

ExtendPlus Programme Evaluation

Glasgow City Region Intelligence Hub

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GLASGOW
CITY REGION

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Executive Summary

The ExtendPlus Programme was designed to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in understanding, measuring, and reducing their carbon emissions, while contributing to wider Net Zero goals. This evaluation assessed the effectiveness, impact, and areas for improvement of the programme, based on feedback from participating businesses, stakeholders, and delivery partners.

Key Findings

- **Positive Impact for Early-Stage Businesses:** The programme was particularly valuable for organisations at the beginning of their sustainability journey. These businesses benefitted from tailored carbon baseline reports, and clear action plans that helped them understand their carbon footprint and identify practical steps forward.
- **Mixed Quality of Support:** While some participants received detailed and bespoke advice, others reported that their reports were generic and data-light. This was often due to challenges in providing input data, communication delays, and delivery pressures on the programme team.
- **Limited Value for Net Zero Ready Businesses:** Organisations already active in sustainability saw less added value, raising concerns about whether programme resources were best targeted. In some cases, the programme appeared to subsidise actions that were already underway.
- **Challenges for Small and Rented-Space Businesses:** Smaller organisations and those operating from rented premises faced significant barriers to implementing recommendations, particularly where physical changes (e.g. insulation, solar panels) were needed.
- **Programme Perception and Communication:** Most participants would recommend the programme, praising its professionalism and clarity. However, many highlighted the need for better marketing that emphasises business benefits beyond carbon reduction, such as financial savings and compliance advantages.

Implementation and Delivery Challenges

- **Delays and Missed Opportunities:** Early delays in launching the programme affected engagement and delivery. Businesses engaged too early became disengaged due to lack of follow-through, and a more coordinated rollout could have improved uptake.
- **Governance and Structure:** The evaluation found a need for a firmer governance framework from the start, with clear accountability and adherence to core delivery elements like referral approach, site visits and a communication plan. These should be planned and guaranteed before programme launch to ensure credibility and effectiveness.
- **Follow-up and Long-Term Impact:** There was limited follow-up support for businesses post-assessment, which reduced the likelihood of action plan implementation and made it difficult to assess long-term outcomes.

Recommendations

1. Establish a strong governance structure and adhere to key delivery elements.
2. Strengthen outreach by clearly communicating wider business benefits.
3. Ensure programme timelines and delivery targets are realistic and aligned.
4. Prioritise support for businesses at the start of their sustainability journey to maximise additionality.
5. Time business engagement to align with actual programme readiness.
6. Provide robust follow-up support to maximise impact.
7. Future energy efficiency programmes should include a clear strategy to engage commercial property owners, recognising the limitations tenants face in implementing building-level interventions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Structure of the Report

This report provides an independent evaluation of the ExtendPlus Programme conducted by the Glasgow City Region Intelligence Hub. The report is structured as follows:

Section 1 – Provides an overview of the ExtendPlus Programme

Section 2 – Outlines the evaluation methodology

Section 3 – Presents the key findings

Section 4 – Provides reflections on the programme

1.2 Programme Overview

Reaching Net Zero and building resilience to climate change is a challenge for businesses. To help meet this, and to help address the challenge of rising energy costs, seven of the eight member authorities (MAs) in GCR¹ have used UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) funding to introduce a new programme in partnership with the University of Strathclyde to offer businesses a free Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Carbon baseline via their ExtendPlus programme.

The University of Strathclyde ExtendPlus team support SMEs to complete a GHG Carbon Baseline which serves as a foundation for businesses to understand their current carbon footprint, and detail recommendations for reduction of carbon emissions, potential cost savings and CO2 savings (tonnes per annum). This in turn will support businesses and organisations to gain additional insights on their journey towards Net Zero.

A GHG carbon baseline serves as a comprehensive measurement of a business's GHG emissions. It acts as a one-year snapshot, essentially providing a starting point for the organisation to begin their journey to carbon neutrality.

The programme ran for one year (21 March 2024 to 31 March 2025)² and was offered at no cost to participating businesses and organisations. To complete a GHG carbon baseline, organisations were required to provide the ExtendPlus team with information on their energy use. To streamline this process, the team developed a checklist, in the form of an Excel spreadsheet, designed to help businesses gather the necessary data efficiently.

The programme was managed by the Glasgow City Region Programme Management Office, which played a key role in facilitating collaboration between member authorities and the ExtendPlus team. Its responsibilities included designing and enforcing the contractual agreement, as well as monitoring and reporting on programme progress. The member authorities' responsibility was to refer eligible businesses to the ExtendPlus team.

1 North Lanarkshire does not participate in the programme but does offer a similar service to its local businesses.

2 The Grant Agreement was fully executed on 19 Dec 2023, but referrals weren't accepted until 21 March 2024.

2. Evaluation Methodology

This evaluation assesses the effectiveness, process, and overall impact of the ExtendPlus programme on participating organisations. It examines how the programme was implemented, evaluates its outcomes, and identifies strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

The research question is: **how effectively has the ExtendPlus Programme supported participating businesses in measuring, understanding, and reducing their carbon emissions, and what key factors have influenced its effectiveness?**

The evaluation assesses both the implementation and impact of the programme. It examines the programme's structure, objectives, and delivery process, analysing the effectiveness of outreach, application, and selection procedures. Additionally, it evaluates the level of support provided to businesses throughout the programme. In terms of impact, the evaluation measures changes in business awareness, knowledge, and capacity to monitor and reduce carbon emissions. It also considers the extent to which businesses adopted recommended sustainability practices.

The evaluation has used qualitative analysis to assess the effectiveness and impact of the ExtendPlus programme. The method used was semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, and a business survey. The interviews were conducted online. Stakeholders included:

- GCR staff and Member Authority representatives — those involved in funding, designing, and implementing the intervention, as well as staff responsible for identifying and referring eligible businesses.
- Extend Plus delivery team (University of Strathclyde) — those directly involved in running the programme.
- 13 participating businesses.

One of the primary limitations of this evaluation was the low response rate to the business survey. This was, at least in part, due to the survey being disseminated via the participating local authorities. This was due to the data protection agreement. Due to the small sample size, these insights have been omitted from this evaluation.

Additionally, there is a clear bias in the interview sample toward businesses that had a more positive experience with the programme. This is known as 'response bias' and often affects evaluation work. Although efforts were made to include a control group of businesses that decided to disengage, these organisations were generally unwilling to participate in the evaluation process. As a result, the findings of this evaluation should be interpreted with an understanding that they are more reflective of positive experiences and may not fully capture the range of outcomes.

Another limitation was the lack of input from certain local authorities that did not nominate or provide any participating businesses. This gap may affect the place-based understanding of how the programme was implemented and experienced across the Region. Without insights from these areas, the evaluation may overlook local challenges or variations in delivery that could inform future improvements.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Programme Approach and Implementation

3.1.1 Process

This section looks at the effectiveness of the process such as the objectives, stakeholder collaboration and outreach to organisations.

Objectives and Delivery Process

The programme had a clear target of engaging 500 businesses and organisations. While this was the primary goal, many local authorities and the ExtendPlus team also had softer objectives, such as providing SMEs with a stepping stone to begin their Net Zero journey, reducing emissions, and initiating compliance processes for tender contracts. Additionally, local authorities linked the initiative to local green business support grants, creating further incentives for businesses to complete their carbon baseline assessment.

There was consensus among stakeholders that the programme's one-year timeframe was highly ambitious. The time required to engage businesses — from initial contact to the completion of a baseline report — was underestimated. Additionally, delays in finalising the contractual agreement were not reflected in adjusted timelines, which had significant negative knock-on effects on all aspects of delivery. Upon reflection, stakeholders suggested that the programme would have been more effective if structured as a two-year initiative rather than a single year.

While follow-up with businesses was included in the agreement, the ExtendPlus team argued strongly that meaningful follow-up was impractical within the available timeframe — primarily because businesses had not been given sufficient time to access the green grants and implement recommended measures within the project's duration. In the absence of a follow-up mechanism, it was impossible to assess how businesses were acting on the recommendations provided in their reports. Nonetheless, some local authorities placed less emphasis on direct follow-up, focusing instead on the broader goal of fostering a cultural shift among SMEs towards Net Zero.

Stakeholder Relationships

Overall, stakeholder collaboration was seen as a positive aspect of the process, with particularly strong feedback for the Glasgow City Region Programme Management Office. At the start of the programme, discussions took place between all stakeholders to clarify roles and responsibilities. Relationships and communication between the ExtendPlus team and member authorities were generally positive. However, some member authorities reported instances where sustainability advisors engaged with businesses in a manner perceived as abrupt, and at times, even rude. This occasionally resulted in reputational damage for local authorities that had recommended ExtendPlus to local businesses.

Additionally, there was a shared view among member authorities that the ExtendPlus team was not sufficiently proactive in reaching out to businesses and establishing relationships. While it was acknowledged that tight timescales placed significant pressure on the team to deliver results quickly, there was still an expectation for more proactive communication. Specifically, businesses would have benefitted from clearer guidance on the terminology used in the checklist and more hands-on support in understanding the requirements and how to complete the process effectively.

Another issue arose when ExtendPlus stopped conducting site visits partway through the programme due to a variety of challenges (explained below). This change affected relationships with member authorities, who had been assured that site visits would be a key component of engagement with

businesses. One business advisor from a member authority highlighted the impact of this change, stating:

“The only challenge was when there were changes in programme delivery and confusion. Site visits fundamentally changed for businesses, and reports became more data-light and generic. The PMO did raise this issue, but ExtendPlus advisors would have expected that if there were problems contacting businesses, the council could have stepped in to resolve them directly.”

Business Advisor, GCR Member Authority

Implementation Challenges

The delivery of the programme faced several implementation challenges, the most significant being business outreach. A major criticism from all stakeholders was the lack of a dedicated marketing budget. As a result, local authorities had to rely on their existing networks, often resorting to cold-calling businesses. This approach placed a strain on staff, particularly in smaller local authorities.

While many local authorities also attempted alternative strategies — such as promoting the programme through social media, local events, and dedicated webpages — these efforts struggled to gain significant traction.

Most local authorities reported difficulties in generating business interest and increasing referral rates. This was largely attributed to a variety of issues but mostly due to lack of concern among businesses for the Net Zero agenda.

“The programme overestimated demand and set an ambitious target, but many businesses were simply too busy or not ready to begin their Net Zero journey. Challenges like rented premises, landlord restrictions, and rolling lease contracts made it even harder for them to engage.”

Business Advisor, GCR Member Authority

One member authority also mentioned that other active policies and regulations interacted negatively with the ExtendPlus Programme. However, this is a common challenge for other types of grant funding:

“Non-domestic rates (NDRs) posed a challenge, as economic development divisions couldn’t provide further support to businesses with outstanding debts. Changes in NDR liabilities, relief policies, and compliance issues created additional barriers, complicating the process for ExtendPlus.”

Business Group Manager, GCR Member Authority

Once businesses were engaged, another challenge emerged with the checklist, which was frequently perceived as clunky and difficult to use. However, some business advisors suggested that part of the issue stemmed from businesses being reluctant to provide the necessary information, despite the potential for funding opportunities.

Additionally, inconsistencies in how the checklist was used across different local authorities created further complications. The lack of a uniform approach meant that the ExtendPlus team faced difficulties in implementing the initial stages of business engagement, such as making first contact and conducting video calls. Without clear briefing and aligned expectations, this led to confusion and inefficiencies in the process as highlighted by one sustainability advisor:

“The checklist was designed to help businesses prepare for the reporting process, but its use varied across local authorities. Some local authorities chose not to use it, which led to confusion among businesses who still had to gather the required data but hadn’t been briefed appropriately.

“In contrast, other local authorities found it streamlined and refined it with additional questions. Despite initial meetings to ensure consistency, for some local authorities it became purely a box-ticking exercise.”

Sustainability Advisor, University of Strathclyde ExtendPlus team

Once businesses were engaged in the process, one of the biggest challenges for the ExtendPlus team was arranging site visits. The primary issue was scheduling — due to the ambitious engagement timelines, many businesses simply didn’t have availability, often leading to delays of two to three weeks.

Another significant challenge was transportation. Sustainability advisors struggled to reach some businesses using public transport, which was either limited or non-existent in certain areas. This was mostly the case for businesses located outside of Glasgow where public transport is sparse and infrequent, especially close to industrial areas where many manufacturing and construction businesses are located. While the University of Strathclyde had two electric vehicles, they were rarely available when needed. As a result, the team ultimately had to discontinue site visits and rely solely on online assessments. These logistical challenges affected programme uptake, as businesses were initially slow to engage. The inability to conduct in-person visits also meant that some businesses missed out on the hands-on support that site assessments could have provided.

3.1.2 Outputs and Outcomes

Achievement of Targets and Milestones

The programme did not meet its hard, measurable target, supporting 288 businesses instead of the intended 500. In terms of milestones, it was only in the last quarter that it was achievable to produce the carbon baseline reports in the agreed timeline.

The ExtendPlus team further noted that the referral rate was lower than expected, which contributed to the shortfall.

“We aimed for smooth communication, but while we reached out in the first five days as agreed, companies often took two weeks to respond — plus the added time for site visits. Capturing and returning data was another challenge; the ambitious eight-week timeframe proved unrealistic due to inevitable delays. With smoother processes, we could have engaged more businesses and made an even greater impact.”

Member of the University of Strathclyde ExtendPlus team

Despite this, there was consensus from all stakeholders that the programme successfully initiated conversations on Net Zero with businesses, raising awareness and encouraging consideration of sustainability goals.

Perceived Value for Money

The majority of member authorities indicated that the programme’s key deliverable, namely the carbon baseline report, did not meet quality expectations. Business advisors largely described the reports as a “desk-based and high-level exercise” that provided little added value to participating organisations.

Several factors were attributed to this, including the rushed production of reports due to tight timescales and the absence of on-site assessments. Specific examples highlighted these issues, such as a company being advised to update a boiler — despite not having one. Another company received an audit report

comment advising against placing heating under the office desk, even though the premises had no office. The latter had been visited as part of the process.

This led to relationship damage between the member authority and the business. Some member authorities reported that businesses provided feedback stating that the responsible sustainability advisor was not apologetic when mistakes were identified.

To some extent, the ExtendPlus team acknowledges that some assessments were not as thorough as they should have been. They recognise that with more time for assessment and refinement, a few reports could have been more tailored and detailed.

Overall, six of the seven participating member authorities thought that the programme was not value for money; the £750 price tag per report was perceived to be too expensive for the quality of the output. According to one interviewee:

“Half of the audits in our local authority were merely desk-based exercises that could have been completed using an online form. The assessments lacked depth, with generic recommendations that were often not applicable to the businesses. As a result, businesses received generic advice, making the reports less valuable — despite each costing approximately £700.”

Business Advisor, GCR Member Authority

3.2 Impact on Participating Organisations

This section looks at the impact that the programme had on participating organisations.

Reasons for Engaging and Expectations

The majority of organisations interviewed became aware of the programme through direct outreach from local authority business advisors. Key motivations for participating included reducing operational costs, meeting regulatory requirements for tenders and grants, and lowering their environmental impact. All organisations reported that the programme met their expectations, with clear communication of its objectives and anticipated benefits. Many also noted that it exceeded their expectations, particularly in comparison to previous experiences with other sustainability consultants.

Impact

The impact of the programme varied depending on where businesses were in their sustainability journey. For those in the early stages, establishing a carbon baseline was especially valuable, as it provided a clear understanding of what needed to be addressed and a structured plan for taking action. This, in turn, equipped organisations with a strong evidence base to support investment decisions in sustainability initiatives. According to one business:

“The programme has made us more environmentally aware as a business. It’s been an educational journey, showing us that even simple changes can have a meaningful impact. We’ve gained insights into our vehicle usage, fuel types, and how different roles within the company affect our carbon footprint.”

Tech Supplier

For other organisations which were more advanced in their Net Zero journey, having a carbon baseline meant that they could set clear targets and make more progress on their priorities.

“It was reassuring to see that many areas had already been identified — validating our current direction. The estimated energy savings, particularly around draft exclusion and lighting, provide a strong case for investment and support ongoing efforts.”

Creative Arts Business

Some third sector organisations, particularly those with a strong social impact focus, highlighted additional benefits from implementing the programme’s recommendations — namely, improved community wellbeing and a sense of inspiration. For example, one charity operating a community centre reported that its new building now runs partially on solar power and uses rainwater to flush toilets. These changes not only reduced environmental impact but also served as a visible, practical example of sustainability in action, inspiring local residents and reinforcing the organisation’s role as a community leader. They mentioned that:

“While not easily measurable, the impact is clear — around 40 children and various community groups use the facility, and all respond positively. The building is widely praised, with children saying it feels better, improving wellbeing and inspiring them to care more about the planet.”

Community Centre

Key Challenges

For organisations operating in rented premises, one of the most significant challenges was implementing physical changes — often the very measures that could have the greatest impact on reducing energy costs, such as upgrading windows or installing solar panels.

For small organisations without a dedicated sustainability resource, a key challenge was the lack of capacity to implement the programme’s recommendations. This lack of internal expertise was also a primary reason for their participation — they simply couldn’t afford to hire sustainability advisors. As a result, while they benefitted from having an action plan, many lacked the means to put it into practice. Although the programme offered follow-up support, several organisations felt this was a missed opportunity to provide more hands-on assistance. Additionally, for those just beginning their Net Zero journey, the language used in the checklist was often too technical, highlighting the need for greater support in building carbon literacy. For example, one organisation highlighted:

“The jargon was hard to understand — we relied heavily on the council for clarification, and some figures got lost along the way. We also had support from the University of Strathclyde. The assessment was done online, with no site visit due to availability.”

Childcare Provider

Suggested Improvements

Most participating organisations said they would recommend the programme to other businesses. However, a few areas for improvement were identified. A common suggestion was the need for better communication around the benefits of the programme beyond just carbon reduction — particularly how it can support wider business goals such as cost savings, competitiveness, and regulatory compliance. While the programme was seen as valuable, not all businesses felt ready to invest in implementation. Clearer guidance on practical routes to carry out the action plan would make the programme more accessible and impactful.

“I would recommend it to other organisations, as it provided a clear understanding of our emissions and highlighted potential cost-saving opportunities. The process demonstrated the clear benefits of reducing emissions, leading to a significant reduction in carbon output. It also helped us set targets and focus on key priorities moving forward.”

Community Support Organisation

“We’d definitely recommend the programme, but better communication is needed around the broader business benefits beyond carbon reduction. Not all companies are ready to invest, so clearer guidance on how to implement the action plan would really help.”

Circular Economy Business

4. Programme Reflections

Overall, the ExtendPlus Programme has supported several participating businesses in measuring, understanding, and beginning to reduce their carbon footprint. The greatest impact was seen among organisations that were at the early stages of their Net Zero journey and received tailored support, including site visits and a bespoke carbon baseline report with a clear action plan.

However, for some businesses, the carbon baseline reports were perceived as generic and lacking in detail. This was attributed by business support personnel to difficulties or reluctance in providing robust input data, delays in communication, and pressures on the ExtendPlus team to meet delivery targets. For these organisations, the programme was perceived to be a box-ticking exercise to apply for further funding rather than a meaningful intervention.

Organisations further along in their sustainability journey did benefit from the programme, but for many, the added value was limited. In some cases, the programme may have subsidised actions that these businesses would have undertaken anyway — raising questions about whether greater impact could have been achieved by focusing support on businesses earlier in their Net Zero journey.

Although this evaluation does not include a comparative analysis with similar programmes delivered by the public or private sector, some organisations with experience in other initiatives noted that ExtendPlus stood out for its professionalism, the clarity of its reports, and the tailored nature of its action plans.

While the programme came close to meeting its overall targets, many stakeholders felt that the reports did not consistently represent good value for money — particularly for businesses that were less engaged or already well advanced in their sustainability efforts. It is widely believed among respondents that, had the programme not faced early delays and had referrals been more targeted, uptake could have been significantly higher — especially among businesses that would have benefited most.

This evaluation has identified several key lessons and areas for improvement:

- **Clear Governance and Delivery Structure:** A firmer governance structure should be established from the outset to ensure accountability and consistency in delivery. Greater adherence to key elements of the programme design, such as site visits, is essential for credibility and impact.
- **Stronger Marketing and Outreach:** Improve communication with businesses by clearly highlighting the benefits of participation beyond carbon reduction — such as cost saving and regulatory compliance.
- **Timely and Strategic Programme Launch:** Delays in launching the programme led to lost momentum and reduced effectiveness. Future programmes should align targets with realistic timelines or revise them accordingly to reflect any delays.
- **Better Timing of Business Engagement:** Engage with a pipeline of businesses only when the programme is ready to launch. Early communication, without timely follow-through, resulted in frustration, loss of trust, and disengagement.
- **Follow-up Support:** Ongoing support is critical — not only to help businesses implement their action plans, but also to assess long-term impact and maintain engagement.

5. Appendices

5.1 Member Authorities Interviews – List of Questions

General Background

1. Can you briefly describe your role and responsibilities in the ExtendPlus Programme?

Programme Design & Delivery

2. How do you understand the key objectives of the programme?
3. Did you encounter any challenges in implementing the programme, and how were they addressed?
4. How would you describe the collaboration between your Local Authority, the GCR PMO, and the Strathclyde ExtendPlus team?
5. Were there clear roles and responsibilities between the different partners? If not, what improvements could be made?

Outreach, Application & Selection

6. What strategies were used to identify and recruit eligible businesses?
7. To what extent was the checklist developed by the University of Strathclyde useful to the selection process?
8. What were the main challenges in reaching and engaging businesses? Any factors that helped with this?
9. How effective was the selection process in ensuring the right businesses participated?
10. How many businesses participated in the programme from your Local Authority? How many were contacted? And were there dropouts?
11. Which sectors/types of business took up the offer? Were any groups of businesses underrepresented in the programme? If so, why?

Lessons Learned & Future Improvements

12. What aspects of the programme were most successful, in your opinion?
13. If the programme were to be scaled, adapted, or introduced elsewhere, what changes would you recommend?

5.2 ExtendPlus University of Strathclyde – List of Questions

General Background

1. Can you briefly describe your role and responsibilities in the ExtendPlus Programme?

Methodology Development

2. What were the key considerations when developing the carbon baseline methodology?
3. How was the methodology tested and refined? Were there any alternative approaches considered?
4. Did you receive any feedback from businesses on the methodology and/or carbon baseline reports?

Checklist for Referring Businesses

5. What were the key criteria used for selecting businesses for referral?
6. Were there any challenges in getting local authorities to use the checklist effectively? If so, what were they?
7. How was feedback from local authorities incorporated into improving the checklist?
8. In your opinion, what was the quality of the checklists that were received — i.e. fully or only partially complete?
9. How useful was the checklist in terms of preparing business for the carbon baseline assessment?

Site Assessments & Baseline Template

10. What was the rationale behind developing the standard template?
11. How were bespoke calculations tailored for different businesses or sectors?
12. What challenges did you face in developing and implementing these calculations?
13. What logistical challenges did you encounter when arranging site visits and preparing carbon baseline reports afterwards?
14. How were findings from site assessments used in decision-making?

Programme Effectiveness and Improvements

15. How do you understand the objectives of the ExtendPlus Programme? In your opinion, how well did the programme meet its objectives?
16. What would you say were overall the main obstacles/challenges and what improvements would you recommend?

5.3 Participating Organisations – List of Questions

1. How did you hear about the programme and why you decided to participate?
2. Has the programme met your expectations?
3. Has your organisation made any changes as a result of the Carbon Baseline Report?
4. What was the biggest benefit to your organisation?
5. Would you recommend the programme to other businesses?



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