

Ethical Consumer Climate Transition Plan

November 2024



Background

At [Ethical Consumer Research Association](https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/) (ECRA) we have been researching and publishing critical analyses of carbon management plans of other (mainly multinational) businesses since 2019.

Both our own assessments, and our colleagues at Business Declares, require net zero targets to be in line with the SBTi framework.

ECRA had a turnover of around £800,000 in the 2022/3 financial year, which is classed as a micro enterprise for most regulatory and management assessments.

As an independent multi stakeholder cooperative that works to challenge corporate power, we have also been striving to choose the more ethical options available across the business since 1989, including choosing the lowest environmental impact options. These include:

- Our use of post consumer waste recycled paper for all periodical printing and office use.
- Our use of second-hand computers and office equipment at all times.
- Keeping our money at ethical banks which do not fund fossil fuels.
- Operating a vegan where possible/ vegetarian food policy for our offices and events.
- A policy not to fly within Europe for business trips where possible.
- Gift subscriptions sponsoring an organic olive sapling in Palestine, through the Palestinian Fair Trade Association Trees For Life programme.
- Our ethical fundraising policy.

But similar to other micro enterprises, we have not had the capacity to learn and measure our carbon and wider environmental impacts accurately, and in sufficient detail, to meet modern net zero aspirations.

Since it is core to our mission to provide detailed information and analysis to consumers and companies on how to reduce their own carbon impacts, we have signed up to Business Declares with the aspiration to use this process as an action research project – sharing our learnings and the challenges we face in striving to meaningfully reduce our impacts with other small and medium sized enterprises.

1. Setting Targets

SBTi targets require:

Near term:

- 50% reductions in scope 1+2
- 67% scope 3 in 5-10yrs

Long term:

- 95% reduction in scope 1+2
- 90% scope 3 by 2050 or sooner

Ethical Consumer's own [analyses](#) show that near term 90% reductions by 2030 would be ideal. This could be factored into thinking about ECRA's target for 2030, however, it's important to see our reflections on the calculations at 3 below.

Our base year will be 2023 and our carbon calculations for that year are set out below.

2. Our base year calculations

Both Business Declares and the UNFCCC's Race to Zero websites point to the SME Climate Hub as a key resource in helping to calculate emissions. SME Climate Hub itself uses a resource called normative.io where companies can enter financial and business data to get current carbon estimates. If we use this data, it tells us the following:

Scope 1 and 2 emissions

Normative.io suggests that these will be 2.23 tonnes of CO₂e for the ECRA office (mainly heating). This is partly because if we enter 'electricity generated by renewables' (because our landlord, [Work for Change](#) (WfC) buys from Ecotricity) we get a 0 tonnes of CO₂e record for 2023. WfC, which does not take this approach and does its own calculations (including CO₂e from electricity), assigns 3.676 tonnes of CO₂e to ECRA for the 2023 calendar year. We will take this higher number as the base for scope 1 and 2 for now.

The building where Ethical Consumer's office is based was designed to be low energy and well insulated when we helped to design it in 1996.

We do however have 22 employees, 14 of whom are primarily remote working - either from home or from shared office spaces owned by different landlords. If we divide 3.676 by 8 (the number of people in the office) that gives us 0.459 per employee. Times this by 22 and we get a 10.10 tonnes estimate for CO₂e for both our Manchester and remote offices.

Because this is a big assumption we plan, in time, to improve the data collection in this area by asking our remote workers to provide actual energy use estimates. We will then explore options for reducing these within different workplace contexts.

Scope 3

For the 2022/3 financial year normative.io calculates (based on our turnover and the industry sectors we operate in) the tonnes of CO₂e to have been as follows:

Scope 3	% of emission	Tonnes CO ₂ e
Business travel	4.4 %	3.01
Upstream transportation and distribution	53.9 %	37.1
Purchased goods and services	41.7 %	28.7
TOTAL		68.81

This suggests that print magazine distribution may be a larger element than printing.

We are conscious that these figures are only very rough estimates and we have been working for a while to get more direct data from printers and paper producers amongst others, although their data tends to be based on industry estimates too.

This calculation also does not fully consider the full impact of events that Ethical Consumer manages for external clients. Going forwards we will try to gather more accurate data around the carbon impact of events, in order to inform future approaches.

Image: Most of the Ethical Consumer workforce during one of the in-person strategy meetings in Manchester



3. Reflections on base year calculations

a) The figures feel small

If they are correct they amount to around 78.91 tonnes of CO₂e per year for scopes 1, 2 and 3. By some accounts, UK per capita CO₂e emissions are around 6 tonnes per person per year (see below). This means that the impact of the whole ECRA operation is roughly the same as about 13 people. This doesn't feel very much, and is therefore something we plan to explore some more in the next 12 months. Perhaps it is usual for microenterprises to have figures this low.

In our work with larger companies, we know that getting actual emissions data from your suppliers or users is a much more accurate way of gauging impact than economy-wide calculations of the type used by normative.io. Although we are on our way to doing this, this needs to be a key part of the early years of our strategy. Once done, working with them to reduce their impacts in line with our targets will be the next key step.

b) What about our impact on consumers?

We also know that consumer use of a product can count as downstream scope 3 emissions. Since a core role of ECRA is providing information to help people or organisations to reduce their own emissions, if we were to do this effectively on a large scale, it could be that we have in

some sense negative overall CO2e emissions.

c) Calculating reader impacts

For argument's sake, we know that UK per capita CO2e emissions, by some calculations, were [6.27 tonnes](#) per year in 2022. We also know from our 2024 readers survey that 79% of our subscribers said that our information 'significantly impacted' their purchasing decisions.

If (say) half our subscribers reduced their carbon impact by 5% in the last year as a result of reading Ethical Consumer, this could amount to actual cuts of 2,194 tonnes ($7,000 \times 6.27 \times 0.05$).

More conservatively, even if only 10% of our subscribers reduced their impact by 1% we would still have negative overall emissions. ($1,400 \times 6 \times 0.01 = 84$ tonnes).

These figures are not even beginning to consider our wider readership of newsletters (35,000 and web visitors (250,000 monthly).

d) Coming to conclusions.

It is important to note that we are not performing these calculations so that we can somehow claim to be carbon neutral or negative. We are generally critical of such claims in our research. Our total CO2e emissions remain at 68.81 tonnes and need to be managed down. We are doing them so that we do not come to the wrong conclusions about the right course of action to take.

For example, one obvious way to reduce direct emissions would be to stop producing a print magazine. However, if by doing this we would also reduce our ability to help drive indirect consumer CO2e reductions on a larger scale, we would be moving in the wrong direction.

All this tells us that the Ethical Consumer carbon management plan should contain:

- All sensible actions we can take to reduce our direct emissions.
- All sensible actions we can take to increase the effectiveness and reach of our consumer advice around carbon.

4. ECRA Climate Transition Strategy

Our membership of Business Declares requires us to publish a strategy for how ECRA will address the biodiversity/ecological crisis, explaining what actions will be taken toward achieving real zero targets and biodiversity improvements.

For more than 30 years ECRA's core revenue has been as a publisher of Ethical Consumer magazine – a print periodical. By 2023 around half our revenue now comes from our work as researchers, consultants and advisors to other projects.

The basis of our climate plan has initially been taken from the template devised by the Periodical Publishers' Association which, other than target setting, contains the first four elements we have used. To this we have added three additional sections to review around consultancy projects, biodiversity impacts and benchmarking.

Our 2024 Climate Transition plan

1) Addressing Scope 1 and 2 emissions

- Develop a better understanding of what these really are, including how to calculate and reduce the emissions from our remote workers (now more than 50% of the team).
- Work with our landlords at WfC to decarbonise the workspace. WfC are already looking at replacing the boiler with a heat pump and at installing solar panels on the roof of the building. These require a longer term lease to be agreed before they can be taken forward.

2) Quantifying and addressing supply chain emissions

- As well as getting more detail around actual print and distribution costs, we need to begin looking at server use and impacts across the digital side of the business, especially around storing videos and images.
- Decarbonising distribution is going to be tricky for a micro-enterprise to influence, but we could look at getting funding for research into helping to drive broader change in this area

3) Creating content to drive behaviour change

- Continuing to offer high quality advice on how to reduce carbon across all our buyers guides.
- Continue to publish our annual *Climate Gap* report. In 2024/5 we are introducing a new monthly engagement program with consumers around taking account of carbon specifically, continuing to put pressure on consumer brands to improve carbon reduction programmes.
- Continue to seek grant funding to scale up our work in this area. We should note that a core part of our strategy in the next 12 months is seeking grant funding to substantially increase our carbon work including *Building pressure on European consumer brands to improve carbon reduction programmes*.
- Thinking about how we can measure our subscriber impact reductions more accurately and how these can be taken into account for our scope 3 emissions.

4) Advertising and Sponsorship

- We have an informal policy in this space which, for example, currently turns down advertising for products making prominent net zero claims through the use of offsetting. We also have an ethical funding policy that guides who we will and won't accept funding from based on an organisation's operations and motivations.
- More formal policy would be useful.[P]

5) Consultancy

- As with our publishing work, some of our consultancy work is focussed on helping businesses, or charities reduce their own impacts through making the right choices, and also through supporting projects that are actively restoring degraded landscapes and building climate resilience. Learning how to measure this would be good.[C]
- Some of our larger regular projects, such as the Lush Prize and Lush Spring Prize probably have substantial impacts – both positive and negative – of their own. We should begin to work with our clients to include these in the scope of our wider targets too.

6) Biodiversity

- Ethical Consumer's holistic ratings result in biodiversity impacts being considered indirectly through our work e.g. sourcing organic and Fairtrade coffee, but we do not currently fully consider ECRA's impacts and potential impacts on biodiversity. Although carbon and net zero work can help biodiversity impacts (e.g. using second-hand electronic equipment as opposed to new and utilising post-consumer waste recycled paper only), they do not always, and so the first step for ECRA is to map and plan for biodiversity impacts that are specifically ECRA's.
- Some of Ethical Consumer's consultancy work directly or indirectly supports projects that could have positive biodiversity impacts e.g. badger cull campaign, hunting research, Spring Prize funded regenerative projects, advising on shifts away from unsustainable palm oil. Learning how we could measure these impacts could be good.

7) Benchmarking

- We would like to try to benchmark our own emissions calculations against other small print publishers in order to sense check the 79 tonnes figure.

ethical
consumer since
1989