



Version 1.0, Feb 2008

## An introduction to Green Purchasing

### What's it all about?

Green purchasing is about integrating environmental considerations into your purchasing decisions. That might be switching to recycled paper, changing your lighting to energy-efficient bulbs or using less toxic cleaning products around the building. Ideally, it means doing all of these and more as appropriate to your organisation.

Being more aware of environmental issues won't make your office less effective. Once you have simple systems in place to help make appropriate procurement decisions it shouldn't take up extra time, and buying environmentally-preferable products doesn't necessarily cost more. So the big question is 'why aren't more people doing it?'

Resistance to change, inertia and perceived time and cost are some of the frequently-mentioned issues. Knowing where to start is another. Product availability, quality and performance have been other sticking points. But now there are lots of effective products out there in the marketplace so perhaps it's time to take a fresh look at your purchasing. And the good news is that if you ask around other organisations in your networks and partnerships you might be surprised at just how many organisations are making an effort to 'green' their purchasing.

### Why does this matter?

There are lots of reasons why your office or building should be making an effort. As well as reducing your environmental impact and carbon footprint, green purchasing can help cut waste – both resources and money. According to RecycleNow, the national waste awareness campaign, waste disposal costs can be up to 5% of an organisation's annual turnover.

Linking recycling with purchasing, for example, by buying recycled paper, helps create a stronger market for recyclable materials. (See Recycled Paper, <http://eaclink.info/?QQJGY>)

But the first question in any green purchasing activity is always to ask whether a particular item is really needed. It's very easy to envisage a 'want' rather than an actual 'need' when looking through office stationery catalogues. Avoid ordering excess stationery items 'just in case' (or in response to discount offers). Alternatively, substituting a durable item that can be used again and again (e.g. cardboard files, rechargeable batteries) addresses the waste reduction agenda.

### The key green purchases

Green purchasing includes:

- recycled content products
- energy efficient equipment
- low carbon
- low waste
- water saving items
- products that respect biodiversity/habitats e.g. peat-free compost
- Less toxic/polluting
- Fair Trade
- Ethical investment/finance/pensions

For more information see- Green and Ethical Purchasing – 10 first steps page, <http://eaclink.info/?SMWPPW>.

See Understanding Green Labels, <http://eaclink.info/?LVBAE>, for detailed descriptions about product logos and certification schemes (e.g. Forest Stewardship Council for wood)

For guidance on developing and implementing an environmentally and ethically sound purchasing policy and practice, see <http://eaclink.info/?SMWPPW>.

## The wider picture

Green Purchasing isn't just for the VCS sector. There are many initiatives and strategies underway in the public and private sector, including the UK Government's Sustainable Procurement Action Plan 2007 (available via Defra's Sustainable development website). Every local authority also has a Corporate Procurement Strategy (green purchasing will only be a small part of content as procurement is steeped in Best Value issues, compliance with EU regulations and supply chain arrangements). Your local authority may have achieved Fair Trade status, working with the VCS sector.

## Frequently Asked Questions

There can be lots of inertia around Green Purchasing. Some of the Frequently Asked Questions tackled here might be familiar. (Also see **Building Awareness and Education** for more FAQ's (<http://eaclink.info/?QYJRK>).

Have you got a story to tell? Let EAC know about how you overcame the barriers in your office. Real stories, however simple, help others.

**Question:** *"We sense reluctance from some of our Board of Management/Trustees to let us go down the 'green purchasing' route. They mention things like the dubious credentials of some products and cost issues. How do we convince them?"*

**Answer:** It's good to recognise the importance of securing leadership. It will make the transition easier if everyone understands that the organisation is buying greener products as a matter of policy. Overcome perceived or actual barriers on product quality or cost by supplying clear information and examples - if you can find them - of others in your networks

using the items without problems. Get some product samples, especially recycled paper. Highlight the importance of your organisation demonstrating its commitment to environmental principles in line with its values. Mention the sign-up to EAC if appropriate. Be realistic - suggest a trial or phased-in approach, starting with one or two products, to generate confidence. Establish a measure of success with some purchasing that will make a difference quickly.

If cost is the main issue, demonstrate that any premium can be covered by making savings elsewhere e.g. focusing on more re-use etc. Or ensure a strategy that is not buying small quantities of frequently-used items, e.g. single reams of recycled paper will be more expensive than buying a box or two.

The NVCO website [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk) provides information on trustees' obligations which includes environmental performance might be useful. Remind Management/Trustees that funders are increasingly asking about environmental performance; having an Environmental Policy in place (or willingness to develop one) may be a grant condition.

**Question:** *"We're trying to be more environmentally aware in what we buy but there seems to be so much conflicting advice. How do we find our way through the information maze?"*

**Answer:** Creating more awareness about green purchasing underpins the success of efforts to do more. For example, clear information can break down myths about recycled products being inferior in performance etc. Stick to a few information sources you find useful, relevant and reliable. Whilst a 'beginner's mind' can be helpful in asking questions, too much information can be a fetter to action. Avoid getting bogged down in conflicting arguments about which products have the smallest carbon footprint, which is more environmentally and ethically sound etc. Don't try and follow all the details and trade-offs unless you have lots of spare time.

Starting points for information include: trusted non-governmental organisations; other community groups e.g. Fair Trade, social enterprises, co-ops, your local authority website, internet, or approach local retailers, green office suppliers and manufacturers/distributors for relevant product information. Defra's Direct Gov website on 'Greener Living' is another information source. See **Green Labels** (<http://eaclink.info/?LVBAE>).

Agree a purchasing policy (as part of your Sustainable Development Action Plan) to guide your efforts. Formal policies establishing specific purchasing practices may be necessary within certain organisations but informal commitment can be just as effective in smaller groups. The key is the ability to take action, whether you have a policy or not.

**Question:** *"We already do what we can and others recognise this. A local partnership has asked us about measuring the carbon impact of different purchasing options. Are there any recognised 'tools' out there to help such an evaluation?"*

**Answer:** At present (November 2007) no 'green label' gives a clear indication of a product's climate change impacts. Defra is working with the Carbon Trust and BSI British Standards to establish a method that can be used across a range of consumer products. Information about specific products and actions to reduce your carbon footprint is available. Check this website and some of the recommended information sources for answers.

**Question:** *"We want to encourage green and ethical purchasing but people suggest that Fair Trade cuts across supporting local and seasonal initiatives."*

**Answer:** Green purchasing can be ethical purchasing – the two are not necessarily in conflict. Ethical purchasing is not only about Fair Trade. The book, 'Rough Guide to Ethical Living' (Duncan Clark, 2006) suggests that the phrase 'ethical living' has come to mean "adapting our lifestyles and shopping habits with the aim of reducing our negative impact (and increasing our positive impact) on the world's environments, people and animals". Products that reduce waste contribute to more ethical and carbon conscious purchasing practices. Local sourcing brings together many issues from cutting down on unnecessary transport (the 'food miles' issue) to creating local employment to celebrating local distinctiveness.

### Further Information

The following information sources will provide more background about products linked to green purchasing. Availability of products will depend on where you are based, local suppliers, your current supplier of office products and whether you are available to buy online. Check to see what product ranges your current supplier offers.

Directgov – Greener shopping pages give information and direct links to green labels and claims relating to: food labels; organic labels; timber products; wider world; eco-labelling; energy efficiency; vehicles; product specifics; recycling & packaging. See: [www.ealink.info/?OAGJF](http://www.ealink.info/?OAGJF)

Defra Shoppers Guide to Green Labels. An Index of Green Labels (updated Oct 2007, PDF 350KB)

Ethical Consumer: [www.ethicalconsumer.org](http://www.ethicalconsumer.org) (a subscription service for more detailed info but your public library may stock the magazine)

Energy Savings Trust: [www.energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk) helpline: 0800 512012. They also have details of your local Energy Advice Centre or check your local authority website.

Recycle Now – national recycling campaign website: [www.recyclenow.com](http://www.recyclenow.com)

Fairtrade Foundation: [www.fairtrade.org.uk](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk)

Ethical Trading Initiative: [www.ethicaltrading.org](http://www.ethicaltrading.org)