

Supporting Handout: Policy and Sustainability Issues in Procurement

Innovation and Sustainability Seminar — summary of presentation by Paul Chivers, GHC

This handout summarises the key messages from the presentation on national policy, procurement practice and sustainability, with particular focus on PPE, reusable products, net zero requirements and practical actions for health and care organisations.

Summary

The presentation highlighted a continuing gap between national policy commitments on sustainability and the practical reality of procurement activity in health and care. Although net zero considerations are now intended to be embedded in public procurement, recent and forthcoming contracts still appear to include significant volumes of single-use products. The speaker used examples from PPE and related consumables to argue that organisations should be more assertive in seeking reusable, reprocessible and lower-carbon alternatives, particularly where these already exist and can be validated through appropriate testing and certification.

A central theme was that the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, including wasted expenditure, fragile overseas supply chains and the prioritisation of single-use PPE, have not yet been fully reflected in subsequent procurement decisions. The presentation called for stronger challenge from buyers, sustainability leads, clinical teams and suppliers to ensure that future purchasing decisions align with resilience, value, inclusivity and environmental responsibility.

Context and Policy Background

The presentation referred to the recent publication of the COVID Inquiry Module 5 report on procurement activity during the pandemic. The headline message was that the pandemic exposed major weaknesses in procurement, stockpiling and product selection, including substantial waste and a heavy reliance on imported, single-use products. Existing opportunities for reusable and re-processible items were not fully taken up, despite offers to support their introduction during the pandemic period. The speaker also noted that public procurement policy has increasingly emphasised net zero and social value. From 2024, net zero considerations were expected to be embedded in new procurement activity. However, the examples discussed suggested that the practical translation of this ambition into product specifications remains

inconsistent, especially where procurement frameworks continue to specify or favour single-use items.

Salient Points from the Presentation

- COVID-19 procurement exposed significant weaknesses in preparedness, stockpile design, domestic manufacturing capability and product selection.
- Reusable and reprocessable PPE options were available but were not consistently adopted, with single-use products prioritised instead.
- Future stockpiles should better reflect the size, shape and needs of the health and social care workforce, including fit, inclusivity and practical usability.
- Domestic or near-shore manufacturing was presented as an important resilience measure, reducing dependence on long-distance supply and high-carbon freight routes.
- Current and forthcoming procurement contracts appear to include large volumes of single-use PPE and consumables, despite policy ambitions around net zero and value-based procurement.
- Reusable products discussed included transparent masks, reusable theatre caps, reusable eye protection, reusable respirators, reusable washbowls and reusable aprons.
- Transparent products can support inclusivity by improving communication for people who rely on lip-reading or facial visibility.
- Clinical usability matters: poor-quality single-use PPE can affect fit, vision, comfort, confidence and the ability of staff to work safely.

Key Requirements and Considerations

The presentation identified several requirements that should be considered when developing procurement approaches for PPE and associated products. These requirements are not limited to environmental performance; they also include safety, usability, inclusivity, resilience and whole-life value.

- **Evidence and certification:** reusable alternatives should be supported by appropriate validation, testing and certification so that buyers and clinical teams can have confidence in their performance.
- **Whole-life value:** procurement decisions should assess total cost and value across the life of the product, not simply the purchase price of a single-use item.
- **Carbon impact:** specifications should take account of production, transport, use, disposal and reprocessing impacts.
- **Fit and accessibility:** PPE must be suitable for a diverse workforce and should not exclude staff who cannot fit-test to standard single-use respirators.
- **Waste reduction:** product specifications should challenge single-use assumptions where reusable or re-processable options are practical.
- **Supply resilience:** procurement should support domestic, near-shore or diversified supply where this improves resilience and reduces dependency on long-distance freight.

Issues Identified

The speaker raised concern that some procurement categories continue to be framed as single-use by default, which can prevent consideration of reusable alternatives even where they are commercially available. Examples included FFP3 respirators, gowns, visors, eye protection, body wipes, bowls and plastic aprons. This creates a risk that procurement activity locks organisations into avoidable waste, recurring expenditure and higher carbon impact for many years.

There was also a challenge to the use of the term “value-based procurement” where the product being procured remains single-use. The speaker argued that value should include durability, usability, reprocessing potential, staff experience, patient communication, resilience and environmental impact, rather than focusing narrowly on unit price or existing supply-chain categories.

Prospective Actions

- Review forthcoming procurement opportunities and challenge specifications that unnecessarily restrict products to single-use options.
- Ask suppliers and framework providers to make reusable, re-processable and lower-carbon alternatives available where suitable.
- Buy direct from suppliers or manufacturers where frameworks do not provide appropriate sustainable options, ensuring that products are properly validated and certified.
- Gather evidence from clinical teams on fit, comfort, clarity of vision, communication needs and usability to inform procurement decisions.
- Push for wider testing and adoption of reusable respirators, transparent masks, reusable eye protection and other alternatives where they meet clinical requirements.
- Escalate concerns to relevant procurement, sustainability and policy contacts where national or regional contracts appear misaligned with net zero commitments.
- Identify suppliers and manufacturers who could demonstrate reusable or sustainable products at future innovation events.
- Attend the planned October event in Leeds to review products, meet suppliers and manufacturers, and see practical demonstrations.

Key Takeaways

- Policy ambition alone is not enough; procurement specifications must actively enable sustainable alternatives.
- Single-use products can create unnecessary cost, waste and carbon impact when reusable options are available and clinically appropriate.
- Reusable PPE and consumables should be assessed on safety, certification, usability, inclusivity and whole-life value.
- Fit, communication and workforce diversity are central to PPE effectiveness and should be considered alongside infection prevention requirements.
- Local action matters: organisations can challenge specifications, engage suppliers, request evidence and build demand for reusable products.
- The lessons from pandemic procurement should inform future stockpiles, domestic manufacturing strategy and product selection.

Suggested Follow-up Questions

- Which current procurement categories in our organisation are still specified as single-use by default?
- Where do reusable alternatives already exist, and what evidence is needed to support adoption?
- How are carbon impact, waste reduction and whole-life value currently weighted in procurement decisions?
- Are staff fit, comfort and communication needs being captured systematically when PPE products are selected?
- Which suppliers or manufacturers should be invited to demonstrate sustainable alternatives at upcoming events?