



Planning healthy and sustainable meetings

A how-to guide for healthy and sustainable meetings
at the WHO Regional Office for Europe



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1. Introduction

1.1 Why healthy and sustainable meetings?

Meetings and events at the WHO Regional Office for Europe are a fundamental part of its work and the workplace culture. They serve as an important time for people to connect in order to communicate, strategize and solve problems effectively.

WHO's meetings and events represent a significant amount of time in any given working week; they may last for a whole day or for several days and can therefore have a direct impact on the health of their participants, as well as on the environment.

Giving access to healthy foods and beverages, requiring a tobacco-free environment, encouraging physical activity, and focusing on sustainability at meetings provide opportunities to create a culture of health and well-being, and to protect and minimize the impact on the environment.

1.1.1 The purpose of this manual

The purpose of this manual is to introduce guidelines and provide easily applicable examples of how to plan healthier meetings and events at the WHO Regional Office for Europe. These guidelines address four topics: nutrition (snacks, meals and beverages), physical activity, providing a tobacco-free environment, and sustainability.

1.1.2 Audience

This manual is meant to be used by all employees of the WHO Regional Office for Europe planning to organize meetings, whether they are short meetings and celebrations at the workplace or whole-day and multi-day meetings involving larger groups of participants. It provides evidence-based examples of how to realistically incorporate healthfulness into meetings and events at the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

1.1.3 Raising awareness

Each meeting is an opportunity to raise greater awareness – among participants, staff and service providers – of the benefits of healthy diets and regular physical activity and of using sustainable practices to protect the environment.

It is important to explain in advance to meeting participants that the event will follow principles of health and sustainability and that the choice of location, accommodation, food and beverages, and even the scheduling of the meeting agenda, are based on these principles.

Leading by example, the WHO Regional Office for Europe has the opportunity to motivate its stakeholders to introduce a healthy and sustainable environment in the meetings they organize.



2. Snacks, meals and beverages

2.1 Foods

It should be noted that not all meetings require food. When organizing a meeting, assess the length of time, time of day and number of people attending the meeting before deciding whether food should be part of the work session.

If you decide that serving food is really necessary, ensure that a variety of healthy options is provided throughout the event.

2.1.1 Fruit and vegetables

- Fresh fruit and vegetables should be the basis of any snacks provided.
- Fruit and vegetables can also be the main component of starters, side dishes and desserts. Give preference to fresh fruits and vegetables that are in season.
- Avoid canned fruit, dried fruit and fruit juices from concentrate, as they are often higher in sugar and lower in fibre.

2.1.2 Fats and oils

- Select foods that contain healthy sources of unsaturated fats, such as olive oil, sunflower oil, fish, avocado and nuts. Limit saturated fats, which are typically found in fatty meat, butter, palm and coconut oil, cream, cheese, ghee and lard; skin and trim excess fat from meat and poultry.
- Eliminate *trans* fats by avoiding processed foods, fast food, fried food, baked goods and margarines. Read labels and ensure that *trans* fats and hydrogenated oils are not listed in the ingredients.

2.1.3 Whole grains

- Choose wholegrain foods such as steel-cut oats, brown rice and whole-wheat wraps, rather than refined grains such as white rice and white bread.

2.1.4 Proteins

- Choose leaner meats such as skinless poultry, rather than red or processed meats.
- Seafood, unsweetened yogurt and eggs are also great sources of protein.
- Be sure to include plant-based sources of protein, such as lentils, tofu, nuts, nut butter and beans, for non-meat eaters.
- Opt for steamed, grilled or braised sources of protein instead of fried foods.

2.1.5 Desserts

- As a preference, serve cut fruit for dessert.
- When other dessert options are chosen, ensure that they are low in fats and sugar.
- Offer fruit smoothies or milkshakes with low-fat frozen yogurt.

2.1.6 Sugar

- Limit availability of foods and drinks that are high in free sugars (e.g. sugar-sweetened beverages, juice drinks and juice concentrates, honey, syrups, sugary snacks and sweets).

2.1.7 Salt

- Choose products with lower salt content.
- Request that caterers reduce the amount of salt in the menu by not adding salt, soy sauce or fish sauce during preparation; ask them to use herbs, spices and acids (vinegar and lemon or lime juice) instead.
- Do not place salt on the table and exclude salty snacks.

2.1.8 Portion size

- Reduce portion sizes. For example, cut baked goods or sandwiches in half. This will discourage overeating and decrease food waste.
- Serving utensils such as chopsticks may encourage people to eat more slowly and less.
- Providing smaller plates or paper napkins, instead of large plates, can help reduce portion sizes further.

2.1.9 Nutrition labelling

Whenever possible, include nutrition labels for foods served, indicating total calories and serving size, so that participants are able to make informed food choices.

2.2 Beverages

2.2.1 Water

- Make water available throughout the entire meeting.
- Water may be served plain or with the addition of fresh cut fruits, vegetables or fragrant herbs for additional flavour.
- Some ingredients that may be added to water include: sliced citrus, fresh mint with cucumber, peeled ginger, cinnamon and lemon, or cut berries.

2.2.2 Sugar-sweetened beverages

- Avoid offering sugar-sweetened beverages, such as juice drinks, flavoured milk and coffee, sweetened teas, sports drinks and energy drinks.

- Offer unsweetened hot beverages: tea, coffee and infusions.
- Low-fat or fat-free milk, as well as 100% fruit juices, are also good options if drunk in moderation.

2.2.3 Alcohol

- As a general rule, don't offer alcohol at WHO meetings: a substance with the potential to cause so much harm is hardly suitable for an organization dedicated to the promotion of public health.
- If – in exceptional circumstances – alcoholic beverages are offered, alcohol-free alternatives should always be provided.
- If alcohol is provided, limit the number of drinks to no more than one per person – and never serve spirits of any kind.
- Good alternatives to alcoholic beverages include 100% fruit juices and smoothies; water flavoured with fruit or vegetables; and tea, coffee and infusions.



2.3 Healthy Swaps: Alternative food and beverage items

Breakfast	
Choose this ...	Rather than ...
A small serving of fresh 100% fruit or vegetable juices	Juice drinks
Fresh fruit and unsalted seeds and nuts	Fruits in syrup
Low-fat or fat-free milk and yogurts	Full-fat milk and yogurts
Wholegrain bread	Bread made with refined grains
Low-fat and low-sugar granola, muesli, or plain oats with hot water	Pastries (croissants, doughnuts, sweet rolls, high-sugar granola)
Low-salt nut butters, hummus and reduced-fat cream cheese	Butter, full-fat cream cheese
Wholegrain cereals low in sugar	Refined grains and/or sugary cereals
Lunch/Dinner	
Salads with dressing on the side	Salad with dressing mixed in
Olive oil and vinegar-based salad dressing	Creamy salad dressing
Soups made with low-fat milk, non-dairy milks or home-made broth (i.e. no dairy)	Soups made with heavy cream
Wholegrain pasta salad with light vinaigrette	Pasta salad with mayonnaise
Sandwiches on wholegrain bread or whole-wheat tortilla wraps	Sandwiches made on croissants, white bread or bagels
Lean meats, poultry without skin, fish, tofu	High-fat and fried meats, processed meats, sliced deli meats, poultry with skin, fried fish, deep-fried tofu
Vegetable platter with hummus or guacamole low in salt	Bread rolls with butter
Fresh fruit	Ice cream, cheesecake, cakes, pastries, cookies, brownies

2.3 contnd.

Finger foods	
Choose this ...	Rather than ...
Vegetables with hummus, salsa, bean dip or guacamole	Cheese platters
Fresh cut fruit	Fruit tarts, pies
Grilled or broiled chicken skewers	Fried chicken tenders
Miniature turkey or chicken meatballs	Large meatballs made of red meat served in gravy
Fresh summer rolls (not fried)	Fried egg rolls
Mini pizza slices made of whole-wheat crust, tomato sauce, part-skim mozzarella cheese and vegetables	Regular pizza with a heavy layer of cheese and meat toppings such as sausage, ham or pepperoni
Air-popped popcorn flavoured with a small amount of olive oil	Potato chips, tortilla chips
Snacks	
Fresh cut fruit	Cookies
Vegetable platter	Chips
Wholegrain crackers (5 g fat or less per serving)	Crackers made from processed grains
Nuts	
Beverages	
Water (sparkling or still) with fresh cut fruit, vegetables or aromatic plants for flavouring	Soda or sugary drinks
100% freshly squeezed fruit or vegetable juices	Juice made from concentrate or with added sugar and flavourings
Low-fat or fat-free milk	Full-fat milk, sweetened milks, or cream for use in tea and coffee
Unsweetened tea and coffee	Tea and coffee with sugar

Adapted from the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity Healthy Meeting Toolkit



2.4 How to plan a healthy celebration

Celebrations at the workplace are important occasions that help to increase team unity, boost morale and have fun in the office. They can also be an invaluable opportunity to incorporate healthy eating practices. Below are some tips on how to organize a healthy celebration.

- Salad bar potluck: everyone brings their own salad ingredient to create an attractive and colourful choice of salads.
- Assorted potluck: create a sign-up sheet to ensure a varied and colourful selection of foods, fruits and vegetables.
- Have a breakfast social with unsweetened yogurt, fresh fruit, muesli, oats and nuts. Try to avoid fruit juices from concentrate, refined grains, and sweetened cereals and granolas.
- Create a vegetable platter with healthy home-made dips low in salt such as hummus, guacamole or bean dip.
- Make fresh fruit bouquets or fruit kebabs for dessert instead of serving cookies and cakes.

No Smoking



No Smoking



3. Tobacco-free

Ensure a tobacco-free environment at meetings of the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

- Meetings should be held in smoke-free venues.
- Make sure there is clear signage that the event is smoke-free.
- Consider hosting a multi-day event in a city with a comprehensive anti-tobacco policy that ensures that indoor public places and other public spaces, as appropriate, are smoke-free.



Active breaks should be

- completely voluntary
- adaptable to anyone's level of physical ability and mobility
- achievable without sweating and without a professional fitness leader
- fun, safe and pain-free.

4. Physical activity

Offer participants appropriate opportunities to be physically active and to achieve the recommended 150 minutes of physical activity per week by creating a physically active environment – by incorporating physical activity in the meeting agenda or by organizing a meeting that is actually in a moving format. Also consider allowing enough time during lunch break for people to be physically active and to refocus the mind – for instance, by going for a short run or a refreshing walk. Include suggestions for walks and other opportunities for physical activity in the meeting pack – perhaps indicating how many calories are burned or steps are taken by walking a particular route.

4.1 Creating a physically active environment

4.1.1 Meeting location

- Choose a venue that is easily accessible on foot or by bicycle and has parking for bicycles.
- Choose a meeting location with walking or running routes; provide maps of these routes to participants.
- Choose hotels that have fitness facilities that are available to participants free of charge; alternatively, contract nearby exercise facilities.
- Provide exercise stations or equipment in the hall or in the meeting room (for instance, raised tables for standing, exercise skipping ropes, standing desk bikes, free weights, exercise/resistance bands).
- Encourage people to take stairs instead of lifts and post signs directing people to stairwells outside meeting rooms and near lifts.
- For overnight meetings, encourage participants to walk

to a dinner location and organize dancing during dinner or evening receptions.

4.1.2 Dress code and incentives

- Choose a business casual dress code for the meeting and notify participants about it in advance; encourage comfortable clothes/shoes to support physical activity during the meeting and breaks.
- Mention to participants before the meeting and during registration that they are encouraged to move within the meeting space.
- Give participants pedometers during registration, encourage them to walk 10 000 steps every day, and consider giving prizes to those who meet this goal.

4.1.3 Participants with disabilities

- Give participants an opportunity to inform organizers about any special physical access needs before the meeting or during registration.
- Listen to participants' needs and make sure that exercises are adjusted for people with disabilities or that alternative activities (breathing/relaxation/mindfulness sessions, light exercise) are provided.

4.2 Incorporating physical activity in the meeting agenda

- Include physical activity classes (for example, yoga, aerobics, tai chi, dance and stretching, mindfulness or reflection sessions) in the agenda so that participants can plan accordingly.

- Schedule physical activity sessions before and/or after the meeting.
- Organize regular active breaks during the meeting; consider having active breaks instead of food breaks.
- Play up-tempo music during breaks to inspire people to move more.

4.2.1 Frequency and types of activity

- If a meeting is scheduled to last up to 4 hours, include 3–5-minute breaks at the end of every hour, or 5–10-minute breaks at the end of every 2 hours (standing, stretching, moving).
- Additionally, if the meeting is due to last more than 4 hours, include a 30-minute break in the middle of the meeting (moving, walking, stretching/mindfulness/relaxation).

4.2.2 Types of active break

Standing break

A standing break can easily be incorporated into a meeting, as it does not require any equipment or complex preparation.

Organizing tips

- Offer participants the option to stand up and move around the room for a few minutes or to change chairs with someone else.
- Ask participants to march on the spot and raise their arms overhead for 30–60 seconds.
- Explain that this exercise improves blood circulation, attention and concentration.

Stretching break

A stretching break can help relax the body after long periods of sitting, while also improving blood circulation and muscle flexibility.

Organizing tips

- Identify someone to facilitate a stretching exercise and invite participants to follow the facilitator.
- Remind participants that during a stretching exercise they should relax and focus on their breathing and that they should never force a stretch. If they start feeling a pinching or uncomfortable pain sensation, they should stop immediately.
- Inform participants that even short stretching breaks can help prevent muscular tension and pain induced by long periods of sitting.

Moving break

A moving break is a 5–10-minute group activity, often accompanied by music, that encourages participants to do simple aerobic exercises. It does not require any special fitness training and should be suitable for people with all levels of physical ability.

Organizing tips

- Identify someone to facilitate a moving break.
- Before starting the moving break, make sure that all participants have enough space to move safely.
- Inform participants that they can modify the tempo and intensity of exercises according to their abilities.
- Switch on the music and invite participants to follow simple aerobic exercises demonstrated by the facilitator.
- Explain to participants that moving breaks warm them up and increase their energy levels.

Relaxation break

A breathing/mindfulness/relaxation break can be used to increase concentration and focus on problem-solving. Such breaks are especially good before the beginning or at the end of a meeting, to improve clarity of ideas and to remove muscle tension that participants may have accumulated during the event.



Possible exercises include:

- marching on the spot
- alternating knee lifts (touch a knee with the opposite elbow)
- side-to-side steps (step left, feet together; step right, feet together)
- kickboxing kicks to the front and sides
- star jumps
- running on the spot.

Or: prepare a video with exercises and switch it on during the break.

Or: if participants have experience leading such exercises, let them take turns in leading.

Example of the abdominal breathing technique

Instruct participants to put one hand on their chest and the other on their stomach.

Invite them to take a deep breath in through the nose for four seconds and feel their diaphragm (not their chest) inflate with fresh air; the hand on the stomach should move more than the hand on the chest.

After they have held their breath for four seconds, instruct them to take a long breath out through their mouth for eight seconds, feeling how air leaves their lungs.

Instruct participants to hold their breath for four seconds before repeating the cycle.

Lead them through six to 10 slow and deep breaths per minute for up to five minutes.

Organizing tips

- If it is a guided session, the facilitator should ask participants to find a comfortable posture and follow instructions.
- Invite participants to take several slow, deep breaths. At the beginning of the session they should concentrate only on their breathing. Later, the facilitator can pose a question to the group for reflection, or they may ask participants to feel lightness and relax their whole body.

Walking break

A walking break allows participants to limber up after

periods of sitting and to change their surroundings. This kind of break works particularly well when weather conditions are favourable. However, even if the weather is not suitable for walking outside, it is possible to walk inside the building along corridors and between floors.

Organizing tips

- Schedule time for breaks in the agenda and invite participants to take a 10–15-minute walk.
- Develop possible walking routes and share them with participants; consider printing maps of these routes for participants.

Or:

- Organize walking breaks in small groups of two or three participants during brainstorming or networking sessions. Offer the option of walking inside or outside the building during a discussion period. Agree on a time when all groups should reconvene.

Or:

- Encourage participants to go for a 15–30-minute walk after lunch. Identify a leader who will guide participants on a pre-planned route.

4.3 Meeting in a moving format

In some cases, a whole meeting can be organized in a standing, walking or some other moving format, depending on the physical abilities of participants and the meeting agenda.

4.3.1 Standing meeting

A standing meeting can be a suitable format for short meetings.

Organizing tips

- Make sure that all participants are physically able to stand during the meeting and inform them beforehand about the standing format.
- Choose an appropriate room which can accommodate the meeting in a standing format; it should be spacious enough and well ventilated.
- Bring clipboards to the meeting so that participants can easily write while standing.

4.3.2 Walking meeting

A walking meeting can be a suitable format for both one-on-one and group meetings.

- If there is a safe walking route near the building and the weather is good, always try to choose a walking format for a one-on-one meeting, rather than sitting in an office.
- Walking meetings can be organized for groups of 3–10 people if the meeting agenda allows.

Organizing tips for a group walking meeting

- Break participants into smaller groups of two or three people to walk together and discuss the meeting agenda.
- Plan the walking route and identify points on the route where the whole team will come together to discuss salient topics as a group. Consider printing a map, marking meeting points and giving a copy to each group.
- A leader should propose key points that participants can discuss while walking in pairs or small groups.
- At each stop, agree on the discussion topics for the next walking interval. Make sure that the last stop is long enough to sum up the results of the meeting.





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5. Sustainability

Careful planning and consideration of sustainability issues can help event organizers to maximize the positive impacts of meetings on individuals, the community and the environment and to reduce any potential negative impacts.

5.1 Venue, accommodation, transport and mobility

The location of an event, the type of venue and accommodation, and the means of transport available provide an opportunity to substantially decrease greenhouse emissions, avoid generating waste, and minimize consumption of natural resources.

- Consider holding a meeting virtually; exploit the advantages offered by teleconference and videoconference services to limit travel.
- Choose a meeting location close to public transport and accessible to bicycles.
- Choose accommodation from which the venue can be reached either on foot or by public transport. Encourage participants to use bicycles.
- Choose a venue and accommodation that are energy-efficient and have adopted energy-saving policies.
- Give preference to venues and accommodation that use advanced systems of waste collection and recycling.

5.2 Event materials

Adopting environmentally friendly practices while communicating with participants and when preparing and

distributing invitations and conference materials allows event organizers to reduce overall environmental damage, save considerable costs and increase awareness.

5.2.1 Reduce paper use

- Avoid unnecessary printouts and send all meeting materials electronically before and during the meeting; ensure that such materials are also available on the website (in a password-protected section, if necessary).
- During the event, post materials for display on boards in a meeting room; provide as few print copies as possible to be picked up by those who need them. Do not put unnecessary copies in participants' folders.
- If printing a document is unavoidable, print on recycled paper; consider printing on both sides, with multiple slides on each page; make as few copies as possible; and encourage participants to share.
- Display presentation slides rather than printing them.

5.2.2 Choose and use conference materials sustainably

- Reduce the amount of promotional materials, delegate bags and gifts; ensure that all materials and gadgets have a useful purpose.
- Choose gadgets that are made of sustainable materials and are produced according to ethical standards.

5.2.3 Reuse

- Consider whether gadgets from previous events can be reused at the current event with the same or different purpose (publication stands, banners).
- Give preference to conference materials that can be

reused (for instance, reusable name badge holders, rather than single-use or plastic name badge stickers).

5.3 Catering

Choose food and beverages for your event sustainably, avoiding plastic utensils and giving preference to foods with a lower carbon footprint, such as local and seasonal fruit and vegetables. To maximize the positive impact, choose caterers who have adopted environmental policies.

5.3.1 Utensils

- Provide reusable mugs or water containers.
- Provide paper or compostable cups; avoid plastic cups and other plastic utensils.
- Use paper bags as lunch containers.
- Do not use towelettes and wet wipes – they are not recyclable.
- Choose reusable, washable serving containers and eating utensils whenever possible.

5.3.2 Food and beverages

- Offer plant-based, vegetarian meal selections; reduce the amount of meat.
- Select foods and beverages that are local (produced in

the area where they will be consumed), organic and fair trade whenever possible.

- Reconfirm the number of food items with caterers to avoid food waste (for example, if planning a meeting for 15 people, order food for 13–14).
- Order food and beverages in bulk platters rather than as single servings.
- Provide either tap water or water and other beverages from reusable pitchers; avoid using individual containers.
- Organize hydration stations for refilling water bottles.

5.3.3 Leftovers

- If country regulations allow, collaborate with local organizations to distribute edible leftovers from an event.

5.4 Waste

- To reduce energy waste, turn off electrical and electronic equipment, including lights, when not in use or when you leave.
- Maximize use of daylight and green energy, if relevant.
- If disposable products are the only option, make sure that they are recyclable or compostable.
- Provide recycling containers with proper indicators around the meeting space.

6. Healthy and sustainable meeting checklist

Useful questions	Y/N/notes
Venue and transport	
Is holding a meeting in a virtual format (video- or teleconference) an option?	
Are meeting and accommodation venues located close to public transport?	
Does a meeting location have walking and running routes?	
Is a meeting location accessible on foot or by bicycle?	
Are there options for bicycle rental and storage?	
Is there a fitness facility available to participants free of charge?	
Does the meeting room have natural light?	
Does the venue have waste collection and recycling systems in place?	
Does the venue use energy-efficient practices?	
Invitation and conference materials	
Are all meeting documents available online?	
Are meeting materials printed on recycled paper and double-sided?	
Are all meeting gadgets really useful and made of recycled materials?	

Food

Does the meeting require food?

Are there choices available for people who do not eat meat?

Has a variety of healthy food options been included throughout each meeting day?

Are fresh fruit and vegetables included with every meal or snack?

Have you made sure to select foods with healthy fats and avoid *trans* fats?

Will meals include wholegrain breads, cereals, rice and pasta?

Have you requested that low-fat, low-salt, low-sugar and low-calorie methods be used to prepare food?

Will desserts that are low in sugar and fats be served?

Have you asked for sauces and dressings to be served on the side?

Have you asked for food to be served in smaller portion sizes and for small-sized dishware to be provided?

Have you made sure to avoid pastries, deep-fried items, creamy sauces or dips, sweets and savoury snacks?

Have you asked the caterers to place nutrition labels next to foods indicating facts such as serving size and calorie count?

Are chosen food products sustainable (local and fair trade)?

Have paper or compostable utensils been chosen in preference to plastic ones?

Does the amount of food ordered correspond to the number of participants?

Are disposable items recyclable, biodegradable and/or reusable?

Can excess food be collected and passed to charitable organizations?

Beverages

Will fresh water be available and water vessels refilled throughout the entire meeting?

Will unsweetened tea, coffee and infused water be provided instead of soda and sugary drinks?

Are beverages served in reusable pitchers?	
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Have you avoided serving alcohol or set a limit on the number of alcoholic drinks per person?	
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Tobacco-free	
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Have you ensured a tobacco-free environment at the meeting and accommodation venues?	
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Physical activity classes and breaks	
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Have you checked with participants whether they have any physical access needs?	
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Can the meeting or some of its sessions be organized in a moving format?	
--	--

Will the meeting dress code allow participants to be physically active?	
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Will participants be encouraged to be physically active and achieve the recommended 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week? (Have pedometers, physical activity stations, etc. been provided within the meeting space?)	
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Are physical activity classes incorporated in the meeting agenda?	
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Are active breaks planned at the end of every 1–2 hours?	
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Will music be played during coffee breaks?	
--	--

Will physical activity options for people with disabilities be provided?	
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Waste	
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Has use of plastic and packaging been kept to a minimum?	
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Is there an appropriate system of waste collection and disposal in place?	
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Use of sustainable materials	
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Have you managed to avoid all unnecessary printing?	
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Will all printed materials be double-sided and on recyclable paper?	
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Have you made sure that materials used at the meeting are recyclable?	
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The WHO Regional Office for Europe

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

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