



THINKING SUSTAINABLY



Sustainability in procurement is an emerging branch of discussion within the public procurement sector.

Claire Delaney, Managing Director of the Schools' Buying Club, discusses how school business professionals should navigate any changes and why sustainability is important.



There are three areas that need to be explored to fully operate sustainably. These follow the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 and require you to consider how procurement could improve the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the relevant area.

Firstly, there is **economic sustainability**. This is probably the most focused on and covers everything from procuring through framework agreements to aggregating spend with other schools to result in financial gain.

Secondly, and most widely spoken about, is **environmental sustainability**. This ensures we adopt eco-friendly processes such as limiting single-use materials and having better recycling disciplines or water usage management.

Finally, there is the newly emerging strand of **social sustainability**. This relates to our behaviours and how we use our roles and service contracts to ensure we get the best return on investment and reward for the communities we work, educate and live in.

Incorporating and substantiating social return requires us to address our behaviours towards procurement. By adopting a more strategic approach to procurement, all strands of sustainability can be positively impacted.

What to focus on and where to start?

Let's start by acknowledging that when it comes to sustainability, there are no silver bullets or quick fixes; there is often a large element of people management and changing of behaviours to achieve desired goals. So, start by allowing extra time for a pre-procurement stage in your contract lifecycle, which will give you the chance to look at sustainability in your current service provisions and identify key areas for improvement. It will give you time to rectify potential issues where you might have insufficient data and a chance to engage with the supply chain to understand what social value and sustainability processes they are currently implementing. This will also give you time and insight to build sustainability award criteria into your tenders.

Also, why not get to know the other school business professionals (SBPs) in your area and discuss the benefits of collective buying? Not only will this provide you with a better-value deal, but it will help support local smaller suppliers (small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs). Ultimately, this will financially benefit your community, save your school and others money, and help SMEs implement sustainability initiatives, which is harder for them at single-site contracts owing to potential upfront investments.

Maximising processes

Now we have built in a sustainable approach to procurement, here are some examples of how to maximise your sustainability processes.

1. Encourage your supplier to utilise a local supply chain, which will create economic, environmental and social improvements for your school and community. Recruiting local employees will not only cut down on travel time and costs – creating an eco-friendlier commute and economic benefits for employees – but it has operational benefits because local employees are likely to have fewer absence issues owing to ease of commute.

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2. Create a joint sustainability plan with your supplier during the mobilisation period. Review your current sustainability initiatives and identify new ways to create a sustainable environment – for example, using eco-friendly cleaning products or providing more local and/or organic produce in school meals.
3. Identify and build your sustainability key performance indicators into your quarterly or yearly reviews. It's important to set reasonable goals based on your school's current baseline – for example, your water usage or recycling data – and then to keep tracking your progress against these targets.

Throughout the contract cycle, continue to work in partnership with your suppliers to get the greatest rewards from your contracts.

Why is becoming sustainable important – are there educational benefits?

Yes. You can enhance the education of your students by including them in the sustainability discourse. It's clear that young people are at the heart of the sustainability movement; pupil-led initiatives often resonate better within schools, which means the overall sustainability goal needs to sync with teaching curriculums.

1. Look for opportunities to partner with your suppliers on events such as Fairtrade Week, where you can host workshops or assemblies to educate your students on sustainable practices, or sponsor sustainability events such as Plastic Free July.
2. This can also be an opportunity to teach students about researching and putting together business cases on the topics that resonate most with them, and then build these initiatives into your new tender specification – for example, introducing more water fountains to support reusable bottles. Perhaps you could set up a Dragons' Den-style competition for the best sustainability proposal.
3. For older students, why not consider work experience opportunities with your suppliers? These can range from helping school-based staff to office roles and even apprenticeships. Older students can easily support the current OJEU (Official Journal of the European Union) process, engaging with bidders, outlining the vision of the school and contributing to, and being clear about, the school's requirements. ■



Claire Delaney

What about you?

Education through social sustainability initiatives has to start somewhere, and it naturally fits within the SBP role. Therefore, by changing behaviours towards procurement, you can take a step forward in enriching your school's procurement function and your own individual business knowledge.