

**Metropolitan Housing Partnership and
sustainability**

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Introduction

Metropolitan Housing Partnership (MHP) is working with customers to build better homes and stronger communities, from affordable new homes and large regeneration schemes to care and support services.

We believe in offering our customers a better deal in society, and that a decent home is just the first step. Alongside this, we strongly feel that sustainability is a natural bedfellow as MHP invests in the long-term interests of our customers, homes and communities.

Background

Tackling climate change and environmental sustainability has been described as the most urgent challenge of our generation.

A lot of what housing associations do already intrinsically supports the sustainability agenda. However, as a large social housing organisation, MHP does recognise that it has a significant environmental impact resulting from its existing stock, new developments, care and support services and housing management functions. Responsible management of these impacts will contribute to the overall aim of decreasing the effects of climate change and creating sustainable communities wherever we operate.

MHP has had a corporate commitment to sustainability since 2004, supported by a comprehensive strategy and action plan. This case study summarises what we've achieved since then and where we're heading. We're keen to make sustainability more accessible and relevant, both to our staff and to our customers.

We've made a good start, but recognise that there is more we can do to improve our performance and get the maximum benefit from our resources. By getting the basics right, we can be more efficient, economical and effective, and deliver on our commitment to reduce our impact on the environment.

The role of the sustainability team, which comprises a sustainability manager and an officer, is to be a focal point for sustainability within MHP. The team is responsible for promoting and co-ordinating the corporate response to the sustainability agenda. Key to this is liaising with strategic decision makers, corporate groups, staff and customers to facilitate the inclusion of sustainability into relevant business elements.

What issues is MHP trying to address?

Our work in sustainability is underpinned by our Chief Executive's ethos to:

- Put the customer first
- Seek to do the best that we can with the resources that we've got
- Look for the most business-effective way of working in order to do more
- Have care and concern for our employees.

We're already tackling environmental sustainability through work in many parts of the organisation. It reflects our commitment to the principles of sustainable development adopted in the government's national strategy. They are:

- The prudent use of natural resources
- Social progress which recognises the needs of everyone
- Protection of the environment
- Sustainable consumption and production.

The intended change

- Make it easier for customers and staff to live in a more sustainable way
- Deliver cost-effective, environmentally-innovative refurbishment, regeneration and new build that supports the sustainable management of our housing stock
- Save the organisation, staff and customers money through the most efficient and effective use of resources
- Embed sustainability and manage performance as a mainstream function across all operational elements of the partnership.

Key features

It's argued that successful delivery of our sustainability strategy offers an opportunity to fundamentally support all of the organisations key aims and, indeed, to support improved performance in all areas of the business.

CEO and board commitment – alongside a strategy

This has formally been in place since 2004. Even during a period of change, with no sustainability team in place for 12 months, this corporate commitment and the strategy have ensured that sustainability-related activities have continued to be supported and developed. It has remained a feature of the business planning process throughout and has been driven forward by managing directors and staff.

Taking staff and customers with us

It is recognised that we won't achieve anything without taking with us the people connected to the organisation's activities. The challenge is to make the case of sustainability a compelling 'no-brainer', and make taking action easier for all.

Linked to service improvement (EMS)

In our current plan we are developing new ways to improve engagement with our customers to ensure sustainability remains relevant to the services we develop and deliver for their benefit. Part of the focus of the sustainability team is to further mainstream sustainability into performance management. The previous environmental management system (EMS) has been isolated from the core policy and performance function of the organisation. The team has recently moved into the policy and performance directorate (from the development team) and this will greatly assist in this matter.

Keeping it visible and demonstrating benefits

We are using a number of media to communicate with staff, customers and stakeholders to demonstrate the benefits through the sustainability communications strategy. These include articles for the intranet pages, developing the internet site, placing articles in MHP magazines, developing the sbyte e-news monthly update and taking other opportunities to raise the profile both internally and externally.

To build the business case for sustainability we have to build the evidence base (environmental, social and cost benefits). Our current plans include new projects on monitoring the 'cost in use' of our refurbished and new build properties to inform our future activities.

Understanding needs (best fit for the organisation)

In consultation with the member organisations of the partnership, directors, staff and customers, the sustainability team has been exploring and defining the needs of the various elements of MHP. It is creating an appropriate framework that complements the existing architecture of the organisation.

Internal champions

MHP has an internal champions group, the Environmental Sustainability Strategic Group, which is central to making all the linkages between different member organisations and departments. It has been fundamental in supporting the development and dissemination of activity over the last four years.

Reporting and external communication

This is an integral function for the team. We're currently reviewing our existing EMA and evaluating the merit of the framework for future use. In the interim we have developed KPIs for the organisation's mainstream reporting mechanisms and are producing a position statement, to include short- and medium-term priorities for action. We'll be producing an annual report of our sustainability performance.

Sustainability around the organisation – examples of what it looks like

Our people

- Energy efficiency training and advice
- Horticulturally based social enterprises.

Our existing homes

- Pilots of solar PV and solar thermal to retrofit existing stock
- Local community regeneration
- Improving energy efficiency in our existing homes.

Our new homes

- Pioneering development of sustainable homes
- A tree for every home we sell
- 'Green' welcome packs.

Our office

- Reducing waste and increasing recycling in the office
- Sustainability in procurement.

Conclusion: what we've learnt so far

Within MHP we have made progress against our key objectives in the sustainability strategy. We are able to demonstrate, through the range of activities, the scope with which sustainability has been embraced across the organisation. However there is still only limited evidence of measures of the benefits of some of these.

We have been able to demonstrate that the benefits of the sustainability agenda include the following:

Some key benefits

- Doing the best that we can with the resources that we have got
- Opportunities to save money
- Supporting innovation (design)
- Risk management
- Regulatory compliance
- Positive external communications and stakeholder engagement
- Marketing opportunities
- Valued by staff'.



Working with residents for better homes and stronger communities

The existing sustainability strategy has helped drive the agenda forward internally. However there is an opportunity now to review it and make it more operationally relevant and better dovetailed to the business activities. It is intended that this will draw together the work of the various elements of the partnership into a more cohesive programme of activities more consistently delivered across the partnership.

One of the key challenges has been the development of consistent and co-ordinated approaches to this work across many different departments, without losing sight of the need for local flexibility and enabling some departments to go further faster.

In trying to tackle some fairly large scale issues, there is evidence of some staff scepticism that we won't complete and finish on these green projects. The challenge for the team therefore is to define the work in projects that start and finish, with a discernable and beneficial conclusion, before developing that same agenda further.

Sustainability is an agenda that cuts across work areas and we continue to strive to improve the sharing of knowledge and cross departmental/organisational working.

MHP has made a good start, and has realised benefits from its approach. Our current approach is focussed on doing the basics better and better connecting the agenda to residents and customers.

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