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BS ISO 20121:2024

Event sustainability management systems
— Requirements with guidance for use

A BSI executive briefing



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Overview

BS ISO 20121:2024 is a framework which enables sustainability to be considered at every decision point during the planning and delivery of an event. It is suitable for use by companies of any size in the global event sector supply chain.

The standard was launched in 2012, inspired by the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and revised in 2023–2024, inspired by the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. It was developed by event professionals around the world in collaboration with their National Standards Bodies (NSBs) or liaison bodies.

ISO is a non-governmental international organization that brings global experts together to agree on the best ways to do things. Event professionals around the world collaborated with

their NSBs or via liaison bodies to develop and revise ISO 20121, *Event sustainability management systems — Requirements with guidance for use*. It has since been adopted by BSI as BS ISO 20121:2024.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a roadmap for our future, and BS ISO 20121:2024 provides a way of working which will enable the global event sector to show leadership in advancing the UN SDGs.



Who is the standard written for?

One could argue that the most crucial transformative moments for humanity are events. For example, the signing of the Paris Agreement at a COP (Conference of the Parties), gathering to celebrate a lifelong commitment at a wedding or experiencing inspiration from the world's greatest sport competitions. The event community ensures the important human act of engaging and gathering is possible in a way that delivers the positive legacy that event attendees, sponsors and participants are increasingly expecting.

An event can be described as two or more people gathering with a shared purpose. Events or engagement activities include: meetings, exhibitions, conferences, competitions, sports, festivals, experiential marketing, etc., and can be grouped into three main types: cultural, business and sport.

The majority of the global event sector consists of small-to-medium female-owned businesses.¹ BS ISO 20121:2024 has been written for every company within this vast and varying supply chain. For example, for the International Olympic Committee which delivers the world's largest sporting event, or a small business whose majority of income comes from catering for business events, or a lighting company specializing in concerts.

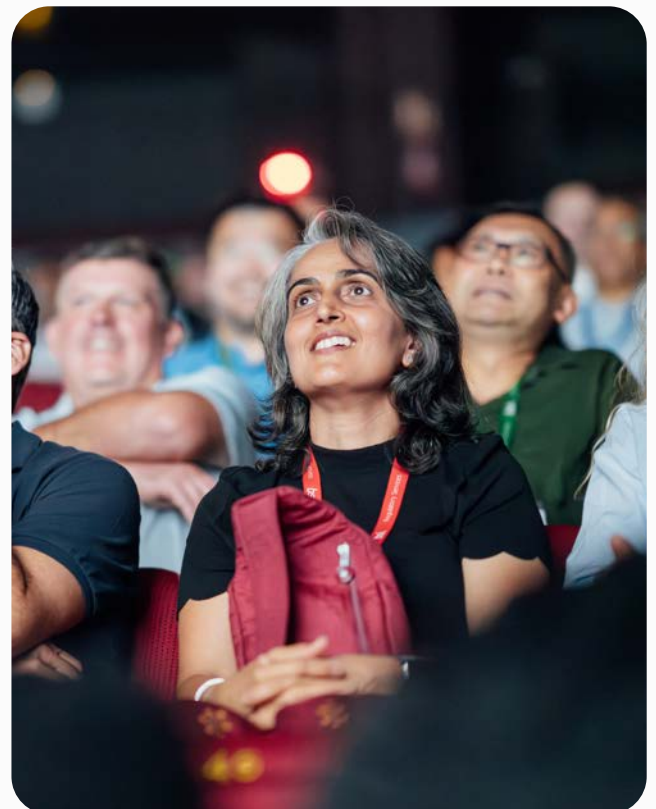
From a company with a few people supplying to the event sector to one of the world's largest event organizers, BS ISO 20121:2024 will provide a framework for considering and acting on sustainability at every point of the planning and delivery of an event.

¹ <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/school-of-events-tourism-and-hospitality-management/research/gender-inequality-in-the-events-industry/>

Benefits of using the standard

Implementing a BS ISO standard can provide users some benefits including:

- cost reduction
- new customer or market expansion
- increased productivity
- meeting regulation requirements (or demonstrating how best practice can be delivered without regulation)
- building customer confidence in your product, approach and brand
- marketing, branding and publicity
- recruitment and retainment
- stakeholder engagement.



BS ISO 20121:2024 is a framework that will support users to identify sustainability objectives. This means that what implementing it looks like in practice will differ for every organization. However, there are some broad benefits:

- Reputational: it enables users to demonstrate good practice in planning and delivering an event so sustainability is considered and acted on at every decision point.
- Strategic: it aligns with global sustainability best practice including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the Race to Zero, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

- Future proofing: it will enable the user to demonstrate their understanding of, and action in, addressing the negative impacts of events (e.g. carbon footprint and resource use). This is important because the expectation from event attendees, participants and other interested parties is increasingly for an event to deliver impact and legacy. The business case for the majority of events in 2024 requires reference to a sustainability strategy and this is likely to increase.

What has changed?

ISO Standards have a regular process of updating and represent a consensus among international experts in the field concerned. To ensure that they remain up-to-date and globally relevant, they are reviewed at least every five years after publication through the Systematic Review process. Through this process, NSBs review the document and its use in their country (in consultation with their stakeholders) to decide whether it is still valid, should be updated, or withdrawn.

In 2023, an international working group of at least 16 NSBs and at least 12 liaisons including UNDP, UNFCCC, the International Olympic Committee and the International Paralympic Committee revised ISO 20121. Highlights of the revision include:

- requirements to consider the impact of specific issues including climate change when considering the context of the organization;
- an extended list of issues which can, where applicable, be identified and evaluated, including human and child rights and social impacts;

- additional examples of interested parties to be engaged with, where relevant, including partners and sponsors;
- new commitments for the policy including reporting on achievements and lessons learnt and, where appropriate, legacy; and
- an increased focus on the supply chain demonstrating sustainability.

In summary, the recent revision has increased focus on areas including climate change, legacy and human and child rights. The updated version of BS ISO 20121 will support the event sector to take best practice actions to meet growing business, government and consumer sustainability expectations.

How to implement the standard

A common misunderstanding from those new to ISO standards is the difference between implementing the standard and being certified to the standard. The benefits of BS ISO 20121:2024 come from implementing the standard, and this should always be the starting point. Focusing on certification before users are ready could result in a number of experiences that deter users from implementing the standard, such as significant time completing excel spreadsheets or needing a significant budget for the cost of certification visits. This reputation is damaging for BS ISO 20121:2024 and could deter small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) from using it.

To focus on implementing the standard rather than just being certified to it, users should read resources, gather a team internally and get buy in from top management to explore a new way of working.

After implementing the standard, certification does provide benefits and there are a number of certification options that are suitable for a three-person company or a global corporation. The standard states that any organization can “demonstrate voluntary conformity by:

- first party (self-determination and self-declaration);
- second party (confirmation of conformance by parties having an interest in the organization, such as clients, or by other persons on their behalf);
- an independent third party (e.g. a certification body).”

This means users can demonstrate implementation of BS ISO 20121:2024 in three ways. To demonstrate first party conformity or self-declaration, users would transparently share key documents that would demonstrate actions. For example, an organization could share the sustainability policy and interviews with stakeholders explaining how the user engaged with them during this process. Self-declaration is valid and could be described as more transparent and authentic than third party certification



because it is sharing how the goal was reached (which could inspire and guide others) rather than simply showing a certificate.

The opportunity to demonstrate second party conformity with BS ISO 20121:2024 is currently limited but presents an opportunity for many event sector associations. These bodies would be able to create their own approach to checking that the standard has been implemented and the approach would likely be a combination of event expertise and BS ISO 20121:2024 knowledge. For example, if a global exhibition wanted to demonstrate implementation of the standard at a trade show, the exhibition association that the organization belongs to could check the organization’s actions and award a certificate communicating to clients, peers, suppliers and attendees that an association with expert knowledge in the specific field has checked the best practice approach used.

The other option is having a third party certification body check the organization’s approach. It offers a very helpful option; however, the professional approach of a certification body could be more expensive and standard-focused with limited specific event expertise.

The following steps can help to implement the standard. These can be done in the order that aligns with the organization's way of working, potentially using processes already in place.

- 1 Decide on scope, e.g. will the focus be on one event/location or on implementing BS ISO 20121:2024 in 100% of events/office locations?
- 2 Issue identification and evaluation: decide how to identify the most important issues to focus on (also called a materiality assessment).
- 3 Identify key stakeholders and ask for feedback on the identified issues (this step builds credibility and engagement).
- 4 Create a policy, endorsed by top management, which includes objectives created to address issues identified. It should also include other commitments, for example, to report.
- 5 Collaborate with the supply chain to understand how they can help meet the sustainability objectives.
- 6 Create a plan of action and identify who will be responsible for doing what to achieve the objectives.
- 7 Regularly communicate, build awareness, monitor, measure and evaluate performance towards objectives. Keep an awareness that not everything will go to plan, and put in place a process to manage changes and take suitable action.
- 8 Regularly review and report on progress with the aim of identifying ways to improve.



Challenges and pitfalls in using the standard

It is important to remember that implementing a standard is not about taking the 'right' actions or 'doing what you are told'. Implementing BS ISO 20121:2024 is about establishing a way of working that creates a culture where sustainability is considered at every decision point.

Within the standard, Subclauses 6.3 Planning of changes, 8.2 Managing changes, and 10.2 Nonconformity and corrective action illustrate that facing challenges and unexpected changes are all part of successfully implementing BS ISO 20121:2024.

Implementing BS ISO 20121:2024 does not need to look the same for everyone. For example, the process to identify issues may include an interactive team workshop and a questionnaire shared with clients and suppliers or users could undertake a period of monitoring and data gathering before meeting with interested parties to gain their feedback. The standard will guide

users on what to do, but how to do it should be shaped by existing company culture and processes.

Since the launch of BS ISO 20121, over 12 years ago, the primary challenge witnessed across the global event sector has been organizations focusing more on certification, rather than implementation, which has led to them doubting their actions and abilities, in turn resulting in many saying the standard is too challenging and expensive. This result is a misunderstanding which prevents many, especially SMEs, from trying to use the standard and thereby gaining reputational advantage² and the experience that comes from trying, experiencing challenges, making changes and learning.

² A recent event industry media publication published an interview stating: "An easy way to validate a venue's credentials is to ask if they have certification for sustainable events, such as ISO 20121."





Wider context

Sustainability initiatives from industry press, associations, networks, clients and peers are not all equal. BS ISO 20121:2024 is the only international standard for sustainability in the event sector. Therefore, implementing it is the most credible action a company can take to demonstrate taking best practice action.

BS ISO 20121:2024 requires credible action on sustainability and highlights areas of focus including:

- The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- Human and Child Rights (including an annex written by Unicef UK)

- Climate change with reference to the Net Zero Guidelines (IWA 42), which were commissioned by Our 2050 World, a global collaboration to accelerate action towards net zero through standards. The collaboration includes bodies such as ISO, the Race to Zero campaign and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Global Innovation Hub.

ISO standards are often used by governments before regulation is created. As of 2024 there is no regulation for the event sector, however the sector is increasingly under the spotlight because events (engagement activities) are used by everyone (businesses, governments, associations, etc.) to inspire, educate and communicate their sustainability best practice.

Suggested next steps

Implementing BS ISO 20121:2024 does not have to be complicated. It starts with a conversation with management to ask 'could we implement new processes that will future proof our business?'.
From that point, organizations can begin to compare current ways of working with those required by the standard (a gap analysis). External support is not needed to do a gap analysis, as

reading the standard and annexes and making the most of credible education that exists should guide users.

Here are some basic questions that will help identify gaps in current ways of working compared to working in a way that aligns with the standard and considers sustainability at the heart of key decision points.

- 1 What do those interested in your work expect from you (and what could they expect from you in the future)?
- 2 Who is interested in your company and could you engage with them to understand their expectations?
- 3 Is your company management supportive of action being taken on sustainability that could change the company's way of working?
- 4 Do those leading on sustainability have the competence and resources they need (e.g. do they understand what sustainability means and frameworks including the United Nations SDGs)?
- 5 What changes are there in the market that could potentially affect your business when it comes to sustainability?
- 6 Do you have a mission statement and policy (including objectives) which anyone interested could see?
- 7 Is time and resource regularly given to a process where sustainability issues can be identified?
- 8 Are you taking action to communicate about your actions for sustainability to all those who could be interested (for example sharing best practice and creating reports)?
- 9 Is sustainability in your business plan and your operational plan?
- 10 Do you choose your suppliers based on sustainability (or at least talk to your suppliers about sustainability)?
- 11 Do you measure your sustainability initiatives?
- 12 Does your company's management make time to review their sustainability progress and identify what they could do differently to achieve greater success?

Action on any of these points shows evidence of implementing parts of BS ISO 20121:2024 and it is a good starting point for the BS ISO 20121 journey.

Further reading

Race to Zero, *The 5th P (Persuade) Handbook*, <https://climatechampions.unfccc.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Race-to-Zeros-5th-P-Persuade-Handbook-2.pdf>, (p.40)

Positive Impact, <https://www.positiveimpacetevents.com/resources/what-is-iso-20121>, (Regular updates of free resources and case studies)

Sustainability in Event Management, <https://committee.iso.org/home/tc250>

About the author



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Fiona Pelham is chair of SCP/1/7, Sustainable Events, the committee responsible for the development of BS ISO 20121:2024. In 2005 she launched Positive Impact, a not-for-profit set up to create a sustainable event sector which, since 2019, has provided a United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Acceleration Action Report on the role of events advancing the SDGs. Since 2021, in partnership with SME Climate Hub, she has led the Race to Zero Accelerator for the event sector.

In 2014 Fiona received an honorary doctorate from Leeds Beckett University for services to the event sector and in 2018 chaired Meeting Professionals International, the world's largest global association for event professionals.

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