

# ESG guide

for public sector organisations

How public sector organisations can get the most out of their  
environmental, social and governance strategy



**Business**

# Taking the next step on your ESG journey

**The public sector has long been committed to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) projects.**

In serving the needs of the public, organisations like yours are already making a contribution towards society. It's already in the fabric of your normal ways of working.

But these aren't normal times.

2023 has brought difficult economic challenges. And as all organisations start to feel the pressure to act towards commitments made in easier times, it can be difficult to maintain momentum on your ESG goals.

So what does a successful ESG pathway look like for the public sector?

One thing is for sure: it isn't about reinventing the wheel. It's about putting social value at the heart of your whole strategy. Relying on partnerships to help you amplify your ESG work to make a meaningful difference. And equipping your organisation with the tools to measure your progress in a transparent and robust way.

To succeed, public sector organisations should focus on making specific and considered changes to their ways of working. That way, we can maintain momentum on ESG goals in a sustainable, long-term way.

To understand what the next step looks like and what support the public sector needs, we surveyed over 1,200 UK workers across public and private sector organisations, from decision makers to junior staff, in partnership with Censuswide.

We also surveyed 1,000 general consumers to understand their views on how important ESG is to them and how UK organisations align with their values, combining our research with first-hand customer insights to better understand the challenges and opportunities at play in the UK right now.

This spotlight report holds the information you need to take your next step on your ESG journey, from embedding social value for community impact to understanding your carbon footprint.

No organisation is an island, and together we can pave the way for an ESG strategy that makes a meaningful impact.

## Research methodology

Censuswide surveyed 1,203 respondents working in UK businesses in organisations with more than 11 staff and in the private and public sector between 10.08.2023 - 17.08.2023.

Censuswide surveyed 1,000 General Consumers (aged 16+) between 10.08.23 - 14.08.23.

Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society which is based on ESOMAR principles.



# Put social value at the heart of your organisation

## A successful ESG strategy doesn't just adhere to regulations or tick boxes.

It is fully integrated into your organisation's wider plan. Constructed with social value at its core. And amplified by partnerships to help you reach the communities that need support.

30% of public sector organisations prioritise a social focus to their ESG strategies, compared to only 19% of private sector firms.

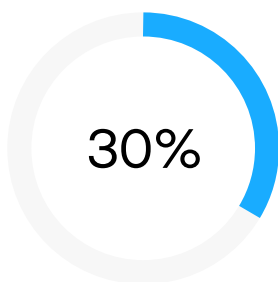
This is reflected in the [Social Value Act](#), which calls for social value to be embedded into organisational practices. 73% of organisations note a higher priority for social action compared to a year ago, reflecting a heightened sense of

societal consciousness. There is a brighter spotlight on organisations looking to prove their commitment to their communities.

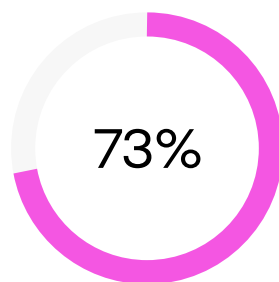
More recently, social value has been reshaping the procurement process too.

80% of new tenders over £500,000 in West Sussex will have social value criteria included within their evaluation by 2025, according to the [Local Government Association](#). Putting social value at the heart of your ESG strategy is undoubtedly more important than ever.

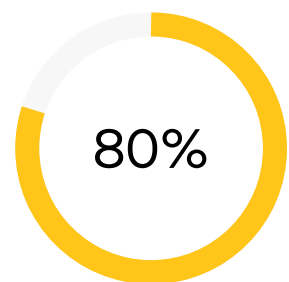
So how can you ensure your ESG work is really making a difference to the communities that need it?



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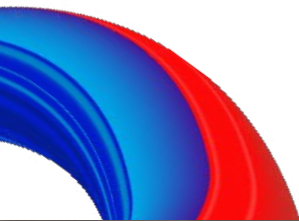


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# Tech can unlock greater impact



**Technology can have an incredible effect on people's lives, but it can also be the key to a more socially conscious ESG strategy.**

That's what one of our customers Birmingham City Council recognised when developing its digital inclusion strategy.

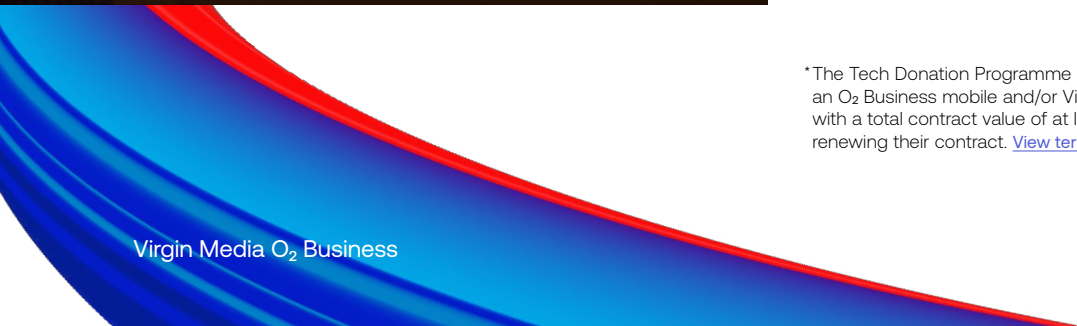
Following conversations with citizens and charities in the area, the council acknowledged that 'there has been a recognition that our digital inclusion work needs to be continued. And we are currently exploring alternative funding ways and bringing in our partners more so to help us deliver some of that capability.'

So investigate how the power of tech can help you maintain your ESG momentum. And use the rich opportunities already available in the public sector as an opportunity to make a meaningful difference.

Our own [Tech Donation Programme](#), for example, lets you donate smartphones and mobile data to digitally excluded people in local communities when you enter a contract with us.\*

By handling the donation on your behalf at no extra cost, we take the pressure off you in a difficult economic year while allowing you to prove your commitment towards your own ESG goals.

\*The Tech Donation Programme is available for new customers who buy an O<sub>2</sub> Business mobile and/or Virgin Media Business SD-WAN contract with a total contract value of at least £200,000. Or existing customers renewing their contract. [View terms and conditions here](#)



# Use your understanding of the communities you serve

## The public sector can use their innate understanding of the communities they serve to make social change happen.

The digital divide is one such issue. And the scale of the problem is enormous.

Roughly 12 million people do not have the digital skills needed for everyday life in the UK, according to [IPSOS](#). That means they are cut off from basic activities such as booking a GP appointment via a smartphone or staying in touch with friends and family online.

Tackling this issue can't be done alone, and the public sector can engage with digital inclusion schemes to make a crucial difference.

Our [Digital Skills Programme](#), for example, allows our employees to volunteer at drop-in digital inclusion

workshops with partner local authorities, helping to narrow the digital divide by sharing their skills and experience. This is just one of the ways they can choose to use their 'Take Five' annual volunteering days, which gives them five working days a year to spend volunteering in the community.

It means that our employees get to meet and interact with digitally excluded people in person and can make a fundamental difference to the quality of their life. And now, after a successful pilot with Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), the Connect More Programme is now going nationwide to help deliver more digital skills training to people in need.

By using your relationships with the communities you are already immersed in, you can ensure social value is woven into the fabric of your organisation.

woven into the fabric of your organisation.



**‘Almost every job requires some level of digital capability now, and those without access to technology are facing significant barriers. So the work that needs to be done is about implementing programmes or systems that reduce or remove those barriers.’**

**Raj Mack, Head of Digital City and Innovation,  
Birmingham City Council**



Less inequality

## Key actions for decision makers

Consider the  
end goal

of your social value  
strategies to make  
meaningful progress

Get up  
to speed

with new responsibilities  
to embed ESG  
into procurement

Hold partners  
to account

to secure wider  
sector partnerships

# Achieve more carbon transparency

## Public trust is incredibly important to the public sector

A successful ESG strategy needs to be robust enough to withstand growing scrutiny. But organisations are facing challenges when it comes to quantifying ESG progress in an effective way.

69% of those we surveyed say limited availability of data and difficulty verifying data are challenges for their organisation.

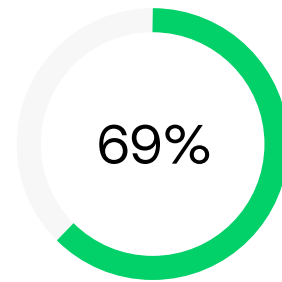
18% are struggling to prioritise ESG amongst other competing demands of various organisational initiatives.

When it comes to transparency, carbon measurement can be a powerful tool for organisations to back up their ESG claims with concrete proof.

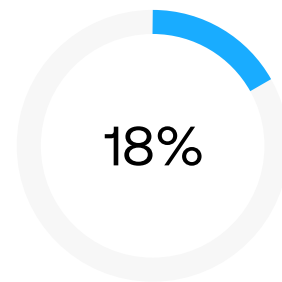
And the good news is that there are ways to embed this measurement into your organisational practices, and schemes in place to support you to achieve this.

The [Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme](#), which supports the aim of reducing emissions from public sector buildings by 75% by 2036 through initiatives such as grant funding.

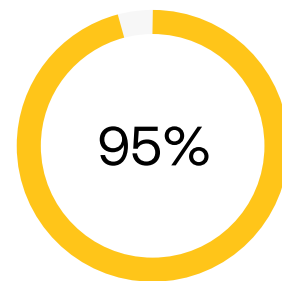
95% of the public sector attach a high importance to carbon transparency in decision making. Done in the right way, this transparency represents a golden opportunity for organisations to show crucial momentum towards their ESG goals.



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# Three simple steps for you to get started on this journey

1

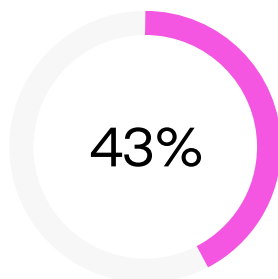
## Understand

43% of senior respondents in the public sector expect some level of transparency from their suppliers regarding their carbon impact. To ensure that transparency, organisations need to take control of their supply chains to understand where emissions are coming from and where they can make reductions.

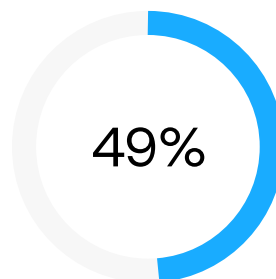
Just 49% of the public sector are likely to access information on carbon footprints. So there is work to be done in establishing mechanisms for assessing and reporting carbon impacts.

Rely on your suppliers to provide that information for you. The right partnership should be open and honest, and sharing our ESG objectives and goals and having regular conversations around the subject is a great way to ensure you have full oversight of the breadth of your environmental impact.

It's also becoming increasingly common for organisations to have a lower tolerance of suppliers unable to provide that assurance. So if your suppliers aren't helping you understand your carbon impact, it might be time to find ones that can.



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of the public sector are likely to access information on carbon footprints





2

## Measure

Data is at the core of carbon measurement. Getting that comprehensive information to measure your impact is critical to helping you reduce it. And technology can help unlock that data for you.

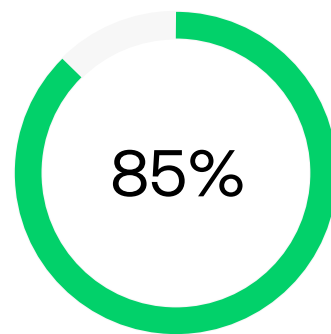
85%<sup>1</sup> of public sector organisations feel ready to leverage technology for their own ESG advancement. In practice, this looks like implementing tools that can help you make more informed decisions about your carbon future.

For example, our [Carbon Calculator](#)\* allows you to estimate the carbon footprint of working with our technology before you commit, helping you plan for the future in a more informed way.

The carbon calculator is based on a model that has been verified by the [Carbon Trust](#) as conforming to the Greenhouse Gas Protocol Product Lifecycle Standard<sup>†</sup>. This means you can use the data in your own carbon reporting with confidence.

**‘When it comes to carbon, data can be extremely difficult to get hold of. For the aspects of work that we are in control of, we can understand the potential carbon footprint - but across an entire city, with many different partners, that’s still a challenge.’**

**Raj Mack, Head of Digital City and Innovation, Birmingham City Council**



of the public sector feel ready to leverage technology for their own ESG advancement<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Highly and moderately equipped combined

\*The carbon calculator is available for new customers who purchase Virgin Media Business SD-WAN or O<sub>2</sub> Business mobile solutions. Or existing customers renewing their contract. Model outputs do not constitute a verified product/organisation footprint.

<sup>†</sup>Model outputs do not constitute a verified product/organisation



3

## Share

Once you've armed yourself with the right information, it's important to make sure you are conveying your progress in a positive and quantifiable way.

89%<sup>2</sup> of the public sector report difficulty in transparently conveying ESG targets, highlighting communication hurdles that need to be overcome.

But public tolerance towards unquantified claims or potential greenwashing is waning.

That's where building a model of future investment with accreditation from an organisation like the [Carbon Trust](#), or gaining a better grasp of your supplier's own ESG efforts, can help you build a more watertight picture.

Use your existing partnerships and identify new ways to reach out to organisations aligned with your vision for ESG success.



<sup>2</sup>Very difficult and moderately difficult combined



Less carbon

## Key actions for decision makers

### Understand

Rely on your partners to ensure you're building sustainability across your entire supply chain

### Measure

Use verified tools available to ensure you're backing up ESG claims with comprehensive and accredited data

### Share

Be vocal in your sustainability efforts but ensure you're backing up your successes with data



# Don't let your strategy go to waste

## The circular economy has long been an effective theory for minimising waste.

In the public sector particularly it is already being put into practice. What does that look like in action?

Initiatives such as the [Waste & Resources Action Programme \(WRAP\)](#) are helping the public sector make crucial progress. The programme campaigns to build and champion circular economies across the UK, highlighting the possibilities of waste reduction and recycling.

And this also highlights the momentum in the public sector to enact real change when to waste reduction. WRAP's annual report, for example, explores how it positively influenced over £1bn of Welsh public sector spend towards developing a circular economy.

But there can be challenges in making waste a priority, especially in a time of such economic difficulties.

There are new reporting obligations and legislation to be aware of. For example, there is uncertainty around the extent to which the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) will be able to implement policies to boost the circular economy under its new ['Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste' programme](#).

18% of those in the public sector whose organisation does not have an ESG strategy or ESG goals express challenges related to a lack of guidance on ESG implementation. But it's important not to see waste as another obligation to worry about. Instead, there are underexplored opportunities here.

Minimising electronic waste (e-waste), for example, can be an often-overlooked way to make progress towards your ESG goals.

E-waste is the fastest growing waste stream in the world, with **5.3 billion mobile phones** set to be discarded worldwide this year, according to the [WEEE Forum](#). So initiatives that can make a difference are crucial.

Our [Mobile Recycling Scheme](#), for example, helps you reduce your electronic waste and give back to communities by taking extending the life of your old or unwanted devices.

The initiative operates on a zero-landfill policy, so all phones will be reused, repaired or recycled. By the end of 2025, we will recycle **95%** of this waste responsibly and fulfil **10 million circular actions**. That's actions which divert materials away from waste and back into use.

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# Amplify your initiatives through partnerships

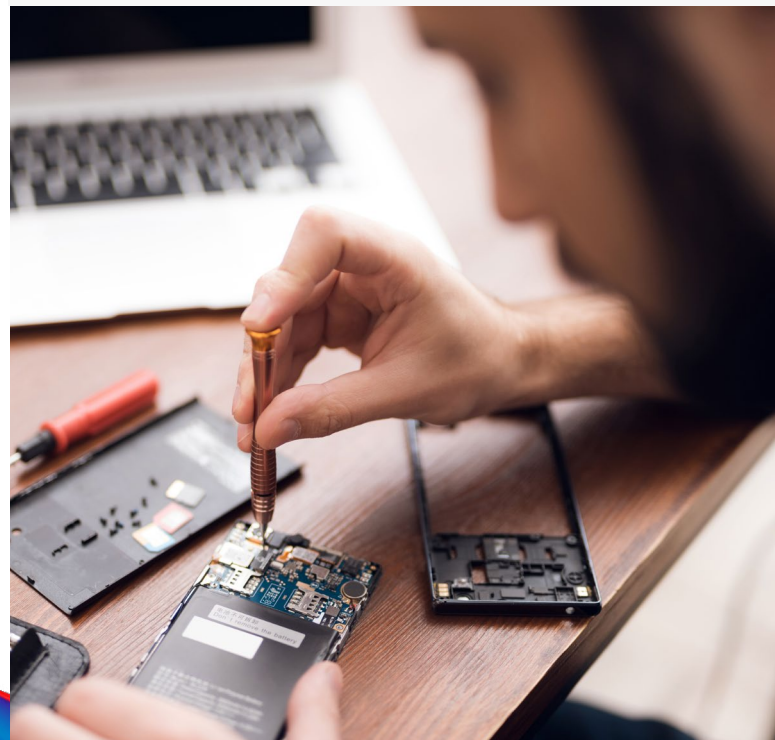
Our initiatives such as our [Tech Donation Programme](#) and our [Mobile Recycling Scheme](#) rely on crucial partnerships with environmental and digital inclusions charities.

These relationships have allowed us to scale our programmes to make a meaningful difference: by diverting more electronics away from landfill, for example, and getting more devices into the hands of people that need them.

It's important to reach out to partners and charities yourself to see how you can enter a similar relationship. We must all work together to boost the circular economy, and you can take the initiative today to get the ball rolling.

**‘We’re working with our partners to see how to improve our waste collection, and how we can reduce the impact of waste across the city, which involved developing digital twins to model potential interventions. It’s about finding these innovations to reduce our impact for the long run.’**

**Raj Mack, Head of Digital City and Innovation,  
Birmingham City Council**





Less waste

## Key actions for decision makers

### Get on board

with the circular economy and find ways to build in reuse to your organisation's practices

### Acknowledge the challenges

that come with balancing ESG efforts with economic pressure and rely on existing initiatives to help you make progress

### See waste as an opportunity

not just a responsibility – it can be the missing puzzle piece to a fully rounded and successful ESG strategy

## What's next for ESG in the public sector?

As ESG becomes more firmly embedded into every aspect of the public sector, maintaining momentum towards meaningful impact is crucial.

We've discussed how pressure is mounting both from the public and from new government reporting and measurement programmes, but also how these forces represent an opportunity for organisations to ensure they make a meaningful impact.

Now is a golden time to review the resources available to you.

Here's how we are helping our customers on the way to ESG success:

### Carbon calculator

Estimate the carbon footprint of some of our most popular business solutions, with a model verified by the Carbon Trust as conforming to the Greenhouse Gas Protocol Product Lifecycle Standard\*

[Learn more](#)

### Tech Donation Programme

Give digitally excluded children and over65s free smartphones and mobile data, creating more opportunities for them and their communities

[Learn more](#)

### Mobile Recycling Scheme

Extend the life of your old or unwanted devices by trading them in for cash to help bring tech waste down and support the circular economy

[Learn more](#)

### Connect More Programme

Help narrow the UK's digital divide through local digital skills sessions supported by our own staff volunteers in partnership with the public sector

[Learn more](#)

The future of ESG looks strong for the public sector. New schemes such as the [Public Sector Low Carbon Skills Fund](#), which helps organisations access skills and put long-term decarbonisation plans in place, are making change more achievable.

\*Model outputs do not constitute a verified product/organisation footprint.

## But let's not stop there

### Amidst this new legislation and growing pressures, confusion is understandable.

So if you have questions or concerns about advancing your ESG strategy, you're not alone. There are actions you can take and questions you can ask to make sure you're equipped for success.

The key is to start those conversations now. Reach out to your suppliers about their emissions data, and work together.

One of our experts will be more than willing to help and provide information on how to get involved with a scheme such as our [Tech Donation Programme](#), or start working with charities such as Hubbub, Digital Unite and the Good Things Foundation.

ESG will only become more interwoven into the fabric of the public sector, so building on what you do now will help you maintain momentum on your success for the long run.





# Summary of key actions for decision makers



## Consider the end goal

of your social value strategies to make meaningful progress

## Get up to speed

with new responsibilities to embed ESG into procurement

## Hold partners to account

to secure wider sector partnerships



## Understand

Rely on your partners to ensure you're building sustainability across your entire supply chain

## Measure

Use verified tools available to ensure you're backing up ESG claims with comprehensive and accredited data

## Share

Be vocal in your sustainability efforts but ensure you're backing up your successes with data



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**Business**

**Ready to make meaningful  
ESG progress?**

**Visit our sustainability hub**