

Green Key Criteria and Explanatory Notes

1 October 2026 – 31 December 2031

Glossary



This glossary provides definitions and explanations of key terms and concepts used throughout the Green Key criteria catalogue. These definitions are intended to support consistent interpretation, implementation, and auditing of the criteria across countries and establishment types.

Areas with a high-water consumption: an operational zone where water use is either continuous, high in volume (accounting for a significant share of the establishments' total water use, typically above 10–15%), or essential to core services, e.g. kitchens, swimming pool and spa areas, laundry facilities, landscape irrigation systems, etc.

Catering Offer: an individual menu, buffet, restaurant, café, or other food and beverage service offered to guests.

Certification Process Manual: the Certification Process Manual describes the process from pre-screening, onboarding, to the onsite certification audit, the review and decision-making and the ongoing conformity during the certification period. The Manual includes information about the audit preparation, methodologies, timelines, and responsibilities. It specifies which staff members should be available during the audit.

Coffee station: a complimentary setup (usually in guest rooms) providing items such as tea, coffee, sugar, and cups for self-preparation.

Correct dosage: following the supplier's or manufacturer's recommendations to ensure effective use while minimising chemicals.

Communication materials: all communication by the establishment related to its activities, products, services, and sustainability performance must be accurate, clear, relevant, and easily understandable. Communication should be visible to guests and include, where applicable, a clear and prominent call to action encouraging guest involvement in the establishments' environmental work. The establishment displays accurate, clear, relevant and correct information and communication about its sustainability performance aligned with the actual performance and reflecting only actions and measures that are implemented in practice.

Data storage and accessibility: All submitted performance and business data are stored either in the national Green Key database (where such a database exists) and in the Green Key International database. Establishments may request access to their profile in the international database for internal reporting, monitoring, and transparency purposes. Green Key cooperates with selected online travel agencies (OTAs) and marketplaces that highlight certified establishments on their booking platforms. For this purpose, Green Key may share extracts of the international list of certified establishments, containing only publicly available information (e.g. establishment name). No private, confidential, or sensitive data are shared. Further information on documentation requirements, data handling, and responsibilities is provided in the Certification Agreement shared with establishments upon registration of interest.

Disinfection substances: chemical agents or biocidal products specifically intended to destroy, deactivate, or inhibit harmful microorganisms on surfaces, materials, equipment, or water. These substances go beyond routine cleaning and are designed to achieve microbiological control, not merely the physical removal of dirt or organic matter. Disinfection substances contain active ingredients such as chlorine compounds, quaternary ammonium compounds (QACs), hydrogen peroxide, alcohols, or peracetic acid.

Domestic animals: species legally classified as domestic or livestock under national legislation (including culturally herded or traditionally managed species).

Environmental policy: a documented statement outlining an organisation's commitments and principles for managing and reducing its environmental impacts.

Animal exploitation: using animals in ways that cause or risk causing pain, injury, distress, or unnatural behaviour, or that treat animals as entertainment props for human benefit or profit, without delivering genuine welfare, educational, or conservation value.

FEE Academy: the Foundation for Environmental Education's digital platform offering sustainability learning and communication resources for Green Key establishments.

Fixtures: items that are permanently attached or built into the building, such as recessed lighting, sinks, toilets, doors, frames, etc.

Furniture: durable items such as chairs, tables, beds, wardrobes and similar long-lasting furnishings.

Good Practice: a verified sustainability initiative or action implemented by an establishment and shared for promotion and peer learning through Green Key.

Green areas: gardens, lawns, flowerbeds, landscaped grounds, vegetated roofs, plant pots and any other maintained outdoor or indoor vegetation. Forest areas are not considered as green areas under Green Key as these fall outside the rules on the certification boundary.

Green Committee: a cross-departmental group that supports the Green Key Establishment Representative in planning, implementing and communicating sustainability actions and strategy.

Green Key binder: The establishment maintains a Green Key binder containing all relevant and up-to-date documentation demonstrating conformity with each criterion. The binder is easily accessible to relevant staff and to the auditor, ensuring transparency, traceability, and continuity in case of staff changes. The binder should be organised according to the Green Key criteria sections and numbering. It is strongly recommended that the binder is maintained electronically (e.g. via an intranet, shared drive, or document management system) to facilitate version control, accessibility, and reduced paper use. Only where digital systems are not available or commonly used may the binder be maintained as a physical file, provided it remains complete, up to date, and accessible.

Green Key logo: the authorised visual mark of the Green Key programme provided by Green Key for certified establishments. To be used without modification in any communication materials, following the Green Key Branding Guidelines and other trademark policies and only once certified.

Green Key Establishment Representative: staff member appointed by the management to coordinate and communicate sustainability actions within the establishment.

Green Key Toolbox: official digital repository containing Green Key templates, communication materials, and, when available, protected links to the national version of the toolbox.

Guest-facing staff: employees whose primary duties involve direct interaction with guests, including welcoming, assisting, serving, or supporting them during their stay or visit.

Interview: an interview is an audit methodology used during an audit to verbally confirm whether a criterion is being implemented in practice. It typically consists of one or a few targeted questions asked to relevant persons (e.g. staff, management, or other involved parties) to determine whether conformity is met.

Interviews are used, for example, to confirm that:

- staff understand and follow required policies or procedures;
- staff have received relevant information or training;
- specific practices are taking place (or not taking place) in daily operations.

Interviews are adapted to the situation, the topic, and the person interviewed. They are conducted during working hours, and in a respectful manner. Where relevant, auditors may interview individuals in private and at random to encourage honest answers. If an answer is unclear, unexpected, or raises concerns, the auditor may ask additional questions or interview more than one person to verify the information.

Logic of applicability: this means that establishments are not expected to provide evidence, take action, or implement measures for situations, activities, or risks that do not exist. Where feedback or audit findings identify relevant and actionable points, the establishment is expected to:

- a) take appropriate corrective or improvement actions; or
- b) clearly explain why the point is not relevant or not applicable to its context.

Where feedback does not indicate any relevant or actionable issue, no action is required. In such cases, the establishment may, if needed, provide additional comments or discuss the matter with the auditor for clarification.

Major changes: deviations of more than 20% above the baseline or expected usage in consumption intensity (e.g. per bed night).

Major construction or renovation work: significant increase in built surface area, change of land use, or structural modifications requiring the closure of a significant part (more than 50%) or all of the establishment being closed down.

Minibar: a retail unit stocked with individually packaged drinks and snacks for purchase, similar to a kiosk or vending machine.

Nature Positive Tourism: an approach to tourism that actively protects, restores, and enhances biodiversity, ensuring that tourism activities contribute to measurable net gains for nature rather than causing biodiversity loss.

National legislation and adaptations:

National legislation: where national legislation is stricter than the Green Key criteria, compliance with national legislation is mandatory.

National adaptations: the criteria catalogue includes national adaptations applicable in specific countries. Where such adaptations are indicated, establishments must conform with the adapted requirements.

Outsourced staff: individuals performing work for the establishment but employed by an external company or engaged as independent contractors/freelancers, rather than being direct employees.

Overtourism: A situation where the number or concentration of visitors exceeds a destination's capacity to manage tourism sustainably, resulting in negative impacts on the environment, local communities, cultural heritage, infrastructure, the visitor experience, and/or the quality of life of residents.

Payroll and pay structure documentation: official internal records that demonstrate how employees are remunerated and how pay levels are determined. This may include payroll summaries, salary matrices, pay scales, remuneration frameworks or similar documents showing wage levels, job roles, working hours or days, and applicable wage benchmarks (e.g. minimum wage or living wage). Documentation may be presented in anonymised form.

Performance and business data:

Data submission

As part of the Green Key application and certification process, establishments are required to submit relevant data to ensure transparency, support auditing, and enable performance monitoring. The required data formats are defined by Green Key International and/or the National Operator and communicated during the application phase.

Data categories

During the certification process, establishments may be requested to provide the following categories of data:

- contact information (e.g. establishment name);
- geodata (e.g. address, coordinates);
- application-related information (e.g. contact persons, number of employees);
- size of the establishment (e.g. number of rooms, facilities); and
- performance data (e.g. energy, water, waste, greenhouse gas emissions).

Each data point is classified as imperative (I) or guideline (G), as specified in the criteria catalogue. Imperative data must be provided to be eligible for certification. Guideline data are optional and may be provided at the establishment's discretion. For each data point, the required input type (e.g. number, text), reporting frequency (e.g. annual, monthly), and unit options are specified.

Reporting period

All application and performance data submitted must refer to the full calendar year (12 months) preceding the year of application (e.g. applications submitted in 2031 refer to January–December 2030). For first-time applicants, a minimum of 3 months of operational data is required. Newly opened establishments may apply for certification once at least 3 months of operational data after opening are available.

Professional/commercial kitchen: any kitchen where staff conduct on-site meal preparation for customers that produces fat, oil, or grease.

Routine cleaning: the regular, day-to-day cleaning activities defined by each establishment (e.g. daily cleaning, room turnover after guest departure, cleaning of common areas, etc.).

Safe dilution system: chemicals are handled in a way that prevents direct skin or inhalation exposure, avoids spills, and ensures correct dilution ratios.

Samplings: targeted, on-site verifications carried out by the auditor to confirm that something observed, declared, or documented is in place and functioning as stated. It is not a full inspection of all units or areas, but rather a sample-based visual or functional verification. Samplings are carried out using 3 methodologies:

Methodology A) Physical / area-based sampling:

The auditor conducts visual samplings in each of the areas specified in the criterion text (minimum 1 area X, area XX, and area XX). When guest rooms are one of these areas, the auditor checks a sample of guest rooms based on the size of the establishment:

- 1–5 rooms: up to 2 rooms
- 6–50 rooms: 3 rooms
- 51–150 rooms: 4 rooms
- More than 150 rooms: at least 5 rooms (additional rooms/areas may be checked if relevant, e.g. multiple wings, buildings, or systems).

Methodology B) Functional / operational test sampling:

In the sampled areas/rooms (based on sampling Methodology A), the auditor tests how systems/devices work by operating them where feasible (e.g. opening windows/doors, triggering sensors, using appliances, running water) to confirm correct function and conformity.

Methodology C) Documentation / evidence sampling:

The auditor reviews a sample of 3 supporting documents/items relevant to the criterion (e.g. bills, logs, contracts, certificates, purchase records, photos, system extracts). If several years, sites, systems, categories, or suppliers are involved, the sample is chosen to reflect that spread.

Seasonal staff: employees engaged for a limited period to meet seasonal operational needs. This includes staff employed during peak tourism seasons or other recurring periods of increased demand.

Standard Operating Procedure (SOP): written and detailed instructions that describe the steps to be followed to carry out routine or recurring tasks in a consistent, safe and quality-controlled way. In a hospitality setting, SOPs translate policy intent into day-to-day practices, ensuring that staff know how to implement standards reliably across shifts, departments and personnel.

Strategic sustainability targets: long-term, measurable goals set by the establishment to guide its sustainability performance and continuous improvement.

Take-away: Food or beverage items that are prepared by an establishment and provided to guests in portable, containers for consumption outside the building or designated dine-in service areas. Take-away items are intended to be carried away by the guest, such as around the premises (e.g. gardens, lawns, amusement parks) or off-site, and are not served using standard dine-in tableware.

Temperature band: specific set range of temperature within which certain systems, such as HVAC, implemented for operational efficiency. Often defined by a deadband to prevent frequent cycling of heating and cooling systems to save energy.

Training: a structured learning activity that provides staff with knowledge or skills relevant to sustainability or operational practices, delivered through organised instruction. To qualify, the training must last at least 30 minutes. Training activities and meetings required under the Green Key criteria take place during paid working hours. Participation in such activities must not create additional workload, unpaid time, or negatively affect staff members' ability to complete their regular tasks.

Vegan: a vegan dish contains no ingredients of animal origin, including meat, poultry, fish, seafood, dairy, eggs, honey, or any animal-derived additives.

Vegetarian: a vegetarian dish contains no meat, poultry, fish, seafood, or products derived from animal slaughter (e.g. gelatine, animal rennet), but may include dairy products and eggs.

Visual inspection: for the purposes of the Green Key Criteria Catalogue, the term "visual inspection" refers to the on-site component of the audit during which the auditor gathers objective evidence using one or more audit methods, including visual inspection, interviews, observation of activities, sampling and verification of documented information, as applicable.

Wastewater: it includes greywater (from laundry machines, dishwashers and showers), blackwater (from toilets), condensate water from air conditioning systems and water from cleaning operations or other on-site processes.

Wild animals: species that are not legally recognised as domestic or livestock in the country or region, unless they are managed under regulated traditional, agricultural or cultural systems.