

the knowledge

Learning from London

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Greening the Third Sector



This report reviews the interim findings of a pilot study into the environmental performance of the third sector.

The first in a series of occasional papers from The City Bridge Trust - it may be downloaded from our website: www.citybridgetrust.org.uk

Introduction

The Doomsday clock has moved a couple of minutes closer to midnight. It now stands at five minutes to twelve – for the Chicago-based atomic scientists, who are the custodians of this symbolic clock, now rank climate change explicitly alongside nuclear war as the greatest threats to human civilisation. Yet, amid the fear, most of us seem to believe that we *can* survive into the next century, provided only that we make the necessary adjustments – *and fast*.

So what do we as funders, charities, community organisations, social enterprises – collectively the ‘Third Sector’ – need to do to bring about these changes? In a move to see how the third sector is faring, and how it may need to improve its environmental performance, The City Bridge Trust embarked on a pilot programme of environmental audits of a dozen different charities across the capital. We aimed to engage a cross-section of sizes and types of organisation – and we included five which are the London bases of national membership bodies, so that the lessons learnt might easily ripple out to a wider audience.

The Rationale

Good environmental practice is now incumbent on all of us – it is integral to good citizenship. Just as the third sector is increasingly challenged over whether our investment policies are properly aligned to our charitable objectives, so also do we need to consider whether our environmental performance is well integrated to the services we provide. Are we unwittingly contributing “upstream” to the problems which land on our doorstep “downstream”? It is vital for our credibility that, for example, a homelessness charity does not ignore the rising numbers of people likely to be made homeless by climate change; and a charity serving older people will be outraged by the numbers of old people who suffer or die during a heatwave.

The Eco-Audit Process

We commissioned 3 Acorns Eco-Audits to carry out the audits on our behalf. The process involves:

- Meeting with management to introduce the concept, to get an understanding of how the organisation runs, how to match the process to its existing culture and to set out a timetable.
- Site visit to the office and to a cross-sample of any other premises.
- Recording of energy use, waste generated, travel patterns and purchasing practice.
- Discussions with staff to agree the need for urgent environmental action and to tease out any suggestions they may add from their own knowledge and experience.
- One-to-one interviews with the decision makers identified during the meetings and walkabouts.

From these, 12 individual eco-audit reports have been produced summarising good practice already in place and making recommendations for improvements. The reports also cover policy, communications, annual monitoring procedures and the extent of each organisation's influence – whether through lobbying or through services to members. These are to be followed up by a return visit after six months, to identify progress, to check what was easily implemented and to work out how to resolve any difficulties. The return visit is also intended to maintain momentum.

The government's current initiative Every Action Counts offers advice and encourages 'environmental champions' to drive changes within voluntary and community groups. There is great value, however, in having an individual audit: an outside expert can take a fresh view of habits that may be too familiar for us to have noticed, talk through the obstacles and help to devise tailored solutions. Additionally, the eco-auditor can help to embed good practice throughout the organisation – from management policy through to the daily actions of staff, volunteers and users.

Key Findings

All 12 of the organisations responded enthusiastically to the exercise, as one would expect in a sector driven more by values than self-interest, and each took time out to engage voluntarily with the issues. All had taken positive steps well before the eco-auditor arrived on the scene – paper recycling, for example, proved to be the norm everywhere; and 50% of the organisations bought Fairtrade tea and coffee as a matter of course. But the baseline results do suggest that most of us have a long way to go if we are really to put our environmental house in order. Our 12 organisations are hardly a statistical sample, but they do give us an interesting snapshot of where the third sector may be in relation to sustainability practice.

Some highlights will help to illustrate the problems we face:

Energy Efficiency Most of the organisations we saw had inefficient lighting controls. Many had broken radiator controls or badly-fitting single-glazed windows. Only a quarter of our sample had efficient gas boilers; and five had air-conditioning. In one office, central heating was switched on in summer, to counteract the faulty air-conditioning! Central heating hours were often not aligned to building use – or were set as high as 26°, against a recommended temperature of 19°.

Recycling Although all waste paper was recycled, only three organisations completed the loop by buying recycled paper for photocopiers and printers; and none used it for external publications. Only one had full recycling in place for glass, cans and plastic bottles.

Travel Only one organisation had a staff travel plan, and most of those we saw took flights as part of their work.

Purchasing Fairtrade tea, sugar and coffee would seem to have penetrated half of our sample so far. Is the other half an easy win? Only two organisations used environmentally friendly cleaning materials. Seven used plastic bottle (rather than mains-based) water coolers, and an alarming ten still used disposable plastic drinking cups.

Awareness & Monitoring

Most of the participants did not have full figures to establish their carbon footprint. None were yet on a green electricity tariff, and none were offsetting their carbon. Most had figures for un-recycled waste, but only half knew how much water they use. Most did not know how old their boilers are. In one instance, three large freezers were found lying empty – but switched on – for the last three years!

What are the Obstacles?**Policy & Structural**

Most third sector organisations concentrate on carrying out their mission. Care for the environment may not figure in the core aims and, given time and funding pressures, it is understandable that trustees and management may not yet have given it the priority it needs. Formal environmental policies have been adopted by a significant minority of organisations, but are not yet embedded as the norm. There is even the fear that stakeholders or funders will see environmental improvement as diverting resources away from charitable objectives. And environmental practice is seldom included in the performance requirements of service level agreements.

Awareness

The message of immediate and local responsibility is only slowly getting through. Simple reminders to switch off lights or avoid running unnecessary hot water are often absent. Building facilities managers often do not have eco-awareness in their sights. Where staff have left, it is common to find that knowledge of how the heating or hot water systems work has gone with them.

Money

Shortage of funds easily leads to buying the cheapest – regardless of environmental cost. Fundraising departments are geared to core aims, and there are in any case few funders who will directly assist environmental improvement. There are few tax breaks or other incentives to help the third sector make the capital investments for which the payback may take several years. Even though some support is available through the government's Low Carbon Building programme, grants are competitive and they still require investments of time and capital which are beyond the reach of most third sector organisations.

Practical

Much of the third sector is housed in leased or rented premises – often in multi-occupation. Utilities are paid for by the building management or owners, with the cost passed on to tenants. Thus, those responsible for capital investment have no incentive to increase energy efficiency. It is apparent that a large proportion of the sector is housed in very inefficient premises – but there is room for manoeuvre, even if this does demand more imaginative remedies.

Top Tips for the Third Sector

Environmental Policy

- Establish a policy with clear commitments and targets for environmental sustainability.
- Communicate this to your staff, volunteers and users.
- Review it regularly, with an annual report on progress to trustees.

Energy Efficiency

- Install a modern boiler. Where price is a hindrance, check the efficiency saving against current bills to review the real cost.
- Set heating no higher than 19° – every one degree above this adds an average 10% to your heating bill. And align the timing to the hours you need it.
- Use only energy-efficient lighting. Turn off unwanted lights, or fix timers in stairwells or corridors.
- A refrigerator needs be no cooler than 3° or 4°.
- Phase out bulky computer monitors in favour of flat-screen, turn off all IT equipment when not in use – and always overnight.
- Switch to a green electricity supplier.

Recycling & Waste

- Recycle paper, glass, plastic, used ink cartridges, IT equipment and compostable food waste.
- Use only recycled paper.
- Where possible, use electronic documents rather than paper.
- Set printers to double-sided, and print internal notes on the blank sides of used paper.

Water

- Use spray taps for hand washing.
- Install variable flush handles on lavatories that do not already have dual controls – or at least put a brick in the cistern.
- Ensure urinal system only flushes when used – or install waterless devices.
- Check your meter. At one site we visited, a reading at evening and next morning revealed a giant leak beneath the building, which resulted in a vast cost-saving – literally overnight!

Travel

- Pay a bicycle mileage allowance.
- Discourage free parking spaces, except for disabled people or mini-buses.
- Opt for rail, over air, wherever possible.
- Offset your carbon – but check the credentials for real impact among the many schemes on offer.

- Green Purchasing**
- Purchase less – for example, avoid daily lining of bins with plastic bags.
 - Buy environmentally friendly cleaning materials.
 - Buy re-used office furniture, and choose products made from recycled materials.
 - Ask your suppliers to show you their own green supply chain policy.
 - Switch to Fairtrade.

- Communicate**
- The more others are aware of your commitment, the greater your influence.
 - Advertise your greening process on the website.
 - Signing up to a carbon offsetting scheme may authorise you to use a carbon-neutral logo.

Conclusion

Changes such as the steps outlined here do not make themselves. We expect to know a lot more about how easy or hard they are to implement, once our consultant has completed the return visits to the organisations which joined in our pilot.

Meanwhile, we are committed to working with our partners to explore the best ways to resolve the challenges we have identified and to sharing our findings throughout the sector. There are more than 180,000 registered charities in the UK, and the annual turnover of the Charity Sector exceeds £26 billion. This is larger than the UK's agricultural industry – even before we add the growing field of social enterprise. The City Bridge Trust wants to play its part in helping all of the third sector to close the loop between the social and the environmental – and to make the vital shift to a sustainable carbon-neutral economy.

Appendix: List of the Participating Organisations

ACF – Association of Charitable Foundations
 ACEVO – Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations
 Centrepont
 CSV – Community Service Volunteers
 Crisis
 East London Mosque
 Hackney Community Transport
 Merton Voluntary Services Council
 NCVO – National Council for Voluntary Organisations
 ROTA – Race on the Agenda
 RNID – Royal National Institute for Deaf People
 The Building Exploratory

