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Sustainable Events Starter Guide

Actionable steps that create
long-term impact

About this Guide

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This guide is commissioned by ad industry climate action program Ad Net Zero, powered by sustainability event experts at isla and brought to life through Ad Net Zero's US Action 4 Working Group, with input from across the industry.

Our goal is simple. This easy-to-use starter guide is intended to help event professionals and company leaders implement sustainability best practices for events.

While there are many frameworks and resources offering best practices, we identified that there was a gap in a succinct guide that focuses more clearly on the *how* and *why*, including how to overcome barriers.

Applicable across a range of event sizes and types:

Small – Mid Size

Company Meetings / Off-sites
Client Dinners & Happy Hours
Small Conferences

Large-Scale

Brand Events
Industry Conferences
Stadium Activations
Award Shows

Contents

I. Introduction.

The impact, opportunities, and the roadblocks.

II. Impact Level 1: Quick Wins.

Easy-to-implement decisions that make a difference.

III. Impact Level 2: Grow Your Impact.

Decisions which may require more thought or buy-in, but deliver big impact.

IV. Impact Level 3: Long-term Gains.

Strategic choices with biggest impact over time.

V. Resources.

Frameworks, Tools & Guides.

Appendix.

Case Studies, Details by Action.

Why this matters.

Events have a significant carbon footprint.

Travel

People & Transport



Food

Waste & Production



Facilities

Water & Energy



10% of global carbon (CO₂) emissions come from the events industry. ⁽¹⁾ That's 3x more than aviation, or the ad industry. ⁽²⁾

And 70-90% of an event's carbon emissions come from travel alone. ⁽¹⁾

Sources: ⁽¹⁾ [ClimateTrade](#), ⁽²⁾ [Campaign Asia](#)

Companies will soon be forced to face their emissions.

Incoming regulations in the EU, UK and US will soon force corporate reporting on emissions, including from events.

Clients and Partners Care.

Thoughtful, sustainable experiences drive stronger brand loyalty.

Clients are increasingly looking for sustainability-assured partners and activations.

Sources: [Live Union](#), [Forbes](#), [LinkedIn](#)

Overcoming Roadblocks

Sources and Recommended Reading

[What are the main challenges and barriers to implementing sustainability in live events?](#)
(LinkedIn)

[International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences](#)

[The biggest barrier to corporate sustainability isn't what you, or corporations, think it is](#)
(Colorado State University)

The **most common obstacles** to implementing sustainability best practices at events are typically:

- Lack of **time** and/or sufficient **resources**
- **Leadership resistance** and/or team **inertia**
- Lack of **awareness** and **education**
- **Cost** and **budget** constraints (often perception vs. reality)

Here's how to navigate this:

1. Start small, find wins.

Identify a few clever choices that will have a big impact.

2. Show competitive advantage.

Focus on the engagement and loyalty benefits with clients / attendees and partners.

3. Address cost concerns.

Focus initially on solutions that are cost-saving or cost-neutral, and identify partnership opportunities to share costs.

Level 1: Quick Wins.

Manage Staff Travel Emissions.

- No first class, limit business class, focus on trains
- Virtual meetings where possible
- Incentivize public transport, ride sharing

Prioritize Digital Solutions.

- Leverage QR codes and apps to minimize printing
- Choose LED signage
- Prioritize reuse with any printed materials

Curate Thoughtful Menu Options.

- Use local suppliers and in-season produce
- Offer more plant-based options
- Communicate the environmental impact of menu choices

See page 14 for more details and data points.

Level 2: Grow Your Impact. Moderate Effort.

Reduce Waste.

- Don't over-order food, select vendors who can properly dispose of waste
- Eliminate single-use serveware, set expectations ahead of time
- Prioritize modular builds, donate locally if not reusable

Rethink Swag.

- Offer donation to charity or digital alternatives to physical items
- Choose upcycled or 100% recycled, practical and reusable items
- Minimize over-ordering and choose opt-in

Keep it Local.

- Avoid shipping costs and emissions
- Establish a procurement radius to prioritize local suppliers and staff
- Support the local economy

See page 15 for more details and data points.

Level 3: Strategic Actions. Long-term Gains.

Prioritize Renewable and Energy Efficient.

- Choose energy efficient and, ideally, sustainability-certified venues
- Make sure equipment is as energy efficient as possible
- Choose battery, hybrid, and biofuel options over diesel

Address Audience Travel.

- Prioritize locations that are proximate to most, limiting air travel
- Track where and how attendees travel
- Encourage low-carbon travel, arrange group transport

Measure Emissions and Commit to an Event Sustainability Plan.

- Use a robust measurement tool designed for events
- Integrate new questions and procedures into event project plan
- Invest in education for both your team and suppliers

See page 16 for more details and data points.

Digging Deeper: Resources, Tools & Guides

From isla:

[TRACE](#) – event measurement tool for live, hybrid and digital events.

[Proseed](#) – industry best practice framework, a free, interactive tool to simplify sustainable event planning.

[Blog: getting started](#) – six ways to reduce your carbon footprint.

[Cannes Lions Green Guide](#)

Developed in partnership with isla, tailored for Cannes but applicable considerations for other large-scale events.

[Net Zero Carbon Events](#)

A global framework launched at COP26 in Glasgow, November 2021. NZCE exists to catalyze the events industry to reduce GHG emissions in line with the Paris Agreement, providing guidance and support on key issues, and focusing on common measurement standards for direct, indirect and supply chain.

[Events Industry Council Sustainable Event Standards](#)

US-based non-profit providing specific sustainable event criteria, with auditing and certification available via [Alliance for Audited Media](#). Online 12-credit hour [Sustainable Event Professional Certificate Programme](#).



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About Ad Net Zero

Ad Net Zero is a climate action program to help the advertising industry tackle the climate emergency by decarbonizing ad operations and supporting every industry to accurately promote sustainable products and services. Ad Net Zero has widespread backing from across the industry and proudly counts support from the world's six biggest agency holding groups, advertisers, media owners, tech companies, and independent creative and production agencies. Find out more at adnetzero.com.

About isla

isla is the UK event industry's collective sustainability membership organization, providing best practices, resources and the TRACE measurement tool, used by over 100 companies. Find out more at traceyour.events.

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A special thank you to the Ad Net Zero US Action 4 Events & Awards Working Group members for their support on this guide.



Appendix

Case studies

Details & Data on Levels 1, 2, 3

isla proseed interactive tool

Case Studies

Levels 1 & 2

Reducing Staff Travel

[PwC](#) UK reported a 61% reduction in carbon emissions from business travel since 2007, despite the business nearly doubling in size.

Thoughtful Menu Choices

[Compass Group](#) prioritizes local produce and supports community engagement through initiatives like sourcing from local suppliers to reduce food miles, mentoring local businesses, and partnerships like Common Market in the US.

Reduce Waste

[Live Nation Entertainment](#) initiated a switch to [TURN Systems' Reusable Cup System](#) at venues and festivals. Aiming to eliminate single-use plastics and drive zero-waste concerts, this demonstrates a significant commitment by avoiding over 1 million single-use cups annually.

Many venue providers can help you with a plan to reduce waste, water use, and provide estimates to prevent over-ordering, in addition to recommendations on local vendors. [Marriott Hotel Group](#) is one example.

Rethink Swag

Merchandise company [Brand Addition](#) developed a fully recycled beach towel which included 10% upcycled marine salvaged plastic. The SEAQUAL initiative helped remove at least 36 tonnes of marine litter from the ocean in 2023.

Responsible marketing platform Givsky's [Season Without Swag](#) program provides businesses an alternative to holiday client and employee gifting, funneling dollars and volunteerism to nonprofits. Launched in 2020, the program has raised over \$500,000 for nonprofits, with over 40 organizations across the ad industry opting in.

Case Studies

Level 3

Be More Energy Efficient

[Cisco Live EMEA](#), reduced their power at different stages of the event delivery and powered off.

Address Audience Travel

In 2021, the [Festival of Thrift](#) aimed to tackle travel emissions by tracking transport data and promoting sustainable travel options. Car parking passes included a carbon offset donation, balancing 120 tonnes of CO₂e.

Measure Event Emissions

See [isla's temperature check report](#) for insights and more case studies from the event carbon measurement platform [TRACE](#).

Create an overall Event Sustainability Plan

While the Sydney 2000 Olympics marked a pioneering effort in implementing a comprehensive sustainability plan for a global sporting event, the [London 2012 Olympics](#) is frequently credited for embedding sustainability deeply and systematically across all aspects of its planning and execution.

This pioneering approach led to the development and adoption of [ISO 20121:2012](#), an international standard dedicated to promoting sustainability in event management systems.

Level 1: Quick Wins.

Manage Staff Travel Emissions

Air travel is often the most significant source of emissions for businesses and events, and staff travel is a part of this. Even if the event is in a location that requires flying / long-distance travel, policy adjustments can help.

- No **first class**, no **business class flights** for short haul journeys, and **trains** whenever possible (i.e., under 5 hours).
- Incentivize use of **public transportation, carpooling** and electric taxis.
- **Utilize technology** to minimize in-person meetings.

Fact: Flying business class produces 3x more CO2 emissions per passenger than flying economy class.

Source: The World Bank (2013), Calculating the Carbon Footprint from Different Classes of Air Travel

Prioritize Digital Solutions

Paper alone accounts for 26% of all landfill waste. Adopt the mantra “digital if renewable [energy source], printed if reusable”.

- Use **digital solutions like QR codes and apps** for providing tickets, maps, agendas. However, keep in mind that digital still creates emissions, unless powered by renewable energy.
- **LED signage** offers an energy efficient and waste-free alternative to traditional signage.
- If printing is a necessity, choose a design and material that can be **reused at your next event**.

Fact: LED screens use 90% less energy than traditional counterparts, allowing them to last on average 60,000 - 100,000 hours of use.

Source: Ultimate Guide To Low Energy and LED Lighting

Thoughtful Menu Options

View sustainable catering as an opportunity, rather than a challenge. Employ a fresh approach to menu options, and get attendees excited about this thoughtful approach!

- **Celebrate local** - use local suppliers and in-season produce wherever possible.
- Explain your menu choices and communicate **the environmental impact** of menu options, especially red meat.
- Offer **more plant-based options** and ensure they are not an afterthought, in taste or promotion.

Fact: In food terms, beef is by far the biggest offender, generating 60kg of greenhouse gas emissions per kg of meat produced.

Source: Poore, J., & Nemecek, T. (2018), Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers

Level 2: Grow Your Impact. Moderate Effort.

Eliminate Single-use Serveware

Waste from food, plastics and event marketing materials has a big impact. Abundance should not be celebrated as success / a sign of health. Plan for what is needed and plan for re-use.

- **Don't over-order** (ask your caterer or venue for help), ensure **clearly labeled bins** for recycling, food waste, and general waste, and identify a contractor that guarantees offsite segregation. **Donate leftover food.**
- **Eliminate single-use serveware, explain choices ahead of time** and encourage attendees to bring reusable bottles, and have water refill stations.
- Prioritize **modular builds/set design**; if can't be reused, donate to the local community.

Fact: 50% of all plastic produced each year (380 million tonnes) is for single-use purposes.

Source: Plastic Oceans

Rethink Swag

Promotional items (swag / giveaways) have a significant environmental impact. Items are often made from virgin materials, transported large distances, then disposed of.

- Consider **donation to charity** or **digital alternatives** instead of physical items.
- For unavoidable physical merchandise, opt for **upcycled or 100% recycled materials** and ensure the items are practical and reusable in daily life.
- Ensure your inventory is being effectively managed to **minimize over-ordering**, and leverage **opt-ins** vs. assumed giving.

Fact: 66% of promotional items are eventually thrown away. Only 16-21% kept by the original recipient, and anywhere from 18-50% given away.

Source: [Forbes](#) (2022), The British Promotional Merchandise Association Research (2018)

Locality is Key

As noted earlier, transportation is a major emitter and pollution-generator. Make location choices that limit air travel for people, supplies and food.

- Prioritizing local **supports the local economy** and reduces shipping costs.
- Give precedence to **local suppliers and event staff.**
- Establish a **procurement radius** around your event location to acquire goods/staff for your event.

Fact: The transport of fruit and vegetables contributes 36% of food miles emissions – about 2x the amount of greenhouse gases (GHG) released during their production.

Source: Directorate-General for Environment (2024), EU Commission, [Field to Fork](#)

Level 3: Strategic Actions. Long-term Gains.

Renewable Energy Venues

Powering your event can consume a lot of energy, from lighting and sound to technology and production.

- Choose **energy efficient venues** – i.e., have sustainability certifications, use renewable energy, or invest in on-site renewable energy generation.
- Make sure all **equipment is as energy efficient as possible** while also making efforts to turn off equipment when not in use.
- For temporary power needs, **prioritize cleaner alternatives**, choose battery > hybrid > biofuel options over diesel.

Fact: Globally, the world added 50% more renewable capacity in 2023 than in 2022.

Source: Johnny Wood, [World Economic Forum](#), (2024), [The world added 50% more renewable capacity last year than in 2022](#)

Address Audience Travel

Audience travel often represents the most significant source of event emissions. Reductions in this area are critical.

- Prioritize locations that are **proximate** to most attendees, **easily accessible by public transport** or to hotels. Where aviation is unavoidable, opt for venues close to airports.
- **Track where and how attendees travel** to grasp the full impact.
- Encourage **low-carbon travel choices** to make a difference; **arrange group transport** from your event to the airport.

Fact: Of all the things that humans do, flying is the single most carbon-intensive activity per minute.

Source: Hannah Ritchie (2024), [What share of global CO₂ emissions come from aviation?](#)

Measure Emissions

Effectively managing your carbon footprint and setting goals to drive true progress hinge on good data collection and long-term commitment.

- Use a robust measurement tool such as **TRACE by isla** as your centralized event measurement system. You'll be able to track progress and identify areas for environmental improvement.
- Integrate **new questions and procedures** into your event project plan and leverage stakeholder collaborations.
- **Invest in education** for both your team and suppliers; make sure they have the knowledge and resources to confidently handle the exchange of environmental data.

Fact: US, EU and UK Regulations are increasingly requiring large businesses to report on their climate impacts, including Scopes 1, 2 and 3 emissions. This impacts events and marketing activities, and vendors in your supply chain.

Interactive planning tool **based on event role**

[Check out the
isla proseed tool](#)

Sustainable solutions in practice.

Select your organisation type or role to change the recommended view. You can still explore all the segments and can 'clear all' to reset.

☒ I'm an event organiser ☐ I'm a venue ☐ I'm a caterer ☐ I'm a production supplier [Clear all](#)

Energy	Food & Water	Travel & Transport	Production
Venue Energy	Sourcing	Audience Travel	Purchasing
Organisation Energy	Service & Packaging	Staff Travel	Graphics & Signage
Event Energy	Food Surplus & Waste	Event Transport	Built Elements
Generators	Conserving Water	Supply Chain	Waste Management