

While businesses jump over each other to prove their green credentials, charities are being prodded to do the same – by their funders. John Merivale explains what the City Bridge Trust learnt from its pilot scheme of charity eco-audits.

Under the trusteeship of the City of London, the City Bridge Trust traces its origins back to mediaeval times and to old London Bridge – the first stone bridge over the Thames. Our core business is bridge maintenance in the City, but the remit was widened in 1995 so that funds are now also distributed to a range of charitable purposes across all of Greater London.

Our vision is of a fair, inclusive and sustainable London. The Trust's Environment programme has awarded grants for enhancing biodiversity, recycling and for making better use of natural resources to all kinds of environmental education and community projects. Other initiatives have included a London Sustainability exchange to share green knowledge between private, public and the voluntary sectors in London.

All of these schemes are vital, but today's environmental and climate crisis is more than the concern of "green" organisations. We have to explore what sustainability means across the whole of our operation and the charity sector we fund.



Eco-audits

Two years ago we called together a pool of our grantees along with environmental experts to ask them what we should do to help the whole sector move towards better environmental accountability. The upshot was a pilot programme of eco-audits. We chose 12 organisations, a cross-section of sizes and types – including five which are the London bases of national membership bodies, so that the lessons learnt might easily ripple out to a wider audience.

We commissioned the work from 3 Acorns Environmental Transformations. The process involves meeting staff and visiting their buildings to get a picture of energy use, waste generated, travel patterns, and purchasing practice. From there, a report summarises good practice and recommends improvements. The reports also cover policy, communications, annual monitoring, and the extent of each organisation's influence. A follow-up visit after six months or a year is designed to keep up the momentum, and to measure the difference.

Our pilot revealed a sector enthusiastic to do its bit, but nevertheless falling short. Energy efficiency is patchy – we even found horror stories such as central heating switched on in summer just to counteract faulty air-conditioning; or plain lack of awareness as to how to use the controls. Green electricity tariffs are rare, and none of the organisations we saw are offsetting their carbon. Recycling waste paper is normal, but only a few groups completed the loop by buying recycled paper in the first place. Fairtrade tea and coffee have penetrated much of the supply chain, but environmentally friendly cleaning materials are rare, and an alarming majority were still wedded to disposable plastic drinking cups.

The third sector faces obstacles, of course: hard cash is a problem when it comes to capital improvements. And there are practical difficulties: many organisations are housed in rented premises, often in multi-occupation, and may have little scope to change the utilities or make capital investments in insulation or efficiency.

This is where an individual audit can help – for an outside expert can bring a fresh slant to familiar habits, and devise tailor-made solutions. At the NCVO, for example, the audit led directly to group purchases of both green electricity and green stationery for the membership – a huge impact which helps to embed sustainable practice as the norm. And remember, most eco-friendly measures actually bring savings in day-to-day costs.

The environment vs core objectives

Nevertheless, there was anxiety over whether stakeholders and funders would see environmental improvement as diverting resources away from core charitable objectives. Last October we contributed to a seminar at the Charity Commission, where the regulator stated its position on the issue. Although it emphasises that charity trustees have a duty to act within their objects and maximise their resources to that effect, the Commission says that as 'green' issues become more prominent "charities will become increasingly expected to demonstrate how they are environmentally friendly and may risk reputational damage and reduced donor support if they cannot".

Additionally, for charities which are also companies, the Companies Act 2006 imposes a new duty on directors to take note of the impact of the company's operations on the community and the environment as they act to achieve the company's purposes.

Making sustainability the norm

Our concern has been about the best way to encourage and enable action – we do not want a punitive framework, nor further hoops which might draw only lip service. The sector has great capacity for change – there are more than 160,000 registered charities in the UK, with an annual turnover around £26bn. Add to this the influence of the educational and campaigning charities over the rest of the economy, and the potential to catalyse change is enormous. The response to our eco-audits – by grantees, the media, and our partners in the funding world – indicates that the time for questions has passed. We just need to get on and do it.

John Merivale is a grants officer at the City Bridge Trust. He began his career as a landscape architect and has extensive experience in urban design and regeneration, including the supervision of a Historic Landscapes restoration grant scheme for English Heritage in the wake of the great storms of 1987 and 1990. From 1996 he set up and ran a new Groundwork trust in South West London and in 2005 joined the City Bridge Trust, where he handles various grants, and has a particular interest in the Trust's environmental funding.

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