

Audit of the Ecology Building Society's Environmental Policy



MERCi

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October 2008**

INTRODUCTION

All paragraph numbers in this report refer to the Ecology Building Society (EBS) Environment Policy approved by the Board on the 25th January 2008. This 2008 policy builds on the previous Environment Policy approved on the 27th April 2007.

This audit, held on the 17th October 2008, shows an organisation still committed to delivering environmental gains through its lending policies, through its head office building and through its purchasing.

An area still highlighted for implementation is training. However, due to the very low turnover of staff perhaps this should be termed 'awareness raising' and presented as a celebration of the great things already happening within the EBS, with scope for areas for improvement identified by management and staff. This will help to engage staff in the areas where there appears to be 'slippage' such as purchasing and controlling the ventilation.

There also needs to be work at management level (in participation with staff) on developing an Environmental Management System (EMS). This means that the current Environmental Policy would be scoped down to its major components and all the supporting information already detailed would be turned into an action plan. This would be the EMS, so that it can be clearly seen what is being done, who has responsibility for which action and when this needs to be achieved and when it will be reviewed.

1. BUSINESS ACTIVITIES AND PRACTICES

This audit shows that just as in the evaluations of 2005 and 2007, 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.

1.4 Audit – EBS consider strengthening this section by stating that they require environmental policies from their service providers and suppliers. It is advised for the next Audit a full list of service providers and suppliers is provided to the auditor with clear indications as to whether they have been requested to supply information or not and the reasons for this and what sort of information was requested.

1.6 Training – There is a low staff turn-over, therefore, training is almost 'CPD in-house' and should include environmental awareness training along with other training provided for staff. This should be presented as a celebration of what the EBS has achieved and have opportunities for all employees to contribute to improving the environmental performance of the EBS. The paragraph could be strengthened by stating how staff are made aware of the environmental and ecological implications of office activity (email, posters, training ,etc. etc?)

1.8 P.R. - This could be strengthened with examples of what these 'opportunities' are.

2. LENDING PARAMETERS

Lending criteria still relevant - no changes required.

3. PROPERTY AND FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

3.1 PREMISES

3.1.1 Site

Garden - A copy of the design plans and rationale behind the permaculture garden is now on the website.

There is still no outside seating for the staff to enjoy their lunch or breaks. However, due to the rain and poor weather we have had over the summer months this has not been a priority. The suggestion to build a suitable recycled/reclaimed or cob build bench has been agreed in principle but not yet implemented. Suggested position of away from the main road, on the sheltered side of the building, remains the same.

The car parking area is still rather compacted and evidence of water 'pooling' was minimal. Future plans might include 'grass-creting' the area, however, visitor numbers are low so this is not crucial but a neat and tidy entrance helps reduce vandalism. In response to the previous review a casual employee now maintains the car park on a monthly basis.

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). Costings for solar lighting have been gathered and lighting within the entire site is under review.

3.1.2 Building

The technical details of the HQ are available in the environmental specification. There is a digital display in the foyer which measures the energy use.

Certificates are still 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 next to and around the monitor.

The building is light and airy downstairs but there are still 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 been provided with electric fans from EBS in order to remain comfortable at work but this is not a long-term solution.

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. After discussion with General Manager (Operations) it was clear that staff turn-over is very low in the EBS (a credit to the company) and, therefore, it is engagement and training of existing staff that is required rather than induction. Staff need to feel empowered to take control of the system and need the 'tools' in order to do this. Discussions with other staff indicated that they relied on 'others' to sort out the ventilation or they just put on the fans, as this seemed the best option.

The Society's heating and ventilation contractor had visited the building, the day before I visited, to discuss an action plan. Suggest that when this information is received that a plan is drawn up on how to tackle this problem and, if necessary, all staff participate in a comprehensive training programme.

The straw-bale meeting room is used for Building Society meetings and used by the staff between 12-2 to eat lunch. It is occasionally used by local groups in a controlled basis and during office hours.

The rainwater harvesting guttering still needs some attention as well as trickling down the drainage chains water is leaking down the sides of the building at certain points and damaging the walls.

3.2 UTILITIES, ENERGY AND SERVICES

3.2.1 Electricity

Promote the purchase of power from Ecotricity – bigger feature in reception area. As noted before, 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. The EBS has not yet completed its comprehensive energy review and this will be tied into the review of the ventilation system. Eventually this will form a separate statement and will include all utilities costings and consumption charts – this is the sort of information that would be available in the action plan to back up the policy statement.

3.2.2 Heating and lighting

EBS has indicated that installing evacuated solar water heating is a future consideration. Costs and potential savings need to be drawn up to measure the pay back time. Whilst these will be out of date quite soon it would give a ball park figure on which to make a decision on whether to proceed with installation. Time frames for these actions will give a clearer indication of progress.

3.2.3 Water usage

Work on EBS consumption trends is to be under taken - this needs a time frame. The amount of rainwater supplementing the mains consumption should be detailed if possible. 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

'Ethical' is now included in your bullet point list.

3.3.1 Office

The paper is 100% post consumer waste.

Printer cartridges and refilling and reuse are constantly under review – perhaps a time frame for this might be beneficial – such as review once a year. Ink jet cartridges are refilled by EBS supplier. Not able to obtain appropriate toners for laser printer refills.

One person is in charge of purchasing and ordering. The reasons for sustainable purchasing should be included in the staff training. A time frame for delivery of this training needs to be agreed, urgently. Whilst it might be difficult to include all of the issues small steps could be taken to increase awareness perhaps through an informal meeting/discussion group.

Decide about the pens – make it clearer what positive steps you would want people to take – use refillable, purchase eco pens etc. 'Consideration' is not a clear enough direction.

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 – Gooshing and Ethical Consumer are good sites.

We note that cotton loo rolls were still in use so we conducted a quick search. Whilst the company web site insists that the cotton used is 'waste', there are 'bigger' questions around this purchase that still need to be considered when deciding on the purchase.

Cotton is a very thirsty and 'hungry' crop and it needs a large amount of water and feeding. Whilst the cotton waste used for the loo rolls is organic the wide spread growing of cotton for the export market does use land that might be better used for growing food. Organic cotton is a much better crop in that it does not use pesticides and oil-based, man-made fertilizers, however, loo rolls from unbleached, 100% post consumer waste paper that is sourced from this country might be a better environmental choice.

Whilst there are much more 'weighty' environmental issues to discuss it does highlight the many issues all people have to deal with to reach sustainable solutions – not always an easy and clear path. If EBS decide to continue with this loo paper then it needs to agree on the criteria used to make this purchase. Cost, sourcing, environmental impact of the product and company details could all be considered. Perhaps a testing of alternatives could be done as part of the awareness raising training/celebration and may help in reaching a decision!

The section on fairly traded goods does not yet include the fact that external caterers will be asked to try to provide locally sourced, vegetarian, seasonal food for meetings, AGMs etc.

Explain why EBS purchase kitchen implements made of inert materials – prevent leaching of carcinogens.

There were a number of issues in the kitchen area that need to be addressed. The tea was not fair-trade or organic. Some products were not ecological or environmentally friendly. For example:

- Washing tabs were not ecological/environmentally friendly.
- Peanuts for the birds were mouldy.
- Air freshener rather than natural scents or pot pouri. (3.3.3)
- Non organic fertilizer for the plants.
- TF2 spray for the bikes (contains teflon).
- Composting rota but might be a good idea to have a recycling rota for all waste not just compost.
- Ecover – review this purchase as company has been implicated in impact on palm oil forests and lifting the ban on animal testing.
- Health and safety form was faded – replace with new one.

3.4 WASTE

3.4.1 Office/Domestic

Updated.

Recycling needs to be clarified with a list in the kitchen as to who takes what and when. In the policy replace 'metal' with 'cans'. Make it clear that staff bring their used batteries to the office as a central collection point – *to be recycled*.

Where do the florescent light bulbs get recycled? – there should be a separate collection for these.

IT section still needs updating. EBS upgrade machines every 4 years. Replacing with laptops as a) energy consumption is much lower b) can provide two screens and c) if experience a power cut, lap-tops don't crash. This needs to be included in the policy and eventually in the action plan arising from the policy.

Still need clarity and detailed information about the reuse and/or refurbishment of the machines. What actually happens to the machines needs to be put in the policy and this can then be detailed in the action plan..

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

3.4.3 Carbon offset

Perhaps clarify the carbon offsetting into three areas:

- development of site
- business practice
- staff travel

Might need a revisit in light of the bad press carbon offsetting has received to explain more fully the rationale behind this scheme.

4. OFFICE PRACTICES AND SERVICES

Could add in here that EBS will ask printers to use post consumer paper and vegetable dyes if this is agreed or already good practice.

4.3 Computing

All screens are now flat screens and laptops. This section needs rewriting to include updated computer profile see Waste.

5. TRANSPORT

The Society runs two company cars – both are Toyota Hybrids.

Need to promote what concessions and benefits are available for staff using their bikes or car sharing – how are they 'encouraged'?

It still might be helpful to draw up a travel plan for the building.

CONCLUSION

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

The areas that need to be addressed are:

- Development of an Environmental Management System to implement the policy, with time scales and people responsible identified.
- IT – need a comprehensive IT part of the policy where it needs to be clearly stated what will happen to the old machines, refilling by whom and EBS's policy on upgrades etc.
- Training - in that a comprehensive awareness raising celebration/training programme, covering all of the areas of the Environmental Policy, needs to be put down on paper and implemented.
- Purchasing – needs to be clearly communicated what criteria is to be used for all purchasing.

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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January 2009