

Tips to make your conferences more sustainable

Choosing a venue:

- Is it accessible by public transport?
- Is it powered by renewable energy source?
- Does it have ways to minimise and recycle waste?
- Has it got the tech to run a hybrid event (or can you go fully online)?
- Does it use environmentally responsible caterers? Select vegetarian or vegan options as the default.
- Is it accessible for attendees? e.g. wheelchair access.
- Is there outdoor space suitable for breaks, hosting part of the conference if suitable?

Getting there and overnight stays:

- Expecting international attendees? Plan the date/location around another event to minimise multiple trips?
- Provide incentives for using low carbon travel options e.g. grants
- Partner with or promote eco-friendly hotels

Minimising waste:

- Avoid using single use items (plastic name tags, catering items, promotional material). Consider re-usable or digital options for promotional or agenda material.
- Ask attendees to bring their own pens, notepads, water bottles etc.
- Use none or only sustainably sourced items for promotion by organisers and attendees.

Promoting sustainability

- Collaborate with sustainable initiatives and local communities or businesses.
- Include a theme or session about sustainability
- Share the actions you have taken to make the conference more sustainable with attendees. Make plans to measure the impact.
- Take action to maximise diversity and inclusion for attendees and presenters

Tips for organising environmentally friendly conferences

This document outlines how researchers and research funders can reduce the environmental impact of their conferences/events/meetings. The EViR Sustainability Working Group have adapted this list, originally created by ZonMw.

The list is not exhaustive, but it aims to capture a range of suggestions. As not all these suggestions will be suitable for everyone, we encourage each conference organiser to adapt this guidance for their own context. For example, researching local eco-certification schemes.

A note on carbon offsetting:

Definition: The action or process of compensating for carbon dioxide emissions arising from industrial or other human activity, by participating in schemes designed to make equivalent reductions of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

We have deliberately omitted carbon offsetting from the guidance, taking the view that carbon reduction should be a first solution. Carbon offsetting carries the risk of greenwashing (making false or misleading statements about the environmental benefits of a product or practice), there are a lack of reputable suppliers of carbon offsetting schemes and it fails to address the root cause of carbon emissions.

Social sustainability: A core component of sustainability

Throughout this guidance we have provided tips to reduce environmental impacts while also ensuring we are socially sustainable. Being socially sustainable means helping people and communities thrive in a healthy, fair and equal way.

Format:

Fully online or hybrid event format: Online or hybrid events reduce the environmental impact considerably. This option may also make the event more accessible to a diversity of people. There is a wealth of guidance online for running online or hybrid events depending on your need. For a large hybrid conference, this may involve contracting with a digital services company, but for smaller hybrid conferences (15-20 people in person, the remaining online) you could use a conference camera like a Meeting Owl.

Conference funding consideration: if you rely on funding from suppliers to put on the conference, when choosing the format of the event consider and discuss with them options for how they may be able to promote their offerings. Hybrid models typically mean fewer people through the door, and appeal less to those who funds conferences. However, there is opportunity for innovative and low waste ideas to be used that either mean alternative funding methods for conferences or ideas that benefit both the suppliers and the conference organisers.

For in person and hybrid events:

Choosing a venue:

Power and waste systems: Consider venues with a green power source (own solar panels or an active sustainability policy) and those who have recycling systems for waste produced during the conference (include food waste).

Accessible location: Where possible, choose a location which is easily accessible by public transport. *We understand that in some circumstances it is not possible to eliminate flying e.g. international conferences hosted by countries without train links. To help minimise attendee footprint, conference organisers could plan the date/time around another relevant event nearby.*

Accessibility of the venue: Ensure wheelchair accessibility and provide facilities for the visually and hearing impaired. Venues may also offer creches to enable parents/carers to attend.

Catering: The conference's catering services should be sourced from ecologically certified and responsible providers. Try to use caterers who source seasonal food locally to reduce food miles. Encouraging such partnerships aims to drive more caterers to adopt sustainable practices, creating a positive ripple effect in the industry.

Include this consideration when choosing your conference location as you may be restricted to using their supplier. Consider all catering aspects including tea/coffee/creamer, eating utensils etc.

Regardless of supplier it should be possible to have all catering plant-based (vegan) or vegetarian. If meat and fish is essential, use an 'opt in' option that attendees must specifically request. Include an environmental footprint to help steer people away from meat.

	GHG (Kg CO2e)	Land use (m2)	Water use (litres)
Roast vegetable sandwich (vegan)	0.45	1.2	105
Ham and cheese sandwich	2.5	3.8	241
The vegan choice saves...	...as much CO2 as driving a petrol car for 12km UK: travel carbon footprint by transport mode 2023 Statista	...enough land to grow over 100 carrots! Yield calculator for vegetables: calculate area requirements and harvest quantities (fryd.app)	... enough water for 544 cups of tea or coffee! (average cup size 250ml)

Source: [Catering to the Climate \(biologicaldiversity.org\)](#)

Getting there and overnight stays:

Support for travel by public transport Conference organisers to provide clear instructions to attendees detailing how participants can get to the conference by public transport (including via international train connections). In addition, sharing website links for booking. Make it an easy choice for attendees.

Conditional travel grants: If the conference offers travel grants, these should, where possible, be awarded to participants who opt for train travel (or providing a significantly higher grant for train travel compared to air travel) and discounts for participants who opt for travel by public transport.

Eco-friendly hotel partnerships: If conference organisers arrange accommodation for attendees, they should collaborate with eco-friendly hotels. This ensures that sustainability practices are encouraged in the hospitality industry. The host country or region may have eco-certifications or recommendations for these.

Speakers and local communities

Speakers: Offer speakers a virtual or a recorded talk option. This may be appealing to a diverse range of speakers who may want to contribute but have clashing commitments. Check the venue can cater for this.

Strive for a balanced representation of presenters (gender, race, sexuality, ability level, social-economic background).

Presentation format: ask all presenters to design their work using accessible formats, e.g. conducting a colour blind check for graphs. Example guidance: [Make your PowerPoint presentations accessible to people with disabilities - Microsoft Support](#)

Local engagement: Reach out to local communities and local small businesses to reduce transport and increase growth of local businesses.

Minimising Waste

The first way to reduce environmental impact is reduce the use of unessential items or single-use items. If there is no option for this, only use fully home compostable options e.g. bamboo or paper. **Greenwashing alert!** Be aware that items saying they are 'compostable' often require 'industrial composting' which involves a machine with high heat/air flow. Look for 'home compostable' items to avoid this.

Reduce waste by having water stations and asking attendees to bring their own bottle and to return the conference materials at the end of the event (e.g. nametags, pens and keycards).

Minimize food waste by accurately estimating attendance and arranging beforehand what you will do with any food surplus. Some charities will be able to use unused food but this must be pre-planned.

Sustainable promotional materials and goodies (communicate this to exhibitors as well):

The biggest reduction in carbon footprint will be to not have any materials and goodies. However, we are mindful that promotional materials for smaller organisations e.g. charities, are important.

To minimise waste:

- a. Avoid printing programmes, flyers, or other promotional items: utilize QR codes and PDFs that can be sent in advance; display the program on screens rather than in a printed booklet.
- b. Design banners/flags/posters so they are reusable year on year (e.g. don't include details specific to a single conference)
- c. If providing a goodie bag, ensure it contains ecologically responsible items in home compostable bags.
- d. If you need organizational promotional materials including clothing: strive for reusability or invest in high-quality items from a responsible, local producer.
- e. Creative decoration. Consider how you could decorate the venue without producing waste. This might involve working with local artists. Interesting examples of this: <https://www.rebeccabanens.nl/> and <https://www.mariakoiijck.com/>

Talk about it!

Include a theme/session/workshop about sustainability: Consider organising a specific session or keynote around sustainability to increase awareness. For example, on a topic around the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss or on sustainable research practice.

Collaborate with sustainable initiatives: Conference organisers could involve someone from a sustainable research initiatives to be involved or to run a stand to raise awareness and gather support from conference attendees. They may also be able to advise on the planning. These initiatives will be different for each country.

Share your sustainability progress:

Explain what initiatives you implemented at the event itself and in your promotional and evaluation communications so participants know what to expect and can be inspired.

b. Ask attendees for feedback to identify opportunities for further sustainability enhancements in future conferences.

c. Measure the environmental impact of the conference and publicly report on sustainability achievements and areas for improvement.

If you have limited resources for doing this accurately, you could use estimates to give a general overview. For example if you previously served meat-based food and have switched to vegan, you can estimate the CO₂, land, and water savings (the caterers may even have this information). Or ask attendees (e.g. in a feedback questionnaire) how they attended the event each time you run it, so you can present the change in behaviour and environmental impact.

Researchers and research funders play a pivotal role in encouraging sustainable practices while promoting and celebrating their work. These tips aim to help foster a more sustainable approach to events and other gatherings.