



Sustainability in the research sector

The MRS guide on getting to Net Zero

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The world leaders descended on Glasgow in November 2021 for the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) to discuss the next steps in addressing the climate emergency. The science is clear: we have eight years left to avert the worst impacts of climate change and current commitments fall dramatically short of what is required.

Ambition must be scaled across every sector, with businesses of every size rising to the challenge and taking action today. However in the UK, 1 in 2 companies do not have a net zero target, and only 20% of employees feel their business will be net zero by 2050.

A survey of 1,700 senior UK business leaders found that 64% say cutting their carbon footprint is part of their organisation's environmental sustainability strategy, but only 17% have implemented a detailed programme for mapping their emissions and less than half (47%) monitor them. A lack of guidance, organisational strategy and skills are cited as the main barriers to progress. MRS wants to support SMEs who want to pursue net zero but aren't sure where to start.

We are pleased to be able to preview content from the Insight Climate Collective's Net Zero In Sight report. Launching later this year, the report is a comprehensive look at the role of the insight industry in addressing the climate crisis, exploring our sector's impacts, workers' perspectives, and roadmap for climate action.

The below summarises actions from the 'eliminate' and 'educate' sections of the report, building in additional content and links specifically for SMEs.

1. Find your climate champions

Sustainability suffers from being everybody's second priority. Form a dedicated team to work on your strategy and create the time outside of their other responsibilities to make this happen. Your dream team will consist of:

- Senior leadership – to oversee and ensure deadlines are met
- Accounting/finance – the gatekeepers of the data you need to do your measurements
- Office/facilities managers – people who have access to things like meter readings and energy bills
- Anyone passionate about sustainability in the business – to give the project energy, enthusiasm and keep things moving!

2. Decide on a methodology

As researchers know, your results are dependent on your sampling approach. Similarly, the size of your footprint is determined by your methodology; what you choose to

include, and how you measure it. Ultimately, every time you spend money, you create emissions – so the best practice is: include everything you spend money on!

The good news is that you have all the data you need already, through accounts or office records.

There are many methodologies and reporting standards available but we recommend the GHG Reporting Protocol – Corporate standard. You should be measuring your Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions. Scope 3 emissions (particularly commuting and business travel) are important for market research, as these account for a large part of our footprint.

The **GHG protocol offers straightforward guidance on approaching Scope 3 calculations**. As with research, in GHG accounting we must strive for accurate data.

Emissions can be estimated myriad ways, but as a rule of thumb, anything you can measure in units of weight or distance is preferable to a spend-based calculation (eg if measuring miles in company vehicles, litres of fuel > KM driven > spend in £/\$/€ on fuel). That said, the perfect is the enemy of the good: it is better to measure what you can now and improve next year.

The MRS have partnered with sustainability consultancy Green Element to provide a GHG calculator free of cost to businesses with a turnover under £300,000 per annum and at a discounted rate of 20% for MRS Accredited Company Partners and organisations signed up the **MRS Net Zero Pledge**.

Reviewing this [tool](#) in advance should outline the specific data for collection. Guidance on calculating emissions is also available via **the SME climate hub**.

Homeworking emissions are not currently a mandated category in the GHG Protocol which was developed before COVID-19. Given that there is likely a large impact on emissions vs. office work depending on the season (higher emissions in the winter, lower in the summer), we advise that GHG emissions from home working should be included in measurements from 2020 onwards. **Guidance on calculating home working is available from Eco Act.**

Ambitious agencies may wish to include the emissions from qualitative research within their calculations.

3. Crunch the numbers

The first stage of a diet is getting on the scales. Pick a year to use as a baseline to measure your emissions reductions from – 2019 is advised as a pre-COVID benchmark.

Pull the numbers for your 2019 baseline year, and if possible 2020 as well for context.

You will now have a good idea of where your highest emissions are (your 'hotspots') and so where you should be looking to make reductions first. For most businesses, this will be travel and energy usage.

4. Set a reduction target

The ambition of a net zero target is to fundamentally restructure business to operate in a low-carbon way. Businesses must treat their targets for emissions reduction as seriously as any financial target, and aim for genuine emissions reductions, rather than just baking in offsetting costs to budgets. Signatories to the MRS Net Zero Pledge have committed to

be net zero by 2026. This means that by 2026, you will remove as many GHGs from the atmosphere as you put in.

The **Science Based Targets Initiative** offer advice on how to set an emissions reduction target in line with climate science, including both a near-term and long-term target.

The way these reductions can be achieved will vary by business, but for market research will likely involve:

- A policy on business flights: when they can be taken, and in what flight class. It may be helpful to set a specific metric to ensure this happens (e.g. business flights to be 75% reduced vs. 2019 levels)
- A switch to renewable energy
- Improving energy efficiency
- Switching to electric cars
- A sustainable procurement strategy

A wealth of advice on practical steps SMEs can take to reduce emissions can be found at: <https://smeclimatehub.org/tools/>

Climate action is a top-down initiative that requires senior leadership for success. A simple way to ensure this is achieved in your business is to link executive compensation to environmental performance.

5. Remove what can't be reduced

It is unavoidable that on the journey to net zero, some emissions will remain as part of the transition. Offsetting is a way to account for these unavoidable emissions. So, the credibility of a net zero claim rests on its offsetting strategy.

However, the offsetting sector is rife with unsubstantiated claims and accusations of greenwash. The majority (95%) of carbon offsets do not actually remove carbon from the atmosphere – they only avoid emissions being created. As we are looking to 'balance the books' with our carbon accounts, we must remove what we emit. We must also ensure that anything removed, stays removed permanently, otherwise the balance is disrupted.

There are two ways to remove carbon currently:

- **Nature-based solutions:** projects like tree planting or peatland restoration. Nature based solutions have other benefits outside of just removing carbon, like improving biodiversity. However, they are not permanent solutions, as trees could become sick, burn down, or land could change hands in the future
- **Direct air capture:** technologies that remove carbon from the atmosphere and store it, usually in rock. These are expensive currently but will decrease in price as technology improves.

We recommend buying carbon removals only, though if avoided emissions are purchased then the portfolio should evolve over time in line with the **Oxford Principles for Net Zero Aligned Offsetting**.

The cost of an offset varies from around £16-26 per tonne for nature-based solutions to c.£700 for direct air capture. Dedicating a percentage of your emissions to direct air capture helps fund a nascent but important industry.

We recommend the organisation **MyCarbon** as an offset provider.

6. Green your supply chain – especially your pension

There are huge opportunities to make sustainable choices which have a ripple effect through your supply chain, that don't show up neatly in your carbon accounting sheets. This is because it's easier to accurately calculate the carbon impact of things like flights and energy usage than it is on wider business spend like staff entertainment, client gifts, or even pensions.

Recent research shows that at an individual level, switching your pension to a sustainable fund is 21x more effective than going veggie, giving up flying and switching energy provider combined. Finding a net zero aligned pension is not hard: major institutions like Aviva, Scottish Widow and Nest have already committed to net zero across their entire investment portfolio. The campaign Make My Money Matter can give you advice on your providers performance and how to begin a conversation with them about net zero.

More widely, work with suppliers and brands who not only have a net zero target but can demonstrate steps towards achieving this. Consider every purchase through the sustainability lens, but think beyond packaging, which is unlikely to account for much of the carbon footprint. Look for products and services that support the circular economy, such as refurbished electronics, or recycled paper for printing.

Market research companies wishing to go further can pursue the ISO 40200 sustainable procurement standard which offers a framework for embedding sustainability in purchasing.

7. Educate your staff

Sustainability is a complicated topic with intersecting and sometimes competing challenges.

Studies consistently show that people are concerned about the environment but continue with environmentally damaging lifestyles. This is often discussed as the 'say-do' gap between values and behaviour. However, research shows there is a 'believe-true' gap whereby the general public are misinformed about the impacts of, and solutions to, the climate crisis^[1]. We can assume that this 'education gap' extends through to the professional world as well.

Make time to educate staff not just on your own net zero journey, but the wider context it's framed in. Ensure your staff understand the climate crisis, causes and solutions. This has benefits not only for employee engagement, it is also a competitive advantage. As insight professionals, clients require our expertise regarding not just people's behaviour but understanding that in context: we must seek to upskill ourselves on the topic, and to be ahead of the curve in terms of public demands, regulatory and societal pressures, and the multitude of factors required to leverage the greatest impact.

8. Iterate and improve

Sustainability is a fast-moving field. Strive for best practice, stay abreast of new advice and strive for accuracy and completeness in our measurements.