



Surviving and thriving in the year of COVID-19

How Zero Waste Scotland seized the chance to do business differently long-term to help end the climate crisis.

The new normal – pioneering a radical switch to permanent homeworking to help end the climate crisis is ‘like starting a new job, creating a new company’

As an organisation leading national efforts to end the climate emergency our sole purpose is to help people overcome a global crisis by embracing change.

When COVID-19 hit we were already transforming our business to become more agile. So, while no one expected the pandemic or its devastating impact worldwide, we were perhaps better placed than most to adjust.

As a result of the public health crisis, we’ve fast-forwarded radical changes to how we work. Switching to permanent homeworking is without a doubt the most significant change we pioneered during lockdown. Like other businesses across Scotland and worldwide, we began working from home under orders from the government rightly imposed to help save lives as the virus spread globally. But unlike most we’ve never stopped. Instead, we seized the chance to make homeworking permanent to help end the climate crisis.

While companies typically need to make money, our goal as an environmental non-profit is to help end the climate crisis by eradicating waste. It’s also to lead by example to show others what they can do.

Pre-COVID-19, we were already reducing emissions from commuting and corporate travel which we knew were by far the biggest cause of our organisation’s carbon footprint. Lockdown gave us an unexpected chance to find out if we could still operate effectively if staff stopped travelling altogether.



Iain Gulland,
chief executive,
Zero Waste Scotland

Our experts found that after the first two weeks of lockdown the benefits of eradicating all staff travel versus the extra emissions caused by one-off investments in extra home office equipment cut our organisation's carbon footprint by 25 per cent, compared to the same period the previous year.

They also forecast that switching to homeworking permanently would reduce our emissions by around 75 per cent long-term as the impact of making that change balanced out.

When I offered staff the chance to change their job contracts to work from home, I urged them to take it. In July 2020 most did, helping us make significant progress on our own net zero plan.

People who work in other organisations have said to me since, 'God, that was a brave decision for the business, how's that going?', but it's not really going anywhere at the moment as we're still all working in a pandemic. We won't know what permanent homeworking will really be like until the pandemic is over, and we're no longer trapped in our houses.

Making such a dramatic change to how we work is a bit like accepting a new job or creating a new company. My work life until now was turning up in the office and going off meeting people. Now I'm leading from home. It's challenging.

We've strived to involve all our staff at every stage, and they've all played a crucial role in helping us adapt to this new and changing normal and most importantly, in supporting each other.

We're continually trying new ways to stay connected and productive virtually. We need to keep doing that as we keep working differently in future.

We will still have some form of office working. Staff are all individuals, and we recognise that not everyone can work from home.

We will also still meet in person sometimes as that's an important part of our social work culture. Whatever we do has got to be lower carbon, which doesn't have to mean everyone working from home. We could look at 'coffices' or 'poffices' – with carbon-free commutes like walking or cycling to work in cafes or even pubs, which we already did sometimes pre COVID-19. We need to be more experimental.

Remote working has led us to move key business services online, such as food waste and energy audits, while our new podcasts were recorded remotely during lockdown. The pandemic has helped us be more authentic, leading others by example.

Our headline message before and during the pandemic is unchanged: The single greatest cause of carbon emissions in Scotland comes from all the stuff we produce, consume and too often waste. To end the climate crisis,

“
Switching to homeworking permanently would reduce our emissions by around 75 per cent long-term.
”

we need to end our wasteful use of limited resources. We can do that by making things last through the circular economy – which means reducing, reusing, repairing, remaking and finally recycling everything.

But while the circular economy is key, it's not a one size fits all solution to saving the planet. That's because while we all create damaging emissions from wasting resources, what we waste most varies from person to person, and business to business.

Homeworking could significantly cut the carbon footprint of other service industry businesses whose greatest emissions are also likely to come from staff travel. For others, though, working from home is neither possible nor beneficial as their greatest carbon emissions have other causes, such as the materials they use.

This core message and understanding of the differences and similarities has stood us in good stead during the pandemic, as the same is true for COVID-19. Since the first lockdown began, we've all learned just how much we can do differently to overcome the virus and the climate crisis simultaneously.

After a rollercoaster year of hopes and fears the future looks a lot brighter now as we emerge from lockdown with the incredible success of the vaccine rollout finally bringing the prospect of light at the end of the tunnel.

Some of the pioneering firms we work with, like Renewable Parts in Argyll, and Bowhouse in Fife, are among those which are already on the frontline of the 'Green Recovery' as Scotland 'Builds Back Better'. They have been hiring during lockdowns, and their trade has grown as they adapted. That's the Green Recovery in action, bringing the sustainable jobs we badly need more of.

Other businesses are interested in what we're doing but I don't think many are thinking like we are. Some were severely hit and they're just thinking about surviving COVID-19. They don't think they can look at the climate crisis yet, but it's not going to go away. We do all need to change, and changing will create new jobs, products and ways of working which will help the economy and environment recovery in harmony, not conflict. It's not just about surviving, we all need to find ways to thrive as we commit to doing things differently from now on to help end the climate crisis.



Surviving and thriving in the year of COVID



As COVID-19 spread around the globe, Zero Waste Scotland set up the Incident Response Team (IRT). The business reacted fast, monitoring the changing situation and keeping staff informed. Our executive leadership team agreed to split in late February, so some members were already working remotely while others remained office-based to reduce the risk of the virus jeopardising how we operate. One of the first key steps the IRT takes is to check whether we can keep functioning effectively if all staff work from home.

Before working-from-home became the norm, we tested our ability to completely shut down the office with little notice. Colleagues were asked, without prior warning, to take their laptops home to work there the following day. We pass that test, thanks largely to our history of pioneering agile working to help staff juggle the demands of life outside work and reduce our organisation's own carbon emissions by using technology to cut commuting.

As news reports and government updates grow increasingly concerning, we took the decision to shut down all our offices over a week before the Prime Minister's historic broadcast on national television telling the whole of the UK to stay at home.

Supported by a robust IT infrastructure and team, employees are already set up with the equipment and software needed to work from anywhere. This provides access to the intranet and the ability to use smart phones as mobile hotspots to get online. Using virtual meeting apps like Zoom and Teams had already become a normal part of collaborative working life for staff pre-lockdown, which gave us a huge advantage while the rest of the world turned to these platforms over the coming weeks and months.

With colleagues suddenly unable to see each other in person amidst so much uncertainty and change we recognised the need for all staff to be regularly brought together virtually and updated by our chief executive, Iain Gulland.

To help keep us focused, Zero Waste Scotland held an all-company briefing, and these soon became a weekly feature which has continued throughout the pandemic. Regularly checking in is a new and vital function which these remote meetings help to serve now we no longer have any contact in person in the office, commuting or socially.

While a significant number of staff are used to working from home, sometimes by choice, being suddenly told to work from home for an unknown period amid a deadly outbreak is a very different experience for us all.

To help alleviate any worries, our HR team announced support calls for employees with parental responsibilities to discuss and arrange any changes they need. This includes the offer to cut their hours without reducing their pay to help them juggle work, home-schooling and childcare. Crucially, this ongoing support is also offered to all staff to help people manage whatever challenges the pandemic brings, from colleagues caring for elderly or disabled relatives, to those living alone dealing with the impact of isolation.

Ever since the start of the first lockdown, the social side of work has been missing. It's a key part of our collaborative culture, which we work hard to maintain by encouraging everyone across all departments and roles to suggest, organise and attend events. At the end of week one in lockdown, we had our first Friday quiz.

As the pandemic worsens, we support staff to set up different groups and activities to boost morale, aid collaboration and foster the sense that while we can't see each other face to face, we're still all in this together.

Informal coffee break catch-ups initially begun spontaneously by staff are opened to all employees to help keep people across, as well as within, teams connected.

With so many new starts joining the business, social events are not just a way to help us stay in touch with colleagues we already know but also a chance to get to know people we haven't met yet outside work-related video calls.



The ongoing pandemic brings painful loss and distress for many people, including our staff and the people they work with across the diverse range of businesses, organisations and communities.

From the start, supporting staff to help protect their mental and physical health as we adapt to combat two global crises at once is our overriding priority. Our existing wellbeing strategy covers the physical, emotional, social, financial, occupational and cultural elements of supporting staff.

Before the pandemic, we worked with a mindfulness expert who trained several employees to deliver sessions for staff by staff. This lets us launch short, twice weekly virtual drop ins for employees to join as and when they want, to help them focus and relax.

We created a new colleague connections and wellbeing platform listing the growing mix of fun and more serious events so staff can sign up to attend or host anything from book groups to fitness tips.

We also held sessions on our existing Employee Assistance Programme outlining the range of free external support already open to staff covering everything from counselling to legal and financial advice. We launched mental health awareness sessions run by programme experts as part of our commitment to taking an authentic approach to staff wellbeing.



Fraser Millar

Working from home has led to a huge improvement in my work-life balance. Pre-pandemic, I used to commute for an hour each way between my home in Glasgow and the office in Stirling. But now my office is off the hallway of my home in Robroyston. The travel costs used to be enormous, I was spending around £70 a week in petrol and other motoring expenses. Nowadays I don't even need a car, so I gave it up when the lease ended.

Pre-pandemic, I nearly bought a flat. But when lockdown hit, the need for space became a priority and the flat idea was abandoned in favour of a house and garden. This in turn has given me the flexibility to get a dog and I now have more energy in the evenings to get out and socialise. Working from home has allowed me to virtually attend external events instead of travelling and arriving back home often after 6pm – hungry and tired. Nowadays I join a meeting with one click, deliver a presentation, and can sign off again at 5pm on the nose.

Sure, there are technical glitches to deal with and I don't feel quite as adventurous without travelling, but the benefits outweigh the downsides for me. Of course, I'm looking forward to reuniting with colleagues when the restrictions allow. But for the most part, low-carbon attendance just can't compete with no-carbon attendance. For me it's about convenience and authenticity.

For the first time ever, we carry out a virtual financial audit. We've never considered conducting a virtual financial audit before COVID-19, but lockdown shows that it's possible - and we can and will do it again.

Despite the sudden switch to remote working, we're able to collaborate to adapt fast to ensure there are no delays and staff continue to be paid on time.

With rising unemployment and huge job insecurity as Scotland and the rest of the world move in and out of lockdowns, money worries are one of the greatest stresses for everyone throughout the pandemic. Being a publicly funded non-profit puts us in the fortunate position of being able to commit to continue employing and paying all our staff in full, with no furlough or redundancies.

To help staff build mental resilience to boost productivity and focus, we launched a series of webinars led by the Think Distinct consultancy.

We also injected some fun and creativity into motivating colleagues and recognising their hard work in tough times through a 'thank you' video from our leadership team. The video featured a range of staff who filmed themselves saying or spelling out the word 'thanks' in their homes and gardens, using everything from colourful chalk to fridge magnets.

Our IRT team then issued a survey asking staff what they think of our organisation's response to the pandemic as we all continue working from home. The vast majority, 94 percent, take part in the survey and employees score Zero Waste Scotland around nine out of ten overall. It also revealed concerns about our understanding of how COVID-19 may affect staff productivity and over access to technology and equipment for homeworking.

A second survey later produced similar scores, with improved ratings on homeworking equipment, and staff reported they were feeling listened to.

Our annual engagement survey was also positive, and in the latest of these, most staff gave Zero Waste Scotland either a nine or a ten out of ten for providing information and support to manage their health and wellbeing. That score puts the business in the top 25 percent benchmark of non-profits for valuing and supporting staff health and wellbeing.

As it became clear that we'll be working from home for months rather than weeks, our IT, procurement and finance teams collaborate to meet staff requests for the equipment they needed to work safely and comfortably from home.

“
To help staff build mental resilience to boost productivity and focus, we launched a series of webinars led by the Think Distinct consultancy.
”

Our health and safety team emailed all staff to let them know how to request an office chair to help ease any discomfort through working from home, as we realise not everyone has suitable furniture or space. We use our supply networks to provide employees with more equipment, such as monitors.

Our staff continue to adapt and support one another as the pandemic continues. They also keep learning how to do their jobs differently during COVID-19 to help meet our aim of ending the waste and emissions behind the climate crisis. Therefore, we launched Cheers for Peers so staff could recognise, and be recognised for, the great and varied work.

It's become popular with people across all departments and grades with colleagues using it to celebrate how peers are demonstrating our core business values of being pioneering, focused, authentic and collaborative. Our chief executive Iain Gulland takes pride in reading out the latest batch of nominations once a month as part of our ongoing online staff briefings.

All staff also took part in a 'hackathon' to help create a Scottish Green Recovery Plan. An opportunity for staff to demonstrate our four core business values by pioneering a new approach for us to develop authentic ideas to forge a Green Recovery nationally and globally, focused on really making a difference through collaborating as a team.

This builds on our work highlighting the need for a circular economy to create much-needed sustainable jobs and businesses as we Build Back Better, allowing the economy and the environment to recover in harmony to help overcome COVID-19 and the climate crisis. The 'hackathon' also gave us a chance to spend a bit of fun time working with colleagues we haven't seen in a while.

Pre-COVID, we're already reducing emissions from commuting and corporate travel which we know are by far the biggest cause of our carbon footprint. Lockdown gave us an unexpected chance to find out if we can still operate effectively if staff stop travelling altogether.



Over the summer of 2020, we make a pioneering change by switching to permanent homeworking. Our experts estimate that switching to homeworking permanently will reduce our emissions by around 75 per cent. Most staff choose to change their job contract to work from home, helping us pioneer a radical change to make significant progress on our own net zero plan as a business.



Kelly Allan

Starting a new job is daunting at the best of times. Taking on a new role in a virtual world knowing it was unlikely I would meet any of my colleagues for months to come brought a whole new perspective.

I joined Zero Waste Scotland as the Head of Communications in September 2021, 'virtual starter' number six. Like most people, I was nervous in advance of day one and meeting my team, the thought of doing it via a screen – and the worry that my tech would fail – added an extra layer of anxiety. However, I was relieved to find that the IT team had this all covered and set me up with all my tech equipment the week before and helped me test it all to ensure everything worked. This didn't just apply to tech; I was pleased to discover that I would be provided with a proper office chair. Having lived through the pain and discomfort of working from a dining room table and stool since the start of the pandemic this was more than a nice to have, it's so important to protect against back and neck strain. As a new starter, these might seem little things, but it made me feel reassured that I was joining an organisation that truly cared about people's health and wellbeing.

As for meeting my team, ten months into the job and I have yet to meet anyone in person. It's been a surreal experience but working in a virtual world now feels as normal as it was working in an office.

It is not without its challenges though. It takes a lot longer to get to know people as you miss out on the daily social chat while getting a cup of tea in the kitchen or taking a lunch break with a colleague. It is harder to keep track on all the things happening across the communications team as it is so fast paced, and we must make a concerted effort to create opportunity for collaboration and creative thinking. The Microsoft Teams channel has helped with this and provides a good platform for sharing inspiration or breaking news that we need to jump on, with everyone at any time.

Working from home permanently presents a new way of life and certainly brings a welcome flexibility to my job and reduces my carbon footprint due to less travel. As we emerge from the pandemic and look back at all we have learned, I am looking forward to finding a balance that allows for time spent away from a screen with my team. I'm a social being by nature and so is my team – it's how most of us ended up as communications professionals. So, even if it's once or twice a month, meeting up in 'real life' will be a welcome boost to morale and creativity. Zero Waste Scotland is actively working to explore all options for working in a post COVID world so I'm confident we'll find that balance.

It's down to personal choice and circumstances, however, and we'll still have some form of office working in future as not everyone can work from home permanently.

With the pandemic ongoing and so much time spent working at home in front of computer screens, we realise everyone could do with a break so they can be more focused when they are back at work.

Our new colleague Health and Wellbeing Day gives staff the choice to take a day off, still paid, to do whatever works for them. That could be joining more online activities which we've arranged to help people learn or relax or taking the chance to just head for the hills.

To help ensure success, our IRT holds a business continuity session to discuss what has worked well overall and what we're doing differently to ensure we respond effectively to the ongoing pandemic - and any future crises.

The rollout of technology has been invaluable in keeping staff connected, while the support which employees have welcomed suggests that IRT has helped take pressure off colleagues across the business.

It has been challenging to communicate quickly and clearly though and maintain a clear sense of shifting roles, responsibilities and ownership of decisions while working to meet multiple new and still-changing priorities, budgets and deadlines.

To address this issue, IRT creates a 'critical' list of key people and their roles in the business, along with a register of risk to help all staff understand problems and how we're solving them.

More widely, we continue to set up a variety of meetings and drop ins, including one to ones and informal chats with HR, heads of department and members of the board. Offering reduced hours to staff, such as parents juggling home schooling, revealed pressure points in the business which we try to address in various ways, including contracting the work out or stopping some work altogether when it's no longer a priority.

The All Colleague Day is a key event in our organisation's calendar which we have traditionally held at different venues in Stirling. For the first time ever, this takes place online. Holding it virtually doesn't just cut any emissions from travel, it makes it easier and quicker to bring people together no matter where they are geographically.

Our chairman, a regular guest at these events, is joined for the first time by all of our other board members, giving them and staff a welcome chance to collaborate, sharing ideas and information.

“
**Our new
colleague Health
and Wellbeing
Day gives staff
the choice to
take a day off,
still paid, to do
whatever works
for them.**
”

Guest speakers are a popular part of the day, with our chief executive Iain Gulland hosting an informal debate with leaders of other organisations including the Institute of Directors Scotland. Another first for this event is a five-minute online exercise session which has also become a regular feature of our weekly all staff updates to help ease any aches and pains from so much screen time.

In other sessions we discussed ideas and lessons learned on key topics, including our future office and our ongoing business transformation which was underway pre-COVID-19.

In anticipation of a drop in morale, we scheduled our second Health and Wellbeing Day for Blue Monday, on the 18 of January. It is a tough month at the best of times, and the new year began under new lockdowns, so this one was even more challenging.

Learning from the first wellbeing day, we also gave employees a vote so they could choose between online events and time away from their screens. Most preferred a chance to get out and about so they can be better focused when they return.

We used our learnings to build on our wellbeing strategy, bringing in Steven Burns from Solutions in Mind to help staff manage their emotions using neurolinguistic programming. Bitesize modules from Steven also form part of our new online emotional wellbeing modules.

Throughout lockdown, we've adjusted and grown our support to companies, moving our audits on food waste and energy savings online. We'll continue to offer remote auditing long term to become more authentic as a business working to reduce carbon emissions, with visits taking place only when the environmental benefits outweigh the cost.

We've also adapted and expanded our communications, launching our new podcast, Towards Zero, after switching to recording remotely. It's the latest in a wide range of work helping us reach a wider audience while cutting our emissions, including online policy consultations building collaboration to raise people's awareness and action on the problems behind the climate crisis - and what we can all do to help.



On the first lockdown anniversary, we join the nation in a minute's silence to remember everyone and everything we have lost in the year since Scotland first went into lockdown.

The pandemic is not yet over, and neither is the pain or the challenges which it brings. But we can take some comfort and strength from everything we've achieved and everything we've learned to do differently in the face of a global crisis. And from how much that's helped us make progress towards our overriding aim of ending the waste of resources.

From now on we'll continue doing things differently, like homeworking, by choice. We'll keep on changing to find ways to balance working from home with opportunities for face-to-face meetings and events with other staff and the diverse people we work with, nationally and globally. We'll also keep working to find the best form for our future office for those staff for whom homeworking is not possible, which could include 'coffices' and 'poffices' – offices in cafes or even pubs.

And we'll be bolder in our thinking and our actions to end our own emissions and lead others to do the same. We all have to keep changing.

While COVID-19 has become the most chronic global crisis short term, the climate emergency remains the greatest challenge of our lifetime.