



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Government Digital
Sustainability Alliance

Government Digital sustainability Alliance (GDSA) Terms of Reference

June 2026
Version: 1.0

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 UK government Digital Sustainability Alliance (GDSA) brings together UK public sector, its information, communication and technology (ICT) supply chain, industry, academia and third sector organisations to drive progress on the sustainability of the UK governments ICT and digital estate. 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:
 - a) reduce the environmental and social impacts of governments IT estate.
 - b) foster the development of innovative, sustainable solutions.
 - c) provide practical guidance and recommendations to UK government and the public sector.
- 1.3. To achieve this aim, the objectives of the GDSA are:
 - a) identify key risks and opportunities in the design, 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 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.
 - **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. The GDSA is led by a GDSA Coordinator provided by Defra, which sits within the Digital Sustainability Team.
- 2.2. To become a member of the GDSA, applicants need to complete the GDSA sign-up Form which includes:
 - a) Confirmation that their organisation meets UK government's due diligence criteria on sustainable practices
 - b) Agreeing to these Terms of Reference
 - c) Signing the GDSA Charter
- 2.3. The GDSA sign-up form can be obtained from sustainableICT@defra.gov.uk. The GDSA Coordinator reserves the right to decide on membership of the GDSA.
- 2.4. 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.
- 2.5. There are 2 categories of membership:
 1. **GDSA Member** – organisations and academics with expertise in digital sustainability, who want to support the GDSA's aims and 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.
 2. **GDSA Working Group Member** – organisations 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 in Section 4.
- 2.6. Unless specified, 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.

- 2.7. GDSA meetings and events will be held virtually by default. Face-to-face meetings, working groups and events 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).
- 2.8. Government departments and public sector organisations 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. Any input from public sector 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 and public sector to ensure that GDSA activities do not breach strict commercial boundaries or exploit government relationships extended to members through the alliance.

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

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.
- **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 these terms of reference. If a member suspects another member has violated the terms set out herein, they should first contact the GDSA Coordinator (sustainableict@defra.gov.uk). 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:**

- a) Meet the commitments set out in the GDSA Charter (set out in the GDSA sign-up form)
- b) Demonstrate and advocate high standards of professional practice within the sustainability field.
- c) Apply their skills and experience to enhance the GDSA and contribute to a better future.
- d) Demonstrate professionalism and act as ambassadors for sustainability.
- e) 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.
- f) Actively work towards aligning with best practices and internationally recognised sustainable technology standards, visibly demonstrating exemplary behaviour in their application within their own organisation.
- g) 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. The GDSA has 7 working groups:

- Circularity & Waste Reduction
- Emissions
- Planetary Impacts
- Social Impacts
- Resilience
- Disruptive Technology
- Embedding Sustainability

- 4.2. 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.
- 4.3. Each working group is led by a nominated chair and deputy chair, responsible for organising meetings and ensuring the delivery of group objectives.
- 4.4. 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.
- 4.5. To ensure an equal balance of views, organisations shall have no more than 2 affiliated participants present at the working group at any one time.
- 4.6. 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.
- 4.7. Regular attendance at working group meetings is an important expectation for all working group members. Attendance to the working group meetings is a minimum requirement of being a working group member. If a working group member is unable to attend a meeting, they should inform the working group chair. If a working group member does not attend two consecutive meetings without providing good reason, it shall be assumed they have stepped down from the group, unless the chair advises otherwise. 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.
- 4.8. The GDSA Coordinator shall be responsible for overseeing the working group's positioning and governance within the wider context of the GDSA. They will facilitate communications and ways of working with public sector members and has final authority on working group structure and priorities.

Roles and responsibilities

- 4.9. 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.
- 4.10. 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.
- 4.11. The chair and deputy 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. If the chair or deputy wants to abdicate their role, they must inform the GDSA Coordinator. A new working group Chair or Deputy shall be selected by the working group in a fair and transparent manner. Each working group member has equal right to put themselves forward for the position.
- 4.12. 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 chair and deputy. Summaries of the working group meetings will be made available to all members on the [GDSA Collaborative Space](#) on SharePoint, along with working group objectives
- 4.13. 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 Steering Group. 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'.

6. Amendments

- 6.1. The terms of reference will be reviewed and updated on a yearly basis 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.