

Research Methods and Professional Development

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“What are the influences that can focus SME’s and Micro business to implement a sustainable Environmental strategy into their business?”

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1.0 Introduction

In my current role with Business Wales as a Business and Sustainability Adviser, I have a unique insight into how micro, Small and Medium sized business engage with environmental strategies and practices.

As a business advisor I help clients develop strategies; from prestart, through to start-ups and progressing onto Growth and scaling up.

As a sustainability Advisor I offer support with developing sustainable strategies and adopting environmental policies, this could be in the form of introducing the subject of sustainability, through to identifying best practice or signposting support, grants, or investment opportunities.

From my interactions and experiences, I believe there is an opportunity for more development, more involvement and more action and achievement to be made for small and micro businesses in the journey to Net Zero Carbon by the target date of 2050, set by the U.K. government.

2.0 Definition of Businesses

According to the Business Energy and Industrial strategy business population – the following definitions are used to describe business size:

Large Businesses are 250+

SME's (Small Medium Enterprises) are companies with less than 250 employees

Medium Business 50 – 249 employees

Small Business 10-49 employees

Micro Business 0 – 9 employees

SME's account for more than 99% of the UK's 6 million businesses

SME's employ 61% of the UK workforce

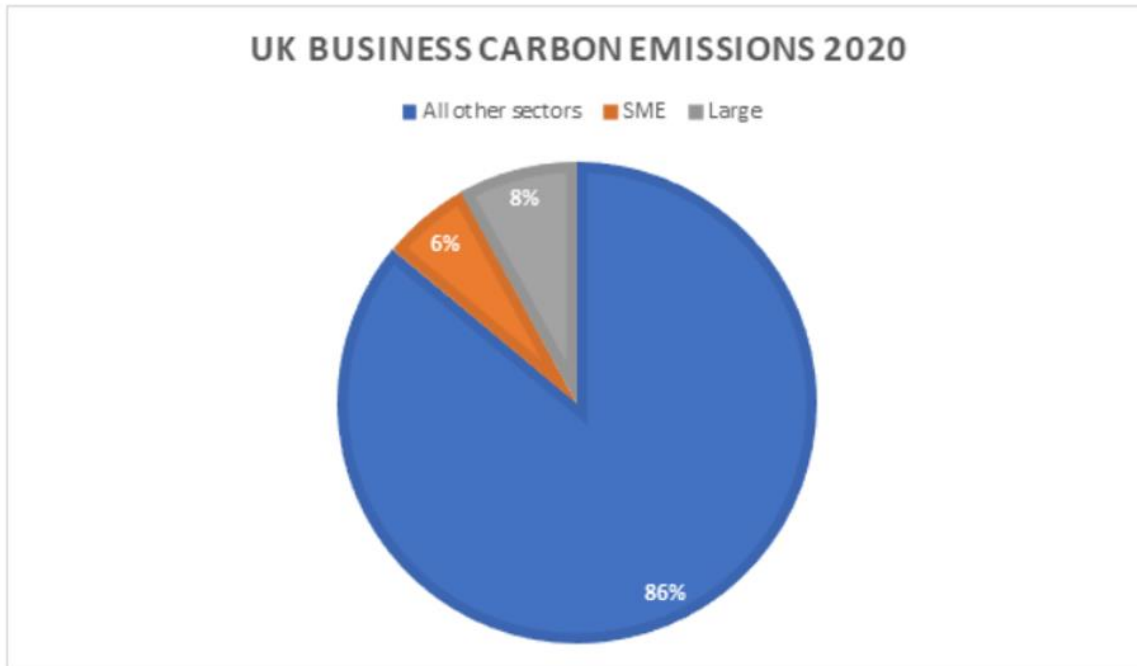
SMEs generate 52% of UK business revenue

Only 8000 large companies in the UK employ over 250 staff

Less than 1% of companies are classed as Large

(Home Business, industry and trade Business Activity, size and location Business demography, UK, 2020)

According to information from the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy large companies generate 8% of total UK Green House Gas emissions and SME's a further 6%.



Source: [BEIS](#). 'SME' calculations by Small99

3.0 Sustainability Comparison: Lge companies vs SME's

Large companies now embrace sustainability and are proudly sharing initiatives and outcomes publicly trying to show their contribution to helping the UK and World achieve Net Zero Carbon. There are many papers written about large companies and their socially responsible behaviour.

It appears in many ways achieving sustainable outcomes are more achievable for larger businesses as they have:

Hierarchies that decide directions

Missions and goals that secure the business directions

Many employees to achieve the goals, often with a job title specific to that goal e.g., Finance, Marketing, Sustainability.

A culture that aligns the direction

Policies and legislation to adhere to.

Products and processes that must have a competitive difference to remain competitive.

E.g., Mercedes the battery driven car that can travel the furthest without, recharge.

CSR Policies that allow them to display what benefit having a sustainable strategy brings to customers and the communities they trade in.

Information that is up to date, as they have good stakeholder networks and are aware of changes in government policy.

Finances that allow them to achieve their sustainable goals.

However, SMEs appear to have attracted less attention, which is quite surprising in view of their numbers and contribution to emissions. In my experience of SME's there appears to be a much smaller appetite to change, adapt and share their actions, there appears to be diminishing commitment to change with the size of the enterprise.

With this in mind I would like to investigate:

4.0 Hypothesis

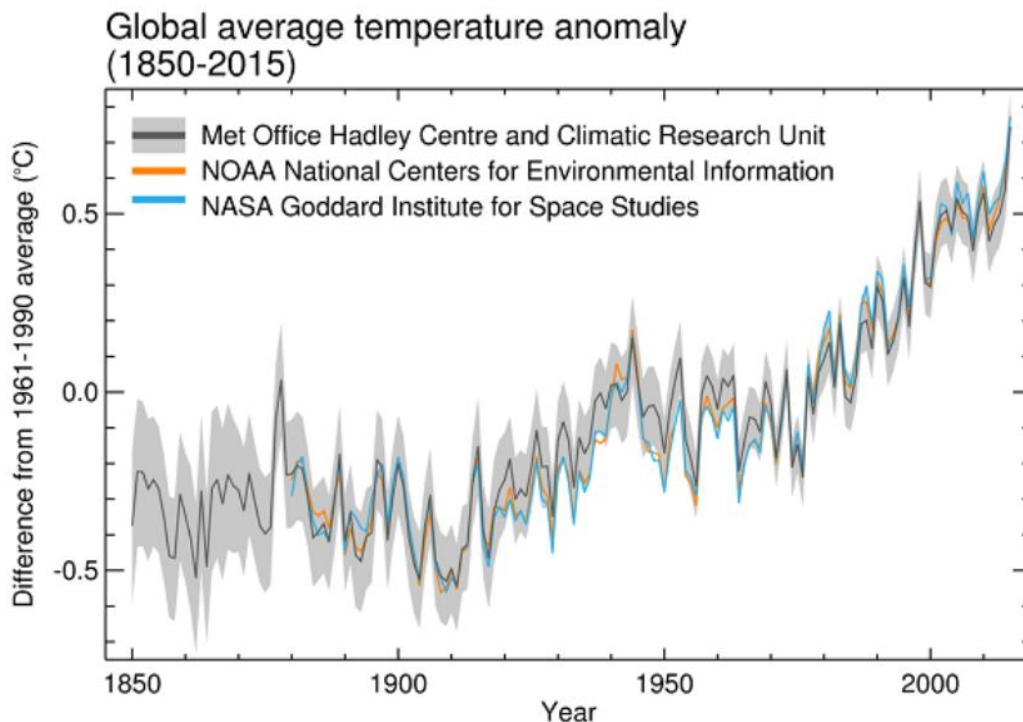
“What are the factors that can focus SME's and Micro business to implement a sustainable Environmental strategy into their business?”

Furthermore, it would be beneficial to identify if SMEs are aware of the potential impact they could make on emissions if they took action.

Finally, I would like to investigate SME knowledge of the support that is available to them to develop environmental strategies.

5.0 Background

“The last seven years have been the warmest seven years on record, typifying the ongoing and dramatic warming trend,” said Goddard Institute for Space Studies Director Gavin Schmidt “Whether one year is a record or not is not really that important – the important things are long-term trends. With these trends, and as the human impact on the climate increases, we have to expect that records will continue to be broken.”



5.1 Commitment to reducing Green House Gases

In 1997 the Kyoto Protocol was the first worldwide step to acknowledging and gaining a commitment to action in the limitation and reduction of the emission of Green House Gases (GHG). It has since been adopted by 192 countries and is overseen by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

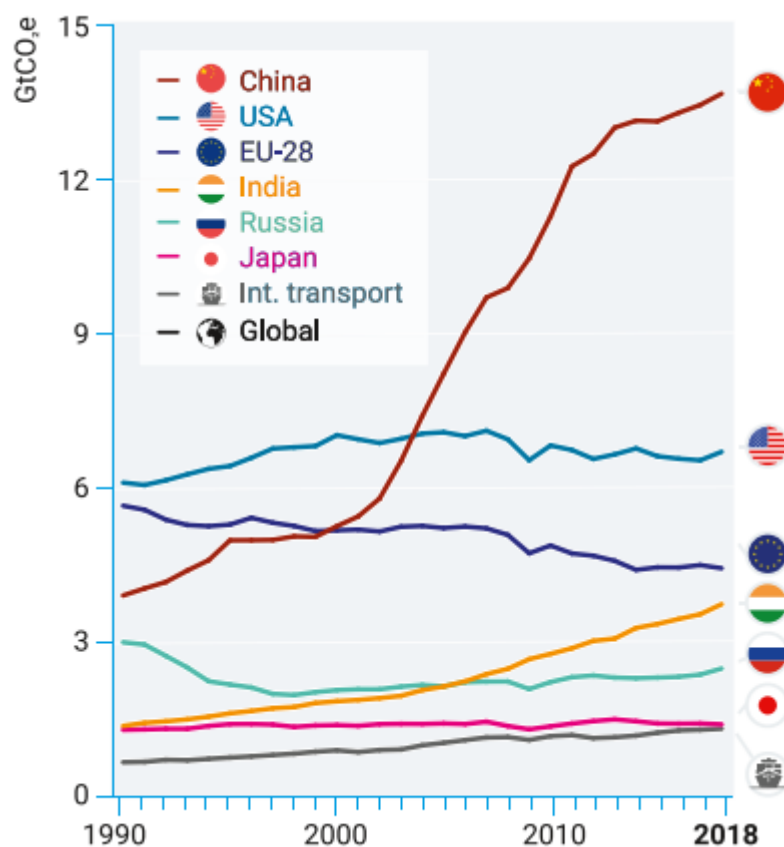
It was designed to place a heavier burden for change on 37 industrialized countries recognizing they are largely responsible for current levels of Green House Gases in the atmosphere (The Kyoto Protocol, 2022).

During 2015 at a conference in Paris the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreed to try to limit the global average temperature rise as close as possible to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels (The Paris Agreement, 2022)

5.2 Global Emissions

According to the United Nations Environment Program Emissions Gap Report 2019 the G20 countries account for 78% of Total Green House Gas emissions (European Emissions Report 2019, 2019)

The table below illustrates the world's biggest Green House Gas producers in terms of absolute production (as with all statistics there are many ways of illustrating the facts which in turn can change the burden of responsibility, but I have identified absolute production as the most accurate indicator of the source of Green House Gas emissions)



In 2018 the United Kingdom accounted for less than 1% of total Global Green House Gas emissions

5.3 UK Government actions overview

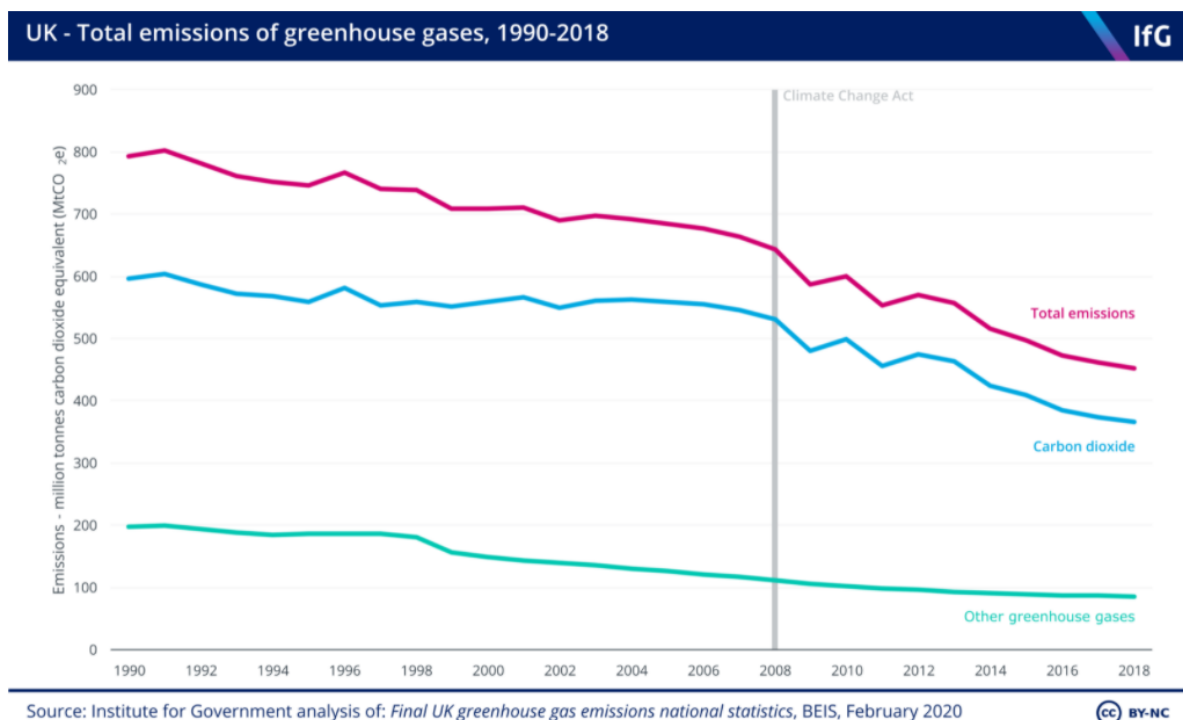
Legislation was passed in UK during June 2019 by parliament, requiring the government to reduce the emission of Green House Gas to the same level as 1990 by 2050. In effect a 100% reduction and making the UK a “net zero emitter” of Green House Gases (Net Zero = GHG Emissions – Natural Carbon Absorption)

At the time the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth Chris Skidmore said the UK was “pioneering the way for other countries to follow in our footsteps, driving prosperity by seizing the economic opportunities of becoming a greener economy” (UK becomes first major economy to pass net zero emissions law, 2019)

Whilst Michael Gove talked of the UK having a “moral responsibility” to lead the international efforts combating climate change, after playing such a leading role in the industrial revolution (Industrial Revolution means UK has moral responsibility to lead on climate change, 2020)

As illustrated in the graph below UK emissions of Green House Gases have fallen in the last 30 years, in 2018 they were 57% lower than in 1990, thanks mainly to stopping the burning of coal to produce energy. Unfortunately, this was easy to achieve lower hanging fruit.

The next 43% will be much harder to achieve and will require major changes in all areas of emissions



5.4 UK emissions and actions by sector

When looking at Green House Gas Emissions by sector, at 27% Transport is the largest contributor to UK emissions in 2019 according to figures released by the Department for

Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). Followed by Energy (21%) and Business (17%)

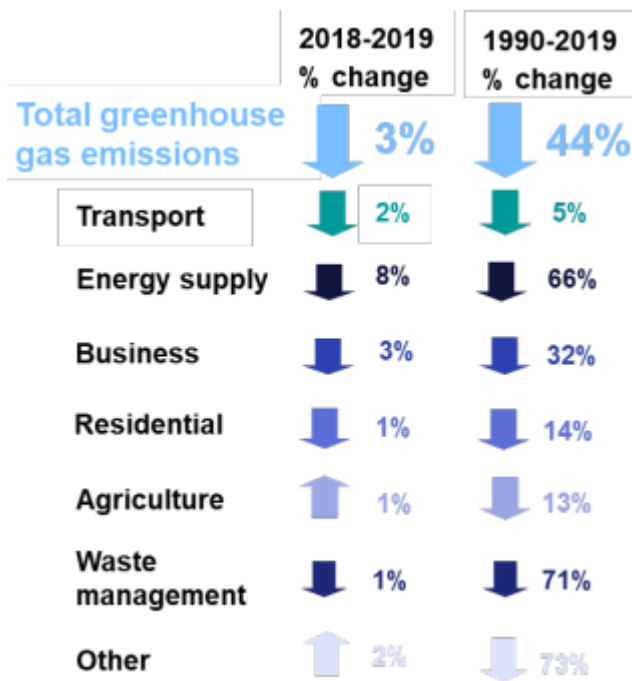


Looking at reductions made in the last 30 years total Green House Gas emissions have fallen by 44%. Up until 2016 Energy supply used to be the largest sector contributor but by ceasing the burning of coal at power stations and the introduction of cleaner energy production has reduced emissions by a massive 66%.

Since 2016 Transport has become the largest emission producer and has only seen a 5% improvement in the last 30 years. However, the tide with the government setting targets to ban the production of new petrol and diesel cars in 2030. Plus, the introduction of more and more new electric car models and the development in battery technology giving consumers more faith in electric cars.

Business is the third largest producer followed by Residential emissions – again this figure will fall dramatically, in the near future, as the government are looking to restrict the installation of fossil fuel operated heating systems possibly as early as 2025 and incentivising the installation of energy efficient heat pumps.

Business will be the hardest to legislate change and may possibly become the emissions problem of the future if there isn't a change in actions by SME's



6.0 Why should SME's get involved?

Climate change, Global warming and the reduction of Green House Gas emissions are not the sole responsibility of SME's. All sectors of society have become involved willingly or not in actions to reduce Green House Gas emissions. Either through education, government policy and action plans or legislation.

Statistics from the Dept. of Business Industry, Energy, and Industrial Strategy. Plus, the announcements from National and Regional Government and NGO's show the direction of change and further changes to come. It may be SME's get left behind because as a large diverse group (6 million SMEs in the U.K.) with a multitude of different business sectors and operations, it is difficult to engage them all as one group.

As indicated in SME facts – Micro, small and medium businesses account for 6 % of the total U.K. output of Green House Gas Emissions, so they are an essential part of the solution to the U.K. achieving Net Carbon Neutrality by 2050.

7.0 Options for Action

There are many basic simple actions, even small and micro companies, can take to reduce the number of emissions they produce.

Including:

- Measuring / monitoring the usage of energy e.g., Electricity, Gas, Fuel, or Water – knowing what's being used may prompt identification of savings both in energy use and financially.
- Looking for alternative ways to transport goods and supplies more efficiently
- Looking at where supplies come from, is there a local alternative without the added transport
- Reviewing packaging, using sustainable or reusable packaging

- Recycling and sending less waste to landfill will make an impact
- Preventing waste and pollution through better process
- Promoting sustainable practices
- Working with other responsible suppliers
- Reviewing products and services used or wasted
- Even supporting local community projects and groups can improve sustainable practices
- Developing an ethical ethos even offers sales opportunities

8.0 Perceived Barriers for SME's

Sustainable practices may be seen by smaller companies as a burden or a threat

Reaching the underrepresented businesses – there are 209,000 business in Wales, but only 10,000 members of the Federation of Small Business – how are the silent majority contacted and encouraged to adopt their behaviours to help improve sustainable practice.

Preaching to the converted – the members of the FSB and Trade Associations have taken a positive action to be part of an organisation and network, again there is still a silent majority who either unaware or not prepared to be part of a group dialogue.

Knowledge – Larger companies have the flexibility and financial muscle to employ specialists, small and micro business with limited options and finances

Language - Can cause barriers that disenfranchise business owners – A typical example used by Business Wales is the use of the term Resource Efficiency (a hybrid term) on their website instead of the word sustainability.

Terminology may also an inhibitor – sometimes it can be intimidating for example the question “Do you monitor resources?” can be misinterpreted as technical question when in fact it can be a simple “Do you know much your utility bills are?”

Accessibility - of information is another key factor, how easy a website is to use – again using Business Wales as an example – Decarbonisation is a key part of the Welsh Governments Economic action plan but doesn't have an accessible icon and must be searched for using the search engine.

Possibly the lack of regulation and enforcement from government may reduce the urgency for action from the viewpoint of the smaller business.

Technology – Digital exclusion means small businesses may not have access to information or systems to measure and monitor sustainable goals and achievements.

Business Process – A window cleaner may consider his/her processes too simple for the need for a sustainability strategy.

Employment – Sole traders may only have themselves to complete a multitude of tasks, this means prioritising, making an income before considering strategies and policies.

Relevance – A micro business may think that the actions they take have not relevance to the environment and that larger businesses are only relevant. This is similar to the attitude of individuals who don't think their own recycling is important.



Possibly the lack of specific regulation and enforcement from government may reduce the urgency for action from the viewpoint of the smaller business. The introduction of the Landfill Tax 1996 gave any business producing waste the choice of paying to send waste to landfill or reduce waste through process improvement or recycling.

9.0 Support for SME's

In Wales government support for SME's is provided by Business Wales, there is a suite of support available without charge. The Green Growth Pledge is a simple but efficient introduction to sustainable actions.

The Federation of Small Business FSB offer subsidised support from £177 per year, they conducted a member survey in 2021 on the subject of the environment and environmental practice,

In May 2021 the UK Government launched the UK Small Business Climate Hub, giving SME's free tools, advice, sign posting and even offering a free BS ISO 50005 Energy Management System as an incentive. However even the government are struggling to attract the attention of SME's because only 2637 companies have signed up to the Climate Hub out of a possible total of 6 million. Perhaps a well- intentioned offer, however, it could be argued that if a small business hadn't adopted environmental strategies, the chances the owners wouldn't recognise the value of the offer of a free BS ISO accreditation in Energy Management System.

There are numerous not for profit organisations and charities offering support and advice to small business, including:

- Wrap
- Carbon Trust

- Energy Trust

10.0 Incentives – Carrot vs Stick

It may be the greatest incentive to small business is the prospect of reducing costs – educating small and micro business to monitor their use of resources would be beneficial for both sustainable practice and their bottom line.

Every year small business must declare income and expenses to HMRC – there is an opportunity to link environmental practice with Tax Incentives.

11.0 Cascading Sustainable Practices

Local Government have adopted policies to encourage monitoring of resource use for any contractors considering tendering for council contracts by insisting all contractors complete a Carbon Benchmarking Recording sheet. The benefits are three-fold, improving up take of sustainable practices, encouraging monitoring resource use and measuring impact. Alternatively, this has caused concern and confusion with contractors failing to understand the changing rules for acceptance to be on the council's procurement program.

12.0 Working Hypothesis

- The aims of this research will be to:
- Establish a greater understanding of what factors influence SMEs to have a sustainable strategy.
- Have a greater understanding of the perceived barriers for SMEs to become more aware of environmental policies.
- Have an opportunity to engage with SME's about how they can implement an environmental strategy.
- Create an opportunity to increase the uptake of Environmental Policies in SME's and Micro Businesses.
- Open a dialogue with SME's that could have the potential to reduce Green House Gas emissions from SME's.

13.0 Research Methods

A questionnaire will be sent out to Businesses via LinkedIn and Email using available contacts.

Factors effecting SME's implementing a sustainable environmental strategy

Question Title

1. How long has your business been established?

- ☐ Under 1 yr.
- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ 3-5 years
- ☐ +5 years
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Question Title

2. How many people does your business employ?

- ☐ 1-5

- ☐ 5-10
- ☐ 10-25
- ☐ 25-50
- ☐ 50+

Question Title

3. Does your business have any documented environmental policies

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Question Title

4. Do you think your business has an impact upon the environment

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Question Title

5. What measures does your business take to control its environmental impact?

Question Title

6. What environmental policies are you aware of?

Question Title

7. Do you receive any business environmental advice/support for your business?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Question Title

8. If you do receive support, who provides the support?

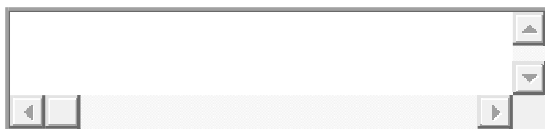
Question Title

9. Do you belong to any business networks, support groups, trade associations?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Group memberships - please specify

Question Title

10. What impact do you think not having any engagement with environmental policies has on your business?



14.0 Response and Ethics

A target response of a minimum of 15 businesses and a maximum of 50 would be ideal to create and insight into SME's thought processes regarding the environment, sustainability policies and the impact they think not having a sustainable strategy had on their business.

There is an awareness from experience of talking to micro businesses, day to day, who are not part of federations, trade associations and support groups that having an environmental policy is not a priority, as these businesses may be receiving support from the DWP. Accessing income is more important.

The businesses that are part of networks, support groups or trade associations that may not have awareness are offered support through those groups.

There may be a challenge getting businesses that are closer to the bread line to respond to a questionnaire, as they might not see the importance of completing a questionnaire about sustainability when they are concentrating on income.

It will be important when distributing the questionnaires not to have a bias towards the micro businesses and to gain a wide coverage of assorted business sizes. From the Micro to businesses employing 50+ employees.

Bigger SME's may also fail to interact with a questionnaire, as they may think they have employees who's responsibility it is to ensure sustainability policies are in place.

Confidentiality and data protection may also stop Micro and larger SME's interacting with the questionnaire. To minimise the impact of this an Ethics form will be obtained from the Trinity St David's and reassurance about confidentiality and GDPR will be provided with the questionnaire.

Interviews using the questionnaire will be used as an alternative to distributing the questionnaire. The intent will be to reach the target quantity set out to enable the collection of enough data to be useful to gain an insight into the SME thoughts on sustainability, sustainability policies and strategies.

If this is the method used there will need to be care to collect a diverse range of business ages and types from micro businesses through to 50+ businesses.

Interviewing may have the same issues as distributing the questionnaire broadly, as business owners might not think it is important or that they have the time to discuss, something that is not a priority.

GDPR and confidentiality might also be a concern and businesses may choose not to be involved for this reason.

Assurance regarding GDPR and confidentiality will be given, and an ethics form accessed from the university.

15.0 Results

To identify the factors that could help SME's and Micro Business successfully focus on implementing sustainable environmental strategies may have an impact on assisting the government to achieve its target of achieving Zero Carbon neutrality by 2050

Have and opportunity to discuss potential change and to influence how Policy changes are communicated to SME's. (HMRC are the only organisation, that has regular communications with all businesses sm and lge – due to tax returns).

The U.K. as a country achieving its net zero carbon target by 2050.

The U.K. exercising its moral duty to be a leading Nation example in the journey to engaging SMEs in their Net Zero Carbon target.

16.0 Evaluation

Sustainability is a subject that is on trend and at the upper most thought in minds of Governments, the people and businesses.

Considering how to engage small businesses as much as large businesses is crucial to Government reaching their Net Carbon Targets.

By completing this research, there is potential to understand more about the barriers and mindsets of SME's regarding sustainability strategies and to be able to find ways to help them engage more fully with environmental measurement and strategies that will benefit, both their business and the environment in the future.

17.0 Timescale

The research timescale will be carried out once evaluation or research has been considered by tutor and an university ethics form has been completed, in time to evaluate data and insert it into dissertation.

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