

Sustainable Event Strategy

Cutting emissions where it actually counts

A useful frame: what actually emits, and how much

Sustainability strategies for events go wrong when they start with a shopping list — replace plastic cups, offer vegetarian menus, add recycling bins — instead of an honest picture of where the impact actually comes from. For a typical London corporate conference of 200 delegates over one day, the emissions breakdown is broadly: delegate travel 55-65%, catering and food waste 15-20%, venue energy 10-12%, materials and print 5-8%, everything else under 5%.

Look at that split and the strategy writes itself. The biggest single lever is who travels how, not whether the tea is Fair Trade. If you can pull down the travel component even 20% — by choosing a venue closer to public transport, offering hybrid attendance for people flying in from more than 400 miles away, or scheduling in a way that lets guests come by train — you've saved more than perfectly executing every other line item.

Scope 1, 2 and 3 — what applies to events

Corporate reporting frameworks divide emissions into three scopes. For events, only Scope 3 usually applies to the organiser (indirect emissions from the supply chain), while the venue itself may be reporting Scope 1 (its own gas boilers) and Scope 2 (its purchased electricity). The organiser's carbon footprint for the event is essentially the sum of every supplier's Scope 1 and 2 combined with the delegate travel component.

This matters because "carbon-neutral event" claims are often based only on the direct footprint of the event day — venue energy plus catering plus materials — and quietly ignore the largest line, delegate travel. If your event brief demands a genuine footprint measurement, the boundary needs to include travel from a defined origin (delegate's home or office) to the venue and back.

Where to actually cut

Delegate travel

The biggest lever, and the least discussed. Practical moves: pick a venue within a five-minute walk of a mainline station so most delegates don't drive; ask remote delegates to join hybrid rather than fly for a half-day session; publish a "how to get here by public transport" section on the event site rather than car directions.

For international speakers, one long-haul return flight from the US produces roughly 3 tonnes CO₂e — the same as 3,000 delegates arriving on the London Underground. A single decision to record and stream a US-based keynote rather than fly them in is worth more than everything else on the day put together.

Catering

Every meal is a decision. Plant-forward menus (not exclusively vegan, but with meat as an accent rather than the centre) cut catering emissions by 35-45%. Portioning to actual headcount, not padded numbers, cuts food waste directly — waste routes to anaerobic digestion cut the landfill methane component of what remains. The [detailed food waste piece](#) covers this ground.

Venue energy

Most large operators now buy renewable electricity on a certified tariff — check whether your venue does, and

whether the certification is REGO-backed (the UK's Renewable Energy Guarantees of Origin scheme) or self-declared. REGO backing is verifiable; self-declared is not.

Materials and print

Delegate packs are one of the fastest-shrinking budget lines because most delegates take everything digital now. If print is genuinely necessary — safety cards, restaurant menus, name badges — specify FSC-certified paper and vegetable-based inks, and reclaim badges at the exit for reuse. Lanyards can go into a bin at the door and be re-used at the next event without laundering.

The supplier scoring approach

For anyone running events more than twice a year, formalising a supplier sustainability score is more useful than negotiating each event ad hoc. A workable one-page score covers: verified environmental accreditation held (B Corp, ISO 14001, Sustainable Restaurant Association, Planet Mark, or equivalent), waste routing (any landfill? if so, what percentage?), energy source (grid mix or renewable tariff?), delivery vehicle type (diesel or electric?), packaging return policy.

Rank suppliers on the score and use it as a tie-breaker when price is comparable. Two years of steady application typically re-shapes the supplier base without a single confrontation.

Certifications that mean something

Not all certifications are created equal. A quick guide to what carries weight in an audit:

- **B Corp:** independently verified triple-bottom-line assessment covering environmental, social and governance practices. Recertified every three years against tightening standards.
- **ISO 14001:** environmental management systems certification. Widely used, moderately robust.
- **Planet Mark:** annual re-measurement and reduction requirement. UK-focused.
- **Sustainable Restaurant Association (SRA):** hospitality-specific, three-star ratings. Useful for caterers.
- **Self-declared:** marketing language without verification. Ignore.

Cavendish Venues holds B Corp certification — the only dedicated London conference venue operator to do so — which means environmental, waste and supplier practices have been through independent audit. B Corp isn't a marketing claim, it's a verified score against a public framework.

Carbon offsets — read the fine print

Offsetting has been the industry's default answer to unavoidable emissions for a decade, but the market has changed. Voluntary carbon markets are under investigation for overstated impact — many forest protection schemes turn out to have protected forests that weren't at risk. If offsetting is part of the strategy, look for Gold Standard, Verified Carbon Standard or UK-based woodland projects with Woodland Carbon Code verification. Cheap offsets are cheap for a reason.

Better approach: reduce first, offset the residual. A £5 offset per delegate on a fully-emitting event is less credible than a proper reduction plan that removes 40% of emissions at source and offsets only what's left.

Measurement and reporting

What gets measured gets managed. For each event, log three numbers: total emissions in kg CO₂e (or ranges if source data is patchy), waste to landfill in kg per delegate, and renewable electricity percentage. Track these over time. The point isn't to hit a specific number the first year; it's to show the number moving in the right

direction over three or four events.

If the client requires reporting for their own corporate ESG statement, ask them what data format they need at the brief stage. A well-prepared post-event report saves an awkward exchange three months later when the client's own auditors ask.

The Cavendish view

Cavendish has been running toward sustainable operations for close to thirty years. The current position: five London venues within five minutes' walk of a Tube or rail station, in-house catering with plant-forward options standard, food waste routed to anaerobic digestion, REGO-backed electricity across the estate, and B Corp certification underpinning the claims. The [detailed sustainability page](#) covers the specifics.

The venue-side lesson learned across those years: the biggest single reduction lever wasn't in the building, it was in choosing to be walkable from Tube stations so delegates could arrive without driving. Everything else compounds after that.

Frequently asked questions

What's the biggest single emissions contributor to a corporate event?

Delegate travel, typically 55–65% of the total footprint. Every other line — catering, energy, materials — is smaller.

Is a "carbon-neutral event" claim meaningful?

Only if the boundary is stated and travel is included. A carbon-neutral claim that covers only the venue-day operations and ignores travel is technically true but misleading.

How do I pick a caterer with genuine sustainability credentials?

Look for Sustainable Restaurant Association certification (two or three stars), or B Corp status. Ask specifically about food-waste routing (anaerobic digestion vs landfill), local sourcing distances, and packaging return.

Does hybrid delivery actually reduce emissions?

Yes, materially, if remote joiners are people who would otherwise have flown or driven long distances. If remote joiners are people who could have taken the train comfortably, the savings are marginal and may be offset by the added streaming infrastructure.

Is B Corp certification worth chasing as a venue booker?

As a booker, it's worth using as a filter — B Corp requires actual independent audit, not just self-declaration, so a B Corp-certified venue has done the work. As a status to hold yourself as an event organiser is much harder to attain and rarely necessary for corporate event work.