



# GREEN AUDIT CONFERENCE:

## SHAPING THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN THE FITNESS INDUSTRY

*Gisella Guglielminotti, Policy Officer at EuropeActive, welcomed the participants at the Final Conference of the Green Audit Project. In a concerted effort to address the pressing environmental concerns facing the fitness industry, stakeholders gathered on 11 April 2024, at FIBO, Cologne, to delve into sustainability strategies and implementation. Hosted by EuropeActive, the event provided a platform for insightful discussions and exchanges on this crucial topic.*

### MAURITS GROEN SETS THE SCENE OF THE GREEN AUDIT PROJECT

**Maurits Groen**, sustainability entrepreneur and consultant, kicked off the conference by shedding light on the Green Audit project. Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme, the Green Audit project aims to address this challenge by providing support to sports and fitness clubs/centres, as well as industry stakeholders, who may find it difficult to navigate the European and international landscape of environmental sustainability and enhance the sustainability of their structures. In a humble attempt to support fitness and sport stakeholders to take the first steps in their sustainability journey, EuropeActive, together with the Green Audit project consortium, has been working together since June 2022 on two essential components of the project:



The Green Audit Self-Assessments Tool which seeks to offer fitness and sport club/centre managers and owners a comprehensive overview and understanding of their club/centre's current sustainability efforts, and to provide insights for further progress. The tool was officially launched in October 2023 and is available online.



The Recommendations for greener sport and fitness sectors intended to offer a strategic approach and inspire the green transition within the fitness and sport sectors.

## URGENCY IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CRISIS

Drawing attention to the 2015 Paris Agreement, Maurits emphasised the imperative to curb greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate climate change. The Agreement's goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius underscores the critical need for immediate action. However, the reality paints a grim picture, with humanity consistently overshooting the Earth's sustainable limits, as evidenced by Earth Overshoot Day occurring earlier each year. As the fitness industry grapples with its environmental footprint, the urgency to adopt sustainable practices becomes increasingly apparent and necessary. Sustainability can no longer be considered a 'nice-have' – it must become an essential requirement mandated within the sector.

## FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SECTOR

The outcomes of the Green Audit self-assessment trial have been very telling: those who responded are not very far along their sustainability journey, yet respondents are most likely to be interested in it, suggesting potential progress within close reach. Key recommendations to advance sustainability in the sector include:



Compiling a concise handbook with practical information, advice, and tips for the sector on topics such as waste prevention, energy and cost-saving measures.



Entrusting the responsibility for the topic and its support materials (handbooks, leaflets, workshops, webinars) to National Associations, as they possess the best understanding of their country-specific challenges and opportunities for resources and financial support.

## EU GREEN CLAIMS DIRECTIVE

**Ineke Vlot**, acting as the Green Audit project's sustainability expert from Stichting Milieukeur, addressed the implications of the EU Green Claims Directive, which aims to combat the prevalence of misleading green claims and align with the circular economy objectives of the EU Green Deal. A recent commission study found that 40% of environmental claims are unsubstantiated, and 53.3% are vague, misleading, or unfounded.

In response, the EU has taken steps to curb this practice, making it significantly harder for businesses to make unsubstantiated or false environmental claims, which could potentially damage their reputation. For businesses in the fitness sector, making business-to-consumer environmental claims requires substantiating them through scientific methods and verified 'ex ante' by a designated third-party conformity assessment body (or another Member State), and receiving a conformity certificate. While certification requirements are stringent, there is currently no label for the sustainability level of fitness clubs, prompting discussions about the need for standardized ecolabels at EU level. The adoption of EU Green Claims by the European Parliament on 12 March 2024 awaits approval by the Council of the EU post-June elections, with implementation expected within 24 to 36 months.



## BEST PRACTICES FROM SECTOR STAKEHOLDERS

A dynamic panel discussion showcased exemplary initiatives from industry leaders committed to sustainability. From reducing energy consumption and water usage to implementing renewable energy solutions, representatives from different sized organisations showcased their commitment to environmental stewardship.

**Ricardo Rosado Villaverde**, Sustainability and Quality Manager at GO-fit, outlined strategies employed by the organisation to reduce their carbon footprint by 59%, emphasising the importance of verified carbon footprint data and energy efficiency plans and highlighting the savings achieved through biomass energy creation and reduced water flow rates. He also shared some examples and best practices relevant for reaching this milestone:

- Each centre has its own efficiency plan, closely monitored with all staff involved in both implementation and creation.
- Biomass energy creation, resulting in a 19% energy saving.
- Reduced water flow rate in clubs, although the exact difference wasn't measured.
- Replacement of all urinals with dry urinals, which was easily accepted by clients.
- One of the most impactful ways to reduce carbon footprint is by addressing air conditioning systems. Traditional HFCs are both environmentally harmful and costly.
- Transitioning to a water-based system (H<sub>2</sub>O) is a significant change that businesses can make to achieve substantial environmental benefits.
- GO-fit secured subsidies for sustainable renovations; In the Netherlands, obtaining financial support for such initiatives is straightforward and often tax-deductible, as mentioned by Maurits.

**Hyke Van Der Heijden**, Entrepreneur and Director at De Leyens, highlighted how he was able to make a significant transition by converting their heating system from gas to electricity. While this change involved considerable expense and initial investment, it is projected to yield long-term benefits, with a return on investment anticipated within approximately 7 to 10 years.

- In line with principles of the circular economy and equipment reuse, they furnished their interior exclusively with refurbished items. All machines were sourced from the second-hand market, a significant sector, and to enhance customer perception, they simply modified the seat colours to impart a fresh and dynamic appearance.
- By promoting cycling internally, they successfully encouraged 55% of their clientele to commute to the club by bike. This initiative was remarkably straightforward to implement and has the added advantage of reducing turnover times, as customers arrive already warmed up.
- There is a notable trend among banks to favour loans for sustainable choices. This reflects a growing reality and underscores the importance of proactively embracing sustainable practices before they become mandatory.



**Alan Bennet**, Operations Manager at Sport Ireland Campus, highlighted that Sport Ireland has developed a comprehensive sustainability strategy, and shared some practical steps and suggestions:

- The first step involves data logging, which is easily accessible. For Ireland Active's initial audit, basic data such as bills were utilised, emphasising the importance of saving energy as a primary and straightforward step.
- Educating staff, even on minor actions like turning off lights, is crucial. The more staff involved, the more impactful these small actions become.
- Changing mindsets is fundamental in the fitness sector, particularly given the predominance of younger generations seeking employers with strong ESG and sustainability practices.
- Engaging major club operators is essential for driving sustainability initiatives across the market.
- The industry should not waste time neglecting improvements in sustainability. There are simple and feasible changes that should be implemented.
- For instance, the installation of covered bike sheds not only keeps bikes dry but also addresses staff needs for drying cycling clothes, promoting the use of cycling facilities and reducing mobility footprint.
- The swimming pool is the largest consumer of resources on the campus and within the leisure sector.
- Each degree reduction in water temperature represents significant financial savings. During the pandemic, Sport Ireland reduced water temperature from 29 to 27 degrees; a shift to 27 degrees could easily be the new standard, suggesting a psychological adjustment.
- Implementing UV lamps can reduce chlorine usage and affect water temperature.
- Transitioning from fixed temperature showers to push-button controls with temperature choices will lead to cost savings.

**Matthias H. Lehner**, Bodystreet's Founder & CEO, highlighted Bodystreet's journey towards sustainability began in 2013 when they engaged an agency to develop a CSR report. Being a franchise brand, each gym is operated by franchisees, raising concerns about implementing a unified sustainability strategy. Interestingly, despite variations in staff numbers and energy consumption across franchises, they all share small studio spaces ranging from 40 to 80 square meters, minimising resource usage. Additionally, they opted for hot towel solutions instead of showers, promoting efficient water use.

- The green footprint is ingrained in their brand DNA, and Matthias suggests that if it's not, companies should consider incorporating it.
- Many franchises and gym owners are uncertain about where to begin their sustainability journey.
- There's a widespread concern about the potential costs of sustainability initiatives, which Matthias believes are not as significant as perceived.



- While collective buying initiatives were considered, they faced obstacles due to diverse landlord arrangements. Instead, they encouraged franchisees to share energy invoices and offered modest discounts for achieving energy savings. Despite the small incentives, franchisees readily embraced the challenge.
- Matthias underscores the importance of prioritising staff treatment and social impact, anticipating challenges in recruiting quality personnel. They established the 'Bodystreet Kids' Foundation to promote physical activity in schools.
- The increasing importance of being environmentally conscious is noted as crucial for attracting and retaining talent, as well as meeting customer expectations.
- In 2021, DIFG was honoured with a Green Franchise Award, which was achieved through the implementation of incremental changes and initiatives, very achievable.

## TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

In its closing remarks, EuropeActive's incoming CEO, Kai Troll, emphasised the need for tangible actions tailored to different operators within the fitness sector. He highlighted the role of EuropeActive in collecting best practices, translating EU policies into actionable strategies, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. With concrete steps outlined and a collective determination to drive change, the fitness industry is poised to play a pivotal role in building a greener and more sustainable future.