

# Greening the government estate

## Achieving SOGE commitments...

**A**s part of the government's sustainability objectives, a mandate has been issued requiring departments to work towards an accredited certified environmental management system (EMS), ie. ISO 14001, the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) or BS8555. This requirement comes with a certain degree of discretion as to the scope of the EMS and the timescales involved. Departments have varied widely in achieving this requirement, and only a quarter of the government estate is currently covered by an EMS (Sustainable Development Commission 2007). However, as Greg Roberts, EMS Team Leader at Hyder Consulting, argues, an EMS will also provide the framework for achieving the Sustainable Operations of the Government Estate (SOGE) targets, which every central government department, executive agency and non-departmental public body is required to achieve.

### The SOGE targets

The SOGE targets relate to carbon, sustainable procurement, energy-efficiency, water consumption, biodiversity, waste and recycling. Departments and agencies are required to report on their progress against these targets each year. However, the Environmental Audit Committee has recently found that 15% of executive agencies do not report on their sustainability targets (14th July 2008), and a naming and shaming of those non-compliant departments may be adopted in future. The reliability of the reported data could also be questioned, which supports the argument for a robust system to monitor data, particularly those agencies with larger estates.

### An EMS as a solution

An EMS offers a means to assist with this co-ordination. This is endorsed by the Sustainable Development Commission who suggest that an EMS "...should deliver the systematic approach to managing, reporting, checking and reviewing the process of meeting the SOGE targets."

An EMS is a formal framework for providing continual improvement of an organisation's environmental performance. Through a plan, do, check, review process, an organisation identifies its activities and processes that have the greatest impact on the environment, and establishes objectives and targets to minimise the risk posed. The objectives and targets will then need to be regularly reviewed, and an action taken to ensure improvement continues. An uncertified EMS may deliver continual improvement, a reduction in pollution and compliance with legislation, but without gaining certification, this cannot be independently recognised. Certification to an accredited system such as ISO14001, EMAS or BS8555 allows independent assurance to all stakeholders, including the government, that the EMS is effective and delivering the requirements of the standard. Furthermore, a certified system provides a guaranteed robustness and formality that is essential to delivering on the SOGE targets. For this reason, certification to ISO14001 (or other accredited system) is recommended where feasible.

### Taking responsibility

The SOGE targets by name relate to the government estate, and the responsibility for management is usually and rightly placed within the estates department. However, the

SOGE targets are not only an estates issue. For example, the estates and facilities departments may procure electricity but they are not the only ones that use it. ISO14001 certification is dependent upon top management buy-in, which should be echoed throughout the organisation, whether this is within support services or business delivery. An EMS can therefore greatly improve the chances of achieving the SOGE targets, as it requires a formal responsibility structure applicable to all employees.

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In addition to a formal responsibilities structure, it is very important that everyone within the organisation is engaged and empowered to 'do their bit' towards the SOGE targets. Some of this will have been undertaken through awareness initiatives on the intranet, for example, but how does an organisation know that this process is working and whether it is sustainable after the first initiatives have been delivered? ISO14001 requires the organisation to formalise this process, potentially through the use of a competency assessment,

which clearly identifies basic awareness and formal training requirements. In an office, for example, the majority of people will need to be made aware of their environmental impact and how they can help reduce this impact. This can be achieved through regular initiatives such as posters, the intranet, e-learning, newsletter articles or seminars.

Formal training may be required for the estates department, eg. spillage training, and the group responsible for delivering the SOGE targets would benefit from an accredited training course on legislation and EMS. The engagement and empowering of the workforce will greatly increase the chances of achieving the SOGE targets.

### Getting organised

As already mentioned, the setting of objectives and targets to minimise the environmental impact is a fundamental part of an EMS. Existing department and agency Sustainable Development Action Plans can provide the backbone to these objectives and targets. In addition, ISO14001 also requires a robust management programme to achieve the objectives and targets. This would include how each SOGE target will be achieved, with timescales, responsibilities and indicators. It is more than just documenting the management programme; ISO14001 allows the organisation to develop a structure for successful achievement of SOGE that goes right throughout the organisation.

A good example of this is carbon. The government has set a target to reduce carbon emissions from government buildings by 12.5% of 1990 levels by 2010-11 and to be carbon neutral by 2012. By 2006-07, the estate had managed a reduction of only 4%, which is behind the trajectory required to meet the 2011-12 target as reported by the Environment Audit Committee (14th July 2008). The same report also questions the accuracy of carbon monitoring data. ISO14001 requires a robust proce-

cedure to measure and monitor significant environmental risks, which would certainly include carbon. Importantly, this procedure would be scrutinised by the external auditors, which gives independent assurance to both the audited organisation and the government that the procedure is robust and that the data can be relied upon.

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### Formalising procedures

ISO14001 requires environmental procedures to be implemented for significant environmental risks. From our experience, many organisations do not have a formal series of procedures to cover activities that have the potential to cause an environmental impact. Often these activities are undertaken by the landlord's agent or a facilities contractor. A department has responsibility for ensuring that no legislative breaches occur at any of its sites in which they operate, whether directly or indirectly caused. Standardised procedures reduce the risk of environmental incidents occurring and enable all employees to work safely. Legislative breaches and potential prosecutions will lead to a significant loss of reputation, and negative publicity in the media will derogate from any positive PR gained through SOGE.

Waste is a common example where formalised procedures reduce the risk of environmental incidents and non-compliance. A department will be in breach of legislation where the appropriate duty of care documentation is

not available. A formal procedure will define responsibility, timescales and arrangements to be made in case of departure from the norm, for example, a one-off waste collection. The procedure can also be used to formalise the recycling procedure so that it is consistently implemented across departments.

### And certification...

Lastly, one of the major benefits of ISO14001 is the certification process. The role of the certifiers is to ensure that the organisation is demonstrating compliance with the requirements of the relevant standard. Anyone who has been through an external audit knows these to be nervous times, but who can argue that this process does not focus minds before and during the audit? The auditor's role is not only to find gaps, but also to identify good practice. The identification of a non-conformance should not necessarily be seen as solely negative (unless, of course, there are many!); instead, it should be taken constructively and, through the agreed corrective action, it can be used to assist towards continual improvement. Certification undoubtedly makes an EMS more robust, the people more focused, and increases the likelihood of targets and objectives being achieved. The formal framework provided by an EMS, particularly one that is certified, will therefore assist each department and the government in turn to achieve their SOGE commitments.



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