

## **SUSTAINABLE ASTON WORKING GROUP**

### **“A Sense of Direction”**

**Completed 25<sup>th</sup> June 2008**

#### **1. Introduction**

The Sustainable Aston Working Group (SAWG) has developed over the 2007-08 academic year from Ad Hoc beginnings into an active and respected group, enjoying the support of, and reporting to, the University’s senior management.

This report celebrates the achievements of the Working Group over its first 12 months, and aims to provide a sense of direction for 2008-09 and the medium term future.

#### **2. Achievements**

In its first year SAWG has been instrumental in:

- ▶ obtaining commitment to sustainability from senior management;
- ▶ establishing Sustainability Aims for the University;
- ▶ publishing an Environmental Policy;
- ▶ the appointment of an Environmental and Sustainability Manager;
- ▶ developing a growing network of groups;
- ▶ launching an environmental and sustainability Web Site.

Care has been taken not to sell empty promises, and to ensure there is substance behind any actions. Activities have been publicized through a special edition of Aston Aspects, the Web page and a World Environment Day event on 5th June.

#### **3. Looking Forward**

At the 29th April 08 meeting of SAWG the future direction of sustainability at Aston was considered. Given the principles of:

- ▶ developing a path for the University to follow;
- ▶ providing representation for the variety of voices in the University;
- ▶ ensuring a forceful dynamic Sustainability Group;
- ▶ implementing the Environmental Policy and Sustainability Aims;
- ▶ taking ‘Sustainability’ forward;

The key issues were identified to be:

1. **Communications;**
2. **Behavioural change – cultural change;**
3. **Integration of sustainability into the curriculum – mechanism/power relationships;**
4. **Innovation – cutting edge project/demonstrate practical action;**

And

5. **Structure to support efficient action;**
6. **Creation of a research focus – sustainability centre/chair**
7. **Community involvement;**
8. **Making sustainability meaningful.**

Several of these issues can be perceived as overlapping. Taking this into consideration, the following are some thoughts as to how the issues can be addressed.

#### **4. Communications**

Essential for maintaining awareness of sustainability across the Aston community, and a cohesive and coordinated direction, communications will also effect behavioural change, community involvement and making sustainability meaningful.

A loose organisation structure for internal sustainability action groups has already been agreed (Appendix), and day to day communication should pass between the champions of these groups to SAWG for consideration at monthly meetings. If appropriate issues can then be raised with senior management.

Each action group should have their own web page, and SAWG minutes should be posted on the web site and distributed to senior management.

SAWG should seek to publicise activities/actions through regular articles in Aston Aspects, the Aston Times and the University web site.

Mechanisms for enhanced collaboration with the Guild, People and Planet and the wider student body need to be explored.

Goals addressed: - 1, 2, 5, 7, 8.

#### **5. Sustainability in the Curriculum.**

The embryo for a teaching and learning action group exists. This needs a champion to take it forward.

It is proposed that the University aspire to embed some facet of sustainability within the curriculum of all taught programmes.

This aim could be achieved either overtly, through specific modules, or through integration within other modules (e.g. debating the political stances in UK and France

within LHS language modules; causes and impact of photochemical smog on the eye in Vision Sciences).

A directory of sustainability related modules should be maintained and published on the Web. A core of relevant modules could be owned by and reside with a relaunched Combined Honours environment subject. These modules could be bought into from across the University.

It is also envisaged that a number of support pages are mounted on the SAWG web site for access and use in teaching and learning.

Further suggestions for ensuring that no student leaves Aston without some awareness of sustainability issues include: a series of open 'non-accredited' lectures; inclusion of relevant issues/teaching strategies in the PG Certificate for staff. This would also have the benefit of raising staff awareness.

Goals addressed: - 3, 2, 8.

## **6. Innovation**

To enable short term achievement of this goal, given the University's financial resources and current development plans, the focus has to be the Main Building.

Discussions have already revolved around small cutting edge demonstration projects (e.g. a model lecture theatre; toilets). In the medium term enhancing the overall sustainability of the Main Building through a directed programme of 'green' renovation is required.

In the longer term, as and when new building projects are launched (e.g. ABC; BCU building), opportunities for maximizing sustainability should be taken.

Consultation should take place with respect to any new development/renovation with regard to incorporating opportunities for active teaching and learning, and research.

Goals addresses: - 4, 7, 6, 3, 2, 1.

## **7. Research**

Currently, no clear champion has emerged to take this area forward. As such, a Sustainability Research Centre is unlikely to be established in the near future, but this should be a medium term goal. To this end it will be recommended to senior management that a Chair in Sustainability be created.

In the short term an Ad Hoc approach will be adopted and opportunities provided for interested parties to explore potential avenues and collaborations.

Goals addressed: - 6, 7, 4, 2, 8.

## **8. Community Involvement**

In considering community involvement, the internal Aston community is taken as the focus. The Aston community embraces a wide range of staff, both academic and non-academic, and students.

Communication is the key, and should address the needs of the passive members of the community (see item 4). For those who wish to participate actively, besides the opportunity for individuals to engage with action groups, there is a need for a forum for identifying needs and perhaps a suggestions scheme.

The University may wish to introduce some formal recognition of those who commit their time and effort through an Aston Sustainability awards scheme. It is understood that an annual award is to be introduced shortly.

For engaging and involving the community SAWG should establish a volunteering scheme, where Aston staff and students are invited to participate in activities, such as days working for a charity, a 'good cause', etc. Furthermore, as there is already a significant degree of goodwill and enthusiasm towards the greening of Aston, a series of 'campaigns' should be instigated to maintain this enthusiasm and provide opportunities for direct action.

Whilst a volunteering scheme has the focus of enhancing sustainability within the internal community, it will also provide an avenue for engaging with Aston's wider community. Estates already have ongoing relations with a range of parties through mutual interest in the local infrastructure, such as the Eastside development team, Birmingham City Council, and parties involved with the CHP project.

The University needs to explore further vehicles for engaging with the wider community.

Goals addressed: - 7, 1, 2.

## **9. Behavioural Change.**

Direct action to change behaviour is unlikely to generate any lasting effect. However, through many of the actions proposed above an awareness of sustainability issues will grow within the Aston community, and with this will come behavioural change. Examples of actions which will facilitate this change include: embedding sustainability within the curriculum (item 5); action groups, campaigns and a volunteering scheme (item 8); publicity of activities (item 4).

Goals addressed: - 2, 7.

## **10. Making Sustainability Meaningful.**

To make 'sustainability' meaningful, the concept has to be fully understood. We are aware of the fact that the term sustainable development has been defined in many

different ways. The most general definition goes back to the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development which stated:

“Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

From this definition springs the need to balance the ‘three pillars of sustainability’ – or ‘the triple bottom line’ – of social and economic needs, with environmental protection. This is particularly difficult on occasions when there are conflicts between the three pillars – for example when economic costs are used as an argument to avoid investments in environmentally sound projects.

To date at Aston some progress has been made in identifying and addressing environmental issues, gaining Fairtrade Status and the Director of finance agreeing to the additional cost of purchasing recycled paper. Overall, however, the balance between long-term goals relating to the environment and social and economic considerations needs to be addressed throughout.

Aston 2012 may provide a signpost, from which SAWG can develop an action plan during 2008-09, to address such issues as: ethical investment, and, intangible benefits vs. financial cost of staff and student welfare.

Goals addressed: - 8.

# Appendix

## Sustainable Aston Working Group - Operating Structure

