The Bristol Method

how to engage small businesses to be more sustainable

In it for good

BRISTOL 2015
EUROPEAN GREEN CAPITAL

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Introduction

Engaging the Small and Medium sized (SME) business community is a huge opportunity: they make up a sizable proportion of businesses in the UK and employ millions of people.

However, while their environmental impacts are significant, due to the nature of smaller businesses, they rarely have sufficient time and resource to devote to changing their business models in the way that larger businesses often do. They are also very vulnerable to systemic shocks, and are less able to respond to fluctuations in supply, or to local environmental impacts such as flooding. However one advantage of smaller businesses is that they are often owner-managed and tend to be more responsive to change. So once a business decides to operate in a different way, it can often have a significant impact quite quickly.

Since there are so many SMEs, they are present in all areas of the supply chain and the way in which they procure their goods and services, and design those they sell, can have enormous impacts on overall sustainability of supply chains. As the number of decision makers on issues such as sourcing and facilities are proportionately much higher in smaller business, these changes can also be very effective in communicating the issues to a wide range of people in ways that are relevant outside their working lives.

SMEs are often time-poor, meaning they typically find it difficult to devote resources to improving the sustainability of their operations. In addition they face challenges around decision making, having often been provided with conflicting advice and unclear guidance. While a great many SMEs recognise the importance of addressing sustainability issues within their business, they find implementation challenging. This is seen particularly in the case of businesses in rented offices – many of the actions they see as key to becoming more sustainable are out of their control, such as improving the lighting or insulation, or having a recycling provider.

However there are increasing numbers of businesses demonstrating that these issues can be overcome and making huge strides towards more sustainable businesses. The box on the right contains a couple of examples of small businesses taking the initiative to make a difference. Please visit the Go Green website for more detail: http://gogreenbusiness.co.uk/case-studies.
Key stakeholders

The Bristol city region has long been known to be an area with expertise in the environmental goods and services (EGS) industries. Bristol City Council has supported that industry for many years, specifically through the Bristol Environmental Technologies and Services organisation (BETS) which later developed into Low Carbon South West (see below) and their contribution as a partner in the Environmental iNet programme. In addition to supporting the EGS sector there have been a number of programmes, funded through various sources and delivered by different organisations, that have helped to improve the sustainability of Bristol businesses over several years.

Low Carbon South West

Low Carbon South West is a membership organisation working to support the growth of the low carbon and environmental sector in the South West of England. Its objective is to help grow a prosperous and resilient low carbon economy for the region by supporting and promoting local businesses as well as working to attract new companies and inward investment to the region. Its key strength is its network of over 3,000 people, and the breadth of business types that it encompasses.

See their website at: www.lowcarbonsouthwest.co.uk

Bristol Green Capital Partnership

In the run up to 2015 it developed a set of Action Groups on key areas such as Transport, Health & Wellbeing and Business. These groups brought together relevant stakeholders from across the city to feed into various activities and funding bids that took place. To learn more about this organisation and the huge impact it has had on Bristol’s green journey, please read the Bristol Method module ‘how to use partnerships to drive change’ which is available at www.bristol2015.co.uk/Method

Business West

Business West is a business leadership organisation which represents more than 18,000 businesses across the South West of the UK. It operates as a local access point for a wide range of business and export solutions, helping to support their growth – both in the UK and overseas.

The organisation aims to help improve the quality of life and wellbeing for residents and businesses across the West. It works in partnership with local councils, local enterprise partnerships and key stakeholders to influence and shape the economy of the region as well as supporting and promoting wider social and environmental concerns.

In 2015, Business West and Low Carbon South West launched Go Green supported by BGCP, a new scheme for businesses and organisations that are working to create a low carbon city with a high quality of life for Bristol in 2015 and beyond.

www.businesswest.co.uk

Environmental iNET

iNets South West were funded from 2010 until 2015 to provide advice and resources to SMEs and organisations working within specific sectors to help turn business ideas into new products and services. The Environmental Technologies iNet provided support to the most promising environmental goods and services businesses in the South West of England. It helped innovative companies or entrepreneurs with high growth aspirations to develop, protect and commercialise their ideas, products and service.

It comprised of a consortium of regional delivery partners including Bristol City Council, the universities of Exeter and the West of England (UWE) and the Royal Agricultural University (RAU), and the Institute of Sustainability, Health and Environment (ISHE).

While the initial European funding ended in 2015, UWE intends to maintain the network in the future. www.environmental-inet.co.uk
The “Go Green” initiative

When Bristol was announced as European Green Capital for 2015, Business West and Low Carbon South West formed a partnership to create Go Green, a network that would allow businesses of all sizes across all sectors to share best practice and show leadership in sustainability.

The city and those within it who work with the business community recognise the huge importance of having a business sector that is financially prosperous, but is also resilient to shocks and changes and is socially and environmentally responsible. All those involved in developing Go Green worked with the common understanding that, by helping businesses to work together and share their own experiences, we would be able to develop a robust and future-proof business community who are aware of the issues that face them, and are as well-equipped as possible to address them.

Where did it come from?

The new project builds on the success of The West of England Carbon Challenge (WECC) and the old Go Green Bristol project.

The West of England Carbon Challenge (WECC) ran from 2009 to 2014, and was a network that supported over 100 businesses and organisations of all sizes in the West of England reduce their carbon emissions. This was achieved through collective carbon targets, annual awards and green networking events. Originally set up by Forum for the Future, WECC was handed to Low Carbon South West who continued to run the network until the end of 2014. Forum chose to run WECC in Bristol because they recognised that the region was already a prime location for environmental thinking in the business sector.

Go Green Bristol was a European funded project (part of the Improve Your Resource Efficiency – IYRE programme) delivered by Business West in 2012-13. In its original incarnation it supported over 250 SMEs to explore resource efficient solutions. Through workshops, one-to-one consultations and a downloadable guide, Go Green Bristol supported businesses to achieve average cost savings of £15,000, and average CO2 savings of nine tonnes.
Who made it happen?

Both LCSW and the Initiative team at Business West recognised the need for a business facing project as part of the 2015 programme. It was suggested that by collaborating, those two organisations would be able to provide the best possible combination of experience and networks to make the project a success. Both organisations are experienced at communicating with business and running events that will engage them, but while LCSW specialised in working with a relatively small and specialist network of companies with environmental expertise, Business West have a very large network much more general in nature. This provided both the expertise required, and the target audience.

In addition to the project partners, the Go Green team worked with a wide range of experts and stakeholders to make the programme as detailed and successful as it could be. Much of this was facilitated via the Business Action Group of the Green Capital Partnership. Amy Robinson from LCSW was chair of the group. It was drawn from among the 800 members of the partnership and comprised a wide range of excellent stakeholders, both businesses that had experience of becoming more sustainable and many organisations that work in business support and help to provide advice and guidance. This group provided an invaluable perspective on how best to engage and gave lots of feedback on the various iterations of the programme as it developed over the course of 2014. In particular their collective knowledge was used to ensure that the content of the Go Green Tool, was as comprehensive as possible.

The council was helpful throughout the process, primarily in providing input and support to the process. Up front their involvement with Go Green Bristol (IYRE) and WECC was very useful, in fact the council enabled WECC to continue running in the interim between its original term and the start of Go Green by providing a small project grant that enabled LCSW to run events and maintain momentum in that time. The Project Manager for Filwood Green Business Park which was in development at the time, Iwona Tempowski, a council employee, was vice-chair of the Green Capital Business Action group.

The project is run as a collaboration between LCSW and Business West. The day to day operations are the responsibility of the project manager, who was recruited specifically for the role. She is supervised by two project co-directors (one working for each of the partner organisations) who report to a management of LCSW and Business West directors and senior staff. They also report to the 2015 management team on activity and progress.
What does “Go Green” deliver?

The plan for Go Green is to help local businesses to become more sustainable, but also to ensure that all the local charities, social enterprises and companies that work to provide green goods and services are able to benefit from the increase in attention.

The aim was to ensure that the increased interest in green business practices prompted by the European Green Capital year would be supported by a project that would support businesses to create change. Go Green brings together all the business support tools that the city has to offer in one simple to use and easily accessible programme. It operates in three key ways, explained below.

Events
Go Green hosts a range of events that cater for everyone, from experienced sustainability practitioners to micro businesses with an interest in differentiating themselves in the market by highlighting their green credentials. Businesses are encouraged to engage with the agenda which offers a wide variety of support and advice.

This has included a monthly business breakfast on one of the five theme, attracting up to 100 attendees. The breakfasts include keynote speakers, case studies and 60 second pitches for stall holders who come to exhibit their green goods and services, and a range of workshops on subjects ranging from Carbon Offsetting to ‘Cutting through the Greenwash’. There will have been over 30 Go Green events during 2015 and to date these events have seen over 1,300 attendees.

The Go Green team have also supported numerous affiliate events. These workshop or discussion based events are run in conjunction with Go Green Prove It members who generate all the content using their expertise. Go Green provides guidance on the event development such as venue and content, promotes the event to its members and has a presence at it.

Go Green members have also laid on behind-the-scenes tours so that other members can learn from their experiences, and ask their facilities teams questions about the reality of the day to day running of the site, and how sustainability initiatives are implemented.

One particularly notable event was Business Green Week 2015 which took place in June 2015, with support and promotion by Go Green. More than 40 businesses across the Bristol region in the UK took part.

The concept for the event emerged in 2013 when numerous Green Capital Partnership members realised that they were each running their own internal “Green Weeks” to engage employees in sustainable issues. By compiling the best ideas from each organisations and getting support from The Schumacher Institute and Low Carbon South West, the Business Green Week was born. For the full insight see https://storify.com/GoGreenBristol/business-green-week-goes-viral
“There is a buzzing atmosphere at our events because everyone is there for the same reason: to take action to make their businesses more sustainable or to provide a product or service that can assist in this aim. Go Green aims for its events to be informative, engaging and, where possible, fun! We invite speakers that we know will be confident and bring a fresh angle to a topic. For example for the Travel & Transport Business Breakfast a Bristol pilot from the World’s first Solar Hot Air Balloon that launched in Bristol in 2015 spoke about harnessing the power of the sun, and brought along fabric samples from the balloon. This really caught the imagination of attendees.

“To bring about lasting change, the Go Green team aims to produce events that provide the business case for change, have a solid grounding at a theoretical level and connect with individuals at an emotional level. Go Green members are often working in isolation as the Sustainability Manager or more often than not a solo Green Champion with green initiatives in addition to their full time post. They report that networking opportunities through our events are a unique opportunity to meet others in a similar position and a brilliant way for them to learn from others and gain inspiration to keep pushing forward with actions.”

Go Green Project Manager
Website
The website was launched at our main launch in February, and has seen 8071 new visitors so far. It is a simple, easy to navigate platform that provides information about the events, a wide range of resources and case studies to help inform and inspire. These include a company who have cut their lighting energy consumption by 99%, a ‘Turn it off Campaign’ that has saved an estimated £48,000 per year and an Agile working programme that has reduce air travel in one Go Green member by 80%. The website is also the front door to the Go Green Tool.

Information tool
The Go Green Tool is the fundamentally different part of the programme. It was developed in partnership with Net Positive Futures, experts in business sustainability facilitation. The tool is important because of the way it captures information about the opportunities for businesses to become more sustainable from across the city region. The advice in the tool is designed to facilitate change within a business, not to be prescriptive about what they must do. See box for more information.

The Go Green tool
The online tool uses a set of data provided by each business to generate a bespoke action plan with advice and information specific to them. A business enters information such as location, size, type of business, and whether their property is owned or rented, and then identifies the issues that affect them. These are divided up into five categories:

- Planning & Resilience
- Travel & Transport
- Energy & Efficiency
- Sustainable Sourcing
- Happy & Healthy

For example, in the Travel & Transport section a business might choose to select ‘Our staff commute to work’ but not ‘We mostly transport and deliver our own products or services with our own vehicle or fleet’. The tool then identifies the type of changes that the business could take and presents them in an interactive online action plan. This plan can then be used to prioritise activity, report on progress to an internal Green team, or at Board meetings, and can be updated as the business completes more actions.

Who pays?
There is an inevitable tension when funding a project like Go Green which is designed to continue beyond the European Green Capital year. While it was very important to all the partners that the tools and support were readily available to anyone who wanted to get involved, and that this provision be free at point of use, the Go Green were also tasked with ensuring that the project could be sustained beyond the end of 2015.

This meant developing a scheme that had capacity to raise some revenue and cover at least some of the direct costs. This has the added benefit of imbuing the project with a sense of being ‘worth’ something – experience shows time and again that it can be difficult to get people to value something that they get for free.

Go Green requires payments for certain aspects, such as attending events, to ensure that the attendees are engaged and the drop-off in attendance is low. This is always a balancing act and it is difficult to please everyone but negative comments have been very few considering the number of attendees.
Getting small businesses to engage

The principal target was to engage with over 1,000 businesses over the course of the year. In addition to that target, which had been reached by the summer, Go Green aims to get as many Do It and Prove It members as possible.

In order to develop a programme that would appeal to advanced green businesses as well as those starting out in the area, Go Green has a three stage process:

**Say It** is a simple commitment that any business can make – a statement of intent that they would like to do more.

**Do It** requires the business to generate a Go Green Action plan and demonstrate that they are making tangible changes to their business.

**Prove It** is for more advanced businesses which have made at least one improvement in each of the five categories. Prove It members are asked to pay a fee which is invested back into the project to help ensure its longer term success.

The aim was to engage 1,000 businesses over the year and to be able to share best practice between members across the network. Through the events programme, which has been attended by over 1,200 individuals, the project has already shared a huge amount of useful information and guidance, and inspired many businesses to improve.

As of mid-October 2015 the Prove It members are a diverse mix of organisations of different sizes and from different sectors:
How did they do it?

This section of the module outlines the practicalities of how Low Carbon South West and Business West delivered Go Green. It is offered here as advice to others who might be seeking to replicate the model.

Try to build in as much lead time as you can to organise your consultations and develop your programme.

The timeline for this project was tight, with the decision to proceed only being made in late September 2014. The launch of the tool occurred in February 2015 which could only be achieved because it involved taking an existing platform and re-engineering it to fit with the actions the team wanted to include.

Engage and consult with your partners and stakeholders as much as possible.

Use your networks to help identify the ‘known unknowns’ there will be lots of projects and activities that even the most knowledgeable organisations won’t know about. Internally, the most significant amount of time was spent gathering information on as many initiatives, businesses, charities and projects as possible to include in the signposting section of the tool. Since the remit had always been to be inclusive and help existing organisations to benefit from the European Green Capital status, it was important to be as comprehensive as possible. In addition to the combined networks and industry knowledge of Business West and LCSW, the team held meetings and consultation sessions with a wider range of local stakeholders, including other business support organisations, companies and the charity sector to gather as much information as possible. The involvement of the Bristol Green Capital Business Action Group was especially helpful in the stage of the process. They were also an invaluable sounding board for the various iterations of the programme as it developed.

Make sure you have a knowledgeable and committed team and trust in their expertise.

Other than the external development by the technical and web developers, the rest of the development of the tool, the event programme, and the website content was generated internally by a small but very hard-working team. Until the start of 2015 all the development was undertaken by a manager at Business West with support from colleagues, and two members of the LCSW team. All the preliminary work was funded by those organisations themselves.

Seek funding and support.

Think carefully about your budgets, and if your funding is for a limited period – think from the start about whether you can create a financially sustainable model when that comes to an end.

The Bristol 2015 Company supplied a grant to cover the technical development of the programme, the events activity and the staffing costs for the calendar year of 2015. Over the course of the year, that covered salaries for three fulltime staff to manage and coordinate the activities. However, the project has also included a great deal of additional resource. Part of this came from the two organisations, particularly the time of senior staff members who helped with the development and promotion of the project. But the project would not have been possible without a great deal of help and goodwill from partners and third parties.

Involve members.

Many organisations have contributed time and resource to help host and run events. Members have been very supportive and helpful in providing evidence of the activities they have undertaken, and numerous organisations have helped to promote Go Green and signpost their own networks to the programme. In addition, the project team worked closely with the Green Capital Partnership and the Bristol 2015 Company. Collaborations with Bristol 2015 Company on press and PR has been very helpful, while also providing them with a source of content for their website and newsletters.

A good communications strategy is essential.

Ensure you know what you want to say and how, and make sure you keep on top of social media and press to promote what you are doing.
“Overall it would certainly be fair to say that anyone intending to develop a scheme like Go Green should first and foremost ensure that they have the support and buy-in of as many local organisations and networks as possible. The key principle of the project was to be as collaborative as possible. The biggest challenge was in trying to meet the needs and expectations of many different types of group. The stakeholders included Bristol 2015, our funders, but also the local authorities, the businesses who had been involved with previous schemes, the organisations we wanted to support and signpost to, local interested politicians who wanted to know what we were planning to achieve, and many more.

“This aspect of the project seems to have been pretty successful to date. The key has been to ensure that these organisations can see how they will also benefit from being involved, and to work with partners on events and projects wherever possible.”

Go Green co-director

Looking ahead

The intention has always been for Go Green to continue after 2015. The infrastructure costs, in terms of time, expertise and cost, were significant so there is a clear desire to maximise on those, and to keep the momentum going. The Go Green project team is aware of a clear desire from members to see the programme develop in the future.

The challenge is to create a sustainable business model that still ensures that the barrier to joining is low, and that the main focus of any financial benefit is with the businesses and organisations who supply the environmental expertise and services. It is also important that future activity works in concert with other organisations in the area. Go Green is developing a financial model that combines income from Prove It membership, sponsorship, event delivery, referral fees and various other sources, with the intention that the programme can continue to run successfully in the years to come.

Effective collaboration

This case study is offered here as an example of different organisations working together to deliver shared goals.

Refill Bristol is a collaboration between City to Sea, a campaigning organisation working to reduce the use of single use plastic consumption, FRANK Water, a charity providing clean drinking water in the developing world, and Go Green. It is supported by Bristol 2015. It aims to discourage the purchase of single use water bottles by promoting reusable bottles and encouraging businesses to offer tap water to their customers. Working in collaboration with a combination of staff and volunteers, the Refill team have managed to sign up 100 businesses well ahead of the target of the end of the year.

It was recognised that each of the partners had a different motivation and strength, but by working in collaboration, the different groups were able to make the project more successful in a shorter timeframe.
Enlisting the support of big businesses

One of the most successful aspects of the Go Green programme is the networking and learning opportunities available to facilitate the exchange of transmission of experience from large to small businesses.

Large businesses often have the capital to invest in sustainability initiatives that lead to financial and other positive social and environmental changes, which SMEs can then learn from and choose to invest in, with a lower sense of risk. They are also good customers, helping to expand and support the local green economy by purchasing from SME businesses. Numerous large businesses attended Go Green events, enabling them to meet exhibitors from local SMEs with sustainable business products or services to offer.

Two examples are supplied below:

City of Bristol College working with CollectEco

The Go Green launch event, which took place in February 2015 to an audience of almost 400, also provided a platform for the City of Bristol College to partner up with Bristol’s leading waste reuse, recycling and collection service, CollectEco. The two organisations now work together to sort and dispose of all waste materials generated by the College without sending it to landfill. The scheme has realised financial returns of in excess of £8k through sales of redundant equipment, freeing up storage areas, as well as clearing valuable classroom and office space.

Skanska working with the Children’s Scrapstore

At the Go Green Business Breakfast – Energy & Efficiency Skanska’s representative met an exhibitor for the Children’s Scrapstore which now takes some of their waste packaging for use as children’s craft and play materials.


Go Green members enjoying networking at the Go Green Business Breakfast on “Planning & Resilience” at Bristol Hotel, July 2015.
What people have said about Go Green

Below are collected quoted from partners, exhibitors and members explaining what the benefits of the Go Green project have been.

“As part of the Travelwest Business Engagement work in Bristol, we were excited to be part of the Go Green Business Breakfast to talk about how businesses in Bristol can work with Bristol City Council and Go Green to progress and improve their sustainability. We so enjoyed being in a room of likeminded businesses all with the same aim and motivation to be inspired to try something new. We are hoping to help a number of those businesses access the Local Sustainable Transport Fund and benefit from the Go Green principles.”

_Sara Sloman, Business Engagement Manager, Local Sustainable Transport Fund_

“I attended the Go Green ‘Happy and Healthy’ business breakfast in May 2015 as a stall holder to promote my business ‘Green Tomato Kitchen’. The event helped me to target exactly the kind of businesses, organisations and individuals that I wish to work with. I had so many positive conversations at the event that I felt sure it would lead directly to new business, and indeed I had three bookings from new clients I had met at the event within a week or two. As a relatively new business and a sole trader, I have to be especially careful about how I spend money and resources on promotion. The small fee I paid for the stall at the Go Green breakfast was well worth the investment for Green Tomato Kitchen. On a personal level, I really enjoyed the event as well. It was great to tap into the energy of so many people and organisations taking really positive steps in Bristol.”

_Jo-Anne Lovemore, Director, Green Tomato Kitchen_

“The Go Green Travel and Transport breakfast was an excellent event for Velopost as it put us in touch with individuals within businesses who share the same passion for environmental sustainability as we do. We met people from many different businesses and backgrounds whom at traditional networking events may have found it difficult to understand the value of what we offer, but at this event were very open to our proposition. Attendees in general were highly motivated to achieve green goals and were ready and willing to introduce our service into their businesses where possible. Demand was so high that we actually ran out of promotional Velopost stamps on the day! We attend many networking events and business shows and have found that the Go Green events are great value for an environmentally focused organisation such as ourselves, particularly when compared with conventional networking events and business shows.”

_Jeremy Field, Velopost_

“The Go Green Tool compliments our ISO 14001 accreditation by helping us focus on areas of our business that are not all about Environmental Systems, for example our people and how we interact with the local community. The tool is very easy to use and by creating an Action Plan we can involve other stakeholders within our business to identify, action and deliver positive benefits for our staff, our customers, our suppliers and enhance our business profitability.”

_Kevin Pembroke, Sales and Marketing Director, Latcham Direct._
European Green Capital is a prestigious annual award designed to promote and reward the efforts of cities to improve the environment. Bristol is the first ever UK city to win the award.

European Green Capital is run by The European Commission, recognising that Europe’s urban societies face many environmental challenges – and that sustainable, low-carbon living is vital to the future of our cities and our people.

The award was first won by Stockholm in 2010. Since then, Hamburg, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Nantes and Copenhagen have carried the torch. Bristol will hand over to Ljubljana at the end of the year.

THE BRISTOL METHOD

The Bristol Method is a knowledge-transfer programme aimed at helping people in other cities understand and apply the lessons that Bristol has learned in becoming a more sustainable city, not just in 2015 but in the last decade.

Each module of the Bristol Method is presented as an easy-to-digest ‘how to’ guide on a particular topic, which use Bristol’s experiences as a case study. The modules contain generic advice and recommendations that each reader can tailor to their own circumstances.

The Bristol Method modules are published on the Bristol 2015 website at www.bristol2015.co.uk/method