

Discussion Paper 2023/06

**Net Zero as a Catalyst in fashion micro  
and small enterprises: Contributing to a  
wellbeing economy in the UK.**

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## Summary

This discussion paper is based on 'Net Zero as a Catalyst' (ZAC) research findings exploring fashion design entrepreneurs' purpose and practices responding to climate, environmental and social justice imperatives.

This ambition - to contribute to their own and wider social, ecological and economic wellbeing (referred to throughout this paper as the "wellbeing economy") - is changing operational practices and approaches in several areas including; governance, the design, use and value of products and services and the role of creative entrepreneurs.

This report identifies examples of work taking place across these three levels of change that could act as pilots in and beyond the fashion sector. Our findings suggest that efforts to operate more sustainably can encourage an expansion of creativity and business distinction. Likewise, design entrepreneurs who ground their creative practice in the context of the wellbeing economy are developing operational practices that align with that creative ambition; meaning operational (putting their own house in order) and conceptual sustainability (making and influencing change in society) can be mutually reinforcing. This paper explores the opportunities to expand on such examples and to link them to the fashion and sustainability policy landscape. This will also help identify ways to lift the current inhibitors of a UK wide expansion of the contribution the sector can make to sustainability goals, with specific reference to a just transition of the fashion sector to net zero emissions, understood as achieving net zero in ways that are as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind. The report seeks to contribute to shifts in how fashion entrepreneurialism is viewed, by demonstrating the viability of connecting environmental, social and business goals and relating them to sustainability cultures.<sup>1</sup> The recommendations of the paper are aligned to sector and wider environmental policy and industry-related goals with an ambition to inform and accelerate a fashion wellbeing economy.

## Report Framing

The framing of this ZAC report is based on the findings from an AHRC-funded project Rethinking Fashion Design Entrepreneurship: Fostering Sustainable Practices (FSP) (2018-2021) underpinned by a four-fold framework for sustainable prosperity (cultural, social, environmental and economic prosperity) applied through a resource targeted at business support organisations - the Guidebook *Fashion as Sustainability in Action*. The paper cross references this framing with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Wellbeing-Wardrobe-A-wellbeing-economy-for-the-fashion-and-textile-sector-March-2022.pdf>

that of the wellbeing economy<sup>2</sup> where prosperity is understood as reducing environmental impact through a reduction in the consumption of resources and supporting place-based economies, supporting income distribution and a transition to community-oriented societies (Sharpe et. al. 2022). Within this framing, recognition is given to the role and contribution of business support organisations in the fashion and creative industries in facilitating sustainability work with micro and small enterprises (MSEs) and contributing to UK and wider prosperity.

The ZAC project extends the application and learning from the Guidebook, and gains insights from areas under-represented in the original FSP research, which had a focus on London. This was due to the intensity of fashion activity in London leading to a high number of responses from London-based organisations to the original research call-out. Through the application of an interactive workshop methodology, the ZAC research was undertaken with support organisations in locations around the UK, based on the Guidebook's tools and approach to sustainable prosperity. This testing of the four-fold matrix of sustainable prosperity offers further case studies from across the UK for application across the sector and wider creative industries (see Appendix 1).

The following findings and recommendations are discussed in detail on pp. 25-31.

## **Key findings and recommended actions**

### **1. Creating a wellbeing economy aspiration**

**Sustainable Fashion Designer Entrepreneurs** (SFDEs) are informing and acting on a sustainability zeitgeist that is becoming a distinction of the UK creative sector, both in how it is seen locally and internationally. There is clear evidence of SDFEs incorporating environmental, social, cultural and economic values into their work as part of their business DNA. However, this momentum has yet to create overall change in the sector's impacts, which are on a trajectory to substantially miss net zero targets.

**Action:** There is an opportunity to link and apply international, national and local net zero ambitions through fashion entrepreneurship.

### **2. Transforming governance contributes to transformational change**

There is a will and interest from organisations supporting MSEs to foster MSE practices of sustainable prosperity and thus, these support organisations can evidence how positive change in community engagement can link to environmental as well as social goals. However, gaps between short and long-term goals and between economic, social, cultural and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Wellbeing-Wardrobe-A-wellbeing-economy-for-the-fashion-and-textile-sector-March-2022.pdf>

environmental governance means that ambitions become fragmented and siloed.

**Action:** There is an opportunity to connect funder, borough, regional and national ambitions to net zero targets. This joined up approach could be extended to demonstrate the connection between community resilience, social justice, levelling up and environmental governance.

### 3. Counting what counts

Business support can be a key lever for economic, social, cultural and environmental prosperity and there is evidence that these goals are implicit in the work of organisations across the UK. There is an appetite to learn from these practices to make explicit the metrics that can enable the transition from consumption-based societies to more participatory and community-oriented ones.

**Action:** There is an opportunity to iterate existing models and develop and implement a wellbeing metrics framework for sustainable prosperity that is recognised by investors, government agencies, business support organisations and Micro/SMEs. By cross-referencing findings from this research with activity across the creative sector, a user-centred system could catalyse a workable way to achieve the goal of net zero emissions.

### 4. Scaling out as well as scaling up

Fashion MSEs' ability to innovate for and contribute to the UK economy and wider social and environmental goals is linked to their nimbleness, transparency, design leadership and appropriate application of ideas. To amplify the potential of these creative entrepreneurs, there is a need to recognise the value of the UK sustainable fashion MSEs creating new niches, providing examples and encouraging replication of good practice.

**Action:** There is an opportunity to explore both the value and liability of smallness, and consider whether a greater focus on smaller companies could help the fashion sector to be more nimble, diverse and resilient. Case studies of how businesses implement multiple elements of sustainable prosperity in their work can be an important driver of change for others to adapt and apply.

The ZAC findings evidence the potential for creativity to mobilise aspirations of a wellbeing economy, joined-up governance, new measures of success and a diversity of opportunities. This paper advocates for connecting, adapting and applying wellbeing economy practices across locations and scales, with reference to UK and EU guidance, legislation and policy plans including: Guidance on Making Environmental Claims on Goods and Services, UK (2021);

Green Claims Initiative, EU (legislation expected 2023); the Circular Economy Action Plan, EU (2020); Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) EU and UK schemes; plus current work taking place in the UK regarding Enforcing the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. Thus, this paper proposes that sustainable fashion design entrepreneurs can be examples that create mutually reinforcing loops between creative and cultural industries, employment, levelling up and net zero targets.

# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	3
Report Framing	3
Key findings and recommended actions	4
<b>1 Introduction</b>	8
ZAC Research context	8
1.1 Applying the Fashion as Sustainability in Action framework	10
1.2 Applying the sustainable prosperity framework towards creating a wellbeing economy	12
<b>2 Net Zero as Catalyst study approach</b>	14
2.1 Engagement of support organisations	14
1.2.1 Practical dimensions of participation	14
2.2 ZAC workshop design and delivery	16
2.2.1 Creating the conditions for co-creation and mutual learning	16
2.2.2 Adaptability of tools for immediate and long-term use	16
2.3 MSE interviews	17
<b>3 Implementing the framework for Sustainable Prosperity in 3 UK regions</b>	18
3.1 Descriptors of the support organisation participants	18
3.2 ZAC workshops: Thematic Findings	21
3.2.1 Environmental sustainability is documented, based on operational elements, whilst cultural shifts are hard to document	21
3.2.2 Reflection and building agency are pre-conditions of transformational shift	22
3.2.3 The framework of sustainable prosperity supports strategic development and goal setting for businesses and business support organisations.	22
3.2.4 Telling new stories and leading by example	23
3.2.5 Reconciling immediate imperatives with fundamental sustainable prosperity	23
3.2.7 Creating safe space environments fosters creativity and sustainability	24
<b>4 ZAC Opportunities, barriers and recommendations</b>	25
4.1 Creating a wellbeing economy aspiration	25
4.2 Transforming Governance contributes to transformational change	26
4.3 Counting what counts	27
4.4 Scaling out as well as scaling up	30
<b>References</b>	33
<b>Appendix 1: Case studies of regional MSEs</b>	35
CASE STUDY: Almaborealis	35
CASE STUDY: Billy Tannery	38
CASE STUDY: OUBAS Knitwear	41
<b>Appendix 2: Study methodology</b>	44

# 1 Introduction

## ZAC Research context

This ZAC discussion paper contributes to a discourse in wellbeing as a connected economic, ecological, social and cultural endeavour. ZAC extends and builds on the findings of Rethinking Fashion Design Entrepreneurship: Fostering Sustainable Practices (FSP), funded by AHRC (2018-2021).<sup>3</sup> The FSP project contributed an evidence-led guide (*Fashion as Sustainability in Action*) to the sustainable practices of fashion micro and small enterprises (MSEs)<sup>4</sup> as examples of and contributors to social, environmental, cultural, and economic prosperity, a framework that extends the usual triple bottom line to recognise culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability.<sup>5</sup> The FSP research identified the vital and distinctive role of business support organisations, and others who mentor, showcase and invest in fashion design entrepreneurs. Their role as levers for change in the fashion and wider creative industries' ecosystem is recognised as enabling and supporting best practice and thereby contributing to the success of MSEs and their contribution to sustainable prosperity/ wellbeing economy.

The ZAC research expands the FSP investigation by applying its findings, particularly the Guidebook [Fashion as Sustainability in Action](#), to engage with a more geographically diverse set of support organisations, MSEs, and stakeholders (e.g. local enterprise partnerships (LEPs)) beyond London, focusing on Scotland, the Midlands and the Northwest. Earlier research by PEC identified the gap between creative industries in London and those in other UK regions.<sup>6</sup> This paper contributes evidence from the fashion sector, and makes recommendations to facilitate support organisations to foster sustainable practices in MSEs across the creative industries and contribute to UK strategy relating to climate and social sustainability.

Through analysis of a series of designed workshops and guided interviews with a diverse group of support organisations, this report documents the implementation and evaluation of the *Fashion as Sustainability in Action* Guidebook as a tool to foster sustainable prosperity and offers recommendations to extend and enhance knowledge and support towards sustainable prosperity and the wellbeing economy. It proposes ways to help the fashion sector and other

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/fsp>

<sup>4</sup> EU Document 32003H0361 (2003) defines micro businesses as having 0-9 employees, small 10-49 employees, medium 50-249 employees, definitions that are used by the UK Office for National Statistics

<sup>5</sup> Williams, D. (2019). *Fashion Design for Sustainability: A framework for participatory practice*. In: *Lens Conference*, 3-5 April, Milan.

<sup>6</sup> Mind the Gap: Regional Inequalities in the UK's Creative Industries. B Tether (Sept 2019) Policy and Evidence Centre Discussion Paper 1.



creative sectors to support the UK's net zero goals and wider wellbeing economy ambitions. These are by:

- Reducing the environmental impact of human activities through practices such as reduced material and energy consumption and more localised economies.
- Supporting income distribution, both within countries and globally, including through new modes of ownership and non-monetary exchange systems.
- Fuelling the transition from material and consumption-based societies to more participatory and community-oriented societies.<sup>7</sup>

A consideration of the wellbeing economy in fashion necessitates addressing key issues:

- The immediate imperatives of the cost-of-living crisis, the war in Ukraine, Post-Covid recovery and Brexit impacts, have led to a focus on immediate concerns without direct alignment to net zero, other environmental and social justice and economic prosperity factors.
- Complexities in the recognition of interdependencies between climate and environmental fragility, social inequality and discrimination.
- The 99.3% of businesses in the UK that are micro or SMEs ([ONS, 2020](#)) are innovating through nimbleness and responsiveness but their efforts are being outweighed by destructive practices of exploitation and extraction, based on models of high consumption at larger scales, notably in the fashion sector.
- The liability of small (lack of collective power, invisibility, resource limitations) outweighing the assets of being small, (locally relevant, resilient, nimble, resourceful).

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<sup>7</sup> Sharpe, S.A., Brydges, T., Retamal, M., Pugh, R. Lavanga, M., Wellbeing Wardrobe, prepared for the European Environmental Bureau, March 2022.

## 1.1 Applying the Fashion as Sustainability in Action framework

*“The prosperity framing has really helped in my thinking around what we’re delivering. How you talk about and work with it.”*

(Super Slow Way, cultural development organisation)

The research conducted for Fostering Sustainable Practices (FSP) included 100 in-depth interviews with 48 micro and small businesses and 15 support organisations. It offered a heuristic framework for consideration of business, community and societal needs and barriers to developing business support mechanisms for sustainable prosperity. The findings from FSP were focussed into an open-access Guidebook to assist support organisations to foster sustainable prosperity, [\*Fashion as Sustainability in Action\*](#), targeted at business support organisations and incubators wishing to understand and support fashion MSEs as part of a just transition to a wellbeing economy. *Fashion as Sustainability in Action* contains new tools for a holistic approach to supporting existing and emerging fashion businesses in their sustainability ambitions, going beyond environmental targets alone. The Guidebook provides a reference point and evidence base, including 12 MSE case studies, applicable to the wider national and global fashion sector, and to other sectors of the creative industries.<sup>8</sup>

The businesses and entrepreneurs who contributed to this research operate and measure success against their personal values and the fulfilment and satisfaction that they get through directly seeing the difference they are making at human and wider environmental scales. Many of them have taken lessons from prior professional involvement in the mainstream fashion industry, now using creativity and resourcefulness to offer a regenerative approach to counter the destructive practices of conventional fashion models of success, that are based on incomplete accountability.<sup>9</sup> The descriptors used in the Guidebook draw from analysis of the data compiled from personal testimonies of SFDEs and their teams together with support organisations. Sample pages below summarise the approach to sustainable prosperity and fashion MSEs’ contributions.

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<sup>8</sup> In the first year since its launch in June 2021, the Guidebook was downloaded 1120 times

<sup>9</sup> Black et.al. (2023). Fostering Sustainable Practices: the case of micro and small designer fashion enterprises. In Charter, M., B. Pan and S. Black (eds.) *Accelerating Sustainability in Fashion, Clothing and Textiles*. London: Routledge.

# SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY IN FASHION MSEs

FASHION MSEs CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY BY:

<b>Adopting a holistic view of fashion</b>	Being aware of interdependencies between culture, society, environment and economy.	<b>Approaching growth as a tool</b>	For increasing social, cultural and environmental regeneration.
<b>Perceiving the urgency of the climate emergency</b>	Recognising that incremental changes are not enough.	<b>Appreciating the benefits of staying small</b>	For retaining creative control and authenticity.
<b>Being driven by purpose</b>	To create a lasting positive impact that goes beyond monetary value.	<b>Being reciprocal</b>	Empowering communities and cultivating trust, collaborative spirit and mutual learning.
<b>Moving beyond products</b>	By designing possibilities and solutions for cultural, social, environmental and economic good.	<b>Questioning and challenging</b>	The logic and values of the current fashion system.
<b>Exercising thoughtfulness</b>	In relationship to both people and planet.	<b>Mastering complexity</b>	Through self-reflection and iterative improvements of all aspects of business.
<b>Putting emphasis on creativity</b>	And intellectual development, together with profit.	<b>Bridging fashion</b>	As it is now with fashion as it could be.

MENU

CONTENTS

0 ABOUT THE GUIDE

PART ONE

1 WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY?

> SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY: AN INTRODUCTION

SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY IN CULTURE, SOCIETY, ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY

SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY IN FASHION MSEs

COUNTING WHAT COUNTS

PART TWO

2 CULTURAL PROSPERITY

3 SOCIAL PROSPERITY

4 ENVIRONMENTAL PROSPERITY

5 ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

PART THREE

6 WE NEED TO DARE

7 USEFUL RESOURCES

16

**Sustainable prosperity**

**means** long-term quality of life for people and nature everywhere.

**cares** for nature, because rich biodiversity, clean water, air, and fertile soil are critical for the well-being of all species on earth.

**recognises** that economic prosperity is critical for global equality, but, on its own, is an insufficient metric of human well-being.

**enables** decent work and long-term livelihoods everywhere.

**allows** enough time, energy and opportunities for personal development and participation in culture and community.

**nurtures** the search for meaning, satisfaction and fulfilment in life.

"Our jobs are being empathetic while still trying to make money."

BIRDSONG

MENU

CONTENTS

0 ABOUT THE GUIDE

PART ONE

1 WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY?

SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY: AN INTRODUCTION

> SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY IN CULTURE, SOCIETY, ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY

SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY IN FASHION MSEs

COUNTING WHAT COUNTS

PART TWO

2 CULTURAL PROSPERITY

3 SOCIAL PROSPERITY

4 ENVIRONMENTAL PROSPERITY

5 ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

PART THREE

6 WE NEED TO DARE

7 USEFUL RESOURCES

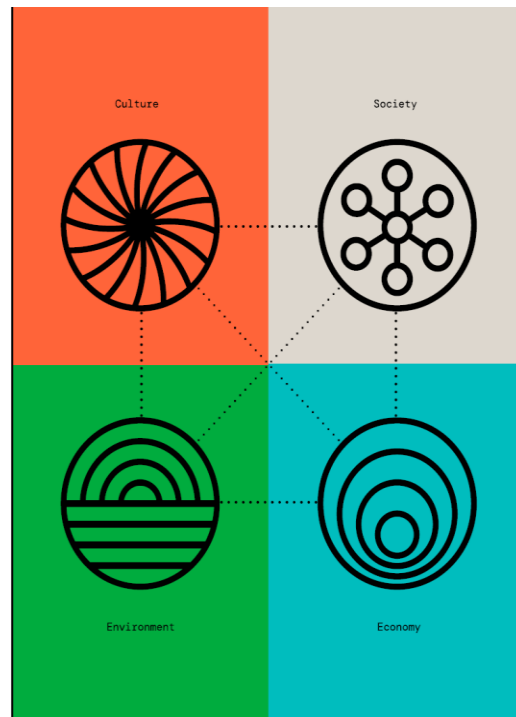
17

## SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY IN CULTURE, SOCIETY, ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY

Sustainable prosperity draws attention to the critical interdependencies between culture, society, environment and economy.

While this guide explains how each of these four elements can be uniquely reflected in fashion MSEs (Chapters 2 - 5), the distinction of the businesses featured here is that they work in a holistic way, across all four areas of sustainable prosperity. Any divisions between culture, society, environment and economy made here are only for the purpose of a detailed introduction of all four concepts.

The diagram here can be used as a constant reminder of their mutual interconnections:



## 1.2 Applying the sustainable prosperity framework towards creating a wellbeing economy

The lens of sustainable prosperity enables us to approach prosperity as a means of living well within planetary boundaries. This links sustainability not only to nature and environment, but also to culture, society, and economy. We argue that sustainable living requires us to recognise that all these four elements are interdependent and need to work distinctively and in synchronicity to enable sustainable prosperity and a wellbeing economy.

This lens looks at wellbeing at individual, business and society levels and how it is interpreted as value. What is seen as of value affects what we do, it defines our conversations and everyday decisions. As the economist Mariana Mazzucato writes, in a society where “value is defined by price, as long as an activity fetches a price, it is seen as creating value.”<sup>10</sup> In an economy where consumption is seen as the driver for business success and an almost (but not quite) attainable goal for the customer, thinking through elements of recognised value creation and value extension in relation to sustainable prosperity can re-balance perceived value and show how success can be attained across these levels. Hence, sustainable prosperity can help us to improve how we look after nature, leading

<sup>10</sup> Mazzucato, M. (2019). *The Value of Everything: Making and taking in the global economy*. London: Penguin Books, p. xviii.

lives that support net zero targets, helping us to live lives that are richer and more satisfying in human terms and in livelihood terms. As the Dasgupta Review notes:

*“Sustainable economic growth and development requires us to take a different path, where our engagements with Nature are not only sustainable, but also enhance our collective wealth and well-being and that of our descendants. ...”*<sup>11</sup>  
(p. 3)

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<sup>11</sup> [HM Treasury \(2021\). The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review – Headline messages. Independent review led by Prof. Sir Partha Dasgupta.](#)

## **2 Net Zero as Catalyst study approach**

### **2.1 Engagement of support organisations**

The FSP research that informed the Guidebook *Fashion as Sustainability in Action* involved mainly (but not exclusively) London-based MSEs and support organisations. The purpose of the research for this ZAC paper, conducted between November 2021 and June 2022, was to extend the application of this framework into regions outside London to share the resource more widely and learn from its implementation with new and broader-than-fashion support organisations, MSEs, and other stakeholders. The key regions identified for this work were Scotland, the Midlands and the Northwest, based on their rich history of fashion and textiles industries, and corroborated by a landscape review of recent policy, industry and research reports conducted in the first phase of this research. Workshops with up to three business support organisations were planned for each region, including Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in England.

Through desk research and consultation with networks a database of business support organisations across the three UK regions was collated and a shortlist compiled of the most relevant organisations to approach to take part in a workshop and follow-up sessions. See Appendix 2 and Table 1 for details of organisations approached and more information on methodology and learnings. The responsiveness of organisations to enquiries varied considerably between regions, therefore the number of organisations approached in each region differs, reflecting efforts to set up workshops per region.

#### **1.2.1 Practical dimensions of participation**

Across the regions, it was found, as anticipated, that participation is dependent on developing relationships of trust. This was exacerbated by the very limited capacity of many support organisations to engage in anything beyond planned activity. The lack of flexibility was identified as being linked to funding and staffing problems. A critical issue named by the organisations was the ending of EU funded projects that focused on delivery of MSE/SME support programmes and accelerators in the UK regions. In response to feedback received during introductory conversations with the support organisations approached (see Table 1), the appetite from stakeholders for multiple participants to take part in the work required a restructuring of the original plan. Rather than proceeding with a 3-hour workshop, 6-week application trial and a final reflection session, an immersive, interactive, multi-stream workshop was created to accommodate participants from multiple departments of one organisation together with some of their close collaborators or partner organisations. The experience from the pilot workshop conducted in February 2022 confirmed that this format is better suited to the capacity and working structures of support organisations and requests by

participants to use the resources after the sessions demonstrates the potential for outcomes to be implemented into their everyday practices. In addition, this openness of approach (working in the open) allows for inclusion and relevance for a range of needs and specific conditions in each organisation.

## **Scotland**

The responsiveness of organisations in the three regions outside London was highest in Scotland, however, difficulties were still experienced in engaging with organisations where no previous relationship or direct contact had been established. Some organisations were unable to commit to collaboration due to a lack of capacity within the short duration of the ZAC project. Other organisations showed active interest in involvement and future collaboration, leading to inspiring initial conversations, but were unable to confirm dates for participation within the project timeline. In one case in Scotland (and another similar case in the Northwest), the organisation was interested in co-developing their current activities with Centre for Sustainable Fashion, on a bespoke basis only. Successful collaborations were achieved promptly with those whose current strategies and goals directly aligned with the core focus and aims of the Fashion as Sustainability in Action framework. As the LEP scheme does not include Scotland, no LEP contacts were possible in this region. One full workshop was conducted in Scotland plus two exploratory dialogues.

## **The Midlands**

The response rate was especially low in the Midlands region, which is why we approached the highest number of organisations in this region – see Appendix 2, Table 1. While many conversations were started and revisited multiple times throughout the duration of the project, no further interaction was feasible in the project timeline. The key reasons cited by those who did respond were: 1. perceived lack of direct applicability of the content due to lack of fashion MSEs in supported cohorts across the sample of organisations; 2. insufficient capacity within the timeline of the project plan as their focus on specific projects was linked to funding. No responses were received from local LEPs, despite multiple contact attempts, and ultimately no workshops were conducted in the Midlands.

## **The Northwest**

The responsiveness of organisations in the Northwest was higher than in the Midlands region overall, whilst similar to the Midlands in terms of the success rate with local LEPs. The one exception was Cumbria LEP, showing keen interest, however not being able to participate due to capacity, timing, and lack of fashion-related activity in the area. The three successful collaborations required multiple attempts at justification of the relevance of the work to the organisations' interests, especially given that the framework was primarily built on data collected from business and organisations in the London region (but also in Cornwall, the

Midlands and Kent). The perceived London focus was seen as a potential barrier, making it difficult to justify time investment within the organisation's current workload if not seen as applicable to the day-to-day running of their support services. However, despite initial reservations, all three organisations that took part in the project actively engaged with the content and concluded they had all benefited from the engagement on personal and professional levels.

## **London**

Due to the lack of responsiveness within the Midlands region the geographic focus was reconsidered and we tested the framework with some of the London-based organisations who contributed to its original development. The pre-existing relationships and active interest in the work led to all three organisations approached agreeing to take part straight away. Despite this, scheduling was also a challenge here, reflecting capacity and staffing challenges experienced in other regions.

## **2.2 ZAC workshop design and delivery**

### **2.2.1 Creating the conditions for co-creation and mutual learning**

The feedback on the workshop format confirmed the importance of aesthetically strong, simple and clear visuals in communicating complex concepts and information. The visuals developed for the workshop methodology drew on the format of the Guidebook *Fashion as Sustainability in Action*, with resources being made adaptable to a range of participant numbers, needs, roles, organisational types, and interests. The workshop format was successfully applied within and beyond the fashion sector, evidencing its relevance and future potential application in MSE support ecosystems across UK regions and creative industries.

### **2.2.2 Adaptability of tools for immediate and long-term use**

Each session included pre-reading material shared with participants to introduce the concept of sustainable prosperity and key aims of the workshop. During the session, participants were able to refer to the full pdf version of the guide *Fashion as Sustainability in Action* and access the [Fostering Sustainable Practices Hub](#). The content presented during the sessions was unanimously assessed by participants as useful, insightful, informative, and engaging, with many opportunities for use beyond the workshop session, in their ongoing work. The digital board that captured the interactive part from the workshop, reflecting the goals set and lessons, became a tool for strategic planning. The board's initial format below illustrates the four areas of analysis (environment, society, culture and economy) at three levels (awareness, ideate, shift), before it is populated with the organisation's practices and goals through reflective discussion, using post-it notes.



## HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY THROUGH YOUR WORK?



### 2.3 MSE interviews

The purpose of the in-depth interviews with regional MSEs was to understand sustainable fashion practice and to gather background information on MSE support needs and experiences within their respective regions. The MSEs approached for interviews were identified through a combination of recommendations from collaborating support organisations in the target regions, desk research, and existing MSE contacts outside London.

Three of the businesses interviewed were selected as case studies: Billy Tannery (Midlands), Almaborealis (Scotland) and OUBAS Knitwear (Northwest) (see Appendix 1 p.36). These provided regional examples of organisations with a holistic understanding of fashion and sustainability and innovative approaches to MSE practice in relation to the interconnected elements of sustainable prosperity. These case studies complement and extend the series of case studies conducted during the FSP project (available for download via the [Fostering Sustainable Practices Hub](#)).

### 3 Implementing the framework for Sustainable Prosperity in 3 UK regions

#### 3.1 Descriptors of the support organisation participants

<b>Scotland</b>	<a href="#"><u>Elevator</u></a>
	<p>Elevator is a social enterprise with 4 divisions, supporting entrepreneurs across sectors.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Property – running 19 business centres across Scotland, with 500 tenant businesses</li> <li>2. Business Gateway – the UK government initiative, of which Elevator covers 40% of businesses in Scotland, supporting around 4000 businesses annually across Aberdeen, Dundee, Angus, Perth and Lanarkshire.</li> <li>3. Programmes – running 9 accelerator programmes annually, across all sectors, including creative, tech, food and drink; supports 100-150 businesses a year</li> <li>4. E3 – supporting communities and rural organisations through running community projects and causes. From an idea to set up and running.</li> </ol>
	<a href="#"><u>The Future Economy Company</u></a>
	<p>The Future Economy Company is a social enterprise that supports micro enterprises in the creative industries. It oversees 3 business support programmes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#"><u>Creative Entrepreneurs Club</u></a> – online members community and resource hub for the creative industries.</li> <li>2. <a href="#"><u>Creative Game Changers</u></a> – creative business support programme to advance skills in creative, critical and digital thinking.</li> <li>3. <a href="#"><u>Fashion Foundry</u></a> – business support for fashion designers and companies in Scotland.</li> </ol>

<b>Northwest</b>	<b><u><a href="#">Creative Lancashire</a></u></b>
	<p>Creative Lancashire is a service provided by Lancashire County Council that drives advocacy for creativity and design in the region and offers support to creative and digital businesses, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborations and networking opportunities</li> <li>• Creative business support</li> <li>• Information on finance, funding and growth</li> </ul>
	<b><u><a href="#">Super Slow Way</a></u></b>
	<p>Super Slow Way is a cultural development agency, and a part of the Art Council England's Creative People and Places Programme. Its focus is on supporting cultural development along the Leeds &amp; Liverpool Canal Corridor, addressing the needs of local communities - especially those with little or no experience with the traditionally subsidised arts sector. The two key long-term projects of Super Slow Way include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u><a href="#">Pennine Lancashire Linear Park</a></u></li> <li>• <u><a href="#">British Textile Biennial</a></u></li> </ul>
	<b><u><a href="#">The Business Growth Hub</a></u></b>
	<p>The Business Growth Hub is a subsidiary of <u><a href="#">The Growth Company</a></u>, one of the largest and oldest regional business support schemes with a social enterprise status. Its network of experts and specialist teams provides support for business growth for the Greater Manchester region, offering expert one-to-one and peer-to-peer business support, events, specialist programmes and funding across sectors.</p>

## London

### [Poplar Works](#)

Poplar Works is a new fashion hub in East London, whose key aim is to support the revival of East London's fashion economy. It was developed through the partnership between the local housing association Poplar HARCA, the social enterprise The Trampery, and London College of Fashion, UAL, with the financial support from the Greater London Authority. Its core activities include:

- Business: studio spaces and business support
- Community: support and opportunities for regeneration of local communities
- Making for Change Training Programme and Manufacturing Unit: vocational qualifications in fashion production and industry standard manufacturing support for businesses of all sizes

### [The Trampery](#)

The Trampery is a social enterprise that provides workspaces and business support to small and start-up businesses across six sites in East and North London. Its two key areas of focus are tech businesses and fashion businesses, 110 businesses and 500+ individuals in all. The Trampery aims to create a sense of community and also social impact in the local areas, and runs a range of support programmes: Pathways (ERDF funded, for new start-ups), Creative Pioneers, and Pathways Decelerator (2-day reflective programme).

Two East London sites are focused on sustainable fashion in partnership with the Fashion District (Poplar Works and Fish Island Village sites). Trampery also runs a Sustainable Fashion Accelerator programme (LLDC funded) working across the Olympic boroughs for businesses showing a significant potential for growth – beyond simply turnover. The funding for the SFA programme supports 35 businesses over 3 years, showing what success could look like in the fashion industry compared to business as usual.

### Cockpit Arts

Cockpit Arts is a social enterprise that operates as a contemporary craft business incubator, currently with two sites - in Bloomsbury and Deptford. Its core aim is to provide affordable high quality studio spaces with in-house business coaching and training for contemporary makers across different craft disciplines. It currently supports around 150 micro businesses in-house, working across more than 20 disciplines, with particular concentration in jewellery, textiles, leather and ceramics.

## **3.2 ZAC workshops: Thematic Findings**

### **3.2.1 Environmental sustainability is documented, based on operational elements, whilst cultural shifts are hard to document**

Awareness of the environmental dimension of sustainable prosperity is high in comparison to social, cultural and economic areas of sustainable prosperity. Many support organisations struggle with clear pathways for translating this awareness into recognised changes in practice and impact. Capturing, measuring, and assessing day to day elements of an organisations' practice can be challenging, especially for small organisations where limited staffing affects the ability to translate tacit knowledge and what they can 'see' into reporting formats. There is a need for accountability relating to net zero; the reporting formats need to consider what is appropriate to small businesses. Much of the current sustainability reporting formats are appropriate to large scale, rather than small scale businesses.

Companies tend to focus on the environmental aspects of procurement (energy suppliers etc.) materials sourcing and waste. There is still a gap when it comes to companies recognising the wider impact they can have through their creative business practices, such as models of extended value of their products, services and activities in social, economic, cultural and environmental terms (despite the fact that this is where they may have the greatest influence, in terms of wellbeing, including net zero, lifestyles). The Fashion as Sustainability in Action framework encourages consideration of all stakeholders, including nature as a client or beneficiary of the business, to guide businesses towards implementing and documenting their regenerative practices, and demonstrating a stronger business USP.

The interactive element of the workshop demonstrated broader aspects of the organisations' sustainable practices, especially relating to social dimensions of sustainability. These were identified by participants as surprising in a discussion of sustainability as they had previously been seen as separate to, rather than interconnected with, sustainable prosperity.

### **3.2.2 Reflection and building agency are pre-conditions of transformational shift**

The turbulence of the times we live in is seen as an opportunity for necessary change by many organisations. Once a commitment to the workshop had been made, benefits from the process of reflection were evidenced. The following quotes are taken from transcripts of the workshops with the specific support organisations named.

*"It's been like a therapy session that helped to re-focus, so thank you."  
(The Trampery)*

The learning aspect of the workshop is described as a means to build confidence by connecting organisations' own work with the four areas of prosperity to develop knowledge and understanding. It is also an opportunity to affirm the validity of implicit work, surfacing new ideas about what else could be done, how successes can be built upon, and gaps and opportunities identified to improve the business.

*"This was useful in redefining sustainability for me and will use it going forward."  
(Poplar Works)*

The framing of the workshop as an opportunity to pause and reflect enables many organisations to recognise that they are doing more than they had realised. This is a means of demonstrating achievement and building confidence in taking a holistic approach to sustainability through the four elements of culture, society, environment and economy as parameters of prosperity.

*"So helpful in capturing all the things we want to do, but haven't mapped out in this way yet."  
(Poplar Works)*

### **3.2.3 The framework of sustainable prosperity supports strategic development and goal setting for businesses and business support organisations.**

Understanding the interconnections between the areas of prosperity helps to spotlight opportunities for direct action, by breaking big topics into digestible chunks that are recognisable and mutually reinforcing.

*“This makes it a lot clearer in explaining what sustainability is about and how different businesses fit into it.”*

*(Poplar Works)*

The workshop considers a range of stakeholder needs, enabling organisations to consider the support they provide in relation to short-term business ambitions, goals and success factors and wider contributions to social, cultural, environmental, and economic wellbeing.

*“The prosperity framing has really helped in my thinking around what we’re delivering. How you talk about and work with it.”*

*(Super Slow Way)*

### **3.2.4 Telling new stories and leading by example**

As an organisation's implicit ambitions become explicit through the workshop framework, clear opportunities for articulating the organisation's portfolio open up. This offers the opportunity for organisations to demonstrate leading by example.

*“The four areas have the potential to become core criteria for own work but also for selection of the businesses that organisations work with; shifting the perception of what the organisation stands for, telling a new story.”*

*(Elevator)*

The four areas of prosperity offer a pathway for telling a trusted story of micro-models demonstrating integrity, offering MSEs distinction in the face of competition from corporates engaging in unsubstantiated sustainability claims.

*“We have the responsibility to talk about our wins to inspire others to act in the same way – showing that we have a proof of concept, you can also do that...”*

*(The Trampery)*

### **3.2.5 Reconciling immediate imperatives with fundamental sustainable prosperity**

Support organisations sit in tension between big and small, between short-termism and the imperatives of long-term wellbeing, and funder and stakeholder expectations. Action on different scales is needed to address the critical challenges of climate and social justice, together with local and national government and global goals. Policy frameworks often focus on a mass scale industry lens (for obvious reasons in relation to net zero emissions) however, there is an opportunity to explore policy that rewards good practice at MSE level and how these practices can be scaled out.

*“We aim to work in embedded and deep ways.”*

*(Creative Lancashire)*

### **3.2.6 Businesses implementing multiple elements of sustainable prosperity can be drivers of sector change**

Case studies of fashion design entrepreneurs who have built viable businesses but have taken a path that is different from mainstream market practices offer pilots which could be scaled up, adapted and replicated in multiple locations.

*“We need case studies that we can really identify with”.*

*(Elevator)*

### **3.2.7 Creating safe space environments fosters creativity and sustainability**

By creating conditions for reflection and honest and open discussion, the workshop format extends the conventional role of support organisations (as those who offer business support, mentoring, showcasing or investment) to a role of convening peer-to-peer listening, sharing and innovating together. The workshops conducted through the ZAC research highlight the critical role of manufacturers, local cultural development organisations and initiatives who contribute to an enabling environment for the creative industries; and those who support training and skills development in local communities.

The framework for cultural, social, environmental and economic prosperity spotlights the need to provide support to de-centre knowledge hierarchies, and foster diversity and social inclusivity within projects. Multiple support organisations offer community outreach programmes that support young entrepreneurs without access to starting capital, entrepreneurs from disadvantaged communities and those facing multiple barriers to conventional employment. For organisations with aims to support participatory societies and localised economies, there is potential to link these activities explicitly to aims for environmental prosperity of their regions.

*“A part of the deal for the MSEs we support is giving back to local community.”*

*(The Trampery)*

*“Addressing economic deprivation is key to engagement and sustainable change – living in a decent environment is critical for appreciation and care.”*

*(Super Slow Way)*



## 4 ZAC Opportunities, barriers and recommendations

This study aims to demonstrate ways in which fashion MSEs can evidence holistic business practices for a wellbeing economy and catalyse a shift towards a creative sector wellbeing economy with Net Zero emissions. The findings of the research are based on a set of one-to-one discussions, workshops with support organisations and policy round table discussion (see Appendix 2) involving regional and London organisations and building on the findings of [Fostering Sustainable Practices](#), a 3-year interdisciplinary research project<sup>12</sup>. From a thematic analysis of data, outlined in section three, four areas of discussion are identified:

### 4.1 Creating a wellbeing economy aspiration

Sustainable Fashion Designer Entrepreneurs' (SFDEs) are informing and acting on a sustainability zeitgeist, creating a distinction of the UK creative sector at high profile and local levels across the UK and internationally. The data from the workshops evidence that SFDEs are incorporating environmental, social, cultural and economic values into their work as part of their business DNA.

#### Opportunities, barriers and recommendations

The momentum from SFDEs' actions has yet to be scaled to create overall change in the sector's impacts, which are on a trajectory to substantially miss net zero targets. Wellbeing economy practices are distinctive, but limited, when created by businesses acting alone, however when businesses act together, through peer-to-peer learning and with parties external to the business, there is an opportunity to scale positive impacts towards fulfilling sustainability goals including Net Zero and the levelling up agenda. Whilst these goals are recognised at investor and government levels, fashion entrepreneurs are not identified as accelerators or pilots for scaling such initiatives. Study participants referenced the prioritisation of tech companies over fashion companies as a missed opportunity towards exemplifying the wellbeing economy in the UK. Their contribution to sustainable prosperity is diverse in terms of product and practices, see Appendix 1 case studies. The often hybrid and hard-to-classify nature of SFDEs' work was recognised by the Department of Culture Media and Sport in 2016:

*"Fashion: The estimates in this release are intended to measure the design element of the fashion industry. Ideally, the fashion design category would be separately identified in the estimates. However, it is not possible to separate*

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g.: Elf, P., Werner, A., & Black, S (2022). Advancing the circular economy through dynamic capabilities and extended customer engagement: Insights from small sustainable fashion enterprises in the UK. *Business Strategy and the Environment* 31(6) 2682-2699.

*design associated with fashion from the category 74.10 “Specialised design activities” with any degree of confidence. Nor is it possible to identify in official data the full range of fashion occupations across industries. The fashion industry has taken a broader approach to measuring its activities, going beyond the design element, for example, including relevant retail activities, published in the report Value of the UK Fashion Industry.” (p.19) <sup>13</sup>*

A recent focus on guidance for customers, through the Green Claims Code, can support MSEs’ ability to espouse the six guiding principles that businesses making environmental claims should follow to remain compliant with consumer protection law when making sustainability claims. Overall, all environmental claims displayed on product labelling, packaging, advertisement, branding and/or any other type of communication such as e-newsletters should comply with the Code’s Guidance<sup>14</sup>. Those businesses with underlying governance principles that align with wellbeing economy principles, are well placed to demonstrate their implicit as well as their explicit goals.

There is an opportunity, through alignment to upcoming Extended Producer Responsibility legislation<sup>15</sup>, to link and apply international, national and local net zero ambitions to fashion entrepreneurship in ways that are appropriate to their size and workforce capacity.

It is recommended that the cultural currency and collaborative practices demonstrated by Sustainable Fashion Design Entrepreneurs are used as catalysts to shift business and customer aspirations towards net zero lifestyles. There is an imperative for a dramatic shift to take place across the UK in terms of fashion and broader lifestyles, in order to reach net zero goals. The universality of fashion acts as a lever towards wellbeing economy lifestyles espoused by these entrepreneurs

## **4.2 Transforming Governance contributes to transformational change**

There is a will and interest from organisations supporting MSEs to foster practices of sustainable prosperity, and there is evidence that linking positive change in community engagement can contribute towards wider environmental goals. However, gaps between short and long term goals and between economic, social, cultural and environmental governance means that ambitions can become fragmented and siloed.

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<sup>13</sup> See UK Government DCMS Creative Industries Economic Estimates Methodology [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/499683/CIEE\\_Methodology.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/499683/CIEE_Methodology.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/green-claims-code-making-environmental-claims/environmental-claims-on-goods-and-services>

<sup>15</sup> [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/news/waste-framework-directive-revision-2022-02-14\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/news/waste-framework-directive-revision-2022-02-14_en)

## **Opportunities, barriers and recommendations**

The data suggests that many companies seek to demonstrate good governance through environmental reporting of their operational activities. There is potential for businesses to link what they can report with what they can influence beyond their own operations, i.e. wider cultural change towards net zero lifestyles. Some businesses are questioning the current growth-based economic model and circular economy premise of decoupling growth from resource use due to the lack of evidence that it is a feasible (or fully costed, including external costs) route to a wellbeing economy. Small businesses may be well placed in ensuring that their governance structures are underpinned by wellbeing economy principles, whereas larger companies may be less able to evolve the underlying principles of their business and shareholder demands.

In considering the development of wellbeing governance policies, there is an opportunity to look to the Welsh Government's foundational economy concept, which is one of the first administrations to build future sustainability-proofing into all its policy areas through the Well-Being of Future Generations Act (2015). An example of national governments working together to develop a wellbeing economy policy can also be seen in The Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (WEGo) between Scotland, Iceland, New Zealand, Wales and Finland. These policies offer potential considerations in supporting MSEs' wellbeing practices. It is recommended that the long-term goals outlined in the acts and partnerships above could be referenced to support MSEs whose practices seek to demonstrate long-term sustainability. This may create short-term support needs that will not yield quick returns. The principles of patient capital investment could inform and recognise MSEs that have transformative goals. This would help to leverage such enterprises in realising their potential for direct impact and influence in wellbeing economy terms. Thus funder, borough, regional, national and international ambitions towards net zero targets can be linked and demonstrated through fashion entrepreneurship. This could clearly evidence the connection between community resilience, social justice, levelling up and environmental goals of fashion MSEs.

### **4.3 Counting what counts**

Business support can be a key lever for economic, social, cultural and environmental prosperity and there is evidence from the workshops that these goals are implicit in the work of organisations across the UK. There is an appetite to learn from these practices to make explicit the metrics that can enable the transition from consumption-based societies to more participatory and community-oriented ones as part of a just transition.

## Opportunities, barriers and recommendations

Measures of Success in a wellbeing economy need to be diverse and be locally, nationally and globally recognised. The practices of SFDEs could be developed into guidelines and metrics for business support for sustainable prosperity and the wellbeing economy in ways that are user-centred and relevant to fashion and wider creative sectors. There is an opportunity to link the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR)<sup>16</sup> and a range of other social and environmental policies and legislation, including labour rights and standards, to create a practical heuristic framework for UK MSEs to use, provided it is recognised by regulators and those who fund business support organisations. Such a set of new metrics could demonstrate how MSEs and business support organisations can be a key lever for economic, social, cultural and environmental prosperity. Participants in the research found that the “race to the bottom” in fashion is due to incomplete accounting, not only in environmental and labour terms during manufacturing, but also in terms of customer fulfilment and satisfaction. This is borne out in statistics of fashion waste, perpetuated through models of built-in obsolescence. The MSEs in the study did not subscribe to this model and yet, transformative business models of extending value, through a holistic approach to sustainability are not recognised by investors, government and even by customers.

This finding chimes with the recent call in the Wellbeing Wardrobe report to *“Develop and use wellbeing indicators in the fashion, textile and garment sector that focus on health, social and environment indicators, rather than only financial and income measures.”*<sup>17</sup> (p. 6)

The UK Government's Dasgupta Review on the Economics of Biodiversity states: *“Transformative change is possible – we and our descendants deserve nothing less.”* (p. 5) and:

*“Standard economic models view our choices as self-centred. There is growing evidence, however, that our preferences are affected by the choices of others – they are ‘socially embedded’. Since we look to others when acting, the necessary changes are not only possible, but are likely to be less costly and less difficult than often imagined.”*<sup>18</sup> (p. 5)

Guidelines and metrics should relate to soft and hard skills, plus quantitative and qualitative reference points for ways of working and business decision-making. The Wellbeing Wardrobe report asserts:

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<sup>16</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:bb8539b7-b1b5-11ec-9d96-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:bb8539b7-b1b5-11ec-9d96-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF)

<sup>17</sup> [Wellbeing-Wardrobe-A-wellbeing-economy-for-the-fashion-and-textile-sector-March-2022.pdf \(eeb.org\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> [HM Treasury \(2021\). The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review – Headline messages. Independent review led by Prof. Sir Partha Dasgupta.](#)

*“Current policy developments for supporting sustainable textiles and garments in Europe are mostly focused on optimising and increasing efficiency within the existing business model (for instance, through increased design for circularity, recycling and/or using recycled materials). As such, this policy framework does not yet meaningfully engage with the requirements of the wellbeing economy,”*<sup>19</sup> (p. 43)

There is a need to develop and implement guidelines and metrics for sustainable prosperity that are recognised by investors, government agencies, business support organisations and MSEs. By cross-referencing the findings from this research with guidelines and metrics in use or development across the creative sector, there is an imperative to refer to external benchmarks, including Science-Based Targets towards net zero emissions<sup>20</sup>, the levelling-up agenda and creative occupations in the Creative Industries. New measures of success are supported by the UK Government's APPG on Limits to Growth:

*“... changing the way we measure success; building a consistent policy framework for a ‘wellbeing economy’; and addressing the ‘growth dependency’ of the economy.”*<sup>21</sup> (p. 2)

These success indicators can also be cross-referenced with wider economic, creative and cultural strategy ambitions, such as laid out in the UKRI AHRC Strategic Delivery Plan:

*“The work that we fund underpins health, happiness, well-being and thriving places; it creates the space for research and innovation to make a difference to society and the economy”*(p.4)<sup>22</sup>

Fashion companies contributing to a wellbeing economy, could be a powerful factor in bringing public attention to wellbeing lifestyles. This could help to stimulate a wellbeing metrics framework for sustainable prosperity with input from investors, government agencies, business support organisations and MSEs. By cross-referencing findings from this research with activity across the creative sector, a user-centred system could catalyse a workable way to achieve the goal of net zero emissions in business and public life.

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<sup>19</sup> [Wellbeing-Wardrobe-A-wellbeing-economy-for-the-fashion-and-textile-sector-March-2022.pdf \(eeb.org\)](#)

<sup>20</sup> UNFCCC Fashion Charter for Climate Action  
[https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Fashion%20Industry%20Carter%20for%20Climate%20Action\\_2021.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Fashion%20Industry%20Carter%20for%20Climate%20Action_2021.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [APPG on Limits to Growth \(February, 2020\). Wellbeing Matters: Tackling Growth Dependency. An Economy That Works Briefing Paper No. 3.](#)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/AHRC-010922-StrategicDeliveryPlan2022.pdf>

## 4.4 Scaling out as well as scaling up

Fashion MSEs' ability to innovate and contribute to the UK economy and social and environmental goals is linked to their size, creating nimbleness, transparency, design leadership and appropriate application of ideas. To amplify the potential of these creative entrepreneurs, there is a need to recognise the value of the UK sustainable fashion MSEs creating new niches, rather than seeking unmet consumer demands or over-stimulation.

The lack of connected fashion and wellbeing networks across the UK was apparent in the ZAC research and most participants were contacted through individuals with connections across networks (rather than the networks and organisations being connected themselves). These fragile connections, based on individuals in current positions, suggests that there is an opportunity for expanding resilience through locally relevant, nationally recognised networks of SFDEs and wider creative occupations in the Creative Industries.

The UK fashion sector comprises micro to mass market enterprises. The interaction between large and small players tends to be limited to supplier-retailer relationships. There is an opportunity to find mutually beneficial collaboration between SFDEs and large scale businesses. This can take a range of forms, from large businesses investing in R&D in small businesses for mutual benefit, to co-learning between design teams, which can be brokered through academic research and other university collaborations. The power imbalance between the big and the small can be mitigated through government-led funding schemes such as those offered through Innovate UK. Whilst there is evidence of the value of these collaborations, the research identified that the access to these funds is very limited for fashion MSEs.

The EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles<sup>23</sup> aims to address the production and consumption of textiles to create a greener, more competitive textiles sector that is more resistant to global shocks. It seeks to ensure that fashion products are long-lasting, recyclable, and produced in respect of people and planet. It seeks to ensure that it is economically profitable to promote re-use and that repair services are widely available. These ambitions can be realised through locally based fashion networks that are also nationally connected.

It is recommended that further research is undertaken to explore how the liabilities of smallness can be outweighed by its strengths, to seek ways to promote nimbleness, diversity and resilience for the fashion and creative industries, based on practices that are not extractive or exploitative. Case studies of businesses who implement multiple elements of sustainable prosperity in their work can be

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<sup>23</sup>[https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:9d2e47d1-b0f3-11ec-83e1-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:9d2e47d1-b0f3-11ec-83e1-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF)

an important driver of change for others to adapt and apply (see appendix 1 and [FSP hub](#) for examples).

## **In conclusion**

UK fashion is world renowned for its creativity; there is an opportunity to expand this reputation, building on the leadership shown by UK Sustainability-led Fashion Design Entrepreneurs. They demonstrate what a wellbeing economy looks like in practice, living their personal and business values and utilising a holistic approach to sustainable prosperity catalysed by net zero environmental sustainability goals and social justice. To realise the potential of these creative entrepreneurs to inspire transformation through replication of pioneering practices, public and policy discourse must be raised. This paper seeks to demonstrate how restorative models and practices can contribute to long-term social, economic, cultural and environmental prosperity and be culturally relevant in the short and long term. The frameworks and metrics for sustainable prosperity, such as prototyped in this project and outlined in this paper, offer a proof of concept for future work.

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## Appendix 1: Case studies of regional MSEs

### CASE STUDY: Almaborealis



*If children don't know what they're wearing, how can they make informed decisions as adults when they purchase things?*

*We would re-learn to have that appreciation of those materials that we use, that we extract, that we make. All those processes that go into the clothing, that we understand those and then learn to value them*

*Extending the life of garments and offering these opportunities for the user to participate in the customisation or the repair and elongation and extension of the life of the garment. .... they become part of the garment's journey, and put their mark on it, and we get a closer relationship with our garments.*

*I would like to see this change happen, particularly, in children's and parents' and any age education about clothing, and – much as Jamie Oliver did with his food revolution - this kind of basic understanding of clothing and the impact it has for future generations.*

Maija Nygren, Almaborealis

#### Key Facts:

Name of Organisation: Almaborealis

Website: <https://www.almaborealis.com/>

Type of initiative: Limited Company

Sector: Clothing/Knitwear

Target market(s): Childrenswear

## Key Takeaways:

- Connecting play, educational tools and clothing/fashion by learning through clothes.
- Almaborealis creates innovative products for children combining education and clothing to actively engage children with what they wear through materials and making processes.
- By working with children aims to fulfil a bigger purpose of educating the next generation to become participants in their own future
- Maija Nygren has proactively sought out and responded to opportunities, including crowdfunding, competitions and mentoring programmes, and been supported with small amounts of funding which enabled progress and raised confidence.

## Overview:

Almaborealis is a micro start-up business based in Scotland, founded and run by Maija Nygren, creating a unique form of childrenswear based on a modular knitted system of 2D shapes, developed during her Master's degree at Heriot Watt University in 2018. A key element of the concept, called Puzzleware, is to involve children more in making their own clothes, giving them agency to configure clothes through building with knitted modules as in puzzle pieces, and eventually take their acquired appreciation and understanding of materials and making into adulthood.

Having previously worked in costume for kids theatre, and then becoming a mother herself, Maija is acutely aware of society's legacy to the next generation. Motivated to change the current fashion industry to foreground people and especially children, whose views she feels are overlooked, a key strand of Maija's and Almaborealis' operations are the workshops that she conducts with children (and their parents), exploring how children feel about clothes, and guiding them in creating their own. This feedback on the children's needs and likes inputs directly into Maija's innovation process.

Products are plastic-free and sold as kits including stitching templates, to enable learning of simple sewing skills to make a 3D item and are either 'free play' containing a selection of pieces or designed to create a specific item such as a beanie hat, scarf, or dress. Maija is currently the sole worker, a designer-maker, knitting everything herself, also running the business, maintaining the website, marketing and dealing with orders, but has ambitions to scale up so she can eventually have the products made externally, in small batches (whilst being aware of the financial risks this might bring).

Along her journey, Maija has been resourceful, seeking out and receiving support in several ways, including finding an affordable space to operate, via her own

contacts. Having lost her part time teaching post at Dundee University in the initial pandemic lockdown in 2020, Maija decided to focus on developing the business through a crowdfunding campaign, bringing clients to the business. Being shortlisted for the Dezeen Awards in Wearable Design was also a boost to publicity and brought new overseas clients. Whilst at Dundee, Maija became aware of opportunities for external support, including Dundee's Venture award, her first external funding (of just £4000). She then took part in the general business Accelerator programme run by Elevator Scotland. Almaborealis was shortlisted twice for the Converse Challenge competitions run by Scottish universities, leading to useful networks and publicity, if not funding. Other support has included creative entrepreneurship courses run by both Robert Gordon University and the Crafts Council, more appropriate in focus than those support systems broadly directed to include high growth technology start-ups. Although some of the support has not been tailored to creative businesses, there has been much to learn, and the support helped clarify ideas for the business. Finding appropriate craft and design networks has been key to Maija's engagement with other makers for mutual support.

Small amounts of funding enabled Maija to keep her micro business going, and she is now looking for more substantial funding or a loan tailored to her sustainable fashion business with modest ambition for organic growth, as opposed to immediate 6-figure expansion. In five years, the ambition is to have outside production and one or two people working in the business, and Maija has plans to extend the business to adult's wear, building on positive feedback from workshops.

Constantly responsive to new opportunities, via a project with Applied Art Scotland, funded by Creative Scotland and Creative Informatics, Maija has recently experimented with virtual prototyping using a virtual reality headset to develop new design ideas – saving her own time whilst maintaining creativity using a 3D sketching tool. Maija Nygren's clear purpose and resourcefulness has enabled her to take advantage of small-scale support and training opportunities whilst maintaining longer term focus.

*"The fashion industry, and many other industries as well, how they operate behind these hidden doors.....would they continue it if they knew that the children were watching?"*

Maija Nygren

## CASE STUDY: Billy Tannery



*We're trying to turn waste into something useful - waste into worth is what we call it.*

*That's what's happened in the leather industry as much as in many other industries. It's become so industrialised that it's completely disconnected from the natural systems that it could be benefiting.*

*What I want to be trying to do with our businesses is having a positive story on the different things you can do with leather and trying to promote leather as the sustainable material that it is. It is about getting people to think a little bit differently about it.*

Billy Tannery

### Key Facts:

Name of Organisation: Billy Tannery

Founders: Jack Millington and Rory Harker

Website: <https://www.billytannery.co.uk/>

Type of initiative: Limited Company

Sector: Leather goods

## Key Takeaways:

- Finding and creating value from underused resources that would otherwise end up in waste streams.
- Appreciation of traditional leather crafts as the central philosophy.
- Ambition to become a vehicle for change, rethinking the British leather industry for the future.
- Pushing the traditional boundaries of what tanneries can offer and do. Innovation and doing things differently as one of the core business values.
- Sufficient profitability, not endless scaling up, as the goal of company growth.

## Overview:

Billy Tannery is an artisanal vegetable micro-tannery based in the Midlands. The company runs an end-to-end leather business from its own tannery set up on a family farm to the finished leather goods.

The original inspiration for the business came from the family history of one of the co-founders, Jack Millington, who uncovered serious waste issues with goat hides from the meat industry through his father's involvement in farming. After many years of research and development alongside his job in marketing, Jack finally launched Billy Tannery on the premises of his father's farm, with his friend Rory Harker, the company's creative director, in 2017. With their aim to give value to goat hides that would otherwise end up in waste streams, Jack now tans goat hides in their own small tannery, collaborating with a handful of UK leather workshops that turn their designs into products mainly sold direct to customer through the company's website and their newsletter following.

Thanks to an initial collaboration with experts from the Institute for Creative Leather Technologies at the University of Northampton, Billy Tannery operates a set up that recycles all used liquids between the tanning batches, considerably reducing water use in the process and producing an effluent that can be spread on the farmland. Such integration of the company's operations into the ecosystem within which it operates is one of the core pillars of the company's philosophy. Jack's ambitions for the future include pushing their process innovations even further, to encourage maximum circularity between the tannery and the farms that produce their hides, interweaving the story of leather production with the story of regenerative agriculture.

Although there are still some vegetable tanneries left in the UK, the uniqueness of Billy Tannery's model is in their leather production for their own signature bags, backpacks, small accessories as well as limited edition design collaborations with a range of fashion and hospitality businesses. Future plans include diversifying product range, expanding collaborations and building capacity for a B2B goat

and deer leather production. The driving mission of the Billy Tannery is pushing the boundaries of process innovation while telling a nuanced, non-binary story of leather and becoming a force for rebuilding the traditional UK leather industry for the future. As Jack says, he'd be in the wrong business if he ever arrived at a point when he'd be fully satisfied, feeling that his job was all done.

*"It's not black and white, it's not 'this is good and that is bad'. There are different types of leathers, some are better than others and some are great, and some are bad. And this is the nuanced story that I want to tell. I'm focused on what is going to waste and what needs to be used. That's why we started with goats."*

*Billy Tannery*



## CASE STUDY: OUBAS Knitwear



*“Bringing skills, keeping skills going, and keeping the industry going in the UK was a massive motivator. Then making out of natural fibres and not making out of plastics, and using British wools.*

*We’d like to just create a sustainable range that we can design creatively, that I can have the team here always learning, and to have an environment that is not high stress and high pressure, but we’re able to make a good quality product and not constantly pushing for high growth, and we’ve got it to a point where it’s a sustainable business.*

*You realise the breadth of what you do when you run the business. There’s lots of different areas that are creative and it’s all part of it. I think when design students want to start their own labels, it’s actually learning lots of the different skills that you need to build up, and not getting overwhelmed – that’s quite a skill in a start-up.”*

Kate Stalker, OUBAS Knitwear

### Key Facts:

Name of Organisation: OUBAS Knitwear

Website: <https://www.oubasknitwear.co.uk/>

Type of initiative: Limited Company

Sector: Clothing/knitwear

Target market(s): Womenswear/Menswear

## Key Takeaways:

- Aiming for a sustainable business through organic growth, balancing creativity, quality product and environmental stewardship through transparency and education.
- Direct communication with customers to engage with key messages, build community and generate understanding of fibres and textiles.
- Developing the local ecosystem and networking amongst like-minded designers and customers is key to supporting sustainable (fashion) businesses and countering the focus on London.

## Overview:

Having studied knitwear at Winchester School of Art, and then worked in the fashion industry for 18 months, Kate Stalker returned to Cumbria and set up her own knitwear business in 2012 to satisfy her need to be creative. Making the pieces herself initially, after three years she started producing small batches of knitwear working with manufacturers and mills in the UK. In 2021, with the support of the Rural Payments Agency to enable job creation, OUBAS was able to invest in two industrial knitting machines and set up its own workshop. The business now has three employees working alongside the two directors, Kate and her husband, who helps part time.

OUBAS offers a stable range of design-led pieces that are updated seasonally with new colours and occasionally new styles are added. Knitwear is made to order in a range of natural fibres - various wools, cashmere, cotton and linen - rather than being made for stock, so making only what is needed. Most sales are direct to consumers, plus there are a few local and UK retail clients. OUBAS recently opened a small showroom in the workshop. Kate plans to expand the bespoke side of the business to accommodate more customisation and personalisation beyond sizing choices. She also envisages offering small order knitwear production services to other designers, utilising her recently gained knowledge of programming the industrial machines. In Kate's words "I think we could be more of an incubator hub, and I can do training and teaching here too".

As the business has settled in its new situation, Kate is aiming to work more on issues related to sustainability, and is developing a sustainability report for the company, working with an intern. She is interested in developing recycled yarns, created from textile and knitwear waste collected regionally, in collaboration with a contact in Yorkshire. Developing knowledge of the local and regional networks and ecosystem is generating more ideas for collaborations such as working with local farmers to develop products using their own fibres, and working with the regional Fibreshed organisation in relation to the creation of new flax and linen production.

One of the company's biggest challenges is the evolution of online marketing through social media which has become more expensive, and also how to counter the impact and greenwashing of big high street businesses. Returning to more analogue marketing is one solution being developed.

Plans include building a community with OUBAS customers, offering events, workshops and other engagement activities with sustainability, textiles and caring for clothes at the core. Education is also on the future agenda, linking up with local schools to take pupils on work experience and introduce them to the creative textile and knitwear industry.

Being based in Cumbria, Kate is aware that there is a need to create more of a regional ecosystem that can provide coaching and mentoring, as most initiatives on sustainable fashion are London-based. Particularly, mentoring for businesses that are beyond the start-up stage, that have different challenges, having learnt what their strengths and weaknesses are, and where support might be needed in areas they are not so good at.

Kate would also like to see a collective body responsible for UK grown fibres beyond just wool, and also help facilitate shared bulk buying at more favourable prices for small businesses. This new body could also help transparency, accreditation and promotion of all the actors along the textile supply chain, connecting designers with mills and farmers to share knowledge and communicate the provenance of fibres to the public. After 10 years in business, and recent investment in production facilities, OUBAS is poised for exciting future developments.

*"You learn that leadership and vision are equally important. I've learnt more business and financial acumen, but the emotional, vision side is what kept me going."*

Kate Stalker

## Appendix 2: Study methodology

Table 1. Organisations approached for collaboration (shortlisted on location and remit)	
Scotland (7 organisations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Entrepreneurial Spark</li> <li>● Elevator</li> <li>● Women's Business Centre</li> <li>● The Future Economy Company</li> <li>● Fashion Foundry</li> <li>● Zero Waste Scotland</li> <li>● Women's Enterprise Scotland</li> </ul>
Midlands (23 organisations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● STEAMHouse Birmingham</li> <li>● The Big House Nottingham</li> <li>● Leicester Start Ups</li> <li>● Spark Business Incubation Centre, Wolverhampton</li> <li>● Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership Accelerator</li> <li>● Mansfield Innovation Centre</li> <li>● Dryden Enterprise Centre NTU</li> <li>● Fashion Enter Leicester</li> <li>● Leicester &amp; Leicestershire LEP</li> <li>● Birmingham and Solihull LEP</li> <li>● Coventry and Warwick LEP</li> <li>● Southeast Midlands LEP</li> <li>● Worcestershire LEP</li> <li>● NBV Enterprise Centre</li> <li>● Real Creative Futures</li> <li>● The Creative Quarter, Nottingham</li> <li>● Sparkhouse Lincoln, University of Lincoln</li> <li>● Bizzin business incubator, University of Birmingham</li> <li>● Coventry University – Social Enterprise</li> <li>● Innovation Hothouse, University of Derby</li> <li>● Bseen, Birmingham</li> <li>● Leicester Innovation Hub, University of Leicester</li> <li>● The Innovation Centre, De Montfort University</li> </ul>

Northwest (17 organisations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Creative Lancashire</li> <li>● The Business Growth Hub, Manchester</li> <li>● The Growth Company, Manchester</li> <li>● Northern Clothing and Textile Network</li> <li>● UKFT Rise</li> <li>● Liverpool LEP</li> <li>● Cumbria LEP</li> <li>● Lancashire LEP</li> <li>● Greater Manchester LEP</li> <li>● Cheshire and Warrington LEP</li> <li>● Innospace – Manchester Metropolitan University</li> <li>● Northwest Textiles Network</li> <li>● The Fashion Network, Manchester</li> <li>● Create Oldham/Hack Oldham</li> <li>● Business Growth Programme, Liverpool</li> <li>● ID Manchester</li> <li>● Knowledge Quarter Liverpool</li> </ul>
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**Note:** The responsiveness of organisations to enquiries varied between regions, reflected in the different number of organisations approached in each region.

The process of identifying and securing support organisations to partner with highlighted key elements for setting up successful, long-term collaborations within the MSE support sector across regions, especially when working with online communication channels remotely over a short timeframe of 8 months. The research team noted that:

**a). New relationship building requires focused time and sensitivity** to the needs, expectations, and possibilities of potential participants to capture understanding of internal, external, and human push and pull factors.

**b). Many support organisations face considerable limitations in their capacity** for engagement linked to both funding and staffing problems. A critical issue was the ending of EU funded projects that focused on delivery of MSE/SME support programmes and accelerators in the UK regions. These funding shortfalls have considerable impacts on the prospects of the MSE/SME support sector, resulting in reactive ways of working and the prioritisation of short-termism and existing strategies, as opposed to proactive, future-focused outcomes (as promoted in the Fashion as Sustainability in Action framework).

**c). Flexible formats and timelines are needed that allow for co-creation.** In response to the pilot workshop (February 2022) and initial feedback from support organisations, the anticipated format of a 3-hour workshop, followed by a 6-week trial period and a final reflection session, was restructured into one multi-stream

workshop that accommodated participants from multiple departments of one organisation together with some of their collaborators or partner organisations.

<b>Table 2. Workshops conducted between February and July 2022</b>	
Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Elevator (Workshop)</li> <li>● The Future Economy Company (Workshop exploratory conversation to be followed up post-project)</li> <li>● Fashion Foundry (Workshop exploratory conversation to be followed up post-project)</li> </ul>
Northwest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Creative Lancashire (Workshop)</li> <li>● Super Slow Way (Workshop)</li> <li>● The Business Growth Hub (Workshop)</li> </ul>
London	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Poplar Works (Workshop)</li> <li>● The Trampery (Workshop)</li> <li>● Cockpit Arts (Workshop)</li> </ul>

### **Workshop design and delivery**

The Fashion as Sustainability in Action framework promotes a proactive approach and draws attention to four interconnected areas of sustainable prosperity. It highlights indicators that go beyond the currently recognised measures of success in business. Lack of resources and capacity can limit experimentation in organisations to innovate the kinds of support MSEs need in the current context.

The design of the workshop methodology was led by five key objectives identified by the research team for the learning journey of the workshop participants:

- **Consider**  
Why sustainability is important on both personal and organisational levels.
- **Reflect**  
On support already provided and the support the organisation would like to provide in the short-term and long-term future.
- **Learn to think holistically**  
Through understanding the interconnected nature of sustainable prosperity, across the four dimensions of culture, society, environment, and economy.
- **Explore**

Challenges and opportunities across the four areas of prosperity, with concrete examples of current and planned support.

- **Offer**

Ambitions and key takeaways mapped against 3 levels of transformation; 1. Awareness, 2. Ideation and 3. Shift, to help identify how to bridge the gap between current and future reality.

Considering the 5 objectives, the workshop format translated the key sections of the Guidebook *Fashion as Sustainability in Action* into an interactive learning session of 3hr duration. The sessions were delivered online by 2 or 3 members of the research team and structured in 3 parts, progressing from discussion to education and finally to the mentoring and co-creation element. The learning journey in each of the four areas of sustainable prosperity was accompanied by case study examples of best practice in each one of them, introducing the work of the micro and small businesses that contributed to the research for the Guidebook. The core part of the session was highly interactive, with discussions, mutual probing, listening and reflections around the four areas of prosperity. This process was facilitated by accompanying graphic material and mapping using the online Miro board interface created for this purpose (shared before and during the session, see p.16 )<sup>24</sup>.

The pilot workshop conducted in February 2022 confirmed that this format better reflected the capacity and working structure of the support organisations and offered potential for outcomes that can be more easily implemented into their everyday practice.

### MSE Interviews

Table 3. MSE interviews conducted in May-June 2022	
Scotland (2 interviews)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Alma Borealis</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Hayley McSporran</a></li> </ul>
Midlands (1 interview)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Billy Tannery</a></li> </ul>
Northwest (2 interviews)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">OUBAS Knitwear</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Frida Rome</a></li> </ul>

<sup>24</sup> This material was developed with reference to previous research from Stockholm Resilience Centre's planetary boundaries [Planetary boundaries - Stockholm Resilience Centre](#), La Fleur de l'Agroécologie [La Fleur de l'Agroécologie - Fermes d'avenir \(fermesdavenir.org\)](#) and Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

## **Policy roundtable**

To engage with policy activity a roundtable session 'Defining Fashion's Roadmap to Sustainable Prosperity' hosted a discussion between policy makers, representatives of support organisations that took part in this research and the CSF research team. Facilitated by Fashion Roundtable lobby organisation, the topics covered focused on the findings and recommendations formulated through the original Fostering Sustainable Practices research<sup>25</sup> and its further development through workshops conducted with support organisations in regions outside London. The conversation focused on policy actions required to support the implementation of the four agendas of sustainable prosperity (cultural, social, environmental and economic sustainability) in the MSE support sector and beyond. The policy recommendations refined through this discussion are summarised in the concluding section of this paper (see p. 25).

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<sup>25</sup> See <https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/fsp>