

Beyond Net Zero: The Practical Sustainability Moves That Will Matter Most in 2026

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Efficiency is 'the fastest, cheapest, least-regret step in any sustainability plan,' delivering the best ROI from operational excellence rather than new capital. High-value improvements include heat recovery, load shifting, compressed-air leak reduction, boiler tuning, setpoint optimisation, and real-time monitoring. Even sites labelled 'efficient' underperform after 12 - 24 months as controls drift and settings change. A proper energy audit acts as a diagnostic and investment roadmap, not just compliance. Our audit and energy management services help sites identify and sustain these operational gains before committing capital to larger projects.

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Northmore Gordon's Point of View as We Close Out 2025

As 2025 draws to a close, one thing is clear: organisations don't need more slogans - they need clearer priorities, better data, and practical steps that improve efficiency, resilience, and cost performance.

Across Australia, governments have increased their focus on climate adaptation, energy transition, and long-term resilience:

The Federal Government is committed to achieving 82% renewable electricity by 2030 as part of a broader Net Zero Plan, and 6 x Sector plans.

NSW's Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan 2025-2029 outlines 46 actions across infrastructure, transport, land use, water, health and economic planning.

Victoria's Climate Change Strategy 2026-30 sets out significant investment and a whole-of-economy pathway.

Other states are moving similarly: building adaptation capacity, electrifying systems, and embedding climate risk into regulatory and planning frameworks.

For businesses, this means the question is no longer "Should we act?" but "How do we act smartly, consistently and in a way that aligns with business strategy?"

The organisations that succeed in 2026 won't be the ones chasing shiny tech or the next grant. They'll be the ones who make practical, high-value moves - the ones that compound.

Below is Northmore Gordon's point of view on what really matters.

Efficiency first

Develop a strategy for Certificates, funding and incentives

Electrify where it makes sense for cost and efficiency

Manage your carbon risk through your vwhole alue chain

Use data-driven decisions

1. Efficiency First - The Best ROI Still Comes From Operational Excellence

Efficiency, the first fuel, remains the fastest, cheapest, least-regret step in any sustainability plan.

Some things are simple and cheap!

This is not new news in 2025, but it was a lesson re-learnt. Businesses re-discovered that many efficiency gains are operational, not just capital investments.

This aligns with what we saw in our companion article, Quick Wins - What Actually Worked in 2025? , where the highest-value improvements came from:

Heat recovery

load shifting and sequencing

compressed-air leak reduction

boiler and steam system tuning

setpoint optimisation

better scheduling and behavioural adjustments

real-time monitoring enabling fast correction

Why does this matter for 2026? Efficient systems drift. Controls get overridden. Settings change. Habits slip.

Even "efficient" sites underperform after 12-24 months unless they are regularly reassessed. We see this repeatedly.

Energy Audits Still Matter!

A good audit is not a compliance box. It is a diagnostic, produces an investment roadmap for deeper efficiency, and most importantly, is a reality check against assumptions.

Data is money - when you can see it, you stop wasting it.

Metering & Monitoring Matters More Than Ever!

Energy audits based on data assure ROI on opportunities. It's no coincidence that NSW Government is providing grants for Metering and Monitoring plans and implementation. Measuring electricity, gas, steam, hot/chilled water and air, informs where it is used efficiently and where it is being wasted, and where it can be reused or redirected.

2. Certificates, Funding & Incentives Need Their Own Strategy - Not Last-Minute Scrambling

In 2025, too many organisations still chased grants reactively or relied on vendors to "find them a rebate".

In 2026, the winners will do the opposite: they will build funding and certificates into their business planning cycle.

Here's the shift:

Use a framework, not chance. Northmore Gordon helps clients map VEECs, LGCs, ESCs, and grants into 12-36 month project or capital works pipelines so funding becomes predictable, not incidental.

Stop missing out. Build a structured process where your project pipeline is supported by VEEC /LGC/ESC eligibility, and upcoming and known grants, and you are aware of government announcements before it happens.

Let funding accelerate operational priorities. External funding from certificates and grants can bring forward a project that was marginal, or change priorities, or help take a large transformation leap instead of small steps.

Integrating certificates and funding into your workflow is one of the biggest missed values we still see in the market. Fixing this can lift project ROI by 15-30%.

3. Electrification - drive efficiency, cost reduction and carbon reduction together

Electrification onto an increasingly renewable grid isn't a trend anymore. It's a transition.

But it must be done with eyes open:

grid & connection capacity is not guaranteed

electrification loads must be modelled, not guessed

partial electrification may outperform full electric on ROI

network connection costs, network tariffs and certificate value can make or break payback

sequencing loads and load shapes matter

carbon emissions due to electrification may rise in the short term

don't assume that the same gas capacity must be replaced - drive the opportunity for efficiency as well

biomethane supply through the grid could meet some thermal needs at lower cost

2025 showed a clear shift: the smartest electrification projects weren't "replace gas with electric"

They were modular, staged, monitored, and financially engineered through the right strategy that combines wholesale electricity market exposure, and optimisation of network tariff, certificates and grant funding, and engineering design.

Case studies like MainStream Aquaculture highlighted a new reality: electrification is most successful when data, grid constraints and certificates are aligned from day one.

4. Embedded Carbon & Supply-Chain Readiness - Start Small, Scale later

State climate strategies, federal government regulations, the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, and customer demand require more visibility on Scope 3 emissions.

The message for business:

You don't need perfection

You need to start

Start with:

your top 10 suppliers or categories

major material or equipment inputs

upstream energy-intensive processes

logistics and transport exposures

Many organisations overcomplicate this. You can start with spend-based or proxy data simply to identify where to focus.

Once you know where your carbon liability is greatest, you can plan better to reduce risk, negotiate better, select smarter, and avoid unpleasant surprises in the years ahead.

5. Data driven decisions - Because Guessing Isn't a Strategy

As policies tighten, certificate prices fluctuate, grants come and go, political parties change, and electrification accelerates, data is becoming the difference between businesses that advance and businesses that miss out.

2025 reinforced this:

customer demand and product mixes change

"efficient" controls operate inefficiently

multiple teams report different emissions and energy data (ESG vs NGERS vs ASRS)

meter-level insights catch waste that's been hidden for years

visibility unlocks quick wins with no capex

validated data dramatically improves investment decisions

Regular energy audits + metering & monitoring + proper energy data governance = competitive advantage.

This is how leaders get ahead:

They assign ownership

They set review cycles

They track performance

They catch drift early

They use data to shape the 2026 capital plan, not guesswork

And critically - they use data to identify what to stop doing, not just what to start.

2026 Mindset Shift: The Difference Between Leaders and Laggards

Leaders:

Electrify what makes sense

Optimise what they already own

integrate bioenergy , energy efficiency and electrification into a thermal strategy

Integrate certificates and grant funding strategically

Reassess assumptions regularly

Use data to guide every major decision

Laggards:

Chase grants reactively

Assume their systems are "fine"

Invest without modelling

Treat audits as a checkbox

Ignore drift in controls and operations

Assume electrifying everything is the right answer

The gap is widening - and 2026 will amplify it.

If You Only Do Four Things Before March 2026:

Audit your site - not for compliance, for clarity.

Build your certificate & funding strategy - don't leave money unclaimed.

Optimise what you already own - it's where the fastest payback still lives.

Plan your metering & monitoring - you can't manage what you can't measure

Ready to Build Your 2026 Energy & Sustainability Plan?

If you'd like help turning these priorities into a practical roadmap, we're here to support you. Northmore Gordon works with organisations across Australia to build actionable strategies , deliver high-value audits , and design funding and certificate plans that maximise ROI and reduce risk.

Whether you need to:

map out your 2026 energy and sustainability strategy ,

complete a site-wide audit and uncover operational savings,

or integrate VEECs, ESCs, LGCs, grants or other funding into a structured project pipeline - we can help you plan with confidence.

Get in touch with our team to talk through your goals for 2026 and how we can support your next steps.

Scheme and certificate context

Before using a certificate or grant figure, confirm the current scheme method, eligible activity, effective date, evidence requirements, price date and registration or application process.

Related guidance

Certificate services

Government schemes

Contact us

Read the original article for the source publication and its full context.

Why does Northmore Gordon emphasize efficiency as the foundation of 2026 sustainability strategy rather than jumping straight to electrification or net-zero commitments?

Efficiency is 'the fastest, cheapest, least-regret step in any sustainability plan,' delivering the best ROI from operational excellence rather than new capital. High-value improvements include heat recovery, load shifting, compressed-air leak reduction, boiler tuning, setpoint optimisation, and real-time monitoring. Even sites labelled 'efficient' underperform after 12–24 months as controls drift and settings

change. A proper energy audit acts as a diagnostic and investment roadmap, not just compliance. Our audit and energy management services help sites identify and sustain these operational gains before committing capital to larger projects.

How can businesses improve their sustainability project ROI by 15–30% according to Northmore Gordon's 2026 guidance?

By integrating certificates and funding into 12–36 month project pipelines so funding becomes predictable rather than incidental. We recommend mapping VEECs, LGCs, ESCs and grants strategically into capital works schedules. This approach separates energy savings, tariff effects, maintenance benefits and certificate revenue as distinct financial streams. Our services include environmental certificate assessment, funding-pathway analysis, and transition planning that connect each opportunity to its owner, dependencies, capital requirement and implementation timeline—ensuring funding and incentives align with project timing.

What specific cautions does Northmore Gordon give about electrification projects in 2026, and what data must be modelled first?

Grid and connection capacity is not guaranteed; electrification loads must be modelled, not guessed. Partial electrification may outperform full conversion on ROI. Network costs, tariffs and certificate value can make or break payback. Load sequencing matters, and carbon emissions may rise short-term during transition. Businesses should not assume gas capacity must be replaced one-for-one; biomethane through the grid could meet some thermal needs at lower cost. Our renewable heat assessment, feasibility studies and integrated energy strategy services help clients model these variables, assess grid constraints, and align electrification decisions with actual operating conditions and financial implications.

What does Northmore Gordon mean by 'properly integrating certificates and grant funding into workflow,' and why is this a common gap?

Most organisations treat certificates and grants as incidental to projects rather than coordinated funding streams. Proper integration means preparing the project brief early, identifying the applicable scheme (VEU, ESS, ACCU, REGO), checking eligibility and timing requirements before installation, documenting baseline and implementation evidence, and separating certificate quantity, price and sale timing from energy savings and operating benefits. Our environmental certificate and funding-pathway assessment services help clients check scheme eligibility, establish evidence gaps, and coordinate timing so projects meet scheme prerequisites and avoid retrospective ineligibility—securing funding rather than hoping for it after work is complete.

How should businesses start managing Scope 3 emissions and embedded carbon in 2026 without seeking perfect data immediately?

Start small: focus on top 10 suppliers or categories, major material or equipment inputs, upstream energy-intensive processes, and logistics exposures—using spend-based or proxy data to identify where to focus. This pragmatic approach avoids paralysis while establishing where Scope 3 emissions concentrate. Our carbon advisory services, including diagnostic workshops, Scope 1, 2 and 3 inventory support, and product carbon footprint assessment, help organisations establish baseline emissions, identify material supply-chain risks, and develop transition pathways that separate physical reductions from contractual attributes and offsets—moving from data gaps to actionable priorities.

What distinguishes sustainability leaders from laggards in Northmore Gordon's 2026 framework?

Leaders electrify what makes sense (not everything), optimise existing assets first, integrate efficiency, bioenergy and electrification into a thermal strategy, use data to guide decisions, reassess assumptions regularly and integrate certificates and grant funding strategically. Laggards chase grants reactively, assume systems are 'fine', invest without modelling, treat audits as checkboxes, ignore operational drift

and assume electrifying everything is correct. The difference lies in data governance, regular energy assessment and evidence-based decision-making. Our six-stage delivery approach—Assess, Build the Case, Capture Value, Deliver, Procure, Perform—ensures organisations move beyond assumptions to verified outcomes and sustained performance.

Why does Northmore Gordon stress metering, monitoring and energy data governance as competitive advantages in 2026?

Policies tighten, certificate prices fluctuate, grants come and go, and political priorities shift. Data becomes the difference between organisations that advance and those that miss out. Issues include inefficient controls in supposedly 'efficient' buildings, divergent emissions data across ESG, NGER and ASRS reporting, and hidden waste caught only by meter-level insights. Regular energy audits combined with metering and monitoring reveal these gaps and enable fast correction. Our moreData platform and energy management systems provide data collection from multiple sources, performance tracking, opportunity analysis and NGER reporting—establishing the data governance and transparency needed to sustain competitive advantage.

What are the four foundational practical steps Northmore Gordon recommends organisations complete before March 2026?

First, audit your site for clarity, not compliance—establishing a diagnostic and investment roadmap. Second, build your certificate and funding pipeline—mapping VEECs, LGCs, ESCs and grants into capital plans. Third, optimise what you already own—where fastest payback still lives through operational improvements. Fourth, plan your metering and monitoring—because you cannot manage what you cannot measure. These steps position organisations to make data-informed decisions, integrate funding strategically and deliver sustained efficiency gains. Our energy optimisation, environmental certificate and energy management services support each step.

How does Northmore Gordon's delivery approach connect technical assessment with commercial decisions and ongoing performance in 2026 sustainability projects?

Our six-stage model—Assess, Build the Case, Capture Value, Deliver, Procure, Perform—organises work so that technical findings (energy audits, feasibility studies) inform commercial decisions (investment cases, funding pathways) and lead to verified, sustained outcomes. Assess identifies opportunities and missing evidence. Build the Case evaluates technical and commercial viability. Capture Value secures funding and certificates. Deliver implements and verifies. Procure addresses energy and attribute purchasing. Perform ensures sustained outcomes and guides next decisions. This structure prevents the common disconnect between projects that appear good on paper but fail in operation—ensuring efficiency, electrification and renewable investments are backed by evidence, properly timed against schemes and regularly reassessed.