

Getting Started: A Guide to Embedding Sustainable Procurement

Tool Alignment Area: This guide serves as your comprehensive roadmap to embedding sustainable procurement into your operations. It is directly aligned with the 'Circular Economy' section of the Sustainability Maturity Tool, moving your organisation from a basic understanding towards Stage 3 and beyond, where sustainability is a core part of your DNA.

1. Securing Commitment & Action

Before you can change how you buy, you must change how your organisation thinks. This stage is about shifting the internal culture from viewing procurement as a purely financial transaction to seeing it as a strategic tool for positive impact.

Securing Your Commitment to Action

To ensure this strategy is not just a "paper exercise," you must embed it into your formal governance:

- **The Strategy Pitch:** Use *An Introduction to Sustainable Procurement.pptx* to present a compelling case to your board or senior leadership.
- **Formal Policy Development:** Customise the *Sustainability Procurement Policy Template.docx*. This document should define your organisation's non-negotiable standards, such as a zero-tolerance policy for modern slavery or specific carbon reduction requirements. Once signed by leadership, this becomes your procurement framework.
- **Creating Company Guidance:** High-level policies can feel abstract to staff. Extract the core principles to create a "Buying Guide" that offers practical, "how-to" advice for any employee with a corporate credit card or budget authority.

Visualising the Core Framework:



Figure 1: Focus on the Triple Bottom Line (Planet, People, Profit) to mitigate supply chain disruption or legal non-compliance.

Identifying Your Sustainable Procurement Priorities

You cannot tackle everything at once. You must identify where your spend has the greatest potential for risk or improvement:

- **Categorising Your Spend:** Review your annual accounts and group your spending into logical buckets (e.g., Marketing, Office Supplies, IT Hardware, Facilities Management).
- **Strategic Risk & Impact Mapping:** Using *The Sustainable Procurement Playbook*, evaluate each category through two lenses:
 - **Environmental Impact:** Which categories involve high carbon emissions, heavy water usage, or significant waste? (e.g. Logistics or Textile manufacturing).
 - **Social Risk:** Which categories are prone to human rights abuses or poor labour standards? (e.g. Electronics or Apparel).
- **Setting Goals:** Based on this map, set 3–5 high-level goals. **Example:** *"By 2027, 100% of our office paper will be FSC-certified or recycled"*.

2. Identifying Your Sustainable Procurement Requirements

Once you know your priorities, you need to establish the technical criteria for those purchases. This ensures that, when buying products and services, you are requesting the appropriate requirements and specifications.

Before making a purchase, your organisation should refer directly to the visual priority hierarchy below. This involves considering whether the purchase is genuinely necessary by evaluating whether existing resources can be used more effectively, shared, or repurposed.

THE SUSTAINABLE PROCUREMENT HIERARCHY



Where possible, always ensure you prioritise re-use and re-source options before committing to buying a new product or service.

Establishing Your Requirements

- **Requirements for Goods (Products):** Move towards a circular model by specifying products that are durable, repairable, and recyclable.
- **Requirements for Services:** Focus on how the service is performed.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION EXAMPLES

- **For Apparel:** Require 100% recycled material content and a "take-back" scheme for end-of-life recycling.
- **For IT Hardware:** Mandate a minimum energy-efficiency rating (like EPEAT Gold) and the ability to replace batteries or components.
- **For Cleaning:** Require the use of non-toxic, biodegradable chemicals and evidence of the "Real Living Wage" for staff.

Relevance & Proportionality

Apply a "common sense" check to ensure your requirements are proportionate to the purchase. For example, you would not ask a local SME providing a one-off service for a 50-page carbon audit; however, you should ask a multi-million-pound logistics partner to provide a comprehensive fleet emissions report.

3. Managing Sustainable Procurement

This stage covers how you vet your suppliers and ensure they are meeting your standards. The complexity of your approach should be proportionate to the type of product or service you are procuring.

Your Procurement Strategy

Your approach to sustainable procurement will vary depending on the value, risk, and complexity of the purchase. In practice, organisations will typically apply different levels of scrutiny depending on the procurement activity.

Scrutiny Scopes Matrix by Purchase Type	
<div><p>Small Spend Purchases</p><hr/><p><i>For lower-value or low-risk purchases, a simple and practical approach is often sufficient.</i></p><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using pre-approved suppliers• Completing a basic sustainability checklist before purchasing• Prioritising recognised eco-labels and certifications• Considering re-use, refurbishment, or rental options where appropriate</div>	<div><p>Higher Spend Purchases</p><hr/><p><i>For higher-value or higher-risk procurements, introduce a structured assessment process.</i></p><p>Use a Supplier Questionnaire covering critical ESG topics. Depth corresponds to organisational maturity:</p><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stages 1 & 2: Shorter, streamlined questionnaire focused on key risks.• Stage 3+: Detailed and comprehensive supplier assessment processes.</div>

Contracts: Sustainability expectations should, where appropriate, be reflected within supplier contracts. This can include specific clauses relating to environmental performance, ethical standards, reporting requirements, or continuous improvement commitments. Embedding sustainability into contractual arrangements helps ensure that agreed standards are maintained throughout the duration of the supplier relationship.

Procurement Toolkit

The sustainable procurement toolkit provides practical resources to help organisations apply a proportionate and consistent approach to supplier assessment and decision-making. These tools may include:

- Supplier questionnaires
- Sustainability checklists
- Supplier scorecards
- Example contract clauses
- Guidance on reviewing supplier evidence and responses

THE MATURITY GATE & SCORING LEAD RULES

The Maturity Gate Rule: The full Supplier Questionnaire and Scorecard are more detailed assessment tools and may require significant internal resource to review and verify supplier responses. **Only use these more complex tools for high-value or high-risk tenders if your organisation has reached Stage 3 of the maturity tool.** Organisations at earlier stages should use a streamlined and proportionate approach.

Review & Scoring: Designate an appropriate lead, such as a Sustainability Lead or Procurement Lead, to review supplier responses. Using a consistent scoring approach can help ensure procurement decisions are evidence-based, transparent, and objective.

Early Stage Engagement: Your Supplier Questionnaire (Stages 1 & 2)

For organisations at Stages 1 & 2, use some or all of these questions to build a baseline profile of your suppliers

Governance & Strategy

Does your organisation have a formal sustainability policy and a named contact responsible for it?

Do your mission/values include climate or environmental priorities, and will this proposal support them?

Do you have set sustainability targets (e.g. % emission reduction, plastic usage, water usage, etc.)?

Do you hold ESG ratings (e.g. CDP or SBTi) or certified management systems (e.g., ISO 14001)?

Do you hold values-aligned certifications (e.g. B Corp, Real Living Wage, or Disability Confident)?

Have you introduced any sustainability-related improvements or innovations in the last 12 months?

Social Responsibility

Do you ensure products/services comply with the UN Guiding Principles on Business & Human Rights?

Can you provide evidence of human rights due diligence and fair treatment of workers?

Are Diversity and Inclusion integrated into your employment and hiring practices?

Do you apply the "Employer Pays Principle" for contracted labour to prevent debt bondage?

Do you actively seek to include social enterprises and local businesses in your operations?

Environmental Management

Do you currently monitor and record Scope 1, 2, and 3 GHG emissions?

Do you have an energy efficiency plan and a commitment to sourcing renewable energy where possible?

Do you adhere to the waste hierarchy (Prevent, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) in your operations?

Do you avoid single-use plastics unless specific reuse arrangements are in place?

4. Communicating Commitment & Requirements

Effective sustainable procurement depends on clear communication. To successfully embed sustainable procurement practices, organisations should ensure that both internal and external stakeholders understand the purpose of the approach, the expectations being introduced, and the role they play in supporting delivery.

Internal Stakeholders

Internal engagement is essential to ensure sustainable procurement principles are understood and consistently applied across the organisation.

- **Staff Engagement:** Provide staff with introductory guidance and training on sustainable procurement principles, processes, and expectations. This may include awareness sessions, procurement guidance documents, e-learning modules, or presentations tailored to different departments and purchasing responsibilities. The *Introduction to Sustainable Procurement* powerpoint could provide a useful introduction to the topic.
- **Training & Capability Building:** Ensure employees involved in purchasing or supplier management receive appropriate training to help them identify sustainable procurement opportunities, apply procurement requirements consistently, and understand relevant environmental and social risks.
- **The Business Case:** Use practical examples and organisational data to demonstrate how procurement decisions contribute to wider sustainability objectives. This can help staff understand how areas such as travel, equipment, facilities, and outsourced services impact carbon emissions, waste generation, and social value.

- **Communicating the Benefits:** Explain the wider organisational benefits of sustainable procurement, including:
 - Reducing waste and resource consumption
 - Lowering energy and operational costs
 - Supporting ethical supply chains
 - Reducing exposure to risks such as modern slavery, environmental harm, or reputational damage
 - Strengthening organisational resilience and stakeholder trust

External Stakeholders

Clear communication with suppliers and partners helps establish expectations, encourages collaboration, and supports successful implementation.

- **Transparency:** Publish your Sustainable Procurement Policy and related commitments on your website so expectations are clear and accessible to all potential suppliers and partners.
- **Supplier Engagement:** Engage strategically important suppliers - such as those representing the highest proportion of organisational spend or risk - early in the process. Providing advance notice of new sustainability expectations allows suppliers time to prepare and adapt.
- **Communicating Future Requirements:** Consider issuing a formal communication or “Letter of Intent” to relevant suppliers outlining planned sustainability requirements and implementation timelines. This helps suppliers understand future expectations and supports a smoother transition before requirements become mandatory within procurement processes or contracts.
- **Collaborative Approach:** Where possible, encourage open dialogue with suppliers to support continuous improvement rather than adopting a purely compliance-based approach. This can help build stronger supplier relationships and encourage innovation and shared sustainability outcomes.

Example Contract Clause

To make your requirements legally binding, embed a sustainable procurement clause into your contracts with suppliers and partners.

Clause X: Sustainable Procurement Compliance LEGAL TEMPLATE

Commitment: The Supplier acknowledges they have read and agree to comply with the Organisation’s Sustainable Procurement Policy.

Data Provision: The Supplier agrees to provide detailed ESG data (including carbon monitoring and supply chain audits upon request to support the Organisation’s reporting.

Improvement: The Supplier shall use reasonable endeavours to improve performance; the Organisation may require a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) if standards are not met.

Termination: A material failure to comply with core standards (e.g. Modern Slavery) entitles the Organisation to terminate this agreement with immediate effect.