

# Navigating Sustainability in Your Library: Choosing Wisely for a Greener Future

Climate change, microplastics, landfill concerns, and the elimination of single-use plastics have prompted many libraries to adopt several of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Libraries implementing sustainable practices is promising news. However, there remains a significant gap between ambition and action, with hidden pitfalls that can derail any library's sustainability journey.

As custodians of knowledge, it's crucial that libraries are seen as leaders in sustainability. When implementing sustainable solutions, there are several critical aspects to consider and understand.

## Fast Furniture: Avoiding Short-Term Solutions

In the quest for cost-effectiveness, libraries might turn to fast furniture—cheap, mass-produced seating and tables typically imported from overseas. While these options may seem economical upfront, they come with hidden costs. Fast furniture is known for its low durability and minimal warranties, often failing to withstand the rigors of library use. They often have low weight ratings – around 100kg – who will tell visitors to your library that are over 100kg not to sit on these seats?

The environmental footprint of manufacturing and transporting these items across continents adds to their sustainability drawbacks. Additionally, fast furniture is often designed for domestic use and may not be “fit for purpose” in a library setting. If staff or visitors have an accident due to breakage, it could adversely affect your public liability insurance.

## What to Look For:

Unlike fast furniture, which tends to last only 1-2 years, sustainable furniture typically includes a long warranty—look for 10 years or more. Your selection should feature commercial-grade fabric, high-density foam, and a sturdy frame.

Australian-made furniture supports local industries and adheres to stringent environmental and labour standards. Purchasing locally manufactured pieces reduces the environmental impacts associated with overseas imports.

When choosing library furniture, it's crucial to compare “apples with apples.” Fast furniture often represents a “false economy”—both financially and environmentally. Its shorter lifespan means more frequent replacements compared to the durability of sustainable furniture, resulting in higher costs and increased environmental impact over time.

## Shelving Quality: From 'Made in Australia' to 'Manufactured in Australia'

Shelving labelled 'Made in Australia' may include imported components which are assembled locally. For genuine sustainability, seek shelving that proudly boasts 'Manufactured in Australia,' indicating that the entire process—from design to manufacture and assembly—occurs locally.

Sustainable shelving includes lifetime warranties, ensuring longevity and reliability. Additionally, look for certifications such as GECA (Good Environmental Choice Australia).

## Sustainable Book Covering: Beyond Greenwashing

Protecting your library's most valuable asset—the collection—is crucial. Book covering can extend the life of each covered book by up to three times. However, many libraries have stopped covering their books due to the environmental impact of single-use plastics.

As a result, some book covering products claim to be 'eco-friendly,' 'sustainable,' or 'biodegradable' without providing substantiating evidence. It's essential to verify these claims with credible certifications. For instance, Raeco have developed Bioguard80. This fully biodegradable adhesive book covering is certified for full biodegradability, ensuring it breaks down without leaving toxic microplastics—a critical consideration in reducing environmental harm.

Libraries that have switched to this fully biodegradable book covering have collectively removed over 10 metric tonnes of toxic microplastics from soil and waterways. Imagine the difference if every library adopted fully biodegradable book covering.

## Conclusion: Making Informed Choices

Implementing sustainable solutions in your library involves more than just choosing environmentally friendly options; it requires making informed, long-term investments that benefit both the library and the planet.

By prioritising quality over quantity in furniture, opting for locally manufactured shelving with robust environmental credentials, and verifying certifications for sustainable book coverings, libraries can lead by example in fostering a greener future.

These choices not only align with sustainable practices but also uphold the library's commitment to education, community, and environmental responsibility. Positive changes made today will contribute to a sustainable future for many generations to come.