Questions to help you put circularity at the heart of your business strategy



Transforming the world to sustainability

IEMA

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Introduction

In this guide, we aim to suggest questions to help you kick-start a redesign of your overall organisational strategy, or to design a strategy for a new business. The resulting ideas and priorities can then help you use circular approaches for designing products and processes, specifying materials, and in your interactions with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders.

We suggest a range of 'questions you can ask yourself' when developing circular strategies. Three of IEMA's six circular economy goals – **Slow, Intensify** and **Cycle** – are at the core of circular strategies, and these are supported by the remaining three goals: **Narrow, Regenerate** and **Shared value**.

These questions can be applied to the products and services you offer your customers; some of the questions may also be relevant to your own operations.

Throughout the guide, we use 'products' as shorthand for anything a business makes and sells to its customers, including equipment, buildings, infrastructure, components, materials and so on. If you are looking at a new product or service, you can ask these questions in the context of what is already available, or what your product or service would disrupt or replace in the existing marketplace. This guide covers the following:

Section 1 introduces the importance of circular strategies for businesses and organisations.

Section 2 considers how customer priorities might have changed.

Section 3 explains how 'sell more' strategies can undermine sustainability and value for customers and businesses.

Section 4 explains how circular strategies create more for customers.

Section 5 explores how shifting from ownership to usership can meet customers' needs while creating value.

Section 6 puts the three core circular goals into practice with questions and examples to spark ideas to help develop circular strategies.

Section 7 looks at how the shared value goal creates value for all stakeholders, with practical questions and examples.

Section 8 considers some of the operational changes needed to support circular strategies.

Section 9 looks at how the narrow and regenerate goals can boost efficiency and effectiveness.

Sections 10 and **11** summarise the guide with key references.

1. Questions to help you think differently

In IEMA's guide *How to integrate circular strategies into your business model* we explained how our 'six goals for decision-makers' can help you develop an overarching circular strategy, providing opportunities for your organisation to do better, with less. In practical terms, that means developing strategies to create profitable products and services that make lives better, while shrinking the footprint of production and consumption by making and selling fewer units. That might sound like a tough challenge, perhaps even an impossible task – but disruptive businesses are already using circular economy solutions to do just that!

Compared to today's typical approaches to business, we believe that truly circular strategies require a big shift in thinking. Rather than aiming to 'sell more' every year, circular strategies aim to find alternative ways to create value, both for customers and the business – perhaps selling services to support circularity, finding ways to improve the utilisation of the product itself, or recovering value from end-of-use objects. In other words, the overall aim is to reduce negative impacts associated with production and consumption; and growth could be reframed to mean taking market share from less sustainable companies!

Figure 1 shows how the six goals fit together and support each other. Businesses can combine the three core goals – slow, intensify and cycle – into strategies that help customers keep things in use for longer, and/or to use those things more intensively, followed by 'cycling' – supporting recovery of end-of-use objects so they can have further cycles of use. The recovery process might include cleaning, refurbishment or even remanufacturing to revive the product and make sure it is fit for purpose – as good as new. What's more, recycling should be our least preferred choice, as it generally requires lots of energy, logistics and chemicals to recycle materials. Using the automotive sector as an example, we can see that these strategies and systems already exist. Car dealers and independent garages help customers care for and repair their cars; car hire companies help people access cars instead of having to own them; there are plenty of options for reselling your car when you no longer want it, and when it's finally reached the end of its usable life, many of the components and materials can be refurbished and recycled to be used again. It's probably fair to say that the automotive sector could take this further to be much more circular: helping to keep cars in use for even longer, to find more ways of helping people to use cars rather than needing to own them, and to develop more effective systems for recovery and revival of cars and their components. Implementing circularity into the automative sector is especially important as we transition to a net-zero future where we no longer use polluting combustion engine cars and move to electric vehicles, public transport and more walking and cycling.

Of course, not every business makes products that can be repaired, shared and remade, and we will outline strategy questions for organisations making food and other bio-based products, and for those providing circular services to keep other firms' products 'in the loop', for example, by recycling, repairing, renting or reselling.

The questions in this guide are intended to complement IEMA's *How to integrate circular strategies into your business model* guide, so if you're not already familiar with that, we suggest you **read it first**.



Figure 1: The six goals supporting circular economy strategies

2. People's priorities are changing

You've probably seen research showing how people want to make more sustainable choices, even if the same research often shows a gap between what people say they want, and whether they follow through on that in their day-to-day choices. In *How to integrate circular strategies into your business model*, we referred to Globescan's research, used by IKEA to help it understand how people's priorities are changing¹:

- **Value** is important: people want less stuff, and want the things they choose to be as good as possible.
- **Affordability** means low prices without sacrificing function, quality, design or sustainability.
- **Convenience** is important but can be a barrier to caring for and circulating our stuff.
- There is a growing awareness about consumption and sustainability. People don't want to be wasteful and want to be good citizens, contributing to a better society and planet.

Globescan's 2023 research found a big overlap between those people wanting to live more sustainably, and those keen to prioritise their health, with less than one-third of respondents motivated by other factors².

You might be targeting the luxury market, appealing to customers who aren't worried about affordability and are more focused on status. But perhaps status itself is shape-shifting, with excessive consumption seen as greedy, and the wealthy making more conscious choices, wanting to be seen as part of the solution. The *Global Millionaires 2023 TrendLens*[™] report found that nearly nine out 10 of High-Net-Worth Individuals in the UK would pay more for a sustainable brand, four in 10 made pre-owned luxury purchases in the past year, and 47% plan to do so in the coming year³. Are you clear about what your customers really want? How might their priorities have changed? Are you talking to non-customers as well as existing customers? There are always many more non-customers out there who might be looking for different solutions. What about the next generation of customers, or potential customers who might be buying from a competitor – what are their needs?

We'll come back to these and how circular strategies can help people meet these changing priorities.

Based on the outputs of several major surveys by Globescan, IKEA realised that customers are changing their priorities¹ with a focus on:

- **Value** people want less stuff and want the things they choose to be as good as possible.
- Affordability this means low prices without sacrificing function, quality, design or sustainability.
- Less waste people do not like throwing things away.
- **Convenience** which if not considered carefully, can be a barrier to caring for and circulating our stuff.
- Being **good citizens** with a growing awareness about consumption and sustainability.

3. Is your existing strategy all about 'selling more'?

Let's start by asking some questions about the underlying aims of your current strategy.

In which ways does your existing strategy undermine sustainability?

For the economy to become more sustainable, every industrial sector has to meet its customers' needs, while reducing the volume of production and consumption and creating much less waste and pollution. For example:

- Does your current strategy favour obsolescence, including planned, emotional, or industrial obsolescence? There might also be legal changes, meaning that a product is no longer deemed fit for sale, or is unsafe to use.
- Are you encouraging customers to buy more than they need? That might be 'buy one, get one free' offers for which there is a risk that the 'free' item won't be used (e.g. perishable food); creating aspirations to have collections of things that are hardly used (e.g. shoes, shirts, handbags, DIY tools); or creating a desire for owning things that are rarely used and could easily be rented (e.g. holiday cottages, motorhomes, skis, gardening equipment).
- Are you using biological materials to produce a single product, with lots of the main resource then being wasted? For example, making orange juice creates waste, including the pips, the pulp and the peel – and yet all of these could be turned into valuable by-products for other industries.
- Are you designing things to be used just once, and then to be discarded or sent for recycling? Lots of packaging falls into this category, together with 'disposable' razor blades, nappies and personal protective equipment such as plastic gloves and aprons.

Planned obsolescence means planning regular releases of products with new design features, to encourage people to buy the latest version.

Emotional obsolescence often relates to trends in fashion and aesthetics, and means that certain designs, shapes, colours or materials are now seen as unfashionable and uncool, which again encourages people to replacethat product with a more on-trend version.

Industrial obsolescence happens when parts, services and resources are no longer available from the original equipment manufacturer (OEM), making it difficult or even impossible to keep the object in working condition.

How do these 'sell more' strategies undermine value from the customer's point of view?

While it seems attractive to grow revenue by encouraging people to buy the latest model, or to buy more than they need, or make things that can only be used once, these tactics don't necessarily build brand trust and loyalty. If the product doesn't meet people's expectations, particularly for quality, durability and value for money over the long term, that customer may choose another brand for future purchases. These questions might help you critique your offer from the customer's perspective:

- Do customers feel the product lasts as long as they expect it to, or are they disappointed?
- Are repairs straightforward, or expensive and difficult to arrange?
- Do customers feel that they waste things because your marketing has encouraged them to purchase unnecessary versions or extra quantities?
- When the customer no longer has a need for the product, or it is empty or no longer functional, what options do they have to avoid discarding or disposal, or to help them recover value from what they've purchased?
- Is your company seen as a trusted provider, prioritising customer needs? Or does the aftercare fail to live up to expectations?
- Is the customer's experience over the course of using the product likely to make them a fan of your organisation? Or will they be relating stories of what went wrong, and how they feel let down by the quality, durability or value for money?

What costs are these 'sell more' strategies adding to your business?

These may be direct costs (e.g. overproduction, unnecessary packaging) or indirect costs (e.g. high costs of customer services to deal with complaints, writing off unsold products, processing returns and trying to reduce the resulting waste, extra marketing or Research and Development to create new demand)? How might these strategies undermine your brand value?



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4. How do circular strategies create value for customers?

Let's return to those changing priorities, summarised in the research by Globescan and IKEA. We think these are deep-seated attitudes that apply both to how people want to live their personal lives, and how they think about business purchases.

First, **having fewer (yet better) things**. That could include products with multiple functions; products that can adapt to different circumstances; and products with minimal or reusable packaging. However, it's also important to avoid overcomplicating products in ways that might lead to more breakages, or making them so multifunctional that they appeal to very few customers (think a simple kitchen knife, compared to a Swiss Army knife).

Then, how can circular solutions improve **value for money and affordability**? Functionality, quality, how long something lasts, its ease of care and repair and even its resale value all feed into the customer's perception of value for money over the product's useful life, and ultimately, whether the customer is satisfied with the product. For those customers who want to spend less and yet still have access to high-quality products, pre-used, refurbished and remanufactured options are becoming more widely available.

Prioritising **convenience** might mean ease of access to the things that make life better, but without the burden of ownership or the hassle of finding somewhere to dispose of/recycle it at end of use. It might also mean easy ways to buy pre-used, refurbished and remanufactured products, knowing that they are from a trusted provider, and they will be as good as a new version. Convenience could also mean easy, flexible ways to rent, borrow or exchange things. Markets for subscription services are growing rapidly, for physical products as well as digital and other services. Lifestyle changes after the pandemic mean fewer people see car ownership as a priority, and mobility as a service (MaaS) offers a wide range of alternatives, including ride-hailing, ride-sharing and car-sharing, plus car, bike or scooter rental. Subscription or rental services might cover accessories for an already long-lasting product. For example, Stokke is a Norwegian manufacturer of children's furniture and accessories, including Tripp Trapp® adjustable, wooden baby highchairs. Stokke sells the basic chair, and offers its Tripp Trapp accessories as a rental bundle, including a wrap-around newborn support cushion and harness, a plastic clip-on meal tray, a safety rail and seating support for babies. These accessories can be swapped as the child grows⁴.

People **don't want to be wasteful**, and so need choices that help them keep things in use for longer, to use things 'on demand', and to get things back into the system when they've finished using them (rather than discarding things). That might mean products that can be resold or are easy to send back at the end of use. It might mean easy, flexible and convenient ways to subscribe to services or product refills (including concentrates to reduce water, logistics and packaging costs).

All of these choices help people feel they are being good citizens, contributing to a more sustainable society: caring for their things, and reducing waste and pollution, helping create a market for more ethical, healthy products and services.

5. Could you shift from selling ownership to 'usership'?

As we saw in the last section, people are getting more comfortable with the concept of 'usership' – renting, subscribing, borrowing or swapping things – using them 'on demand' rather than needing to own them. Subscription services (some of which are aimed at selling more) are growing in lots of sectors, driven by factors such as people's preference for convenient, flexible access to products and services; the stability of recurring revenue, predictable income streams and easier financial planning; and/or a more sustainable alternative that uses resources more efficiently⁵.

How might this work for your business? Could you provide rental, exchange or lending, perhaps in addition to traditional ownership models to satisfy different customer needs?

Might you look at developing services to help customers keep their tools, equipment and other goods in better working conditions, with those services offsetting the reduced revenue from selling fewer new units each year? Could you offer to sell consumables to help people maintain or care for the product, or perhaps sell service plans? Maybe there is an opportunity to provide refills as a subscription service, as we mentioned earlier?

If those services mean ownership stays with your business rather than transferring to the customer, you can then more easily recover the item at the end of the contract and return it to a usable state for another contract. In other words, you can invest a bit more in the original unit (cleaning, refurbishing etc.) and then create a much higher overall financial return. Some customers will prefer to own your products, while others will prefer to receive the functions and benefits of the product, without taking on the burden of ownership. Relatively new concepts include Cooling as a Service (the client pays for the temperatures it needs, and the provider is responsible for the equipment, consumables, energy and reliable performance) and Lighting as a Service (the client pays for the light levels it needs, and the provider is responsible for the light fixtures, bulbs, energy and reliable performance). If we think about examples like these, then we might want to understand who is best placed to provide the equipment, maintain it, and ensure reliable performance. Who has the knowledge and expertise? Who has the buying power? Who can respond more effectively, efficiently and rapidly if something goes wrong?

Is there an opportunity to create value by creating another useful life for the product? Could you sell the spare parts, or provide services to restore the performance of the product to 'as new' condition? Circular services present excellent opportunities for businesses to create value from products originally made by other firms. Companies like **Circular Computing** and **EGG Lighting** provide remanufacturing as a service, backed up by a British Standard Kitemark – even for products made by other brands.

6. Three core strategies – questions to spark ideas

Let's move on to think about questions for each of the three core strategic goals – **slow**, **intensify** and **cycle**.



Slow: use for longer

Keep materials in use for as long as possible, by designing for durability, disassembly, deconstruction, demounting, repairability and multi-use

Slow:

Longer product lifetimes mean fewer replacement products are needed each year, and this reduces the footprint of production and consumption.

Q: What could you do to support longer lifetimes for what you provide?

This starts with designing products that will last. Then, to support these longer lifetimes and help customers use things for longer, could you offer longer warranties, provide advice to help customers care for their products, and ensure there are easy ways to repair and perhaps to upgrade products? Could you provide services (or partner with other organisations) to help your customers to resell the product once they no longer need it?

Offering longer warranties helps develop brand loyalty. For clothing, companies like **Mud Jeans, Huit Demin Company** and **Patagonia** focus on high-quality products made with durable materials. They offer long, even lifetime, warranties backed up by repair services. In the United States, Patagonia provides resale services, and customers everywhere can choose to repair their own gear, supported by online 'fix it yourself' tutorials. People are prepared to pay a premium for products like these, knowing that when they've finished using them, they can recover value by being able to pass them on to another user. Vitsoe sells a small range of timeless, iconic furniture pieces, using modular design to make these more flexible and reduce the number of parts it makes and stocks. It actively supports its customers to treasure their high-quality furniture, and to help them reconfigure it as their needs evolve.

Numatic's Henry vacuum cleaners are made to last and to be easily repaired. Every one of the 75 parts that make up the latest model could be used to repair 'Number one', the 1981 original⁶.

We shouldn't forget food and perishable products – while it might be more difficult to help these last longer, developments like **Apeel**, a plant-based protective layer for fruits and vegetables. The extra 'peel' keeps moisture in and oxygen out, slowing down respiration, oxidation and water loss so the produce stays fresh for longer.



Intensify: use it more

Make it easy and more affordable to share, pay to use and swap underused objects. Maximise the use of each input with by-products and co-products

Intensify:

We can **intensify use** by helping our **products to be used more productively** – in other words, so they spend more time being used instead of sitting idle. You can increase productivity by offering convenient and affordable ways for customers to rent, pay-per-use, share or simply reuse those products. By increasing the intensity of use (i.e. the productivity) of each unit manufactured, it means fewer of these objects are required overall.

How well are your products utilised? Does the customer need to have 24/7 'on-demand' access to the product, or could they access it through services for rental and sharing? Could you create value for more customers through 'product as a service' models?

Q: How might you offer pay-to-use/rental, sharing, exchanging or subscription models for products that people don't need to own?

Consider implementing a rental or leasing system for your products, shifting from an ownership model to a 'pay-peruse' approach to create new revenue streams. This increases an item's productivity by enabling more people to use it, reducing material footprints and intensifying use.

For example, **Tulu** is an on-demand service enabling people to access things to help them cook, host, clean and do DIY. Tulu operates in residential buildings and student housing, with customers renting things by the hour. It curates the kinds of items residents are looking for, and installs a smart unit to display and stock the items, with a one-click app to manage access. Founded in 2018, it is already in 22 cities across three continents, servicing 70,000 households. **MyTurn** is a unique cloud-based software platform that combines the best and most essential features of asset tracking, rental, and product subscription services. It improves utilisation and helps businesses and communities to reduce costs by making it easy to find and track the usage of tools, equipment or products, so you can streamline what you really need, and maybe pool resources with other organisations. MyTurn is also an out-ofthe-box subscription service, meaning you could provide rental or lending to your customers – like a bespoke Library of Things.

Q: What resources are you buying in, that aren't fully utilised?

We mentioned the example of orange juice earlier, and the potential to create valuable by-products from resulting waste. The pips and the pulp can be used as natural thickeners in food processing, orange essential oils from the peel are valuable for cosmetics and healthcare, and a company is producing a silk-like textile from waste citrus peel. Waste coffee grounds can be used in beauty and cosmetic products, and even to create 3D-printed filaments. By creating valuable new products, your business becomes less reliant on its primary product and so more resilient and profitable.



Cycle: use it again

Cycle and reuse materials at their highest value, minimising the need for virgin material inputs and therefore also narrowing flows

Cycle:

To **cycle** products, components and materials more means firstly recovering them at the end of use (in a cost-effective way that doesn't reduce their quality), and then to find ways to revive them for reuse, by refilling, refurbishing and even remanufacturing them. Our least favoured option is recycling – we recover much less value and yet expend more energy (and emissions), expense and resources.

Q: What value is present in end-of-life products, and how could this be recovered?

Could you explore the possibility of a take-back and refill programme?

For example, **Marks and Spencer**'s 'Refill' range is a deposit-based system enabling refills and a container return scheme.

Q: How could you recover end-of-use products and components so they can be revived for another cycle of use?

Offering incentives for customers to return products that are no longer required, even if they are not in perfect condition or are faulty, can be an effective way to get back high-value items (e.g. mobile phones). If the products cannot be fully restored, you may be able to reuse or resell some of the usable components as spare parts.

Q: How could you improve the end-of-life recyclability of your products, ensuring that the materials are recyclable and that the infrastructure exists to support recycling?

Could these materials be reused in your own process? Otherwise, what could be of value as raw materials in other industrial processes? This can be particularly complicated with textiles but opportunities exist, for example, for wool. Can you look for opportunities to invest in viable, appropriate recycling technologies to capture materials needed for your products?

Q: How could you recycle end-of-use materials, creating secondary materials for the next batch of products?

Reducing dependence on virgin materials helps reduce supply chain risks for your business. A supply management plan mitigates risks by exploring alternative materials or suppliers, focusing on crucial components, and optimising supply chain links.

7. Sharing value: fair, just and inclusive at every stage



Shared value: fair, just and inclusive

Ensure that circular practice is beneficial in the long term for all involved, both up- and downstream of core activities, and across all stakeholders

As you can see in **Figure 1**, the **shared value** goal can apply to the entire value chain, and for some businesses, sharing value with multiple stakeholders is at the heart of the business strategy. Embedding shared value principles into your strategy can be transformational, helping bring together employees, supply chain partners and their workers by ensuring meaningful, healthy work that pays above the living wage, and fostering a culture that aims to leave a better future for people and our living planet.

The **shared value** goal aims to create value for all the stakeholders, ensuring that circular practice is beneficial in the long term for all involved, both up- and downstream of core activities. This might include policies to ensure fair pay, fair trade and fair taxes across your supply chain, and

Riversimple has created a Future Guardian Model for its governance processes, which is centred on representing and benefiting modern society through its product and service. The company has introduced six Custodians, each representing a vital aspect of modern life, including the Environment, Customers, Community, Staff, Investors and Commercial Partners. This governance structure is focused on balancing the interests of all stakeholders rather than prioritising shareholder value alone, creating a partnership model where no single entity has control, ensuring equitable representation and protection of all stakeholders' interests. By prioritising environmental, societal, and economic goals, Riversimple aims to demonstrate that profitability can be achieved through responsible business practices.

could go further, for example, by creating a worker cooperative or with employee ownership.

Faith in Nature collaborates with local initiatives and charitable organisations, supporting causes that promote environmental conservation, social justice and sustainable development. Through its support, Faith in Nature encourages its customers to become 'agents of positive change'.

Understanding your business and your supply chain's broader impact helps you to understand your social footprint. Develop an action plan that considers vulnerable groups within your supply chain, determining risks and opportunities for enhancing social value. For example, initiatives like **The Body Shop**'s Community **Fair Trade recycled plastic programme**, which empowers marginalised waste pickers in India with fair wages, stable income and improved working conditions in an often unstable and discriminatory sector. Boost employment by generating new jobs, and offer training and upskilling, such as through repair and remanufacturing activities.

Q: Are your business activities supporting good livelihoods, or undermining them? What impacts and opportunities are you creating locally, regionally, nationally and internationally? How might potential changes to your strategies and systems impact others (positively or negatively)?

For example, you could map up- and downstream relationships and social impact to see where value is being exchanged/overlooked, and understand social value risks and opportunities. Furthermore, as new circular jobs are created within your business and supply chain, you can ensure these are inclusive and fairly paid.

8. What other operational changes are needed?

These circular strategies are likely to be very different from the way the business operates today, and it may be that you decide to pilot the new strategy for one or several products, or to test it with one group of customers first. Pilots and iterations can help you avoid unforeseen consequences, and to better understand some of the knock-on effects of going circular.

Here we suggest a few questions that relate to your business infrastructure:

- Are there cashflow implications if you sell 'access' to products, perhaps renting them rather than selling them? Could you start by offering this for one product range, or into one section of the market, so you can gradually fund the reduced cashflow? Might some of your suppliers be open to similar approaches, reducing the size of your cash outflows?
- How might you create or improve 'circulation systems' to keep products, components and materials in the system? How can you help products come back in good condition?
- Are there opportunities to partner with specialists or even logistics providers, so you can tap into existing service teams, manage stocks of spares and so on? Some logistics providers have technicians who can respond rapidly to repair products and equipment, following scripts to diagnose and make the necessary adjustments or replace parts.

It's worth highlighting that all of these strategies can become more efficient and effective if products and material specifications make it easy for us to identify, inspect, disassemble, refurbish and so on.

• What are the implications of these strategic changes for your suppliers? How can you involve them, share ideas and find ways to make this work better for both parties?



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9. Boosting efficiency and effectiveness

The final two of our six goals – **narrow** and **regenerate** - can help your strategy be more effective, although these goals are more likely to be relevant when thinking about the design of products and production processes.

Narrowing involves using less resources to produce things: that might mean avoiding waste in the process, recovering unused production materials, or finding ways to reduce the specified quantity needed for each unit (for example, 'lightweighting' packaging).

The **regenerate** goal includes '**make clean**' by phasing out hazardous and toxic materials – like harmful 'forever

aims to 'make sustainable' by substituting undesirable materials with regenerative alternatives (renewable, reusable and non-toxic), ensuring resources are procured from more sustainable sources, including using recycled materials instead of virgin sources, using materials that are produced as a by-product, or ensuring biological materials are from regenerative agricultural systems. All materials and process inputs should be safe for humans and life on Earth, at every stage of the process, including after the end of use.

chemicals' used in plastic packaging. Regenerating also

10. Summary

In this guide, we have explored how to integrate circular strategies into business models by asking questions to help you think differently. These challenge the traditional business model and can help you create more value for your business and customers while ensuring that circular practice is beneficial in the long term for all involved, both upstream and downstream of the business' core activities. Questioning whether your existing strategy undermines sustainability can reveal how unsustainable approaches also undermine value from a customer's point of view, and what these costs could be to your business. Questioning your existing strategy can help the transition to a circular solution, reduce your reliance on resources, reduce emissions and pollution, and create more value for all your stakeholders. This guide should be read in conjunction with IEMA's publication *How to integrate circular strategies into your business model.*

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Further information

The use of this guide will be reviewed, and future iterations published if, and when, required.

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We work to influence public policy on environment and sustainability matters.

We do this by drawing on the insights and experience of our members to ensure that what happens in practice influences the development of government policy, legislation, regulations and standards.

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