

Reconciling Net Zero and Net Profits

A dss⁺ event held at



As the world races to decarbonise in the face of growing geopolitical instability and economic headwinds, the path to net zero remains a defining challenge of our time. At **Innovation Zero 2025**, dss⁺ hosted an interactive workshop entitled **Reconciling Net Zero and Net Profits**. The event featured an executive panel discussion and roundtable discussions with over 50 business leaders, investors, and sustainability experts. The aim: to examine what organisations can realistically deliver, what's holding them back, and the enablers that can accelerate the transition.

Despite market uncertainty and political shifts, panellists remained resolute. They stressed that reconciling climate action and profitability is possible but that it will require new perspectives and innovative approaches to balancing investments, returns and stakeholder engagement on near term, and longer-term expectations. Practical implementation of net-zero in line with this perspective requires clear leadership, operational alignment, and strategic innovation. There was a strong consensus that visible leadership, robust governance, meaningful internal culture, financial innovations, and further skill development are essential to turn ambition into implementation.



Many thanks to the panellists



Lamé Verre

Director of Net Zero
at The Crown Estate



Dana Barsky

Global Head of
Sustainability Strategy
and Net Zero at
Standard Chartered



Jay Ham

FirstGroup Plc's Group
Head of Corporate
Responsibility



Wessel Schevernels

Operating Partner at
Patrizia Infrastructure



Alan Matthews

Director at Earth
Capital

Below is a synthesis of insights from the panel and roundtable discussions, organised into **five themes** that emerged as central to enabling net-zero transformation.

1.

Visible leadership and cultural alignment

Leadership was consistently identified as the cornerstone of successful net-zero transformation. Whether through embedding carbon targets into leases and procurement contracts, pushing pilot projects through resistance, or setting clear tactical actions for employees, strong leadership is what translates strategy into behaviour.

Several panellists also highlighted the need to retain and empower leaders who champion the net-zero vision. Organisational culture, driven from the top, was described as the glue that sustains long-term change—even when external conditions become unfavourable.



We need to break strategy into tangible actions – 'what are you doing on Monday?' Without that clarity, we get paralysis."

**Lamé Verre, Director for
Net Zero, The Crown Estate**



2.

Innovation beyond technology

While much attention is given to clean tech, the panel emphasised that innovation must extend far beyond technology to include financial instruments, contracting methods, and supply chain relationships. Indeed, this systems level innovation was seen as a powerful step in overcoming delays to the scaling of known technologies, such as heat pumps and energy-efficient materials which are not yet reaching their full potential due to implementation delays.

Panellists shared examples of carbon accountability being written into project contracts, partnerships enabling cross-sector pilots, and financing mechanisms that reward emissions reductions across the value chain. Furthermore, one panellist emphasised that the technologies we need to decarbonise effectively already exist – the focus should rather be on scaling these technologies effectively.

3.

Financial strategy and patient capital

Reconciling profit and climate ambition requires organisations to shift from short-term ROI to long-term value creation. Participants discussed the need for patient capital, especially in sectors with long asset lifespans. Sustainability-linked bonds and loans, carbon-focused KPIs, and funding for hard-to-abate sectors were cited as vital tools.

One panellist pointed to the trillion-plus in uninvested private capital that could be mobilised if more focus were placed on real impact rather than compliance-heavy ESG reporting.

“

The problem isn't a lack of capital – it's that we've focused too much on reporting, not action. The real opportunity is deploying capital into solutions that reduce emissions at scale.”

Alan Matthews, Director,
Earth Capital



4.

“

There's a fundamental mismatch between the pace of demand and the pace of skill development. We need to close that gap – fast.”

Wessel Schevernels, Operating
Partner, Patrizia Infrastructure



Addressing the skills gap

Participants agreed that the speed of transition is now outpacing the availability of talent. From technical experts in clean energy to sustainability-literate procurement officers, there is a shortage of the practical skills needed to implement decarbonisation strategies effectively.

Several roundtables flagged the importance of upskilling the workforce and aligning education and training systems with the needs of a net-zero economy. One speaker called this “a money problem”—companies unable to attract the right talent are leaving value on the table.

5.

Empowerment, collaboration and the role of SMES

The transition to net zero cannot be achieved by large organisations alone. Panellists and roundtable participants highlighted the vital role of empowering employees and engaging small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), who face major obstacles accessing finance and innovation resources.

Ideas such as SME clustering, cross-sector partnerships, and embedding carbon costs into procurement were discussed as key enablers. Multiple participants called for regulatory clarity to level the playing field and prevent greenwashing.

“

Our investors are asking us to double down, not step back. Climate action is no longer just a cost – it's a customer proposition and a value driver.”

Jay Ham, Group Head of Corporate
Responsibility, FirstGroup Plc



The session underscored that net-zero transformation is not merely a technical endeavour – it is a cultural, financial and operational shift.

Success hinges on embedding climate action into core business strategy and making it real at every level of the organisation.

The panel ended with **four powerful reflections** from the speakers that captured the spirit of the day:

“

Just do it.

Lamé Verre



“

Climate action is not a cost, but a customer proposition.

Jay Ham



“

Climate change isn't optional – action on it shouldn't be either.

Alan Matthews



“

Walk the talk.

Wessel Schevernels



Roundtable insights: enablers and obstacles to Net-Zero delivery

Following the main panel discussion, participants joined facilitated roundtables to explore practical enablers and challenges in delivering net-zero strategies. These working groups brought together cross-sector leaders, SMEs, advisors, and sustainability professionals, generating grounded insights into what's working—and what's holding organisations back. **Seven key themes** emerged across the discussions:

1. Leadership and cultural continuity

Leadership was widely recognised as the most critical factor in enabling meaningful climate action. A compelling strategic vision, sustained by visible and consistent leadership, was seen as essential to embedding net-zero values across an organisation. The continuity of leadership was highlighted as particularly important, with participants noting that frequent turnover at the top can result in a loss of momentum and diluted ambition.



2. Supporting SMEs in the transition

Participants emphasised that SMEs play a pivotal role in achieving national net-zero targets, yet face disproportionate barriers. These include limited internal capacity, restricted access to finance, and difficulty navigating complex regulatory environments. Proposed solutions included simplifying access to advisory support, and creating SME clusters to pursue collective financing or procurement opportunities. Leaders of large organisations have an important role to play in designing and implementing these enabling clusters.

3. Skills and capacity gaps

The discussions underscored a growing mismatch between the scale of the net-zero challenge and the skills available to deliver it. While many organisations have developed robust strategies at the corporate level, they often lack operational-level expertise to implement them effectively. Participants called for greater investment in targeted training, upskilling, and talent retention, particularly in areas related to implementation and product-level sustainability. To complete the journey towards net zero its essential that organisations go beyond simply hiring for individuals with skills and that they are able to create an organisation wide capability across key functions to deliver on implementation of profitable net-zero programs.

4. The challenge of actionable data

Access to transparent, decision-ready data was cited as a significant barrier to faster progress. Participants observed that some actors—particularly in manufacturing and supply chains—are hesitant to share critical data that could support broader industry transformation. This lack of transparency hinders efforts to quantify emissions, model risk, or prioritise reduction efforts effectively. Furthermore for data to create value it needs to be acted on which implies that business functions have reached a level of maturity for them to interpret and act on sustainability and carbon data alongside financial data and make value creating decisions on a routine basis: for example in procurement functions, This maturity needs conscious and structured development as it doesn't simply arise from a call to action or the data itself.

5. Commercial viability and return on investment

Many participants shared the challenge of proving the financial case for sustainable solutions—especially when piloting innovative materials, technologies, or business models. While the long-term value of decarbonisation is broadly acknowledged, demonstrating short-term returns remains difficult. This tension is compounded in larger organisations by shrinking internal budgets and shifting political priorities. Some argued that stronger regulatory frameworks could help de-risk investment and enable scale, others pointed out that a sharpening of business cases could act as a powerful scaling factor if aligned with internal business functions and their priorities and value drivers.



6. Regulation and strategic alignment

Regulation was seen as a necessary enabler for aligning markets with climate goals. However, participants also noted internal contradictions within some organisations, where sustainability teams seek more ambitious policy while other departments push back. Concerns were raised about recent rollbacks or delays in key EU regulations, creating uncertainty and potentially stalling progress. That said others saw an opportunity to develop business cases centred around value creation rather than compliance and to free up reduced reporting and compliance budgets for innovation and implementation.

7. Partnerships as an accelerator

Collaboration was consistently identified as a powerful tool for scaling impact. From co-investment in innovation to aligned supply chain strategies, partnerships were viewed as essential for overcoming resource and knowledge gaps—particularly for SMEs. Several participants shared examples of recent efforts to prioritise partnerships as a strategic driver of progress, citing their potential to unlock both operational and financial benefits. Again design of an effective collaborative structure requires leadership, governance and cultural factors to be in place to a high level of maturity as there are many lessons learned on what does and does not make a successful collaborative initiative in this field.

How dss⁺ helps companies accelerate profitable net-zero transitions

At dss⁺, we work with organisations to translate ambition into action – bridging the gap between strategy and implementation to deliver net-zero outcomes that are both credible and commercially viable. Our experience across high-impact sectors has shown that success is not determined solely by technical solutions or bold targets, but by the ability to align leadership, culture, operations, and capital around a clear transformation pathway.

We partner with companies to:

- + Create the enabling environment for change: We help senior leaders embed net-zero goals into governance, leadership behaviours and decision-making frameworks—ensuring alignment across business functions and accelerating the cultural shifts required to move from intent to execution.
- + Scale innovation and operationalise sustainability: We support clients in integrating climate and carbon considerations into daily operations—whether through procurement, capital planning, product design or supply chain engagement. Our approach connects sustainability to value creation and resilience, rather than treating it as a separate or compliance-driven agenda.
- + Build internal capability: We help organisations close the skills and maturity gaps that often slow or stall progress. This includes developing sustainability literacy, enabling cross-functional collaboration, and building structured programmes for workforce upskilling and capability building—so that the right decisions can be made at the right levels, every day.
- + Strengthen the business case and unlock investment: We work with finance and operational leaders to sharpen the investment case for decarbonisation, including identifying co-benefits, minimising stranded asset risk, and making the case for capital allocation in ways that resonate across stakeholders.
- + Enable collaborative ecosystems: From supplier engagement to cross-sector coalitions, we design and govern partnership structures that drive scale, share risk, and foster innovation. Our collaboration frameworks are grounded in operational reality and built for measurable results.

Ultimately, our role is to help clients accelerate the journey to net zero – by unlocking the capabilities, confidence and conditions required to make sustainability a source of competitive advantage.

Contact us



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About dss⁺

dss⁺ is the operational transformation partner for complex and high-hazard industries, embedding real-world expertise and proven methodologies to shift mindsets, shape cultures, and build critical capabilities at every level. Through this approach, we help chemical manufacturers achieve breakthroughs in safety, performance, and sustainability – while ensuring long-term business resilience.

At dss⁺, we don't just consult – we embed change, helping chemical manufacturers protect what matters most, transform operations, and sustain success for generations to come.

Find out more at www.consultdss.com



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