



# Top Tips for sustainable purchasing in schools



department for  
children, schools and families

**Sustainable development is a way of thinking about how we organise our lives and work – including our education system – so that we don't destroy our most precious resource, the planet.**

From over-fishing to global warming, our way of life is placing an increasing burden on the planet, which cannot be sustained. Things which were once taken for granted such as a secure supply of energy or a stable climate do not look so permanent now.

We need to help people in all parts of the world to find solutions that improve their quality of life without storing up problems for the future, or impacting unfairly on other people's lives. Sustainable development means much more than recycling bottles or giving money to charity. It is about thinking and working in a profoundly different way.



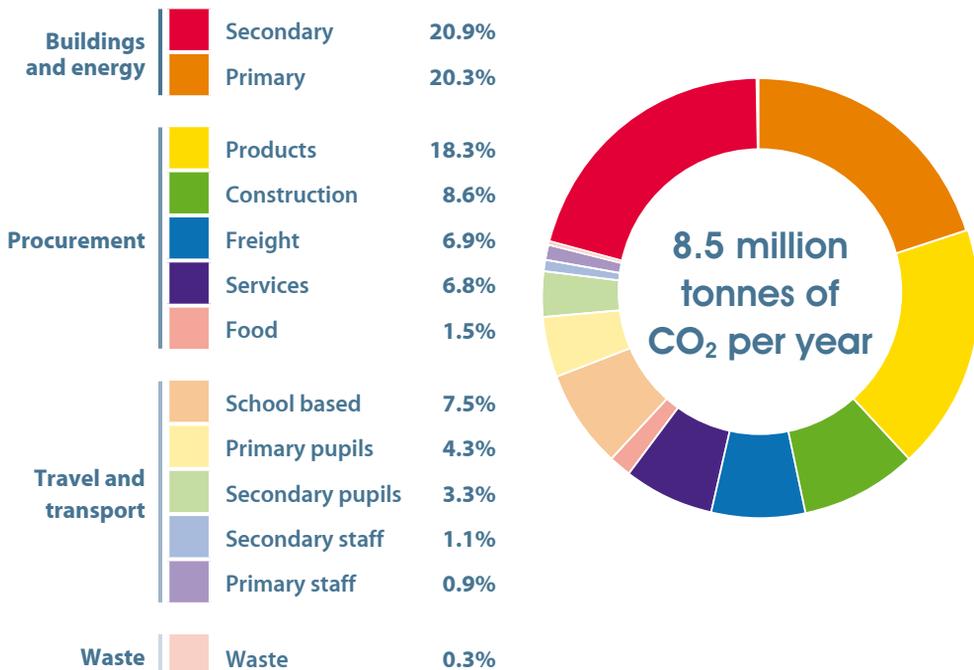
**Sustainable procurement is the process of making and managing buying choices which take into account the impact of those choices on sustainable development.**

All procurement decisions will have some impact on sustainable development – **a good procurement decision is one that evaluates these impacts in the same way that other procurement factors are evaluated.** Initial cost, quality, durability, running costs, management, and disposal issues need to be assessed, and will all influence the final procurement decision.

The Sustainable Development Commission has calculated that **42 per cent of carbon emissions from the schools sector come from procurement** – the day-to-day buying choices and decisions made by each school. This is nearly one per cent of *total carbon emissions* in the UK.

**Government's aim is for every school to be a sustainable school by 2020.** To meet this challenge, it is essential that all schools have the skills and understanding to make sustainable procurement decisions, by using goods and services of high environmental and ethical standards, wherever this is consistent with making the best value spending decision over the whole life of the purchase.

The chart shows a breakdown of the major contributors to the carbon footprint of schools in England.



# 1

**Develop procurement expertise** – nominate and train someone to coordinate everything centrally.

Developing professional skills in any area of your work helps to improve your efficiency and effectiveness. Both procurement and sustainable development are valuable professional skills which will enhance your capacity to deliver improvement across the whole range of school activities, including sustainable buying decisions. Look at the Sustainable Schools and OPEN websites for advice and ask if your local authority provides training.

# 2

**Plan ahead** – identify your requirements early to get the best deal.

Thinking about basic procurement questions before buying can help you to incorporate sustainable factors into any purchase:

- Is your purchase really necessary to deliver your school's objectives?
- What alternative solutions may be available (for example, sharing equipment or services with another school)?
- Can you time your purchasing to avoid peak buying periods (such as the end of the financial year)? High demand reduces your scope to secure good deals with suppliers and their scope for working sustainably by maximising the efficiency of delivery runs, or keeping regular working hours.
- Could you gain from economies of scale by delaying short-term purchases where possible? (bundling together purchases from

the same supplier can cut down delivery costs – less mileage means less fuel consumed to supply you).

- What waste will you be left with? Will you need to dispose of excessive packaging waste or old equipment – your contract with the supplier could cover this.

### 3

**Know your own power** – how much can you spend, are there limits?

You need to understand the power of your spending choices, their impact on the marketplace and the message you give to others by making sustainable choices.

What are your bargaining points? How might your business be especially attractive to a sustainable supplier? Will it improve their profile or market reputation, locally or more widely? Can you use your connections with other schools in the area as a lever to get a good deal?

As demand from schools increases, the market for sustainable goods and services will expand to meet it, with increased economies of scale and wider competition also helping to reduce cost. So you need to take into account both the full cost-benefit of each decision to purchase, and the wider cumulative impact of these decisions.

## 4

### **Don't buy unless you need to** – does anyone have a spare?

Making best use of existing resources, alternative sources, lateral thinking to get the things that your school needs, is both economical and more sustainable.

Before going ahead with a purchase:

- Check whether someone else can spare or loan you the item you need. Don't just look within your own school – can specialist equipment be shared between schools (for example, equipment for field trips)?
- Hold a 'stationery amnesty' – collecting in unused pens, staplers, highlighters and other supplies from classroom cupboards and desks, to restock the main stationery cupboard. Think about other commonly-used materials and supplies that may have been mis-stored and lost (cutlery, IT accessories, books) – is there scope for regular amnesties or scavenger hunts?

## 5

### **Don't spend hours saving a pound** – consider the total cost of procurement.

Your time is a procurement cost – it's a false economy when a tiny purchase price saving takes many hours to achieve.

Sustainable procurement means focusing your efforts on the areas of greatest potential impact over time, like energy and water efficiency, purchasing of paper, ICT and furniture, rather than the most visible or dramatic 'green' purchases.

## 6

**Look for alternatives** – branded products may not always be the best.

Our familiarity with big-name brands doesn't guarantee that they offer best value for money. Less well-known brands may be as good and reliable as their well-advertised rivals – and at a more competitive price.

Why not carry out market testing in your own school? Will recycled paper really jam the printer, or produce poorer results than more expensive branded paper? Or will it turn out to be perfectly good, as well as being more sustainable.

## 7

**Improve your buying power** – work collaboratively wherever you can.

One way to get better purchasing deals with suppliers is to buy collaboratively – grouping together with other local schools in your area. Many local authorities have set up consortia arrangements to help schools achieve good deals. Schools working together on a consortia basis can benefit from:

- Increased purchasing power; greater volumes of business can encourage suppliers to offer better deals for the group, and more sustainable goods and services when they are requested.
- Improved collective ability to source goods and services – some companies see individual schools as too small to be worth bothering with.

- Experience and understanding of sustainable development issues – a consortium enables all schools in it to benefit from the shared specialist knowledge of individuals.

## 8

### **Know what you want** – get the best deal for your money.

Remember that sustainable procurement is about getting the best price for the right product – and by right product, we mean goods and service with high standards of environmental, social and ethical performance. This may mean a bigger discount in return for bulk buying, or arguing for an additional service such as ongoing maintenance support, which can improve the life of purchased equipment and reduce your need to throw away and replace items.

With contracts, the quality of the service plan you agree can be critical in improving sustainability. A contract incorporating regular and reliable servicing will help to ensure, for example, that heating systems run at optimal efficiency, or that copiers and printers don't waste paper and ink by repeatedly jamming or ruining print runs.

## 9

### **Get it in writing** – read and understand the small print.

It's what's in writing that matters. If you rely on verbal agreements with a supplier – that a particular purchase will be delivered in a specific way, for example, or services will include certain maintenance commitments – you have no effective way of ensuring that you get what you've paid for and what you want.

- Understand your contract – use standard terms and conditions of contract where possible to ensure your rights are protected and you get the best deal.
- Make sure you're getting what your contract entitles you to – such as regular servicing of kitchen, lab or IT equipment, helping machinery to run efficiently and not break down and force unnecessary repairs or replacement.
- Check estimates and meter readings quoted on bills against your actual readings – this will help you to understand the patterns of usage in your school, and to avoid overpaying for what you actually use.

## 10

**Share best practice** – if you've made a good sustainable deal, let other schools know about it.

Sharing information is an excellent way of improving your options for delivering sustainable procurement – by supporting and developing the good practice of sharing your knowledge and experience with others, you will increase your chances of getting knowledge and experience back in return. For example:

- Finding out if your existing suppliers are offering deals on sustainable products to other local schools. This opens up possibilities to pull together to get an even better deal from the supplier.

- Market testing – for new sustainable products, the experiences of other schools are essential in informing your own decisions, and vice versa. Do ‘green’ cleaning products and paints work well? Have low-energy IT or other equipment purchases resulted in reduced power bills?
- Have you found a good and reliable sustainable supplier whose business can be expanded by making them known to a wider potential market?
- Look at the Top Tips to reduce waste in schools – sustainable procurement and good waste management make a virtuous circle.

**Further information and guidance can be found at the following:**

[www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools)

[www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/epc/](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/epc/)

[www.dcsf.gov.uk/open](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/open)

[www.sd-commission.org.uk](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk)

See *A fresh look at school food procurement – efficiency and sustainability* at [www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/doc\\_item.asp?DocId=79&DocCatId=9](http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/doc_item.asp?DocId=79&DocCatId=9)



DCSF-00799-2008LEF-EN  
ISBN: 978-1-84775-234-5  
PPAPG/D35/1008(3946)/53

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