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RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

How Do Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Embed Sustainability Through Partnerships? An Integrated Dynamic Capabilities, Stakeholder and Institutional Theory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability partnerships offer small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) access to expertise and resources, yet how these relationships connect to organisational adaptation remains insufficiently explained. Drawing on template analysis of interviews with leaders from 13 service-oriented SMEs in Northeast England, this study integrates dynamic capabilities, stakeholder and institutional theories. It identifies four partnership models: due diligence, organised around values-based screening; ad hoc engagement, responding to immediate needs; bilateral collaboration, based on reciprocal exchange; and client-driven engagement, drawing on existing commercial trust. These distinctions explain how SMEs approach collaboration, while accounts of learning and contextualising external advice illuminate the relationship between resource access and internal implementation. Three integrative propositions connect institutional expectations, stakeholder relationships and organisational capabilities. The study contributes an empirically grounded account of partnership engagement and organisational adaptation and develops a prospective support ecosystem from participants' expectations, with implications for SME managers and intermediaries.

1 | Introduction

Embedding sustainability in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involves more than adopting individual environmental practices. It requires firms to interpret sustainability demands, reconcile stakeholder interests and incorporate relevant knowledge into organisational activities. These tasks are complicated by resource constraints and differences in organisational size, expertise and maturity (DiBella et al. 2023; Isensee et al. 2020). Understanding how SMEs undertake them is therefore central to explaining the role of partnerships in sustainability practice.

Sustainability-oriented partnerships offer access to expertise, resources and opportunities for learning (Dzhengiz 2020; Journeault et al. 2021). However, identifying the resources that partners provide does not by itself explain how SMEs select collaborators or adapt external support to their own practices. The literature also connects collaboration to collective agency and wider market transformation (Luederitz et al. 2021; Westman et al. 2023). The unresolved issue lies at the intersection of these accounts: how relationships with external actors connect wider sustainability expectations to the organisational work of embedding sustainability.

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This distinction matters because access to a partnership need not imply the capacity to use it, and willingness to collaborate may reflect a pre-existing sustainability commitment. Research on partnership coordination and the capacities required to embed sustainability highlights the need to examine these organisational and relational processes together (DiBella et al. 2023; MacDonald et al. 2019). We therefore ask: how do SME leaders describe the relationships between sustainability expectations, partner engagement and the adaptation of organisational practices?

We address this question through qualitative interviews with leaders from 13 service-oriented SMEs in Northeast England. Dynamic capabilities theory (DCT) provides the organisational process vocabulary; stakeholder theory (ST) explains the relational considerations through which demands and partners are prioritised and institutional theory (IT) situates those relationships within wider expectations of appropriate practice. Their integration provides a basis for interpreting how external expectations become relevant to particular firms and how partnership resources are understood and used. The study elaborates this account from participants' experiences rather than testing causal effects.

The paper makes three related contributions. First, it specifies the explanatory boundaries and connections between DCT, ST and IT in the context of SME sustainability partnerships. Second, it identifies four partnership models with distinct organising logics and uses accounts of learning and adaptation to explain how relational access connects to internal implementation. This develops the interpretation of partnerships as settings in which capabilities are exercised and potentially developed. Third, it draws on participants' expectations to formulate a prospective sustainability partnership ecosystem that connects support provision to the needs of resource-constrained firms. This third contribution concerns the design of support arrangements and their future investigation, rather than evidence of an ecosystem already operating effectively.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on sustainability in SMEs, sustainability-oriented partnerships and the three theoretical frameworks, embedding the theoretical framing within the review. Section 3 outlines the qualitative methodology. Section 4 presents the empirical findings structured around three thematic clusters. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature. Section 6 concludes with implications for theory and practice.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Sustainability in SMEs

Research identifies strategic benefits associated with SME sustainability, including employee motivation, differentiation and competitiveness (Cantele and Zardini 2020; Saunila et al. 2024). Empirical studies also connect corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement to employee commitment and corporate reputation in Pakistani SMEs (Ikram et al. 2020), and examine financial returns alongside expenditure on CSR, innovation and

training in Romanian firms (Burlea-Schiopoiu and Mihai 2019). This evidence strengthens the rationale for engagement, but leaves a distinction between identifying returns and explaining implementation. Johnson's (2015) survey of German SMEs explicitly separates managers' awareness of sustainability tools from their application. The question is therefore how firms translate an interest in sustainability into organisational practice, particularly where sustainability is understood narrowly in environmental terms (Isensee et al. 2020).

SMEs differ in size, maturity and organisational priorities, making a uniform account of sustainability implementation problematic (DiBella et al. 2023; Klewitz and Hansen 2014). Frameworks addressing green lean approaches, activity-based integration and different levels of sustainable practice provide complementary ways of organising implementation (Rodríguez-Olalla and Avilés-Palacios 2017; Sanchez-Planelles et al. 2022; Siegel et al. 2019). Business-model research extends this concern to the connections between value propositions, value chains and financial arrangements (Boons and Lüdeke-Freund 2013). These contributions clarify what organisations might integrate, while raising a further question about how SMEs select and adapt approaches to their circumstances. A catalogue of practices alone cannot explain that process; nor should broad claims about resilience obscure differences in organisational priorities and capacities.

Resource constraints, knowledge gaps and regulatory uncertainties complicate this task (Luederitz et al. 2021). External stakeholders may provide training, analysis, coordination, specialist expertise and finance (Journeault et al. 2021), but such provision does not resolve the distinction between external support and internal implementation. Research on dynamic capabilities directs attention to the organisational capacities associated with sustainability performance (Eikelenboom and de Jong 2019), while cultural and institutional accounts locate sustainability within expectations and values that vary across contexts (Horak et al. 2018; Isensee et al. 2020). Read together, these perspectives suggest that access, interpretation and adaptation require joint attention: what enables SMEs to recognise relevant support and incorporate it into practice?

2.2 | Sustainability-Oriented Partnerships

Sustainability-oriented partnerships are understood here as collaborative engagements with firms, civil society organisations, public bodies and academic institutions directed towards sustainability-related purposes (Stott and Murphy 2020). Such relationships can involve reciprocity and shared objectives, but common participation does not ensure agreement about priorities or an equal capacity to benefit. The tensions between organisational benefit and societal goals therefore remain relevant to the design and interpretation of collaboration (Christ et al. 2017; Manzhynski and Figge 2020). Research on environmental entrepreneurs' legitimation shows how personal values and external audiences' expectations can be negotiated over time (O'Neil and Ucbasaran 2016). This brings the terms of stakeholder alignment into focus: collaboration involves interpreting whose expectations matter, as well as locating useful resources.

Existing research illuminates different aspects of these relationships. Journeault et al. (2021) identify the support roles undertaken by stakeholders, while Luederitz et al. (2021) examine collective agency in sustainability strategy formation. Westman et al. (2023) place collaboration within processes of market transformation and institutional co-evolution. Broader alliance research also shows why access should be distinguished from assimilation: Mowery et al. (1996) connect interfirm knowledge transfer to absorptive capacity and alliance structure. These perspectives link firms to external actors, but leave an analytical distinction between the availability of support, the negotiation of collaboration and its incorporation into organisational activities. Partnership coordination is consequently an explanatory problem in its own right (MacDonald et al. 2019).

An integrated account must also accommodate relationships that emerge in response to immediate needs, alongside deliberately planned collaborations. The emphasis on adaptive alliance arrangements in He et al. (2020) supports examining partnerships as developing relationships rather than fixed resource channels. For SME sustainability, the gap concerns how wider expectations, stakeholder priorities and organisational capacities are connected within those relationships. This calls for explicit links between theoretical perspectives, rather than a broader inventory of partnership benefits.

2.3 | Theoretical Framework

The framework connects three explanatory questions. IT addresses the wider expectations through which sustainability practices acquire legitimacy; ST addresses whose demands and interests become relevant within particular relationships and DCT addresses how firms recognise opportunities, commit resources and adapt organisational activities. DCT remains the primary process lens, but it is not treated as an exhaustive explanation of the sources or relational distribution of sustainability demands. The value of combining the theories lies in specifying these connections, rather than claiming that this is the only possible theoretical combination.

DCT focuses on the capacity to integrate, build and reconfigure competences in changing environments (Teece et al. 1997). In this study, sensing concerns the recognition of sustainability needs and potential partners; seizing concerns decisions to engage and mobilise relevant support and reconfiguring concerns the adaptation of organisational practices. This vocabulary helps distinguish resource access from the work of using resources (Eikeleboom and de Jong 2019; Mousavi et al. 2018). It does not, on its own, specify why particular sustainability expectations carry authority or whose interests inform partner selection. Moreover, a reported instance of learning or change is not sufficient evidence of an established dynamic capability; that interpretation requires attention to organisational processes beyond the acquisition of an individual resource.

ST locates these processes within relationships among actors whose interests may converge or conflict (Freeman 1984; Hörisch et al. 2014). The instrumental perspective adopted here examines how firms relate stakeholder engagement to organisational objectives (Donaldson and Preston 1995). It helps explain why shared

values, commercial relationships and expectations of mutual benefit matter to partner selection. It also exposes a tension: prioritising partners on economic grounds may narrow the social or environmental interests represented in collaboration (Hahn et al. 2015). ST therefore contributes an account of relational prioritisation, rather than simply adding stakeholder engagement to an otherwise firm-centred explanation. It does not, by itself, establish how access to a partner becomes embedded organisational practice.

IT situates those relationships within regulatory requirements, professional norms and models of legitimate practice (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Glover et al. 2014). The interactive perspective recognises that responses to institutional expectations vary with organisational circumstances and stakeholder relationships (Delmas and Toffel 2004). This prevents institutional influence from being reduced to direct government pressure: standards, accreditation and professional expectations may remain salient even when formal policy support is viewed sceptically. IT identifies the wider sources of expectations, while ST addresses their relevance within particular relationships and DCT addresses the organisational response. These are analytical distinctions with areas of overlap, not discrete or necessarily successive empirical stages.

The proposed integration concerns the translation of expectations through relationships and their incorporation into organisational practices. For example, an external standard may supply a recognised sustainability framework (IT), become relevant through a valued accreditation or client relationship (ST), and require the firm to identify gaps, mobilise expertise and adapt activities (DCT). This is a theoretical illustration, not a causal sequence established by the present data. Identification, integration and institutionalisation are used as connected organising processes; institutionalisation here means embedding practices within the firm and should not be conflated with institutional pressure at the wider field level. Relationships may develop iteratively, and prior commitment or capability may shape whether firms engage at all. In Figure 1, capability reinforcement is interpreted as reconfiguring; the framework indicates possible relationships rather than a fixed sequence.

Three propositions specify these connections. They are stated before the findings to clarify the revised theoretical argument, not to imply that they were formulated as hypotheses before data collection. The interview study is used to elaborate them and identify their limits.

Proposition 1. *The relevance of wider sustainability expectations to SME partnership engagement depends partly on how those expectations are interpreted and prioritised within stakeholder relationships, together with the firm's capacity to recognise them as actionable needs or opportunities.*

Proposition 2. *The incorporation of partnership support into SME sustainability practices depends on the relationship between stakeholder alignment and the firm's capacity to mobilise and adapt externally supplied knowledge or frameworks; access to support alone does not establish organisational embedding.*

Proposition 3. *Existing sustainability commitment and capabilities may shape partner selection and engagement, while*

experiences within those relationships may inform subsequent organisational adaptation and further engagement; this potential reciprocity should not be assumed to operate uniformly or progressively.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, pragmatic design and an abductive approach, combining engagement with existing concepts

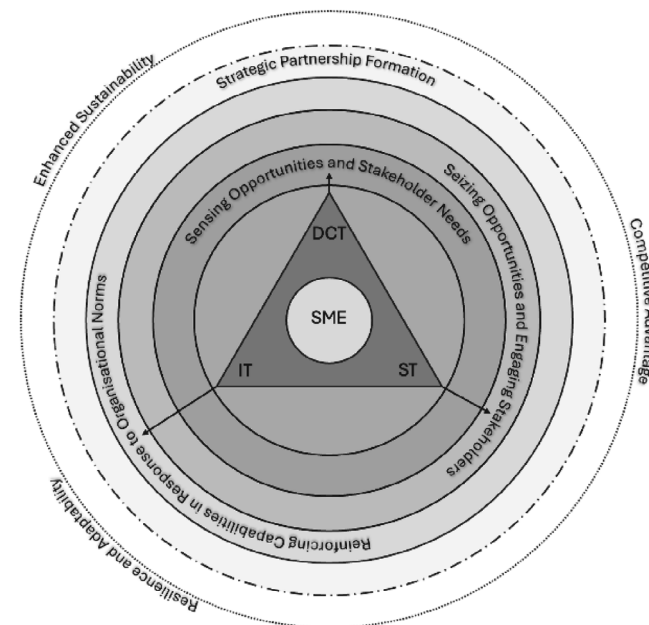


FIGURE 1 | An integrative conceptual model for leveraging partnerships in SME organisational sustainability. DCT, dynamic capabilities theory; IT, institutional theory; SME, small and medium-sized enterprise; ST, stakeholder theory. Outer-ring labels denote potential outcomes rather than effects established by this study.

and iterative interpretation of participants' accounts. Its practical concern is how service-oriented SMEs understand sustainability and use partnerships in their organisational circumstances. The analysis elaborates theory from reported experiences and meanings (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007); it does not independently measure partnership effects on sustainability or organisational performance.

3.2 | Sampling and Participants

The sample comprises 13 service-oriented organisations in Northeast England recruited through purposive selection and snowball referrals. Recruitment targeted service organisations with 1–250 employees. Recruitment sources included the FAME database, web searches, university business-clinic contacts, supervisory introductions and participant recommendations; these sources supported recruitment rather than supplying data for the analysis. Selection sought variation in organisational size and service activity rather than statistical representativeness. Recorded employee numbers ranged from 1 to 200 and recorded organisational ages from 2 to 40 years. P2's employee number was not recorded. The sample includes commercial firms, charities and a provider of commercial services and publicly funded support (Table 1). The number-plating business was included on the basis of its customised, compliance-oriented service activity. The analysis concerns this service-oriented sample and should not be generalised to the whole SME population.

Interviewees held senior roles relevant to sustainability or partnership decisions, including founders, chief executives, directors and specialist leads. The researcher judged the dataset sufficiently rich after the thirteenth interview, with later interviews reinforcing existing themes. This was a judgement of adequacy for the study's analytical aims, rather than evidence that further interviews could yield no additional insights (Saunders et al. 2018). Table 1 reports the available participant-level characteristics. Ownership arrangements, sustainability maturity and prior partnership experience were not systematically tabulated;

TABLE 1 | Participant and organisational characteristics.

ID	Interviewee role	Service activity	Employees	Organisation age (years)
P1	CEO	Health and wellness	1	Not recorded
P2	CEO	Consulting	Not recorded	8
P3	Business Development Director and Co-Founder	Insurance	5	Not recorded
P4	Founder/CEO	Marketing and training	9	9.5
P5	CEO	Number plating	12	40
P6	CEO	Consultancy	2	13
P7	Head of Business Development	Environmental charity	200	Not recorded
P8	Founder/CEO	Consulting	1	Not recorded
P9	CEO	Design	1	2
P10	Managing Director/CEO	Accountancy and taxation	4	25
P11	Senior Environmental Consultant	Consulting	5	10
P12	Chief Commercial Officer/Director	Commercial service and public funded support	100	23
P13	Partnership Development Lead	Charity	200	Not recorded

Abbreviation: CEO, chief executive officer.

executive titles are not treated as ownership classifications, and no maturity scores or experience durations are inferred.

3.3 | Data Collection

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted by the doctoral researcher between August 2024 and February 2025 via Microsoft Teams, lasting 30–90 min. The guide contained 10 main questions across organisational sustainability and sustainability partnerships, with opening questions about participants' roles and interpretations (Appendix A). Topics included implementation, performance indicators, practices, barriers, participation, motivations, partnership arrangements and internal readiness. The final question explicitly invited views on bringing partnership arrangements together as a hub for easier access to sustainability solutions. Ecosystem responses were therefore elicited by a proposal, rather than wholly unsolicited descriptions of existing arrangements. Interviews were recorded with consent; Teams-generated transcripts were reviewed and corrected before analysis. Ethical approval was obtained through the host university, and participants were informed about anonymity, voluntary participation and withdrawal.

3.4 | Data Analysis

Template analysis combined literature-informed starting concepts with the development of themes from the interview accounts (King et al. 2018). The doctoral researcher read the full set of 13 transcripts twice during familiarisation and undertook preliminary coding manually. Interview questions supplied tentative higher-order codes, with sub-questions informing lower-order codes. NVivo supported the subsequent organisation, coding and retrieval of material. After an initial review of the full dataset, three transcripts representing smaller, intermediate and larger organisations were selected to develop the initial template. The template was then applied to the remaining transcripts and revised after each through the addition, restructuring, merging or removal of codes.

For example, the initial higher-order codes 'Organizational Sustainability Perspective' and 'Sustainability Design and Implementation' were merged as 'Organizational Sustainability'. Later refinement removed 'Internal Sustainability Values' where 'Understanding and Definition of Sustainability' offered greater relevance to the research questions. 'Internal Competencies and Dynamic Capabilities' was located within the sustainability cluster and removed from another cluster where it duplicated interpretation. The final template was reapplied to the full dataset. Its higher-order clusters concerned organisational sustainability, organisational sustainability partnerships and the sustainability partnership management model; the last is presented here as perspectives on a prospective ecosystem.

Findings are presented thematically across the sample, with selected verbatim quotations used to ground the interpretation. The three higher-order clusters organise the empirical account; they should not be equated with the three theories or read as confirmation of the propositions introduced in Section 2.3. The propositions make the revised explanatory argument explicit and provide interpretive expectations for discussion, rather than hypotheses tested through the interview design.

3.5 | Rigour

Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail of template development, comparison across participant accounts, examination of negative evidence and rival interpretations, and use of verbatim quotations (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The interview guide and developing interpretations were reviewed with the supervisory team, and periodic reviews also involved a subject specialist and research chair. These procedures provided scrutiny of the researcher's interpretation; they are not presented as a quantified intercoder reliability assessment. The doctoral researcher's consulting and project management background informed an interest in practical, integrated solutions. To examine the influence of this orientation, he recorded assumptions and preconceptions, documented experiences of the research process and repeatedly reviewed interpretations. Such reflexive practices make the interpretive position more explicit; they do not eliminate researcher influence.

The interview framing and the researcher's interest in integrated solutions are especially relevant to the positive responses to the hub proposal. These responses may reflect the way the proposal was introduced as well as participants' own preferences. Neither comparison across interviews nor supervisory review independently verifies reported organisational outcomes. Transferability depends on similarity of organisational and institutional conditions and on the limits of the available participant profiles (Yin 2018).

4 | Findings

The findings follow three higher-order thematic clusters: organisational sustainability, sustainability-oriented partnerships and a prospective sustainability partnership ecosystem. The first two concern participants' interpretations and reported practices; the third concerns both experiences of existing networks and expectations for a proposed support arrangement. Quotations illustrate those accounts, rather than independently verified effects on sustainability performance.

4.1 | Organisational Sustainability in SMEs

4.1.1 | Interpretations and Goals

Participants revealed diverse but convergent interpretations of organisational sustainability, predominantly framed around the triple bottom line of people, planet and profit. Organisational survival emerged as the central element in SMEs' conceptualisation of sustainability, with economic considerations functioning as the compass for navigating sustainability ecosystems. As one participant explained: 'Sustainability is a double-edged sword in a way, because it's about how I can have a business that can continue without me and it's sustainable and is growing' (P4). Another described sustainability in relational terms: '... thinking about not just how something impacts our organisation, but also our clients, also our industry, also our communities, also our region' (P3).

Participants with professional and sustainability expertise described comparatively integrated understandings of

sustainability. As P11 explained: 'I believe in the interconnectedness of the triple bottom line ... any kind of sustainability initiative that I would be proposing to a business, I'd like to be able to demonstrate that there's benefit for the environment, there's benefit for people and ultimately that there's benefit for the business'. Such accounts place expertise alongside an ability to relate sustainability to organisational circumstances. They do not establish whether that expertise preceded partnership participation or developed through it.

Other accounts reflected a narrower understanding of sustainability. As P10 explained: 'It appears as though it doesn't have any great impact on the day-to-day activities of our business insofar as we're not manufacturers. We don't really produce anything'. This account associates sustainability primarily with physical production, illustrating how the perceived relevance of sustainability may constrain the recognition of support needs. It does not establish that a lack of knowledge caused non-participation.

Participants related sustainability goals to long-term growth, financial stability, stakeholder expectations and environmental needs, with economic considerations prominent. P3 contrasted tangible financial goals with less specific social ambitions: 'In terms of social impact, we don't have tangible targets. Our goals are quite loose. It's just to do better or to be positive'. P12 linked responsibility towards employees to business continuity: 'We have a shared responsibility to each other, for making sure that the businesses are here in the longer term, and that therefore we're sustaining people's jobs'. These accounts suggest that economic and social concerns were often interwoven, although social objectives were not always formalised. The distinction matters when interpreting a limited number of explicit social targets as evidence of limited social concern.

4.1.2 | Implementation Models and Practices

The study identified five sustainability implementation models. The economic model was driven by financial performance and cost savings. The embedded model wove sustainability into the fabric of organisational culture: 'We don't have a policy that says sustainability, but it's embedded into everything that we do ... Sustainability is everything, it's embedded in everything' (P4). The partnership-influenced model involved adopting frameworks from accreditation bodies—particularly prominent was the B Corp model: 'We've utterly embraced the B Corp model. It's utterly comprehensive in terms of the framework that it gives you, and we are guided in every aspect of the business now by the framework' (P4). International standards models drew on ISO frameworks, especially ISO 14001. The top-to-bottom framework distributed sustainability responsibilities across leadership-led, cross-functional teams: 'Sustainability is responsibility of everybody within the business ... we don't have a department; what we do have is project teams that work on particular initiatives' (P12).

Sustainability practices spanned all three dimensions. Economic practices included sustainable product development, cost management and staff development. Environmental practices encompassed renewable energy generation, carbon footprint reduction and sustainable packaging: 'We've invested in the

PV panels on the roof to create our own energy' (P12). Social practices included foundation-based community support, volunteering programmes, flexible work environments, personal development opportunities and youth empowerment initiatives. Notably, several participants implementing social sustainability practices did not recognise them as such, suggesting under-reporting of social sustainability due to knowledge gaps rather than absence of practice.

4.1.3 | Barriers

Reported barriers included knowledge gaps, limited resources and expertise, unsupportive business models, governance difficulties and lack of time. P2 described the pressure of immediate demands: 'I'm yet to meet anybody that I work with who isn't pressed severely for time ... many SMEs are constantly dealing with urgent because that's the nature of their world'. External barriers included conflicting sustainability information, demanding stakeholder expectations and dissatisfaction with government support. P8 expressed particular distrust: 'There's no trust with government ... Nobody's seeing the government as a helpful organisation that wants to help us grow. They don't want strategic partnerships if your face doesn't fit'. These accounts identify perceived obstacles to engagement. They should not be read as an independent assessment of policy effectiveness or evidence that institutional expectations were absent.

4.2 | Sustainability-Oriented Partnerships

4.2.1 | Interpretations and Participation

Partnership participation and sustainability commitment appeared together in participants' accounts, although this does not establish a relationship with measured performance. P11 explained the perceived value of external expertise: 'Nobody can solve sustainability alone. The breadth, the complexity of the subject, all of the ways that the environment is affected by business operations—people generally cannot be specialists in everything'. P13 challenged the view that participation depends on firm size: 'I don't think taking part in sustainability initiatives necessarily has to be based on the size of your company'. These accounts express reasons for collaboration, while leaving open whether existing commitment encouraged participation, participation supported learning or both occurred.

Participants converged on conditions for successful partnerships: engaging with the right partners with clearly defined goals. 'I think partnerships are really a positive thing, if they're with the right organisations and the expectations are clear from the outset' (P4). Partner suitability involved shared objectives, shared value systems and cultural reciprocity: 'We would always choose our partnerships on shared values—do they stand for the same thing? Do they work in the same way that we do?' (P11).

4.2.2 | Motivations

Reported motivations encompassed competitive positioning, learning and business growth. P6 emphasised recognition: 'The

number one is brand and values, to be seen to be sustainable and efficient, and be seen to perform what you say you do'. This indicates the importance of legitimacy claims, but does not itself demonstrate greenwashing. P9 described an interest in learning: 'To meet with other business owners to learn a lot more about sustainability ... mainly just to learn about it and meet and network'. P11 linked engagement to an expected organisational return: 'You absolutely can't have a conversation about sustainability without considering the benefit to the organisation and making sure that there would be a reasonable return on investment'. These motivations may coexist and are not treated as measures of participants' sincerity or sustainability performance.

4.2.3 | Partnership Models

Four partnership models were identified: due diligence, ad hoc, bilateral and client-driven. Their distinguishing organising logics are values-based screening, response to immediate needs, reciprocal exchange and trust derived from existing client relationships. Each directs attention to a different practical basis for engaging a partner.

The due diligence model involves systematic identification of needs and evaluation of prospective partners against shared values, purpose and criteria spanning economic, social and environmental concerns. P12 explained: 'We'll select through due diligence, to check that they're in line with the values that we have as an organisation'. P13 similarly described stakeholder mapping to assess alignment. The distinguishing feature is explicit assessment before commitment: suitability is examined against organisational priorities rather than inferred from a relationship's availability.

The ad hoc model is triggered by an immediate sustainability need and organised around a bounded response. As P5 put it: 'It's basically on an "as the need arises" model. There's nothing hard and fast'. Here, the pressing task provides the basis for collaboration. This differs from the due diligence emphasis on a systematic selection procedure; the account foregrounds responsiveness and the immediate purpose of engagement.

The bilateral model centres on reciprocal exchange between firms, with shared values and common objectives providing a basis for working together, including within similar sectors. P1 characterised the relationship as 'much more bilateral'. Its distinctive emphasis is the contribution each party brings to a mutual exchange. Reciprocity therefore concerns the organisation of collaboration, rather than simply the existence of two parties or a shared sustainability interest.

The client-driven model draws on established commercial relationships when seeking sustainability-related services or expertise. P3 explained: 'We tend to prioritise going with clients who have trusted us with their business, and we trust them with ours'. Existing trust and reciprocal patronage shape the pool of preferred partners. This differs from bilateral exchange in making the prior client relationship the stated basis for partner preference; bilateral collaboration need not originate in a client tie.

The models distinguish how participants approach partnership formation and exchange; they do not classify whole firms into

exclusive categories. Their organising logics can coexist: values screening could be applied within a trusted client relationship, for example. The analysis identifies these logics in participants' accounts; it does not establish a developmental sequence or observed transitions between models.

Once partnerships were formalised, various governance mechanisms were established, including memoranda of understanding, non-disclosure agreements and partnership ordinances, with clearly stipulated expectations and boundaries: 'You have to know what the expectations are from the outset, and you have to be very clear about what the expectations are. If it is not clear, you have a misalignment, and a misalignment causes issues' (P4).

4.2.4 | Barriers and Benefits

Participants described overlapping barriers to sustainability and partnerships. The range of partnership options was associated with uncertainty about engagement: 'There's an absolute myriad out there. And I do find it very overwhelming ... I think it could be really overwhelming knowing which partnerships to develop' (P3). Additional barriers included cost implications; fear of competition associated with 'closed-book' approaches: 'Sometimes we become a little bit precious and we can sometimes be a little bit worried about competition ... in the Northeast we're a little bit of a closed book businesses' (P4); limiting mindsets about firm size and perceived shortcomings in government support and limited confidence in institutional partnerships. Limited knowledge and non-participation appeared together in P9's account: 'Again, I don't really know too much about that. I don't have any partnerships' (P9).

Participants associated partnerships with access to advice, finance, knowledge exchange and training through pooled resources. P12 described the work of adapting external support: 'The partnerships allow you to take advice from the experts, but also then refine what's right and proper for your organisation and use those standards or frameworks as a tool to help you internalise what that really means for you and your business'. P4 emphasised continuing learning: 'They add to our understanding; they add to the richness of who we are and the next stage of the business future. So, I think partnerships are really essential. We're constantly learning, and I think you do that through partnerships'. These accounts distinguish obtaining advice from interpreting its organisational relevance. They support an interpretation of perceived learning and adaptation, rather than an independently demonstrated increase in dynamic capabilities.

4.3 | Perspectives on a Sustainability Partnership Ecosystem

Accounts of existing networks described coordination with public and specialist bodies and opportunities for policy engagement. P7 explained: 'We work with the Northeast Combined Authority and Energy Saving Trust as a partnership ... looking at how can we support communities, individuals to reduce their energy consumption'. P3 described access to policy discussions: 'We've been involved quite a lot with Small Business Britain ... through them we've had conversations at round tables with Members

of the Cabinet about sustainability'. These examples indicate reported network activities. They do not establish that an integrated sustainability partnership ecosystem was operating across the sample.

All 13 participants expressed support for the idea of a sustainability partnership ecosystem, understood as an integrated community of sustainability stakeholders. Their responses concerned its anticipated usefulness. P2 emphasised navigation: 'If there's an ecosystem out there and I know where to go to talk to the right people about doing sustainability practice ... an ecosystem that can direct the traffic and get me to the point that I need to be as quickly and then work out what I do with it'. P5 similarly envisaged a source of practical assistance: 'If there was one group of people who were all qualified in business, helping save and do sustainability, then people in business, a small business like us could go to this hub and find out what we want'. Such expectations identify desired support functions; they do not demonstrate reduced costs, improved access or organisational change.

Participants' expectations centred on practical assistance, affordability and credible coordination. P11 emphasised relevance to practice: 'It has to be something really practical ... really relevant and have to be instigated or definitely collaborated with people that are already in the field doing the work'. P12 contrasted this with advice alone: 'There are things like the SME climate hub ... It's sort of stops at the advice piece'. P4 favoured an independent hub with minimal financial implications, while P6 envisaged cooperation between public bodies, universities and specialists: 'I think with the partnership of the combined authorities and the local authorities partnering with organisations like the University and specialists, it would have greater credibility and give SMEs more confidence'. These are perceived design requirements and preferences, rather than validated conditions of ecosystem effectiveness.

5 | Discussion

The accounts connect sustainability expectations, stakeholder relationships and organisational adaptation, but do not validate a causal model. Their contribution lies in elaborating how the three theoretical perspectives can inform a connected interpretation of SME partnership engagement. The discussion considers the propositions introduced in Section 2.3, the limits of the evidence and alternative explanations.

5.1 | Partnership Engagement and Capability Development

The accounts of values-based screening and due diligence are consistent with sensing, but are not adequately explained by a capability vocabulary alone. P12's selection criteria and P13's stakeholder mapping also concern whose values and purposes are considered appropriate. ST explains this relational prioritisation, while IT directs attention to the standards and expectations that may inform it. This distinction is central to Proposition 1: institutional expectations may become actionable through particular relationships, without all external demands being translated into collaboration. Accounts of

limited knowledge and disengagement suggest a possible role for existing capabilities in recognising opportunities (Dzhengiz 2020; Kohtamäki et al. 2018); they do not establish a capability threshold required for participation.

The distinction between obtaining support and adapting it is particularly visible in P12's account of contextualising standards and expert advice. Interpreted through Proposition 2, the standard supplies a recognised framework (IT), the relationship provides access to relevant expertise (ST) and the SME's interpretation of its organisational relevance concerns seizing and reconfiguring (DCT). P4's description of B Corp as a framework guiding the business further illustrates reported use of an external framework. Together, these accounts motivate an interpretation of partnerships as potential settings for capability development, extending a focus on the resources provided by stakeholders (Journault et al. 2021). They do not establish that access to a partner is sufficient for embedding sustainability.

P4's account of continued learning and P12's description of internalising advice suggest a possible reciprocal relationship between collaboration and organisational adaptation. This is consistent with Proposition 3, but repeated observation would be needed to demonstrate a recursive process over time. Existing expertise may support partner selection and the use of advice, while collaboration may offer further opportunities for learning. The present contribution is to specify this possible relationship and its organisational and relational components, rather than demonstrate that partnerships create a virtuous cycle of capability development or confirm effects on performance (Eikelenboom and de Jong 2019; Mousavi et al. 2018).

5.2 | Stakeholder Alignment and Instrumental Logic

The four partnership models make a distinct empirical contribution by differentiating the relational arrangements through which SMEs pursue sustainability. This extends an account of stakeholder support roles (Journault et al. 2021) by distinguishing the basis on which SMEs select and organise engagement. It also makes stakeholder relations analytically necessary alongside DCT: recognising an opportunity does not explain which relationship is preferred or how exchange is arranged. The models identify different questions for collaboration, rather than ranked levels of capability or maturity.

The prominence of expected organisational returns is consistent with the instrumental ST perspective, but also exposes limits to an uncomplicated account of stakeholder alignment. Partners may share commercial objectives without assigning equal priority to economic, social and environmental concerns. P3's distinction between concrete economic goals and less formal social ambitions illustrates this tension; P12's concern for sustaining jobs also shows how those interests can overlap. The integrated framework therefore asks which objectives are represented in collaboration, as well as whether the firm can pursue them (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Hahn et al. 2015). Expected benefit is an expressed motivation, not evidence of realised benefit or a necessary condition of sustainability adoption.

5.3 | Institutional Expectations and Relational Translation

Dissatisfaction with government support should not be equated with weak institutional influence overall. P8's account indicates distrust of particular policy relationships, while references to B Corp and ISO frameworks indicate the relevance of external standards. These observations concern different institutional relationships. The finding that only two participants reported formal sustainability policy statements does not establish an absence of institutional expectations, since such expectations may be reflected in activities or external frameworks without a standalone policy. The interactive institutional perspective provides a basis for interpreting this variation (Delmas and Toffel 2004).

Proposition 1 directs attention to how wider expectations become relevant through particular stakeholders. Accounts of accreditation, expertise and network participation are compatible with such relational translation. They do not establish that partnerships mediate all institutional influence, or that direct regulatory effects are absent. DCT helps interpret the organisational response, but ST and IT are needed to distinguish the relationships carrying expectations from their wider sources of legitimacy. This is a bounded elaboration of institutional responsiveness in the sample, rather than evidence that institutional theory applies to SMEs only through partnership structures.

5.4 | A Prospective Partnership Ecosystem

The proposed ecosystem is best understood as a prospective arrangement for coordinating sustainability support, informed by participants' accounts of fragmented provision and their expectations of a more accessible hub. Existing network activities in Section 4.3 provide context for these preferences, but do not demonstrate the functioning of the proposed arrangement. Its conceptual value is to make the coordination problem explicit: connecting recognised sustainability expectations and specialist provision to relationships and organisational needs at SME level (Eweje et al. 2021; Liu and Stephens 2019). The study does not establish a novel, empirically validated meso-level construct.

Participants' preferences suggest an agenda for design and evaluation. Practical assistance, affordable access and credible coordination could be considered in developing support arrangements, with universities, public bodies and specialists among the possible participants. Whether such arrangements would reach micro-firms, distribute benefits fairly or support sustained adaptation remains open. Further work should examine who governs access, whose priorities are represented and how support is incorporated into practice. These questions connect IT, ST and DCT while retaining the distinction between an attractive proposal and evidence of an effective intervention.

Taken together, the findings elaborate rather than confirm the framework. Each interpretation remains conditional on context and on evidence capable of distinguishing reported experiences, proposed arrangements, and observed organisational change.

5.5 | Causal Interpretation and Alternative Explanations

The research design cannot establish whether partnerships produce stronger sustainability capabilities or improved organisational performance. The accounts are also compatible with selection: firms already committed to sustainability, or possessing greater expertise, may be more likely to seek partners and recognise benefits. Resource availability, leadership priorities and sectoral circumstances could inform both engagement and reported practices. These alternatives prevent the co-occurrence of collaboration and sustainability commitment from being treated as a partnership effect.

Reverse causality and reciprocal development are therefore substantive possibilities. Participants' accounts of learning provide grounds for investigating capability development through collaboration, but the interviews do not establish temporal ordering, isolate partnership effects or supply a counterfactual. Reported benefits may also reflect executive interpretations and selective recall. The framework specifies plausible relationships for further investigation; it does not identify causal mediation or demonstrate that partnerships improve sustainability or business performance.

5.6 | Practical Implications

For SME managers, the four models suggest different questions to resolve before committing scarce time and resources. A due diligence approach can make the identified sustainability need, shared values, and expected contribution explicit. For ad hoc engagement, a limited task and a review point may help determine whether a continuing relationship is warranted. Bilateral arrangements call for clarity about reciprocal contributions and information boundaries, reflecting participants' concerns about competition. In client-driven arrangements, managers can distinguish the commercial relationship from the sustainability support required and assess whether existing trust is accompanied by relevant expertise. These are recommendations derived from the accounts, rather than tested prescriptions for performance.

Intermediaries could respond to the reported difficulty of navigating provision by offering needs assessment and referral to appropriate expertise, followed by assistance in adapting advice to the firm. P12's emphasis on internalising frameworks and criticism of advice-only provision suggest that the usefulness of support should be assessed beyond attendance or receipt of information. Practical evaluation could examine whether a firm identifies an appropriate partner, applies the advice and sustains a relevant change, while documenting the time and cost involved.

For policymakers and potential ecosystem coordinators, participants' concerns support considering a pilot with transparent access criteria, clear costs and SME involvement in design. To address reported cost pressures, time constraints and difficulty navigating expertise, the pilot could offer subsidised access, short initial consultations and a named adviser to coordinate specialist referrals. Universities, public bodies and specialists are possible collaborators, rather than demonstrated optimal coordinators. Evaluation should include firms with limited prior engagement

and examine whether the arrangement reaches them, how referrals and responsibilities are governed, and whether support is used in practice. This would turn participants' expectations of an accessible, practical hub into questions that can be evaluated.

6 | Conclusion

The study advances understanding of SME sustainability by distinguishing four organising logics of partnership engagement and connecting relational access to organisational adaptation. Accounts of contextualising external advice further illuminate the work involved in translating support into organisational practice. Together, these findings give empirical substance to the integrated framework and identify partnerships as settings in which capabilities are exercised and potentially developed. The prospective ecosystem extends this account to the coordination of support, identifying design priorities for subsequent evaluation.

For practice, the analysis supports tailoring partner selection and governance to the relationship and the identified support need. The usefulness of these recommendations should be assessed in context, particularly where firms have limited time, expertise or resources.

Future research could follow SMEs before and after partnership formation, including firms with differing prior commitments and firms that do not participate. Repeated interviews, observation, organisational records and independently assessed outcomes would help examine temporal ordering and distinguish capability development from selection into partnerships. Such designs would also allow the propositions to be assessed more directly than a cross-sectional account of perceived benefits.

The study's scope is limited by its purposive, regional sample and reliance on executive accounts. It cannot establish population prevalence, resolve sectoral or maturity differences or independently verify reported performance. Transferability requires attention to organisational resources, partnership histories and institutional conditions. Comparative research could examine these conditions across regions and countries. The ecosystem proposal warrants co-design and evaluation with SMEs and support providers, including assessment of access, governance, implementation and outcomes.

Sustainability partnerships are therefore interpreted as relationships through which SME leaders seek and make sense of support for organisational adaptation. Explaining that process requires attention to expectations, stakeholder interests and capabilities together, while retaining a clear boundary between participants' accounts, theoretical interpretation and demonstrated change.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

The 10 main questions below are reproduced from the research interview guide, with its original wording retained. The guide opened with questions about the participant's role and interpretation of sustainability; parenthetical prompts and the opening definitions are summarised below:

1. How will you describe your organisation's perspective on sustainability? (Within the context of your organisation, what does sustainability mean? What are the interpretations and implications when you refer to sustainability in your organisation?)
2. Tell me about your organisation's approach to sustainability goals and implementation? (What is the framework, policies, systems, procedure put in place to operationalize and achieve sustainability?)
3. Does your organisation have key performance indicators (KPIs) and measuring criteria for monitoring their sustainability performance? (If yes, what are they for measuring your sustainability performance in the areas of economic, social and environmental sustainability? If not, can you please explain why you don't have?)
4. Tell me about your organisation's sustainability practices?
5. Are there barriers, both internal and external, to implementing sustainability goals in your organisation? (Regarding external barriers, for instance, do current business trends and environment affect your organisation's ability to form sustainability partnerships and achieve sustainability goals? If yes, what are they?)

6. What are your thoughts on SMEs participating in networks and relationships so as to achieve sustainability goals?
7. Does your organisation participate in sustainability partnerships? If yes, what are the reasons that motivate and encourage your organisation to participate in sustainability partnerships? (And if you are not currently participating, what are the reasons? And what will motivate you to participate?)
8. Does your organisation have a model for participating in organisational sustainability partnerships? (If yes, can you tell me about them: the policies, structures, leadership and partnership management framework of your organisation? If not, why?)
9. To what extent will you say that your organisation is internally prepared to participate in sustainability partnerships? (In order to learn and benefit from the network for achieving her sustainability goals; in terms of capabilities, skills, resources?)
10. What are your views and thoughts on having different sustainability partnership arrangements come together to form a Hub for easy access to sustainability solutions by SMEs?

The opening explanation framed organisational sustainability around continued economic performance and stakeholder expectations, and partnerships around strategic relationships and networks supporting sustainability goals. Follow-up prompts concerned interpretation, policies, systems, procedures, economic/social/environmental indicators, external barriers, non-participation, governance, leadership and internal resources. These framing choices are relevant to the reflexivity discussion in Section 3.5.