



# Circular tender criteria for professional clothing

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## Introduction

There are many sustainability challenges in the professional clothing value chain including water consumption, microfiber pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and human rights risks. From the perspective of a buyer / user of workwear, the most visible challenge is waste – it is estimated that in the UK 90% of professional clothing is sent to landfill or incineration after use.

In response to this, as part of the Interreg NSR ProCirc project and in partnership with the Professional Clothing Industry Association Worldwide, Business in the Community (BITC) convened a Community of Practice for procurers of professional clothing and organisations in the supply chain to identify a set of procurement principles for circular workwear. The key insights from this were published in the [Uniform Approach: Improving the Sustainability of Professional Clothing](#) report which was published in May 2021.

Integral UK Limited, a fully owned subsidiary company of JLL, were the first organisation to trial

adopting a selection of these procurement principles. BITC provided bespoke advisory support, funded through the Interreg NSR ProCirc project, to help Integral apply these to their live tender.

## Procurement process

Integral had already begun the procurement process when they saw BITC's offer to provide support. A group of six suppliers had already been shortlisted and had been sent an initial Request for Information which asked open text response questions on the supplier's sustainability policy and on their recycling initiatives, as well as asking them to list sustainable products which they can provide. In their responses, the suppliers answered the questions in different ways and addressed different sustainability issues, making it very hard to compare responses.

BITC recommended that Integral asked the suppliers questions across two of the circular procurement principles from the *Uniform Approach* report. These principles were selected based on



the stage of procurement. As the tender was already underway it could not be fundamentally changed (for example by moving to a circular business model such as a service-based contract) and suppliers had a short turn around. The principles selected were best practice end-of-life treatment and circular material selection. Two aspects of circular material selection were considered – whether recycled materials are used in products and whether the products are made of a single fibre thereby maximising the recycling potential. This resulted in three topic areas being addressed in the tender, with two questions on each. Integral were already using a balanced scoring assessment for tenders with a weighting being given for sustainability issues, however for the pilot this weighting was increased to 30%.

Each issue area included a question with a yes/no response to a desired minimum specification (with a maximum of three points being awarded for each of these questions), as well as a question on how the supplier has taken an innovative approach to go beyond the minimum spec with a view to improving this over the course of the contract (with a maximum of five points being awarded for each of these question).

BITC provided a review of the supplier responses, including any followup information that was requested, comparing the level of circular maturity between what each supplier was offering and what is considered to be best practice in the industry. Integral completed the process by carrying out their own scoring, taking on board BITC's comments and using the expertise of their parent company JLL's Workplace Sustainability Leader in supporting the assessment.



## Results

Integral ultimately selected Safpro – who scored highest in the sustainability questions – as their supplier for workwear and PPE. Interestingly, while Safpro were the existing supplier, as a result of their responses to the new questions that were added to the tender they offered two new circular solutions which were not previously offered:

- Implemented a workwear collection and return-for-recycling system in Integral's facilities, providing the enabling infrastructure for the closed-loop system which Integral wanted.
- Offered circular polo shirts provided through [Project Plan B](#) which are designed and manufactured in a way that allows them to be 100% recyclable. When end-of-life garments are returned for recycling, these polo shirts are identified by a QR

code on the label, this overcomes the common barrier of separating recyclable garments. The material in the polo shirts is then turned back into raw polyester which is woven into fabrics to be made into new clothes. This is known as closed-loop recycling and is a more effective use of the fabric than the vast majority of textiles recycling in which the material is essentially downcycled for lower value uses, such as insulation material or furniture stuffing, which are non-recyclable and so will ultimately end up going to landfill.

Both of these options were taken up by Integral. Once their stock of old polo shirts is used up, Integral will be ordering the circular polo shirt for all of their mobile engineers. This will result in roughly 3000 circular polo shirts being procured each year which can be recycled into new garments, rather



than being downcycled and eventually ending up in landfill or energy-from-waste incineration.

As well as reducing the amount of garments that are potentially going to landfill or incineration, using closed-loop garments reduces the need for new fibers to be sourced (with associated environmental impacts) and improved transparency in the supply chain. As sourcing and producing virgin fibers is a carbon intensive process, closed loop recycling will reduce emissions in comparison. Once the transition to the new polo shirts is complete, and assuming that they are returned and closed-loop recycled at the

same rate that they are procured (3000 per year), then this has the potential to result in a carbon saving of 11 tonnes of potential CO<sub>2</sub>e savings per year, equivalent to 15 return journeys from London to New York (see calculation methodology in Background information section below), in comparison to the shirts going to landfill or energy-from-waste and an equivalent amount of virgin material being produced.

### Lessons learned

- Suppliers commented that making some PPE products out of recycled fibers is not possible to achieve safety standards – when asking questions about the use of recycled fibers across the product portfolio it may be appropriate to exclude such items.
- Be ambitious. Don't enter the procurement process with preconceived ideas about what is and isn't viable in the market. There is a lot of and your role is to set a clear market signal to suppliers about what is important to your organisation.
- You'll be surprised at the amount of information you get back from suppliers when you ask focused questions.
- Don't be scared to try new things, learn from it, review the results, look for opportunities to improve the process, and do it better next time. If it doesn't work out as planned, you can fall back on your previous procurement decision making criteria.

### Background information

The calculation methodology for the carbon savings is as follows:

WRAP's [Carbon Waste and Resources Metric](#) provides a figure of 14,760kg.CO<sub>2</sub>e savings / tonnes for closed loop recycling of textiles as an alternative to landfill.

3000 polo shirts x an [average weight of 0.25kg](#) = 0.75 tonnes.

0.75 x 14,760 = 11,070kg / 11 tonnes of potential CO<sub>2</sub>e savings if the polo shirts are closed loop recycled vs landfilled.

Pure [Leapfrog's flight emissions calculator](#) – based on average historical British Airways data from 2021 – provides a figure of 0.7 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>e per passenger for a return economy class ticket from London Heathrow to New York JFK.

11 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>e / 0.7 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>e per flight = 15 flights.