EuroFM Student Challenge 2025 – Group 1 Article

Shaping the Future of Facility Management: A Focus on Social Sustainability

Social connection and sense of belonging in the workplace

Social sustainability and circularity, including revitalization and regeneration

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Introduction

The EuroFM Student Challenge 2025 invited participating students to explore how Facility Management can contribute to a more socially sustainable future. As the FM profession evolves, it increasingly shapes social connection, well-being, inclusion and community value within workplaces (Opoku & Lee, 2022). The challenge required each student to conduct two interviews with FM professionals, after which members of our group brought these findings together to create a common overview and developed this into an initial prototype that was later tested and refined during the EuroFM conference.

Our project group focused on two interconnected themes: social connection and belonging in the workplace, and social sustainability and circularity. Each member conducted interviews with FM professionals in different geographical contexts, including professionals based in the Netherlands, Ghana, Nigeria and the United Kingdom. The purpose was to gather a broad set of perspectives and to understand how different workplaces approach social sustainability in practice. The insights gathered through these conversations formed the foundation for a shared concept that the team refined and tested at the EuroFM conference in Trondheim. The result is the Social Sustainability Compass for FM.

Understanding Social Sustainability in Practice

Across all interviews, professionals described social sustainability as something grounded in their daily experience. It is not only a matter of policy or design guidelines but something that people feel when they enter a workplace. They feel it when they are treated with dignity, when leadership communicates clearly, when spaces are intuitive and respectful, and when repair, reuse or revitalisation efforts support a sense of pride and community (Bebon, 2025; Sandoval, 2024).

Belonging emerged as a central theme. By the interviewees, it was described as a feeling of being seen, valued and safe enough to participate fully in the organisation's life, an interpretation aligned with workplace belonging literature (iResearchNet, 2025; Petitta & Ghezzi, 2025). Many professionals noted that hybrid working has made belonging less automatic. With fewer spontaneous interactions and less time spent together, workplaces must be designed more intentionally to support social connection, consistent with findings on reduced informal contact in hybrid settings (National Facilities Direct, 2024).

Circularity also carried a strong social dimension. Interviewees gave examples that fit into the R-ladder model, ranging from repairing furniture, to teams reusing materials during renovations, to sustainable procurement choices that support fair labour conditions. These practices create additional social value by strengthening community ties, reducing wasteful behaviour and offering users a sense of pride in their environment (Tucker, n.d.; TNO, 2024). Despite the diversity of the workplaces involved, four recurring themes appeared across every interview. These themes became the structure of the concept later developed by the team.

Four Insights That Connect All Workplaces

Leadership behaviour emerged as one of the most influential factors across all interviews. The professionals consistently emphasised that leadership shapes whether people feel they

belong. Research supports this: inclusive and clear leadership fosters dignity, trust and psychological safety (Liu et al., 2024; Shore et al., 2011). In contrast, when leadership becomes unpredictable or distant, that sense of belonging quickly weakens.

Alongside leadership, interviewees repeatedly described the importance of everyday micro-interactions. Belonging grows through small moments of human contact: greetings, brief conversations, informal support and shared routines. This matches work showing that social ties and informal contact strongly influence well-being (Kawachi, 2001; Jain, 2023). With hybrid working reducing natural encounters, FM now plays an essential role in creating environments that invite people to reconnect, for example through shared spaces like coffee corners (Kuzuoglu et al., 2024).

Another insight arose from the way workplaces communicate through their physical design. Spaces send signals about organisational values long before anyone speaks. A well-maintained, accessible and intuitive environment communicates dignity, care and respect, while spaces that feel neglected or confusing suggest the opposite, this idea is supported by research on the psychological influence of healthy and accessible buildings (Kivlehan, 2025). Several interviewees described the physical environment as a "silent messenger" that shapes how people interpret the culture of an organisation.
The conversations also highlighted the social value embedded in circularity. Repairing, reusing and revitalising materials does more than conserve resources. These practices bring people together, support local expertise, reinforce a shared identity and demonstrate care for both people and place. In many workplaces, circularity was closely linked to belonging because it reflects a mindset of stewardship and community responsibility (Graham, 2024; Sandoval, 2024; KPMG, n.d.).

Developing the Social Sustainability Compass

With these insights in mind, our team found a way to translate them into a practical tool that FM professionals could use in daily decision making. The result is the Social Sustainability Compass. The compass does not prescribe solutions. Instead, it is a practical tool that prompts reflection and helps FM professionals recognise the social impact of their choices (SFMI, 2022; IWFM, n.d.).

The compass is structured around the four insights identified during the research. The first direction focuses on leadership and behaviour, encouraging reflection on how leaders influence dignity, trust and psychological safety (Liu et al., 2024). The second direction addresses belonging and connection by prompting questions about how people are welcomed, recognised and engaged in workplace life (Petitta & Ghezzi, 2025). The third direction turns toward space and design, highlighting how the physical environment communicates values and enables meaningful interaction (Kivlehan, 2025). The final direction brings attention to circularity and revitalisation, emphasising how repair, reuse and regenerative choices create additional social value (Tucker, n.d.; Sandoval, 2024).

The purpose of the compass is to offer a clear starting point for conversations within FM teams, leadership groups or project settings. Because it is simple, visual and intuitive, it can be used

regardless of an organisation's size or maturity level. The compass is not tied to any cultural or national context.

Testing the Concept at the EuroFM Conference

During the EuroFM conference in Trondheim, the team tested the prototype with a few researchers and professionals and this helped refine the final concept. Participants responded positively to the clarity and accessibility of the compass. Many described it as a useful bridge between abstract ideas and practical FM decisions. Something often noted as a challenge in sustainable FM practice (Cifre, 2024). They noted that the compass captured the human dimension of FM in a way that felt both simple and meaningful.

Professionals also provided suggestions that strengthened the tool. They encouraged to include more examples of how the compass could be used in day-to-day FM activities. They also highlighted the importance of showing how the four directions relate to one another and support a holistic understanding of social sustainability. This feedback was incorporated into the final version presented at the conference wrap-up session.

A Tool for the Future of Facility Management

The Social Sustainability Compass reflects a wider shift that is reshaping Facility Management. Technical performance remains essential, but it is no longer enough on its own. Organisations increasingly expect FM to contribute to well-being, connection and culture (WCS Facilities Management, 2024). They expect FM to help people feel at home, supported and respected in their work environment (Bebon, 2025).

Circularity is also expanding beyond environmental performance. When repair and reuse generate pride, when revitalisation strengthens community identity and when procurement supports fair and responsible practices, circularity becomes a social asset besides a material one (Graham, 2024; Sandoval, 2024).

Most importantly, the compass demonstrates that social sustainability is not unique to one country or one organisational culture. The interviews took place in different geographical contexts, different FM professionals and organisations in different sectors. But the core insights were shared, people everywhere value respect, they value clarity, they value comfortable and accessible spaces. They value opportunities to connect and they value workplaces that take care of both people and resources.

Conclusion

The EuroFM Student Challenge gave the opportunity to learn from diverse workplaces and translate these insights into a tool that supports the future development of Facility Management. The Social Sustainability Compass encourages FM professionals to reflect on the social impact of their decisions and to take small, practical steps that strengthen belonging and well-being. It shows that social sustainability is not a distant ambition but something that grows through everyday choices in leadership, interaction, design and circular practice.

Facility Management shapes human experience. With tools like the Social Sustainability Compass, it can do so with greater intention, compassion and social value.

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