

Making sustainability work

Andy Alder, Nottingham Trent University



Most people reading this article will think and work in a sustainable way, to some degree or another. There are two main threads of sustainability needed in a therapy setting: client and environmental sustainability. Both are vitally important in the planning and running of a project.

To achieve client sustainability:

a project should/needs to:

- deal holistically with clients' needs and problems
- create a stimulating and valued environment with an emphasis on personal development
- create a safe working environment and a sense of belonging
- provide activity that is structured and meaningful, so clients can relate and participate at all levels
- work alongside welfare benefits systems to prevent stress and to ease financial issues
- work in partnership to provide opportunities and lessen the funding burden (many organisations, such as county council ranger services and Agenda 21 officers can provide tools, sites, projects and access to funding)

- raise awareness of environmental issues
- provide an exit-led strategy from psychiatric care that enables people to move through towards recovery and achieve.

For environmental sustainability:

a project should:

- encourage local action and decision-making
- link local production with local consumption
- increase employment and training opportunities
- reduce energy use
- reduce waste
- encourage recycling or use recycled products
- re-use/conservate buildings and materials
- create quality open space for community use (social inclusion)
- benefit plant and animal biodiversity
- encourage gardening and organic food production.

This article concerns itself with environmental sustainability. ►

There are many ways that projects can achieve sustainability; how far you go is largely up to time, commitment and money. But by following a few simple ground rules, the fundamentals of sustainability will be achieved. The obvious rules are **re-use, recycle** and **repair**. Using renewable energy is, on the other hand, not as easy to achieve. The cost of installation and the relatively long period needed to see a return on your investment being the main issues.

But how about turning this on its head, or in other words, turn a problem into a solution? Buy your electricity from a company that invests in wind power (there are many around) and power part of your project with a solar or wind power 12 volt system. This is cheaper and can be easily planned into a project (a solar powered herb dryer or wind powered lighting in an outbuilding, for example).

Another school of thought that you need to explore is the idea that everyone should be responsible for their own waste.

Product wrapping, life span and disposability are the three main issues to consider. The making and transport of the product before sale are other big issues, but often these can be partly addressed by looking for sustainability kite marks and by buying as locally as possible.

The use of compost toilets, alongside a normal composting set up, should always be considered, for appropriate sites. Supporting any local composting or recycling projects should be a first step.

By having environmental ground rules, both project users and staff can look at all their materials and activities, addressing any sustainability issues as a *matter of course*. *Devising sustainability indicators* for carrying out projects is an ideal way to check your environmental 'footprint'.

Reinventing the wheel when looking at these issues is a recurring problem. This can be resolved by using the partnership approach (locate the local environmental networks and experts as a starting point) and information sharing (try the web; you can get detailed information on everything from straw bale building and dealing with human manure to organic pest control and composting – visit Steward Community Woodland as a starting point for DIY projects:
www.stewardwood.org/resources/index.html

Sustainability is all about taking responsibility, and this needs to be accepted and met at all levels of management and participation. In broad terms, it is a question of education and also common sense.

An ideal project is one that:

- is led by the local community
- makes a positive difference to the local environment
- addresses wider environmental issues
- helps to bring the community closer together.

Finally, a story...

As the old man walked the beach at dawn, he noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Finally catching up with the youth he asked him why he was doing this. The answer was that the stranded starfish would die if left until the morning sun. "But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish," countered the other. "How can your effort make any difference?" The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. "It makes a difference to this one," he said. (Unknown.)

Andy Alder, email andy.alder@care4free.net

Andy teaches Countryside Management at Nottingham Trent University and his own company Woodscape provides a wide spectrum of environmental training.



Andy Alder sets out some ideas for making your project more sustainable. Looking for partners who have knowledge, services and who think the same way can help.