

Encouraging more sustainable office supplies in Flanders

Government of Flanders (Belgium)

Background

The Government of Flanders has been working on sustainable public procurement (SPP) since 2008, when it set a target of 100% SPP by 2020 for its own purchases. In 2015, SPP-related activities were then integrated into the overall strategy on procurement of the Government of Flanders ([Flemish Plan on Procurement](#)).

In line with this focus, Flanders has been integrating sustainability into their stationery purchasing framework agreements over many years, and in September 2016, it published a new open tender for an office supplies framework agreement.

Procurement objectives

This was the third time that sustainability played a prominent role in the framework agreement for stationery supplies in Flanders, with the process being improved each time. In this framework agreement, the Government of Flanders had two important policy goals in mind:

- (start) closing the material loops, and
- reduce the climate impact of transport.

Flanders set for itself the target of achieving 50% sustainable office supplies. The target was also clearly communicated through the procurement process, as the contractor is also expected to encourage customers to reach this goal. The customers - those purchasing from the framework agreement - are mostly agencies and departments of the Government of Flanders.

Suppliers were asked for:

- a fixed price for a list (inventory) of 252 different product types, and
- pricing and volume discounts for a supplementary catalogue of office supplies, which was optional.

There were 252 products on offer, in total. For 60 paper products, sustainable products were the sole products which could be offered. The technical specifications required recycled or verified sustainable sources. For 20 of the other products, it was mandatory for the supplier to offer a sustainable product as an alternative. And for the remaining 103 product types, offering a sustainable product was optional.



Market research and past experiences were used to decide which product types it should be made mandatory to offer a sustainable product alternative, and which should not. The research showed that there were no products currently available which met sustainability criteria for 69 product types, and as such, offering a sustainable product option was not made mandatory or optional for those particular products.

Criteria used

Subject matter of the contract:

Open procedure for the delivery of (sustainable) office supplies. Office supplies include paper products, writing instruments, folders, filing and storage supplies, (desk) organisers, ink and toner, tape and adhesives.

Selection criteria:

The contractor was required to have an environmental management system in place according to [EMAS](#), [ISO 14001](#) or equivalent for the location(s) in which it operated.

Technical specifications:

Paper products and other products that consist mainly of paper fibres:

- Copying paper: 100% recycled fibres.
- Other paper products: at least 70% of fibres from sustainable sources (either recycled or from sustainably managed forests), remainder from legal sources.

Means of verification included a technical specifications sheet, environmental product declaration or one of the following certificates/labels or equivalent:

- 100% recycled: [Blaue Engel](#) label, NAPM 100% Recycled, APUR 100% or [Forest Stewardship Council \(FSC\) Recycled](#).
- 70% sustainable sources: [EU Ecolabel](#), [Österreichische Umweltzeichen](#), [FSC Mixed](#), [PEFC Recycled](#), [PEFC Mixed](#) and [NF Environment](#) for envelopes.

For products in other categories to be considered sustainable, the following criteria applied:

Labels

- Paper labels: technical specifications above applied.
- Other materials (textile, plastic etc.): at least 30% recycled or renewable content.

Writing instruments (pens, pencils, markers etc.)

- Barrel (and cap if applicable):
- At least 50% recycled or renewable content (accept wooden parts – see below) or;
- 100% wood from sustainable forestry.

Filing and storage supplies – including non-paper folders, binders etc.

- At least 40% recycled or renewable content.

Ink, toner, ink ribbons

- Reconditioned toner / ink without mercury, lead, cadmium or chrome or;
- Products with Blaue Engel or Nordic Swan label or equivalent without mercury, lead, cadmium or chrome.

Desk accessories / Other office supplies

- At least 40% recycled or renewable content.

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Other products

- Products with a Type I Ecolabel;¹
- Other sustainability criteria: possible with consultation/approval of Government of Flanders.

Award criteria:

Out of 105 points, 35 points were awarded to sustainability criteria. These were divided as follows:

- Share of sustainable products in the inventory (based on 103 product types for which a sustainable product was optional) - 10 points.
- Share of sustainable products in the comprehensive catalogue - 20 points.
- Visual aid, search engine and other stimuli helping the procurer to make sustainable choices - 5 points.

Sustainable transport was also a part of the 'service' award criterion, where a maximum of 15 points could be earned. In order to judge the offers, every supplier had to explain how the transport for deliveries is arranged. The points were based on:

- The ecoscores² or emission standard (EURO) of gasoline and petrol driven vehicles in the fleet;
- Alternative technologies such as (partly) human powered vehicles, electrical vehicles and CNG vehicles;
- Actions to reduce kilometres driven and fuel consumption.

Contract performance clauses:

Reporting:

The contractor has to report once a year on the actual products purchased through the framework agreement. A clear indication of those products purchased which meet Flanders' sustainability criteria need also to be provided. This reporting can be used:

- As a benchmark for departments and agencies (comparing their results on sustainability to others or to the Government of Flanders as a whole)
- To follow up on the evolution in sustainable products purchased
- As a tool to detect trends and difficulties so action can be taken when needed
- As information useful for devising the next contract

In addition, the contractor has to deliver to every customer each year a list of 10 products for which the customer could have bought a more sustainable product, in order to encourage them to choose more sustainable products in future. The contractor should take into account the numbers of products bought and the difference in price between the product bought and the product proposed.

Verification:

Each year, claims on sustainability will be verified based on a list of randomly chosen products from the inventory and comprehensive catalogue. The list can contain both sustainable and non-sustainable products. For the sustainable products, the supplier will have to provide the necessary documentation and samples that allow Flanders to verify the sustainability claim. For non-sustainable products, Flanders will verify that no false sustainability claims are being made in the web-shop. This verification will be repeated every year. For false or non-verifiable claims on the sustainability of the product, a penalty of 10 times the product value will be charged.

Transport:

In the contract performance clauses it is specified that the contractor can charge an extra €7.50 to deliver orders under €25 (excluding VAT). This is a financial stimulus to urge customers to cluster their orders, thus reducing transport

¹ Labels in accordance with ISO 14024

² The Ecoscore is a freely accessible tool to indicate sustainability of a vehicle. The higher the number the more sustainable the vehicle. More information on the Ecoscore can be found on <http://ecoscore.be/en/home>.

kilometres. This is an improvement from the previous contracts, which showed that for a lot of customers, non-financial stimuli (e.g. communication) are insufficient to encourage them to cluster their orders.

For the same reason, the contractor and customers can agree to alter the standard delivery period that was set in the tender document (two weekdays). That way it is possible to cluster more orders, by agreeing upon, for example, one weekly delivery. The supplier is also asked to foresee a 'storage cabinet service' upon a customer's request. The cabinets contain the most common stationary products for daily use and are replenished every two weeks, ensuring availability of each item based on consumption levels. Thus, cabinet services further reduce the need for transportation.

Results

The contract will run between June 2017 and June 2020, with the option of extending it for an additional year. The contract has an estimated financial value of €2,252,953 (excluding value added tax) for the four-year duration. Three offers/tenders were received during the procurement process. These were from the three suppliers that the Government of Flanders had initially detected as large enough to take on an assignment of this financial and territorial size. All sustainability measures were carefully designed to not impede competition.

The criteria set by Flanders did drive suppliers towards collaboration with other partners. For instance, in the case of the winning bidder, office storage cabinets will be restocked by an SME delivering office supplies.

Environmental impacts

The inventory of the contract ended up containing 426 unique products of which 199 of the products were sustainable (that is, 47% of inventory). According to the first report (30 June 2017 to 28 February 2018), 40.27% of office supplies purchased met the sustainability criteria. Big differences can be seen between paper products (75.34% sustainable), other office supplies (17.33% sustainable) and ink and toners (4.55% sustainable). These amounts are based on the actual numbers of products bought.

The figures are not simply for reporting the state of affairs, but also serve as a means for taking further action. For instance, as a result of these numbers, Flanders took up communication on sustainable alternatives for inks and toner cartridges, causing a lot of customers to switch to the sustainable product alternatives in the last two months.

Furthermore, transport flows have decreased by 24% compared to the previous period (autumn 2016 to spring 2017).

Lessons learned

Over the course of the three stationery framework tenders run by the Government of Flanders, many lessons have been learned and improvements made.

Collecting and analysing data provides a valuable means of following-up on contracts, for spotting difficulties and detecting where improvements can be made in current and in future contracts.

Verification, for example, is always important to ensure that a product meets the desired criteria across all considerations. For example, for all paper products and sustainable products in the inventory, the suppliers had to deliver documentation and/or a sample to prove the product fulfilled all requirements. This was a time-consuming exercise, both for the suppliers and for the purchaser. The level of documentation every supplier had to provide to support their sustainability claims varied. Very often, requests for more information were needed. In a few cases, the suppliers eventually offered a different product in order to meet the criteria. Common problems experienced were:

- Claims of holding a label but without being able to provide a copy.
- Producers' Certificate of Conformity (CoC) certificates on sustainable wood without a label on the product or packaging.
- Non-documented claims on recycled content.
- Documentation unsuitable for verifying the criteria/requirements included in the tender specifications. For example, specifying water-based ink of writing instruments instead of percentage of recycled content.

In addition, it is important to recognise that just because sustainable products are offered, does not mean that sustainable products are chosen (by office staff), and there is still a need to steer procurers, departments and agencies of the Government of Flanders to purchase the sustainable options on offer. In Flanders, customers can have the majority of office supplies delivered to them through 'storage cabinet services'. The customer decides which products it would like to have on stock in their cabinets, but the contractor needs to encourage the customer to choose greener products. Up until now, most customers have welcomed the help of the contractor in making these decisions.

The entire procedure is a clear demonstration of the value of good partnerships. For the Agency of Facility Management (the procurer), this was a partnership with colleagues from the Department of Environment and Spatial Development whose environmental expertise proved to be very useful in all phases of this process. The contractor sought partnerships with other firms in order to improve on the delivery of the service. Most importantly, this is a partnership between government and a supplier: always learning and growing in the uptake of sustainability in a contract.

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For related information, please see European GPP criteria for [Copying and Graphic Paper](#) and the [Technical Background Report](#).