



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Government Digital Sustainability Alliance (GDSA) Terms of Reference

February 2025

We are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment, growing the green economy, sustaining thriving rural communities and supporting our world-class food, farming and fishing industries. We work closely with our 33 agencies and arm's length bodies on our ambition to make our air purer, our water cleaner, our land greener and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, and to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.



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1. Purpose and objectives of the GDSA

- 1.1. The Government Digital Sustainability Alliance (GDSA) brings together UK government, its supply chain and other experts to drive progress on digital sustainability. The Alliance was established to improve digital sustainability outcomes for UK government and its supply chain - and in so doing, support wider strategies such as the Greening Government Commitments, Net Zero Pathway and UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- 1.2. The Alliance aims to collaborate between government, industry and academia to reduce the environmental impact of governments IT estate, fostering the development of innovative, sustainable solutions.
- 1.3. To achieve this aim, the objectives of the GDSA are:
 - a) Identify key risks and opportunities in the procurement and operation of governments ICT estate which support sustainable digital practices
 - b) Develop and promote best practice, solutions, tools and guidance for tackling strategic challenges and utilising opportunities to make progress on the issue
 - c) Support the work of government in this area by providing expertise and feedback when required to support policy and strategy development
- 1.4. For the Terms of Reference, we propose the following working definitions:

Sustainability:

- We define sustainability as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.¹
- This definition encompasses what is widely referred to as the 'three pillars' of sustainability – environmental, social and economic – recognising that a sustainable future is one which preserves and protects nature and the planet, which creates just and equitable outcomes for people, and ensures a viable economy in present and future.
- However, much like the surrounding literature and policy on this topic, we expect that discussions will be largely centred around environmental sustainability, bringing in the other 'pillars' as and where they connect.

Digital Sustainability:

- Also known as 'sustainable ICT' or 'green IT', digital sustainability encompasses the social, economic and environmental impact of technology and digital services.

¹ United Nations General Assembly (1987) [Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future](#)

2. Membership of the GDSA

- 2.1. To become a member of the GDSA, applicants need to:
- a) Confirm that their organisation meets UK government's due diligence criteria on sustainable practices (see GDSA Due Diligence document)
 - b) Agree to these Terms of Reference
 - c) Sign the GDSA Charter (see New Member Charter document)
- 2.2. The GDSA Coordinator reserves the right to decide on membership of the GDSA.
- 2.3. Membership is on an ongoing basis and held by the organisation, not the individual applicant. Upon entry to GDSA, details of those who will represent their organisation should be given and it is the responsibility of the organisation to keep the GDSA Coordinator informed of any changes by emailing sustainableict@defra.gov.uk.
- 2.4. There are 2 categories of membership:

GDSA Member

- Organisations and academics with expertise in digital sustainability, who want to support the GDSA in its objectives.
- GDSA members will be invited to GDSA events, receive regular communication and updates on the Alliance and be expected to partake in discussions and feedback sessions when invited.
- GDSA members will play a key role in the review and promotion of digital sustainability topics.

GDSA Working Group Member

- Organisations and academics who are members of a GDSA working group and can commit 1 to 4 hours a week to support the work of the group and GDSA.
- To keep working groups manageable there are a limited numbers of Working Group Member places available, which will be allocated by the GDSA Coordinator, in partnership with the Working Group Chair.
- Working Group members will play an active role in taking the working group's activities forward, and in raising the profile of the GDSA.
- Further expectations of Working Group members are set out below in section 4.

- 2.5. The GDSA shall operate under the 'Chatham House Rule': Members are free to use any information received in communications from the Alliance, during a meeting or part thereof, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers,

nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.² An individual participant may waive this rule for themselves in part or whole through explicit consent.

- 2.6. GDSA meetings and events will be held virtually by default. Face-to-face meetings, working groups or summits will be held occasionally, resource permitting. Members participating in any face-to-face meetings or events are requested to cover their own expenses (unless otherwise stated).
- 2.7. Government departments play an important role in assuring, reviewing and implementing the outputs of the GDSA. Although they may be invited to contribute to GDSA discussions or working groups, they do so in an advisory capacity and not as GDSA members. Any input from government employees or representatives to the GDSA and its working groups should be agreed and facilitated by the GDSA Coordinator.

3. Code of conduct

- 3.1. Members are invited to contribute to the Alliance as individuals. Views expressed or implied by members during GDSA meetings, events, or thereof should not be regarded as the official position of the organisations they represent. Instead, members should act based on their personal opinions, informed by their qualifications and experience. This also means that:
 - a) Members should not act based on any obligation to or direction from any person or organisation, including an employer or client, regardless of any external commitments, agreements, contracts, or orders.
 - b) Members should not direct the actions of other participants or retaliate against them for fulfilling their responsibility to act according to their independently developed opinions.
 - c) Members must demonstrate sensitivity and propriety towards the GDSA and government relationship, working closely with the government to ensure that GDSA activities do not breach strict commercial boundaries or exploit government relationships extended to members through the Alliance.

Core Values

- 3.2. Participants shall seek to uphold the following values when participating in GDSA activities or representing the GDSA:
 - **Willingness to participate and contribute to the work and deliverables of the Alliance, with the aim to progress its interests.**

² Chatham House, [Chatham House Rule](#)

- **Openness and curiosity** towards other experiences and perspectives, ensuring fair and equitable consideration of others' views.
- **Respect** towards others regardless of their background, characteristics, organisation or other affiliation.
- **Knowledge-sharing and collaboration** with the aim to improve collective understanding and establish truth.

Member Expectations

3.3. Members are expected to adhere to this Terms of Reference. If a member suspects another member has violated the terms set out herein, they should first contact the GDSA Coordinator. The Coordinator reserves the right to revoke membership from the GDSA. If a working group member is suspected of not adhering to these Terms of Reference, the Chair should be informed. The Chair will make every effort to resolve the issue but reserves the right to revoke the participant's membership from the Working Group, with approval from the GDSA Coordinator.

3.4. All members are expected to:

- Meet the commitments set out in the GDSA Partnership Charter (separate document provided)
- Demonstrate and advocate high standards of professional practice within the sustainability field.
- Apply their skills and experience to enhance the GDSA and contribute to a better future.
- Demonstrate professionalism and act as ambassadors for sustainability.
- Develop, design, and deliver best practices that enable the government and its supply chains to manage risks and maximise opportunities through the sharing of best practices.
- Actively work towards aligning with best practices and internationally recognised sustainable technology standards, visibly demonstrating exemplary behaviour in their application within their own organisation.
- Provide resources to support the delivery of events, initiatives, materials, and content across multiple channels to promote digital sustainability on a global stage.

4. Working Groups

- 4.1. GDSA has 5 working groups – AI, Circular Economy, Green Service Design, Planetary Impacts and Scope 3.
- 4.2. The AI Working Group has additional Terms of Reference below in Annex A, in addition to those included in this document

- 4.3. The status of the GDSA Working Groups is advisory, and participants will not themselves be given decision-making authority over the implementation of activities and deliverables within government.
- 4.4. Each working group is led by a nominated group lead (Chair) responsible for organising meetings and ensuring the delivery of group objectives.
- 4.5. Activities and deliverables will be presented by the working group Chair to Cross-Government Digital Sustainability Steering Group with recommendations for implementation as appropriate. The Cross-Government Digital Sustainability Steering Group will give approval for implementing such recommendations.
- 4.6. To ensure an equal balance of views, organisations shall have no more than two affiliated participants present at the working group at any one time. This does not apply to government representatives who are invited on a temporary basis.
- 4.7. Participation in the working group is subject to invitation by the Chair upon approval from the GDSA Coordinator. No participant shall invite, include or grant non-participants access to working group files, folders, meetings or correspondence without prior approval from the Chair. Participants are otherwise free to share and collaborate with others in a personal capacity subject to their own discretion and consent.
- 4.8. Regular attendance at working group meetings is an important expectation for all working group members. If a participant is unable to attend three consecutive meetings, it shall be assumed they have stepped down from the group, unless the Chair advises otherwise. Attendance to the working group meetings is a minimum requirement of being a Working Group Member. If a participant feels that they are unable to continue participating in the working group for any reason, they shall notify the Chair at the earliest available opportunity to enable forward planning.
- 4.9. The GDSA Coordinator shall be responsible for overseeing the working group's positioning and governance within the wider context of the GDSA, will facilitate communications and ways of working with government members and has final authority on Working Group structure and composition.

Roles and responsibilities

- 4.10. All members of the working group are to be considered participants and are subject to this Terms of Reference while assuming this capacity. They shall be responsible for upholding and furthering the interests of the working group in honesty and good faith.
- 4.11. Guests who are not formal working group members may be invited by the Chair on an ad-hoc basis for specific discussions or sharing information with the group. While

participating in the Working Group, they are expected to abide by these Terms of Reference equally as participants.

- 4.12. The Chair shall be responsible for coordinating working group meetings, managing the agenda and timekeeping for each meeting, as well as managing the overall membership of the Working Group. They are further responsible to ensure working group alignment with the Terms of Reference, and to represent the working group at the GDSA Governance Group, Cross-Government Digital Sustainability Steering Group and other events as appropriate. The Chair has the authority to delegate this role to another participant or government representative (an 'Acting Chair') or to share the responsibilities equally (a 'Co-Chair'). If the Chair wants to abdicate their role, they must inform the GDSA Coordinator. A new working group Chairs shall be selected by the working group in a fair and transparent manner. Each working member has equal right to put themselves forward for the position.
- 4.13. Action owners are expected to complete their allocated actions within a timely manner, if agreed timelines cannot be met the action owner must inform the working group lead and GDSA Coordinator. Summaries of the working group meetings will be made available to all members, along with working group objectives progress reports, these will be published within the GDSA Members area (sharepoint.com).
- 4.14. The working group has scope to suggest, vote on and initiate further activities and deliverables if it deems it necessary and where they contribute to the interests and overall purpose of the Working Group.

5. Governance

GDSA Coordinator

- 5.1. The Defra Digital Sustainability team will provide a GDSA Coordinator who will have oversight of the GDSA and hold the final decision-making authority. The Coordinator will oversee and facilitate engagement between GDSA and other forums, such as the Cross-Government Digital Sustainability Alliance. The GDSA Coordinator will have oversight of the GDSA working groups, Governance group and hold responsibility for communicating with the Alliance.

GDSA Governance Group

- 5.2. The GDSA Governance Group comprises of the GDSA Governance Chair, GDSA Working Group Chairs and the GDSA Coordinator. It will meet on a monthly basis at minimum. The GDSA and its working groups will require sign-off from the Governance Group for any publishable products, such as reports, white papers and blogs.
- 5.3. The GDSA Governance Group will report into and provide updates to the Cross-Government Digital Sustainability Steering Group on a regular basis so the Steering

Group can provide direction, review and support for the GDSA in a coordinated 'single voice'.



Figure 1: GDSA governance structure

6. Amendments

- 6.1. The Terms of Reference will be reviewed and updated by the GDSA Coordinator to ensure they remain appropriate for the requirements of the GDSA and Working Groups. Any changes to the Terms of Reference will be agreed by the GDSA Governance Group before being communicated to GDSA members.

5. Annex A – AI Working Group

- 1.1. The purpose of the Sustainability and AI Working Group is to develop understanding of artificial intelligence (AI) risks, mitigations and opportunities on the topic of sustainability, particularly as they relate to the application of AI technologies in the public sector. The aim is to determine a shared best practice and posture in relation to AI sustainability and to highlight actionable methods to achieve this within the context of government, whether through the development of specific deliverables or a general community of practice.
- 1.2. This may involve discussion around definitions and concepts surrounding sustainability and AI, methods of measurement and evaluation, key risks and priorities, systems of governance and reporting, and how to account for the future development and expansion of AI as a technology. Areas of focus may range from (but are not limited to) software development, data management, IT operations, hosting architecture, hardware and server management, to policy and wider social change. Specific technical knowledge of these areas is not required, as participants have been selected to reflect a breadth of experience and perspectives.

1.2.1. **Artificial intelligence (AI)**: we define an AI system, or AI more concisely, as ‘a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments.’³ While this covers a wide range of systems, ranging from simplistic machine learning algorithms to general-purpose AI, we support the emerging literature and media focus on systems using deep learning network architectures – such as those responsible for large language models, image and video generation, speech recognition and translation, medical imaging, and more.

1.1. The key activities and deliverables of the Working Group may include, but are not limited to:

6.2. Supporting the drafting of a set of Sustainability Standards for AI to utilise within government: Creating guidance that is department-agnostic and applies to the variety of AI use-cases across government presently and in future.

- Setting out best practice principles for AI project and programme design that put digital sustainability at the forefront.
 - Providing relevant and actionable risk criteria for delivery teams to incorporate into AI projects and programmes.
 - Suggesting structures of governance that provide assurance and accountability for the sustainable application of AI.
 - Leveraging partnerships and consult with subject matter experts within Defra group, across Whitehall and beyond to define best practice in this area.
 - Engaging with and extend the frameworks on technology and AI as developed by Defra and the CDDO to ensure alignment and support mutual outcomes.
- Integrating Sustainable AI principles into the Service Standard
 - Developing a bank of examples of Sustainable AI and AI for Sustainability
 - Creating a ‘bank’ of key facts and statistics around AI and sustainability for policymakers and leaders.
 - Drafting a comparative report on international approaches to AI and sustainability with an evaluation of effectiveness.

³ OECD (OECD/LEGAL/0449, 2024) [Recommendation of the Council on Artificial Intelligence](#)