Responsible sourcing is an effective way for the owners and users of buildings to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability. This Information Paper gives straightforward user-friendly guidance on the benefits of, the reasons for, and how to go about, the responsible procurement of all kinds of construction products. The steps needed to achieve responsible sourcing within a supply chain are included as well as case studies and useful links to sources of information for a variety of materials and products currently used in construction.

This Information Paper will be of interest to architects and designers, construction companies, construction product suppliers and anyone who owns or is accountable for the construction, refurbishment or maintenance of buildings, providing an update on this fast-moving area.

BACKGROUND
Sustainability within business practice involves balancing economic, social and environmental performance. There is no single definition of responsible sourcing, not least because sustainability is a challenging concept but also because applications vary between organisations and sectors. The general view is that a high degree of collaboration and engagement between all parties in a supply chain has to be achieved on ‘the triple bottom line’, a concept devised in 1994 by John Elkington, the founder of a British consultancy called SustainAbility (see definition in the Box opposite). Buyers in all sectors increasingly have requirements beyond price, delivery time and quality, and suppliers must respond to these demands to meet customer expectations.

There are many examples of how sustainable procurement delivers on risk management, cost reduction and increasing profitability. For instance, reducing the environmental impact of materials and products can result in cost savings over the life cycle of a building, as well as reducing the company’s carbon footprint. This can lead to improved reputation and customer loyalty.

The concept ‘the triple bottom line’ (TBL) refers to the preparation of three different (and quite separate) bottom lines, consisting of profit, people and planet:
- the traditional measure of corporate profit, ie the ‘bottom line’ of the profit and loss account
- the bottom line of a company’s ‘people account’, ie a measure of how socially responsible a company is throughout its operations
- the bottom line of the company’s ‘planet’ account, ie a measure of how environmentally responsible it is.

By producing the TBL, a company can measure its financial, social and environmental performance over time and take account of the full cost of its business.