen, enabling the organisation to launch cookery workshops based on a simple but powerful concept: grow it, pick it, cook it, eat it. These workshops, delivered in partnership with another organisation, are designed as a paid service and represent a new income stream for Her Land. The model is being piloted and refined, with the aim of also providing free places for women on low incomes or those referred through support services.

The second investment was a ride-on lawnmower, a practical but transformative purchase. The site is large and grows quickly, and previously keeping on top of it required hiring an external contractor at approximately £300 per day throughout the growing season. The mower has not only eliminated that cost but has opened up previously inaccessible areas of the site, making space for new activities such as outdoor yoga and meditation sessions.

A new partnership model has also been developed, with independent self-employed practitioners delivering workshops on-site. This approach is being trialled as a sustainable revenue model, and volunteers are being trained to use the new equipment and support the expanded programme.

Outcomes and Benefits

Cost savings and emissions reduction: The most immediate saving comes from no longer needing to hire an external contractor for site maintenance, eliminating a regular cost of approximately £300 per visit throughout the growing season. Additionally, by bringing the mowing in-house, the transport emissions associated with the contractor travelling to site with heavy machinery have been removed.

New activities and customer reach: The funding has enabled the launch of a variety of different workshops, ranging from outdoor cookery and foraging to yoga and meditation. With an expected 8 to 10 participants per session, the organisation anticipates reaching approximately 100 new people in the initial phase alone. This represents a significant expansion of the existing customer base.

New income streams and partnerships: The funding has opened up a completely new revenue model. The site can now function as a venue for independent practitioners, generating income through a percentage-share arrangement. This, combined with the paid cookery workshops, provides the organisation with diversified and stable income sources, supporting business continuity. New partnership opportunities have also emerged, including a collaboration with a local family centre.

“It has given us that running start to generate an income that otherwise would have taken us much longer to get to.”

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

Becky described the funding as essential. Without it, the organisation would have needed to generate the money to purchase the equipment itself, delaying progress significantly. The capital investment provided what was described as a running start, removing practical blocks and providing the resources to move quickly and at the right moment. The grant administration process itself was praised as exceptionally accessible and well-designed, making the experience of applying straightforward.

Future priorities include piloting, refining, and marketing the new workshop programme over the coming year, with the aim of building a stable income stream. The site's unique natural setting, offering outdoor cooking, foraging, and wellness experiences that are rarely available elsewhere, enables Her Land to make a distinctive contribution to both community wellbeing and environmental education.

PARTICIPANT NAME: Helen Johns
COMPANY NAME: Thame Players Theatre Company
INITIATIVE: Rural England Prosperity Fund
THEME C: Decarbonisation and Energy Reduction



Introduction

Thame Players Theatre is an amateur theatre company with over 80 years of history and the only dedicated theatre and cinema in Thame. The company is a registered charity and operates from a building that is over 100 years old, located in a conservation area. It is a busy venue, hosting five of its own productions each year alongside approximately 25 visiting acts, 25 cinema screenings, and a range of community projects.

Helen Johns, the theatre's fundraising and sustainability champion, led the application for the REPF funding to install solar panels on the building. The theatre has always been committed to environmental sustainability: back in 2023, a carbon and energy assessment carried out by Energy Solutions Oxfordshire, funded by Thame Town Council, had identified a range of improvements and served as the starting point for additional sustainability actions. The solar panel project was the most ambitious of these, and the REPF grant was the major funding source that made it possible, alongside contributions from Westmill Solar and local councils.



Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

The theatre had a strong existing culture of sustainability, from reusing materials across productions to careful waste management. However, the carbon and energy assessment and the subsequent solar panel project significantly deepened the organisation's understanding of its environmental footprint and the practical actions available to reduce it. Helen described the entire process as a learning curve, from understanding the technicalities of solar panel installation to navigating planning requirements in a conservation area.

"It was a learning curve, without a doubt. It was completely new to us, and we learned quite a lot throughout this process."

A particularly valuable lesson was learning how to manage energy storage for an evening venue. Since the theatre operates primarily at night, electricity generated during the day needs to be stored for later use during performances: this required batteries to be installed outside the building. This process has also shaped the organisation's thinking about future energy management, including the possibility of adding a third battery.

Actions Taken

The primary action was the installation of approximately 25 solar panels on the southwest-facing roof of the theatre. The project required planning permission due to the conservation area location. The solar panels were positioned to minimise visibility from the street, and despite a long planning phase, the physical installation was completed smoothly in four to five weeks.

Outcomes and Benefits

Cost savings and emissions reduction: In the 15 months since installation, the solar panels have already saved the theatre over £3,700 in energy costs, and the organisation is past the halfway point towards recouping its initial outlay (its own contribution to the project), with break-even expected by mid-2026 or earlier. The environmental impact has been equally significant: the panels have so far saved 9.62 tonnes of CO₂ and 4.83 tonnes of coal equivalent, with an impact comparable to planting 159 trees.

Audience and community engagement: The theatre communicates its sustainability journey to different audiences through a monthly newsletter and an annual open day. Helen noted a growing interest and awareness among the theatre's clientele of the organisation's environmental footprint and the steps being taken to reduce it.

Networking and visibility: The solar panel project has strengthened connections with many local businesses and organisations, creating several networking opportunities. For example, the theatre now hosts the Thame Town Council Sustainability Awards, further positioning the theatre as a local hub for sustainability. The organisation is also in the final stages of applying for a bronze Sustainability Champion Award, reinforcing its commitment to sustainability with both clients and the wider community.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The REPF funding proved critical to making the solar panel project a reality. Helen explained that, without the grant, the theatre could not have afforded this type of installation. While the organisation would have continued to pursue the project, it would have taken significantly longer and required funding from multiple additional sources. The REPF grant, as the major contribution, accelerated the timeline and made the process achievable.

“There is no way we would have been able to afford solar panels without the REPF funding.”

The theatre now plans to review the recommendations from its 2023 carbon and energy assessment, funded by Thame Town Council, as a guide for future sustainability improvements. Priorities include, for example, completing the transition to energy-efficient lighting across the entire building, addressing remaining areas of heat loss, and potentially adding a third battery to maximise solar energy storage. The organisation also intends to continue building its local sustainability network and sharing its experience with other organisations.

PARTICIPANT NAME: Jake Swinhoe
COMPANY NAME: Velocity Cycle Couriers
INITIATIVE: Rural England Prosperity Fund
THEME C: Decarbonisation and Energy Reduction

Introduction

Velocity Cycle Couriers is a zero-emission delivery company founded by Jake Swinhoe and Will Pepper just over four years ago, working largely across Oxfordshire and the south of England. The company operates electric vehicles and cargo bikes, with a focus on reducing pollution and carbon emissions.

One of the organisation's key projects is Ox Farm to Fork, connecting local agro-ecological farmers, growers, and food producers with a marketplace, with the aim of getting freshly produced, naturally grown food into the kitchens of hospitals, schools, and other organisations across Oxfordshire. The project currently serves 18 colleges in Oxford, with produce collected from farms across the county, sorted at a central warehouse, and delivered into the city centre by cargo bikes. As the project grew, so did the need for a temperature-controlled vehicle to keep fresh produce chilled during collection and delivery. The REPF funding made it possible to acquire a fully electric refrigerated van, a purchase that would otherwise have been beyond the company's budget.



Top: Velocity Cycle Couriers and Proof Social Bakehouse.

Bottom: Velocity Cycle Couriers and Blacklands Organics, one of the main growers for the Oxfarm to Fork project.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

Sustainability is central to Velocity Cycle Couriers' business; therefore, the company's understanding of environmental impact and zero-emission transport and logistics was already well established. However, the process of acquiring and operating the new refrigerated vehicle brought practical learning. Jake and the team spent time researching the electric refrigerated vehicle market, understanding which models are most reliable and energy-efficient, and how temperature-controlled logistics work in practice.

Working closely with local growers also deepened the team's knowledge of cold chain management (e.g. different types of produce may require different temperatures). Learning to tailor the service to each producer's specific needs has been an ongoing process that continues to evolve as the team discovers more about the vehicle's capabilities.

Actions Taken

The REPF funding enabled the purchase of an all-electric, temperature-controlled van, a vehicle that also features solar panels on its roof, allowing much of the refrigeration to run on solar energy. Finding the right vehicle within a short timeframe was not straightforward, as a brand-new purpose-built model was beyond the budget and the second-hand market for electric refrigerated vans is a niche space. After extensive searching, a suitable vehicle was sourced and new operational systems were introduced, including temperature-check protocols agreed with individual clients, to ensure produce is handled and delivered at the correct temperature.

Outcomes and Benefits

Emissions reduction: The vehicle directly replaces diesel-fuelled alternatives that would otherwise be used to transport temperature-sensitive goods. As explained by Jake, one of the founders, every journey the van makes is one less diesel vehicle on the road, contributing to cleaner air across the communities the company serves.

Business growth and new opportunities: The new vehicle has opened up new opportunities not only for Velocity, but also for the local producers the company works with. Two new producers have joined the Ox Farm to Fork network, including a cheese producer whose goods can now be transported safely. A microgreens grower has also been able to expand production, knowing the entire supply chain can maintain the required temperature. Existing growers have also been able to diversify into more temperature-sensitive products such as fresh salads. Beyond the food sector, the van has also opened up a new opportunity: medical transportation. The company is now exploring the possibility of offering a professional delivery service for medicines and medical supplies across the county.

Customer engagement and visibility: The branded vehicle has attracted interest from existing and potential clients. With clear messaging about zero-emission, temperature-controlled delivery, the van serves as both a practical tool and a visible reflection of the company's values.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

Beyond the direct benefits to the business, what stands out most about the impact of the REPF funding is the community it supports. Behind Velocity's operations sits a network of 21 local producers who all farm with an agro-ecological approach, by treating the soil with care, avoiding damaging fertilisers, and employing local people. The refrigerated van has given these producers the confidence to expand and the assurance that their goods will reach customers in the right condition. The result is a connected cycle: local food, grown sustainably, delivered without emissions across Oxfordshire. This circular approach extends further: for example, the company works with five local coffee roasters, delivering beans to cafés across the county and then collecting the spent coffee grounds, which are sent to a partner organisation to be turned into bioproducts and heat logs so that nothing goes to waste.

The next goal is to expand Ox Farm to Fork to supply local schools with locally grown food. The company is also exploring new transport technologies, as part of its plans for cleaner urban logistics.

“We’re supporting this community, allowing them more opportunities, which means they can continue to grow and do more for the environment.”

PARTICIPANT NAME: Oliver O'Dell
COMPANY NAME: Smart Greens UK
INITIATIVE: Rural England Prosperity Fund
THEME C: Decarbonisation and Energy Reduction

Introduction

Smart Greens UK is a community interest company and social enterprise based in Oxfordshire, with a mission to make fresh produce more available locally, and to educate and engage young people around food and food production.

Based on around an acre of land on an educational farm, the organisation runs a variety of activities, including a veg-box scheme, farmers' markets, a schools' STEM teaching programme, and a microgreens contract supplying chefs at local colleges.

Oliver, the founder and co-director of Smart Greens UK, leads the organisation operationally. With a 25-year background in government regeneration and community building, and many years of professional experience writing grant applications, Oliver set up the enterprise with long-term sustainability and resilience in mind. Installing solar PV systems had been a long-held aspiration, seen as a way to future-proof the organisation and secure its continuity by reducing exposure to energy costs. The Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) offered a well-timed fit: the farm's timber-frame building was designed in advance with a south-facing roof at the right angle to accommodate solar panels, so the grant aligned naturally with plans already in place.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

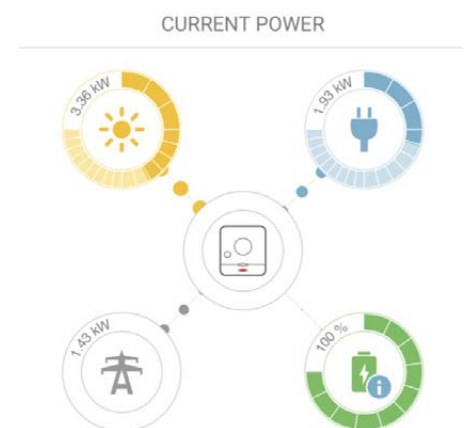
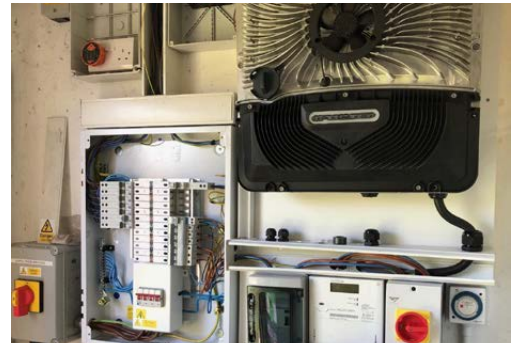
Environmental sustainability was already embedded in the organisation's ethos, with practices such as no-dig growing and vertical farming built into the teaching offer. Moreover, Oliver's established expertise in grant funding, project delivery, and business planning meant these were already familiar areas.

Where the experience added value was in deepening understanding of the practical side of running a capital project of this kind, getting the business process of capital investment right through the grant programme, and working through the technical details of sizing and future-proofing a solar installation.

Actions Taken

The REPF grant funded the installation of 20 solar PV panels and a 10kW solar battery, with the system designed to generate solar energy, store what is not immediately used, and draw on the battery overnight. The immediate purpose was to reduce the cost of running the farm's aquaponics system, a recirculating set-up using fish and plants, powered by an electric pump that was previously expensive to run on the site's business tariff.

What makes this case distinctive is how one action opened the door to several others. By cutting the cost of powering the aquaponics, the savings freed up budget that Oliver was able to reinvest into a new income stream: microgreens. The organisation introduced a 40-foot climate-controlled shipping container, fitted with vertical shelving and LEDs and plugged into the solar system, to grow microgreens year-round, independent of the weather. This enabled the enterprise to take on a commercial microgreens contract with a local food organisation, an opportunity that would not have been affordable without the savings the solar panels delivered.



Oliver explained that none of this would have happened without the grant, especially given the capital investment required. However, the installation was not without its challenges: finding a reliable supplier within the grant's timeframe proved difficult, and as a tenant on a landlord's site, navigating solar allocation limits and securing written permissions added further complexity. In the end, all these challenges were overcome and the system successfully installed.

Outcomes and Benefits

Cost savings: The savings have been substantial. For example, in February 2026 electricity costs fell by roughly 84% year on year, while in peak season the cost of running the aquaponics dropped by around 80%. These savings, which vary with the weather, were then reinvested into the new microgreen's operation.

Business growth and new income streams: The solar installation directly enabled the organisation to scale up, introducing a year-round, weather-independent microgreens income stream and taking on a commercial supply contract.

“The REPF grant solved a problem but also created two or three opportunities on the back of that.”

Emissions reduction: By generating its own renewable energy, the organisation has reduced its reliance on grid electricity and the emissions associated with it.

Education and engagement: A significant additional benefit has been educational. The solar panels and the container are now part of the STEM teaching programme, allowing Oliver to talk with visiting school groups about sustainability, renewable energy, and the future of farming, from aquaponics to vertical growing, and how food can be produced closer to where people live and using innovative approaches.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

Beyond the organisation, the project has started to inspire interest from others. Since installing the container, Oliver has been approached by three organisations, a private school, another educational farm, and a residential care home, all interested in exploring whether they could set up something similar, whether for teaching or to engage residents with healthier eating and growing food for their own kitchens. These are conversations that would not have taken place without the REPF funding, opening the door to knowledge sharing and potential new collaborations.

Looking ahead, Oliver has already secured a further grant to insulate the shipping container with a blue-green roof, harvesting rainwater and increasing biodiversity while adding yet another dimension to the educational offer. The broader ambition is to keep growing more produce and scale up sustainably, embedding renewable energy, biodiversity, and low-impact growing even more deeply into the organisation, guided throughout by a mantra of “make it exist, and then improve it”.

“It’s unusual for grant schemes to support entrepreneurs or emerging small businesses. The REPF initiative offered the opportunity for second-stage capital investment. This is vital in order for us to achieve our ambitions to consolidate what we have and to deliver our activities at scale.”

PARTICIPANT NAME: Katie-Louise Herring
COMPANY NAME: Tribe Zero Waste
INITIATIVE: OSEP Support
THEME D: Innovation and Purpose Led Enterprise

Introduction

Katie is the founder of Tribe Zero Waste, a small retail business, established approximately eight years ago as a market stall and pop-up operation. The business has since grown and now operates from a permanent shop in Farringdon. Tribe Zero Waste specialises in selling refillable food, cleaning products, and personal care items, with the aim of helping customers reduce predominantly plastic waste by providing access to plastic-free goods.

The participant engaged with the OSEP support programme, receiving one-to-one advisory support. Specifically, Katie received guidance on business structure and the various options available for transitioning from sole trader status, including whether to pursue a cooperative model or a social enterprise structure. The programme provided tailored advice on the different options and their respective implications.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

Given that the business was founded on sustainability principles, the participant's prior knowledge in this area was already strong. However, a gap was identified in more specific technical areas, particularly around net zero, carbon footprints, and the practical steps businesses can take to reduce their environmental impact. The programme helped to address this gap, providing useful knowledge on carbon-related topics and small, actionable measures for businesses. In addition, the one-to-one support significantly increased the participant's business awareness, particularly regarding the pros and cons of different organisational structures and how these could be applied to the business. This enabled a more informed and confident decision about the company's future direction.

Actions Taken

The most significant action taken as a direct result of the programme was a change in business structure. Following the advice and information received through the one-to-one support, the participant made the decision not to become a social enterprise and instead transitioned to a limited company model. The programme had a strong influence on this decision, providing all the information needed to make the choice with confidence and helping to secure the business for the future. The participant acknowledged that the programme provided the right resources and space to explore these options safely and ultimately acted as the catalyst to move the business forward.



Top: Photo by Mairi Clare Dunlin

Outcomes and Benefits

Knowledge and confidence: The programme provided the participant with a clearer sense of where to seek further help and support when needed, which was described as important given that navigating sustainability and business decisions can sometimes feel overwhelming. The experience also refreshed existing sustainability thinking, prompting practical actions: for example, ensuring replacement lighting in the shop was switched to LEDs.

Cost savings and new processes: Following the programme, the participant re-examined energy providers and switched to a greener supplier that also proved cheaper than the previous one. The fuel mix was also interrogated more closely to ensure it aligned with sustainability goals. While the change in business structure to a limited company did not generate direct cost savings, it was recognised as an important step in future-proofing the business and supporting long-term continuity. Organisational changes were also made in how the business reports, including legal and accounting processes.

Business growth and visibility: The participant identified new opportunities arising from the increasing businesses' awareness of the importance of sustainable practices. As a business founded on sustainable principles, this trend creates potential to serve other businesses seeking sustainable products and practices. Participation in the OSEP support programme also increased the business's visibility, enabling connections with other businesses that may be interested in the products. The participant noted the wider benefit of such programmes in encouraging business owners to think about sustainability not only professionally but also personally, which in turn supports the mission of businesses like Tribe Zero Waste.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The OSEP programme solidified the sustainability thinking that was already underway and provided the push needed to act on decisions that had been under consideration for some time. The one-to-one support was particularly valued for offering a safe space in which to explore options before committing. Katie continues to engage regularly with the support programme, viewing it as an important way to stay up to date with sustainability developments, even when the content reinforces existing knowledge.

Looking ahead, Katie expressed a desire to improve impact and sustainability reporting and measurement. For example, there is interest in being able to quantify the business's contribution to packaging reduction and broader sustainability outcomes. The support or funding to develop these measurement capabilities was identified as a key next step for the business.

In terms of wider influence, the participant observed that the existence of such programmes encourages conversation and prompts people to ask questions about sustainability, which benefits the sector as a whole. The programme would be recommended to other businesses, particularly those not originally founded with sustainability at their core, as it provides valuable one-to-one support, signposting, and new ideas. The participant emphasised the importance of having a dedicated organisation like OSEP operating in this space, explaining that it provides a sense of belonging and tailored support that may not always be found in more conventional business environments, something especially valuable for social enterprises and sustainability-focused businesses.

“The support I had from OSEP was important to the decision making process in my business and helped me focus my thinking. Even though my business already has a focus on sustainability it was useful to think more deeply about it and learn about different operating structures in my 1:1 support.”

PARTICIPANT NAME: Helen Och
COMPANY NAME: The Makery
INITIATIVE: OSEP Support
THEME D: Innovation and Purpose Led Enterprise

Introduction

Helen runs The Makery, a volunteer-led community craft studio. The initiative's core mission is community building, providing a physical space where people can meet, make friends, and feel part of a creative community in their local town. Activities include craft clubs, tutored workshops, and maker's markets, all designed to facilitate people's interest in making things in a sustainable way. Rather than purchasing new materials from retailers, community members can use donated supplies on a pay-what-you-feel basis, helping to divert craft materials, many of which are plastic, from waste streams. The Makery is built around the principle of circularity and reducing the environmental impact of crafting.

Helen engaged with OSEP through group webinars and one-to-one training. The support covered business structure advice, including an introduction to community interest companies as a potential route for accessing funding. In this respect, Helen explained that without OSEP, the process of changing business structure would likely not have been considered. Moreover, broader business growth support was also received, with the recognition that since the business is sustainable at its core, business growth directly translates into greater sustainability impact.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

The participant's understanding of environmental sustainability was already strong prior to the programme, given that sustainability is the foundational principle of The Makey. However, there were gaps in business and financial knowledge, specifically in understanding how to identify the most profitable areas of the business and how to allocate time and resources to make the organisation more financially sustainable. The OSEP programme helped to address these gaps: acquiring financial knowledge to support business growth has, in turn, increased the organisation's broader sustainability impact. For example, specific skills developed through the programme included marketing and communication, enabling more effective promotion of the organisation's activities and mission.

Actions Taken

The participant acknowledged that not all the advice received from OSEP has been put into practice yet. However, several concrete actions have already been taken.

The most notable change has been in the approach to marketing. Prior to the programme, marketing efforts were unplanned and sporadic. Helen has now developed a marketing plan for the first time, learned how to translate a business vision into marketing activity, and began posting on social media more regularly and with greater purpose. The organisation is also now working towards a Community Interest Company application, moving away from its current sole trader status, and has begun planning the business more strategically to identify areas worth investing more time and resources in.

The participant emphasised that these business-oriented actions would not have been taken without the knowledge gained through the OSEP programme. Although the changes are primarily business-focused, the fact that they support the growth of a sustainability-focused organisation means they also contribute to broader sustainability objectives.

Time management was highlighted as the main challenge in implementing these changes.

Outcomes and Benefits

Organisation and accountability: Having regular appointments and meetings through the programme provided structure and momentum. The scheduled support helped the participant prepare, reflect, and make progress that might not have occurred independently.

Marketing and customer growth: The improved marketing approach led to positive business outcomes. The organisation has experienced greater awareness in the local community, more interactions on social media, and more people visiting the studio both for supplies and workshops. Workshop bookings in particular have become noticeably quicker to fill. While the participant could not attribute this growth solely to the marketing support, a clear connection was observed.

Networking and new opportunities: The programme facilitated meaningful connections with like-minded people and businesses. The participant valued the organic, authentic nature of these interactions, distinguishing them from conventional networking events. These connections have led directly to new opportunities, such as being referred to a fair event in Oxfordshire, which prompted the idea of running pop-up stalls and information stands for The Makery.

Tailored support and sense of belonging: The participant particularly valued receiving business support designed specifically for social enterprises and sustainability-focused organisations. Having access to someone at the end of an email or a video call for questions and guidance was described as invaluable, especially for a sole trader who would otherwise be navigating these challenges alone.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

The programme has had a meaningful impact on the organisation, also helping Helen become more confident in running the business. The advice and support received were described as particularly important for a sole trader who previously had limited knowledge of how to access help in this area.

The immediate priority is to register as a Community Interest Company, which would allow Helen to dedicate more time to the organisation and open up access to funding. The overarching goal remains business sustainability and continuity, ensuring the organisation remains viable so that it can continue delivering its environmental sustainability mission.

In terms of wider community impact, the programme's influence has been indirect but notable. Partly as a result of the improved marketing, the craft clubs have grown significantly, from a small group of four or five people around a dining table to regular sessions attracting fifteen to twenty attendees each week, with further growth anticipated through new collaborations. The Makery now provides a welcoming space where community members can gather, create, and connect, representing a tangible contribution to local community wellbeing and sustainable living.

"I think the programme support has been quite important. They've been able to give me advice on many things. And because what we do is about sustainability, it's about reducing the environmental impact of craft, I need the business to work and keep going. The business needs to be sustainable to support that sustainability work."

PARTICIPANT NAME: Becky Reid
COMPANY NAME: Her Land
INITIATIVE: OSEP Support
THEME D: Innovation and Purpose Led Enterprise



Introduction

Her Land is a volunteer-run social enterprise focused on improving the health and wellbeing of women and girls through different projects based on the heritage-rich Manor farm just outside Thame. The organisation runs programmes centred on biodiversity, connection to the land, and climate-friendly food growing, with a long-term vision of creating a truly healing space. Becky Reid, one of three directors, leads much of the day-to-day work alongside a small team of dedicated volunteers.



As a first-time social enterprise founder with a background in the charity and public sectors, Becky was drawn to the OSEP programme for the support it could offer during a critical early stage of the organisation's development. The motivation was clear: running a social enterprise can feel like navigating without a map, and having access to people who had been through it before felt like an invaluable opportunity. As a social enterprise, the organisation did not always feel it fitted neatly into conventional business support settings, making OSEP's tailored approach particularly relevant.

Understanding of Sustainability Before and After

Becky came to the programme with a solid understanding of environmental sustainability, gained through her job as an environmental project officer. For this reason, the individual coaching sessions focused less on specific sustainability knowledge and more on the practical skills needed to run and grow a social enterprise: governance, business planning, goal setting, communication, and more in general how to tell the organisation's story effectively.

The most transformative impact of the programme was on confidence. Before the programme, Becky described feeling sometimes overwhelmed by the scale of what the organisation was trying to achieve. Both the coaching sessions and the peer support helped bring clarity, encouraging a step back from trying to do everything at once and instead focusing energy and resources on the right next steps. By the final coaching session, Becky felt genuinely confident in having the right skills to lead the organisation forward.

Actions Taken

The programme's most significant impact was in helping the organisation shift from a "trying to do everything" approach to a more focused, structured plan. With four derelict buildings and extensive green space on the site, the possibilities had felt endless. Through the business planning support, the directors were able to prioritise some key areas instead of stretching across too many directions, meaning actions started happening faster and more effectively.

This sharper focus had a direct knock-on effect. Her Land successfully secured additional funding that will provide approximately 10 hours of paid on-site and admin time per week, which is expected to increase what can be delivered. In addition, new governance structures are being developed, volunteer management processes are being streamlined, and work is underway on a new website to support fundraising and marketing. New partnerships, for example with a local family centre, has also been established, with the farm providing the venue for growing activities with mothers and children.

The main challenge, as with many volunteer-led organisations, remains time and capacity. The advice received was described as brilliant, but finding the time to implement it while running the organisation on a voluntary basis, alongside a full-time job, can sometimes be challenging.

Outcomes and Benefits

Organisational growth and sustainability: Since engaging with OSEP, the organisation is on track to increase its sessions. While this growth cannot be attributed solely to the programme, the focused approach to planning and the confidence gained through coaching have played a clear role in putting the organisation in a position to seize opportunities as they arise. As Becky explains, the programme ensured that “when opportunities came along, they were not missed”.

New funding pathways: The coaching sessions opened up awareness of social finance as a potential revenue source, something the organisation had not previously fully considered. Becky described feeling confident to explore this route and expects to pursue it in the near future.

Community impact: The organisation’s work is already reaching into the wider community. Individual participants have started to take on allotments and apply climate-friendly growing practices in their own lives. The farm hosts corporate volunteer days for tree planting and biodiversity projects, and a new pilot scheme focused on local food production and reducing food miles has recently launched in partnership with a farming trust, with potential for national rollout if successful.

Impact of the Programme, Future Intentions and Wider Influence

Becky explains that she would strongly recommend the OSEP programme, particularly the one-to-one coaching and peer support elements. Learning from others facing similar challenges was described as deeply supportive, and both formats were considered hugely impactful for an early-stage social enterprise navigating an unfamiliar landscape.

Future sustainability priorities include installing solar power and rainwater harvesting on the site, expanding biodiversity enhancement projects, and growing the educational programme for women and girls around climate-friendly land use. The local food production pilot, if successful, could influence farming practices well beyond the local area.

“We plan to create a biodiverse, accessible landscape with educational and event spaces inside unique heritage buildings, a hub with cafe, edible food forests, growing plots, and play areas. Our aim is to become a unique regenerative development where women and girls gain the skills to heal both themselves and the land, for a healthier, regenerative world for all.”

4. CROSS-CUTTING THEMES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Analysis of the case studies reveals a number of consistent themes that cut across different programmes, sectors and types of organisation. While participants ranged from small businesses and social enterprises to charities, museums and estates, many reported similar experiences regarding what enables sustainability action and organisational change.

SMEs Respond Best to Practical, Locally Grounded Support

Businesses and community organisations consistently valued support that was practical, relevant to their circumstances, and focused on achievable actions rather than abstract sustainability concepts. Participants often described sustainability as something they wanted to improve but did not know how to begin. Programmes that translated sustainability into tangible topics such as energy, waste, transport, procurement, retrofit, or governance were particularly effective in helping organisations identify realistic next steps.

Rather than seeking complex technical solutions, many participants benefited most from clear guidance, practical tools, action plans, audits, and examples that could be readily applied within their own organisations. In particular, setting realistic expectations was also valuable, with some participants finding it helpful to understand that incremental and meaningful progress, rather than reaching absolute Net Zero, is what truly matters. This was particularly important for smaller organisations that lack dedicated sustainability expertise or capacity.



Blended Support Models Are Highly Effective

The strongest outcomes often emerged where programmes combined multiple forms of support. Across the case studies, organisations benefited from combinations of technical advice, training, peer learning, one-to-one coaching, networking opportunities, action planning, and grant funding.

Different forms of support served different purposes. Technical expertise built confidence and knowledge; coaching and advisory support helped organisations prioritise actions and make decisions; peer learning created motivation and accountability; and funding enabled implementation. Together, these elements created a more complete pathway from awareness to action than any single intervention could achieve on its own.

Financial Support Unlocks Action and Accelerates Progress

Funding emerged as a critical enabler across many of the case studies. In several instances, organisations had already identified sustainability improvements they wished to make, but lacked the capital required to proceed. Grant funding enabled projects that otherwise would have been delayed for years or potentially not happened at all.

Importantly, funding often acted as a catalyst for wider change rather than supporting a single isolated intervention. Solar installations, equipment purchases, and energy efficiency improvements frequently triggered additional investments, further sustainability actions, new business opportunities, and increased organisational confidence. In many cases, the initial funded project became the starting point for a broader sustainability journey.

Trusted Intermediaries Build Confidence and Credibility

A recurring theme was the value of trusted intermediaries, including local authorities, colleges, business support organisations, and specialist sustainability advisers. Participants frequently highlighted the importance of receiving advice from credible and knowledgeable sources, particularly in an environment where sustainability information can feel complex, fragmented, or contradictory.

External expertise also provided independent validation of decisions. Energy audits, carbon reduction plans, training programmes, and advisory support helped organisations build internal confidence, strengthen business cases for investment, and reassure leadership teams that proposed actions were evidence-based and worthwhile.

Peer Learning and Local Networks Are Powerful Drivers of Change

One of the strongest themes across the case studies was the value of peer learning and local networks. Participants consistently reported that hearing from others facing similar challenges made sustainability feel more achievable and less overwhelming.

Networking benefits extended beyond knowledge sharing. Several organisations developed practical collaborations through programme participation, including shared procurement arrangements, resource sharing, logistics partnerships, volunteer opportunities, and new supplier relationships. These connections generated benefits that went well beyond the original objectives of the programmes, strengthening local resilience and creating opportunities for collective action.

For many participants, the opportunity to learn alongside others and feel part of a wider community was as valuable as the formal content of the support itself.

Time and Resource Constraints Remain Significant Barriers

Despite strong motivation, many organisations continue to face significant capacity constraints. Small businesses, charities, and volunteer-led organisations often operate with limited staff time and resources, making it difficult to prioritise sustainability alongside day-to-day operational pressures.

Several participants noted that implementation can be challenging even when knowledge, funding, or good ideas are available. Progress often depends on having sufficient capacity to coordinate projects, collect data, apply for funding, engage staff, or implement recommendations. This highlights the importance of support programmes being designed to minimise administrative burden and provide ongoing encouragement and accountability.

Small Interventions Can Create Significant Ripple Effects

A notable finding across the case studies is that relatively small interventions often generated impacts well beyond their original scope. Examples included training programmes that led to new business opportunities, energy audits that unlocked additional funding, equipment purchases that created entirely new revenue streams, and networking activities that resulted in long-term collaborations.

Many participants described sustainability as a journey rather than a single project. Initial actions frequently increased confidence, revealed further opportunities, and created momentum for additional change. The evidence suggests that relatively modest investments in skills, advice, networking, or capital support can act as catalysts for wider organisational transformation, delivering environmental, economic, and social benefits over time.

Overall Lesson

Taken together, the case studies demonstrate that sustainability support is most effective when it is practical, locally embedded, and designed around the realities facing small organisations. The combination of trusted advice, peer learning, tailored support, and targeted financial assistance can unlock action, build confidence, and create lasting impacts that extend far beyond the immediate objectives of individual programmes.

5. TOWARDS A SCALABLE MODEL FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The case studies demonstrate that meaningful sustainability action among SMEs, charities, community organisations and social enterprises can be achieved through relatively modest interventions when support is designed around local needs and delivered through trusted networks. While the programmes examined varied in their focus, ranging from skills development and business support to energy audits, carbon reduction planning and capital grants, several common ingredients emerged that together form the basis of a scalable model for local authorities seeking to support sustainability transitions within their local economies.



KEY INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL SME SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAMMES

1. Strong Local Partnerships

Successful programmes were typically delivered through partnerships involving local authorities, business support organisations, educational institutions, specialist sustainability providers, and community organisations. These partnerships enabled councils to draw on complementary expertise, reach different audiences, and deliver support more efficiently than would be possible alone.

Local partnerships also increased programme credibility. Businesses often engaged because support was endorsed by trusted local organisations and connected to existing business networks, rather than being perceived as a standalone sustainability initiative.

2. Accessible Grant Funding

Even relatively small grants proved highly effective in unlocking action. Funding enabled organisations to overcome upfront cost barriers and implement projects that otherwise would have been delayed or abandoned.

Importantly, grant funding was most impactful when combined with advice and technical support. Rather than simply funding individual projects, grants often acted as catalysts for wider organisational change, creating momentum for additional investments, behavioural changes, and longer-term sustainability planning.

3. Mentoring and One-to-One Support

Many participants highlighted the value of personalised support. One-to-one mentoring, coaching, advisory sessions, and technical guidance helped organisations translate broad sustainability ambitions into practical actions relevant to their specific circumstances.

This was particularly important for smaller organisations that lack dedicated sustainability staff. Tailored support helped businesses navigate complexity, prioritise actions, build confidence, and maintain momentum despite competing operational pressures.

4. Trusted Delivery Partners

Trust emerged as a critical success factor across all programmes. Participants consistently valued support delivered by organisations with recognised expertise and local credibility, including colleges, sustainability specialists, business support providers, and community-based organisations.

Trusted delivery partners helped overcome uncertainty, provided independent validation of proposed actions, and reduced concerns about misinformation or greenwashing. Their role was particularly important in technical areas such as carbon measurement, energy efficiency, retrofit, and sustainability planning.

5. Practical, Action-Oriented Guidance

Businesses responded most positively to support that focused on practical implementation rather than high-level sustainability theory. Energy audits, carbon reduction plans, training workshops, action plans, toolkits, and peer learning opportunities helped organisations identify tangible actions that could be implemented immediately.

Breaking sustainability into manageable topics such as energy, waste, transport, procurement, and buildings, with sessions spaced to allow time to apply the learning, made the subject more accessible and enabled organisations to achieve early successes that built confidence for further action.

6. Evidence Collection and Impact Measurement

The ability to demonstrate progress was important both for participating organisations and programme funders. Carbon baselines, energy audits, monitoring frameworks, accreditation schemes, and simple reporting tools helped organisations understand where they were starting from and track improvements over time.

Evidence collection also strengthened business cases for investment, supported funding applications, and enabled organisations to communicate achievements to staff, customers, trustees, and wider stakeholders. Importantly, many participants expressed a desire for greater support in measuring and evidencing their sustainability impacts.

Recommendations for Local Authorities

Drawing on the experiences captured across the case studies, the following recommendations may help local authorities design and deliver effective sustainability support programmes for SMEs and community organisations:

Develop integrated support offers rather than standalone interventions. The strongest outcomes were achieved where grants, technical advice, training, networking and mentoring were combined into a coherent support package.

Invest in trusted local delivery partnerships. Councils do not need to deliver all support directly. Working with established local partners can increase reach, credibility, and specialist expertise while strengthening local ecosystems of support.

Prioritise practical action over awareness-raising alone. Most organisations are already aware of sustainability challenges. What they often need is help identifying realistic actions tailored to their needs, accessing funding, and implementing change.

Maintain a strong local focus. Local networks create opportunities for peer learning, collaboration, shared procurement, resource sharing, and community-led innovation. These benefits frequently extend beyond the original objectives of individual programmes.

Ensure support is accessible to organisations at different stages of their journey. Participants ranged from sustainability leaders seeking technical expertise to organisations taking their first steps. Flexible support pathways are therefore essential.

Provide pathways from planning to implementation. Audits, training and action plans are most valuable when organisations can subsequently access funding, technical assistance, or other forms of implementation support.

Build evaluation and impact measurement into programme design from the outset. Capturing outcomes consistently strengthens accountability, demonstrates value for money, supports future funding bids, and helps identify the interventions generating the greatest impact.

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this report demonstrates the value of a locally led approach to supporting sustainability among SMEs, social enterprises, charities and community organisations.

Across the programmes examined, a clear progression can be observed: research and local intelligence informed policy design; policy translated into practical support and interventions; and those interventions generated measurable environmental, economic and social outcomes. From carbon reduction and energy savings to new business opportunities, stronger community networks, enhanced skills and organisational resilience, participants consistently reported positive and tangible benefits.

Importantly, the findings show that sustainability action is most effective when support is practical, trusted, locally embedded and tailored to organisational needs. Technical advice, peer learning, mentoring, grants and networking each played a role, but the greatest impact was achieved when these elements were combined into a coherent support offer.

The case studies also demonstrate that relatively modest investments can act as powerful catalysts for wider change. Many organisations used initial support as a springboard for further action, creating benefits that extended well beyond the original intervention. This highlights the significant opportunity for local authorities to continue playing a convening and enabling role in accelerating sustainability transitions.

Looking ahead, there is strong potential to scale and replicate this model. The lessons emerging from these programmes provide a practical blueprint for how local authorities can support businesses and communities to reduce emissions, strengthen resilience, stimulate innovation, and contribute to wider economic and environmental objectives. Continued investment in partnership-based, locally delivered sustainability support will be critical to achieving these ambitions at scale.



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