

Tradespeople saving the planet



A paper by Purple Market Research & Prevision Research

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Tradespeople and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

Tradespeople in the UK have the potential to play a key role in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, both through their working practices and through the advice they give consumers and businesses relating to the heating systems used.

This paper has been produced by Purple Market Research and its sister fieldwork company Prevision Research.

At Purple and Prevision, we have been conducting research among tradespeople for over 20 years and we understand their working practices, their attitudes and their mindset. This includes recent research conducted by Purple among tradespeople which was part of a report produced by the Energy Saving Trust for the Government's Climate Change Committee on the role of SMEs in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

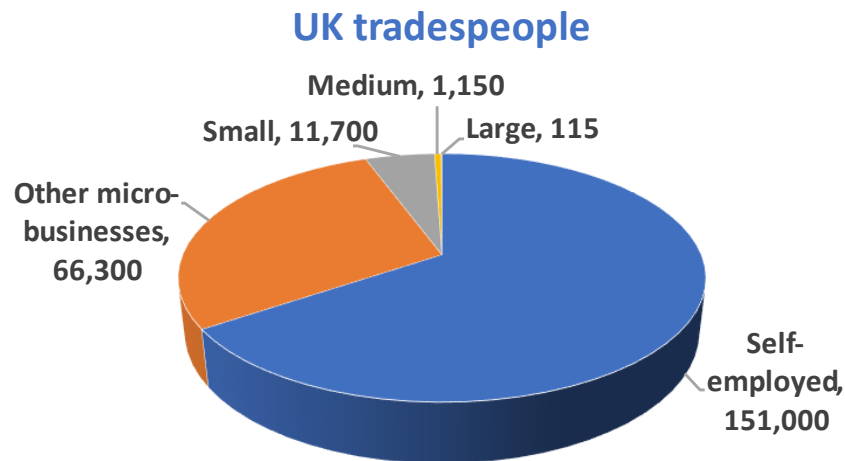
In this paper, we draw on some of the interviews we have conducted with tradespeople and consider their role in reducing emissions. This topic currently has a particularly high profile, with the UK having committed to ambitious targets for the reduction in greenhouse gases. However, there are significant barriers to tradespeople fulfilling that role, and a number of steps need to be taken to overcome those barriers.

Who are the tradespeople?

The Trades sector includes key services including electricians, plumbers and heating engineers, painters and decorators, builders and associated occupations.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates that there are just over 230,000 trade companies in the UK.

Of those, 99% are SMEs (Small and Medium sized Enterprises).



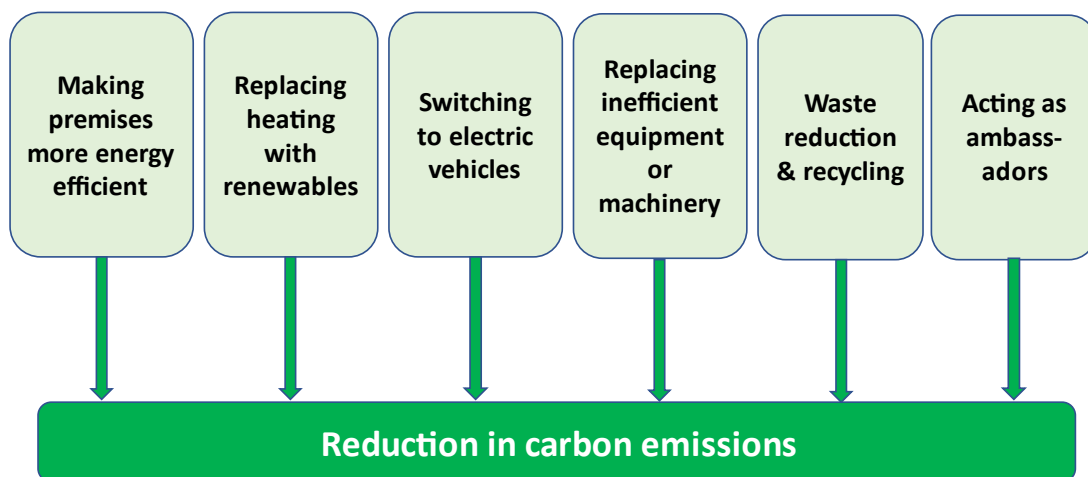
Source: ONS Nomis database of UK companies April 2023

Self-employed tradespeople dominate the sector, accounting for 66% of all trades companies, with the remainder comprising 66,300 other micro-businesses (with 1-9 employees), 11,700 small businesses (10-49 employees) and 1,150 medium sized businesses (50-249 employees).

What is their role in emissions reduction?

Tradespeople have the opportunity to contribute towards the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in a number of ways.

Opportunities for emissions reduction



Given the sheer number of tradespeople, as indicated above, they can potentially reduce emissions by making their working premises more energy efficient, for example by installing insulation, double glazing or renewable energy and heating systems, such as solar PV or heat pumps.

Tradespeople also produce emissions in their working practices: the vehicles they drive to get from job to job; the materials or equipment they use; and the waste they produce.

Reductions in emissions can be achieved by using electric vehicles, taking energy efficiency into account when selecting materials and equipment and adopting better working practices (such as reducing waste generated).

They also have the potential to play a critical role as ambassadors, in the *communication and promotion* and *installation* of low carbon technologies to consumers and other. Homeowners and other smaller building owners rely heavily on tradespeople for advice on new heating systems and other retrofit improvements to their homes and business premises. Retrofit and RMI (repair, maintenance and improvement) is largely delivered by SME builders and directly employed tradespeople.

What are the barriers?

Consideration of the potential role of tradespeople in emissions reduction needs to take into consideration some sobering facts. Self-employed trades people and micro-businesses in the sector are generally very busy and working on jobs, and therefore time-poor ('Time is money'). There is also often limited cash available for investment.

We have already discussed how the majority of tradespeople are self-employed or work in micro-companies. Most sole trader contractors in this sector operate on-site using hand-held equipment, with their base at home and equipment and materials likely to be stored at home or in a garage. So, the opportunities to reduce emission from business premises are limited.

Tradespeople *do* tend to own a vehicle, typically a petrol or diesel van. However, the cost of upgrading vehicles is often prohibitive. A major barrier to action generally in this sector is the need for upfront cash for major initiatives, such as the purchase of electric vehicles. Financial support is also perceived to be complex and piecemeal and there is only sketchy awareness and knowledge of the best options for this sector.

Another issue relating to electric vehicles is that the infrastructure is currently perceived to be inadequate. There is also a time issue relating to electric vehicles, with potential working time lost waiting for vehicles to recharge.

Tradespeople demonstrate limited awareness and knowledge of relevant government targets and other current and impending legislation regarding increased energy efficiency of buildings, the move to electric vehicles and other initiatives. There is also some scepticism about the effectiveness of targets and how realistic or achievable those targets are. Deadlines, such as the phasing out of diesel vehicles, can seem a long way in the future, so the issue can be put 'on the back burner'.

Another key area is waste reduction and recycling, although the potential for savings in this sector is again perceived to be limited.

Probably the key barrier is a perception that (apart from buying an electric vehicle) there is little they can do to reduce carbon emissions.

The following comment, from a self-employed electrician, is typical of the attitudes of tradespeople we have spoken to.

It's just me. It would be different if I had staff and a big fleet of vans. However, I just run one diesel van and that's probably the one thing I could change to reduce my (carbon) footprint. I work from home and my van. I buy materials as I need them, mainly online. I do a bit of recycling of leftover materials, like metal and cardboard packaging. Otherwise my job doesn't produce a lot of emissions. To be honest, I haven't really changed the way I do things in the last ten years.

What can be done to overcome the barriers?

There are some measures that can be taken to help overcome the barriers faced by tradespeople.

Regulation will, to a great extent, determine the products and equipment that is used in building and refurbishment.

Finance is a key issue, as indicated above and any financial support should address the need for upfront cash. It is expected that the price of electric vehicles will have come down by the time trades are forced to switch and most would not switch earlier unless it was affordable, that is if there were help with the upfront cost through a grant or an interest free loan. While any financial support is likely to resemble previous and existing financing programmes for domestic consumers, the higher price point of commercial electric vehicles means that larger sums will need to be offered and likely over a longer time period.

Information and *education* are required to raise awareness and knowledge among tradespeople of energy efficiency issues. Promotion of and access to training and accreditation programmes is key.

Given the trust that consumers and small businesses have in tradespeople, it is important to encourage tradespeople to act as ambassadors for energy-efficient measure. It is also important to ensure that professionals are equipped with the right skills to advise on low carbon alternatives as well as having the skills to undertake low carbon retrofit. The provision of relevant information and training, and an appropriate accreditation scheme, are therefore other key requirements.

In summary

There are, then, significant barriers to tradespeople playing a key role in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, including awareness, attitudes and finance. However, government initiatives can help to overcome those barriers and ensure that the opportunities represented by tradespeople are fulfilled.

PURPLE MARKET RESEARCH

Purple Market Research is a research-based consultancy specialising in business-to-business research, including research in trade sectors. We conduct secondary (desk) research, qualitative and quantitative research.

Research on trade sectors has been conducted for numerous clients, including the Energy Saving Trust and Climate Change Committee.

PREVISION'S TRADE PANEL AND OMNIBUS SERVICES



Prevision Research is Purple's sister company, providing data gathering expertise and resources. That includes online and telephone research.

Prevision's trade panel and omnibus service offer the opportunity to understand the views and purchasing habits of the UK's trade communities.

Prevision Research has interviewed many different trade audiences for the past fifteen years and by combining data from numerous sources, we have built a panel of nearly 100,000 verified and GDPR compliant contacts across the trades. We are now providing quick, simple, and cost-effective access to this database, through a monthly omnibus survey among decorators & decorating contractors, builders and carpenters, property maintenance contractors and handy persons.

For more on Prevision's Trade Panel, go to our website at [Prevision Research :: The Data Collection Experts.](#)

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