

Engaging People

Walking the talk

So you're ready to engage people – colleagues, stakeholders, neighbours, suppliers – around environmental issues, and you're planning an event. It might be a meeting, a conference or something more fun. Penny Walker explores some of the green options for getting away.

Green and Away ...

How can you make sure that your meeting reflects the environmental principles that you will be addressing? When Friends of the Earth takes its staff away for three days to discuss strategy, the venue is a remarkable tented conference centre that gets packed away at the end of the five-week season. For the rest of the year it's a meadow.

FOE's events organiser Joanna Watson says, "Green and Away treads incredibly lightly on the earth. The water is heated by solar and biomass, the compost from the loos is used on the land, food is sourced locally or even grown by the organisers, and you sit on straw bales. You can bring your own tent to sleep in, or use the communal tents. There's limited internet access, solar-powered lighting, a licensed bar, and not a power-point slide to be seen."

Conference sessions take place in large tents, or outside. "We have been coming for a few years now, and know how to design our event to get the most from the venue – it allows people to relax completely and connect with nature, frees up creativity and breaks down barriers, as well as being full of wonderful examples of low-impact technologies and approaches."

Another happy camper is Heidi Orrell, training manager for Lollipop Children's Products, a business selling cloth nappies through a network of nearly 200 sales advisors. "I first went to Green and Away as a delegate, and I've held our annual sales training event there twice. The second event was a day longer, by popular request. The compost toilets are very well done, and there's one with level access for wheelchair users. It's definitely

an unusual venue, and can be a little bit beyond some people's comfort zone. But I just love the attention to detail and I learn so much each time I go there. I use more conventional venues a lot too, for smaller or shorter events, but I've never been asked what I want from an environmental point of view, and I think there's very little awareness of the issues or the range of options."

If you don't fancy camping, there's always the shiny modern glamour of a 21st century building like London's City Hall. Its stunning design and meticulously

planned water and temperature systems mean that it uses around a quarter of the energy of a typical office building. Water from underground is used to cool the building, and is recycled to flush and irrigate. There are plans to fit solar PV panels.

What about the conventional?

For more venues which are designed to be greener, see Forum for the Future's Centres of Inspiration booklet. Jane Palmer, of the UK Energy Research Centre's Meeting Place team, organises events and conferences for researchers and academics. "I match the event to the venue, and then try to work with what's there to reduce the environmental impact. We ask for jugs of tap water rather than bottles, and for equipment to be turned off when it isn't being used

London's City Hall



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If wildlife is your thing, the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust's new visitor centre at Welney in Cambridgeshire is surrounded by birds and water. The building's features include sustainable timber, rainwater collection and a ground-source heat pump, as well as meeting and function rooms.

– things which seem obvious to us, but a lot of venue staff just don't get it. At one place, they poured the bottled water into jugs! We have a detailed catering policy which is based on 'low energy' food – low air miles, organic, largely vegetarian because of the lower energy needed to produce it." The catering policy was introduced at the beginning of 2005. Jane says, "It's hard to check on caterers. We don't really know if they have sourced things locally, although if they use organic food then this is often reflected in the price. Some venues we have used regularly still don't seem to

accept that we really don't want any meat served. No-one's wowed us."

Liz Warren of SE2, who is organising an event for 300 energy advice workers, has had more success with her conventional venue. "We have organised events before where we have offset carbon from travel. This year we're doing a bit more. We are doing all the bookings on-line, so that's a lot less paper flying around. All delegate materials will be double-sided, on recycled paper, and using vegetable-based inks. Our delegate bags are made of hemp, and the give-away pens are recycled plastic. And of course we're telling our delegates what we've done. The venue is Exeter University. They are providing recycling bins for paper, glass and plastic bottles. Food and drink will be organic and locally sourced, there will be reusable crockery and little sachets of sauce will be banned! And in return for their efforts, we've offered them two days of free environmental consulting, to help them look at some of their bigger environmental impacts."

Stephen Whyte, of the University's events team, says that it's still rare for clients to ask about environmental impacts. He doesn't consider Liz's requests about recycling bins and switching off equipment to be out of the ordinary, but the desire to serve local food has led the Head Chef to draw up special menus. Wine will be sourced from Totnes vineyard Sharpshams. The University has some campus-wide green initiatives, and is part of the EU Emissions Trading Scheme and has joined the Carbon Trust's Higher Education Carbon Management Programme. A green travel plan is being drawn up. Water use has been cut by 40 per cent over the last year.

Forum for the Future holds all sorts of meetings where it brings together participants around sustainable development topics. Helen Saunders says, "We always try to choose places with natural light, organic food, and to ask for water jugs. We have a 'sustainable venues checklist' which we try to adhere to. It covers everything from ISO14001 audits to non-toxic marker pens, energy supply, water use and re-use of cutlery and crockery."

Environmental initiatives

There are also initiatives around to help you convince your venue to green up its act, or find one which already has; for example:

- in Newcastle, as part of the Carbon Neutral Newcastle strategy, there is a special push on conferences and events;
- in Manchester, all sorts of venues including Manchester City's stadium and the Radisson at Manchester Airport have joined the Positive Impact Manchester (PIM) programme. PIM held a series of workshops during July and August to help Manchester's providers of meeting space to examine their

Top Tips for greener meetings

- Cut paper use – through electronic communications and better planning. Use scrap paper, recycled, or FSC certified paper.
- Recycle – paper, packaging, food waste – and make sure the blu-tack gets taken off the flip chart sheets for re-use.
- Cut energy use – go for natural light, windows rather than air conditioning, and get that data projector switched off!
- Source local, vegetarian, seasonal, organic and fair trade refreshments, and plan portions carefully to avoid waste.
- Go for jugs of tap water rather than bottles or coolers, and ditch the fiddly single-serve portions of milk-effect coffee whitener.
- Help people to travel by foot, bike, bus or train by choosing a location which makes this easy, and give directions. Help people share lifts by distributing participant lists in advance. Go for a teleconference or video conference instead.
- Choose a venue which is already going green, and work together to push it one stage further.

own energy use, waste management, community involvement and transport impacts;

- in the South West, the Government Office, Envirowise and the Sustainable Development Commission have produced a Greener Events Guide – venues using the guide are listed on their website; and
- this year's National Meetings Week (yes, there is such a thing) includes 'the Green Agenda' as its main campaign initiative – the idea is that everyone who holds a meeting in the UK between 2 and 6 October should add an agenda item: 'how are we going to make our meetings green?'. The organisers point to unnecessary paper use, equipment left on and wasted food as typical problems, and have produced their own checklist of top tips.

Penny Walker

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For further information

Carbon Neutral Newcastle,
www.carbonneutralnewcastle.com/events

City Hall, www.london.gov.uk/gla/city_hall

Forum for the Future,
www.forumforthefuture.org.uk

Forum for the Future's Centres of Inspiration
booklet, www.greenfutures.org.uk

Green and Away,
www.greenandaway.org

Lollipop Children's products,
www.teamlollipop.co.uk

National Meetings Week,
www.meetpie.com/nmw

Positive Impact Manchester,
www.positiveimpactmcr.com,
steve@creativeconcern.com

SE2, www.se-2.co.uk

South West Green Events Checklist,
www.oursouthwest.com/SusBus/gevents.html

UKERC's Catering Policy,
www.ukerc.ac.uk/content/view/90/43

WWT Welney, www.wwt.org.uk/visit/welney