



ASSOCIATION
for **CULTURAL**
ENTERPRISES

RETAIL SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK

A GUIDE TO SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN RETAIL

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Please consider the environment before printing.
All the resources in this guide are available as downloadable
resources.



Introduction

The Retail Sustainability Framework is designed to help retail and commercial teams within the cultural sector embed sustainable practices into their operations. From eco-friendly sourcing to reducing packaging waste, the Framework offers practical, easy-to-implement solutions.

- Why the Association for Cultural Enterprises? We're the only charity and trade body for the arts, heritage, and cultural sector – representing over 1,650 sites across the UK and beyond – that focusses on supporting the sector to maximise its commercial returns. Sustainability is at the heart of our mission, supporting both financial and environmental resilience.
- Why Now? Our members have spoken – advising us that sustainability is a top priority. With retail activities contributing to 25% of global greenhouse gases, it's time to act. Our Framework is here to help you reduce emissions whilst generating income.
- What's in the Framework? Discover case studies, best practice examples, downloadable resources, tips, and strategies to empower your team. Set your own sustainability goals and take action at your own pace.
- Addressing the Challenge: Cultural organisations face significant financial pressure, and as a society we are also facing a climate emergency. How do we address both? By generating income ethically and sustainably. Our Framework provides clear calls to action and the motivation to build a sustainable business case for long-term success.

You will find case studies and examples of best practice from within the sector to showcase successful initiatives and inspire action. The Framework also contains downloadable resources, tips, and strategies to **empower teams to take action at their own pace, setting their own sustainability goals in alignment with their organisational priorities.**



Executive Summary

The Retail Sustainability Framework provides practical, actionable guidance for cultural retail teams to integrate sustainable practices into their operations.

What's in the Framework:

- Sustainability Mission, Policy and Goal Setting Templates
- A Guide to Understanding the Circular Economy
- Top Tips for Improving your Packaging
- Top Tips for Sustainable Product Design
- How to Evaluate your Products and Packaging
- Supplier Sustainability Questionnaire
- Supplier Sustainability, Ethical and Environmental Policy and Agreement
- Materials Index

Our key recommendations for taking action are:

- Create a Sustainable Mission and Policy if you don't already have them
- Then create Sustainable Goals & KPIs for your team
- Review packaging, and shipping to identify where you can make the biggest impact within your available resources
- Implement a Supplier Questionnaire and Supplier Agreement with your supply chain

The benefits of taking part in the Framework include:

- Prioritising decarbonisation efforts where they can have the biggest impact
- Inform decision making across product ranges
- Collaborate with suppliers to reduce emissions & decarbonise the supply chain
- Encourage innovation and new income streams
- Drive positive change through leveraging your buying power
- Engage and encourage employees to reduce emissions
- Communicate on progress made to external customers and internal stakeholders
- Contribute to a global movement toward achieving Net Zero



Who is the Framework for?

We've created the Retail Sustainability Framework primarily with retail and commercial teams in mind. However it can be adopted by anyone working within the supply chain.

Which roles?

- retail buyers, designers, product developers and merchandisers
- retail managers and supervisors
- commercial and sustainability leads at cultural organisations and visitor attractions

What type of retail?

- both physical and online retail operations

What type of retail operation?

- Small to medium-sized organisations and teams with limited resources will likely find the Framework especially valuable
- You do not need to have dedicated staff or extensive budgets for environmental responsibility, the Framework is designed to offer accessible solutions and easy-to-implement actions that can make a meaningful impact.

Sign up to the Sustainable Retail Pledge

Take Part

Sign up to our Sustainable Retail Pledge, it takes less than 2 minutes. Tell us if you're going to be using any of the resources in the Retail Sustainability Framework so we can help build a national picture of positive action.

Everyone's goals are different, and everyone has different resources. So we believe it's important for everyone to set their own sustainability journey, aligned with their organisation's wider goals.

Message from our CEO



Gordon Morrison **CEO, Association for Cultural Enterprises**

To say I am proud of the Association's new Retail Sustainability Framework is a significant understatement. Our members have long expressed a strong desire for the Association to provide yet more practical and actionable tools to support cultural organisations to become more environmentally responsible, and we have responded emphatically to this with the launch of this outstanding new resource. A huge thank you to our expert staff and industry panel who have worked tirelessly to create what is unequivocally the definitive framework for retail sustainability available to cultural organisations, a support tool that will make a significant impact across the sector for many years to come.

Aims & Scope

Aims

This Framework helps cultural organisations start or advance their journey toward more sustainable retail operations. Designed to empower teams, it enables them to set sustainability goals at their own pace, aligned with their organisation's priorities.

Scope

The Framework covers the entire retail process—from product sourcing and supply chains to packaging, postage, and customer communication. While it doesn't include direct measurement of greenhouse gases, we provide recommendations for conducting carbon audits. A basic understanding of climate change is assumed, but for newcomers, we recommend an [introductory article from the BBC](#). A glossary at the end clarifies key environmental terms and acronyms.



Key Terms

We will also refer to 'Carbon Footprint'. This term can be used to refer to just carbon dioxide emissions, or all greenhouse gas emissions. Which is obviously confusing to the general public, which is why terms like CO₂e are used where possible.

CO₂e (Carbon Dioxide Equivalent) is a measurement used to compare the impact of different greenhouse gases on climate change based upon their global warming potential (GWP). This is a widely used metric used by government and companies to discuss climate change using one comparable metric. For example 1 million metric tonnes of methane and nitrous oxide respectively is equivalent to emissions of 21 and 310 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide. (Source: European Environment Agency)

Measuring Your Carbon Footprint

Measuring your organisation's carbon footprint is not within the scope of this Framework.

Many organisations may already have an audit of their greenhouse gases which can be used to understand where to start, and the context of retail operations within a wider business.

We recommend conducting an audit of your greenhouse gases, either at an organisational or retail-specific level. This will help you identify in detail where improvements can be made. There are recommendations for where to go for carbon footprint and GHG audits in the appendix.



Climate Change - Context

In the creation of the Framework we have referenced the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) while developing the award. We would recommend reading goals 8, 9, 11, and 12 from the UN sustainability goals before going further into the Framework.

They are:

Goal 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth (Sustainable Tourism & Green Economy)

Goal 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

Goal 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities (Sustainable Transport)

Goal 12 Responsible Consumption and Production (17% of total food waste is wasted at the consumer level)

The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Global Goals, are a set of 17 integrated and interrelated goals to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that humanity enjoys peace and prosperity by 2030.

You can find out more about them at sdgs.un.org/goals.



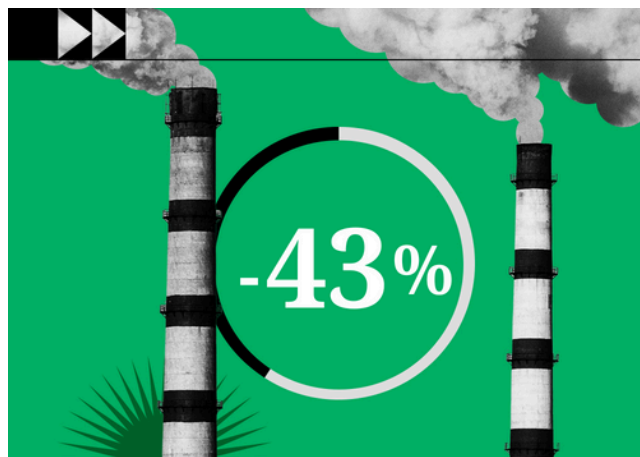
Aligning your actions with the SDGs is important in communicating to colleagues, stakeholders, and customers your commitment to contributing to the Global Goals; claiming accountability and responsibility to take the necessary actions; and measuring progress over time.

The Association for Cultural Enterprises is an Arts Council England Investment Principles Support Organisation (IPSO). The Retail Sustainability Framework supports the wider **Arts Council England's Investment Principle: Environmental Sustainability and Dynamism** and has been created with this goal in mind.



Are we on course to reducing emissions?

The world is working towards net zero by 2050, as stipulated in the Paris Agreement at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference (COP21), with an aim of limiting the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees to avert catastrophic climate change. So are we on course to reducing emissions?



Reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions **needed** by 2030, from 2019 levels, to keep warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius




Decrease in global greenhouse gas emissions **projected** by 2030, compared to 2019, based on available national action plans



Source: UNFCCC NDC synthesis report (Nov 2024)

No. To prevent the most severe effects of climate change and maintain a livable environment, it's essential to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. At present, the Earth is already approximately 1.2°C warmer than it was in the late 19th century, and emissions are still increasing. To stay within the 1.5°C target set by the Paris Agreement, global emissions must be cut by 45% by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050.

Where does retail at cultural venues, and this Framework, fit into this wider context? A recent study suggested retail contributes approximately 25% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The globally accepted accounting of greenhouse gases is split into three 'Scopes', and direct and indirect emissions. It is these indirect emissions that will typically make up 70% of an organisation's emissions, according to the Carbon Trust. Retail falls under Scope 3 emissions, see the definitions below.



Scope 1 Emissions

These emissions cover direct emissions from owned or controlled sources, for example fossil fuel burning for energy or car use.

Scope 2 Emissions

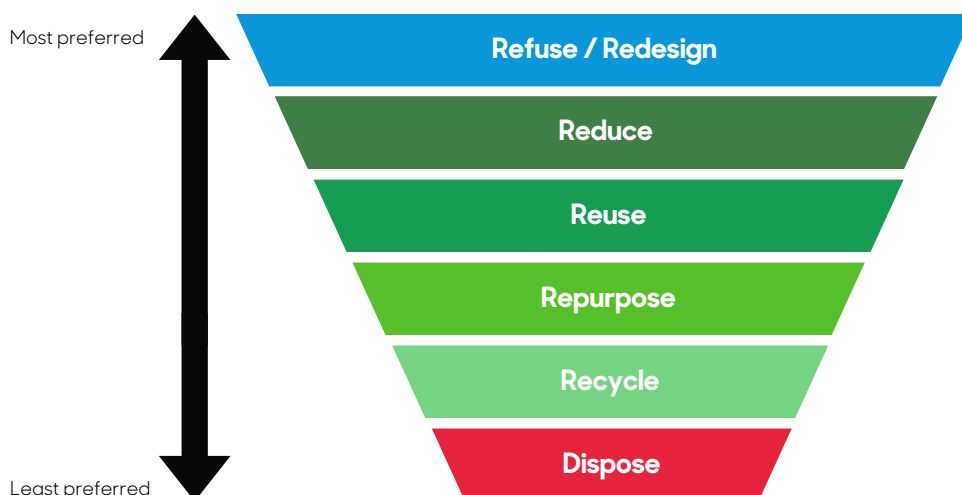
These emissions cover indirect emissions from the purchase and use of electricity, steam, heating and cooling. By using the energy, an organisation is indirectly responsible for the release of emissions.

Scope 3 Emissions

Includes all other indirect emissions that occur in the upstream and downstream activities of an organisation. For example, purchased goods or services, employee travel, or waste disposal.

This is the primary Scope for the purchase and sale of products in retail (your supply chain and procurement) and therefore is the primary focus of sustainability initiatives for retailers.

You might be aware of something like the diagram below, sometimes known as the zero waste hierarchy pyramid, or the 5 R's. This acts as a readable guide to approaching waste and buying decisions, for both organisations and individuals alike. What you might notice is that recycling is nearer the bottom of the hierarchy than the top. This linear approach has been common for many years, but we can move beyond this thinking and into another familiar term, the circular economy. See our A Guide to Understanding the Circular Economy as part of the Framework.





How to Use the Framework

You may pick and chose what elements of the Framework are most appropriate for your business, and how far along a sustainability journey you are already on.

We do recommend that you begin by setting a Sustainability Policy and Mission Statement, and follow the additional resources in this order:

- ↪ Sustainability Mission, Policy and Goal Setting
- ↪ A Guide to Understanding the Circular Economy
- ↪ Top Tips for Improving your Packaging
- ↪ Top Tips for Sustainable Product Design
- ↪ How to Evaluate your Products and Packaging
- ↪ Supplier Sustainability Questionnaire
- ↪ Supplier Sustainability, Ethical and Environmental Policy and Agreement
- ↪ Courier & Delivery Matrix
- ↪ Materials Index



Look out for these helpful hint boxes giving you key tips and what to focus on first



Cultural Enterprises is the only charity and trade body for the arts, heritage and cultural sector that brings together learning, experience and best practice in revenue generation, representing over 1,650 sites across the UK and beyond.

Here's an example



Glossary of Terms

Net Zero

This refers to balancing the amount of greenhouse gases (GHGs) emitted into the atmosphere with an equal amount of GHGs removed. The goal is to reduce emissions to near-zero levels and offset any remaining emissions through measures like carbon capture.

Carbon Neutral

This means having no net release of carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the atmosphere. Any CO₂ emissions are offset by initiatives like reforestation or carbon credits.

Carbon Footprint

A carbon footprint measures the total amount of GHGs emitted directly or indirectly by human activities, typically expressed in tonnes of CO₂ equivalent.

Carbon Footprint

This term can be used to refer to just carbon dioxide emissions, or all greenhouse gas emissions. Which is obviously confusing to the general public, which is why terms like CO₂e are used where possible.

CO₂e (Carbon Dioxide Equivalent)

A measurement used to compare the impact of different greenhouse gases on climate change based upon their global warming potential (GWP). This is a widely used metric used by government and companies to discuss climate change using one comparable metric. For example 1million metric tonnes of methane and nitrous oxide respectively is equivalent to emissions of 21 and 310 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide. (Source: European Environment Agency)

Greenhouse Gases

There are seven commonly agreed emission that contribute to climate change.

Carbon Dioxide (CO₂)

Methane (CH₄)

Nitrous Oxide (N₂O)

Fluorinated Gases (Hydrofluorocarbons, Perfluorocarbons, Sulfur Hexafluoride)

Water Vapor (H₂O)

Each of these gases varies in their global warming potential (GWP) and atmospheric lifetime, influencing how they affect the climate system over different time scales.



Helpful Links

Open University [carbon calculator](#)

Carbon Trust [SME Carbon Footprint Calculator](#)

BBC [What is climate change? A really simple guide](#)

Carbon Literacy Trust [homepage](#)

United Nations [Net Zero Coalition page](#)

European Environment Agency [homepage](#)

Plan A [How to decarbonise the retail industry.](#)

Pack Help [Implementing Genuinely Sustainable Packaging in A Small Brand](#)

Contact Pigeon [The Rise of Sustainable Retail](#)

Shopify [Sustainable Retail: 15 ways to be More Sustainable](#)

Earthy B [homepage](#)

Federation of Small Businesses [Sustainability Hub](#)

Fairly Made [homepage](#)

Ellen Macarthur Foundation [homepage](#)



ASSOCIATION for **CULTURAL ENTERPRISES**

The Framework is comprised of this introduction and fourteen separate resources, including downloadable templates, tips, and strategies.

What's included:

- Sustainability Mission, Policy and Goal Setting Templates
- A Guide to Understanding the Circular Economy
- Top Tips for Improving your Packaging
- Top Tips for Sustainable Product Design
- How to Evaluate your Products and Packaging
- Supplier Sustainability Questionnaire
- Supplier Sustainability, Ethical and Environmental Policy and Agreement
- Materials Index

ACCESS THE FRAMEWORK

**THE FRAMEWORK IS AVAILABLE TO MEMBERS OF THE
ASSOCIATION FOR CULTURAL ENTERPRISES ONLY**

THANK YOU FOR READING