Green public procurement

In the first of a series of opinion pieces from the UK Cleaning Products Industry Association, UKCPI examines the detail of green public procurement.

Greening public purchasing makes sense, to make sure that taxpayers’ money is spent on products and services that help improve sustainability. It’s one very tangible way government can not only provide a lead, but also provide the financial driver to make change happen. Green Public Procurement (GPP) has also been given real momentum as part of the EU SCP Initiative.

But when it comes to the nitty-gritty, it needs careful thought and coordinated action to avoid a lot of chasing around and change for little or no real benefit. All too many ‘green’ consumer offerings are more about lifestyle choices and feel-good factors than improved sustainability or even real environmental benefit. Witness the boundless enthusiasm for things that are ‘natural’; when it’s often hard to show any tangible benefit, and the end result can easily be reduced sustainability across the whole life-cycle rather than improvement.

If GPP is to deliver real improvements in sustainability, and yet still provide the quality, value-for-money cleaning that the paying public rightly expects, the criteria that guide purchasing decisions need to be sound, based on scientifically supported assessments and on whole life-cycle thinking.

Another important aspect of sustainable cleaning is that sustainability must ultimately be improved across the whole cleaning process. In many professional cleaning processes, the life-cycle impact of the cleaning products is minor compared to other impacts in the process such as energy and water use.

Shaky start

Unfortunately, at the practical level, GPP for cleaning products has had a shaky start. Initial public sector efforts in this direction began to emerge more than 10 years ago from local authorities. They commendably adopted green procurement policies as a way of contributing to national and international efforts to improve sustainability. Sadly, the detail of devising the crucially important purchasing criteria was too often left to general environmental consultants who had little understanding of cleaning products and processes. The result was a rash of disparate tender requirements for ‘green cleaning products’ focusing almost exclusively on ingredients and which had little rational or scientific foundation. Trying to supply products to meet all these different requirements, where the criteria sometimes conflicted with themselves as well as each other, would have been a model of unsustainability.

An EU initiative on GPP produced a toolkit addressing cleaning products and services in 2008. Unfortunately, the criteria were largely based on the EU eco-label criteria that had already been developed for consumer products. Professional cleaning on all but the smallest scale makes extensive use of machines and of concentrate systems with controlled dosing – eco-efficiency is generally well ahead of consumer cleaning. For many users, the GPP criteria – if followed – would have driven sustainability backwards. As they come from the eco-label, the EU GPP criteria still work on the crude and outdated hazard-based approach to ingredient safety – few national governments have chosen to formally adopt these criteria.

Significant steps forward

The chaos that arose from the early, ill-conceived ingredient-focused tenders prompted a joint initiative between UKCPI and BACS working with Defra committees and advisory groups. Much needed guidance on ingredient selection rooted in scientific risk assessment was produced in 2006. The scope of the guidance was then expanded in 2008, encouraged by Defra and the UK Chemicals Stakeholder Forum, to cover the whole cleaning product life-cycle in which impacts from ingredients are relatively minor. The guidance stresses that sustainable cleaning is about much more than buying a cleaning product that claims to be ‘green’. It sets out three key steps:

- Choose products that are designed for sustainability as well as safety
- Work with suppliers so that they responsibly manage their manufacturing impacts
- Minimise the environmental impacts that arise during your cleaning operations

The third step challenges the purchaser and user to ensure products are not just properly chosen but are properly used. The stark reality is that most of the impact of the whole cleaning life cycle is determined by the user at the point of use.

National UK government has also markedly improved its own purchasing criteria, now known as Government Buying Standards. The mandatory criteria are necessarily limited in scope, but provisions now include dosing information, packaging requirements, and ingredient requirements dovetail with the sustainable cleaning guidance. Best practice highlights the importance of cleaning at low temperatures.

Meanwhile, the EU eco-label is developing criteria for professional cleaning products. Sadly, the emerging criteria still place unjustifiable emphasis on reducing ingredient hazard, which does nothing to reduce environmental impact. The whole eco-label approach to criteria development, which pays too little attention to the science, makes it ill-suited as a basis for public procurement. Greening public procurement should be about solid, value-for-money progress for the mainstream.

Prospects

Making professional cleaning more sustainable is complex enough, given that products, equipment, packaging, energy and water use must ultimately, all be optimised together. Driving improvement through ‘green procurement’ is a real challenge, as improvement needs to be delivered by a team approach involving both suppliers and users. You can’t simply buy a sustainable option. Ultimately we need approaches that look at the whole process. One promising development is the work being done in AISE to extend its successful upgrade of the Charter for Sustainable Cleaning to cover professional cleaning, and we’ll be reviewing the charter in a forthcoming issue.

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