

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GREENER FITNESS, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, AND SPORT SECTORS



Introduction



Sustainability in the Fitness, Physical Activity, and Sport Sectors – An Overview



To move towards fairer, healthier, and more prosperous societies while ensuring a healthy planet for future generations, the [European Green Deal](#) was introduced in December 2019. This comprehensive framework drives a sustainable revolution in the European Union's (EU) economy and society, outlining necessary actions and objectives for every industry, including sport, fitness and physical activity. Key issues addressed include the transition to a circular economy, the preservation of natural capital, and fostering innovation and financing, all within a fair transition framework. This new growth strategy for the EU, striving for carbon neutrality by 2050, is crucial to achieve the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#).

The SDGs are the key international framework for sustainability, seeking to make the world fairer by addressing environmental, social, and economic development issues. The impact of sport and physical activity on the environment is multifactorial, considering the environmental costs of various components such as food and beverages, waste production, heating and cooling, transport, light and noise pollution, and impact on wildlife. According to preliminary calculations, the sport sector may cause annually worldwide emissions of around 350 million tCO₂e.¹

As explicitly emphasised by the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), sport, fitness and physical activity can make significant contributions to these SDGs. More specifically, environmental sustainability in sport and physical activity is linked to SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 (see infographic below).² Many organisations and stakeholders in these sectors are already using the SDGs to develop strategies and monitor sustainability progress.



(1) *Playing against the clock*, Goldblatt, D., 2020.

(2) *Sport's contribution to the European Green Deal: a sport sector playbook*, European Commission, 2023.



6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



Improving water quality by reducing pollution, dumping, and wastewater can be promoted through sporting and physical activity events. Sport and physical activity can highlight the importance of banning single-use plastics and micro-beads, thus influencing the behaviour of spectators and consumers.

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



Sport and physical activity facilities and events can support goals related to renewable energy, energy efficiency, and access to clean energy by adhering to relevant standards and recommendations. Sport and physical activity infrastructure can promote organisational models that embrace clean and sustainable energy use.

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE



Sporting and physical activity events can have enduring impacts on environmental sustainability if they involve the local population in their legacy. Sport organisations and events, by implementing appropriate policies and procedures, can provide opportunities for capacity building, job creation, and broader economic, social, and environmental sustainable development.

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



Sport and physical activity contribute to making cities and communities more inclusive. Its positive perception makes it an effective tool for addressing inequality in hard-to-reach areas and populations. Additionally, it can combat prejudice and intolerance by fostering tolerance and pro-social behaviour.

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



Incorporating sustainability standards in the production and provision of sport and physical activity products can promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, influencing other industries as well.

13 CLIMATE ACTION



Sport and physical activity, through collaboration with various stakeholders, can significantly contribute to the fight against climate change. Its popularity and wide reach provide opportunities for raising awareness and sharing information, including promoting sustainable development and environmentally friendly lifestyles.

14 LIFE BELOW WATER



Sport and physical activity, through educational initiatives, can offer well-researched insights into the relationship between biodiversity and lifestyle choices by emphasising the connections between food, consumption culture, and biodiversity conservation.


15 LIFE ON LAND



Sport and physical activity in natural terrestrial settings can play a crucial role in ensuring the conservation and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. Sport can integrate safeguards, activities, and messages that promote the sustainable and environmentally respectful use of terrestrial resources.

With environmental sustainability finally taking centre stage, stakeholders from the sport, fitness and physical activity sectors are also gearing up for their green transitions.

On a global scale, the sport industry is already taking significant steps toward sustainability. Notable initiatives include the "[Sports for Climate Action Framework](#)" by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the [International Olympic Committee's \(IOC\) sustainability strategy](#), which sets clear climate objectives, including a 50% reduction in emissions by 2030.

A green circular icon consisting of three curved arrows forming a circle, symbolizing a cycle or sustainability.

European Fitness Operators and Sustainability: State of Play

With the European fitness market representing 64 970 clubs, 67,7 million club users, and a total revenue of € 31,8 billion in 2023³, the sector must concern itself with green transition and proactively embark on its transformation.

According to data from the *2024 European Health & Fitness Market Report*, the fitness and physical activity sector in Europe is increasingly recognising the importance of sustainability: 87% of European operators measure their performance regarding environmental indicators such as water and energy consumption, while 79% track resource preservation and recycling. Moreover, 64% have set goals to optimise water and energy usage, and 50% have similar targets for resource preservation and recycling.⁴

However, a significant gap exists between goal-setting and implementation. Only 40% of these operators have taken specific actions to improve water and energy consumption, and merely 30% have done so through resource preservation and recycling. This gap is even more pronounced when comparing larger and smaller operators, with smaller businesses facing greater difficulties in capacity and resources to implement environmental measures.⁵



(3) *European Health & Fitness Market Report 2024*, Deloitte & EuropeActive (April 2024).

(4) Ibid. Data from 42 large European fitness club chains operating in 22 countries.

(5) Ibid. Data from 42 large European fitness club chains operating in 22 countries.

When it comes to the business relevance of sustainability, 78% of European operators consider it a core value, and 67% view it as an investment in their long-term success. Yet, this percentage drops to 55% when sustainability is factored into business decisions, and only 13% of operators have made less profitable decisions to ensure ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) aspects are met.

The fact that large fitness operators measure their environmental performance is not surprising, given that EU law increasingly mandates it. Under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), enforced on 5 January 2023, all large companies and listed companies (excluding listed micro-enterprises) are required to disclose information about the risks and opportunities arising from social and environmental issues, as well as the impact of their activities on people and the environment.

EU Legislation and Its Impact



The European Union's Green Deal introduced in 2019 seeks to steer the continent towards an emission-free economy, for which the foundations of corporate operations have been laid out through ESG aspects. An array of EU legislation have consequently been introduced in the past 5 years, which are in turn translated into legal and political frameworks at national level by EU member states.

The CSRD modernises and strengthens the rules on social and environmental information reporting, extending the requirement to a broader set of large companies and listed SMEs. Some non-EU companies must also comply if they generate over EUR 150 million in the EU market. Companies subject to the CSRD will report according to European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), with the first set of standards published on 22 December 2023.



By 2026, it is estimated that two out of three of the 20 largest European fitness operators will need to comply with the CSRD.⁶ Additionally, companies required to report under the CSRD must also report under the EU Taxonomy. This framework provides a common definition of environmentally sustainable economic activities, helping the EU scale up sustainable investment by creating security for investors, protecting against greenwashing, and mitigating market fragmentation. The Taxonomy Regulation, enforced on 12 July 2020, sets out four overarching conditions and criteria for an economic activity to qualify as environmentally sustainable.

Early evidence shows that companies, public entities, and financial actors are increasingly using the Taxonomy for their business strategies, transition planning, and investment decisions. On average, around 20% of companies' capital investments are aligned with the Taxonomy. Banks are beginning to incorporate the Taxonomy into their lending strategies and their assessment of companies' investment plans.

This trend indicates that the fitness sector will be increasingly subject to environmental indicators, either by legal obligation or to align with commonly agreed environmental standards. This alignment will facilitate access to investments and loans, encouraging the sector to adopt more sustainable practices.



Challenges for SMEs

The vast majority of active EU businesses are by far micro and small-sized enterprises (employ 50 people and less) who together amount to 99,1% of all active businesses.⁷ This suggests a holistic green transition requires for support to be consequentially angled at smaller businesses, as sustainability is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour. Even when small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are not directly concerned by new laws, the nature of the supply chain will affect them indirectly, when for example SMEs are supplying products or services to larger companies: compliance with Green Deal legislation will be required from large companies who will also be responsible for ensuring their entire value chain is compliant.



(6) *European Health & Fitness Market Report 2024.*

(7) *Key figures on European business- 2024 edition, Eurostat (May 2024).* 11



The Green Audit Project

Enhancing environmental sustainability in the sport, fitness, and physical activity sectors requires significant effort, which more often than not, can be discouraging and shies stakeholders away from taking action. Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme, the [Green Audit project](#) sought to address this challenge by providing support to fitness and sport club, or centre, managers and/or owners, by creating an online [user-friendly self-assessment tool](#).

The tool was designed with, and specifically for, the target group and seeks to offer respondents a comprehensive overview and understanding of their facilities' current sustainability efforts, while providing them with insights for further progress. Through a series of multiple-choice questions, the questionnaire navigates users through an evaluation of their facilities' sustainability performance, with a particular focus on Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions, and further benchmarks their results against similar-sized venues. Based on their answers, an automated report and certificate is generated, offering an illustration of their rating, valuable insights and suggestions for further improvement.

The greater the number of clubs completing the self-assessment and sharing their experiences is, the better the benchmarking will become, and the more extensive the collection of good practice examples will grow, benefiting fitness, physical activity and sport communities at large.

The outcomes of the Green Audit self-assessment trial have been very telling: those who responded are not very advanced in their sustainability journeys, yet the same respondents are more likely to be interested in the topic, suggesting potential progress within close reach. Drafted by the sustainability entrepreneur and consultant Maurits Groen, the present recommendations intend to offer a strategic approach and inspire the green transition within the fitness, physical activity, and sport sectors.





Recommendations for a Greener Fitness and Physical Activity Sector

The trailing of the Green Audit Self-Assessment tool revealed the extent to which fitness and sport club, or centre, managers and/or owners have varying levels of awareness about the necessity to green their businesses. Though awareness is growing, a firm understanding of what it means in practice to make a business sustainable, of which effective measures could or should be implemented, is still lacking.



On this basis, the main recommendation to support and encourage the sector to green their business is to *further increase awareness* about the necessity, and self-interest, to do so. The latter should be *complemented with very practical tools* and resources to support practitioners implement concrete measures.

More specifically it is recommended that:



National federations or associations take the lead by offering a framework appropriate to their respective country, given that fitness and sport club/centres operate in significantly differing contexts across the continent,



Said national federation or association **draft a national greening plan for their sector and stakeholders** containing objectives, timelines, and a specific implementation and organisation outline: who will be involved, defined responsibilities, required budget and how to secured it,



An **'Eco or Green Team' is established**, with representatives from national level and practitioners,



The national federation or association **ensures continuity of the topic** by rendering the plan and information readily available to the sector, and by ensuring contact is reachable.



The national greening plan for the sector and stakeholders should address the main areas of actions, listed below, and provide sufficient information and context showcasing why they are essential to sustainability, such as reference to current national policy and legal requirements, scientific literature, and contact details of relevant organisations and institutions that are active on the topic and would be capable of supporting the implementation of measures.

National greening plans are encouraged to also include practical information per area of action in sight of making the transition more tangible and palatable to local practitioners, including checklists, quick wins, tips and tricks, and good practices.

Proactive promotion and dissemination of the plans are crucial and are recommended to be kept at the forefront of periodical communications and mailings (both digital and hard copies), which will help ensure the topic and work is not forgotten after the initial promotion. Making this information easily accessible is essential.

Those taking the lead, or being proactive, are encouraged to share their story of change to users and clients, and to all other professional sectors involved regardless of how close or far they are to the core activities.

The plan's minimal areas of actions are listed below, along with some concrete examples of action that can be taken. All additional information pertaining to context, relevance, metrics must serve the purpose of emphasising the relevance of the areas of actions.



Areas of Actions



Energy

- ⚡ **Assess the premise's energy consumption and consequent cost** including heating system, water, lighting and any other major energy consumers. Review each element and consider how their consumption could be lowered, and whether renewable energy could be used instead.
- ⚡ When possible **replace natural gas with solar panels**. Chosen solar panels should be fully circular (and recyclable), light-weight and have energy-intensive aluminium frames, and be free of antimony, lead, and PFAS (forever chemicals).
 - *For example, see www.solarge.com*
- ⚡ See that **each room can be separately heated** to the best required temperature.
- ⚡ Install equipment that **automatically switches to the required temperature**- especially when the premises are not in use.
- ⚡ Install **sensor lighting**, thereby effectively reducing unnecessary electricity use and costs.
- ⚡ **Check the ventilation and air-conditioning system**. Many premises still use inadequate systems, notably containing fluorinated greenhouse gases (F-gases) that are 'climate-disastrous' and that are often hidden behind a variety of names. Modern equipment can cool with water ('**dew point cooling technology**'), further reducing energy consumption by up to 80%.
 - *The European Union's [National contact points](#) for issues related to F-Gases*
- ⚡ For clubs and centres that wash their own fabrics (such as towels), consider replacing tumble dryers with **spin-dryer machines**, which are less energy-greedy.





Water

- ① **Swimming pools** are the largest consumers of energy and resources in the leisure sector. Clubs and centres with them **can reduce the water temperature by 1 or 2 degrees**, entailing significant savings on energy costs.
- ① UV lamps can be used to **reduce chemicals** in water treatment.
- ① Set changing room showers and taps with a **fixed water temperature, a shower timer, and flow reducers. Shower systems that reuse water** exist on the market, reducing both water usage and costs.
 - *For example, see www.upfallshower.com*
- ① **Recycled grey-water and collected rainwater may be repurposed** for toilet flushing, cleaning and air conditioning, amounting to both a save of water and costs.
 - *For example, see www.hydraloop.com*
 - *The European Union's overview of [Water Reuse](#)*







Food and Beverages

- ① Modern protein is overwhelmingly present in **modern diets**, and carries a heavy impact on the planet and on people's health. If providing food at your premises, it is recommended to bear this in mind.






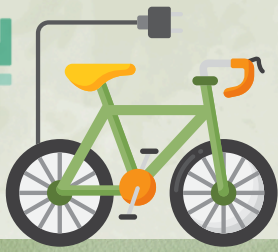
Waste

-  **Waste prevention should remain a priority** (avoiding disposable cups for drinks and single use bottles).
-  Facilitate waste collection with different bins in order to **facilitate recycling**.
-  **Eliminate disposable shoe covers** and replace with reusable ones, and encourage users to bring their own slippers.
-  When possible, choose a waste contractor that uses **high quality waste treatment** facilities.



Cleaning



-  Hygiene is essential and is a continuous process, especially in a sport or fitness club/centre. The **choice of cleaning equipment and products** can therefore have a consequent impact, for which it is recommended to undertake a thorough assessment of current uses and consider potential changes.
 - *The European Union's Ecolabel offers reliable guidance for choosing 'green products'*
-  Energy and cost savings can also be undertaken by **switching the cleaning schedule** to opening hours, preventing unnecessary heating and lighting.
-  Choice of sanity paper also bears a consequent impact, and can be assisted by the Ecolabel. However, growing trees for paper is a highly consuming process, to which **bamboo paper**, that has been grown in a responsible way, is a worthy alternative requiring less resources and fertilizers to be grown, better Co2 absorption, and no irrigation.
 - *A recent study in Norway demonstrated high levels of PFAS in recycled paper and cardboard.*⁸




Transport and Mobility






-  Encouraging a change of habits among staff and users can equally reduce carbon emissions, notably by **promoting active mobility** to the venue that will save warm-up time. Offering secure and sheltered bike parking can stimulate this change. Promoting the use of public transport is also advised.
-  For those unable to avoid using a car, provide **power charging facilities** - and of course also for electric bicycles.

Equipment



-  Before replacing any equipment or machines, it is recommended to consult a **refurbishing service to carry out any necessary repairs** rather than replacing them. By extending the lifespan of equipment and machines, stakeholders take a step back from 'intense consumption', and will also be able to redirect the saved finances into other sustainable initiatives.

General

-  **Choosing local suppliers** should be a priority as it will reduce indirect climate impact through decreased transportation.
-  **Consider collective buyers actions and/or campaigns** for energy supply, energy saving equipment, waste collection, food and beverage supply, cleaning, etc. The saved resources for affected staff can be an incentive to implement other sustainable measures.
-  All the above measures can often **benefit from subsidies, soft loans, and fiscal advantages** in many countries.
-  Conduct a **sustainability assessment, and set clear sustainability goals**.
-  **Reach out** to existing networks, platforms and hubs to find peers undergoing a similar process, potential support and inspiration. They often exist at local, regional, national and even European level



- *Explore the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, and the Enterprise Europe Network*

Some Concluding Reflections



This document has provided a concise overview of sustainability in the fitness and physical activity sector, and has offered tangible recommendations and areas of action for stakeholders to consider for their organisation's green transition. Fitness and sport club, or centre, managers and/or owners must consider that assessing their sustainability performance, setting goals, and implementing these changes evidence them bearing their responsibility to become aligned with (inter)national sustainability policies and frameworks, but are equally smart approaches to reducing their operational costs.



An additional layer of difficulty that has not been mentioned but deserves to be referred to, is club and/or centre ownership or leasing. While green leases offer a legal framework between landlord and tenant to collaboratively commit and work towards improved energy performance of a rented space, they are yet to be standardised.

Unfortunately, one must admit the lack of harmonised information and support, be they resources, information or funding, across different EU Member States- and, in some cases, even across regions; does not play in favour of sustainability. Should the former be made more accessible and visible, stakeholders would undoubtedly be better equipped to face sustainability challenges.

Last but not least, expectations in regards to sustainability efforts and performance continue to grow, for both employees and clients who expect proactive attitudes and actions, and whose loyalty undeniably increases for services and spheres that address their contributions to a healthier world.





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