ISOQAR

Guide to the requirements of

ISO 20121

2024

Event Sustainability Management Systems

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The purpose of this guide

The aims of this guidance document is to familiarise users with the concept of event sustainability and the requirements outlined within the ISO 20121: 2024 standard for event sustainability management systems.

An overview of the ISO 20121:2024 standard

ISO 20121 is the internationally recognised management system standard for event sustainability. It provides organisations with a framework to integrate environmental, social, and economic sustainability into the planning, delivery, and legacy phases of events of all sizes. ISO 20121: 2024 is very similar in structure and content to many other Annex SL standards, following the same Clause 4-10 structure found in standards such as ISO9001 and ISO14001 and is based on the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) model. The clauses are focused on the implementation of an effective Event Sustainability Management System and there are notable differences and some additional clauses to be aware of that are not found in similar standards.

Why is ISO 20121 Certification important?

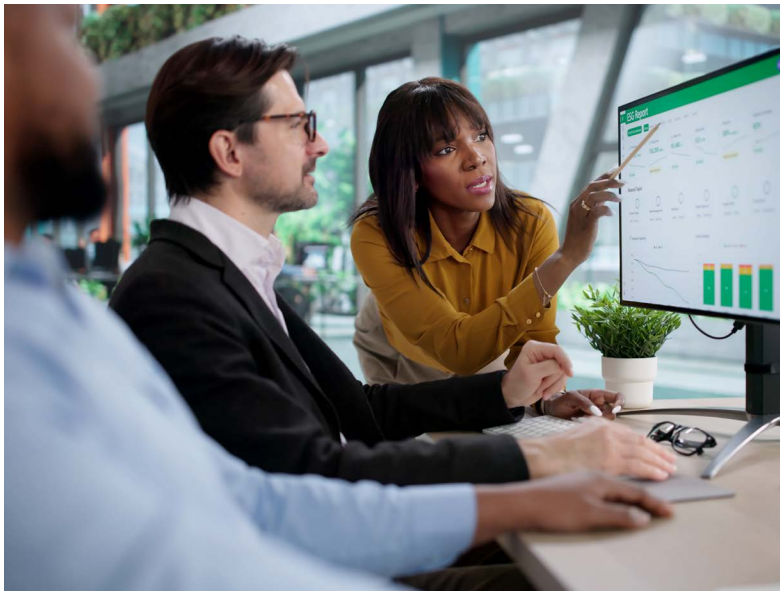
In an increasingly sustainability-focused marketplace, organisations are under growing pressure from clients, regulators, sponsors, investors, and the public to demonstrate that their events are being delivered responsibly. ISO 20121:2024 provides a proven, internationally recognised framework that enables organisations to move beyond ad-hoc sustainability initiatives and embed sustainable practices into the way events are planned, managed, and delivered.

Adopting ISO 20121 helps organisations reduce waste, improve resource efficiency, and identify opportunities to lower operational costs while maintaining high-quality event delivery. It provides a structured approach to managing sustainability risks, protecting reputation, and ensuring that environmental, social, and economic impacts are considered throughout the event lifecycle.

Beyond operational improvements, ISO 20121 can be a powerful commercial differentiator. Many clients and procurement bodies increasingly expect evidence of robust sustainability management when selecting suppliers and event partners. Certification demonstrates that sustainability is not simply a stated ambition but is supported by documented processes, measurable objectives, and continual improvement.

For organisations seeking to demonstrate leadership, certification by a UKAS-accredited certification body provides credible third-party assurance that the management system conforms to internationally recognised best practice. This independent assurance can enhance trust, support business growth, strengthen tender submissions, and provide a competitive advantage in an increasingly sustainability-conscious events industry.

Ultimately, ISO 20121 is not just about achieving certification, it's about building a more resilient, efficient, and future-focused organisation that can deliver successful events while creating lasting environmental, social, and economic value.



How will ISO 20121 benefit your organisation?

Improved sustainability performance

Provides a structured framework to identify, monitor, and reduce the environmental, social, and economic impacts of events, supporting continual improvement over time.

Enhanced reputation and brand value

Demonstrates a clear commitment to sustainable event management, helping to strengthen organisational credibility and public trust among clients, sponsors, attendees, and other stakeholders.

Increased stakeholder confidence

Encourages transparency, accountability, and engagement with stakeholders, ensuring that sustainability objectives and expectations are effectively addressed.

Better risk management

Helps organisations identify and manage sustainability-related risks and opportunities, including regulatory, environmental, social, and reputational considerations.

Operational efficiency and cost savings

Promotes more efficient use of resources such as energy, water, materials, and waste management processes, which can lead to reduced operational costs.

Competitive advantage in procurement and tendering

Demonstrates alignment with recognised international best practice, which can strengthen bids for contracts where sustainability credentials are a key evaluation criteria.

Compliance and governance support

Assists organisations in meeting applicable legal, regulatory, and stakeholder requirements while embedding sustainability into governance and decision making processes.

Independent assurance through certification

Certification by a UKAS-accredited certification body provides independent third-party assurance that the event management system conforms to iso 20121:2024, enhancing confidence among customers, regulators, investors, and other interested parties.

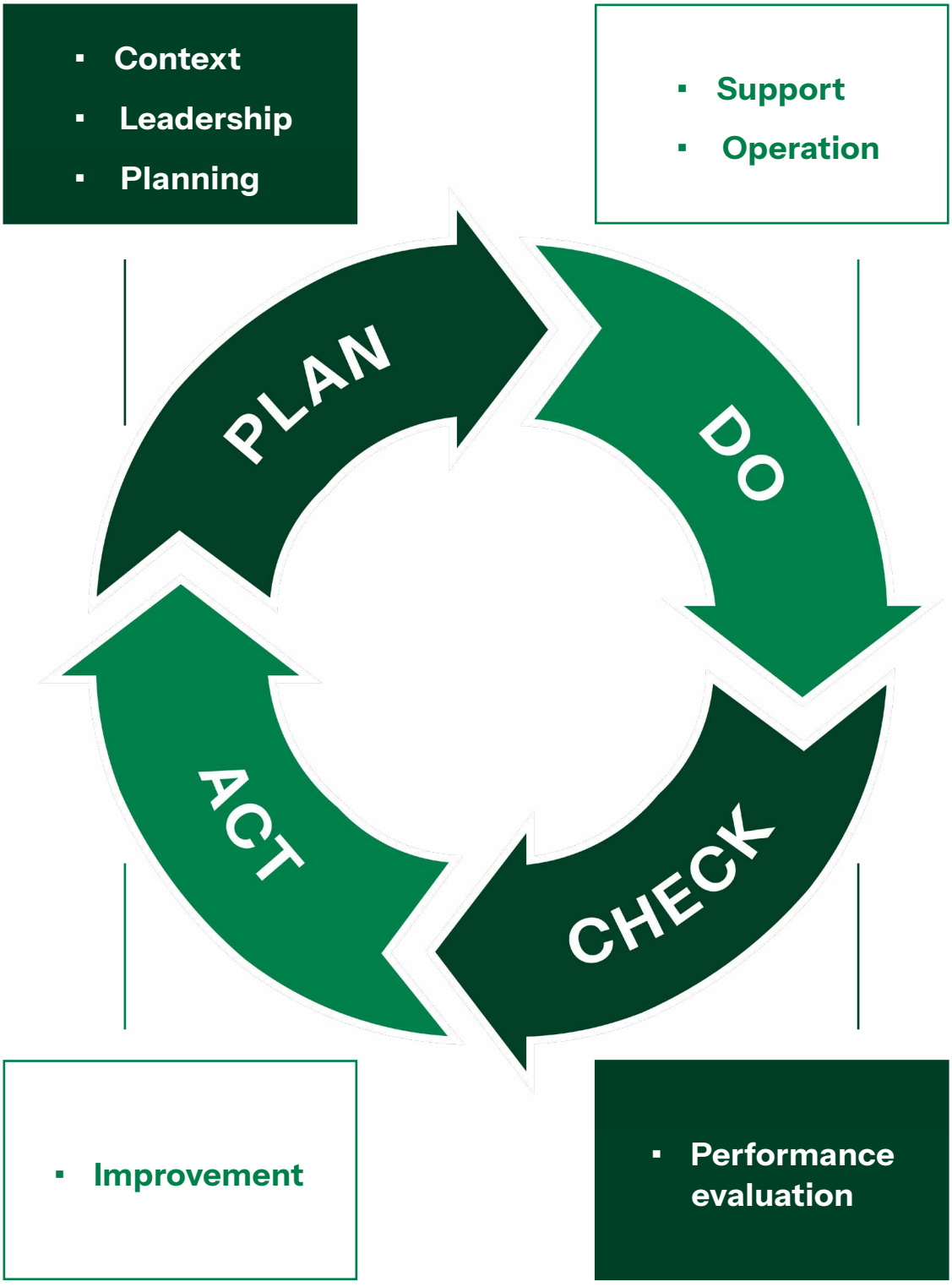
Drive more sustainable, efficient, and resilient events while strengthening stakeholder confidence through internationally recognised best practice.



Structure of the ISO 20121 standard

STAGE IN THE PROCESS	CLAUSE
Introductions and requirements of the standard	1 Scope 2 Normative References 3 Terms and definitions
Context of the organisation	**Clause 4 – Context of the organisation** - The organisation and its context - The needs and expectations of interest parties - Scope of the event sustainability management system - Event sustainability management system - Sustainable development principles and mission statement
Leadership	**Clause 5 – Leadership** - Leadership and commitment - Policy - Roles, responsibilities and authorities
Planning	**Clause 6 – Planning** - Actions to address risks and opportunities - Event sustainability objectives and planning to achieve them - Planning of changes
Support	**Clause 7 – Support** - Resources - Training and competency - Awareness - Communication - Documented information
Operation	**Clause 6 – Planning** - Actions to address risks and opportunities - Event sustainability objectives and planning to achieve them - Planning of changes
Performance Evaluation	**Clause 9 – Performance Evaluation** - Monitoring and measurement - Internal audits - Management review
Improvement	**Clause 10 – Improvement** - Nonconformance and corrective actions - Continual improvement

High level structure



Requirements of the standard
Clauses 1 to 3

Clause 1 - Scope

The first clause simply outlines the purpose of ISO 20121 and what it can enable organisations to do – establish, implement, maintain and improve an event sustainability management system.

Clause 2 - Normative references

In ISO standards, this clause usually lists any additional documents referred to that form part of the standard itself. There are none for ISO 20121: 2024.

Clause 3 - Terms and definitions

Here, the words and phrases used throughout the standard are identified, including a brief explanation of each, there are 46 in total.

Examples:

3.3 – Sustainable development

'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'

3.8 – Event management cycle

'stages and activities of an event (including products and services involved), from research, conception and planning through to implementation, review and post-event activities'.

Gain a clear understanding of ISO 20121's structure, key concepts, and requirements for sustainable event management.



Clause 4
Context of the organisation

Clause 4 sets out the basis for the Event Sustainability Management System (ESMS), introducing context of the organisation, interested parties, scope, processes and sustainable development principles

4.1 - The organisation and its context

This requires you to step back and look at your organisation as a whole in the context of sustainable event management, reviewing what internal and external issues have the potential to impact the organisations ability to deliver events sustainably. Many organisations choose to do this through conducting SWOT and PESTLE analyses.

SWOT Analysis

In trying to understand the context of your organisation, you should consider the internal and external issues that impact upon your organisation and your ESMS. These can be categorised as Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Simply use these words as headings and populate the lists beneath them.

PESTLE Analysis

When developing an ESMS. This exercise involves identifying the Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental issues that impact upon your organisation. You can do all of this by brainstorming with your colleagues across all departments and through interviews, questionnaires, surveys and even independent research involving all interested parties (see 4.2).

The general idea is that you need to consider how your organisation fits in with the world at large and how various factors have the ability to impact the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the events you run, throughout all key stages of the event management cycle.

Note – at this stage, you aren't coming up with solutions to the challenges – that comes later.

4.2 - The needs and expectations of interest parties

This clause requires the organisation to determine the interested parties relevant to the ESMS, their needs and expectations and which of these requirements will be addresses through the ESMS. Interested parties throughout the value chain and society could include, but is not limited to: Event owners, Event organisers, Partners/ Sponsors, Workforce, Suppliers, Participants, Attendees, Regulatory bodies, Community and other organisations. You may find Table A.1 within Appendix A of the ISO 20121 very useful for this exercise.

Establish a strong foundation for sustainable event management by understanding your organisation's context, stakeholders, and sustainability priorities.

4.3 - Scope of the event sustainability management system

This clause requires the organisation to determine and document the scope of the ESMS, which should give consideration to previous exercises involving internal and external issues identified, relevant interested parties and the boundaries and applicability of the ESMS. The scope should be documented as a representative statement of the organisations business processes and operations included within the boundary of the ESMS. The scope of the ESMS will determine the ongoing audit agenda conducted by our auditors relevant to your business activities.

4.4 - Event sustainability management system

From the above exercises, you can then begin to develop your Event Sustainability Management System (ESMS). This clause simply states that you need to develop one, based on what you've learned from the steps above, and that you need to continually improve it. The rest of this guide will deal with how that's achieved.

4.5 - Sustainable development principles and mission statement

This clause requires the organisation to integrate the principles of sustainable development (stewardship, inclusion, integrity and transparency) into an overall mission statement. The organisations statement should document the purpose, mission, social-environmental-economic benefits, risks and values with respect to its activities, products and services that relate specifically to events. The principles, mission statement and values shall provide a framework for setting organisational policy, objective, targets and operational plans.

Build a robust Event Sustainability Management System that embeds sustainable development principles into your organisation's strategy, decision making, and event delivery.



Clause 5
Leadership

Clause 5 is about top management taking ownership for the ESMS, demonstrating awareness and providing adequate resources to ensure the systems effectiveness

5.1 - Leadership and commitment

Auditors will usually conduct a senior leadership interview with a member of top management to review their engagement and leadership responsibilities for the ESMS. Top management and/or governing bodies (when applicable) need to be able to demonstrate leadership and commitment with respect to the event sustainability management system through: establishing policies and objectives compatible with the strategic direction, integrating the ESMS requirements with the organisations processes, ensuring resources are made available, communicating the importance of the ESMS, supporting those directly responsible and promoting continual improvement.

5.2 – Policy

Top management are required to establish and document a Sustainable Development Policy that is appropriate to the business, sets out sustainable development objectives for the ESMS, commits to meeting standard requirements, commits to monitoring and reporting performance and considers the needs of interested parties.

Similar to other ISO standards the policy is expected to be made available as documented information and communicated to internal and external stakeholders, with a regular review and sign off process by a member of senior leadership.

5.3 - Roles, responsibilities and authorities

Whilst top management takes ultimate responsibility for the ESMS, they also need to identify and assign other employee's roles, responsibilities and authorities. In a smaller organisation, it may be that top management takes on these roles, but in larger organisations it's more likely that other staff take responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the ESMS. Organisations typically choose to document all relevant roles to the event sustainability management system, including their respective responsibilities. Auditors may question staff to ensure awareness of their responsibilities in supporting effectiveness of the ESMS.



Clause 6
Planning

Clause 6 is about risk based planning, setting clear objectives, taking action and planning for changes

6.1.1 – Actions to address risks and opportunities

Similar to other Annex SL standards, this clause requires the organisation to consider issues and requirements identified in clause 4.1 and 4.2 to determine the risks and opportunities that need to be addressed to give assurance in the ESMS to achieve intended results, reduce undesired effects and promote continual improvement. Many organisations choose to develop risk registers to demonstrate ongoing consideration of sustainable development issues and effective implementation of controls and measures to mitigate risks and enhance opportunities relevant to the ESMS.

6.1.2 – Issue identification and evaluation

The organisation is required to establish a process to identify its sustainable development issues and to evaluate their significance associated with its event-related activities, products and services, within the defined scope of the event sustainability management system. Any outputs such as risk registers should specifically give consideration to environmental, social and economic issues at a minimum. Consideration of risks and actions to address these should be an open process requiring engagement with interested parties within the value chain and relevant to the ESMS.

6.1.3 – Legal and other requirements

Legal and other requirements should also be considered, periodically reviewed and revised, considering current and emerging legal and other requirements. The organisation should implement controls around relevant laws, or where not present, strive for international norms and best practice. Many organisations choose to establish legal registers to show ongoing access and awareness to key legislation and implementation of compliance controls for relevant regulatory and other requirements.

6.2 - Event sustainability objectives and planning to achieve them

Similar to other Annex SL standards, Clause 6.2 requires objectives to be established for the ESMS, including how these will be set, what needs to be included and planning how to achieve them. As you may be familiar with other Annex SL standards, many organisations benefit from considering setting of objectives using SMART-objective methods that align closely with standard requirements. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound.

6.3 – Planning for change

When the need for changes to the ESMS arise, thought should be given towards, the need for change, providing appropriate resources and responsibilities and reviewing the impacts of any changes so that these changes can be implemented in a controlled manner.

Develop a structured approach to managing sustainability issues, legal requirements, objectives, and organisational change.

Clause 7
Support

Clause 7 is about management demonstrating that adequate support has been provided for the ESMS in terms of resources, training, infrastructure, equipment and awareness



7.1 – Resources

During the audit process, top management should be able to explain and demonstrate evidence for how resources such as: Infrastructure, equipment, technology, personnel, training and other support functions are provided to adequately support and improve the ESMS.

7.2 - Training and competency

Anyone involved in doing work that affects your event sustainability performance must be competent enough to help you achieve your sustainable development objectives. You therefore need to firstly establish what level of competence is required so that you can recruit or train staff accordingly. You may want to perform a training needs analysis and develop a skills matrix to identify gaps. Once the gaps have been identified, you must address them. You should keep documented records of all this, possibly in personnel files. If you outsource work, the same requirements for competence apply to the contractors. Auditors will review competence criteria set out by the organisation for relevant ESMS roles and review competency records available such as training plans, certificates and records which should be readily available throughout the audit.

7.3 – Awareness

Individuals throughout the organisation should be aware of the ESMS policy, sustainable development policy, their roles and responsibilities in supporting the effectiveness of the ESMS, benefits of the ESMS and implications of not conforming with requirements. Individuals may be questioned by the auditor to ensure they are aware of the event sustainability management system, policies and objectives and their relevant responsibilities.

7.4 – Communication

The organisation must determine what to communicate with regard to the ESMS (internal and external parties) e.g. what, to whom, how and when.

Communications shall include the following:

- The organisations governing sustainable development principles
- A statement of the organisations purpose, mission and values
- Issues and objectives
- Guidance for best practice and achieving objectives
- Relevance to interested parties
- Performance and progress
- Feedback from interested parties

To communicate responsibly, the organisation shall ensure that no communications mislead the public on the real environmental, quality and social impact of a product or service or on the reality of the organisations sustainable development approach.

Auditors will review relevant internal and external communications issued by the business including their contents, frequency, audience, relevance, reporting accuracy and ethics in relation to sustainable development.

7.5 - Documented information

The organisation is required to establish documented information relevant to the ESMS requirements, with the extent of documented information proportionate to the size and complexity of business activities. When creating and updating documented information the organisation shall ensure appropriate identification, description, formatting, review and approval. The organisation should establish an effective document control process for creating, protecting, updating, distributing, storing, preserving, retaining and disposing of controlled documents relevant to the ESMS.

Documented information is important for providing the information and tools used to effectively run your ESMS as well as provide evidence to auditors that your system meets the requirements of the ISO 20121 standard.

You may have existing document control procedures relevant to other Annex SL management system standards which will be very similar in requirements to this standard. Ensure review of the ESMS specific requirements to determine the need for any additional updates.



Clause 8
Operations

Clause 8 is the main clause where the organisation plans out its process controls and takes actions to promote sustainable outcomes and mitigate adverse risks. It also introduces the concept of supply chain management within procurement and throughout the event management cycle.

You need to set about this with reference to Clause 6. While Clause 6 relates to planning the actions to deal with the ESMS risks and opportunities, Clause 8 is about determining exactly what you're going to do and actually implementing processes.

8.1 - Operational planning and control

This clause requires the business to demonstrate and evidence they have controls around processes relevant to the ESMS to promote positive outcomes and minimise adverse effects. If you have established procedures related to your ESMS processes, this is where evidence will be reviewed to ensure the business is operating in line with those controls and meeting any compliance and other requirements.

A variety of evidence may be reviewed by the auditor including but not limited to: event case studies, site walks, process reviews, sampled procedural controls in action, interviews and documentation. Remember that evidence of controlling sustainable development outcomes and mitigating adverse environmental, social and economic risks will be reviewed across the whole event management cycle, from inception, planning through to delivery and post-event activities.

8.2 - Management of change

Similar to the clause above, evidence and records should be available to demonstrate the organisations adaptability when things don't go according to plan showing evidence of continuity planning and actions giving consideration to best practice sustainability solutions.

8.3 - Supply chain management

Clause 8.3 is about supply chain management and is relatively unique to the ISO 20121 standard. The organisation is required to request suppliers and other interested parties to show evidence for sustainability requirements in the procurement process. This clause requires the organisation to set out numerous controls around sustainable procurement criteria, supplier selection, monitoring and control. Evidence reviewed may include procurement policies, criteria, supplier questionnaire, contracts, supplier audits and performance.

The organisation is expected to define what criteria suppliers and other parties will be evaluated against and apply these when selecting and monitoring new and existing suppliers related to the delivery of their events. Its important when preparing tenders and procurement documents that any requirements aid in supporting the achievement of the organisations objectives and operational planning arrangements.

Supplier sustainability performance should be routinely monitored with documentation retained as needed. The selection of suppliers relating to the event shall ensure open and fair competition, with clear contract requirements and timings to reply. Additionally the tender and proposal process should be designed in a way that is manageable for small businesses.

Turn sustainability objectives into action through effective operational controls, risk management, and responsible supply chain practices.

Clause 9
Performance evaluation

Clause 9 defines how you check the system is working as intended through effective monitoring, review and management. It looks at how you monitor, analyse and evaluate your sustainability performance and compliance. This process requires internal audits and management reviews for evaluation and continual improvement of the ESMS.

9.1 - Monitoring and measurement

This clause requires the organisation to monitor and measure performance against its objectives by analysing outputs and data relevant to its sustainable development objectives. The organisation needs to determine what is monitored, when and what methods should be used.

KPI's identified as relevant to the objectives set in clause 6.2 should be analysed against targets and benchmarks, outcomes from this should be reviewed by senior management to evaluate conformity and effectiveness of processes. Results from monitoring and measurement should drive forward improvements in the ESMS.

9.2 - Internal audits

This clause requires the organisation to effectively plan and conduct internal audits of the ESMS against the ISO 20121 standard to ensure compliance and ensure the ESMS achieves intended results. Organisations are required to establish an audit programme detailing frequency, methods, responsibilities, planning and reporting requirements so it is clear to internal teams and auditors when and how these take place. Internal audits should have defined criteria, scopes and objectives and be performed impartially. It is crucial to have the latest internal audit available as documented evidence for the auditor to demonstrate that you continually evaluate your ESMS performance.

9.3 - Management review

Similar to other Annex SL standards, Clause 9.3 requires top management within the organisation to conduct management review meetings at planned intervals to a set agenda specified by the standard. There are specific inputs required within the management review as well as specified outputs (review results). Outputs should aim to maximise learning opportunities from different events and promote continual improvement.

It is important to set up a routine for conducting periodic management review meetings to the set agenda of inputs and outputs required by the standard with documented evidence being made available as evidence of the results that management reviews have taken place to an appropriate standard and level of detail.

There is an additional sub-clause (Cl 9.3.4) specific to this standard and requires principles identified in clause 4.5 to be reviewed in relation to the ESMS's performance. These include: inclusion, integrity, stewardship, transparency.



Clause 10
Improvement

Clause 10 is about how issues are identified, evaluated, resolved and mitigated for the future

10.1 – Continual improvement

The organisation shall continually improve the suitability, adequacy and effectiveness of the event sustainability management system. This clause ties together all previous clauses relevant to the standard and the PDCA cycle for continual improvement of the ESMS..

10.2 – Nonconformity and corrective actions

Similar to many other ISO standards, this clause discusses the need for identifying and managing nonconformance and corrective actions. This clause ensures there is a process defined for identifying issues as they arise, evaluating their significance, impact and root cause and implementing necessary corrective and preventative actions to reduce the risk of reoccurrence and promote continual improvement of the ESMS. Evidence may include nonconformance procedures, logs and corrective action reports (CAR's).

Build a proactive approach to managing nonconformities, implementing corrective actions, and improving sustainability performance over time.



Summary

Implementing an Event Sustainability Management System requires dedicated time and resource to learning what's involved, implementing the system and maintaining upkeep.

If you already have other ISO standards in place that follow the Annex SL structure, such as ISO 9001, ISO 14001, etc – you may find this standard relatively straight forward to implement since they share so many common clauses, its just ensuring you apply clauses to the themes and content of the requirements of ISO 20121. As with similar certification standards you'll be required to undergo Stage 1 and Stage 2 audits to successfully achieve certification. These are then followed up by annual surveillance visits and a Recertification visit every 3 years to ensure the system maintains compliance to ISO 20121. This means once the system has been implemented it can't be forgotten about and will need continued time and resource.

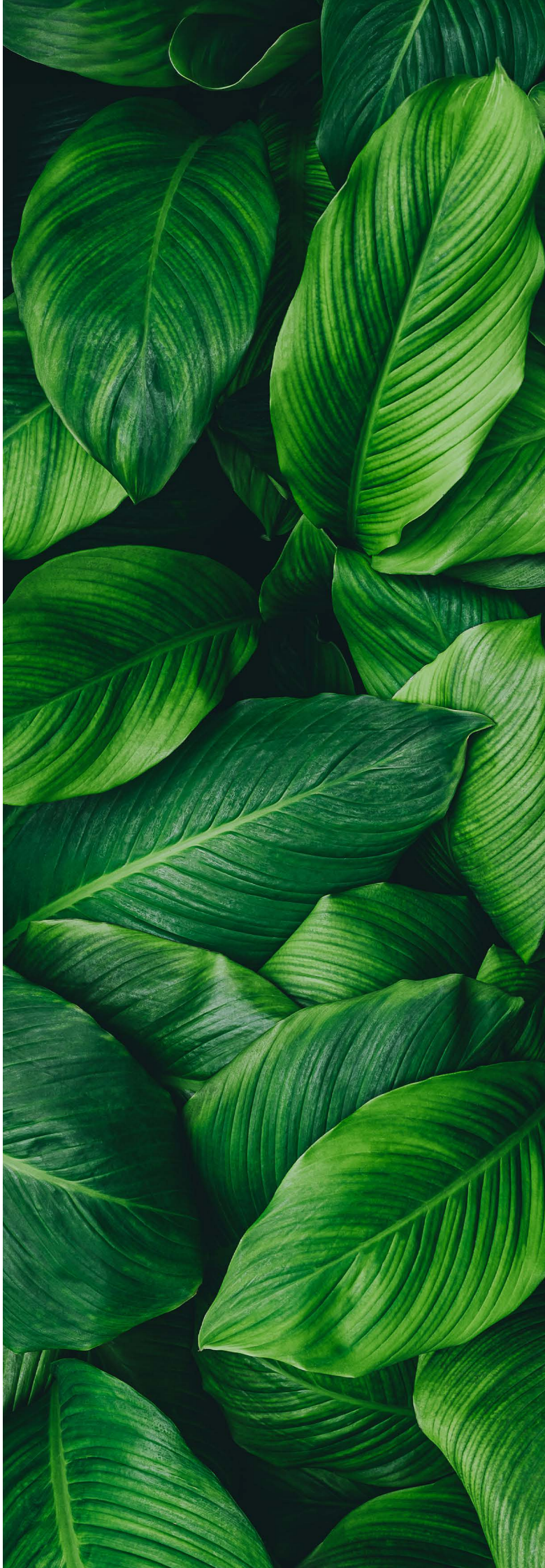
But it doesn't need to be daunting. You may choose to use an independent consultant to help you build, implement and maintain your system. But however you do it, you need to take ownership and demonstrate commitment. To do that, you need to understand the requirements of ISO 20121. Hopefully this guide has provided the clarity needed to begin your journey, be sure to utilise our ISO 20121 Gap Analysis for further support around meeting requirements.

Who is UKAS?

Not all certificates are equal! You need to make sure your certificate is issued by a body that has been accredited by the government-recognised United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS).

A UKAS accredited certification body like ISO-QAR undergoes regular rigorous inspections by UKAS to check we are operating to the highest standards. This means that when you hold a certificate from a UKAS accredited body, you can be sure it's more meaningful. Certificates that are issued by bodies which are not UKAS accredited are often not accepted.

UKAS accredited certificates are accepted across the world as evidence that you meet global standards of best practice.



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