

# Your guide to planning a sustainable event



# Introduction

**VisitBritain, in partnership with isla and the GDS Movement is pleased to introduce our sustainable events guide.**

The UK is legally committed to achieve Net Zero by 2050. There is no doubt that the events and travel industry are hugely important vehicles to influence positive change and education with sustainability being a critical part of being a responsible business. Moving forward, our industry must be responsible for embedding key sustainable initiatives into every activity and event, demonstrating our commitment across every level of the supply chain.

VisitBritain encourages all our event partners to consider the specific actions you can take to align your events with more sustainable ambitions. Using this guide, we hope to offer a level of support that helps you plan more sustainable and lower carbon events with practical tips to plan objectives as well as various action points across all layers of the event cycle.

Together, we can help shape the future of events in the UK.



# Step 1

## Define what sustainability looks like in the context of this event.

What are you trying to achieve? The **best ambitions** will look at how to reduce and mitigate carbon emissions in the first instance, as well as how to reduce and mitigate food and general waste.

The **smartest way** to approach this is to identify the big impact areas of your event. All events have some element of **food, production, travel and transport** and **energy** use. Looking at an event across these areas makes approaching sustainability more strategic, and helps to create some structure around actions.

For example, are you organising a dinner, where **food** will be the main feature? Is it an exhibition with a lot of stand **production** and material use? Are you organising an international congress with high volumes of guest **travel**? Or is it an outdoor event with reliance on generators and temporary **energy**?

This visibility over your main impact areas will help you set your focus, enable you to take action and prioritise activity that will have the most impact.

- ☒ Define what your overarching ambition is - carbon reduction, waste reduction, or both?
- ☒ Identify your big impact areas across food, production, travel & transport and energy
- ☒ Align and agree this with key stakeholders



# Step 2

## Understand your areas of control and influence.

Nothing is more frustrating than having a great idea but no way of realising this. Understanding what you can directly control and what **you** can have a strong **influence** over will help you prioritise and focus.

The things you can control are the things you can make a decision about. Where you can't make a decision, but you can shape the decision being made - this is your area of influence.

You should look at control and influence in the context of the big impact areas identified.

For example, if you've identified that **food** is a big impact area for you can look at what you can control - the caterer you work with, the menu you design or the bar company you contract.



Here's an example of control and influence in the context of **production** suppliers.

Control	Influence	No Control
Your venue allows you to bring in your own suppliers and you are the ultimate budget holder. You are able to put out an RFP for your production supplier	Your venue allows you to bring in your own suppliers but you aren't the budget holder and require sign off on who you contract for production.	Your venue has preferred suppliers only and you have no say in who will supply your production elements.
<i>You have control over who you work with.</i>	<i>You can influence the decision makers.</i>	<i>You have no control.</i>

Identifying where you have control and influence helps you focus on the areas where you can have an impact.

Focusing on these areas is important because it helps you set your priorities. We often have short lead times or tight budgets, so understanding your focus areas and the time or resources you have, means you can plan accordingly.

- ☒ **Assess your control and influence, focusing first on your big impact areas**
- ☒ **Identify priorities - what needs a longer lead time or budget sign off and may need a bit of work to get over the line.**
- ☒ **Align and agree your priorities with your team and communicate this to key stakeholders**



# Step 3

## Set your objectives.

From here, you should set **quantifiable objectives** that you can plan for and report against. Set your objectives without using the word 'sustainable'!

Here are some example objectives that relate to the key areas - **food, production, travel and transport** and **energy**

- "50% of all menu items will be plant based"
- "We will eliminate 100% of PVC-based production and graphic materials from our event"
- "We will measure and offset at least 80% of our event transport"
- "We will measure total energy use for the event and offset this"

Objectives should be **ambitious but realistic**.

Setting an ambition like 'We will eliminate all single use plastic items from front and back of house' is ambitious but unrealistic - we are too reliant on plastic!

### Choosing your venue

One key thing you can aim for when setting your objectives is to choose a venue that has an accreditation in place which demonstrates responsible and considered operations or infrastructure.

Look out for marks and certifications such as **BREAM Good or Excellent, LEED Gold** and / or **Green Tourism** certification.

#### *Instead, set objectives like:*

"We will contract all production suppliers to use recycable paper-based alternatives to plastic pallet wrap".

*Or*

"We will eliminate all single-use items from crew catering, using reusable serveware across all crew touchpoints".

These are ambitious but realistic - you can articulate them and you can track your progress against them.

**Tip:** Get under the skin of your key stakeholders and consider what will be most important to them. An engaged audience will make it much easier to plan and deliver against your objectives. Are you engaging with Gen-Z or Millenials who wouldn't bat an eyelid at plant-led catering? There's nothing wrong with an easy-win, so if you can see it, take it!

- ☒ **Set key event objectives, focusing particularly on your big impact areas**
- ☒ **Set smaller, supplementary objectives across the other areas of your event**
- ☒ **Align and agree your objectives with your key stakeholders and communicate this out to wider teams.**

Browse our handy supplementary guidance for inspiration on your objectives!



# Step 4

## Develop your method without using the world 'plan'.

Getting started is always hardest, and when we think about event sustainability, we often feel like we're looking at a big blank page, forcing us to think tactically, instead of strategically.

But now is the easy part...

- ☒ You have your overarching goal
- ☒ You know what areas you're focusing on
- ☒ You have clear objectives to work towards.

Putting a plan in place to achieve this is just like any other part of planning an event.

You need to think about who's responsible, what resources might be needed (people, budget, time) and how you track progress against your objectives.



**In all of this, it's not just your direct team you can consider as 'responsible', but all your stakeholders - suppliers and audience alike! It's not on one team, or one person or one stakeholder to deliver a sustainable event - it's on everyone. Sharing responsibility is the smartest way to successful sustainable event planning. Which means that when it goes right, you can celebrate with all of your stakeholders!**

And if it doesn't quite plan out? All stakeholders can share these learnings, meaning that we fail faster and can collectively pick ourselves back up quicker.

- ☒ **Identify key team members to be responsible for managing an objective**
- ☒ **Identify key stakeholders whose support will be required to achieve objectives**
- ☒ **Align and agree responsibilities with teams and key stakeholders and start planning!**

# Step 4

Here’s an example of how this can be managed:

Our goal	To design an event aiming to reduce carbon emissions as far as possible across travel
Areas of control and influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Full control over the choice of production suppliers.</li><li>• Control over some audience travel as it is being organised by us</li></ul>
Areas of influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How crew travel</li><li>• How products are transported</li><li>• How guests travel</li></ul>
Strategic objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. We will select 100% of production suppliers from within a 50 mile radius of our venue to limit carbon emissions.</li><li>2. We will measure the carbon footprint of 100% of event transport and offset this.</li><li>3. We will request that suppliers consolidate loads to reduce the number of vehicles.</li><li>4. We will measure 100% of audience travel that we are organising, and at least 50% of audience travel that we are not.</li><li>5. We will measure 100% of crew travel associated with travel to and from site and offset this.</li></ol>





# Step 4

Objective	How?	Responsible	Status
We will select 100% of production suppliers from within a 50 mile radius of our venue to limit carbon emissions.	Research suppliers within 50 miles of the venue	<i>Project coordinator</i>	Completed
	RFP out to suppliers	<i>Procurement</i>	Completed
	Aims and objectives included in RFP	<i>Procurement</i>	Completed
	Awarded contracts to contain supplier commitment to measuring footprint / supplying relevant information	<i>Procurement</i>	In progress

Objective	How?	Responsible	Status
We will measure the carbon footprint of 100% of event transport.	Spreadsheet provided to suppliers to provide travel information	<i>Production assistant</i>	Completed
	Data received back from suppliers	<i>All suppliers</i>	Completed
	Data put through carbon measurement tool	<i>Project coordinator</i>	In progress
	Carbon offset partner identified	<i>Procurement</i>	In progress
	Total production transport footprint offset with crew travel footprint.	<i>Central</i>	Up Next





# Step 5

## Report and reflect.

As with all event planning, things change. Whether it's another off-shoot event that one of your stakeholders has just added in, to content schedule and speaker changes, selected hotels running out of room availability to new requests for environmental design elements. Event planners are masters at juggling, adapting and finding solutions.

But while event plans change, our sustainability ambitions shouldn't. Sustainability must remain a priority on the agenda if we're to drive the global changes we need. Keeping these front and centre, and the reason for why we have these ambitions in the first place, will help us keep working towards them.

**Remember - it's ok if we're not perfect! We're on a journey and it's going to take us a little while until we get to our destination. The important thing is that we're on the journey together.**

One of the key things about planning a sustainable event is about reporting and reflecting on the outcomes so we can take these learnings forward. The key thing is to report on our progress against our objectives - what worked, what didn't and **why**. Whether this is a formal report or an event debrief isn't important, as long as the learnings are captured, understood and taken forward in future events.

- ☒ **Review the progress you made towards your objectives**
- ☒ **Reflect on what your success and challenges were (failure isn't always bad!)**
- ☒ **Outline your learnings from this experience and what you can take forward as you plan your next event.**



# Step 5



Here's an example of reporting and reflection:

Objective	We will select 100% of production suppliers from within a 50 mile radius of our venue to limit carbon emissions.		
Progress	80% of our suppliers came from within a 50 mile radius		
Reflections		Learnings	
<p>A list of local suppliers was provided by the venue, which was really helpful in identifying suppliers that were close together as well as within our radius limit.</p> <p>We weren't able to find a technical production supplier that was suitable for our needs within a 50 mile radius</p> <p>Aims and objectives included in RFP</p> <p>Awarded contracts to contain supplier commitment to measuring footprint / supplying relevant information</p>		<p>When we told the venue about our objectives, they were supportive in helping us find solutions. It's really important to include our key stakeholders and make them aware of our ambitions so they can support us.</p> <p>Our ambition for sourcing 100% of suppliers was high, but made us think about how we might go about selecting our venues in the future to enable localised supply chains as much as possible.</p> <p>This made it much easier for us to benchmark supplier responses and identify those that were willing and able to support our objectives.</p> <p>Including this in the contract was challenging as we were asking procurement to change our typical contract format. It would be useful in future to ensure alignment between procurement and budget owner so there is more flexibility in contract adaptation. However our selected suppliers were all happy to agree to contracts - probably because we had selected them based on their willingness to engage with our ambitions as well as suitability for the project.</p>	
Summary			
<p>For our next event of this kind, we'll be asking all potential venues if they can supply us with information about local suppliers so we can explore supplier availability before making our venue selection.</p> <p>We are working with procurement to update our contract T&amp;Cs to make supplying travel information mandatory and a contractual pre-requisite.</p> <p>Whilst we weren't able to meet our goal of 100% of suppliers from within a 50 mile radius, we believe that this is achievable, taking into account these learnings and will apply the same objective next time.</p>			

# Closing

**Many thanks for your partnership!**

For more information please contact our  
VisitBritain Business Events team

[business-events@visitbritain.org](mailto:business-events@visitbritain.org)

