

Configuration of enterprise support towards the clean growth challenge: A place-based perspective

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Abstract

Although clean growth has been identified as one of the grand challenges of the UK Industrial Strategy, public policy paid little attention to the configuration of business support towards enhancing clean growth potential of SMEs. The dominant approach of policymakers to the design of enterprise support interventions appears to be 'place-blind' and downplays the challenges that SMEs face in engaging with the clean growth policy agenda. Based on a mixed methods methodology, involving a survey of 306 businesses, a range of public engagement exercises and an extensive interview schedule, the study explores SMEs engagement with the clean growth challenge and associated business support mechanisms. We conceptualise the nexus of place-policy-practice as a way of framing policymaking approach in addressing the challenge. As part of the clean growth policy implementation, business support mechanisms need to move beyond a singular focus on energy efficiency and shift towards a holistic approach to capacity building for sustainable development. Small business needs to project a district voice in the definition of place in the local industrial strategies and have access to enterprise support which is place-based, policy-informed and practice-relevant.

Keywords: enterprise support, place-based perspective, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), clean growth

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Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are a significant driving force behind economic and social development. They represent the dominant form of business organisation nationally and account for over 90% of firms worldwide (World Bank, 2019). In the UK, SMEs account for 99.3% of all private sector business and employ 16.3 million workers representing 60% of the private sector workforce (Rhodes, 2019). Smaller businesses also play a significant role in ensuring protection of the natural environment and an important part of the response to climate change (Bradford and Fraiser, 2008; Rogers, 2010). Being a significant part of the business community, SMEs contribution to the clean growth challenge, as one of the 'grand challenges' outlined in the UK Industrial Strategy (DBEIS, 2017), must not be overlooked. At the heart of the challenge is the transformation of existing industries towards 'industries that are low carbon through greater adoption of low carbon technologies and the efficient use of resources' (DBEIS, 2019). Effective response to the challenge calls for greater synergies between the industrial and environmental policy landscapes and business support mechanisms for capacity building towards sustainability transitions in the regions and nationally. This paper offers a place-based perspective on business support configuration aimed at catalysing the SMEs role in addressing the clean growth challenge.

Despite the wealth of literature on business support, there is a lack of studies exploring support mechanisms towards cleaner growth. Studies of pro-environmental business support confirm the primacy of a focus on energy efficiency and limitations in the scope, design and delivery of support interventions (Baranova and Paterson, 2017). Further, support interventions aimed at strengthening SME contribution to clean growth require re-imagining of the enterprise support ethos towards a closer reflection of location specificity in support interventions. In such efforts, a place-based approach (Barca et al., 2012) is a useful point of reference. With its focus on place in the configuration of enterprise support, it bears the promise of bringing closer an *enterprise* and *its place*, with the natural environment at the forefront of the place definition (Shrivastava and Kennelly, 2013).

This paper proceeds with exploring the clean growth challenge in SME context and reviewing the literature on pro-environmental enterprise support. It moves into outlining the study design and methods followed by analytical developments and discussions. The paper culminates in the conceptual development of a place-policy-practice nexus as way of framing pro-environmental business support and the associated gaps. We conclude with a range of recommendations for theory and practice.

Clean growth policy challenge: a place-based outlook

The UK industrial policy landscape has been moving towards a greater integration of efforts from the government and business in tackling sustainable development challenges. Ecological modernisation theory (EMT) (Mol, 1995; Gouldson and Roberts, 2000) argues the development of integrated policies that enable better economic activities without undermining ecological sustainability is better than environmental policies that might restrict markets and social activities. This premise has been underpinning the development of the UK environmental policy since late 90s, where macro-economic policies that create successful business were seen as fundamental to achieving sustainable development (Gibbs, 2000). von Malmborg and Strachan (2005) see business and the government as proactive elements in this ecological restructuring. Government's environmental concern was projected through the discourse of providing opportunities for business through creating new markets and new products, increasing competitiveness, building customer trust and development of new technologies (DBEIS, 2017, 2019).

The policy documents refer to clean growth as growth in the national income whilst cutting the greenhouse emissions (HM Government, 2017:5). Economic growth whilst cutting greenhouse emissions, of which carbon dioxide is most abundant, captured the imagination of policymakers and business community as a way of articulating the need to balance economic and ecological priorities. The discourse of opportunities and challenges plays a central part in defining the clean growth agenda with emphases on framing clean growth as 'economic opportunity' and need to 'nurture low carbon industries'. There is a heavy reliance on deployment of low carbon technologies, processes and systems that are 'as cheap as possible' and on emission cutting activities which 'must be done while ensuring the economy remains competitive' (HM Government, 2017:8). The clean growth strategy outlines investment priorities and support packages targeting improvements in energy efficiency, a more sustainable transport, a cleaner power generation and better management of the natural resources mainly through reduction of waste, forest and peatland management and a more suitable agriculture.

The strategy sets directions for tackling the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation including a series of initiatives at business, policy and societal levels. Although acknowledging the role of business in clean growth, the strategy treats the business community as a homogenous group. There is a lack of recognition of small business specifics when compared with larger businesses. For example in the areas of availability and ease of access to resources and capabilities of a firm (Jones and Macpherson, 2006); skills levels in SMEs (Cecere and Mazzanti, 2017;

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Kraus et al., 2006; Lee, 2014); nature and availability of business support (Mole et al., 2009); and regulatory pressures towards improved environmental performance (Blundel, et al., 2013).

The role of place in the UK industrial transformation is articulated through emphases on ‘building prosperous communities across the UK’ (DBEIS, 2017:10). Although being one of five founding areas of the UK industrial strategy, place has limited visibility in the framing of the clean growth challenge. Local responsiveness is stimulated by the allocation of £1.8bn towards Growth Deals between the government and the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to invest in the ‘clean energy economy in order to drive productivity, job creation and growth’ (DBEIS, 2017: 38). Investment priorities are in building local capacity and capability towards ‘deep decarbonisation’ achieved through local system change ‘in the way that keeps the cost down and maximises economic benefits’ (DBEIS, 2017: 118).

The role of place in driving economic growth at a local level was argued in the Heseltine Report (Heseltine, 2012). The report sets the trajectory for a greater devolution of funding from central government to LEPs; ensuring government investment into economic development is ‘tailored directly to the individual challenges and opportunities of local communities’ and augmented by the private sector investment (Heseltine, 2012: 5). As LEPs are funded to support their local strategic plans, they have become important policy-making actors in defining the nature, operationalisation and funding priorities of enterprise support at a local level. However, Fai and Tomlinson (2017) comment on the confusion in interpreting the notion of ‘place’ across the LEPs’ strategic economic plans and local industrial strategies. In many cases ‘place’ is understood in terms of the LEP’s own geographical areas with associated specifics around skills, transport links, housing and infrastructure. LEPs need to go further “by identifying their own sectoral strengths or, better still, their specific capabilities at a more granular level’ argue Fai and Tomlinson (2017:54). We extend this argument to a call for a synchronised approach in identification of place-specific capabilities and design of capability development interventions, including enterprise support programmes, in order to strengthen the strategic outlook on place in policymaking.

At a regional level, there is a growing number of policy documents aimed at addressing the climate change concerns. For example in the D2N2 LEP area¹, the clean growth challenge is tackled by the Local Industrial Strategy (D2N2 LEP, 2019b), the Energy Strategy (D2N2 LEP, 2019c), the Peak District National Park Management Plan 2018-2023 (Peak District National Park, 2018) and the Good Growth Strategy 2020-2030 (Derbyshire County Council, 2020). The articulation of a place-based perspective in relation to the clean growth challenge is often linked to ‘improvements in quality of place’ policy theme (D2N2 LEP, 2019a) and associated investment priorities in infrastructure (predominately

¹ D2N2 LEP – Derby Derbyshire Nottingham Nottinghamshire Local Enterprise Partnership

transport links), housing and 'natural and cultural experiences'. Despite the rhetoric of 'place-making' in addressing the clean growth challenge, the focus is limited to re-balancing energy consumption towards more renewables and support for development of low carbon technologies (D2N2 LEP, 2019a:56). While the skills agenda is one of the strategic priorities for the region, it is limited to meeting the economic needs of the area and pays little attention to the shortages in the green skills needed for businesses to engage with clean growth (Paterson et al., 2018). The acknowledgement of the necessity to respond to the clean growth challenge is evident from the policy documents; yet, little is articulated in terms of the nature and delivery of enterprise support mechanisms towards supporting businesses, and SME community in particular, towards the challenge.

Enterprise support and the clean growth challenge

The importance of seeking external business assistance has been extensively considered in the mainstream small business literature. Bennett (2008) reports the importance of external assistance in obtaining strategic knowledge and overcoming knowledge gaps for SMEs. Providing that external advice is contextual and evidence-based, it has a higher chance of supporting a firm's competitive advantage (Chrisman and McMullan, 2004). Several studies report a positive relationship between external advice and firm's performance (Bennett and Robson, 2003; Berry et al., 2006), but this trend is not for any form of advice. The studies find that external advice on business strategy and staff recruitment is associated with higher performance.

The literature on enterprise support is largely concerned with configuration of support for SMEs towards business growth. This is not surprising as business support policy has often been an extension of national industrial policy with a traditionally dominant focus on economic development and growth, especially at a regional level (Huggins et al., 2015). In the UK, Business Links, a decentralised network of business support services established in late 1990, became a prototype for the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) network operating currently. Business Links were supported by the Industry Ministry and funded on performance. The most important performance indicators were the degree of 'market penetration' and the 'satisfaction rate' (Mole, et al., 2011). In recent years, the government funding of LEPs supports 'capacity building' and 'development and delivery of their [LEPs] strategic plan' (HM Treasury, 2012) which broadens the remit of enterprise support activities to the areas of sustainability, knowledge and skills development, productivity growth and innovation.

Despite a wealth of empirical evidence about the benefits of the enterprise support to business growth and development, the literature exploring business support towards improved environmental outcomes is limited. The studies tend to explore the types of support interventions and impact on environmental performance. For instance, Rouf (2012) examines impact of green

microfinance and renewable energy programmes on 'greening' of the enterprise understood as transition towards sustainable enterprise development practices. Studies of energy efficiency programmes, the most wide-spread form of pro-environmental business support to date, explored evaluation approaches of financial as well as environmental benefits (Rosenow and Galvin, 2013); the role of revolving funds as mechanisms for simulating investment in energy efficiency programmes (Goudson et al., 2015) and SME behaviours, internal constraints and attitudes towards the programmes (Bradford and Fraser, 2008). Business support programmes with a focus on eco-innovation were found to require different levels of support from customised interventions to more informal approaches, including networking, depending on SME absorptive capacity (Klewitz et al., 2012).

Another common thread in the environmental business support literature is study of support settings linked to pro-environmental practices and environmental performance. Support interventions in a network setting are found to be effective for green innovation capability development (Mellett et al., 2018). University settings feature predominantly in the literature as a settings where SMEs are assisted to develop a portfolio of low carbon environmental goods and services (LCEGS), access green supply chains (Baranova and Paterson, 2017), grow into the renewables energy technology markets (Prochorskaite, 2014), adopt sustainable entrepreneurship practices (Fichter and Tiemann, 2018), and develop green innovation capabilities (Harrington et al., 2016). Public-private partnerships found useful in supporting pro-environmental practices of SMEs through formation of learning clusters and networks, and legitimisation of 'green' business models (Lehmann, 2006; Puppim de Oliver and Jabbour, 2017).

A critical overview of the business support landscape targeting environmental improvements in SMEs was offered by Holt et al. (2000) outlining a lack of co-ordination of pro-environmental support services at a regional level and shortfalls in design of the business support interventions. The authors argue a need for a closer focus on sector-specific and local provision and integrated environmental business support services at a regional level (Holt et al. 2000: 44). Further arguments for devolution of business support towards 'greening' of the SMEs offered by Shearlock et al. (2000) arguing the need for stronger connection between business support services and the locality in addressing the needs of the 'indigenous industries'. They propose for environmental support services to be placed on an equal footing with better-established business support provision in the areas of marketing, strategic planning, cash-flow forecasting. Even within the vibrant landscape of EU and nationally funded projects and programmes supporting the environmental agenda, these arguments still bear weight as pro-environmental business support still lacks a place-based focus and often a niche offering characterised by an inconsistent adaptation across the regions (Revell and Blackburn, 2007).

In debates about effectiveness of pro-environmental business support, scholars draw attention to the role of public policy. A number of authors comment on the lack of SME visibility in environmental policy discourse and reluctance of the policy community to tackle green skills shortages and low levels of eco-literacy in SMEs (Bradford and Fraiser, 2008; Jagger et al., 2013). Revell and Rutherford (2003) note the policy approach to SME engagement in pro-environmental practices has been largely voluntary and dependent on supply-chain pressure and market mechanisms to catalyse SME engagement. They call for a more targeted legislative and inspection system to encourage compliance and environmentally proactive behaviour from SMEs. Fassain (2008) observes although many policy actors consult with business community when developing environmental policies and regulations, they often neglect the opinions and ideas of SMEs assuming what works for large business can be easily scaled down to small business. This situation leads to the design and delivery of support interventions with little recognition for SME specifics (Parker et al., 2009). The scholars argue interventions that are coordinated, context-specific and supported by effective promotion and governance mechanisms are better placed for addressing deep-rooted sustainability challenges (Blundel et al., 2013). With the calls for development of a place-based enterprise (Shrivastava and Kennelly, 2013), as a vehicle for enhancing small business engagement with and contribution towards sustainability transitions, the question of enterprise support is of essence. To address a lack of theoretical and empirical attempts in exploring business attitudes towards the clean growth agenda and the state of pro-environmental enterprise support, the present study has been undertaken. The study is set to address the following research questions: what are the perceptions of business community towards the clean growth challenge agenda and the support mechanisms available for businesses to engage with the challenge? and what is the role of a place-based perspective in configuration of enterprise support towards the clean growth? We turn to the outline of the study design and methods next.

Study and methods

The study is based on a well-established multistakeholder initiative (MSI) (Selsky and Parker, 2005) between local councils, a university in the East Midlands, business and the wider policy community. This initiative was established in 2012, with the university and local councils engaging in a number of collaborative activities supporting regional business and the civic community in the context of sustainability transition (Markard et al., 2014). As a result of this initiative, a pro-environmental network was established as part of an ERDF project operating in D2N2 LEP region in October 2016.

The network is hosted by a regional university with a long-standing tradition in HE, FE and enterprise development. Since its establishment, the network grew on average at a rate of five per cent per months comprising 147 network members in February 2020. 84% of the network participants are

SMEs, where the micro firms comprise the majority at 91 businesses, 24 small and 9 medium businesses respectively. Other network members represent stakeholders from the government, business and civic community thus confirming the tripartite character of the multi-stakeholder network (Roloff, 2008; Baranova and Meadows, 2017). A breakdown of network participants is presented in Table 1. 45 per cent of network members are located in Derby and Derbyshire, 31 per cent in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire with the rest located mainly in Leicestershire and Staffordshire.

Table 1. Pro-environmental network: participant analysis

Network participant	Number
Local Councils	5
HE and FE providers	5
Chamber of Commerce	2
Charity and Community Interest Groups	5
LEP and the Growth Hub	2
SMEs, including	
micro	91
Small	24
Medium	9
Large companies	4
Total	147

The network was set up to support SMEs in D2N2 LEP region to access or strengthen their presence within local LCEGS markets, as well as undertaking interventions to reduce their ecological footprint and enhance their environmental management practices. Apart from a variety of network activities, the MSI's work is complemented by broader policy and practitioner forums and working groups representing local councils, the LEP, Chamber of Commerce, University, business and local communities. The MSI advises and represents its members on issues associated with implementation of the local industrial strategy, clean growth and energy strategy, and various calls for actions in response to climate change. The MSI also supports evidence-based research and data generation towards better understanding of clean growth trends in the region, environmental impact of the regional economy and levels of engagement of business community in pro-environmental initiatives.

The data collection towards this study was undertaken in two stages:

1. Stage 1: several public engagement exercises (PEE) occurred during the period September 2018-2019. As part of these exercises, the authors surveyed businesses operating in the East Midlands to explore perceptions about clean growth policy and the challenges of business engagement with it. The survey was launched in partnership with the regional chamber of commerce in September 2018 across the three counties of the East Midlands: Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. The results of the survey were presented at a number of MSI forums, including a policy briefing for policy and business support agencies held in September 2019, prompting discussions which were documented in the field notes.
2. Stage 2: following from Stage 1, 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken between September 2019 and February 2020. The interview respondents represented main groups of regional environmental stakeholders (Baranova and Meadows, 2017) including regional SMEs, local council, LEP, Growth Hub² and Chamber of Commerce. The focus of the interviews was to explore business engagement in pro-environmental support in the region and the value of a place-based perspective for policy and practice in the context of clean growth. Interviews, that lasted 45 minutes on average, were undertaken at research respondents' premises ensuring research ethics protocol was observed. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim resulting in over 250 pages of interview materials.

Documentary and interview analyses were undertaken using thematic analysis (TA) approach; defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as an appropriate method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Its application is deemed to be valuable in gaining insights into people's experiences and in enabling the construction of 'particular phenomena in particular contexts' (Braun and Clarke, 2013:121). In our approach to data analysis, we have followed the stages of TA such as data review, data coding, themes development and finally refinement of the key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

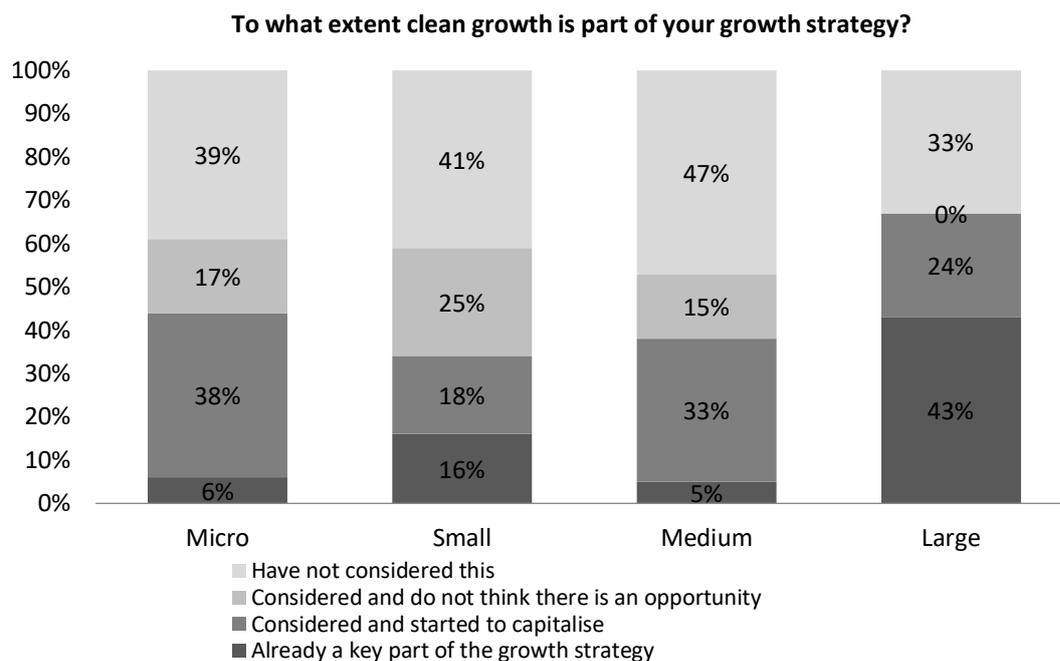
Analysis and discussions

The survey yielded a response from 306 businesses operating across the three counties with 40% of businesses from Derby and Derbyshire, 27% from Leicester and Leicestershire, 29% from Nottingham and Nottinghamshire and the remaining 4% from outside the region. 32% of responses came from businesses operating in professional services followed by engineering and manufacturing (24%), construction (8%), education and training (7%), retail (6%), public and voluntary sector (5%) with the

² Growth Hubs are local public/private partnerships lead by the LEPs. They offer business support services in the LEP regions and provide independent diagnosis and referrals to other business support agencies.

remaining sectors, from transportation and logistics to tourism and agriculture, representing under 5% of the responses. Micro businesses provided 39% of survey responses, 28% came from small businesses, 24% from medium and 9% from large. Figure 1 illustrates a breakdown of business responses by firm's size when asked about the extent to which clean growth forms part of the business growth strategy.

Figure1. SMEs growth strategy and clean growth policy gap



Source: Analysis of the pro-environmental business trends, Derby Business School and EMC, Nov 2018

Analysis of the responses confirms the fragmented picture concerning the integration of clean growth ambitions and business strategy. Only six per cent of micro businesses, five per cent of medium-sized and 16% of small business indicated that clean growth was part of their growth strategy compared with 43% of large businesses. Micro businesses appear to be more proactive than the rest of the SME groups in engaging with opportunities presented by clean growth; with 38% of micro businesses saying that they had started to capitalise on clean growth opportunities when compared to 33% of medium and only 18% of small businesses.

All of the large businesses surveyed saw clean growth as a growth opportunity, whilst 25% of small, 17% of micro and 15% of medium-sized businesses had considered and dismissed it as an opportunity for growth. This contrasting position signals major differences in the way large businesses and SMEs recognise business growth opportunities linked to clean growth. Almost half of small and medium-sized businesses and one in three micro businesses surveyed have not considered clean growth as a

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potential growth opportunity. These findings highlight that despite the potential to lead on decarbonisation and take advantage of the clean growth opportunities, SMEs are significantly lagging behind larger firms.

Following the survey, several public engagement exercises (PEE) exploring the difficulties SMEs faced when engaging with clean growth were undertaken. The businesses were asked to comment on the survey results and respond to questions exploring perceptions about the clean growth policy in the region and the challenges of business engagement with it. Table 2 provides a summary of the emergent themes based on the analysis of the PEE participant responses.

Table 2. Business perceptions about the clean growth element of the Local Industrial Strategy and the challenges of business engagement

Clean growth theme in the Local Industrial Strategy	Challenges of business engagement with the clean growth
Prevailing short-term investment priorities over long-term sustainability orientation.	Lack of skills and expertise in environmental management and broader 'green' skills.
Reluctance to change dominant business and sector practices.	Support to unlock the innovation potential.
Lack of incentives encouraging pro-environmental business practices in SMEs.	Difficulty in understanding policy landscape and enterprise support available.
Lack of emphases on collaboration and cross-sector solutions.	Lack of outlets for channeling business potential towards addressing the climate emergency.
Manufacturing focus dominates investment priorities, whilst service sectors in the region are downplayed.	Reluctance to collaborate towards finding cross-sector solutions.
Rural business interests are under-represented.	Lack of clarity in policy documents about actionable steps involving business in addressing environmental concerns

The analysis signals a significant policy-practitioner gap in understanding the challenges of small businesses and the business support required to advance SMEs' contribution to addressing the clean growth challenge. Businesses commented on the lack of clarity in policy documents about business support mechanisms and incentives for cross-sector collaboration towards tackling environmental underperformance. It was noted that manufacturing, transport and energy focus dominates the policy

documents, which is reflective of the sectoral make-up of the 'place', but lacked a focus on service sectors, such as hospitality, tourism, retail and farming, and rural businesses which are also significant in the region. Businesses commented on the short-termism in investment priorities and a lack of sustainable development perspective (UN, 2014) in business support available in the region.

Amongst the challenges of engagement with the clean growth agenda, a lack of skills in environmental management and broader 'green' skills as well as support for innovation towards LCEGS attracted most responses. Although the skills agenda is reflected in the D2N2 Vision 2030 economic plan, it is mainly concerned with STEM³ skills with little parallels drawn to skills required for business to engage in clean growth (D2N2 LEP, 2019a). The lack of outlets for cross-sector collaborative initiatives and for businesses to channel their potential in tackling climate change was also commented on. Despite emergence of the multi-stakeholder initiatives supporting pro-environmental innovation (Ansari et al., 2013; Moog et al., 2015), they have not yet harnessed a strong business representation and a proactive 'business voice' in shaping the policy at a local level (Bentley and Pugalis, 2013).

When commenting on the local policy landscape, our participants acknowledged a number of regional policies on climate change and energy. Few of the participants were familiar with the full set of policies, with the Local Industrial Strategy being the most commonly referred to. Businesses commented on the confusing messages in the policy documents and the lack of 'joined-up' approach in developing these policies considering that the same set of regional stakeholders would have been involved in policy development and implementation. Studies confirm a lack of SME engagement with policy (Blackburn and Smallbone, 2011) and the study shows similar tendencies towards the clean growth policy landscape.

The analysis of study materials has highlighted that issues relating to the three main themes of *practice*, *policy* and *place* are of concern to business engagement with the clean growth agenda. The semi-structured interviews explored the relationship between practice, policy and place in the context of pro-environmental business support. Namely, business support towards clean growth addressing both: the carbon reduction, and enabling growth through pro-environmental market niches (*practice*); clean growth policy landscape (*policy*); and the significance of locality for pro-environmental initiatives at an individual and organisational level (*place*). Fifteen interview participants were selected from the well-established MSI, as discussed earlier in the paper, with the following representation: nine owner/managers of micro businesses; two owner/managers of small and one medium-sized business;

³ STEM skills are skills held by people with a tertiary-education level degree in the subjects of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) (UK Parliament, 2012)

three business support professionals working at a local council and single representatives from the regional LEP and regional Chamber of Commerce.

Practice in the context of the clean growth challenge

Study participants engaged in a variety of ways with clean growth contributing to a rich and emergent body of pro-environmental practices in the region. A number of businesses commented on practices linked to strengthening competitive positions at the pro-environmental market niches as part of overall business strategy. For example, businesses are expanding the product ranges from core 'green' product groups to associated 'green' accessories. As an owner of EcoElectric, an electric bikes wholesaler, reflected on this trend:

"People are always pleased, and on social media they are saying, 'We bought a bike off you last year, we know you've got an environmentally friendly cleaner, can we have some?' So that has worked, and it's genuinely now getting bigger and bigger and bigger" (Owner/manager, EcoElectric).

Businesses increasingly were moving from the existing markets they serve to the emerging pro-environmental market niches. GreenFreight, a company specialising in electric cars sales and fleet management, commented on the move from personal sales to corporate market and securing a dealership with a world-leading electric car manufacturer. These strategic moves often accompanied by the experiences of 'steep learning curve' where businesses rapidly learn social media skills, pitching and broader marketing communication skills. The businesses are seeking new outlets to market and sell the products "We have done a lot more direct marketing, and we hit other markets by doing more outdoor exhibitions and taking the product to the actual end user" (EcoElectric). For IT-Tech refining their business pitch "brings clarity in your own mind as to what your message is going to be, what you're trying to say and what you're trying to achieve". A small wholesaler of electric goods, ElectroGreen, commented on a learning experience in a context of clean growth:

"To be fair it's been a learning curve for us. It's been a good learning curve because it's alerted us to, the world. It's shifted our mindset and made us more open and potentially us driving the market forward rather than just letting the market pull us along and be swept along by it" (Owner/manager, ElectroGreen)

The businesses engaged in clean growth commented on being prepared to learn and often learning outside the 'comfort zone'. Clean growth requires innovative problem solving which could be aided by learning in a context of peer-to-peer networking. Being part of a network "allows you to talk with other people with the same remit and actually bounce ideas off each other, which allows you to increase your professionalism and awareness" (Environmental Manager, CarbonNet). The networks were seen as important arenas for sharing values such as protection of the natural environment, care for the local community and care for the place. The role of various business support projects in "incubating the ability to network and giving that opportunity to connect with other businesses" was

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commented on by our respondents when describing the features of a successful pro-environmental enterprise support.

The businesses commented on undergoing value proposition re-definition in response to the emerging needs of an increasingly environmental and sustainability conscious customer base. Three out of nine business respondents commented on working with the local community as a result of their broadening understanding about the value creation possibilities of the business. In the case of a wood recycling community interest company (CIC), such work involves volunteers from the local community who “return to work and upskill youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds as well as improve their mental health” (Director, WoodRecycling). GreenFreight is working with a local school to support student projects in the area of electric car innovation and technology. At CarbonNet, they recruit from the local area, prefer to work with local suppliers, and engage with the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust on a number of biodiversity projects.

The second direction of activities towards clean growth was associated with a reduction in the carbon footprint of a business. The majority of the businesses in the study invested in energy efficiency initiatives either through drawing on their own resources or through energy efficiency grant schemes. Popular areas of investment included replacement of LEP lights, investment in a more efficient heating system, use of renewables, mostly solar energy systems, and move to electric and hybrid vehicles. The businesses also invested in environmental management accreditations (EMAs) which supported carbon reduction activities as well as legitimisation the company’s pro-environmental focus. The EMAs strengthened the reputation whilst signalling “we are working with partners that have greener credentials and this does give them [customers] confidence to work with us, save money and save the carbon footprint” (Owner, Green Freight).

Study participants talked about how engagement with the clean growth agenda spurred on engagement with multiple stakeholders in the region and beyond. SMEs acknowledged the benefits of access to large organisations, both public and private, which “allows you to think on a wider scale. Wider scale to similar organisation as well as higher -some of the higher ones we would not be able to reach. It has allowed us to be more collaborative and it is thought provoking...” (Environmental Manager, CarbonNet). Engagement with a diverse range of regional environmental stakeholders, councils, chamber of commerce, universities, LEP, NGOs and others, provided businesses with opportunities for learning through access to skills and social capital (Blyler and Coff, 2003). It strengthened the legitimacy of the pro-environmental business practices and lead to market opportunities as a result of stakeholder interactions.

Business support towards clean growth: a policy-practice interface

When commenting on the state of the business support towards clean growth, the study participants outlined a number of weaknesses as “enterprise support in general - pretty good... the element around sustainable and socially responsible business needs some work” (Manager, Chamber of Commerce). There is a limited number of business advisers specialising in the areas energy and resource efficiency, environmental management and a wider range of environmental capabilities in the areas of circularity, renewables, green funding and finance, green supply chains and environmental strategy (Baranova and Paterson, 2017). Business support in these areas is still a niche offering requiring innovative intervention methodologies. Competence of business support advisors has been identified as an important factor as “there is always an issue with projects that if somebody that is not fully conversant with benefits of engaging with sustainability and clean growth ...- they would not talk about it”. This finding draws parallels with the studies confirming the role of business advisers in the quality and uptake of business support (Robson and Bennett, 2003; Berry et al., 2006).

Our respondents commented on the necessity to align business support provision with ‘local authorities’ policy and priorities’ relating to climate change and clean growth. Involvement of businesses in policy consultations was considered important, especially for city-based initiatives as in the case of the carbon-neutral ambitions where urban businesses buy-in is crucial. The role of business advisers in securing business engagement was highlighted by a Growth Hub manager who noted that: “a lot of the engagement with businesses is going to be driven through us because we are the ones on the ground speaking to them”. However, engagement with the business community in the process of strategy formulation was described ‘rather patchy’ and: “quite a number of times these things [strategy development] will drive forward without the business engagement and that tends to be a re-occurring comment - so where is your business engagement? Ask businesses - what do they want?” (Manager, Chamber of Commerce). Limited business engagement in policy formulation is likely to lead to a policy-practice gap that results in ineffective support mechanisms, poor policy implementation practices and outcomes (Hill and Hupe, 2002).

Respondents from the business support community commented that although SMEs’ awareness of the policies supporting clean growth and pro-environmental business practices has grown, “it is not at the level it is needed to be to achieve these big ambitions and goals we are aspiring to”. These policies are seen outside the remit of SMEs ‘busy working lives’ and core business activities. A lack of relevance of the clean growth policy to businesses, both large and small, is linked to weak responses from the business community:

“What do they [policy documents] mean in practical terms? What are we going to see? and What comes out of them?... We talked about the Industrial strategy at our manufacturing conference last year. We had a large multinational company and a small local company speaking at it and they both said the same thing - that it does not mean anything - nothing that was relevant to them” (Manager, Chamber of Commerce)

Study participants commented on the lack of measurable outputs, KPIs and clear signaling of responsibilities and collaborative opportunities within the local policies towards clean growth. Another challenge identified was a number of strategy documents that 'do not talk to each other' in terms of the timescale and the scope of activities with one city strategy targeting net zero by 2028 whilst the other strategies target 2024, 2030 and 2050 horizons.

The issue of pace of change was considered important in the local authorities responses to the climate change agenda. Although "most of the local authorities have declared climate emergencies, but when you dig down to it - you do not see any changes in day-to-day processes, in fact, in some places, they go in retrospect..." (Business owner, ElectroGreen). The overarching theme is that of policy community is not doing enough to support businesses operating in a more sustainable way: "they fund the projects that are quite bound by ERDF funding regulations and things like that. There is an opportunity with new development funds moving forward to be more inclusive... I think there is a long way to go" (Manager, Chamber of Commerce). It was noted that the policy and business support communities need to do much more to reach out to businesses and to draw their attention to the clean growth policy agenda.

Place-based policy and enterprise support

When analysing the participant responses, there is an emerging discourse about the relationship between community, place and business activity in the context of clean growth. Our respondents talked about their associations of place with 'taking ownership for' and 'working with the community'. The importance of locality for small business was argued as "for the majority of them [SMEs], locality is very important as this is where they trade, where their operations are and where the suppliers are". From this perspective, business support mechanisms that are attuned to the locality and utilise local intelligence in the design of support interventions are seen as important features of the local industrial strategy.

Participants observed predominantly urban focus in initiatives towards addressing the clean growth challenge. Although it is fine to have city specific carbon neutrality ambitions, an interviewee said, there was a need to strengthen *urban-rural links* in responding to the clean growth agenda. Locality based networks with well-articulated community development and place-based priorities were viewed to be important in supporting rural businesses. According to a director of Rural-for-Green, a rural-focused pro-environmental network, "effective network support activities are linked to the locality. When you are [business support network] of a national or international scale, it is much harder for rural businesses to be catered for" (Director, Rural-for-Green). It was commented that the mainstream enterprise support is 'urban-focused' with little reflection of the specifics and needs of

the rural businesses. The lack of local focus and place-based approach in supporting rural business contributes to shortages in business support provision for rural business (Lyee and Cowling, 2015).

Politics at various levels including cities, districts and boroughs, were limiting collaborative efforts.

The regional political landscape was described as having “quite different approaches across the local governments ... whether it is HS2, travel infrastructure and things like that ... It is very difficult to get a single voice” (Chamber of Commerce, Manager). A lack of a unified voice from the local authorities related to clean growth, climate change and energy was seen as a contextual character of the ‘place’ and at the same time as one of the main constraints to the progress in these areas. There is a considerable room for cross-regional and cross-sectorial learning in the definition of place and the implementation of place-based strategies for sustainable development (Wilbanks, 2003). The localised successes in carbon reduction and well-established pro-environmental sectorial leadership in manufacturing and tourism in the High Peak, for example, were seen as examples of successful application of a place-based perspective.

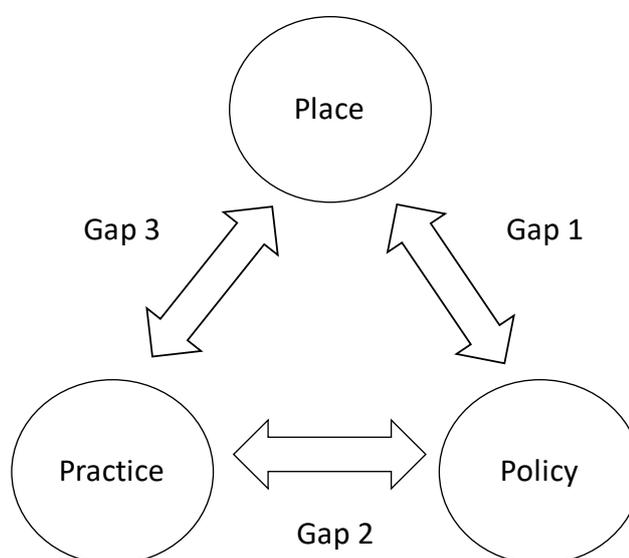
Although a place-based focus was deemed to be important for the configuration of enterprise support, there are challenges for adaptation. For example, a place-based focus requires careful facilitation and stakeholder management in order to develop common vision and values (Moog et al., 2015). Civic leadership and political will are necessary to bring the parties together for a *better place*. And although business support can be designed and implemented at a place level, the fact that quite a number of businesses have their supply chains beyond the boundaries of the place suggests that the support design needs to consider not only the specifics of the place, but also inter- and intra-connectedness with other places. It is through clear definition of a ‘place’, which often requires distinction from ‘other places’, that the clarity of the local industrial strategy can be achieved.

A place-based perspective offers several useful angles for the configuration of enterprise support towards clean growth. First, it localises the design and delivery of support interventions which offer a greater chance of delivering tailored support interventions which are deemed to be more effective than a generic business advice (Mole et al., 2011). Second, stronger policy-place links could ensure a better buy-in from the business community towards the local clean growth initiatives, for instance towards achieving a net zero carbon target. Third, the pro-environmental business support which is place-based takes account of a broad range of communities in the locality and the role they play in sustainable development. Community connectedness and complexity of the links between economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development (UN, 2014) are place specific and require in-depth understanding and integration of local industrial and environmental policies.

Conclusion and recommendations

Analysis of the evidence collected in the study has led to the development of a place-based perspective on enterprise support for clean growth. The complex relationship between place, policy and practice becomes pivotal in the development and delivery of support interventions. Place-policy-practice nexus is useful in framing the complexity of challenges in relation to supporting businesses towards clean growth. Nexus thinking has recently drawn attention from the sustainability scholars as a novel approach in framing sustainability challenges in policymaking (Dalhmann and Bullock, 2020). Figure 2 offers a graphic representation of the relationship.

Figure 2. Configuration of enterprise support through a place-policy-practice nexus



In exploring the relationships within the nexus, a number of gaps have been identified as a way of aligning the place-policy-practice nexus dimensions for effective enterprise support:

- Gap 1 between policy and place occurs when policy lacks recognition of the contextual specifics in the development of the policy scope and policy implementation mechanisms. Study findings, presented earlier in Table 1, indicate a significant gap between policy towards clean growth and the place. Our analysis suggests there is a lack of recognition of the place specifics of the business community in terms of enterprise size, sectoral interests, business performance characteristics and growth trends. To a large extent, policy treats the business community as a homogeneous group without signalling differences in business support mechanisms and incentives for large and small businesses and the varying needs of different sectors. Despite a growing body of well-established evidence about the significance of firm

size on environmental performance (Elasayed, 2006; Orlinsky, 2001), it is surprising to see that the policy discourse fails to acknowledge this. Alongside enterprise size and sector, another significant contextual characteristic is urban vs rural composition of the business community. Many policy documents in the D2N2 LEP area are written largely with urban businesses operating in manufacturing, engineering, hi-tech, construction and transport sectors in mind. Despite a significant proportion of businesses in the region operating in the Peak District National Park and contributing to well-established service sectors such as tourism, hospitality and farming, they have secured little representation in the policy discourse thus far (D2N2 LEP, 2019 a,b). The sectors that have little or no representation in the policy discourse find it difficult to match their clean growth aspirations with the business support on offer, thus resulting in a limited uptake of the support from these sectors.

- Gap 2 between policy and practice results in the design and implementation of business support programmes and interventions that are ill-informed and ill-fit to support the delivery of the policy priority areas and associated incentives. This gap could widen further as a result of poor communication between the policy and practice communities and ineffective engagement mechanisms during the consultation stages of the policy development. A weak evidence-base and/or difficulty in accessing up-to-date and relevant data could also lead to policies which are 'out of touch' with practice. For example, whilst the D2N2 Local Industrial Strategy has drawn together a substantial evidence base to support its proposals (D2N2 LEP, 2019b) the Evidence Review Report for the Clean Growth Grand Challenge is based on government data from 2011/12 that is squarely focused on the renewable technology and clean energy market (Hendy, 2019:5) whilst making no reference to the wider opportunities for SMEs in the context of clean growth. Participants in our study commented on a policy-practice gap in the area of clean growth and pro-environmental enterprise support resulting in businesses becoming 'disillusioned' with the regional policy community and the policy initiatives towards addressing the climate change commitments at a national and regional levels. Widening of the policy-practice gap could hinder further policy credibility and buy-in from the general public and business community.
- Gap 3 between practice and place signals a lack of recognition of the context and place specifics in the configuration of the enterprise support. Enterprise support programmes, especially those driven through centralised institutions, for instance, LEPs and Chamber of Commerce, are in danger of focusing narrowly on conventional approaches of supporting businesses to deliver on economic outcomes. Although LEPs have some autonomy in the delivery and implementation of the local industrial strategies and strategic economic plans,

which are encouraged to be reflective of the regional specifics and the locality (DBEIS, 2018), the configuration of business support is yet to catch up with this approach. Our findings suggest that the configuration of pro-environmental enterprise support is overly focused on energy efficiency grants and associated energy audits. At large, it does not attend to a wider remit of equipping SMEs with resources and capabilities to enable their role in becoming active catalysts of sustainable development in the regions.

The application of the place-policy-practice nexus advances our understanding of the enterprise support towards improved environmental outcomes and reveals a number of challenges faced by the business and policy communities when engaging with the clean growth agenda. These challenges can be conceptualised as gaps that are characterised by a degree of misalignment between place, policy and practice dimensions. Drawing on the study findings, we offer the following set of recommendations aimed at narrowing the gaps in the place-policy-practice nexus and maximising the benefits of a practice-based perspective in configuration of the enterprise support.

For the policy community:

- Greater recognition of small business challenges of engagement with clean growth, particularly in the areas of recourse and skills shortages. This should lead to the design of capability building support mechanisms empowering SME contribution towards the clean growth agenda. Pro-environmental enterprise mechanisms should be adopted across the business support agencies in the regions and nationally. They should go beyond energy efficiency focus and have a broader remit of developing enterprise capabilities for clean growth, for example in greening supply chains, responsible leadership and pro-active environmental strategy.
- Establishment of private-public partnerships and collaborative initiatives and ensuring effective small business representation in designing and delivering infrastructure projects towards decarbonisation ambitions such as net-zero carbon targets.
- The clean growth element of the local industrial strategy should become a central theme and should be well-integrated across other grand challenges. Policy initiatives towards clean growth need to be well-grounded in regional evidence-based data. According to the Derbyshire Observatory (2019), the data on business engagement with clean growth, the sectorial picture on carbon emissions and progress towards de-carbonisation is limited. This is partially due to still developing methodologies and data capture approaches, but it also relates to the civic will and awareness of the opportunities such approaches offer for

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informing policy and practice. The policy community, therefore, needs to be actively engaged in securing reliable and up-to-date data on clean growth trends to aid effective policymaking.

- Place needs to become a bigger part of clean growth policy to encourage policy buy-in and effective practice adaptation. This requires a deeper reflection of the place specifics including sectoral composition, urban-rural divide, socio-demographic, economic, infrastructure and natural environment characteristics, amongst many others, in the policy discourse and policy initiatives.

For the business community:

- We encourage businesses to explore opportunities presented by clean growth as a sustainable source of business growth as well as an opportunity to reduce carbon in operations and through supply chains. Identifying and securing these opportunities in the locality reduces risks and supports pro-environmental business practices of the place.
- Approach development of the capabilities towards clean growth holistically and with strategic foresight. Although energy efficiency might be a starting point of a pro-environmental orientation, broader skills are required to succeed in the fast emerging green market niches.
- Engage in a proactive dialogue with the policy community to shape clean growth policy and associated business support mechanisms thus ensuring effective small business representation in policymaking. Multi-stakeholder pro-environmental networks and initiatives offer exciting opportunities for capability development and innovation towards clean growth.

For the scholars:

- Further investigation into the place-policy-practice nexus with a focus on relationship between the three domains and understanding the significance of gaps in other policymaking contexts beyond clean growth is needed.
- There is need for further exploration of capability development towards clean growth including study of setting, methods and interventions. The study, in turn, informs the practice of pro-environmental enterprise support as a significant lever for enabling businesses to lead sustainability transitions.
- Further attention is needed to strengthen the conceptual and empirical developments in enterprise support mechanisms and exploration of their role in sustainable enterprise development.

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