

# ***Beyond Profit: Exploring the Landscape of Sustainability at Small Businesses in County Durham***

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## **Introduction**

Sustainability is more than just a concept; it's a way of life. My dissertation journey took me into the heart of three inspiring small businesses in County Durham: REfUSE Café, Recyke Y'Bike, and The Weigh To Shop to explore how they navigate the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic.

Essentially, REfUSE Café turns surplus food into affordable meals, Recyke Y'Bike refurbishes discarded bicycles and The Weigh To Shop offers package-free shopping.

My research aimed to understand how these small businesses balance profit and purpose, often pushing back against the profit-driven model that dominates modern economies. Through participant observation, interviews, and deep ethnographic engagement, I unravelled the complexities of their sustainability practices and uncovered the vibrant, interconnected networks that sustain them.

## **Finding Relief and Purpose in Sustainability**

Coming from a culture where food is sacred and waste is taboo, moving to the UK was a shock. I saw food discarded at alarming rates due to policies, arbitrary "use by" dates and general negligence. It wasn't just the food, it was the wasted water, energy, and labour behind it. Finding REfUSE Café felt like a breath of fresh air: a space where waste was seen as a resource, something to be cherished.

My months of volunteering at REfUSE allowed me to connect with this ethos. The pay-as-you-feel model invited people from all walks of life, and being part of this made me feel like I was contributing to something real and meaningful.

## **Findings and Insights**

Through my time with these businesses, I learned that sustainability is both challenging and rewarding:

### **1. Interconnected Networks:**

I shockingly discovered, that these businesses were not standalone ventures but were interconnected, relying on community networks to flourish. REfUSE, Recyke Y'Bike, and The Weigh To Shop worked together in various capacities, sharing volunteers, participating in joint events, and lending support to one another. These collaborative relationships created a local ecosystem of sustainability, allowing them to benefit from shared resources and collective strength. This interconnectedness demonstrated that sustainability is not just an individual pursuit but a community-wide effort.

## 2. Volunteers as Central Actors:

Volunteers play an indispensable role in these enterprises, forming the foundation upon which their sustainability efforts are built. Their dedication and passion were evident throughout my research. They all try fostering an environment that feels more like a family than a workplace. The enthusiasm of the volunteers ensured that the sustainability goals of each business remained at the forefront of operations.

## 3. Sustainability as an Everyday Practice:

Sustainability at these businesses was not limited to the larger objectives; it extended into the everyday actions of staff and volunteers. The founders, staff and volunteers embodied sustainable living in their daily routines, whether it was repurposing materials, minimising waste, or encouraging others to make conscious choices. Sustainability became more than a practice; it was a mindset, embraced at both individual and collective levels.

## 4. Navigating Compromises:

Despite their deep commitment to sustainability, these businesses often faced practical challenges that required compromises. For instance, during busy lunch hours at the cafe, keeping the grill on continuously was essential for maintaining service efficiency, even if it meant increased energy use. At the bike store, not every bicycle part could be salvaged, despite best efforts. The zero-waste shop sometimes offered packaged goods to meet customer demand. These choices highlighted the inherent balancing act in trying to maintain high sustainability standards while also meeting practical business needs. Far from being shortcomings, these compromises reflected the adaptability and realism necessary for long-term sustainability.

## **Reflections on the Journey**

Looking back, this research was more than an academic exercise, it was a real human experience. Volunteering at REfUSE allowed me to witness firsthand the impact of sustainable practices and the sense of community that emerges from shared efforts. It was heartwarming to witness in person what the enterprise meant to the locals.

Finishing my dissertation was difficult, bereavement in the final stages left me feeling incomplete about my writing. But it's the experiences I had, the people I met, and the stories I heard that mattered most. They showed me that sustainability is a collective journey, full of small but meaningful steps, driven by people who care.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

This journey taught me that sustainability is not about grand gestures, it's about everyday choices, small actions, and community-driven change. The 3 case studies showed that small businesses can have a big impact when sustainability is lived, shared, and rooted in genuine commitment.

True change starts at the grassroots level, in the relationships we nurture and the resilience we build. It's not about perfection but about caring enough to try, adapting, and striving for better. Real impact grows from collective, bottom-up efforts.

This journey showed me the power of collective commitment, ordinary people taking action, proving that we can all be agents of meaningful change.

