

Audit of the Ecology Building Society's Environmental Policy

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MERCi

INTRODUCTION

All paragraph numbers in this report refer to the Ecology Building Society' (EBS) Environment Policy, approved by the board on the 27th April 2007. This latest Policy builds on the previous Environmental Policy approved on the 17th December 2004 and incorporates the findings of an evaluation held on the 29th August 2005.

This audit, held on the 19th June 2007, shows an organisation committed to delivering environmental gains both through its lending policies, through its head office building and in its purchasing.

One area highlighted for attention in 2005 was training. Improvement to the training programme is ongoing and a training policy is steadily being developed. This should be an area for focus over the coming year. Staff appeared to be well engaged, from the cleaners through to the CEO, and take an active interest in delivering the environmental policy. On the whole it appears to be an active document and is undergoing continuous improvement as technologies improve.

1. BUSINESS ACTIVITIES AND PRACTICES

This audit shows that just as in the evaluation of 2005, all points under this heading have received attention. Lending is still fully documented and subject to routine investigation. There is no reason to doubt the assertions of the Policy. The only points requiring some attention are:

1.4 Audit. Suggest slightly rewording this to give greater clarity and consistency. "From 2007, an audit of the Society's *environmental* practices will be conducted by an external body and will be used to ensure that the practice commitments made in the Environmental Policy are evaluated as a baseline for business compliance and future improvement actions. *As a measure of good practice the Society will require all service providers to provide evidence that they are complying with stated environmental commitments.*

1.6 Training. Although there are a range of training opportunities such as handouts, emails reminding people of issues, blue skies, etc., the actual Training Policy is still to be developed. It is suggested that the coming year could provide an opportunity to produce a structured induction process and training programme. This should cover how the building works and give staff the confidence and resources in which to engage with the Environmental Policy and would help to improve the environmental performance of the building and the Society.

1.8 P.R. Website provides good opportunities to promote best practice from the Society such as water conservation and pemaculture garden.

2. LENDING PARAMETERS

2.1 PHILOSOPHICAL CRITERIA

Definition of sustainable development used is the 'Bruntland' definition and this might need to be revisited or increased to include a definition that includes ecological limits - see WWF's education for sustainable learning.

2.2.2 Sustainable lifestyles and sustainable economic activity.

Suggest including 'social enterprise' as a category.

2.2.3 Other ecologically positive projects and ventures

Suggest including Education for Sustainable Development as a category as well as Environmental Education.

Perhaps reinstate vegetarian and vegan in with the organic and wholefood.

3. PROPERTY AND FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

3.1 PREMISES

3.1.1 Site

The permaculture garden is well established. The permaculture plans were available to view and up loading some of these plans as a case study on the website might be an opportunity to showcase best practice.

Although the gardens are well established there is no outside seating for the staff to enjoy their lunch or breaks. Suggest that a suitable recycled/reclaimed or cob build bench be put in the garden. If this is situated away from the main road, on the sheltered side of the building, this will reduce the possibility of the area being mis-used outside office hours.

There were a few containers next to the compost bins – lime putty and an unidentified white container – perhaps these should have been put in the secure lock-up.

The car parking area is rather compacted but evidence of water 'pooling' was minimal. It was indicated that future plans might include 'grass-creting' the area. There was evidence that some additional maintenance of the approach to the front entrance would help to present a neat and tidy HQ.

There are ground lights in the car park but the majority of these have been vandalised and smashed (the site is open to the public). Lighting within the entire site is under review and a balance between security, energy use and functionality is required.

3.1.2 Building

The technical details of the HQ are available in the environmental specification. There is a digital display in the foyer that measures the energy use. Perhaps a comparison of the energy use of a less sustainable building might highlight the excellent standards being set by the Ecology Building Society (EBS) HQ. Certificates are on display in two areas of the foyer and it might increase the message and visual impact for them all to be brought together and displayed in one place.

The building is light and airy downstairs but there are some technical problems with the ventilation system, especially on the upper level, which experiences high temperatures. The velux windows have been placed half way down the roof so there is a heat trap. Staff have had to bring in electric fans in order to remain comfortable at work. The Environmental Specification mentions that the natural ventilation 'depends largely on a successful management strategy and co-operation by all staff members'. It would appear that the system is not functioning as well as it could, however, this might be partially alleviated by staff training. Suggest that a comprehensive induction and training

programme be drawn up and specialist advice sought in order to address the ventilation system problems.

The meeting room is of straw bale build. There have been problems with the varnish used on the terracotta floor and this is being rectified. It is possible that alternative flooring will be used. The meeting room is actually connected to the main building, not separate as it states in the policy. It has yet to be used by the local community and perhaps the Environmental Policy should put this in as an aspirational goal, because additional security measures will need to be put in place if the local community is to use the room. At the moment the room is used for Building Society meetings and used by the staff between 12-2 to eat lunch.

There appear to be some small leaks in the rainwater harvesting guttering that need attention.

3.2 UTILITIES, ENERGY AND SERVICES

3.2.1 Electricity

Monitoring is evident in the foyer with displays on: - power generated, total energy generated and CO2 saved displays.

Originally the photovoltaic cells were estimated to be able produce 30% of the Ecology's electricity needs; this has now dropped to 15%, perhaps a small explanation of this drop should be included in the new policy. Understood that the EBS is half way through a comprehensive energy review and this will form a separate statement, perhaps details of why the target has been revised could feature in this.

Suggest that ethical considerations are included with the energy ratings and environmental impact when electrical equipment is purchased and this be extended to all purchasing. The website Gooshing and the organisation Ethical Consumer can offer advice on this.

3.2.2 Heating and lighting

Suggest that the EBS investigate installing evacuated solar water heating.

3.2.3 Water usage

Exceptionally low water usage should be celebrated with a best practice feature on the website. A comparison with a traditional office with equivalent numbers of staff would be interesting both for water usage and cost savings.

3.3 MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT

Suggest that 'ethical' be included in your bullet point list.

3.3.1 Office

Clarify that the paper is 100% post consumer waste.

Review the situation on refilling the printer cartridges. Are there still quality issues around thinner ink and drying times? If so then refilling equipment should be used and monitored and evaluated. Investigations should also be made into local firms who refurbish and refill.

One person is in charge of purchasing and orders go through her, however it might be beneficial for all staff to have training on the reasons for sustainable purchasing. This could be an element of the training policy.

3.3.2 Domestic

Cleaning products etc. The member of staff responsible for purchasing needs to be up to date with new products and changes in this area. Dilemmas arise such as – should we purchase loo rolls made from cotton or recycled paper? Cost, sourcing, environmental impact and product company details need to be weighed against comfort! Training may help in reaching a decision.

The section on fairly traded goods could be expanded to include the fact that when you bring in caterers you will try to use locally sourced food for meetings, AGMs etc.

3.4 WASTE

3.4.1 Office/Domestic

Update this section to take account of the new recycling system introduced by the council. Newspapers, magazines, paper and cardboard now deposited in outside wheelie bins and collected by the council. Attention needs to be given to how these materials will be collected within the building in order to give the greatest recycling rate.

Confidential papers are shredded on site by a registered waste carrier (in accordance with the Data Protection Act) and then sent for recycling.

There is a recycling point for glass, metal, plastic and batteries and these are collected and taken to the local public recycling site as part of the cleaner's contract. (This needs to be verified).

IT section needs updating. EBS appears to upgrade machines every 3-4 years. There appears to be no voluntary/charity outlet for the machines to be reused or refurbished and a commercial company is taking them. It is not clear if this is a contract and if EBS have to pay for this service. The WEEE Directive will come into force next year and it is possible there will be a further cost implications. There are plans to install laptops rather than computers and the servers are being upgraded and there should be a corresponding reduction in energy use. It has been estimated that a thin client system could cut energy use by up to a third. Microsoft is the preferred software system but Open Source has improved and might be worth another look. All machines purchased should be checked for ethical ratings.

Food waste is collected in the kitchen and taken to compost site in the garden by the staff on a rota system.

4. OFFICE PRACTICES AND SERVICES

4.3 Computing

All screens are now flat screens.

5. TRANSPORT

Need to clarify what concessions and benefits are available for staff using their bikes or car sharing. Need to state that dedicated bicycle storage is available (and ensure that the builder's materials are removed from the facility). Mention that the showering facilities are the low water use.

Might be helpful to draw up a travel plan for the building.

CONCLUSION

The Ecology Building Society's Environmental Policy is an excellent example of a robust policy that is continuously being reviewed and revised in light of new thinking and technology.

The areas in need of some attention are the:

- IT policy – in that it needs to be clearly stated what will be happening to the old machines and EBS's policy on upgrades etc. and
- Training - in that a comprehensive training programme needs to be put on paper and implemented.

The annual cycle of review by the board and audit by an external party will enable the EBS to maintain its leading edge.

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