



Environmental responsibility for charities

This guidance covers some of the common issues connected with environmental responsibility. It includes information on when trustees need to contact the Charity Commission and when they can take decisions themselves.

It is for charity trustees to decide if becoming involved in environmental activities is:

- in the best interests of the charity
- an effective way of furthering the charity's purposes

How to improve the environmental impact of a charity's buildings

Some actions which a charity can take won't cost anything, or may reduce costs for the charity (eg shutting down PCs at the end of the day or lowering thermostats). These actions are maximising the charity's use of resources, which a charity should be doing anyway.

Other actions may cost something, eg switching to a 'green' energy supplier which is more expensive than other suppliers. In these situations the trustees should balance the extra cost of environmental measures against other factors eg benefits to their reputation and donor confidence. The trustees can proceed where they think it's in the interests of the charity to do so.

For more ideas for actions to improve environmental impact look at the commission's links [to organisations which offer training and assistance](#).

How to install energy saving systems

Energy saving schemes include photovoltaic solar panels, wind turbines and heat pumps. These can:

- reduce electricity bills
- improve a charity's environmental impact
- sometimes provide income through selling surplus electricity to the national grid

Charities don't usually need to consult the commission before going ahead with these schemes. It is up to the charity's trustees to make the decision. Trustees should be clear which of these is their main aim:

- improve the charity's property (including reducing its electricity bills and reducing its carbon footprint)
- generate income for the charity as a fundraising activity, through selling the electricity produced

Trustees can often use the charity's general funds to pay for the project, in both cases, as long as they think the project is in the best interests of the charity.

If the purpose of the scheme is to improve the charity's property, they might be able to:

- use designated or special trusts which are held for that purpose
- use capital funds – take advice to check this is legally possible

If the purpose is fundraising, and a separate trading company is installing the system, the trustees may also be able to [invest capital funds](#). This is only if they fulfil their duties and act in the best interests of the charity.

You can get advice from an umbrella or sector support body or a solicitor.

Charities whose stated aims ('objects') do not mention the environment

Charities must act within their objects - the aims set out in their governing document. The commission encourages charities to explore the full scope of their objects, without acting outside them.

It's up to the trustees to decide which activities best further the charity's objects, and whether this might include environmental activities. Here are some examples of charities which do not have specific objects for the preservation of the environment but who can still carry out environmental work:

- a charity with objects for the 'relief of poverty' delivering environmental projects because they have evidence that the effects of climate change are contributing to the poverty in certain parts of the world and that their efforts can help to reduce these effects
- a charity with objects for 'relief of sickness' or 'promotion of health' researching the effects of pollution on the causes of sickness, or how environmental factors affect the recovery of those with a particular illness

Trustees must be confident that they can demonstrate how their activities work towards achieving their charity's aims.

How to change a charity's objects to include environmental activity

Some charities might want to adopt a new object which is specifically related to the environment.

How trustees go about this depends on if the charity is a company or not, and what its income is.

It is likely that the commission would need to make a Scheme to change an unincorporated charity's objects. The factors which the commission needs to take into account when doing this include current social and economic circumstances. The Charities Act 2011 doesn't define the meaning of 'social and economic circumstances' but it is certainly possible that environmental issues may be of relevance.

Charitable companies must apply to the commission for consent to amend their objects under section 198 of the Charities Act 2011.

For more information, read [change your governing document](#).