



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

A BUYER'S GUIDE TO ASSURANCE ON SUSTAINABILITY INFORMATION

Assurance on sustainability information: key considerations for boards and senior management



Summary for boards and senior management

- Sustainability information is increasingly used to inform strategy, governance, risk oversight, capital allocation, regulatory reporting and stakeholder confidence.
- External assurance can strengthen trust in that information by bringing independent challenge, evidence-based discipline and transparent reporting.
- Assurance delivers most value when boards are clear on purpose, intended users, scope, readiness, practitioner selection and how findings will be used.

READ THE FULL GUIDE

This Executive Summary highlights the main messages for boards and senior management.

The full Guide includes practical tools, case studies, question sets and checklists to support application in practice.

**A BUYER'S GUIDE TO ASSURANCE
ON SUSTAINABILITY INFORMATION.**





What are the basics of assurance



External assurance, when performed in accordance with recognised international standards, is a formal, independent engagement that results in a written conclusion for intended users. It can also provide insight into weaknesses in processes, controls, estimates and judgements.

It is built on the same core principles as financial statement audit, independence, evidence, professional judgement, materiality and transparent reporting, but applied to information that is often broader, more judgement-based and less mature.

Assurance is not a guarantee of accuracy. It does not eliminate uncertainty, transfer responsibility from management, or compensate for weak governance or controls. Clear understanding of its purpose and limitations is essential to avoid expectation gaps.

Assurance may be provided at either a **reasonable** or **limited** level. Both follow recognised assurance standards and require clear scope, suitable criteria and sufficient appropriate evidence. The key difference is the level of confidence provided and the nature and extent of work performed.

Reasonable assurance is designed to give intended users a reasonable, but not absolute, level of confidence in the information being assured. The assurance practitioner aims to reduce the risk of a material misstatement in the information to an acceptably low level in the circumstances of the engagement.

Limited assurance provides meaningful but lower confidence than reasonable assurance. The risk of material misstatement in the assured information is reduced to a level that is acceptable in the circumstances of the engagement.

For boards, the choice should reflect intended users, regulatory expectations, materiality and reporting maturity.

In practice, many organisations adopt a phased approach, beginning with limited assurance over priority information and expanding scope or progressing to reasonable assurance over time. Disclosures should clearly state **what has been assured and at what level**.

Readiness before perfection



Assurance works best when the organisation is ready, not when data is perfect. This includes clear accountability, suitable and available criteria, supportable evidence, and governance, systems and controls that can withstand challenge, shaping what can be credibly assured and how assurance is scoped.

Where maturity is uneven, organisations may undertake readiness or pre-assurance activities to identify gaps, prioritise improvements and avoid inefficient or poorly scoped assurance, supporting a structured, phased assurance journey.



Key questions for organisations to ask

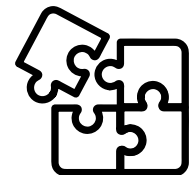


Early clarity on purpose, scope and readiness is critical. The questions below help boards and senior management focus on what matters most to intended users.

Well-scoped assurance helps boards understand what they can rely on, and what still needs improvement.

QUESTION	WHY THIS MATTERS
1. Why are you seeking assurance, and who is it for?	Assurance only adds value when it supports clear decisions by intended users.
2. What information are you asking to be assured, why, and to what timescale?	Not all sustainability information is equally suitable or ready for assurance.
3. Do you have suitable criteria and evidence to support assurance?	Assurance requires information to be assessed against clear criteria and supported by evidence.
4. Are governance and oversight arrangements clear?	Clear ownership and oversight of reporting and assurance underpin credible assurance outcomes.
5. How mature are your reporting processes and controls right now?	Assurance cannot compensate for weak or informal reporting arrangements.

Selecting an assurance practitioner



Appointing a sustainability assurance practitioner is a governance-critical decision, increasingly comparable to appointing the financial statements auditor. Boards should prioritise independence, assurance capability, sustainability expertise, engagement delivery and quality, not price alone.

Assessment can follow a similar lens to audit, with additional consideration of sustainability frameworks, estimates, narrative disclosures and value-chain information.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- 1 Independence and ethics:** safeguards that support objective challenge and credibility.
- 2 Core assurance competence:** experience applying recognised assurance standards and evidence-based approaches.
- 3 Sustainability knowledge:** relevant subject matter expertise and access to specialists where needed.
- 4 Understanding of the organisation:** knowledge of the sector, business model, operating context and reporting maturity.
- 5 Delivery model and quality:** a suitably skilled team, clear accountability, quality management and effective communication.

Board oversight throughout

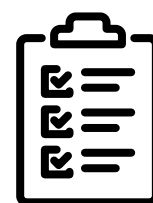


Boards and senior executives do not need to manage every detail of an assurance engagement, but they should oversee the decisions that determine whether assurance is credible, proportionate and useful.

Assurance is most effective when boards remain actively engaged, from defining purpose, users and scope, through to overseeing how complex and judgement heavy areas are addressed and interpreting the assurance conclusion in context.

Its value extends beyond the conclusion. Findings, including management letters and control gaps, should inform continuous improvement to strengthen reporting, governance and assurance planning.

Actions for boards and audit committees



- **Be clear on purpose and intended users:** confirm why assurance is needed and what information matters most.
- **Take a phased approach:** align scope and level of assurance with user needs and reporting maturity.
- **Test readiness early:** focus on governance, criteria, evidence and controls in priority areas.
- **Treat appointment as a governance decision:** select practitioners based on independence, capability and quality.
- **Act on findings:** use assurance outputs to drive continuous improvement in reporting and oversight.



Five steps to obtaining assurance



1 TAKE A PHASED APPROACH

Consider assurance as a progressive journey rather than a single procurement decision. As reporting systems mature and stakeholder expectations evolve, the scope and depth of assurance are likely to expand over time. Be clear about your current position, your ambition and what intended users can expect at each stage, so these expectations can be reflected consistently in early market engagement and the design of your request for proposal (RFP).

2 BE CLEAR ON YOUR PLAN AND READINESS

Set out a practical short to medium term plan, informed by your longer-term assurance ambition. Identify intended users, priority sustainability topics and what information is realistically ready for assurance now. Internal reviews or readiness assessments can help shape the scope, timing and phasing of assurance, and provide a clear basis for the requirements set out in the RFP.

3 ENGAGE WITH POTENTIAL ASSURANCE PRACTITIONERS EARLY

Engage early with a range of sustainability assurance practitioners to test feasibility, refine scope, and understand the implications of different assurance approaches, standards and levels. This engagement may include your existing financial statements auditor where appropriate. Early dialogue supports clearer RFP design and helps ensure proposals balance assurance value, user needs, and cost.

4 EVALUATE PROPOSALS AND DOCUMENT DECISIONS

When evaluating responses to the RFP, assess how well proposals align with your stated objectives, reporting maturity and governance needs, rather than focusing solely on price. Clearly document the rationale for key decisions, including scope, assurance approach, standards applied and practitioner selection to support governance, transparency and future reviews.

5 APPOINT THE RIGHT ASSURANCE PRACTITIONER

Appoint a practitioner that is well matched to your organisation's needs and stage of maturity. In addition to independence and quality requirements, consider the practitioner's assurance capabilities, sustainability expertise, sector knowledge, proposed engagement team and delivery model, including geographical reach (as required). Practical factors such as resourcing, cultural fit, fees and the ability to engage constructively with management as well as those charged with governance should also inform the final appointment. Where relevant, buyers may also consider whether the practitioner can scale and evolve with the organisation as its sustainability reporting and assurance needs develop over time.

