

Embedding Sustainability in Everyday Projects

When we talk about sustainability in Ireland, the conversation often drifts toward heavy industry or multinational reporting requirements. For the leader of a growing SME or a local charity, these discussions can feel detached from the reality of daily operations. There is a common assumption that sustainability is a luxury reserved for those with deep pockets and dedicated departments. However, at Project Compass Advisory, we see it differently. Sustainability is not a separate workstream to be added when time allows; it is a lens through which we can deliver more resilient and successful projects today.

In project management terms, sustainability is essentially about future-proofing. It is the practice of delivering a project that meets its immediate objectives without compromising the ability of the organisation or its community to thrive in the long term. For small teams, this means making sensible, informed choices during the planning and execution phases that consider the environmental, social, and economic ripple effects of our work.

| The Practical Reality of Project Sustainability

To embed sustainability effectively, we must first demystify what it looks like on the ground. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) provide a high-level framework, but for a project team, we translate these into three practical areas: resource stewardship, social value, and robust governance (United Nations 2023).

Resource stewardship involves looking at what we consume during a project. It is not just about recycling; it is about questioning whether we need certain materials at all. Social value focuses on the people impacted by the project, ensuring we aren't just delivering a technical outcome but also supporting local skills or community well-being. Governance is the "how" of our delivery, ensuring decisions are transparent and that risks are managed with a long-term view.

| Making Sustainable Choices with Limited Resources

Small organisations often feel they lack the leverage to influence global supply chains, yet the collective impact of SME procurement in Ireland is significant. Sustainable procurement

starts with asking simple questions of our suppliers. This might mean choosing a local vendor to reduce transport emissions or selecting products that are designed for durability rather than disposal. For a small team, this doesn't require a complex auditing system; it requires a shift in the criteria we use to define "best value."

Resource-efficient planning is another area where small teams can lead. By integrating sustainability checkpoints at the start of a project, we can identify ways to do more with less. This might involve digital-first delivery to reduce travel or reconsidering the energy needs of a new service. As noted by the Project Management Institute (2023), project managers who integrate sustainability into their core planning are often better equipped to identify efficiencies that directly reduce costs.

Stakeholder and community considerations are particularly vital for Irish charities and local businesses. A project that ignores the concerns of its community carries a high risk of delays and reputational damage. Embedding sustainability means taking a proactive approach to engagement, ensuring that the project delivers a positive social outcome that builds long-term trust and local support.

The Business Case for the "Greener" Path

There is a persistent misconception that sustainability is purely an exercise in compliance or an added cost. On the contrary, sustainability is a powerful risk management tool. By considering environmental and social factors, teams can identify risks that traditional financial planning might miss, such as shifting regulations or changing consumer expectations. The European Commission (2023) emphasises that even smaller entities will increasingly face pressure from larger partners who are required to report on their full value chain under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).

Beyond risk, sustainability drives better decisions. When we stop looking only at the next quarter and start looking at the project's impact over five years, we make choices that are more robust and resilient. This perspective fosters a culture of innovation, where teams are encouraged to find creative solutions to resource constraints.

Simple Tools for Small Teams

You do not need complex software to start. Consider using these lightweight approaches:

- **Sustainability Checklists:** A simple five-point list included in every project kickoff meeting to prompt discussion on waste, energy, and community impact.
- **Materiality Thinking:** Identifying the two or three sustainability issues that actually matter for your specific project, rather than trying to save the world all at once.
- **Impact Considerations:** Adding a single line to project status reports that highlights a social or environmental "win" or identifies a new sustainability risk.

Addressing the Common Hurdles

Many small organisations hesitate because they believe they are "too small to matter" or that the work will be too expensive. In reality, the most effective sustainability measures often save money by reducing waste and improving efficiency. Others worry about "getting it wrong" and being accused of greenwashing. The remedy for this is transparency. By being honest about what you are trying to achieve and where you are still learning, you build credibility rather than perfection.

MINI CASE STUDY: THE LOCAL COMMUNITY HUB

A small non-profit in rural Ireland was tasked with renovating a local community space. With a very tight budget, they could not afford high-end green certifications. Instead, they focused on three "everyday" decisions: they sourced 70 percent of their materials from local circular economy projects, they trained three local volunteers in basic maintenance to ensure project longevity, and they installed a simple, high-efficiency heating control system. The result was a project delivered on budget that reduced long-term running costs for the charity by 25 percent while strengthening local community ties.

Five Practical Steps to Start Today

1. **Define your "Why":** Briefly discuss with your team why sustainability matters to your specific mission.
2. **Update your Procurement:** Add one question about environmental impact or social value to your next quote request.
3. **Conduct a Mini-Impact Review:** Take 20 minutes to look at your current project and identify three areas where waste can be reduced.
4. **Engage one extra stakeholder:** Reach out to a community group or local partner that might be impacted by your work.
5. **Measure what matters:** Track one simple metric, such as reduced travel miles or lowered paper waste, to show tangible progress.

Embedding sustainability is not about achieving a perfect state; it is about a commitment to continuous improvement. By making these considerations part of the "everyday" project cycle, small organisations in Ireland can lead the way in creating a more resilient and responsible future.

References

European Commission (2023) *Corporate sustainability reporting*. Available at: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/capital-markets-union-and-financial-services/corporate-reporting-and-audit/corporate-reporting/corporate-sustainability-reporting_en (Accessed: 29 April 2026).

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