

Furniture shops

Sustainable furniture: the story so-fa

ALEX CRUMBIE examines how sustainable UK furniture shops are and presents a trial version of Ethical Consumer's new scoring system.



Whether a joy or a chore, sourcing furniture for your home is a necessity at some point in life. This guide to furniture shops ranks the biggest brands in the market, alongside some of the lesser-known but supposedly more sustainable ones.

You will notice that the Ethiscore table on p34 looks different from usual and the scoring is out of 100. For some time, a team of our researchers has been developing a new rating system, which we are presenting here for the first time. We believe that it has significant advantages to the old system but would love to know what you think to make sure that we are heading in the right direction. See p37 for more about our new system and how you can give feedback.

What makes furniture sustainable?

The main measure of sustainability when it comes to furniture is the sourcing of the materials used to make it. For this guide, we have focused on two key materials for

the furniture sector: timber and cotton. You can see how each company scored for their sourcing policies on these materials

A fully referenced version of this Product Guide is on our website

on the Ethiscore table.

As always, we have also analysed other important aspects of corporate activity in order to give a holistic picture of each company's ethical standing. Alongside timber and cotton sourcing we also assessed:

- **Climate** (how is the company reducing its carbon impact?)
- **Animals** (does the company use animal products, such as leather in its chairs?)
- **Workers** (what is the company doing to uphold workers' rights in its supply chain?)
- **Tax** (is the company likely to be using tax avoidance strategies?)
- **Company Ethos** (what type of company is it? Is it a not-for-profit, a charity, a B-Corp, etc?)
- **Wider Issues** (is the company and its wider group involved in other problematic sectors, such as military/arms or fossil fuel production?)

Home furnishing and accessories

Most of the furniture shops in this guide sell a far wider range of goods than just sofas, beds and wardrobes. And we're often contacted by our readers and asked about where to find ethical bedding, carpets, cushions and rugs, as well as other items like ethical lighting

and kitchenware.

Some of these items may be available from the specialist ethical online retailers we list in our website guide, and some may also be available second hand (see p34).

If you can't find them there, the top three companies on our table, John Lewis, M&S and Next sell pretty much all of these things. The policies they have on cotton and workers' rights, such as they are, should apply across their entire ranges.

Timber

Timber is one of the central components of furniture production. It has the potential to be a fantastic sustainable material because it is natural, hard-wearing, recyclable, biodegradable, and it stores carbon. However, if timber is not sourced responsibly then it can contribute to the loss of the Earth's forests, some of which are millions of years old.

Forests cover 4.06 billion ha (31%) of the Earth's land surface, but coverage is shrinking. Between 1990 and 2020, deforestation (the conversion of forest to other land uses), accounted for a loss of 420 million ha. Though the rate of deforestation is slowing, 10 million ha per year was lost between 2015-2020

Why are forests so important?

Preserving the Earth's forests is essential. Firstly, they support human life, both as a home, particularly for Indigenous communities, and as a provider of vital resources – from food to construction materials. They are also host to an abundance of flora and fauna and provide habitat for 80% of amphibian species, 75% of bird species, and 68% of mammal species, and tropical forests contain about 60% of all vascular plant species.

Forests are also an important means of fighting climate change because they absorb a significant amount of the CO₂ emissions produced by human activity. In 2021, when Elon Musk tweeted that he would donate \$100 million towards a prize for the best carbon capture technology, the most liked response was simply: a tree.

What drives deforestation?

Although figures vary, in part due to differences in definition, it is widely accepted that agriculture, especially

Timber not sourced responsibly can contribute to the loss of the Earth's forests, some of which are millions of years old.

the clearing of forest for livestock, is the biggest driver of deforestation. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), agriculture accounted for 90% of all deforestation globally between 2000 and 2018.

But demand for timber products, such as furniture, also has a significant impact on forests. IKEA, for example, which describes itself as "one of the leading wood users in the retail sector", used 20 million m³ of wood in 2022 – almost 1% of the global total. With overall consumption of wood products expected to grow 37% by 2050, it is vital that timber is sustainably sourced.

for future generations."

Essentially, sustainable timber is timber that has come from responsibly managed sources: it has been grown and felled legally, and the rights of other stakeholders (particularly the environment and people that rely on the forest, such as Indigenous communities) are respected.

The UK is the second largest net importer of forest products in the world, so it is vital that UK companies are sourcing forest products responsibly, especially if they are sourcing from countries with weak regulations. ●

What is sustainable timber?

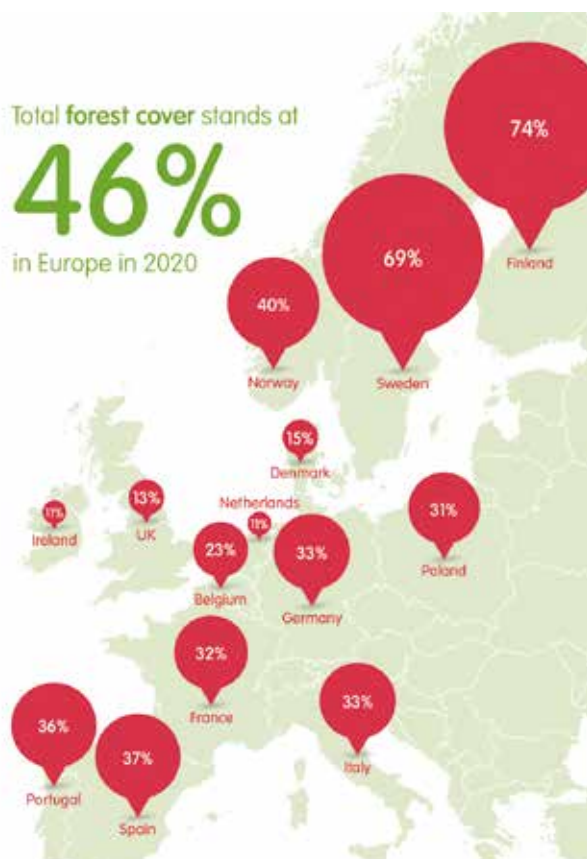
Given that preserving forests is so essential, it may seem odd to speak of any sort of timber as 'sustainable'. According to the Rainforest Alliance: "The hallmark of sustainable forestry, from a purely ecological perspective, is the extent to which forestry practices mimic natural patterns of disturbance and regeneration. Sustainable forestry balances the needs of the environment, wildlife, and forest communities – supporting decent incomes while conserving our forests

WHAT TYPE OF WOOD SHOULD I BUY?

The most sustainable timber is that which is recycled or reclaimed, so try to source this over virgin timber, if possible.

If you are buying virgin wood, try to buy local FSC-certified wood – if you are in the UK, this means trying to buy UK timber. For more on certifications see p36.

For a comprehensive guide to different types of wood and whether they are under threat, Friends of the Earth have a useful online resource called 'A-Z of Good Wood' (<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/sustainable-living/different-types-wood-timber-az-good-wood>).



TIMBER SOURCING POLICY RATINGS

The only company to score over 50 for Timber on our table was Kingfisher (B&Q), which had a relatively strong timber sourcing policy and just under 62% of its timber/paper products were FSC certified.

IKEA claimed that, in 2022, 99.9% of its wood was FSC-certified or recycled (recycled content accounted for about 15%). This is impressive, but we deducted 50 marks because several reports, notably from the non-profit group Earthsight, found IKEA had been using timber from illegally felled trees.

Sustainable Furniture is also worthy of note because a large part of its product offering (it is not clear exactly how much) is from reclaimed timber.

We explain more about timber certifications and illegal timber on page 36 below.

Furniture shops

NEW RATING SYSTEM

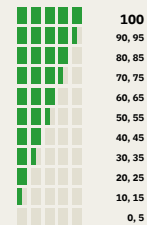
We've used a new rating system for this guide. For more details on how it works, see p37.

USING THE TABLE

Ethiscore

The higher the score, the better the company. Scored out of 100.

- GREEN (good) = 68+
- AMBER (average) = 34 – 67
- RED (poor) = 0 – 33



Categories
Each column scored out of 100. The higher the score the better.

BRAND	ETHISCORE (OUT OF 100)	CLIMATE	TIMBER	ANIMALS	WORKERS	COTTON	TAX CONDUCT	COMPANY ETHOS	WIDER ISSUES	UHC
R John Lewis	47	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	John Lewis Partnership Trust Ltd
R Marks & Spencer	44	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Marks and Spencer Group Plc
R Next	44	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Next Plc
Futon Company	35	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Futon Ltd
Warren Evans	35	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	3 In A Sack Ltd
B&Q	34	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Kingfisher Plc
R Sustainable Furniture	34	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Sustainable-Furniture (UK) Ltd
Barker & Stonehouse	33	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Barker & Stonehouse Ltd
DFS	31	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	DFS Furniture Plc
Sofology	31	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	DFS Furniture Plc
Argos	30	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	J Sainsbury Plc
Habitat	30	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	J Sainsbury Plc
IKEA	30	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Ingka Holding B.V
Furniture Village	26	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Furniture Village Holdings Ltd
Oak Furniture Land	26	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	LMN Finance DAC
X ScS	25	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	ScS Group Plc
X B&M	18	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	B&M European Value Retail S.A.
X Bensons for Beds	18	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Blue Group Topco Sarl
X Amazon	4	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	Amazon.com, Inc

B Best Buys
 R Recommended
 X Brands to avoid

BUYING SECOND-HAND FURNITURE

From an environmental perspective, buying second-hand, upcycled or antique furniture is the best option.

One recent study found that buying a second-hand sofa saved 0.56 tonnes of CO₂ when compared with buying new, while buying a second hand dining table or wardrobe saved 0.46 tonnes.

There are lots of places to buy second-hand furniture these days, and you can pick up some beautiful pieces for a fraction of the price of new items.

Our 2022 Climate Gap report (www.ethicalconsumer.org/climate-gap-report) noted how in 2021 nearly one in two furniture items bought in the UK were second hand, an increase from one in three in 2020.

- **Freecycle:** sign up to your local group online for free furniture and other items.
- **Second-hand shops:** search your local area to see if there are any charity or second-hand shops nearby – some specialise in second-hand furniture. Our web article on buying second-hand furniture looks at how some charities behind the shops might not align with everyone's ethical beliefs – www.ethicalconsumer.org/home-garden/buying-second-hand-furniture.

WHAT TO BUY

- **Is it second hand, upcycled or antique?** Reusing or upcycling furniture is the most sustainable option.
- **Is the timber sustainably sourced?** If you are buying timber products, the order of sustainability is: reclaimed/recycled timber, local FSC-certified timber, FSC certified.
- **Is the cotton certified Fairtrade or organic?** If you are buying furniture containing cotton, opt for Fairtrade or certified organic. If that isn't an option, go for a product made from Better Cotton.

WHAT NOT TO BUY

- **Is the virgin timber uncertified?** Avoid imported virgin timber that isn't FSC certified.
- **Is it made from leather?** Unless it is second-hand, buying leather supports the livestock industry. Most leather production also has damaging environmental effects.
- **Is it made by a company that avoids paying tax?** Try to buy from companies that are paying their fair share of tax. Use the 'Tax Conduct' column in this guide to see which companies scored badly.

- **The Reuse Network** website is a useful resource for finding reuse centres near you: <https://reuse-network.org.uk>
- **Online marketplaces:** Preloved, eBay and Gumtree can all be good for finding second-hand furniture, sometimes for free.
- **Antique or vintage shops:** you may have to pay more for items in antique shops, but they still might be cheaper than buying new ones.

Score table highlights

Climate

The only company to get full marks for this category was Next. We expect companies to meet a number of criteria, including explaining what they have already done to cut their carbon impact, how they will reduce it in future, reporting emissions, and having reduction targets in line with international agreements.

We are less stringent on smaller firms, but we still expect all companies to be discussing their carbon impact to some extent. So it was disappointing to see supposedly more sustainable companies such as Warren Evans and Sustainable Furniture scoring only 10 out of 100 in this category.

Workers

In this category, we examined what measures companies were taking to uphold workers' rights in their supply chain, primarily focusing on the transparency of their approach. Next scored 60, the highest mark relative to other brands, and is notable for publishing lists of its suppliers up to the third tier of its supply chain.

John Lewis and Warren Evans also scored relatively well, both getting 50; the latter was given a partial exemption for being a small business and making its products in the UK.

Animals

Companies that used any animal-derived products, such as leather, scored 0, unless they only used recycled animal products. As you can see from the score table, use of animal products is widespread across the sector. Futon Company was the only company that did not appear to use animal products, and only missed out on getting full marks in this category because it lacked a statement or policy on this matter.

Sustainable Furniture scored 0, but it only sold a very small amount of leather (in its parasols).

Company Ethos

Only three companies were awarded marks for Company Ethos: John Lewis Partnership for being an employee-owned business; Sustainable Furniture for primarily selling products that are environmental alternatives; and IKEA for being a certified Living Wage employer.

Cotton

Unlike in the clothing sector, we found relatively little in regard to cotton sourcing policies in the furniture sector. M&S scored the highest mark, with nearly all of its cotton being Better Cotton, Fairtrade, organic, or recycled. IKEA, John Lewis, and Sainsbury's (Argos/Habitat) also scored reasonably well.

Tax Conduct

Companies that scored 0 in this category were considered likely to be using tax avoidance strategies. To get 100 in this category, companies had to be certified by the Fair Tax Mark,

Buying second-hand, upcycled or antique furniture is best. See opposite for more on second-hand furniture.



For new furniture, John Lewis came top of the table, closely followed by M&S and Next.



Sustainable Furniture scored a little lower, but sold a wide range of reclaimed timber.



Amazon – for too many reasons to list here! You could also avoid **B&M**, **Bensons for Beds**, and **ScS**, all of which are at the bottom of the score table and scored 0 in our Timber category.



which only certifies companies that can prove they are not engaging in tax avoidance.

Wider Issues

This category takes a broad look at the company and its wider group to see whether it is involved in controversial sectors (such as fossil fuel, arms, tobacco, industrial agriculture/factory farming) or has been criticised by a reputable third party on any ethical issues that haven't been picked up elsewhere. In this category, companies start at 100 by default and marks are deducted.

Seven brands lost marks in this category. All of them lost 20 marks each for selling factory-farmed animal products, such as meat. Amazon also lost marks for selling tobacco and weapons, and being fined for a major GDPR breach. Argos/Habitat (Sainsbury's) also lost marks for selling tobacco and petrol, while B&M and John Lewis (Waitrose) lost marks for selling tobacco. ●

●● **The hierarchy of sustainable timber: reclaimed/recycled, local FSC-certified, FSC certified.** ●●

Furniture shops

Timber certifications

As in most sectors, stamps and certifications for sustainable timber abound, but the two that dominate are the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC).



FSC

The FSC is the better of the two and has potential to be a strong certification, but has been rocked by numerous scandals over the years, leading to significant founding members leaving, such as Greenpeace in 2018.

In 2021, Greenpeace published 'Certified Destruction', a damning report that assessed a number of major certification schemes. About the FSC, it said: "The FSC has a number of strengths, including its multi-stakeholder governance structure and strong forest management standards ... It is also the most credible and effective forestry certification scheme, and as one of the first schemes it has served as a model for certification more generally. However, the FSC still has a number of serious and even fundamental weaknesses."



PEFC

The PEFC claims to be "the largest forest certification system in the world" and "endorse[s] national forest certification systems developed through multi-stakeholder processes and tailored to local priorities and conditions."

However, according to Greenpeace's report, the PEFC "is more business-led than the FSC and generally has weaker core standards. It is dominated by governments and economic interests, and the governance structures of PEFC-endorsed schemes do not have full and balanced representation of economic, environmental, social, and Indigenous interests. It is considered a weak and industry-dominated certification scheme, especially in comparison to the FSC."

Cotton

Cotton is widely used by most furniture companies, for sofas, mattresses, and other items. Conventional cotton cultivation is heavily reliant on chemicals, which are harmful to both the people that produce it and the environment. While cotton covered 2.4% of the world's cultivated land in 2019, it used 4.7% of the world's pesticides and 10% of insecticides.

It is also a crop that is widely associated with labour-rights abuses. For example, every year in Turkmenistan, the government forces public sector workers and private businesses to meet cotton quotas, resulting in both forced and child labour. The Responsible Sourcing Network (RSN) campaigns against this by asking brands to pledge to eliminate Turkmen cotton from their supply chains.

In 2010, the RSN and Cotton Campaign also launched the Company Pledge Against Forced Labor in the Cotton Sector of Uzbekistan, but this boycott was lifted in 2022 after no state-imposed forced labour was found in the 2021 harvest. It is a fantastic example of a successful boycott campaign!

Ethical Cotton

We recommend buying organic, Fairtrade, or recycled cotton where possible.



Many of the brands in this guide source 'Better Cotton' – cotton grown under the Better Cotton Initiative, which was set up in 2005 to reduce water and pesticide use. It is better than 'conventionally grown' cotton, but not as good as organic, Fairtrade, or recycled.

We have written extensively on cotton in previous issues, and on our website, so for more detail see our webpage on 'The Ethics of Cotton'.

UK TIMBER REGULATION: FAILING TO PREVENT DEFORESTATION ABROAD

UK timber regulation (UKTR) states that timber placed on the market in Great Britain must have been "harvested without contravening any of the applicable legislation in the country of origin." Those selling to the GB market must operate a system of due diligence, consisting of "information gathering; risk assessment; and, where applicable, risk mitigation" to ensure that the timber they are selling has been legally sourced.

However, this legislation is failing to ensure that timber entering the UK is truly sustainable, especially because some countries do not have sufficiently robust timber legislation.

A recent report by Friends of the Earth argues for stronger UK timber regulation in order to halt deforestation abroad. It claims that the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS), which is endorsed by the PEFC, has "failed to protect local communities and forests" from unsustainable corporate logging, labelling it "an exercise in greenwashing."

The UK is the third-largest importer of MTCS timber globally, and timber is being imported as 'sustainable', despite the abuses of corporate power occurring in Malaysia.



Kelly Hill/Friends of the Earth

Celine and Komeok work with the communities in the Upper Baram area, which hosts some of Malaysia's last intact primary rainforest. They held a solidarity ritual ceremony and ash blessing in the turbine hall of the Tate Modern to mourn the destruction of their forest home and to call on the power of collective global action. For several decades this forest has been under threat from timber extraction by Malaysian timber and palm oil conglomerate Samling, with a huge impact on wildlife and local people. Samling timber continues to be MTCS certified.

NEW RATING SYSTEM

For over thirty years, Ethical Consumer has been rating companies according to their ethics. Over this period there have been many changes to the landscape, both to the corporate world and civil society's ethical concerns, so the way we rate companies is constantly evolving.

Because of this, we have been working on a new scoring system for some time that aims to be:

- a) more easily understood by readers and the companies we rate
- b) more specific to the products under review
- c) more nuanced in the way it scores companies.

SCORING OUT OF 100

Our current scoring system starts companies on a score of 14, with marks subtracted for bad practice. There is also one positive 'Company Ethos' mark available for good practice and up to five possible Product Sustainability marks, which focus specifically on the product rather than the wider company. The total that a product/brand can score in the current system is 20.

While this system has its advantages, it is also rather unorthodox, and we have had feedback from readers and companies that it is confusing. Under the new system used for this guide, the total 'Ethiscore' is out of 100. We have chosen 100 because it allows for greater nuance and it is a familiar figure which is easily understandable.

Not only is the total Ethiscore out of 100, but we have scored each category (e.g. Tax, Animals) out of 100. This gives greater potential for nuance than our current system, which only allows

us to deduct a whole mark for a 'Worst' rating, half a mark for a 'Middle' rating, or no marks for a 'Best' rating.

MORE USE OF POSITIVE MARKS

We have also changed our approach to how our scoring is applied. Instead of primarily taking marks away for bad practice, we have moved to a mixed approach: companies start at 0 and marks are gained for good policy or practice but can also be lost if we find reports of bad practice. For example, IKEA gained a number of marks for its timber sourcing policies but was penalised due to the numerous reports that found that, despite these policies, it has been sourcing timber unsustainably in practice.

BESPOKE CATEGORIES

In the current system, we use twenty categories to score companies, which you can see at the top of each score table. However, in most instances, some of these categories are not relevant. For example, electronics companies generally aren't involved in sourcing palm oil, but the way the scoring works makes it seem like they receive a 'Best' rating in this category as no marks are deducted.

This generally meant that companies involved in multiple sectors (usually bigger companies) scored badly, while it would be easier for companies involved in only one sector to score well.

Also, while these categories cover a range of ethical issues, sometimes it feels that other key issues are not

well represented. For example, an important issue for tech companies is how they approach privacy, but we currently don't have a 'Privacy' category.

In our new system, we will have fewer categories, but they will be better suited to each particular product guide – and some of them merge several of the old categories into one. This way, every category should be relevant to every brand in that guide (no more Palm Oil category when we look at tech companies!) and new, bespoke categories will be used when relevant.

In this guide, the effect of fewer categories has meant that some of the bigger companies which had comprehensive policies are at the top of the score table. Some of the smaller brands are not as high as they might have been in the old system.

WIDER ISSUES

The wider issues column is discussed in more detail on page 35.

FEEDBACK

We really value the views of our subscribers, so it would be very useful to receive your feedback on this new style of guide.

If possible, please use the QR code below which will take you to a short online questionnaire.

Or use this link: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/HVGNXZ5

If you are not able to complete the online questionnaire, please send your feedback to: letters@ethicalconsumer.org



Companies behind the brands

Barker and Stonehouse is an independent company that sells a wide array of furniture, with 18 stores across the UK. More than 30% of its wooden furniture is made from recycled timber, a proportion it claims is "the largest in the UK".

Futon Company is an independent company that primarily sells – you guessed it – futons! Its original mattresses were all made using 100% organic cotton, but the company appears to have moved away from organic cotton in more recent years.

Sustainable Furniture is an independent company based in Cornwall, specialising in reclaimed timber furniture. It lost marks under our Animals category for selling parasols that contained leather – though this appeared to be the only product that used animal derivatives.

Warren Evans is an independent company that makes its beds and mattresses in the UK, using only FSC timber. It boasts a host of awards, including being three-times winner of The Observer's 'Ethical Retailer of the Year'. The company came towards the top of our score-table, though it was not very transparent about its ethical and sustainability policies. If it had been, we suspect it may have scored better. ■