Flanders
State of the Art

VISIT FLANDERS ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAMME

1. Introduction

Sustainability is embedded in our vision "Travel to Tomorrow." As a tourism organization, we aim not only to contribute to a livable planet but also to lead by example ourselves.

In 2021 and 2022, we developed a sustainability plan for our organization. In 2024, with the new 2025–2029 policy period approaching, we reviewed and updated that plan based on new insights and current needs.

From 2025 onward, we will accelerate our efforts. With a new internal structure and a clear focus, we want to help Flanders grow into a climate-resilient destination. At the same time, we are committed to making our own operations more sustainable.

2. What are we aiming for?

We aim to:

- Make Flanders **climate-resilient** as a **tourist destination.**
- Make our **own organization more sustainable**, in line with Flemish and European objectives.

We have signed the **Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism**, committing to:

- **50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030**
- **Net-zero emissions no later than 2050**

Our ecological goals align with broader Flemish and European ambitions, including:

- **30% reduction in material footprint** in Flanders by 2030 (compared to 2010)
- **Adaptation** to the impact of climate change
- Commitment to the principles of the **EU Green Deal**

For our internal operations, we follow the **Internal Climate Plan** of the Flemish government:

- **55% emission reduction** by 2030 for buildings, installations, and domestic travel
- **Net-zero emissions by 2045**

We expand internal action with matters specific to our agency (travel, organizing events,...)

3. How do we approach this?

We focus on both the destination and our internal organization. The five pillars of the Glasgow Declaration guide our approach.

Measure

We measure our ecological impact to understand where and how we can improve. Without good data, there is no effective policy.

Destination

Action	Status	More Information
We measure emissions generated by the 10 largest tourist markets traveling to Flanders.	Ongoing / integrated in our operations	Together with Breda University, we calculated emissions from the 10 largest tourist markets. These figures are included in our destination barometer.
We are expanding research on visitor emissions with 3DHUB and ETC.	In development	Within the D3HUB Competence Center, Visit Flanders is actively working on mapping tourism's impact. As a member of ETC's Chapter Earth, we also contribute to measuring tourism-related emissions in the EU.
We estimate cruise emissions in Flanders.	Completed	Research on sea and river cruise tourism in 2019 mapped all ships' greenhouse gas emissions.
We commit to participating annually in the GDS-Index and monitoring general indicators such as water usage, wastewater treatment, waste production per resident, green space per 100,000 residents, and electricity consumption in Flanders.	Ongoing	Visit Flanders has participated in the GDS-Index since 2019. Based on over 70 indicators, we receive a score for our sustainability efforts. Identified areas for improvement are addressed when possible.
Through a transition project to make tourism enterprises more sustainable, we gather data on the ecological footprint of tourism in Flanders.	In development	The transition project is taking shape. Currently, an analysis is being made on connecting with potential online tools.
We gain more insight into the impact of climate change on tourism and vice versa.	Planned	This is part of a project submitted under Interreg NWE Call 5. If funding is granted, Visit Flanders and its partners will develop this component.

We measure the impact of events we support.	Ongoing	Events supported by Event Flanders receive sustainability reports outlining the impact and how it was or can be reduced.

Internal Organization

Action	Status	More Information
We measure greenhouse gas emissions from our buildings and installations.	Ongoing	Emissions are closely monitored in the Terra Databank, the Flemish government's real estate data platform.
We measure emissions from domestic business travel.	Ongoing	Monitored by the Environment Department, including via reported kilometers.
We measure emissions from international business travel.	In development	A dashboard is being developed to track the impact of international business trips.
We measure the ecological footprint of our own events.	Ongoing	Initial reports were created in 2024 using the My Impact Tool. These insights are now incorporated into our carbon footprint working group for Conferences and Events.

Decarbonise

We actively reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. This is crucial to slowing down climate change.

Destination

Action	Status	More Information
We develop guidelines for more sustainable press and fam trips.	In development	Guidelines include aspects such as mobility, accommodation, activities, catering, and communication.
We collaborate with tour operators offering more sustainable travel to Flanders.	Ongoing	Our trade colleagues work with tour operators offering train and cycling travel to Flanders.
We launch a transition project to support tourism entrepreneurs in sustainability.	In development	Currently analyzing connections with potential online tools.

We provide accommodation grants for energy-saving measures.	Ongoing	Third consecutive year of grants. In 2023, water-saving measures were also included.
Through our cycling theme, we promote visiting Flanders by bicycle.	Ongoing	Examples include the development of Iconic Cycle Routes and investments in cycling infrastructure and experience.
We create a sustainability roadmap for conferences and events in Flanders.	Ongoing/in development	A process started in 2024 by the Flanders Convention Bureau. Actions are underway for catering, carbon footprint, and accessibility.
We organize sector events with a strong focus on ecological and social sustainability.	Ongoing	Our Meet in Flanders Academy focused on ecological sustainability (2023) and accessibility (2024).
Through our culinary theme, we support the Flemish Food Strategy and the Green Deal Protein Shift.	In development	We signed the Protein Shift and are exploring further collaboration with the Environment Department.
Through our nature theme, we promote low-impact activities and published the "Guest in the Landscape" guide.	Ongoing	Based on the Nature First principle, this guide provides inspiration for tourism in valuable nature areas.
We strengthen sustainability certification with our partners.	In development	In 2025, we will co-develop a certification approach for the tourism sector in Flanders.
We integrate ecological sustainability into our marketing.	Planned for 2027	Sustainability will become part of our marketing strategy.
We develop a method to compensate for residual CO2 emissions from supported events.	In preparation for 2025	A note is being drafted, with a pilot planned for 2026.
We use investment funds for pilots focusing on decarbonization, mobility, CO2 compensation, and energy efficiency.	Under consideration	We are exploring how to use funds most effectively to support ecological sustainability.

Internal Organization

Action	Status	More Information
We develop a strategic real estate plan	Completed	Delivered end of 2023 to work towards climate-neutral property by 2045.

aligned with the Climate Plan.		
We support employees in sustainable commuting options.	Ongoing	Our employees have access to bicycle sharing systems such as Bluebike and the Flemish government's own bicycles. Through Cambio, our employees can borrow shared cars and cargo bikes. For commuting, subscriptions for public transport and bicycle allowances are part of the permanent support.
We develop a sustainable travel policy for business trips.	Planned for 2025	At the beginning of 2025, VISITFLANDERS delivered a travel policy, in line with the guidelines of the Flemish government, for both domestic and foreign business travel.
We take action to reduce car travel emissions.	Under study	The number of kilometres declared for travel by car is too high to achieve the ambitions of the Flemish government's Climate Plan. Tourism Flanders is currently investigating how this impact can be reduced.
We develop a sustainable procurement policy.	Ongoing	Tools include the MVOO tool and the new Procurement Robot for sustainable purchases. Purchases via this platform are in most cases made via framework contracts in which sustainability is one of the criteria. Tourism Flanders itself has conducted research into the purchasing behaviour of employees.
We develop sustainability guidelines for our own events.	Completed in 2023	Provides a framework for organizing more sustainable events.
We develop sustainability guidelines for catering.	Completed in 2024	Guidelines have also been developed for catering. It goes deeper into the aspects of sustainable food.
We organize training and activities to educate employees on ecological sustainability.	Ongoing	Information sessions are organised for our employees on ecological sustainability, including the session on the Protein Shift.
We create an internal online platform with all sustainability information.	Ongoing	All information about environmental sustainability is collected in one place on our internal online platform. Colleagues can find information there about our ambitions, actions, contacts and about the actions they can take themselves to improve the ecological impact of our organisation.

Regenerate

We contribute to restoring nature and communities. Sustainable tourism goes beyond "less harm"—it aims to create a positive impact.

Destination

Action	Status	More Information
Inclusion is central to our organization through continued focus on Holiday Participation, Accessibility, and other inclusion themes.	Ongoing	Over the past decades, VISITFLANDERS has built up enormous expertise in the inclusive pillar of sustainability. The large network of Everyone Deserves a Holiday and the knowledge about accessibility ensure that many people can enjoy a barrier-free holiday in Flanders.
We integrate inclusion themes into our marketing.	Ongoing	In 2023 and 2024, an inclusion scan was carried out for the marketing and communication of Tourism Flanders. Based on this, a plan of action is drawn up to integrate inclusion into all aspects of our marketing.
We promote visitor dispersion in time and space through our marketing.	Ongoing	We are actively committed to shifting tourist visits from busy to lesser-known regions, longer stays and trips outside the high season. This is done through the development and promotion of thematic routes, local experiences and campaigns that respond to slow travel, nature experience and culture in situ.
Through resident surveys, we monitor local support for tourism in the local environment.	Ongoing	Sinds 2017 worden bewoners van kunststeden en een aantal andere gebieden in Vlaanderen bevraagd over toerisme. Daarin kunnen zij aangeven in hoeverre zij toerisme in hun leefomgeving steunen, welke impact zij daarvan ondervinden en hoe zij de toekomst van toerisme in hun omgeving zien.
In all we develop, we include voices of residents, entrepreneurs, and visitors.	Ongoing	In a co-creative way, we involve the community in the development of new experiences. The Sint-Godelieve Abbey

		in Bruges with the Garden of Today Project is a good example of this.
Our “Guest in the Landscape” guide highlights crowding, biodiversity, and climate adaptation.	Published in 2024	The guide 'Te Gast in het landschap' was published in 2024. It contains the principles of Nature First and examples of how to develop recreational and tourist activities in valuable nature.
Our transition project increases climate literacy in the tourism sector.	In development	The transition project to inform, inspire and guide the tourism sector is gradually taking shape. An analysis is currently being made of the connection with possible online tools.
We invest in circularity, climate adaptation, and biodiversity through our funding programs.	In preparation	We are currently looking at how we can use our investment resources to support our sector in terms of environmental sustainability.

Internal Organization

Action	Status	More Information
We educate staff about inclusion.	Ongoing	We regularly organise informative sessions for all employees on our progress in and actions on inclusion.
We raise awareness among staff about ecological and social sustainability.	Ongoing	We weave environmental and social sustainability into the activities of our staff days, including a Canoe Clean-up and volunteering with a link to Everyone Deserves a Holiday (in September 2024).
Socially sustainable HR policy.	Ongoing	The Flemish government is committed to an integrated and inclusive diversity policy. Each agency, including Visit Flanders, has a diversity officer who coordinates the actions on equal opportunities, diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Finance

We ensure that funds and investments contribute to climate-friendly choices. This applies to our own budget and our partnerships.

Destination and Internal Organization

Action	Status	More Information
We use accommodation grants to support energy-saving investments in Flemish lodgings.	Ongoing	For the third year in a row, accommodation subsidies for energy-saving measures are available. In 2024, 287 applications were declared admissible for a total requested subsidy budget of almost 8.5 million euros.
We use investment funds to drive sustainability in our sector.	In preparation	It is currently being determined how the investment funds for ecological sustainability can be used in the most impactful way possible.
We allocate internal budget to make our destination and organization more sustainable.	Ongoing	Every year, 80,000 euros is available to work on ecological sustainability for our destination. These funds will be used, among other things, for the development of the transition program and an exercise on certification.

Collaborate

We work with others to accelerate progress. Climate action is a shared responsibility among governments, businesses, and travelers.

Destination

Collaboration	Status	More Information
We continue expanding our Travel to Tomorrow network, linking it to ecological sustainability.	Ongoing	Our Travel to Tomorrow network continues to grow and inspire. Both social and ecological aspects find their place in this.
We take an active role in the NECSTouR network to grow our knowledge of ecological sustainability.	Ongoing	In recent years, Tourism Flanders has taken on the presidency of NECSTouR. In addition, our organization was one of the founders of the Climate Hub. The content of that hub was determined by the Climate Task Force chaired by Tourism Flanders.
We work within the ETC network to make our destination more sustainable.	Ongoing	Tourism Flanders has become a member of Chapter Earth, the climate group of the ETC. In it, needs are discussed and choices are made for joint actions. For example, at the request of the group, a

		guideline for the preparation of climate action plans has already been drawn up.
We actively participate in the Transition Pathway for Tourism to align with European goals.	Ongoing	We have shared our pledges with the European Commission and actively participate in the workshops and networking moments within the Transition Pathway for Tourism. This way we stay up to date with EU Green Deal regulations that have an impact on tourism and we learn from other destinations.
We partner with others to improve the ecological impact of tourism in Flanders.	In preparation	Ecological sustainability is a complex issue. We start working as much as possible with our partners to improve the ecological impact of tourism. Examples of this collaboration include the development of the transition project and a joint reflection exercise for certification.

Internal Organization

Collaboration	Status	More Information
We actively participate in the Flemish government's sustainability network.	Ongoing	Tourism Flanders actively participates in the CIFAL Flanders network for government agencies. Several times a year, our entities meet to learn from each other and discuss common challenges.
We are setting up a new internal structure to enhance collaboration on sustainability.	In development	It was decided to work internally with a steering committee, a team that works at the destination and a team that works on the internal organization. Both the steering committee and the destination team have already started. The internal team will be set up in the coming months.
We're developing an ambassador program to help colleagues learn about ecological sustainability.	In progress	Our internal Sustainability Team was set up in 2022. Until now, this group of enthusiastic colleagues met four times a year. From here, we are now continuing to work on a broader ambassador programme for all colleagues. This gives everyone the opportunity to learn, give feedback and promote ecological sustainability.