Deptford X Environmental Sustainability Toolkit for Artists

*Touching the Earth with Care

rev.1 - 2025

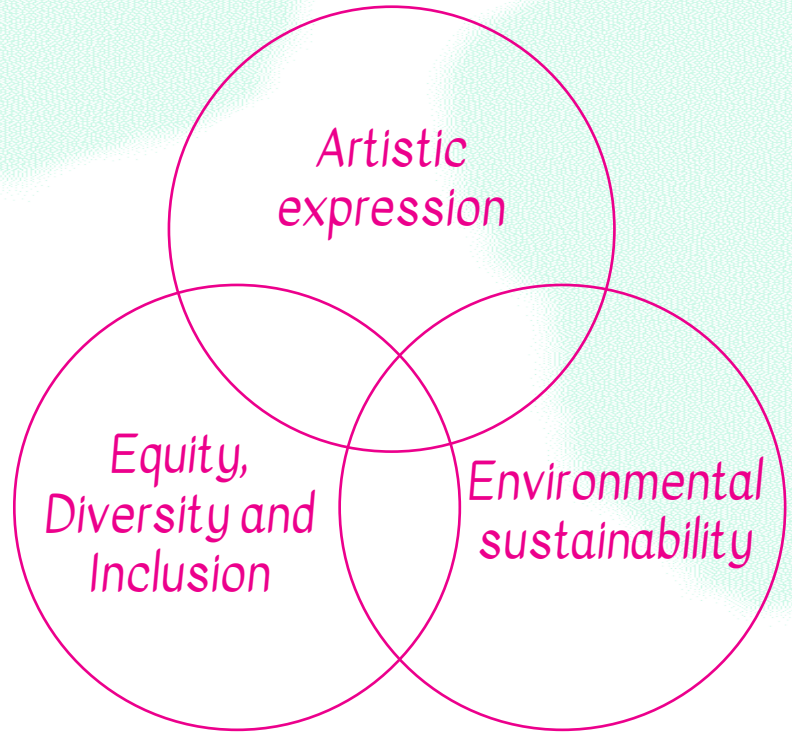
* Thinking Through Choices

#1 Purpose

This toolkit offers practical guidance for Deptford X artists and the wider creative community to grow an environmentally sustainable practice.

It serves as a tool for **thinking**, **reflecting**, and **acting**, grounded in **care, rather than metrics**.

At Deptford X we aim to hold in balance:



This is not about perfection.

It is about **awareness**, **attention**, and **deliberate action**.

We are not asking you to calculate your carbon footprint.

We are asking:

What will your work leave behind—and why?

#2
The artist's role in the climate crisis...

In this time of climate emergency, artists can act as **witnesses**, **interpreters**, or **provocateurs**.

This toolkit invites you to consider:

What does it mean to make art on a changing planet?

What does care for the environment look like in your process?

How might your practice be part of the solution—not just a response?

Every artist's practice is different and "sustainability" can take many forms.

...We invite you to start with a reflection

In the context of your own practice, you might begin by responding to these questions:

Where am I touching the earth with my art practice and work?

How am I touching the earth?

What is the legacy I am leaving behind? Can it be made kinder?

There are no right or wrong answers.

Write, **draw**, **record**, or **reflect** in whatever medium suits you...

Space for reflection

Where am I touching the earth with my art practice and work?

How am I touching the earth?

Can it be made kinder?

What is the legacy I am leaving behind?

#3
Focus areas for sustainable artistic production

This toolkit focuses on three practical themes:

* **Materials and media**
* **Transport and travel**
* **Energy and digital life**

These are areas where meaningful, achievable changes can happen—without compromising your artistic vision.

Materials and media

If nature was your collaborator, their question might be:

Is it necessary?

Some considerations:

Conceptual Significance
What does the material contribute to your artwork's meaning?

Sourcing
Where do your materials come from?
Are they locally produced?

Production
How are they made, and what resources are consumed?

End-of-Life
Can materials be gifted, reused, recycled, composted?
How does the afterlife of your materials relate to the duration of the event or exhibition?

A practical example:

You might choose steel from Germany for a sculpture that comments on deindustrialisation. This may not be the most environmentally friendly option, but if it's core to your conceptual narrative, that's valid.

Some recommendations:

Utilise our **Material Decision Tree** (on page 10).

Prioritise **bio-based**, **recycled**, or **locally-sourced** materials.

Consider the **lifespan** of materials in relation to your artwork's intent.

Consider the **impact of "throwaway"** aspects of your exhibition or event, such as vinyl wall text or temporary constructions.

Ideas for sustainable action:

Use **locally-sourced** or second-hand materials.

Choose **natural, non-toxic, biodegradable** or **recycled** media.

Clean brushes using **less water** or natural cleaning agents.

Consider work and display solutions that are **modular, dismantlable,** or **reusable**.

Reuse stretchers, supports, plinths, and packaging.

We have started an open document to collate local networks and resources:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1T4pJECFGQTJmhBtcMr1mSSzPsJZaFnUIT71F8eyPTbc/edit?gid=0#gid=0

Please add useful links to this shared document

Material Decision Tree for Artists

A practical tool to guide sustainable material choices in your artistic process.

Use this tree when selecting any material—whether for a sculpture, costume, installation, publication, or set design.

Let intention guide you, not perfection

START HERE

Is the material essential to your artistic concept?

- No → Replace, reduce or remove it.
- Not sure → Re-evaluate. Could a different material express the same idea with lower impact?
- Yes → Is the material already available to you (e.g., reused, donated, salvaged)?
  - Yes → Use it! Celebrate its reuse in your practice.
  - No → CONTINUE HERE

Is there a lower impact version of this material (e.g., FSC-certified, recycled, biodegradable, low-VOC)?

- Yes → Use the lower impact option.
- No → Can this material be reused, recycled, or composted after use (e.g., by designing for disassembly or re-purposing)?
  - Yes → Proceed with a clear reuse/disposal plan
  - No → Does this material involve high environmental or ethical costs?
    - HIGH
      e.g., PVC/Vinyl, MDF with formaldehyde, single-use steel, composite plastic, virgin acrylic
      → Reconsider. Unless it is integral to your artistic vision, can this material be replaced or reduced?
    - MEDIUM
      e.g., virgin timber (non-FSC), single-use aluminium, low-recycled-content perspex
      → Use sparingly, with clear rationale and plans for future use
    - LOW
      e.g., FSC-certified timber, organic/recycled textiles, reused perspex/acrylic, paper/card (post-consumer FSC), unfired clay, non-VOC paints
      → Proceed! Celebrate the material choices you have made.

If you found this useful, try making your own Decision Tree for other aspects of your practice. Share it with us for future iterations of this toolkit!

Transport and travel

Transport and travel can be the largest contributor to the carbon footprint of a project.

Where are you making your art?

Where is it going and how is it getting there?

Some considerations:

Necessity

Is transport essential for your project?
Can you make your work where it is being exhibited?
Is the carbon cost of an imported object truly justified?

Alternatives

Can meetings or collaborations occur virtually?

Methods

Choose public transport, cycling, or walking when possible.

Consolidation

Combine trips or shipments to reduce frequency. Can materials and people travel together?

Weight

How much does your artwork weigh?
Less weight means less impact in transport.

Some recommendations:

Consider where you are **located**, where your artwork will be exhibited and where you are making it.

Planning early allows for slower, lower-impact transport options.

Build **modular** and **lightweight** work for easier reuse and transport.

Could your installation be **reproduced** at each site rather than shipped?

Ideas for sustainable action:

Share transportation with other artists.

Use public or **low-emission transport** options.

Create work that can **travel light** (modular, collapsible).

Energy use and digital life

While the energy use of materials and transport are easy to grasp and account for, the impact of our digital footprint is less visible, yet in an ever more digitalised world it is already substantial – and quickly expanding.

Energy use in our art practice

The UK could reduce its total energy demand by up to 52% by 2050 compared to 2020 levels, without compromising citizens' quality of life. In this context, considering energy use not as a given but as a flexible resource that we can have control over is key.

Reducing energy demand is a matter of reflection in the context of our practice.

Some considerations:

What are your most **energy-intensive tools** (e.g. kilns, lighting, computers)? How are you using them? Are you switching them off?

Prioritise **energy-efficient** appliances, lighting, and even digital design. For example, dark screen settings that use less blue light – better for our health and the environment.

Consider the **embodied carbon** of tools, appliances and so on; it is almost always more sustainable to keep using what you have than throwing it out and replacing it before its end of life – even if the new device has lower energy consumption.

Where possible, switch to a **renewable energy** supplier.

A practical example:

PLASTIC HEART: A DIY Fieldguide for Reducing the Environmental Impact of Art Exhibitions is a rich resource compiled by the Synthetic Collective with a focus on plastic pollution. Their PDF document has been intentionally designed to limit energy use – including image dither, single colour, and file compression.

The result is **a beautiful document that embodies the resourceful and climate-conscious spirit** of the collective's research:

https://syntheticcollective.org/fieldguide/

Some recommendations:

Be intentional about your use of AI tools and cloud storage services where carbon-intensity is significant, although not always immediately obvious.

Consider opportunities to **pool resources** by sharing tools within your networks and local communities.

Explore creative opportunities for sustainable digital design.

Ideas for sustainable action:

Minimise use of energy-intensive tools; power down when not in use.

Lobby in studios for a renewable tariff and make this choice for yourself where you can.

Digital communication

Emails, attachments, video calls—they all have carbon footprints. Our online presence, communication, and storage decisions carry hidden environmental impacts.

Some considerations:

Sending emails over texting. Emailing has a much higher carbon footprint than messaging (e.g. WhatsApp). Estimates vary, but to give you an idea; Email consumes between 4 and 50 grams of CO2 when it is sent. While a simple WhatsApp message is as little as 0.02 grams of CO2. Signal has an even smaller footprint.

Writing messages, the screen time, on your phone or your computer has the biggest impact. Using services like Signal who do not mine and process your data are more sustainable when taking this aspect into account.

Some recommendations:

Ensure that the documents you send by mail are optimized. There are free online tools that **reduce the size** of your PDFs or images in seconds, with practically zero impact on their quality.

Get into the habit of **deleting files and messages that do not need to be stored** – especially duplicates. A good practice to make it less of an ordeal is to sit down once a week and spend 5-10 minutes deleting those emails, promotions and old or duplicate files that are no longer important.

Depending on the degree of trust, **a WhatsApp or a message will probably be better than sending an email.**

Unsubscribe from newsletters that no longer interest you, saving the energy of sending and storing them.

Ideas for sustainable action:

Compress files before emailing.

Delete old messages and emails regularly

Switch to lower-impact messaging apps (e.g. Signal)

Be intentional about what you send and receive: avoid unnecessary emails, unsubscribe from newsletters you no longer read, and use AI tools strategically.

*** All our small decisions add up**

#4
Curatorial decisions and carbon footprints

As you might be both making your art as well as installing it, here some points for consideration.

Drawing from the **Design Museum's Waste Age exhibition audit** we know:

Just one installation flown from Ghana added 5 tonnes of carbon—almost 20% of the total impact; **location and transport is key**.

30% of emissions came from the exhibition build; **even the screws mattered**.

Using **renewable electricity reduced the overall impact by 85%.**

In this context, we can ask ourselves:

Is this object, component, or material essential to the artistic or curatorial narrative?

Can I represent it another way?

Can it be made on-site?

#5
Community, iteration and openness

Sustainability is a process, not a finish line. This toolkit is not a one-off checklist; it is a living, evolving resource—open to feedback, sharing, and change. **We invite you to add to, challenge, and re-shape this document.**

We encourage collective learning – taking responsibility not only as individuals but also as institutions in the context of wider networks and communities. **Please share with us:**

Hacks and local suppliers or networks.

Failures, successes, and what you learned in the process.

Reflections on care, justice, and repair.

Ideas for the resources and support you need to develop your practice in more sustainable ways.

Your creative responses and reflections (document, record, scan in, photograph or film).

✱ Contact us at *admin@deptfordx.org*

#6 References and resources

Biosphere Sustainable. (2023). Digital carbon footprint: what is involved in sending an email?, https://www.biospheresustainable.com/en/blog/65/digital-carbon-footprint-what-is-involved-in-sending-an-email

Design Museum. (2024). *Exhibition Design for Our Time: A Guide to Reducing the Environmental Impact of Exhibitions.* [First version: March 2023; Updated: October 2024]

PLASTIC HEART: A DIY Fieldguide for Reducing the Environmental Impact of Art Exhibitions. https://syntheticcollective.org/fieldguide/

Shotwell, A. (2021). *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times.*

Walkley, S. (2022). The Carbon Cost of an Email: Update! https://carbonliteracy.com/the-carbon-cost-of-an-email/

Energy Demand Research Centre. https://www.edrc.ac.uk/

Add your own here:

*** Thank you for being part of this process!**

#7 Acknowledgements

Deptford X Environmental Sustainability Toolkit rev. 1 (2025) was created and designed by Anna Bunting-Branch and Nora Wuttke Shingadia.

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