

inpractice

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Climate Action and Green Recovery

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Sustainable Transport in the Ecology Sector – Finding a Greener Way

Part of the Action 2030 Project

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Most ecologists entered the sector because they wanted to make a difference and improve our environment. But with long travel distances frequently required, it can sometimes feel like we might be doing more harm than good. Over 75 of you took the time to respond to a recent CIEEM questionnaire on transport in the sector and it seems many of us are aware of this apparent dichotomy. One respondent summarised the issue succinctly:

"I frequently think I sadly contribute more to environmental 'damage' by the huge amount of driving to-from office and to-from rural sites."

Many of us will also have made significant changes to our lifestyles during the recent COVID-19 lockdowns, with those changes having the fortuitous by-product of helping to reduce our environmental impact. It seems there has never been a better time for the ecology sector to stop and think

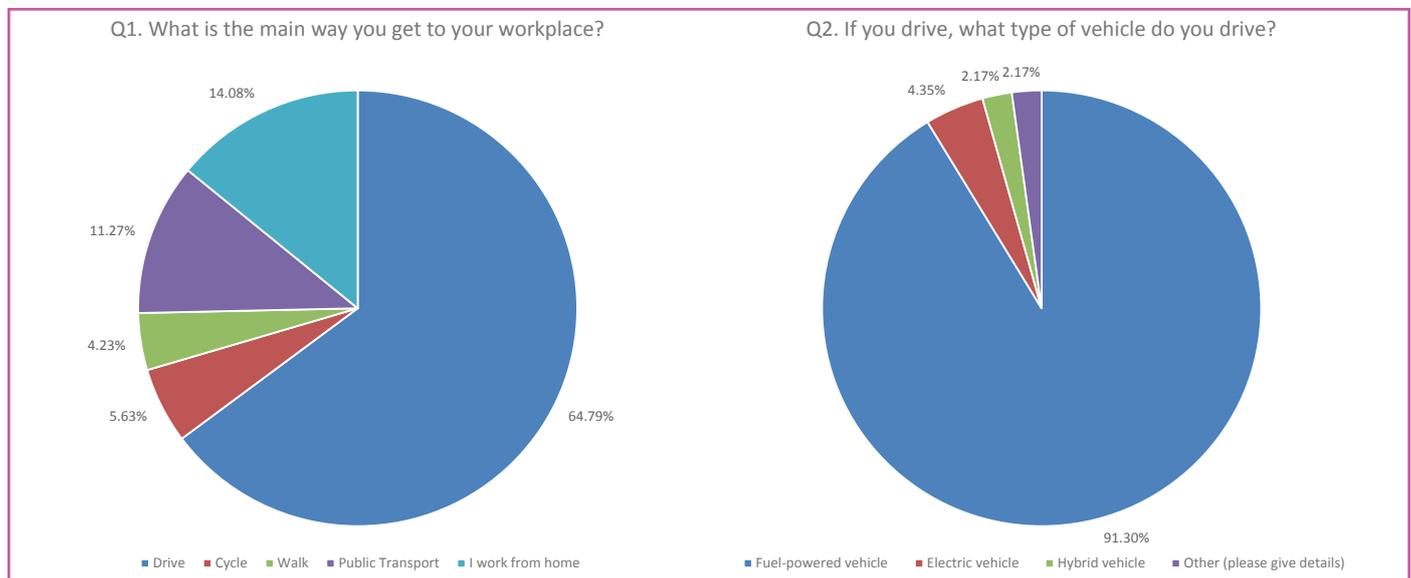


Figure 1. Commuting habits of CIEEM members who responded to our questionnaire.

about our role in the climate emergency. This article aims to generate a discussion amongst the profession about what we can do to minimise our carbon footprints despite the significant amount of travel that our work often entails.

How to reduce emissions from our daily commute

Ecologists, as nature lovers, tend to live in the countryside, and so for many of us a commute from our homes to a base office is part of our routine. Of the survey respondents, 65% did that commute in a private vehicle, and over 90% of those vehicles are fossil fuel-powered (Figure 1). The CO₂ equivalent of a daily commute of an hour in a vehicle with an engine size of 1.4 L is roughly two tonnes per year (www.mapmyemissions.com), so over half of us are emitting two tonnes of CO₂ a year, before we've even reached the office!

Employers can play a role in encouraging their employees to use more sustainable options for their commute. We asked members to provide information on assistance provided by their employers to encourage uptake of sustainable transport options – results are shown in Figure 2.

Financial incentives

Financial incentives are one way to encourage people to use more sustainable transport for their commute. There are a range of tax incentives available for employers to encourage their employees to use sustainable transport options; including salary sacrifice schemes, such as the Cycle to Work scheme and the Tax saver scheme for public transport in Ireland. Over 80% of respondents said that the Cycle to Work scheme was available to them and roughly 15% had access to salary sacrifice schemes for public transport tickets.

Employers could go one step further by offering an 'Environmental Rewards Scheme' to give employees financial remuneration for sustainable transport choices. Our survey results showed only 7% of employers were currently providing financial incentives for their employees to use sustainable transport. Whilst offering a financial incentive may seem expensive to employers, in practice even a few hundred pounds at Christmas time could be a nice bonus for 'doing the right thing'.

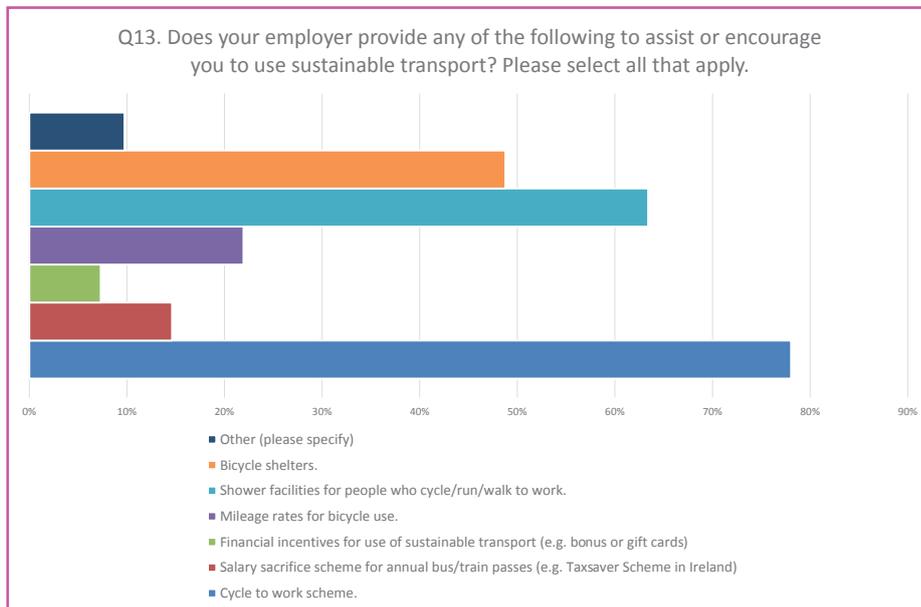


Figure 2. Incentives for use of sustainable transport, as reported by respondents to the questionnaire.

Practical considerations

Many respondents said that practicality and safety concerns were their main reasons for not using public transport or cycling for their commute. Whilst this is not a simple fix, employers should, when considering options for new offices, select locations that are on public transport routes and/or cycle paths. Flexible working hours would also help, as employees can make use of sometimes sporadic transport timetables or to cycle/walk outside peak traffic

hours when it is safer to be on the road. Employers could also provide facilities such as bike shelters and showers for those choosing to cycle to work.

Remote working

A simple way to help employees reduce their emissions is to allow greater use of home working where possible and facilitating combinations of home and office working. Respondents to our questionnaire reported that most employers allow some degree of remote working (Figure 3), but

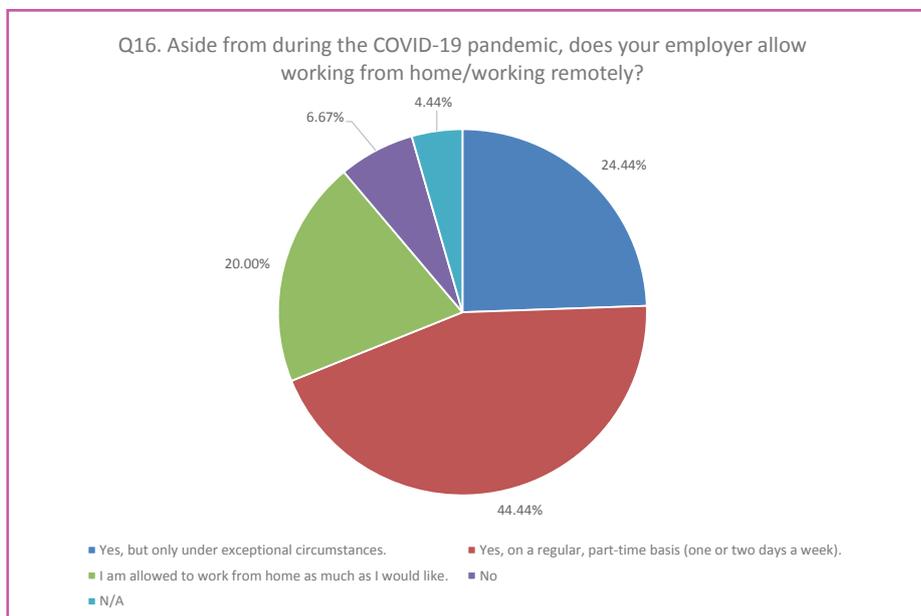


Figure 3. Remote working policies, as reported by respondents to the questionnaire.

many respondents said that they would like their employers to allow more flexibility in this regard. The coronavirus pandemic has shown us just how much home working is possible, though it might not be the right option for everyone.

However, working from home is not the only option for remote working. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of 'Shared Office Space' facilities in small towns and villages throughout the UK and Ireland. Such facilities offer workers the opportunity to get out of their houses and into a dedicated working space without the long, stressful commute. These spaces have the added benefit of keeping people within their communities and working alongside their neighbours, helping to reduce social isolation and increase community cohesion.

The carbon footprint of fieldwork

Somewhat ironically, ecologists and other environmental professionals may be particularly high carbon emitters as a result of their work practices. Ecological

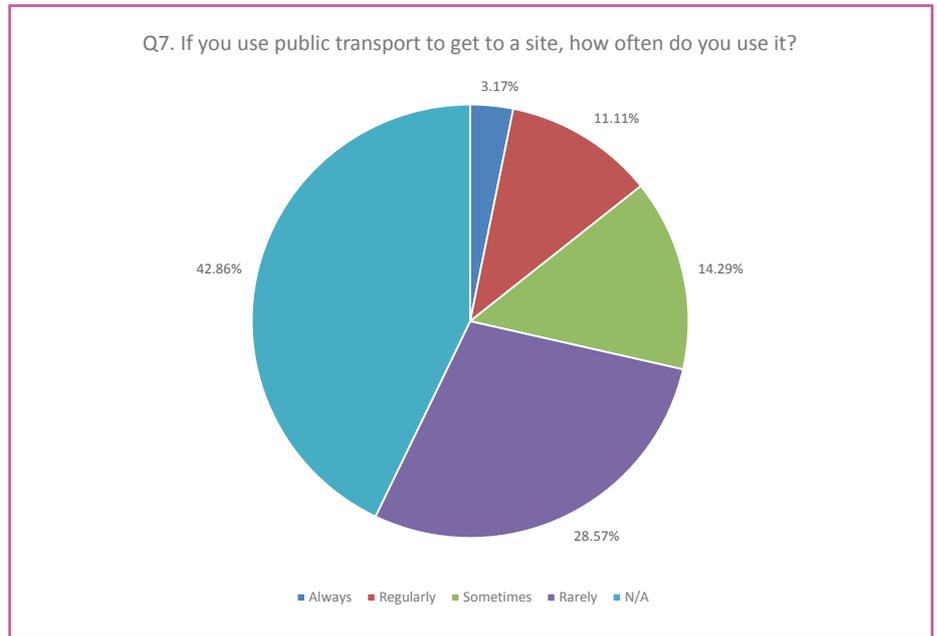


Figure 4. Public transport usage for fieldwork, as reported by respondents to the questionnaire.

survey work requires us to work in remote areas and regular trips are often required. Our survey found that over 90% of respondents travel to fieldwork in their own vehicles, the majority of which are

traditional fuel powered cars. How can we reduce the impact of fieldwork without compromising the quality of our work? Several options are considered below.



Public transport for fieldwork

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the nature of our work, responses to the questionnaire revealed low levels of public transport usage in fieldwork (Figure 4). As many respondents pointed out, use of public transport or cycling/walking is rarely feasible for fieldwork due to the lack of options, safety concerns of walking/cycling and the requirement to transport bulky equipment. Employers may also be concerned about the additional time required to travel to site, though the use of public transport and the associated extra time required could be built into fee proposals and could be used as a selling point in tenders, demonstrating the 'green credentials' of the tenderer.

Use of electric vehicles

Where public transport or cycling/walking is not an option, the most obvious way to reduce emissions from fieldwork mileage is to use electric vehicles. Our survey results showed that the high initial purchase cost of such vehicles reduces their feasibility, especially for low-waged workers. A lot of fieldwork is done by those starting out in their careers who are on very low wages or on zero-hours contracts. Therefore, it would be beneficial to provide incentives such as more favourable mileage rates for use of electric vehicles.

Employers could also provide an electric pool car for employees to use for field work. Whilst this may incur a large initial investment, grant aid is available in both Ireland and the UK to assist with initial vehicle purchase and the cost of installing charging points in office premises. Providing electric pool cars would also save money in the long term and will give employees a sense of well-being in reducing the emissions of their work. Many people find electric vehicles more comfortable and relaxing to drive, which will make long journeys more pleasant. Some survey respondents also expressed concern about the range, capacity and all terrain ability of electric vehicles. Whilst these vehicles may not be suitable for every single site visit, could larger 4WD vehicles be hired when required, rather than used routinely?

Fieldwork planning – sustainability assessments

As we are all aware, good planning is critical for the safe and successful outcome of survey work. The preparation of risk assessments for fieldwork is now a routine exercise for ecologists. Could we apply the same method to reducing our carbon emissions? Consideration could be given to undertaking 'Sustainability Assessments' for fieldwork, where all options are considered for reducing emissions, such as use of local surveyors, options for use of public transport, electric vehicle charging points along the route. Some sustainable transport options might require compromises (for example, a public transport journey might take longer than a car journey), but might also have benefits (for example, it's often feasible to work on public transport, so whilst the journey may take longer, it may be more productive). Sustainability Assessments should also be combined with Health and Safety Risk Assessments to take into consideration the potential hazards of sustainable transport options, such as cycling on busy roads. Evaluating all the options for a journey and deciding what compromises we are and aren't prepared to make may ultimately help us to make more sustainable choices.

The way forward

Both the climate crisis and the global pandemic have shown us that change is necessary and that it needs to come soon. As ecologists, we should be at the very forefront of that change. As the response to our questionnaire has demonstrated, there is a high level of interest in this topic amongst CIEEM members and here we have highlighted just a few options. To help us all find a way forward, we've set up a LinkedIn discussion post (<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/4306428/>), where we've posted the full results from the survey. This can be used as a platform to share ideas for encouraging the uptake of sustainable transport and tips for planning fieldwork to reduce your emissions. Please join in the conversation to help ecologists find their greener way forward.

Action 2030

In September 2019, CIEEM declared a climate emergency and biodiversity crisis – but a declaration means nothing without action. That is why we launched Action 2030: a project which sees us reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2030 and leading the way for our profession in taking urgent action to address the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis.

Find out more at:
www.cieem.net/action-2030

About the Authors



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