

The environmentally-friendly events venue centre posed sourcing challenges, writes **Stuart Spear**. Photographs **Alexis Maryon**

LEARNING CURVE



Bamboo computer monitors and keyboards, cushions from old seat belts, crowd control barriers made of old fire hoses and a receptionist desk and coffee bar made from recycled washing up bottles. The team behind the opening of the CIEH's latest business venture are ambitious in their intent to make 15 Hatfields the greenest events venue in London.

The opening two weeks ago was the culmination of 15 months of hard slog as the old ground-floor meeting rooms at the charity's London headquarters were transformed into a gleaming testimony to modernity and sustainability.

Run as a profit-making business by the trading arm of the CIEH, the venue will now compete with hundreds of others across London, using its green credentials as its unique selling point. Profits from the business will be gift-aided back into the charitable arm of the CIEH.

"As with all our business operations we have

to behave in line with the values of the CIEH and because of who we are and what we espouse, it seemed only sensible that we promote the venue as being as sustainable and green as possible," says Cath Horsfield, director of CIEH corporate services, who has overseen the process.

She says the work was an enormous learning curve. It taught her that when trying to be green in your purchasing decisions you enter a bewildering world of imprecise terminology, questionable science, false claims and in some cases, self-delusion.

There are surprisingly few pointers to help you make decisions. Is composting better than biodegrading, or recycling, or are miles travelled more damaging than all three? How much carbon are you emitting when composting? Which uses more energy – biodegradable cups from corn starch processed in China or china mugs fired in UK kilns? If a company transports 100 per cent recycled glass from Spain then

Shopping list

- ↘ Reception desk and bar – 100 per cent recycled plastics
- ↘ Carpets – goat hair and wool 100 per cent sustainable and ecologically produced
- ↘ Office furniture – 100 per cent compostable fabric, natural wool, sustainable



Natural light: glass is used to the maximum to reduce lighting needs and recycled materials used throughout

offsets its carbon output, is that less damaging to the climate than a company using unrecycled glass produced in the UK?

Venue manager Warren Campbell and his deputy, Victoria Mace, have the job of making these, in many cases subjective, carbon footprint calculations when sourcing cutlery, glass, food, drink, cleaning products, furniture, doormats, paint, and all the other items needed in state-of-the-art function rooms. It has not been easy.

“The hardest thing has been working out what is best for the environment – recycling, biodegrading or composting,” says Mr Campbell. “Then there is understanding what the supplier’s commitment to being green really is. They just do not have the information and make claims they cannot prove, or their supplier can’t prove, or their supplier’s supplier can’t prove.”

The Facility architecture and design practice was given the design brief to create a flexible events space and business centre that is as environmentally sustainable as possible given the constraints of working within a grade II listed building.

Low energy

Low-energy water fittings are used throughout. Mechanical and electrical equipment, including heating, lighting, data cabling, sockets, air conditioning and fire alarms are AA rated where possible. The air conditioning is fitted with heat exchangers that prevent lost heat in winter months while the space itself uses glass to its maximum in order to capture natural daylight, so minimising the need for artificial light, which is either LED or fluorescent, producing minimum heat. The CIEH estimates that energy-saving measures will cut its bill significantly.

Materials used by the architects were based **»»**

- manufacturing, non-metallic dyestuffs
- Tables – 100 per cent sustainable veneers
- Cushions made from recycled seat belts
- All stone locally produced from sustainable sources
- Catering – organic menus, local delivery
- Water – glass bottle, inhouse re-usable system
- Coffee – Fair Trade



No plastic in sight: stainless steel cutlery in the new business venue uses 80 per cent recycled materials

largely on recycled, natural or locally sourced materials that aim to create the sense of the outside being brought inside.

The most dramatic example has been the use of recycled plastics to create the main reception and juice bar. A programme of recycling furniture was initiated with the builders, who were encouraged to recycle demolition materials, with spoil from the site collected and re-used on local projects by local charities. "Everything possible was recycled, including audio-visual equipment, which was reused. It was a question of making a builder who might typically want to bin everything take a different view and recognise that these things have an environmental as well as a cost value to someone," said Steven Fitzwilliam of The Facility.

Once the building was completed the management team began sourcing everything

'We have to be environmentally audited by a credible, independent agency before we can start making any green claims'

Cath Horsfield, corporate services

to go into it. The first surprise was that there did not appear to be one single supplier of 100 per cent recycled, good-quality glassware in the UK. Disposable plastic cups were out of the question, while mass-produced glass used for catering uses 40 per cent more energy to produce and is typically imported from China. Spain is the closest source for recycled glass. Carbon offsetting and delivering large quantities infrequently mitigated this environmental impact.

This raised another problem, delivery times. A commercial operation needs reasonable lead times, realistic pricing and high quality. "We have found that the domestic market is far more developed than business to business. We quickly found that we had to use domestic suppliers and

negotiate wholesale pricing," says Mr Campbell. "We are trying to bust the myth that being green means you either have to be a hippie or that it has to be twice as expensive as anything else. Overall we have only added about 10 to 15 per cent on costs to make it green."

Organic food

Food suppliers are the exception. Commercial suppliers have well-developed green credentials with food miles deeply etched into their consciousness. Locally sourced organic, seasonal foods delivered by a company two minutes from Chadwick Court were easy to find. Coffee and teas are Fair Trade, coffee granules will be used by a local gardening project, wines are organic, food waste will be turned into compost within 22 days and purified tap water will be served in recycled glass jugs.

Finding an environmentally friendly doormat, on the other hand, is far more complicated. First there is the tripping hazard caused by the thickness of natural mats, 17mm as opposed to 10mm, then the fact that nylon is the only wheelchair-friendly material. The venue team reached a compromise by using a shaved coconut mat.

The CIEH project has attempted to be as sustainable as possible. There is the eye-catching stuff – bamboo PCs, coasters from recycled tyres and vibrant cushions from seat belts. There is the fabric of the project: locally sourced stone, carpets produced from shaved Kashmiri goats washed in a river, furnishings from recycled washing up bottles. Then there are the fittings: 80 per cent recycled stainless steel cutlery from Sheffield, Fair Trade cotton. But does all this add up to the greenest venue in London?

"In the same way that we demanded evidence of green credentials from each of our suppliers we have to be environmentally audited by a credible independent agency before we can start making any green claims, a process that could take over a year," says Ms Horsfield. "But we feel we have made every effort humanly possible to be as sustainable as is commercially possible." ■

- Juices and smoothies – organic
- Milk – organic throughout building
- Electrical supply – a green tariff
- Electrical equipment – AA rated
- Glassware – 100 per cent recycled
- Crockery – British produced and manufactured
- Napkins and disposables – biodegradable or recycled
- Tablecloths – Fair Trade cotton
- No plastic cutlery or cups in the building
- Stainless steel cutlery 80 per cent recycled material
- Coasters from recycled tyres
- Hand soaps and cleaning products – environmentally friendly
- Recycling bins for paper, disposables and food
- All delegate note pads and pens – made from 100 per cent recyclable sources

