



**European Union**  
European Structural  
and Investment Funds



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## **LOW CARBON BUSINESS EVOLUTION PROGRAMME**

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### **SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT MARCH 2023**

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<b>Project Name:</b> <b>Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme (LCBEP)</b>	<b>Project Number: 32R15P00212/ 32R16POO206</b>	<b>Project Value:</b> <b>£3,248,667.26</b>
<b>Project Manager:</b>  <b>Diane Roberts / Stephen Boden</b>	<b>Total Project figures are those agreed following PCR agreed June 2021 as:</b>  <b>Total Public Sector Match £430,043.59 Total Private Sector Match £869,424.00 ERDF £1,949,199.67</b>	<b>Project Start Date: 20 August 2016 End Date: 30 June 2023</b>
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## 1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this document is to present the findings of an evaluation of the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme (LCBEP) operated by Staffordshire County Council, through the Staffordshire Business & Environment Network (sben). The evaluation has been conducted by Baswich Business Services Ltd, who are experienced economic development, business support, and evaluation consultants with experience of both the successful delivery and evaluation of ERDF projects.

This evaluation reports on the progress of the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme up to and including March 2023. The LCBEP service will continue to be delivered to beneficiaries until June 2023, with a focus on any lessons learnt and making recommendations for the remainder of the Programme. It will also consider alternative funding available to support the programme beyond ERDF.

This report, and any supporting documentation, has been prepared in a format which meets the specific requirements of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) Guidance.

### **The headlines:**

- LCBEP is a highly regarded environmental business engagement service delivering environmental advice, support, and access to finance to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to improve their productivity, energy efficiency and environmental performance by evolving into low carbon businesses.
- The Programme achieves extremely high satisfaction ratings from its business clients: in our sample some 93% of respondents were satisfied with the service and support they have received through LCBEP.
- The LCBEP programme has earned considerable respect from stakeholder and referral agencies, with all those surveyed speaking positively about the programme, its benefits, and the delivery team.
- The uncertainty caused by COVID-19, Brexit and the situation in Ukraine has had a significant impact on demand. Businesses have delayed strategic investment decisions due to uncertainty within the business climate.
- Partners and stakeholders highlighted that a lead contact between them and the sben team was highly beneficial and led to effective communication.
- The Programme is seen by all those surveyed as an effective and efficient way to decrease energy and carbon emissions in SMEs thus leading to a reduction in environmental impact across Staffordshire.
- The Programme has responded to recommendations from the original Summative Assessment and made changes, such as increasing the maximum grant amount to benefit those businesses with the potential for significant carbon savings.
- The Programme highlighted the role and work of sben within Staffordshire, and this has led to an increased take-up of membership. This further benefits Staffordshire through the creation and fostering of networking / collaboration opportunities between SMEs and stakeholders to further environmental improvements for businesses and the Staffordshire economy as a whole.

- The Programme has further responded to suggestions from the original Summative Assessment and, when UK Community Renewal Fund (CRF) became available, Staffordshire County Council included an element in relation to the need to consider how low carbon jobs and skills are to be addressed in Staffordshire, by launching free Carbon Literacy Training in January 2022.
- LCBEP plays an important role in fostering environmental leadership and a change in perception within the business community, as can be seen by their increased sben membership. Furthermore 89% of grant beneficiaries state it has helped them consider wider carbon saving measures, ranging from feasibility studies into solar PV and heat recovery systems, installation of electric vehicle charging points and purchase/lease of electric vehicles to the identification and tracking of business carbon emissions.
- The Programme is on track to achieve its contractual performance targets.
- The Programme is very reliant on its team: their individual personas were positively recognised by both clients and partners. This is both a strength and a weakness and action should take place to minimise any associated risks.
- The Programme demonstrates that there is a clear need to highlight the business case for low carbon and to continue to provide workshops, case studies, grant funding and environmental reviews to encourage businesses to engage. Failure to do so could result in Staffordshire falling behind other counties.
- There was some disruption caused by the secondment of the Programme Manager. This was mainly due to the delay in finding a suitable replacement, which took several months.
- The calculation used to demonstrate value for money was extremely stringent and meant that many companies were unable to apply for the top end of the grant, which was £20,000.
- Although the service provides a 12-hour business assist, that is challenging for partners when complex or extensive site premises are to be covered during one site visit, the Programme Lead Officer has agreed additional business assists can be offered to businesses, but not claimed as project outputs.
- Thought needs to be given to a suitable tracking activity to demonstrate 'added value'. Currently the return on investment is limited to the ERDF funding output requirements. During our research it was evident that there were additional benefits to businesses over a longer period which have not been reported. Many of the respondents have stated that it is too early to quantify the benefits of the Programme and therefore further evaluation within the next 24 months would enable a quantification of the benefits to be made.
- The service undeniably provides a valuable model for environmental business engagement – part of its success is the fact that it resides with Staffordshire County Council's sben branding, which is well established and recognised as being impartial and partnership focused. In the future, some thought may need to be given on how such a service can be funded and whether there are any elements which lend themselves to commercialisation.

## 2.0 PROJECT BACKGROUND, CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

### 2.1 Project Background

The current LCBEP project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and HM Government via Midlands Engine under Operational Priority Axis 4: Supporting the Shift Towards a Low Carbon Economy in All Sectors of both Investment Priority 4b (promoting energy efficiency and renewable energy use in enterprises). The contract is managed by Staffordshire County Council and is delivered in partnership with Keele University.

The LCBEP service employs five experienced and appropriately qualified staff, only one of whom is full-time, including an Environmental Business Officer, two Project Officers, one Environmental Support Officer and a Business Support Assistant.

The purpose of the service is to help businesses across the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SLEP) area improve their productivity, energy efficiency and environmental performance by evolving into low carbon businesses.

The Programme aims to encourage businesses to increase energy efficiency, leading to a reduction in Greenhouse Gases (GHG). This was to be achieved by increasing general awareness through targeted events and signposting businesses to free specialist low carbon business advice.

The Programme beneficiaries were small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent area that would benefit from specialist environmental business support and grant funding.

The Staffordshire Business and Environment Network (sben - [www.sben.co.uk](http://www.sben.co.uk)), acts as a key marketing and communication tool for the Programme, in addition to managing the LCBEP service. Keele University is responsible for verifying a sample of the Greenhouse Gas Reductions.

Since the original Project Evaluation in 2018, key changes to the Programme include:

- An increase in the maximum grant from £10,000 to £20,000.
- Resources originally allocated for the EMS Gap Analysis were re-aligned to incorporate more demand for the energy efficiency reviews.
- The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) agreed that sben no longer needed to report on ER/C/O/02 Number of enterprises receiving grants.
- Resources originally allocated ER/C/O/04 Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support was re-aligned to incorporate more demand for the energy efficiency reviews.
- The original Project Manager was seconded, and a second Project Manager was engaged, however there was a delay of 6 months before a replacement was in post.
- The grant panel was replaced by a single independent Staffordshire County Council officer with relevant knowledge yet unconnected to sben and the Programme.

## 2.2 Context and Rationale

This Programme responds to ESIF Priority Axis 4 - IP4b. It aims to meet the objective to increase the energy efficiency of SMEs through the implementation of low carbon technologies. It does this through tailored low carbon specialist advice, where an energy efficiency review is undertaken.

Each review provides an individually tailored action plan and guidance for the business.

The Low Carbon Grant Scheme enables SMEs to make capital investments in energy efficiency measures and processes, enabling them to reduce their energy costs. This, in turn, improves their competitiveness and resilience.

Whilst the original bid application supported the use of internships to adopt and embed practices, this element of the Programme did not come to fruition, due to a lack of demand from businesses participating in the Programme.

Additionally, the original bid application responded to ESIF Priority Axis 4 - IP4f to increase innovation in, and adoption of, low carbon technologies. The project aimed to achieve this through specialist low carbon advice in the form of low carbon innovation reviews to assist the market (local SMEs) to innovate, develop, design and manufacture materials, goods, and services with embedded low carbon technologies. However, again due to the lack of demand from businesses, this was withdrawn.

It is important to note that due to lack of interest from SMEs, a Project Change Request (PCR) was submitted to remove the internship element of the Programme. The available resources were transferred to the business grant offer, as this proved to be more popular with businesses participating in the Programme.

The Low Carbon Grant Scheme enabled capital investment in equipment to develop and manufacture low carbon goods and services. The rationale for the changes was that the Programme would respond to the intelligence received and better target the needs of SME businesses.

### 3.0 PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The LCBEP programme is led by Staffordshire County Council (SCC) and delivered by a highly experienced team at Staffordshire Business and Environment Network (sben). This team has nearly 30 years' operational experience working with businesses across Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire. Staffordshire Business Environment Network currently has 437 business members.

The active Programme partner is Keele University who support delivery through the steering group, that meets quarterly.

The overall objectives of the Programme are:

- To engage businesses in the low carbon agenda.
- To advise businesses on increasing their energy efficiency and renewable generation resulting in GHG reductions.
- To encourage and enable investment in energy efficient low carbon technologies.
- To provide skills to businesses to enable deployment of low carbon technologies.
- To encourage businesses to invest in innovating low carbon technologies.

#### Key Performance Indicators

The contractual objectives of the service are as follows:

Table 1: Contractual Outputs

Outputs:	Total
ER/C/O/01 Number of enterprises receiving support	299
ER/C/O/34 Estimated annual decrease of GHG (tCO <sub>2</sub> e)	2260

Source: Funding Agreement Variation, ESIF-Form-3-027, Version 2

The Business Support team, with direction from the steering group, manage the overall delivery of the Programme, including liaison with stakeholders, procurement, contract management, finance, monitoring and progress towards outputs, publicity and submitting claims to DLUHC.

Keele University was responsible for verifying the Programme's CO<sub>2</sub>e Greenhouse Gas Reductions, and appraising Grant Applications on the Grant Panel.

Progress for Keele University is monitored against a Service Level Agreement via their quarterly claim to the Accountable Body. Costs are calculated via timesheets, with prevailing rates of salary and associated costs attributed to the individuals concerned.



## 4.0 METHODOLOGY

Baswich Business Services Ltd was commissioned, following a competitive procurement process, in November 2022. The procurement remit was to undertake an independent summative evaluation of the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme in line with the Funding Agreement received by Staffordshire County Council from the Department of Communities and Local Government (now Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government). This funding agreement stipulated that as a condition of funding, Staffordshire County Council must procure an evaluation of the Programme, following guidelines specified by DCLG.

The Programme evaluation was completed by two experienced evaluation professionals: Jonathan Andrew and Adele Cope. Both have prior ERDF and summative assessment experience and used this experience to develop an assessment methodology that maximised the effectiveness of the research.

The interim Programme evaluation was completed by the Lead Programme Officer at Staffordshire County Council and followed a similar methodology as previously adopted for the original programme evaluation by Baswich Business Services Ltd. Therefore, the below methodology was also applied to this full evaluation report, to deliver consistency.

The methodology used for the full evaluation was our company's well-established evaluation methodology agreed at the outset with the project management team. The research used both quantitative and qualitative elements.

The methodology comprised analysis of quantitative data of business feedback from energy efficiency reviews and grants provided to businesses since the interim programme evaluation was completed.

As the Programme is funded through European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF), the approach has been adapted to ensure that it complies fully with the requirements of a Summative Evaluation as set out by ERDF Fund Programme 2014-2020: Project Summative Assessment Guidance ESIF-GN-1-033.

The summative assessment is intended to provide an update from the interim Programme Evaluation in terms of the Programme's performance in relation to project implementation, evidence of efficiency, effectiveness, and value for money. The report has also been conducted in such a way as to provide insights into, and evidence of whether interventions have worked (or not) and provide lessons for the future with a particular focus on how the Programme can be sustained in the future. This is important as the project evidence will be combined with national evidence of progress and impact to assess the overall impact and effectiveness of the ERDF operational programme across England.

The evidence will be used nationally to make the case for the delivery approaches in the future and make the case for future funding.

This evaluation has been constructed around the following stages:

- **Stage 1 – Document Review and Updating**

The existing documentation was reviewed. The key indicators of the Programme were clearly defined, and the Logic Model was updated to reflect the range of services available to the businesses and the objectives and outputs of the Programme.

The information was used to:

- Assess the Programme's activity and value for money, and progress since the interim evaluation.
- Determine what and how to gather the necessary information to demonstrate Programme impact.
- Develop interview tools to use with beneficiaries, partners and stakeholders in a way which would fill any gaps in available information, test findings and provide qualitative impact on businesses on the value of specific activities.

- **Stage 2 – Development of tools, Business, Partner, and Stakeholder Interviews**

It was agreed that analysis of the business advice feedback forms would be used together with an online questionnaire to all organisations that have received grant funding since the original Programme Evaluation was completed. These were conducted both at interim stage and again for the full summative assessment.

Online interviews were undertaken with stakeholders to explore the nature, extent and value of the partnership working, what had gone well and what had not gone so well and why, as well as where there was scope for change or improvement.

- **Stage 4 – Reporting and Dissemination**

The final report has determined the range of hard and soft evidence to provide an update on the achievement, outcomes, impact, and the context within which the Programme sits. The Programme's statistical data has been presented where required in both table and graphical format with appropriate commentary.

Interview intelligence has looked at various elements of the Programme's processes and successes to facilitate the development of relevant sections of the report. Where possible, we have supported outcome information with brief and anonymous examples.

Evaluation reports can sometimes be difficult to digest, so to make the report as accessible and valuable as possible, we have included an executive summary which includes key recommendations.

#### 4.1 Key Research Questions

The business beneficiaries of the energy efficiency reviews were asked to provide feedback on their experience. Sections 1 and 2 of the feedback asked beneficiaries to rank several statements (listed below), where 0 represented completely dissatisfied and 10 represented completely satisfied. Sections 3 and 4 required Yes/No answers and only results related to this Programme are shown in section 5 Project Achievements of this report.

1. LCBEP Process
  - a. Eligibility process
  - b. Clarity of information
  - c. Helpfulness of team
  - d. Speed of response from team
2. Specialist Advice
  - a. Communication with low carbon consultant
  - b. On-site visit
  - c. Usefulness of report
  - d. Usefulness of recommendations
  - e. Would you like to receive info on ISO (this question was removed after removal of this offer of service)
3. Next steps
  - a. Do you intend to take up any recommendations?
  - b. Would you like us to contact you about an internship (this question was removed after removal of this offer of service)
  - c. Would you like us to contact you about a grant?
4. sben membership
  - a. Are you a current member of sben?
  - b. If 'No', are you interested in receiving more information about membership?
  - c. Even if you are not, or do not wish to be, a sben member, would you like to receive updates on future Environmental Business Support Schemes (Including grant funding) and Environmental Training Opportunities?

The business beneficiaries of the low carbon enterprise grants were sent an online questionnaire to provide feedback on the following questions:

1. Apart from a grant, which other LCBEP support have you taken up?
2. If you have taken up support on any of the above, how helpful has this been?
3. How easy did you find the LCBEP grant claim process?
4. How did you find the overall helpfulness of the sben team?
5. What impact has the sben LCBEP grant had on your business?
6. Please describe the impact on your business.
7. Has the project helped you to consider wider carbon saving measures within your business?
8. If yes, please let us know what other carbon saving measures you have considered.
9. Overall, how satisfied are you with the support you have received from sben LCBEP?
10. Any other comments/suggestions in respect of sben LCBEP?

## 5.0 PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS

### 5.1 Project Achievements

For this evaluation, LCBEP provided a freeze on their management information on 31 March 2023. At this stage the formal achievement figures are shown in section 5.2 Project Output and Current Results Table.

### 5.2 Project Output and Current Results Table

The LCBEP project key performance indicators achieved against target up to and including March 2023 are below.

Table 1: Project Outputs and Performance Claimed to Quarter 1 (Jan-Mar) 2023

Output	Contracted to date	Achieved to date
ER/C/O/01 Number of enterprises receiving support	299	352
ER/C/O/34 Estimated annual decrease of GHG (tonnes CO <sub>2</sub> )	2260	2251

### 5.3 Project Spend

Table 4: Project Spend Profile

	ERDF /ESF (a) (£)	Public Match (b) (£)	Private Match (c) (£)	Total (d) (£)	Contribution rate (%) (a)/(d) x 100	Total public funding (%) (a+b)/d 100
Capital	£1,301,886.00	£0.00	£867,924.00	£2,169,810.27	60.00	0.00
Revenue	£647,313.67	£430,043.59	£1,500.00	£1,078,856.99	60.00	99.86
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£1,949,199.67</b>	<b>£430,043.59</b>	<b>£869,424.00</b>	<b>£3,248,667.26</b>	<b>60.00</b>	<b>73.24</b>

Source: Finance Tracking PCR1 up to claim 31 March 2023

**Project Spend Table showing profile, Project Current and End Project Estimate Spend**

<b>Programme TOTAL</b>	<b>Profile to Claim 31, Q1 2023</b>	<b>Project End Estimate</b>	<b>Total Variance</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Revenue	£1,020,467.00	£1,134,192.00	£113,775.00	
Capital	£2,170,619.00	£2,170,619.00	£0.00	Capital expenditure was exceeded due to the unprecedented demand for funding following the energy crisis, starting in the latter half of 2022. SCC issued Grant Funding Agreements in line with expenditure. However, project materials costs increased from suppliers, causing a slight overspend.
<b>Sub Total</b>	£3,191,086.00	£3,304,811.00	£113,775.00	
<b>Total</b>	£3,191,086.00	£3,304,811.00	£113,775.00	

**Source: Figures provided by the LCBEP project team as of the 31 March 2023**

In term of total project spend the profile breakdown as agreed in the most recent PCR was as follows:

**Capital Expenditure**

- £2,169,810.27 ESIF funding to be spent within the Low Carbon Grant Scheme. To be matched by a minimum of 40% (£867,924) private sector match from businesses for low carbon and energy efficient equipment, plant, and machinery.

**Revenue Expenditure**

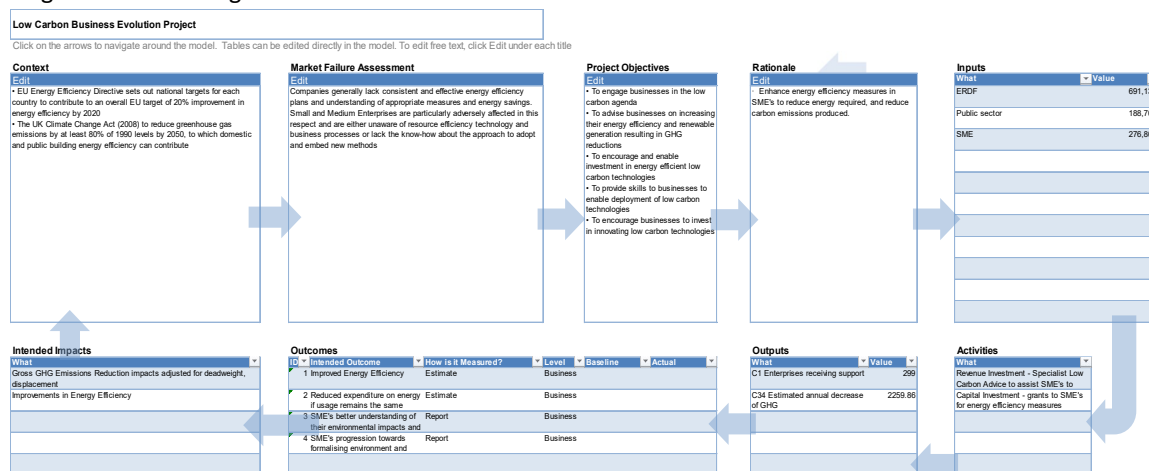
- £225,505.70 ESIF funding towards low carbon specialist advice for eligible businesses to be procured and delivered through Staffordshire County Council salaried costs.
- £33,547.00 ESIF funding for business engagement to market and promote the Programme through a series of events, web content, marketing, leaflets, and case studies.
- £789,804.29 towards eligible staff costs to manage the LCBEP activity, this includes 15% overheads as per direct staff cost overhead methodology, including match by public sector partners.

## 5.4 Assessment of Impact by Aims, Objectives and Results

The Programme aims, and objectives can be seen clearly in the LCBEP Logic Model (diagram 1 below). The full project bid highlighted the following objectives:

- To engage businesses in the low carbon agenda.
- To advise businesses on increasing their energy efficiency and renewable generation resulting in GHG reductions.
- To encourage and enable investment in energy efficient low carbon technologies.
- To provide skills to businesses to enable deployment of low carbon technologies.
- To encourage businesses to invest in innovating low carbon technologies.

Diagram 1: LCBEP Logic Model



Source: Staffordshire County Council

The results are highlighted in the table on page 11 of the report, Project Outputs and Performance Claimed to Date.

## 5.5 Performance against Contract

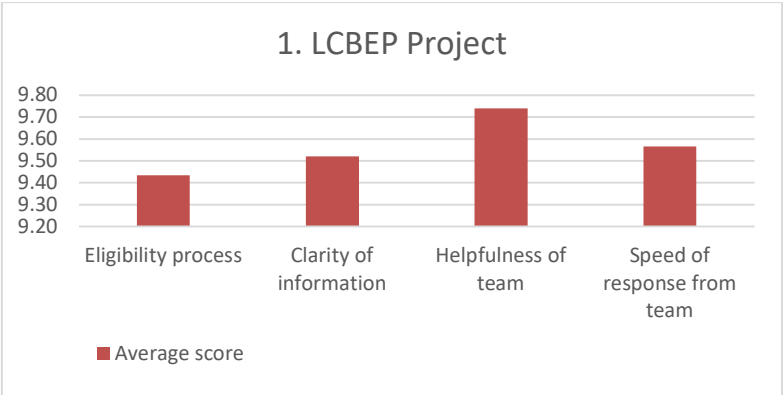
The latest PCR was submitted by Staffordshire County Council to DLUHC in March 2021 and approved in May 2021. The request was for the project extension to June 2023 and associated reprofile.

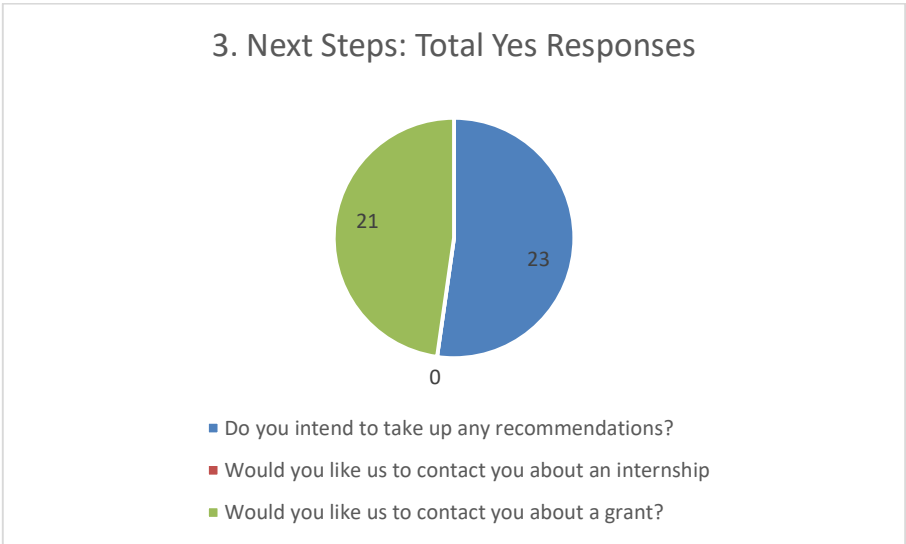
As can be seen in table 5.2 Project and Output Performance the project has achieved the following as of the 31 March 2023:

- ER/C/O/01 Number of enterprises receiving support had a target of 299 they are set to overachieve by 53 leading to 352 enterprises having been supported.
- ER/C/O/34 Estimated annual decrease of GHG (tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>) had a target of 2260 and they are set to achieve 2251.

5.6 Business Beneficiary Feedback – Advice Feedback Form

An Advice Feedback form is sent to all business beneficiaries of the Programme after they have received their energy efficiency review. Since the original Summative Assessment, a total of 25 responses were received from those beneficiaries. The results, where 0 = completely dissatisfied and 10 = completely satisfied, were:



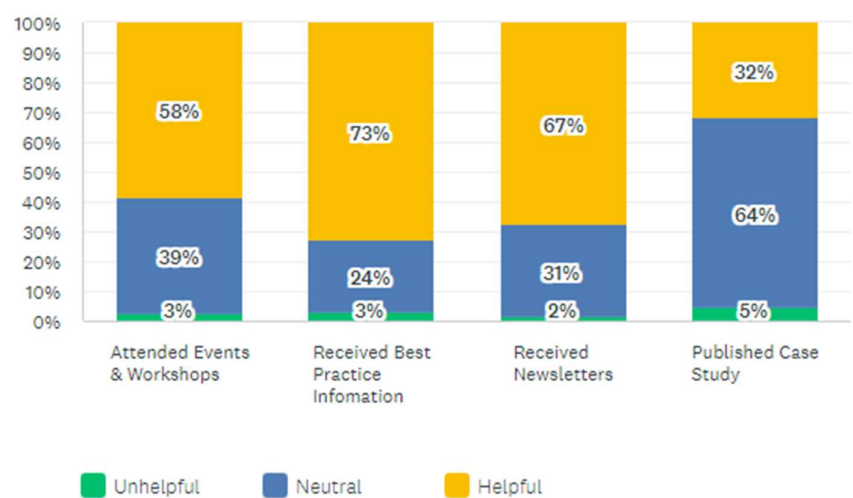


5.7 Detailed Business Beneficiary Feedback

As part of the final summative assessment evaluation, a detailed questionnaire was prepared and sent to those beneficiaries who had received support since the date of the interim summative assessment. The interim summative assessment data was also incorporated into the feedback, to provide a holistic overview of the service benefits. As a result of our approach, a total of 83 unique responses were received from businesses that have benefited from support through the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme.

5.7.1 Apart from a grant, what other support did you receive from the SBEN Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme?

Every respondent answered this question, and also commented whether or not they had found the additional support helpful or not. The table below shows the responses received.





Of the 83 respondents, not all had accessed the four elements of support available to them. The total numbers responding to each of the service were:

- Attending events and workshops 36
- Receiving best practice information 33
- Receiving newsletters 66
- Published case study 22

It is clear from the feedback that the majority of respondents considered the events and workshops, best practice information and the newsletters to be helpful to them, in terms of improving their knowledge and through the provision of information that was of benefit to them. The best practice information was the most effective support and found helpful by 73% of respondents. Additional feedback from respondents in this area included:

*"We found the best practice information to be really helpful, it gave us food for thought and sparked discussions about things we could do to reduce our carbon footprint."*

*"Sometimes, you don't know what you don't know, and the best practice information that was sent to us was really informative."*

*"On reading some of the best practice material, we looked at ways we could do things differently in our business. It was really thought provoking."*

The workshops were also well received, with 58% stating they were helpful. Upon further probing, some workshop attendees believed the workshops were neither helpful nor unhelpful because they had not yet implemented any learnings from them:

*"The workshop we attended was good, we learnt a lot, but as a business it wasn't especially helpful to us as we're not in a position to progress things yet."*

*"Will probably be helpful in 12 months' time or so when we can start and take some of the ideas forward."*

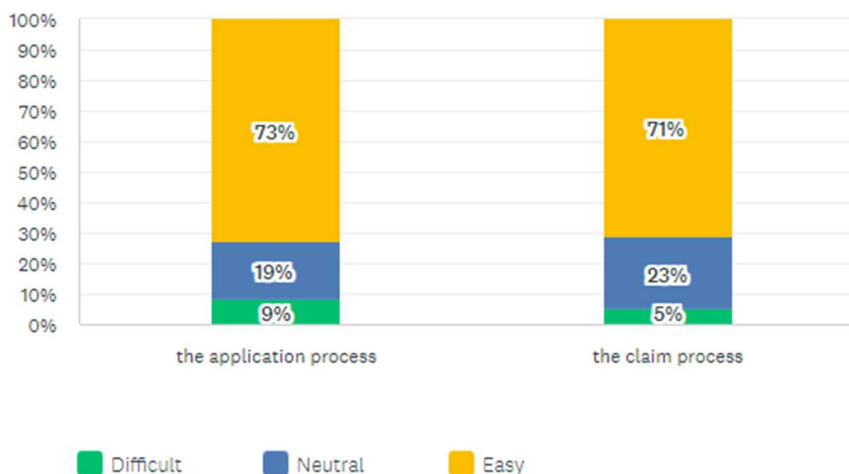
Less impactful, however, were the case studies, with 64% of those who responded stating they were neutral about the overall helpfulness of the case studies. When probed further, feedback included:

*"It's always interesting to read what others are doing, but we didn't change what we were doing as a result of reading them."*

*"The case studies we saw didn't feel relevant to us."*

*"I didn't think that the case study I saw added anything to my business."*

### 5.7.2 If you applied for an LCBEP grant, how easy did you find?



The responses received demonstrate that the application process was considered to be easy by 73% of respondents, with a further 19% being neutral in their assessment of the application process. Feedback included:

*"The application was fairly easy, but a lot of detailed information was needed which was very time-consuming."*

*"It's a shame that the application process still needs a signature and can't be fully online."*

In terms of the grant claim process, 71% consider the process to be easy, and only 5% of respondents believe it to be difficult. Feedback received includes:

*"We have not claimed yet as the project is not complete."*

*"Did not claim as we were unable to get people to quote and/or they did not agree with the report."*

*"We didn't claim in the end as the project was reduced and no longer eligible."*

*"We only found out about LCBEP at a very late stage, so we've been struggling to get everything done in time."*

### 5.7.3 How did you find the overall helpfulness of the SBEN team?

As part of the evaluation, we asked respondents how helpful they had found the SBEN team. Out of 83 respondents, 82 stated that the team had been helpful, with 1 respondent stating the team was neither helpful nor unhelpful. Therefore, 99% of the respondents considered the team to be helpful, and this was reinforced through the verbal feedback we received.

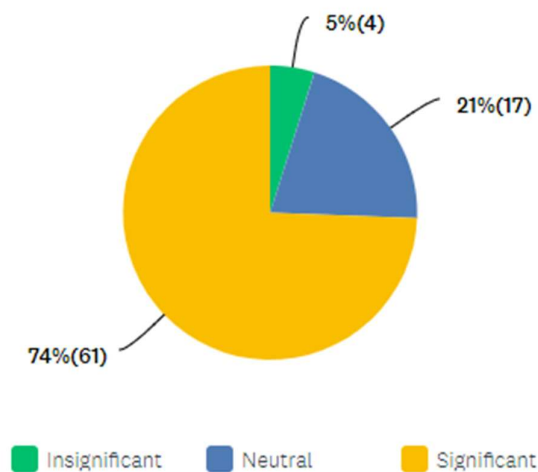
*"The SBEN team are brilliant, nothing is too much trouble for them. Every question I put to them, however trivial, is always answered quickly, and with a considered response."*

*"Particular thanks to Juhi, who is great."*

*"Fantastic!"*

*"Christina is superb, always willing to help, thank you."*

#### 5.7.4 What impact has the SBEN LCBEP grant had on your business?



A total of 82 responses were received to this question, with 74% of the overall responses stating that the impact of the grant has been significant. Only 4 respondents (5%) stated the impact of the grant was insignificant, with the remainder being neutral. From the feedback received, it is evident the majority of those stating the impact of the grant to be neutral have given that response as a result of it being too early to determine the impact the grant will have on their business. Therefore, we believe that if this question was to be asked again in twelve months' time, the response would be considerably different.

Feedback received includes:

*"The reduction in our energy bills has been significant already."*

*"We installed a new boiler which is more efficient than our old one."*

*"The grant helped us upgrade our lighting, the savings on our electricity costs were immediate and very welcome in the current climate."*

*"We had a low carbon grant which helped us install LED lighting and save on power."*

*"Saving on our electricity bill of approx. £2,000 per annum."*

*"The grants have had a significant impact on the business. They help to upskill the employees, which in turn has a positive impact, not just on the individual, but the team and company alike."*

*"Due to the timing of the change, we will not see the benefit of the new indoor tennis lights until after the autumn / winter time as more people play indoor tennis during this period. So far, the change of lights has made a small financial benefit for the club and also improved the service and flexibility we can provide/offer as LED's are instant on/off whereas the old Halide Bulbs required to cool down period so on occasions resulting in facility not being available."*

*"Utility cost savings following replacement of lighting system."*

*"Great support from the team enabled improvements to our carbon footprint."*

*"Enabled us to purchase lower carbon footprint machinery. Update our lighting."*

*"As the equipment purchased on the grant being installed tied in with an extension to the premises, we have not been able to fully equate to the savings/ carbon cuts. We have however noticed that the expected extra energy costs with the extension have been dulled with the installation of the equipment so have noticed its effect in respect to this."*

*"Improved reliability of some old process equipment as well as significantly reducing running costs."*

*"We have been able to update our lighting, with led, thus improving our working environment, having a swift pay back versus our old lighting system."*

*"The grant allowed us to invest in expensive LED lighting for the entire site which has helped reduce our carbon footprint and also offset some of the increased energy bills we are currently experiences and improved working conditions for the staff."*

*"Much better working environment that is more energy efficient and reducing our carbon footprint."*

*"Significant savings on electricity as a direct result of the change to LED lighting."*

*"We have been able to secure funding towards a new, efficient boiler and LED lights. This has already had an impact on our usage and costs."*

*"Saving on heating and electricity."*

*"We have been able to develop a greater product range and protect jobs."*

*"We used the funding to replace Halogen and fluorescent lighting in our Workshop and in our offices. The improvement has been great. We upgraded to the option for occupancy sensors and*

*LUX level and the workshop conditions have improved markedly."*

*"This grant enabled us to install LED lighting throughout the factory which has not only significantly improved the quality of lighting but has reduced utility costs and made a contribution towards reduced carbon use."*

*"Significant savings on our electricity bills - approx. 40% annually."*

*"Drastically reduced our electricity bill."*

*"Cost saving on energy usage and a much-improved work place illuminations including security lighting."*

*"Enabled business to initially sustain & then increase our employment levels we were able to capture more new contracts with more value-add increasing profitability. Also, a major contributor in assisting us to reduce our Carbon footprint hugely."*

*"It is helping us to reduce costs and help the environment."*

*"Allowed us to purchase a new compressor which has significantly reduced our energy bills. We also changed all lighting to LED which also helped to reduce our energy costs."*

*"It has helped us to save energy and considering energy costs are currently doubling, the LCBEP grant transpired to be very significant."*

*"We could not have afforded to upgrade the whole building with lighting and heating without the grant. It has improved the look and feel of the working environment as well as reduce our carbon footprint."*

*"The grant has meant we have been able to invest in low energy lighting and heating units - good for the environment and also, especially in these times of unprecedented energy price rises, good for budgets as well."*

*"The reduction in energy usage through the support and advice of the SBEN team has helped to reduce our building running costs considerably. It had also helped us to achieve our carbon reduction targets and made us think more about the next steps we can take to have a positive- not negative effect on our planet. We are now working towards completing our ISO 14001 certification too. Thank you."*

*"The support helped us achieve ISO14001 accreditation."*

*"Helped to reduce our carbon footprint."*

*"The grant has helped us reduce our electricity costs significantly and hence our carbon footprint."*

*"The grant allowed us to install energy efficient lighting and control systems to allow us to reduce*

*our energy consumption, carbon footprint and costs. As electricity costs have increased significantly, the supported project has helped tremendously."*

*"The scheme helped to make a heating control system more affordable, reduce our emissions and ultimately reduce our operating costs."*

*"Significant reduction in electrical lighting bill."*

*"Cut energy costs and also provided a much better working environment."*

*"The LCBEP grant enabled us to both upgrade existing lighting and relace aged boilers, our new boilers link with our building management system enabling us to further reduce utility usage."*

*"Reduced our Energy bills along with reducing our carbon footprint that we have strived to reduce."*

*"Hopefully it will reduce our outgoings in money and CO2."*

*"We are still in the process so time will tell."*

*"Panels not yet installed but difference once installed should be significant."*

*"Big help with cashflow."*

*"Grants have a great impact on businesses because they encourage you to actively undertake change and reassess best practice throughout the company as a whole."*

*"We will see the impact over many years."*

*"Paid for a small percentage of solar panel and other energy saving measures."*

*"We have the report which we have used to try and find funding through other resources, so we could do the updates required in parts."*

*"None/nothing. We were unable to get contractors to quote. Contractors did not agree with the report. We were then advised we would need to have another report done. No help was received re solar etc."*

*"Unfortunately, we didn't claim the grant as the reduced project made it ineligible."*

*"Our Energy Usage was going to cost us an estimated extra £6,000 a year and we rarely make £6,000 profit in a year. We would have had to significantly increased our prices to members and other local Community Groups that use our facilities. This would not have been easy because we regularly compare our prices with other facilities in the area."*

*"Identified priorities for CO2 reduction."*

*"We have used other grant funding from the GSLEP to improve some energy efficiency initiatives within the business. Without the benefit of the initial Energy Efficiency Report through Pro Enviro and the SBEN/LCBEP to quantify potential initiatives, this would not have been possible."*

*"There was very little impact because we could not reach the threshold without a significant and unnecessary expense on our behalf. We are getting PV panels installed, but the report recommended installing a new boiler. The cost of this compared to the actual level of grant available was prohibitive."*

*"Still awaiting a response following the survey carried out."*

*"Once we have the grant for the solar project, we can then invest other funds in more renewable energy projects."*

*"The chance to upgrade our ageing boilers for something more energy efficient is a game changer."*

*"The time it took to get the grant meant that the cost of the solar array had risen to become too expensive to go ahead with."*

*"Unfortunately, due to difficulties obtaining the number of quotes from suppliers and them to provide all the required information for the application it became an administrative nightmare. As a result, we ran out of time to submit an application. We are now financing some of the recommended changes ourselves."*

*"Significant savings on electric usage/cost."*

*"Energy costs have increased hugely. The grant has helped us to improve carbon footprint, reduce energy costs."*

*"We needed to update our lighting system, as our old mercury lamps were failing, and we had areas not properly lit. Also, it's a much safer environment due to the led lamps coming on instantly with no warm-up period."*

*"SBEN have supported us along our ISO 14001 certification journey but supporting with an energy efficiency review to identify improvements which we've been eligible for a grant for. We are yet to install LED lighting so are unable to measure the benefits, however the carbon and £ savings are expecting to be significant in our context and will support us achieving our environmental and financial goals."*

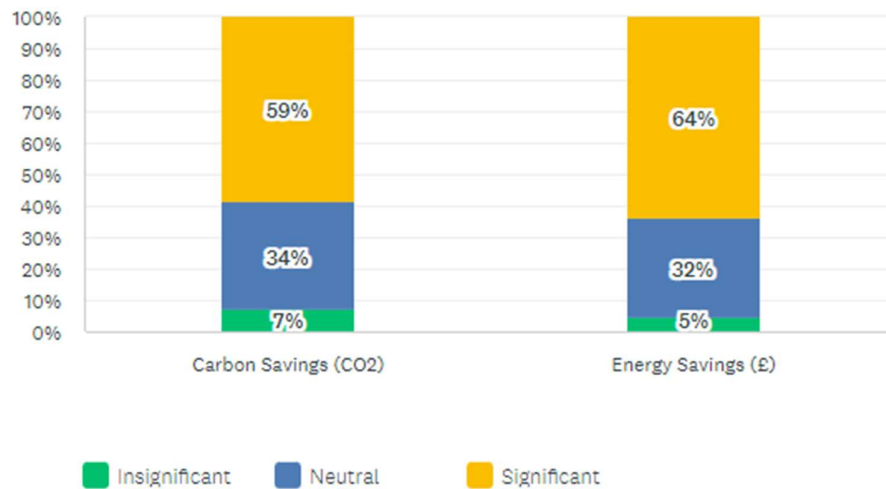
*"Helped to reduce our carbon footprint and save expenditure on electricity."*

*"We are still awaiting the go ahead for our project due to Western Power infrastructure issues."*

*"Just having solar panels installed this month so at the moment impact neutral."*

### 5.7.5 Can you quantify any benefit to your business?

As part of our evaluation, we asked businesses whether they were able to quantify either the carbon savings (CO<sub>2</sub>) or the energy savings (£) that they were making in their business. Of those who responded, the majority were able to capture and quantify the benefit.



At this stage, very few businesses are able to quantify the precise energy savings or CO<sub>2</sub> savings that they are making, but it is encouraging to note that a majority of businesses have plans in place to capture the data to demonstrate the benefits of the investments made. Again, we consider this to be an area that, if re-surveyed in 12 months' time, the results would prove to be very different.

*"We're saving hundreds of pounds on our energy bills."*

*"We have seen our utility costs reduce."*

*"We're saving a significant amount on our electricity bills."*

*"Energy use won't be reduced but it will be greener."*

*"For example, we changed the old lighting to led lighting, throughout the yard - thus saving carbon and costs. Also, an in-house vehicle pit, enabled us to work on vehicles on site, thus reducing emissions and save on fuel consumption."*

*"Led lights and solar panels will give huge savings in time."*

*"We will be making changes to LED lighting, heating, and the purchase of a new Compressor. This identified saving of 7,325 KWh, so we are making improvements."*

*"We stand to save 4.7 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year with the help of the SBEN LCBEP grant. Not able to*



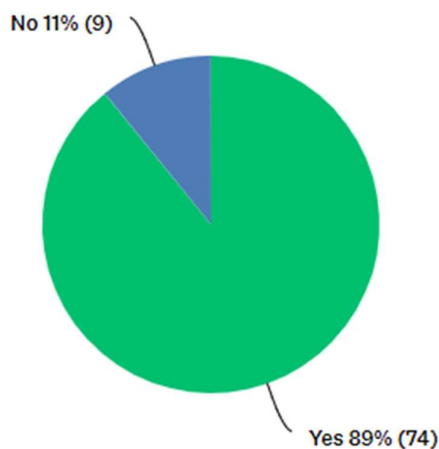
*quantify the energy savings yet, as only just had the grant through."*

*"We hope to save tens of thousands in energy costs with this first project and hopefully another will follow if the infrastructure allows."*

*"In a few months we will be able to advise of the benefits."*

#### **5.7.6 Has the project helped you to consider wider carbon saving measures within your business?**

The overwhelming majority of respondents answered positively to this question, with 74 businesses (89%) confirming that the project has helped them to consider wider carbon saving measures in their business.



A wide range of comments were received in relation to the additional measures that were being considered:

*"We're much more aware of carbon and how to measure it, so looking at projects that will help us reduce carbon such as solar panels and EV charging points."*

*"With a new, efficient boiler installed, we're now looking at other options including solar PV."*

*"We're starting to look at what we can do to minimise our environmental impact and save carbon."*

*"Installed solar panels and bought electric forklift truck."*

*"Recycling materials, electric vehicles, carbon footprint."*

*"We would like to look at the installation of solar cells on the indoor tennis roof which is south facing."*

*"Solar Panels Fast Action Roller door Planting trees to offset carbon footprint."*

*"Looking in to future purchases and projects to be as carbon/energy efficient as technology allows at that time."*

*"Begun measuring carbon intensity for the whole site, multiple projects either underway or to be reviewed for feasibility and impact."*

*"We are looking at solar, as soon as we are able."*

*"Automatic light sensors throughout the building to further reduce our energy consumption whilst reducing carbon footprint."*

*"Paper reduction, swapping to hybrid company cars, car sharing."*

*"We have taken part in the Environmental Sustainability Growth Mapper which has helped us to focus more on our carbon footprint to measure travel / mileage, water usage and plastic."*

*"Assessing needs, just looking at the carbon tracker tool."*

*"We are looking at becoming carbon neutral and encouraging our suppliers to do likewise."*

*"Changing our compressed air compressor - not done yet."*

*"We are at the early stages of considering further measures and in that regard found the recent TEAMS meeting to be useful."*

*"Looking to make use of single use plastics."*

*"We installed solar and have since bought electric cars."*

*"Reduction in transport / type of transport, types of materials used in the processing of goods."*

*"We plant trees every month We have a EV policy ALL new vehicles have to have Green credentials We are looking at viability of solar panels WE are looking to swap out more (older technology) machinery."*

*"Recycling and less use of paper by developing IT based solutions."*

*"Our landlord south staffs council are currently looking at fitting solar panels on the roofs of our 3 units."*

*"We are considering building a factory that is far more carbon neutral, with solar panels across a well-insulated roof structure."*

*"I'm investigating fitting new windows to reduce heat loss (we do have issues as we are in a conservation area, so we will need planning permission)."*

*"We are considering EVs."*

*"Heat loss evaluations, ISO 14001, reducing energy usage out of hours, using electric company vehicle, Lithium-Ion battery recycling programme."*

*"Improved lighting options, reusable packaging."*

*"Air source heat pump, PVs, new boilers, water saving taps."*

*"Installed 50KMP solar roof, installed 3 EV charging points, obtained 2x EV for staff."*

*"We are currently investigating the feasibility of installing solar PV and thermal panels throughout all our sites. We have also reduced emissions by building an onside laundry in our hotel which reduces the requirement for regular deliveries from a third-party supplier."*

*"Replacing electric radiators with heat pumps."*

*"Electric Forklifts and Battery Systems."*

*"Further energy saving measures across the farm."*

*"Solar batteries, consider a ground source heat pump review and can we use wind power."*

*"We are attempting to go off the grid and generate all energy requirement through PV panels."*

*"Will be looking at lighting and solar panels in my other nurseries."*

*"Lighting upgrade from fluorescents to LEDs."*

*"Looked into other measures for being greener, such as vehicles and recycling."*

*"LED lights and solar panels."*

*"The review was useful although was a little generic (could use an innovation section within the report). We have a big old mill but because we were eco minded we weren't already blasting the building with heat and creating vast emissions, we were muddling through with the bare minimum until we could get the correct energy efficient equipment in place. Because the grant only looked at current savings rather than projected savings, we really struggled to make this grant work for us as it meant we had to do a lot of work to meet the minimum carbon savings - however that wasn't financially possible even with the match funding. So we accessed the review but not the grant."*

*"We have devised our journey to carbon neutral plan which included the recommendations in the report."*

*"We've reviewed the times we use our Floodlights and heat our Showers. We are also in the*

*process of replacing the Old Cellar Cooling system in our Bar Cellar."*

*"We do not use a lot of carbon and we are in a similar industry with lighting. We will review the carbon usage of our supply chain."*

*"Yes, we were able to use our Energy Survey report and its potential savings to access funding."*

*"We were already considering PV panels and other carbon saving measures but did not reach the threshold for receiving the grant - possibly due to different priorities."*

*"Starting the process of PV installations."*

*"Ground source monitoring air source LED."*

*"We have had a thorough look across the whole organisation as to how we can achieve carbon neutrality."*

*"Looked into power factoring."*

*"Solar Panels."*

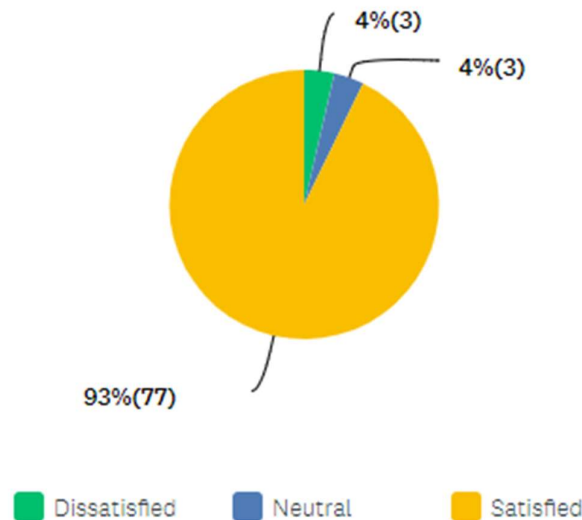
*"We are looking at carrying out a large PV installation on our roof, and eventually ground source heat pumps to heat our offices & toilet block."*

*"We had an energy efficiency review undertaken which identified LED lighting and solar panels to bring the most savings."*

*"Looking at other possible ways to reduce our carbon footprint. Heat recycling & more efficient compressors."*

*"Lighting improvements in the warehouse."*

**5.7.7 Overall, how satisfied are you with the support you have received through the SBEN LCBEP project?**



93% of overall respondents are very satisfied with the support they have received through the SBEN LCBEP project.

A selection of comments from beneficiaries below demonstrates the high regard which they have for SBEN, the LCBEP project and the team:

*"Particular thanks to Juhi and Christina for their support, nothing was ever too much trouble for them."*

*"The LCBEP team were brilliant at answering our questions and helping guide us through the process."*

*"Would be great if the grant application process could be paper free rather than having to sign and print."*

*"Everyone from LCBEP was helpful and courteous and made the process easy and uncomplicated always offering help and guidance whenever it was needed."*

*"The whole process was made very easy and straightforward by Christina Marshall. Her help in gaining the grant was invaluable."*

*"Please keep up the great work and stay in touch, your support is always appreciated."*

*"It would be great if you could help fund battery storage as this isn't commercially viable but would definitely help business resilience."*

*"It would be good if the scope of the funding could be extended to other ways to reduce carbon emissions."*

*"It is a shame the scheme was so narrow and only covered the equipment fitted on the roof. It needed to cover connecting it and solar batteries."*

*"Staff are always helpful, and you get prompt replies. Could be a bit more flexible with seminar days as always appear to fall on the same day of the week. If that day doesn't work, there doesn't appear to be alternatives. Just my perception."*

*"Very responsive team, made the whole process very easy."*

*"I've found SBEN & Christina Marshall to be most proactive & helpful, & very good at targeting help where it's needed."*

*"Christina has been excellent throughout the process."*

There were however, a very small number of respondents whose comments suggested that the project had not worked well for them.

*"The team were really helpful and attentive as always and the review was useful. Sadly, we just couldn't get the criteria to work in our favour for this one."*

*"Could not get quotes."*

*"The whole process was extremely time-consuming and misleading. Some aspects of the report were interesting and useful, but the conclusions didn't match our expectations - nor were they realistic. The first recommendation was to change the remaining halogen light bulbs to LED, which we have done ourselves at a much lower cost than that estimated. The second recommendation was to change the oil-fired boiler (which is only a few years old) for a gas boiler. The cost of which was estimated at £4,500 for a £500 saving (not including getting the gas supply to the location of the oil boiler). During the visit, we discussed that a better solution would be to change the radiator covers and replace with LST radiators, rather than replace the boiler, as it is quite efficient in itself, because the radiators are all old and need updating, and the covers may be having a big impact on their efficiency. Radiator covers or radiators that are safe for young children are essential for our childcare business. This did not appear as a recommendation in the report, which I felt was quite significant. The other recommendation was for solar panels, which we were already considering and will be installed at a significantly lower price than the estimate provided. Overall, I was not impressed with the whole process. It took up a lot of my time, was too restrictive in its requirements and didn't actually appear to be any help to our business at all. We are keen to reduce our carbon emissions and would welcome financial support to do this. However, my experience of the process was less than satisfactory. The site visit was quite constructive and informative, but the report recommendations did not fully reflect the discussions that took place, and the recommendations were too specific and restrictive."*

## 5.8 Stakeholder Perceptions

Of the four stakeholders approached for their feedback all four were successfully interviewed. The service is highly valued as an integral part of environmental business support by stakeholders and referral agencies alike and we heard nothing but praise for the professionalism of the service delivery with key members of staff regularly being complimented for their service delivery.

Stakeholders felt that delivery expectations were made very clear and that inception meetings were both timely and well delivered. There was also regular contact with the Programme Manager and communication was felt to be particularly well managed.

Emphasis was placed on event management skills and how beneficial these events were to highlight the environmental message to businesses, particularly those businesses that may not have considered carbon savings previously.

Several stakeholders stated that COVID-19 had a significant impact on delivery, as certain elements like the energy review had to be delivered virtually. The reality was that many businesses had other priorities at that time and therefore demand was significantly lower. In addition, both businesses and stakeholders had staff on furlough. This did not impact the project, as it was already ahead in terms of performance, so no project slippage occurred.

Companies were still recovering from the impact of COVID-19 in June 2020 but from September onwards there was renewed interest and engagement, as members of staff returned to the workplace.

The established Programme Manager was seconded to another project and a replacement Manager was not identified and engaged for 6 months. This resulted in a significant reduction in claimed revenue. The project, however, continued to perform and deliver and there was praise from the stakeholders for Christina Marshall, who did a fantastic job covering this interim period.

The external energy review supplier contract was re-tendered part way through the programme due to the initial contract ending.

Significant issues such as the energy crisis has had an impact on the support provided and resulted in much smaller organisations being engaged. This meant that energy savings were more economical than making an environmental impact.

At the time of writing the full report it was acknowledged that there is a current underspend which is being reviewed. However, the capital element of the programme has been overspent and so the focus was on trying to move some of the revenue spend to capital. The challenge being the timeframe available for defrayal. Funders declined budget reprofiling in January 2023, so the Project Management team have looked to ensure that both capital and revenue expenditure are used up by June 2023.

There was some confusion as to why energy reviews have not been continued with the supplier, as per a request to extend the project to June 2023. Project Management did raise a purchase order for further reviews to deal with the high level of business engagement in the latter half of 2022, due to the energy crisis but there was no guarantee that the full amount would be realised and there was a deadline date in place to manage staff capacity.

Partners saw an opportunity for further joint working which would enhance the way in which the programme is supported in the future. This was highlighted in terms of using external partners to engage businesses, in particular more medium-sized organisations, which would allow for greater energy reduction and savings.

There was also mention that a more targeted marketing approach could have looked at medium-sized organisations rather than smaller businesses. This would potentially have led to greater outputs and outcomes which in turn would create better value for money.

In terms of the value of the grant offered, all stakeholders stated that the 60% intervention and the upper limit of £20,000 was suitable and fit for purpose but that perhaps revising the approach to value for money would have enabled more companies to access the higher value grant. It was felt that the 3 tonnes Carbon saving requirement was too high.

There was a feeling upon completion of the final Summative Assessment that Staffordshire County Council should consider whether there are any opportunities to obtain more flexibility if the programme is able to access further funding via the Shared Prosperity Fund. Some additional flexibility did take place with the introduction of funding towards the cost of installing solar PV, which was previously excluded, and the streamlining of the paperwork process, which in turn led to greater engagement.

There was mention that the original programme had placements/internships as part of the project, and it wasn't clear to stakeholders why this element did not progress. There was mention of a lack of demand but there is evidence of other projects having successfully placed students in industry. The benefits to both the businesses and the students would be sharing knowledge and skills and assisting with employability. Consideration should be given to re-introducing this element as it could assist in providing Staffordshire with a skilled environmental workforce which in turn could encourage inward investment in green technologies.

Another suggestion was that the companies could have academics accompanied by students complete the carbon reviews for the companies. The students could also have been a communicator between the Programme Manager and the business in the collection and evidencing of results, as some companies proved difficult to follow up.

Some MSc students were engaged to assist companies with benchmarking, which was beneficial and provided additional value. The engagement of students could be flexible, thus fitting in with their academic timetable and allowing the company to access the support when they need it.



It was difficult to truly assess through the carbon review and calculations what savings had taken place. The calculation is seen as inconsistent and low in data transparency, especially considering the impact of COVID-19. This is not something the project management team could influence, as the calculation was prescribed from the outset by ERDF guidelines.

There was a suggestion that it would be extremely beneficial to work with business supply chains to maximise the environmental impact and make cost savings that would attract more medium sized businesses.

There was evidence throughout the project that feedback from both stakeholders, interim evaluation and the steering group board was taken into account and where appropriate implemented. Examples include the increase in grant allowance and the introduction of solar panel capital expenditure (installation was not included, to achieve value for money).

Initially within the project an assessment group was implemented to assess grant applications, but this was seen as creating unnecessary delays in the process. This approach was changed so that all applications went through a standard due diligence process using one internal member of staff at Staffordshire County Council. A clear scoring template was used to ensure fairness, which assessed projects on a value for money basis.

At the time of writing this report it is unclear how the project will continue to be supported beyond the lifespan of ERDF. Staffordshire County Council has been in discussion with Staffordshire local authority districts (except Stoke on Trent) to deliver a Green Solutions programme, whereby the County Council will provide funding for Energy Efficiency Reviews and the local authority areas can provide Staffordshire County Council with Shared Prosperity Fund monies for Carbon Literacy Training and grants.

Staffordshire County Council has committed £60k for 2023-24 to deliver energy efficiency reviews and the format is yet to be decided.

All stakeholders agreed that the demand for energy efficiency reviews has never been higher, due to the energy crisis. As such, this project is not only assisting environmentally but is also assisting to make companies more resilient in an extremely challenging climate. All stakeholders felt that this support needs to be provided beyond the lifespan of ERDF funding but that perhaps the project scope should be expanded and be more flexible, such as looking at environmental savings through supply chains.

## **5.9 Grant Evaluation**

The Programme team firstly review and question any aspects, for example quotations received, of the grant application with the applicant. It has been recognised that this role adds value and is welcomed by the other stakeholders, who may not have the same in-depth knowledge of procurement issues.

Following completion of the original Summative Assessment, the process of grant evaluation was changed to ensure all grant applications were considered by the specialist consultants who

carried out the energy efficiency reviews. This additional step helped to ensure that grant applications were in line with the recommendations of the business beneficiaries report and any recalculation of savings could be made based on the business beneficiaries' preferred quotations.

All grant applications reviewed have been approved, largely since the Programme team does not put forward applications that do not meet the criteria and are therefore unlikely to succeed. Because of this, the Grant Evaluation Panel was replaced by a single independent Staffordshire Council Officer to assess each grant application received through the Programme against a pre-determined checklist to ensure compliance against each of the key criteria. Due to the sporadic timing of grant applications, these are sent via email. There have not been any issues identified by the officer with grant applications.

Upon receipt of a grant application by the officer, the documentation is reviewed in line with the checklist that has been developed by the Programme team. The officer then provides feedback to the Project Officer.

The Grant Application Checklist (terms of reference) has been refined throughout the Programme and is currently on its fourth iteration. Grant applications are assessed on several criteria, including:

- The purpose of the grant.
- Whether the grant links back to the energy report, and how closely it does so.
- The scale of the measurable benefits.
- Investment readiness.

## 6.0 CROSS CUTTING THEMES

The Programme supports the sustainable development theme as set out by ERDF both in terms of sustainable development and environmental impact. Whilst LCBEP adheres to project compliance requirements the team also look to minimise any potential negative impacts, thus going above and beyond the Programme requirements.

### 6.1 Equal Opportunities

As an accountable body, Staffordshire County Council ensures that employees and all individuals from businesses involved in the Programme are treated with dignity and respect at all times. Within their tendering and contract arrangements, they ensure that providers acting on behalf of Staffordshire County Council are fully compliant with the Public Sector Equality duty contained within section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. Staffordshire County Council reports on this quarterly to funders and gathers data on the main business contact from each business that the project supports.

### 6.2 Environmental Sustainability

LCBEP has a specific environmental focus which supports sustainable development across the economy of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. The Programme helps businesses reduce and make the most efficient use of finite resources and reduce the production of harmful greenhouse gases.

The Programme ensures that there are minimal adverse effects on the environment through travel around the County for meetings and business reviews. They achieve this by using teleconferencing and car sharing where possible.

Businesses participating in the Programme are encouraged to work with sben to improve their overall sustainability, including accessing further environmental support through sben membership. This support includes free access to online Carbon Tracker, Smart Energy Monitoring, Carbon Literacy Training, Green Spaces funding and Environmental Sustainability GROWTHmapper tools, as well as support from other sben members who provide other environmental services, such as Environmental Management Systems including ISO 14001, ISO 50001, Energy Performance Certificates etc.

Overall, the effect of the Programme on the environment is extremely positive. The Programme complements ESIF Priority Axis 6 'Preserving and Protecting the Environment and Promoting Resource Efficiency' by signposting to support available from projects delivered under this theme in the Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire LEP area.

Staffordshire County Council supports sustainable development and proactively tackles Climate Change. Since the original Summative Assessment, SCC declared a climate change emergency in July 2019 and, working with Cabinet has considerably ramped up their action in this respect. A new climate change team has been set up and significant investment made into tackling the challenges faced by SCC, Staffordshire businesses and citizens.

SCC published their Climate Change Strategic Development Framework in February 2021 that builds on the work done so far and sets out how they will achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Alongside this, they have published their Action Plan identifying the actions within each of the focus areas, and Annual Report 2021 highlighting the achievements to date. Additionally, SCC has spearheaded a campaign, linked to their wider 'Doing our bit' campaign, named 'Doing our bit to make Staffordshire Sustainable'.

## 7.0 PROJECT SPEND

### 7.1 Project Spend Table

**Project Spend Table as agreed in latest Project Change Request**

<b>Programme TOTAL</b>	<b>Profile</b>
<b>Capital</b>	
Low Carbon Enterprise Grants	2,169,810.27
<b>Revenue</b>	
Consultancy	255,505.70
Marketing	33,547.00
Overheads	101,918.13
Salaries	679,465.87
Other Costs	8,420.29
<b>Sub-total</b>	1,078,856.99
<b>Total</b>	3,248,667.26

**Source: Figures taken from LCBEP Funding Variation**

## 8.0 STRATEGIC ADDED VALUE

### 8.1 Trends and Issues

There has been a healthy pipeline for the Programme since the interim Summative Assessment which had 185 businesses enquire about support, with 59 being referred to complete the energy efficiency review, 5 of which were awaiting sign off from businesses. As the programme is no longer accepting new applications, any enquiries received are being recorded so that should any future funding become available, those businesses that have expressed interest can be notified as appropriate.

There is no doubt that the impact of COVID-19 and Brexit has had on businesses, with many reluctant to make investment decisions, delay project works and struggle to get quotations.

With no certainty of additional grant funding available to encourage businesses to invest in carbon reduction activity, this may limit the successful implementation of energy efficiency reviews if businesses do not have the resources available to implement any recommendations that are made.

### 8.2 Key Barriers to Achievement

Since the original Summative Assessment, some significant challenges were experienced by the team and partners in relation to the project delivery, profile, and the level of demand. The main changes implemented and the reasons for those changes are as follows:

- The impact of COVID-19 presented a major challenge to the project. In March 2020 the Project team experienced difficulties in communicating with businesses and made attempts to contact all businesses by phone to gauge the support needed.
- Since March 2020, marketing and event activities were halted, with the effect that business engagement decreased, leading to lower levels of eligible businesses, completed energy efficiency reviews, and a knock-on effect of fewer grant applications received. To counter this, specialist telemarketing consultants were procured in November 2021 to generate leads into the Programme.
- The impact of the invasion in the Ukraine on energy prices has caused a significant shock to many businesses, faced with rapidly increasing energy costs, leading to a reduction in funds available to invest in new technologies.
- Those businesses that were already in the process of a grant application were extremely reluctant to invest in carbon saving projects due to the uncertainty created by COVID-19 and Brexit. Both funders and the Programme team have adopted a flexible approach to supporting businesses applying for support within the Programme.
- A Project Change Request (PCR) was agreed in June 2021 to extend the project until the end of June 2023 whilst at the same time project spend and outputs were reprofiled.
- Since July 2021, revenue spend related to Programme team has been below profile as the Environmental Business Officer left the project. A replacement was appointed in November 2021, and the revenue spend will be on target.

### 8.3 Key Opportunities

Following COP26 hosted by the United Kingdom in November 2021, there has been increased promotion and awareness of climate change and related environmental topics. This presented an opportunity to promote the low carbon agenda and the support available to businesses.

Reporting should consider going above and beyond ERDF requirements to assess the longer term added value of the Programme. An example would be whether the businesses who have benefited from the Programme have seen an increase in their productivity and / or profitability and a reduction in their energy consumption.

### 8.4 Management and Delivery Processes

Staffordshire County Council, and the Staffordshire Business Environment Network, has successfully delivered a wide range of business support projects that are funded from European and other sources, over many years. The Council has therefore brought their prior experience of delivering ERDF projects to the successful delivery of the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme.

The following Staffordshire County Council staff have been, and continue to be, instrumental in the successful delivery of the Programme:

Diane Roberts/Stephen Boden – responsible for the overall success of Staffordshire Business Environment Network, providing the resources and strategic framework for the successful delivery of the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme. Stephen Boden replaced Diane Roberts in November 2022.

Christina Marshall – responsible for the accuracy and timely submission of project claims to DLUHC, having reviewed the information supplied within the claim to determine accuracy. Also responsible for wider programme administration.

Juhi Bhatia – responsibility for programme administration and eligibility checks.

Jackie Lavelle / Chris Hutt – responsible for marketing and finance activities.

The team has developed a robust project management methodology that sets out to:

- Manage the effective delivery of the Programme, whilst capturing all information required as part of the ERDF terms and conditions of contract.
- Promote the Programme to stakeholders and businesses and undertake robust eligibility checks to ensure that only those businesses eligible to participate in the Programme can do so.
- Manage the grant award and claims process to maximise the number of beneficiaries and therefore the numbers of businesses aiming to reduce their carbon emissions.
- Ensuring businesses receive the support they require that is most appropriate to their business needs.
- Provide guidance to businesses to ensure they meet the procurement requirements

around the grant application process.

- Liaising with stakeholders to obtain information required as part of the claims process.

The successful delivery of the Programme, and the reputation it has gained both with key stakeholders and with businesses is testament to the effectiveness and commitment demonstrated by the team. During the lifetime of the Programme, the team has been proactive as well as having responded to change, embraced all changes necessary to deliver the key outputs of the service and has delivered a Programme that is valued by businesses across the Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership area.

## **8.5 Added Value**

As referenced previously, the Programme currently only reports under ERDF requirements yet there is a clear indication of added value. It was evident that the monitoring and savings to the businesses was only considered over a 12-month period. The true value will continue well beyond this timescale.

There is also evidence from the questionnaire responses provided to the question, “Please let us know what other carbon saving measures you have considered”, that the Programme has kickstarted businesses to implement a variety of other carbon saving measures such as installation of solar panels, air source heat pumps, new boilers, water saving taps, reusable packaging, vehicle charging points and electric vehicles.

There is further evidence that businesses who adopt environmental technologies within their organisations see an increase in productivity (reported in ‘Fit for the Future II’ as up to a 30% increase). Current reporting does not allow us to see what productivity increase has been achieved and yet in our questionnaire we did get responses which clearly indicated that productivity had increased.

## **8.6 Value for Money**

Using the calculation as approved by ERDF, we can calculate the value for money as:  
Business assists – 299 achieved to 31 March 2023, plus an addition 53 profiled, totaling 352 to the contract end, 30 June 2023. Using the contract value of £3,248,667.26, this would equate to £9229 per business which is under the value for money threshold of £10,000 per business.

## **8.7 Exit Strategy/Sustainability**

We have provided below an analysis of options that exist for the future of the Programme. All options (except closing the service) depend on securing the support of external funders. We have concentrated the evaluation on the benefits to the customer and the sustainability of the service but have also factored in the likelihood of securing the funding required.

### **a. Close the service.**

The evidence tells us that the Programme is valued by businesses and partner organisations. It has established a niche for environmental advice, environmental funding support and the sharing of best practice. Both the advice element of the Programme and grant funding element are very much seen as a catalyst for business engagement.



There is evidence of significant environmental benefits in terms of lower carbon emissions and there are additional benefits which have been achieved e.g., an increase in businesses signing up to sben membership and therefore developing a longer-term focus on the environmental impact of their business.

We believe, from discussions with businesses and stakeholders, that some of these additional benefits are not reported as they are not part of the requirement for ERDF purposes. However, we recommend that consideration be given to collating them for future funding opportunities.

The Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme is well recognised and trusted by partners and businesses. On this basis we evaluate closing the Programme as the least favoured option.

b. Mainstream the support.

The evidence suggests that currently there is an uncertainty around funding available to continue this service beyond the contract end and that the commercialisation of the Programme, in the present economic climate would have a significant impact both on what is provided, and the Programme reach.

The current structure of the Programme and the fact that it resides with Staffordshire County Council is an effective operating model which allows the Programme to flex within the current economic climate.

We evaluate mainstreaming the full integration of the service at this point in time as a less favoured option.

c. Downscale the service.

The Programme has previously downscaled to reflect current demand and would consider the same, if necessary, before the contract end date.

We evaluate downscaling as a potential dependent on demand and match funding support available.

d. Expand the service.

Although we can see that the Programme is well regarded, due to the impact of COVID-19 we have seen a reduction in businesses wishing to access the support and services. However, with the increased interest in environmental issues lately, it is hoped that many businesses, who have not already done so, will access the support and services, especially as marketing activities have increased recently. This, together with business budgetary constraints and the current business climate, would lead us to advise against expanding the service at this moment in time.

e. Continue as now.

The Programme provides a valuable niche service for which there is sufficient demand to justify its continuation.

Our evaluation is that the current Programme should continue as it is, but that possible diversification opportunities should be explored for the future should there be clear evidence of additional demand and the resources to support it.

This is our preferred option.

f. Re-focus the service.

Whilst we do not think the current climate allows for it, we did in our consultations encounter strong support, which could be translated into safeguarding the sustainability of the Programme by meeting its costs. On this basis we would suggest that the Programme does consider and looks at future commercialisation opportunities and income generating activities. Its ability to engage businesses in environmental activities and demonstrate its value is a key skill.

In the short-term we believe this option to be limited due to the current economic climate however more long term we believe this option would strengthen the offer and provide the flexibility required to provide a service which is needed and valued by the businesses of Staffordshire and thus improve the sustainability of the Programme.

#### Options Appraisal Evaluation Ranking

(1-5: where 1 is the most attractive and 5 is the least attractive):

Close the service	5
Mainstream the support	4
Downscale the service	3
Expand the service	4
Continue as now	1 (dependent on funding requirements)
Re-focus the service	3 (dependent on funding requirements)

## 9.0 KEY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the course of the evaluation of the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme, several key conclusions can be drawn, along with lessons learnt and recommendations for future Programmes to encourage Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire businesses to consider their carbon footprint.

### 9.1 Conclusions

The Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme is a very highly regarded environmental business engagement service delivering environmental advice, support, and access to finance to SMEs across the Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire LEP area to encourage businesses to reduce their carbon footprint.

A single point of contact within LCBEP is viewed by stakeholders and businesses as making communication between partners and businesses far more efficient and productive. Everyone who has been interviewed as part of the evaluation, both partners and beneficiaries, has spoken highly of the professionalism and commitment to the Programme demonstrated by the LCBEP staff.

The Programme achieves exceptionally high overall satisfaction ratings from businesses, with 93% of businesses being satisfied with the support they have received from the SBEN LCBEP programme and 74% of businesses stating the LCBEP grant has had a significant impact on their business.

It is too early to fully assess the impact that LCBEP has had on business beneficiaries. Many of the beneficiaries themselves identified that it was too early to quantify the carbon and financial savings that they recognise will be realised as a result of investments made. Therefore, a longer-term view should be taken, with impact assessment conducted after a period of 24 months to enable the savings to be quantified.

Business beneficiaries recognised the value of the efficiency reviews, the workshops and newsletters that were delivered through the Programme. Whilst case studies were produced, these were perceived to be less beneficial.

LCBEP has delivered a wider awareness of carbon efficiency than was initially anticipated. Business beneficiaries, having identified and seen early benefits to their operations, are taking a longer term view and considering longer term investment in measures that will further reduce carbon emissions and assist them on their journey to carbon net zero.

There is a need to manage the expectations of referral organisations, especially when there is a spike in demand. This is most common after marketing or event activities.

The current report structure used is fixed which provides a broad review of energy consumption. However, this combined with the 12-hour allocation for a business assist limits the amount of depth achieved.

It is evident from some of the feedback from beneficiaries who were not wholly satisfied with the support they received that the actual issues related not with the LCBEP programme, but with the procurement process required as part of the grant application process. It is clear that some businesses struggled to obtain quotes to enable them to proceed with their projects. This was exacerbated in part by the COVID-19 pandemic, when many businesses reduced trading activity but was compounded as we exited the pandemic and demand increase, meaning there were fewer options available for businesses seeking to make improvements. Supply chain shortages and more recently the energy crisis created difficulty for businesses to contact supplies, obtain quotes and secure activity within the project timelines aligned with the closure of the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme.

The Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme plays an important role in fostering environmental leadership and a change in perception within the business community. This is evidenced both through increased take-up of SBEN membership and through the positivity of those businesses that have participated in the Programme. Several of the respondents are clearly championing the relevance of carbon reduction as a driver of both improved productivity and increased profitability in their businesses.

Thought needs to be given to a suitable, long term tracking mechanism to demonstrate the 'added value' of the Programme over a longer timescale – either three or five years. The return on investment is limited to the ERDF funding output requirements, but it is clear through our research that businesses recognised additional benefits that will not be reported through the Programme.

## **9.2 Recommendations**

Currently the Programme identifies the energy, carbon and cost savings achieved by beneficiary businesses in year one. Provision of the service under LCBEP should consider the carbon savings over the life expectancy of the product or service recommended as per environmental best practice. This would enable a business to fully appreciate the cost/benefit analysis when considering environmental changes within their workplace and would highlight the additional benefits of the LCBEP programme.

Based on the evidence, Staffordshire County Council should consider how the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme could be extended beyond its current operational timescales. This may involve securing additional funding to deliver the Programme, examining the commercial options to deliver the Programme, or finding additional partnerships.

When looking to secure additional funding it would be beneficial to increase the scope of environmental support, in particular a focus on supply chains and it may be beneficial to revisit the involvement of students and academics.