

VONNE – SmartCarbon case study

This is a Smart Carbon case study for Going Green Together written by Allison Madine and Georgia Goncalves from [VONNE](https://www.vonne.org.uk). This case study will be useful for hybrid and office-based organisations.

Introduction about VONNE

VONNE (Voluntary Organisations' Network North East) is a charity organisation based in the centre of Newcastle upon Tyne. It is the regional support body for the North East Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, representing more than 1,300 member charities, voluntary organisations, community groups, networks, and social enterprises across the region. VONNE employs 6 full and 11 part-time staff and occupies 101m² office space in MEA House, a five-floor office building which houses a number of other charities. As in many organisations, VONNE staff have been mostly working from home over the last two years but are steadily returning to the office on a hybrid (home/office) basis.

What are the challenges organisations like yours face while measuring your carbon footprint?

Some of the challenges that organisations like VONNE would face while measuring their carbon footprint include understanding the terminology and having enough capacity within the organisation to go through the process. There are quite a lot of terms that organisations without an environmental focus may not have come across before for instance, the various different Scopes that the activities come under depending on how they relate to your organisation and specific factors such as T&D (transmission and delivery) for electricity – which is something we learned you need to include in Scope 2 and is the same as your electricity use. We learned the terminology and found out what we had to include in our report by having regular peer support meetings where we could ask any questions. Learning the terminology is beneficial because it will help your organisation become more carbon literate which is becoming increasingly more important as more focus is placed on the environment.

It is also quite a time-consuming process which, for a small organisation, can be quite difficult to find the capacity to dedicate the time to. You have to go through quite a lot of old documents and chase things, as well as come to grips with, and input things into the system which takes some time. The time spent collecting retrospective information is helpful because it enables you to understand where your emissions have come from and work out how you will track them going forward on a regular ongoing

basis. Once you get to this point it becomes much easier, all you will have to do is make a note of certain activities which create carbon emissions on a regular basis and add them into the system. Tracking your carbon emissions is quite similar to reporting for projects and funding – it can be a bit time consuming but once you've done the initial reporting for a project it makes it easier going forward because you know what to expect and how to structure future reports.

Which activities were included in the scope and why?

The activities we included in our scopes were:

- Electricity
- T&D
- Business travel
- Employee Commute.

We would have also wanted to include data for emissions on waste and water to fully complete the report however we were unable to get this information in time for completion of the case study. We plan to include them in future years and our baseline will be adjusted once we obtain the information. One of the helpful things about SmartCarbon is that it is an ongoing exercise, meaning you can go back to it and amend information as you receive it and adjust the baseline figure. The above are the key carbon emitters for VONNE as an organisation.

How did you measure your carbon footprint?

We measured the carbon footprint by using information from our Investors in the Environment Self Assessed Carbon Footprint Results and Recommendations report as a starting point. This contained information on energy used from our building and business travel. We used this for Electricity, T&D and business travel.

We then had to work out the employee commute. In order to do this, we got in touch with members of staff to find out what mode of transport they used to get to work, and we worked out which days they came into the office based on the UK average number of sick days and how much annual leave each employee would have had during this period. For metro services we used a calculator to work out the distance of each journey and used the distances on Google Maps for the bus journeys.

Once we found out the relevant metrics e.g. distance travelled and mode of transport, SmartCarbon calculates the emissions for you – meaning you don't have to try to work out complex equations to input your data. Initially, we had concerns about how we would be able to find out about people's energy usage when they worked from home. Though it wasn't in our baseline year, this is something we would need to include in the

future. Fortunately, SmartCarbon is able to calculate a carbon emission average of people working from home so it would make the process a lot easier. Whilst it may sound like it is a difficult task to begin with, once you take the time to get your head around it, it is very straightforward.

What challenges, if any, did you face during the exercise?

One of our key challenges was finding it hard to find out and obtain information because our office is in a shared building. We had to try to calculate our share of things within the building and try to find out information about how much waste we produce, type of waste and our share of water. It can be hard to complete the carbon calculator process when you're waiting for someone else to send you information because you're then working to different timescales which they may not prioritise.

It was also quite difficult to retrospectively find out information about people's commute. Some members of the team don't work here anymore so it was more difficult if we had any questions for them, some left and started partway through the year, so we had to calculate what amounted to the full time equivalent and calculate things like annual leave based on the amount of time they were there.

These challenges are on historic data but going forward it should be much easier because we will track information as we go along. Whilst the initial report can take time to find information, it helps you to understand what you will need to track your emissions going forward and so it's a really useful exercise.

What were the benefits of measuring the carbon footprint of your organisation?

The benefits of doing this meant that we could work out our baseline and identify where to concentrate our efforts to reduce our carbon emissions – this is something which will be really useful for us to complete for our Investors in the Environment accreditation. It was also a great insight into how we need to track certain information going forward so we can continue to go through the process of tracking our emissions. Overall, dedicating some time to focus on climate action and make yourself aware of your emissions helps you to start thinking about what you can do for the climate emergency beyond smart carbon within your organisation. Since working on this project I've become aware of a lot more things I can do to reduce my carbon impact and single use plastic consumption so now I try to buy and behave more sustainably when I can. Despite it being for your organisation being so aware seeps into your day-to-day life as well.

Did you discover any new information about your organisation's activities?



Most of the information we found wasn't that surprising for the type of organisation VONNE is. In the baseline year we worked in the office, went to some external meetings, commuted to work and used resources such as electricity, waste and water within our office building. It would have been interesting to find out more about the type of waste disposal we use, however unfortunately we were unable to obtain this information. As a newer member of staff, I found it interesting that we're on a green energy tariff and think that's a great starting point to taking more building-focused steps to reducing the organisation's carbon footprint.

How well did SmartCarbon meet your requirements in the exercise?

VONNE's SmartCarbon use had a unique standpoint as one of the members of the team calculating our carbon footprint had already been running user testing sessions with other organisations in the North East. This prior insight made it easier to use the tool as they had already seen quite a few examples of it being used and understood how to input the information more quickly than being left to your own devices. We had all of the different activities we needed to input and found the report at the end very useful to bring everything together and consolidate our learning.

What are your plans for CO2e management and reporting in the future?

VONNE recognises the importance of the climate and ecological crisis and is committed to being an environmentally responsible organisation, understanding that

this is an ongoing and continuous process. We will seek to reduce our carbon footprint, with a specific focus on areas such as energy. Following discussions with our landlord about LED lighting, they are now in the process of installing this in communal areas. We will improve recycling, reduce the reliance on packaging, minimise waste, improve efficiencies on finite natural resources in all the company's operations and departments.

VONNE is currently working towards Investors in the Environment Bronze Accreditation. In our action plan, we aim to manage and reduce the use of energy and resources within the organisation and to minimise waste, aiming to reduce our carbon footprint by at least 3% on the previous year. The following categories are covered in our action plan:

1. Regional Leadership
2. VCSE sectoral leadership
3. Resources:
 - i. Waste Management
 - ii. Office Supplies
 - iii. Energy
 - iv. Water
 - v. Chemicals and Hazardous Materials
4. Our People
5. Members, suppliers, other stakeholders, and contractors
6. Communication
7. Transportation
8. Organisation Premises
9. Maintenance and Office Cleaning
10. Monitoring and Improvement
11. Legal Duties

We will continually improve and monitor environmental performance in regular reviews of processes, annually report, and continually strive to improve our sustainability performance.

Is there any help or support organisations like yours need to measure their carbon footprint on an ongoing basis?

It's really useful having an expert to talk things through with. We had meetings with SmartCarbon developers and other organisations who were going through the process. Here we were able to raise any queries, share challenges and talk through how we were all finding things. This would help us to find out about other areas we hadn't considered, and it was motivating to find out how other organisations were getting on.

It would be helpful if some sort of data collection format could be developed to help organisations to track information going forward. This could be a template which would relate to certain activities so you can collect information from the staff team efficiently. In VONNE's case this would relate to ongoing commutes to work.

What we've been doing since the case study

Following on from our baseline year we've still had some work to do. We've been developing some spreadsheets so that we can input all of the information we need to collect carbon emission data into one place. We've tried to integrate this into things that people already use for work for instance, adding information about an employee's commute into their timesheets and information about any work-related travel into their expenses form. We've also got some equipment to start weighing our waste. At this point it is up to you how you want to go about inputting the data into the system so for some things it makes sense to have a spreadsheet whereas things like the weight of waste it may be easier to just add that into smart carbon directly and make a note of the dates that waste has been collected.

We still need to make some decisions about which members of staff will be responsible for what elements of tracking and we plan to have a meeting to discuss what would be the best methods for tracking going forward and making sure the whole team know why it would be helpful to have some of this information from them.

It has been really helpful going through the smart carbon process to understand what it is we need to track and to plan how we can do this in the easiest way going forward. We've also had some great peer support with other organisations and members of the VONNE Climate Action Alliance to discuss any other elements we need to consider throughout the process. Support from the smart carbon team to help us plan what to do has also been really helpful.

Want to start measuring your organisation's carbon footprint?

Going Green Together is currently taking applications for our Become Green Together training programme. This opportunity will provide access for VCSE organisations in the North East and Cumbria to accreditation with Investors in the Environment and Smart Carbon's carbon footprinting course, running between September 2022-23.

Find out more and apply today: <https://www.goinggreentogether.org/become-green-together>

Get in touch: hello@goinggreentogether.org