

Sustainable Tourism



Visit**Aberdeenshire**

Quick start: how to use this toolkit

If you only have 10 minutes: read the “What can you do?” sections and pick one quick win.

If you have 30 minutes: choose one topic that affects your business most, then use the checklist-style actions to plan next steps.

If you are ready to take action: go to “Developing a climate action plan” and turn your chosen actions into a simple plan with owners and dates.

Find what you need quickly	Go to this section
I want to understand the business case.	Introduction to sustainable tourism ; Data and insights
I want to cut waste and save money.	Circular economy ; Reducing food waste
I want to reduce energy use or emissions.	Decarbonisation and resource efficiency ; Energy efficiency ; Sustainable transport
I want to support nature and local places.	Biodiversity
I want to prepare for storms, flooding or changing seasons.	Adapting to climate change
I want a practical plan.	Developing a climate action plan

Tip for busy readers: You do not need to read this toolkit from start to finish. Start with the topic that feels most urgent for your business, choose one action you can do this month, and build from there.

Three simple steps

1. Review: **What do you already do well?**
2. Choose: **Pick one area where change would make the biggest difference.**
3. Act: **Assign one owner, one deadline and one measurable action.**

Introduction to sustainable tourism

What is sustainability?

A simple definition is: “Sustainability is about meeting our needs today without harming the ability of future generations to meet theirs.”

In the context of Responsible Tourism, sustainability means using resources in a way that keeps the environment, communities, and economy in balance.

What is sustainable tourism?

Sustainable tourism practices focus on protecting and improving the places and destinations tourists visit, so they remain attractive and welcoming for future visitors while also benefiting the people who live there now. This involves reducing harm to natural and cultural sites, helping local communities thrive, and making sure economic benefits are fairly distributed.

Under sustainable tourism we will cover circular economy, biodiversity, decarbonisation, energy efficiency, food waste, and adapting to climate change.

We have also included some information on how to create your own climate action plan, and some checklists to provide you with simple steps to take.

Why should you be sustainable?

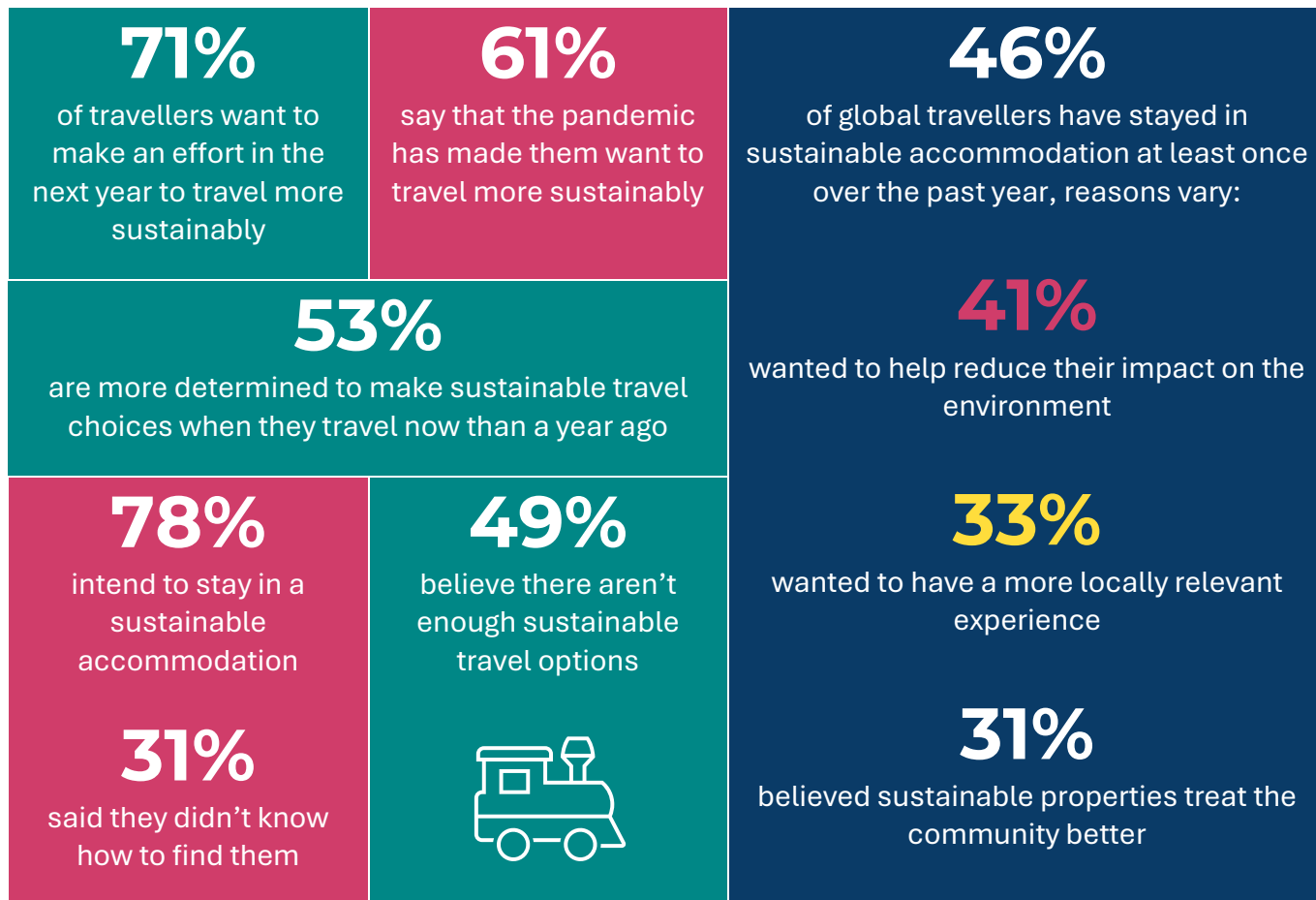
There are many benefits to being sustainable:

Positive environmental impact	Reducing carbon footprints and promoting biodiversity helps protect the region's unique landscapes and wildlife.
Better reputation and brand loyalty	Sustainable practices can improve a business's reputation, attract environmentally conscious visitors and build brand loyalty and repeat customers.
Cost savings	Using energy-efficient methods and reducing waste can lower operational costs.
Increased competitiveness	Offering sustainable tourism can help your business stand out in a competitive market, and appeal to a growing segment of environmentally conscious tourists.
Customer demand and satisfaction	Visitors are increasingly looking for authentic, responsible travel experiences, leading to higher customer satisfaction and repeat bookings.
Marketing advantages	Sustainable practices, as well as certifications and awards, can be used in marketing to attract specific market segments.
Long-term success	Sustainable practices help preserve natural and cultural resources, ensuring the long-term attractiveness of the region as a destination.

Complying with regulations	Adhering to sustainability guidelines can help businesses stay ahead of environmental regulations and avoid potential fines.
Community support	Engaging with and supporting local communities and suppliers can build strong relationships and make the overall visitor experience more unique and memorable.
Support for local economies	Sustainable tourism helps local economies by supporting local suppliers and creating jobs.
Staff recruitment, satisfaction and retention	A commitment to sustainability can improve staff morale and attract employees who value corporate responsibility.
Resilience to market changes	Sustainable businesses are often better equipped to adapt to changes in the market, such as shifts in consumer preferences or resource availability.
Risk management	By addressing climate change impacts, such as rising insurance costs and unpredictable weather, sustainable practices safeguard your business's long-term viability.

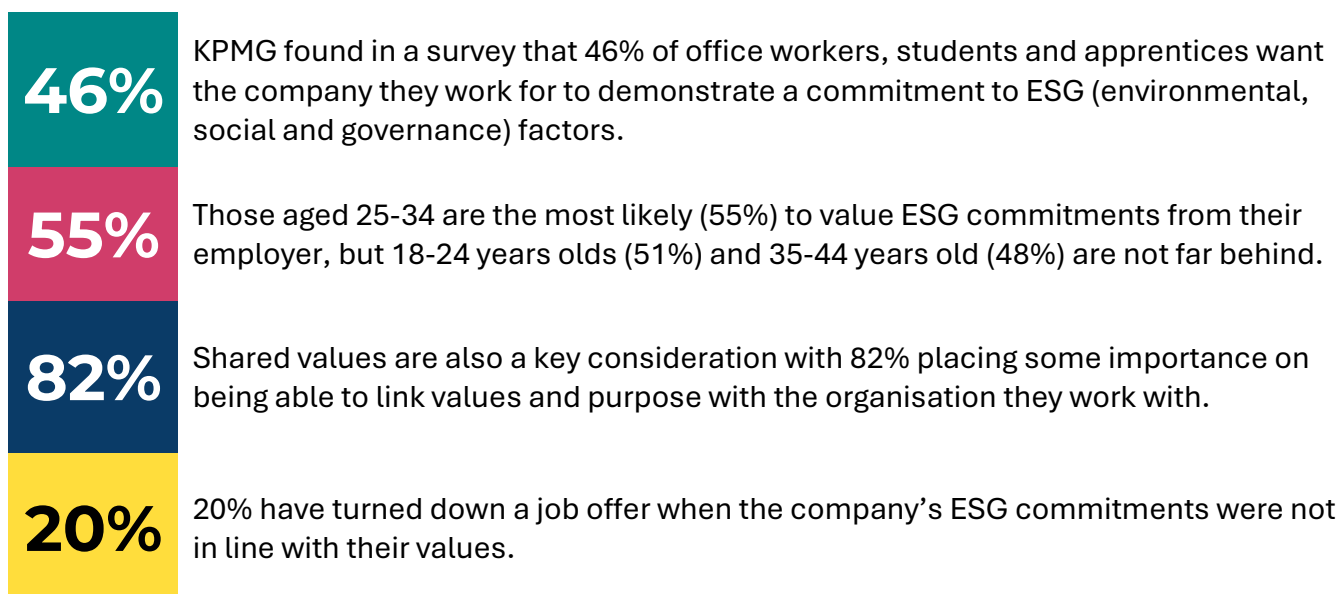
Data and insights

Sustainable travel choices:



Source: Booking.com Sustainable Travel Report 2021 and 2022 and ETAG presentation by Xavier Font

Employee retention:



Source: [Climate quitting KPMG press release](#)

Barriers, and how to overcome them

The most common reasons businesses haven't adopted sustainable business practices include:

Lack of time

**Lack of
technical
skills**

**Lack of
support**

**Lack of
buy-in**

**Lack of
funding**

The good news for SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) is that Business Energy Scotland offer solutions to all these barriers.

They offer free training sessions and provide advisors to support you, even technical specialists if needed. They can help you put a business case in place, and there is also funding support available, for example interest free loans.

Source: [Business Energy Scotland](#)



Circular economy

What is circular economy?

A circular economy is about reducing waste and keeping resources in use for as long as possible by reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling materials and products. Unlike the traditional 'take, make, dispose' model (referred to as linear economy), a circular economy focuses on making the most out of what we have.



**Recycle,
reduce
and
reuse**

In tourism and hospitality, this means designing services, products and operations that cut down on waste, using resources efficiently and extending the life of materials.

By adopting circular economy principles, tourism businesses can reduce their environmental impact, improve efficiency, and help make the region a more sustainable and resilient destination.

What can you do?

Following circular economy principles could include initiatives like:

- Reduce single-use plastics, for example by offering water refill stations to your visitors instead of selling bottled water.
- Encourage recycling and composting, for example by providing clearly marked recycling bins for visitors, and composting food waste from your kitchen.
- Source goods and services sustainably, for example by choosing suppliers that prioritise ethical and sustainable business practices and follow circular economy principles like recycling.
- Shop locally - buy from local companies as much as possible, to reduce your carbon footprint (and boost the local economy).
- Repurpose materials, for example by refurbishing and upcycling old furniture, to use in your business.
- Minimise printing, by using online tools to electronically send and sign documents (such as contracts), issue tickets, and send communications.
- Encourage your customers not to print their tickets or booking confirmations.
- Offer digital brochures, reducing paper use and waste.

Resources

There are several recycling centres in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, you can find them here:

[Recycling](#)

While recycling is important, it's just as important to reduce the amount we waste and reusing what we already have. Reusing materials has many benefits – not only does it cut down on what we produce, it also reduces emissions, saves energy, and lowers cost.

Aberdeen City offers a helpful guide to “ReUse” facilities in Aberdeen, showing locations of charity shops, clothes banks and other places that can help you reuse items: [ReUse](#)

Reducing food waste

Part of circular economy is about reducing waste, and this is especially important when it comes to food waste.

What is food waste?

A simple definition of food waste is when “food that could have been eaten gets thrown away”.

This waste can happen at any stage, from farms to kitchens, and could be leftover meals, spoiled fruits and vegetables, and unused ingredients.

In Scotland’s hospitality sector, one out of every six meals served is discarded – that is a staggering 106 million meals wasted every year (source: Zero Waste Scotland). Not only is this costing businesses money, but it also has a significant impact on the environment and society.

What can you do?

Tourism and hospitality businesses can take practical steps to prevent and reduce food waste, such as:

- Plan meals more carefully.
- Store food properly.
- Track inventory and monitor food stocks to avoid over-ordering.
- Give guests the option of smaller portion sizes.
- Get creative with leftovers.
- Use more seasonal and local ingredients.
- Encourage customers to take home their leftovers, by providing containers.
- Share tips with guests on how they can help reduce food waste.

Resources

For even more tips, **Zero Waste Scotland** offer a comprehensive online guide on reducing food waste in the hospitality and food sector: [Zero Waste Scotland Hospitality and Food Service](#)

You can also train your staff on best practices, and Zero Waste Scotland offer free, bite-sized online training on food waste: [Bitesize Food Waste Course](#)

But you can’t always avoid waste completely, so you may want to consider setting up a scheme to compost food scraps, as well as donating excess food to local charities or foodbanks.

Here is a list of a few solutions to avoid food from going to waste:

Too Good To Go

Consider signing up to “Too Good To Go”, an app that connects businesses with customers to sell surplus food at a reduced price.

Hotels, restaurants, cafes, and even food stores can sign up and offer Surprise Bags containing leftover food, for users to come and collect at a predetermined time. For example, many hotels sell breakfast bags with leftover buffet items, instead of throwing the food away.

Read more here: [Too Good to Go](#)

Foodbanks

There are local foodbanks throughout Aberdeenshire, for example in Ellon, Inverurie, Banchory, Fraserburgh, and multiple locations throughout the city of Aberdeen that welcome donations. Each foodbank may have specific requirements, so it's worth reaching out to see how you can support them.

Here is a list of a few of the foodbanks in the region:

- [Aberdeenshire North Foodbank](#)
- [Aberdeenshire South Foodbank](#)
- [Aberdeen North Foodbank](#)
- [List of foodbanks in Aberdeen](#)

BankTheFood app

One way to check what your local foodbank needs in real time, is to download the BankTheFood app. This free app, run by a registered charity, allows foodbanks to post their current requirements.

As a user, you can download the app and check it, for example while shopping, to see what items your local foodbank needs and choose what you would like to donate. Simply leave your donation in your food bank's donation box at the end of your shopping trip. The app will notify the foodbank of your (anonymous) gift, so they can locate items they really need.

This app could also be used by businesses, to check if any of their surplus food matches the needs of local foodbanks.

Read more here: [BankTheFood website](#)

Decarbonisation and resource efficiency

What is decarbonisation?

Decarbonisation means reducing the carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions caused by human activities, particularly those linked to energy use.

For tourism businesses, this means adopting strategies and technologies to lower the carbon footprint of your operations.

Actions you can take include:

- Switching to renewable energy sources.
- Improving energy efficiency.
- Promoting sustainable transport options.
- Encouraging behaviours that lower overall greenhouse gas emissions.

By committing to decarbonisation, tourism businesses in North-east Scotland can help combat climate change and build a more sustainable, environmentally friendly industry in the region.

What can you do?

We recommend making decarbonisation a key objective of your climate action plan - see "[Developing a climate action plan](#)" below for more details.

Some of the specific decarbonisation actions include:

1. **Measure your carbon emissions:** Understand how much CO₂ your business is currently producing.
2. **Identify reduction strategies:** Find practical ways to cut emissions and improve energy efficiency.
3. **Switch to renewable energy:** Check that your energy provider offers 100% renewable energy, or switch to a green tariff.
4. **Monitor and set goals:** Track your carbon emissions and set realistic targets for reducing emissions.

Source: VisitScotland and Business Energy Scotland

Energy efficiency

What is energy efficiency?

A simple definition of energy efficiency is to use less energy to perform the same task or produce the same outcome.

This involves adopting practices and technologies that reduce energy consumption, such as using LED lighting, energy-efficient appliances, and improving insulation.

For tourism businesses, energy efficiency not only lowers operating costs, but also reduces the environmental impact, making your business more sustainable.

Examples of energy efficient practices:

- Air source heat pump (air to air, or air to water)
- LED lighting
- Solar panels
- Insulation
- Biomass systems

Renewable energy in Scotland

The Scottish Government has set ambitious targets, aiming to generate 50% of Scotland's energy consumption from renewable sources by 2030, and achieve net-zero emissions by 2045.

We are fortunate to live here, as Scotland is playing a leading role in the global shift towards renewable energy, investing in solar, wind, and hydro power.

In 2022, renewable technologies generated the equivalent of 113% of Scotland's electricity consumption – the highest figure ever recorded, and a 26% rise compared to 2021.

The government's commitment to renewable energy is backed by a range of initiatives and incentives, including Renewable Energy Investment grants and energy efficiency programmes for both homes and businesses.

Source: Scottish Government

What can you do?

- Switch off the lights when you leave the room.
- Install motion sensors for lighting.
- Turn the heating settings down.
- Explore other ways of being more energy efficient, like improving insulation, installing heat pumps, solar panels, or biomass systems.
- Review different government initiatives and schemes.

Sustainable transport

Transport, as a sector, is the largest source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, accounting for 26% of the UK's total emissions in 2021.

This means that an important part of your decarbonisation and energy efficiency efforts is to try to use more sustainable transport options.

Source: gov.uk

What can you do?

There are a lot of simple steps you can take, for example:

- Track business travel, and aim to reduce emissions.
- Choose local transport instead of driving where possible.
- Introduce cycle to work schemes – see [Resources - Bike2Work](#) for more information.
- Choose trains over planes where feasible.
- Consider investing in electric vehicles.
- Share information about local EV charging points with your visitors.
- Encourage your suppliers and visitors to make responsible travel choices.

Summary – decarbonisation and resource efficiency

In all aspects of decarbonisation, the same principles apply – review what you already do, track and monitor consumption, and find ways to reduce emissions.

Additionally, it's important to try to influence your customers and suppliers to make responsible choices, and to communicate your climate actions clearly.



Biodiversity

What is biodiversity?

Biodiversity, short for “biological diversity”, refers to the variety of all living things on Earth.

It includes different species, the differences within those species, the various environments they live in, and the ecosystems they form.

Understanding biodiversity is important in Sustainable Tourism because tourism can have a significant impact on natural habitats and wildlife.

Tourism businesses can play a key role in protecting biodiversity, ensuring that ecosystems remain healthy and resilient. This also supports sustainable tourism and brings long-term benefits to local communities and economies.

Biodiversity in North-east Scotland

North-east Scotland is home to a rich and diverse variety of wildlife and natural landscapes that are worth protecting. From our woodlands to our beaches, and the animals and insects that inhabit them, every part of our environment contributes to the region’s unique biodiversity and attractiveness as a destination:

- Rivers, lochs, and coastal waters
- Ancient woodlands and forests
- Wildlife, from red squirrels to deer
- Insects, including bees and butterflies
- Sandy beaches and rocky shores

What can you do?

As a tourism business, there are several ways you can help protect and even enhance local biodiversity:

Minimise your impact

Ensure your activities don’t harm local ecosystems. Be mindful of where and how your business operates.

Support conservation efforts

Partner with local conservation projects or donate to environmental causes. Or encourage your visitors to support local environmental projects.

Reduce pollution and manage waste

Proper waste disposal and reducing single-use plastics are simple ways to cut down on pollution. Encourage guests to use reusable water bottles, bags, and containers to cut down on waste.

Educate visitors	Share information with your guests about the importance of biodiversity and how they can help protect it.
Conserve water and energy	Use resources efficiently and encourage your guests to do the same.
Practice wildlife-friendly tourism	Avoid disturbing wildlife and support initiatives that protect habitats.
Create an animal welfare policy	If your business offers experiences involving animals, it is advisable to have an animal welfare policy on your website. Read more here: <u>Resources – World Animal Protection</u>
Promote sustainable transport	Encourage visitors to use public transport, cycle, or walk to reduce their carbon footprint.
Source locally	Offer locally sourced, sustainable food options to reduce your carbon footprint and support local farmers and fishermen.
Plant native species	Use native plants in your landscaping to support local wildlife and improve habitat diversity.
Reduce light pollution	Install outdoor lighting that minimises disruption to nocturnal wildlife and preserves natural night skies.



Adapting to climate change

What is climate change?

Climate change refers to long-term changes in temperatures and weather patterns.

While some of these changes are natural, human activities like burning fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas) have sped them up, leading to global warming, melting ice caps, rising sea levels, and more extreme weather.

In the North-east, we have already seen the impact with recent floods and storms disrupting lives and businesses. These weather events are expected to become more frequent and intense over the coming years.

Climate trends in Scotland

According to Adaptation Scotland, the long-term trends we can expect in Scotland are:

- More variable and unpredictable weather
- Hotter, drier summers
- Milder, wetter autumns and winters
- Rising sea levels

Additionally, we may also face:

- More summer heat waves, extreme temperatures and droughts
- Increased heavy rainfall and flooding
- Less frost and snowfall

Source: Adaptation Scotland

How climate change could impact tourism in North-east Scotland

Changing visitor patterns

Unpredictable weather (more frequent storms, unpredictable rainfall, warmer winters etc) could discourage visitors, particularly those looking for outdoor activities.

The traditional tourist season could shift if the weather pattern changes. Peak periods may shorten, leading to reduced visitor numbers. Visitors may also start choosing destinations with more stable climates, which could affect the local tourism economy.

Rising sea levels

Rising sea levels, combined with stronger storms, could cause coastal erosion and increase the risk of flooding along the coast and rivers.

This could damage attractions, historic sites, and infrastructure in these areas, leading to expensive measures to protect and repair these sites.

It may potentially reduce the appeal of coastal tourism as well.

Unpredictable weather

Extreme weather events could damage properties, but also disrupt transport routes which could affect not just visitor access, but also deliveries.

This could cause business interruptions, and additional costs for repairs and insurance.

It could also affect the availability and cost of supplies.

Impact on natural landscapes and loss of biodiversity

North-east Scotland's iconic landscapes could be affected by changing weather patterns and climate change could also disrupt local ecosystems.

This could lead to the loss of wildlife and plant species, which could affect nature based tourism and the overall appeal of the region.

Impact on food and drink production

Changes in climate may affect food and drink production, raising costs for businesses that serve food and drink or offer them as part of the experience.



Water scarcity

Warmer temperatures and changing rainfall patterns could lead to water shortages, which would increase utility costs.

Water restrictions may limit services and affect attractions such as gardens, which could impact the visitor experience.

What can you do?

However, it's not all doom and gloom. There are still proactive steps businesses can take to prevent and adapt to the impacts of climate change:

1) Assess your risks

Evaluate how climate change could impact your business, using tools like Adaptation Scotland's risk assessment guide. Link: [Adaptation Scotland](#)

Collaborate with your local community and government agencies to assess and manage risks for your area.

2) Build resilience

Develop attractions or experiences that are less reliant on weather. A few examples could be indoor activities, cultural events, and culinary tourism.

Encourage tourists to visit the area in off-peak seasons with special offers or unique experiences.

Raise awareness about the impacts of climate change and the importance of sustainability among your team and guests.

3) Strengthen infrastructure

Invest in flood defences and improve drainage to protect properties from flooding.

Switch to renewable energy, cut waste and encourage sustainable practices.

Ensure your buildings, roads, and other infrastructure can handle extreme weather, such as stronger winds and heavier rainfall.

4) Protect nature

Get involved in local conservation projects to protect landscapes and biodiversity.

5) Develop a climate action plan

This all leads us neatly onto our next chapter – develop a climate action plan for your business.



Developing a climate action plan

Developing a climate action plan is a great step towards making your tourism business more sustainable and adaptable. It doesn't need to be overly detailed at the start - just getting something in place is what matters.

A climate action plan will provide you and your team with a roadmap, so you know what you want to achieve, and the steps to take to get there.

Both VisitScotland and Business Energy Scotland offer templates to help you get started.

VisitScotland

VisitScotland have provided a list of suggested actions:

- Conduct an energy audit.
- Switch to a green energy tariff or supplier.
- Adopt more sustainable business travel.
- Encourage Responsible Tourism practices.
- Increase your recycling.
- Phase out single-use items.

Find more detailed information, including useful links and templates, here: [Climate Impact Guide](#)

Business Energy Scotland

If this all seems overwhelming, Business Energy Scotland also offer support and funding options, and you can read more about the resources they offer here: [Resources – Business Energy Scotland](#)

Involve your team

We would recommend that you involve your team by asking for their ideas and input. Everyone can contribute to making your business greener, and getting involved from the start will ensure buy-in from your team.

Quick actions to take

If you don't know where to start, some quick actions to take is to “turn it down or reduce”.

This means lowering the settings on your heating, hot water and appliances, and switching the lights off when not needed.

Longer-term actions to consider

Longer term, you may want to consider installing and using heating, boiler, and lighting controls to avoid wasting energy.

You may also want to invest in draught-proofing and insulation to reduce heat loss, and explore renewable energy options like heat pumps, solar panels, or biomass systems.

We would also recommend that you share your actions with your customers; consider creating a Responsible Tourism or sustainability policy document, and share online. You may even want to add a dedicated Responsible Tourism page to your website.

And once you have a climate action plan and a sustainability policy, consider joining Green Tourism.

But for now – start by putting an achievable plan in place. Simple steps can make a big difference.

