

South West College Category – Best Newcomer “Let's Green SWC”

About the project

Summary

South-West College (SWC) recognises that its day-to-day activities have the potential for both positive and negative effects upon the environment at local, national and global levels. Over the past few years, the College has committed to minimising its environmental impact across all aspects of its operations while maintaining excellence in learning, teaching, research and knowledge transfer.

During the 2014/15 academic year, SWC implemented a “Let's Green SWC” initiative aimed at addressing the College's environmental impact using a holistic “three-pronged” approach (investing to save, changing behaviours, greening contract management) which featured a range of sustainability initiatives which have helped us to dramatically reduce our environmental footprint. Let's Green SWC!!

Project partners

The concept of the holistic “Let's Green SWC” initiative was developed and implemented using in-house expertise and involved the participation of management, Estates/Support staff, academic staff and students. Most of the tangible projects implemented under the initiative were made possible by the commitment of resources by College Management which facilitated investment in renewable and low-energy technologies to be undertaken. Examples of such investments include the installation of Solar PV panels at our Cookstown campus and the installation LED-lighting at our Dungannon and Omagh campuses.

The flagship investment project in the past year has been the development of the CREST passive-pavillion – the first passive-house standard educational institution in the UK and Ireland. This project was facilitated through external input/funding through the EU's Interreg IV A programme delivered through the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Our project/initiative to “Green SWC” also involved significant input from our suppliers/contractors with whom we have developed and refined our contracting and supply arrangements to ensure that – where possible – our procurement is being carried out with the lowest possible environmental footprint.

The results

The problem

South-West College (SWC) recognises that its day-to-day activities have the potential for both positive and negative effects upon the environment at local, national and global levels. While many of the “low-hanging fruit” or “easier” options to reduce our environmental footprint had already been explored over the years, the College realized that it needed to undertake a more holistic and all-encompassing approach to sustainability to address its impact across all of its operations.



Profile

- FE College
- Formed in 2007
- 20,033 enrolments (full and part time)
- 500 staff
- Services rural counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh.

The approach

Through discussion with all relevant stakeholders (management, curriculum staff, support staff, students, external experts) the College set out in early 2014 to develop a holistic “three-pronged” approach to tackling our environmental footprint. Aware of the perils of pursuing too broad a remit, it was decided to progress a “Let’s Green SWC” initiative that focused on a “three-pronged approach” aimed at tackling sustainability across the College as a whole. The “three-pronged approach” involved:

- 1) Investing to save - SWC have invested in a number of key renewable energy/low-carbon technology capital projects and initiatives across all of its campuses which have served to directly address our environmental footprint and utility usage. These projects provide “live” demonstrator models around which our sustainability curriculum can be shaped. Examples of these projects include Solar PV panels at two of our campuses, LED lighting at two of our campuses, biomass boilers at two of our campuses, BMS systems at four campuses, wind-turbine and heat-pump demonstrator models, etc.
- 2) Changing behaviours – SWC has strongly pursued the development of a curriculum offering that has environmental sustainability as one of its core tenets. Through our investments in renewables/low-carbon technologies we advocate a “do as we do” approach in addition to our “do as we say” message provided through the range of taught courses across the sustainability spectrum. This helps to instill an environmental ethos amongst our students. Amongst our staff, we have worked tirelessly to advocate a “change in behaviour” by promoting, advocating and involving all of our colleagues in greening our College e.g. bike to work scheme, car-pooling, etc. The College is also very aware of its responsibility to the broader community and in that respect we are widely recognized as being to the forefront of the promotion of sustainable development through our community work and through the work of our InnoTech Centre in promoting and assisting small businesses with the integration of sustainability into their operations.
- 3) Greening contract management – One of the areas identified for improvement in our review of the College’s environmental footprint was the “greening” of our contract management. This work-stream focused on (a) targeting some of our most environmentally-harmful contracts such as electricity consumption, waste-management, fuel-supply, etc. and working alongside our existing suppliers to improve the environmental performance of those contract arrangements, and (b) refining our tendering/procurement processes to ensure that environmental sustainability is one of the core considerations when awarding new contracts.

Our goals

While no explicit numeric targets were set at the outset of the initiative, the overarching objective was to achieve a visible reduction in our utility and resource usage and subsequently our environmental (CO₂) footprint over the course of the first full academic year that the “Let’s Green SWC” initiative was in place (2014/15).

At a broader level, the holistic nature of the three-pronged approach was also aimed at increasing the numbers of those engaging regularly on sustainability-related matters from a baseline figure of 15-20 who participated in the periodic sustainability committee meetings.

Looking to the future, explicit targets for reducing electricity, oil, and water consumption, waste-volumes to landfill and overall environmental footprint have been included in the College’s 2015-2020 Estates Strategy. Progress against these targets will be reported on as part of the SWC Annual Sustainability Report.

Finalist's case study

Obstacles and solutions

Obstacle	Solutions
Resource restrictions	As with all initiatives, securing finance during challenging economic times can prove difficult. However, through the development of detailed business cases showing the economic – as well as environmental – benefit from the various projects, and implementing and managing a tight procurement and tendering process, College management were able to secure and commit monetary resources to help us towards achieving our goals.
Difficulty with visibility and getting people involved	The traditional sustainability movement within SWC struggled to spread the message of environmental sustainability beyond those attending the periodic sustainability briefing sessions. Through a focused and targeted communication and PR campaign – which included student competitions – we were able to enhance the visibility of the sustainability movement through the College. The “Let’s Green SWC” initiative allowed the creation of an identity with which people could recognize immediately by only seeing our logo. There is still work to do on this front but through regular class presentations, open sustainability briefing sessions, class projects, etc. the numbers engaged in sustainability matters at SWC at least once-per month has increased from 15-20 to over 150 (staff and students)
Managing contractors/suppliers to move towards a greener supply-chain	A key aspect of the “Let’s Green SWC” initiative has been working towards the greening of College contract arrangements and management. Initially, this work-stream focused on targeting some of our most environmentally-harmful contracts such as electricity consumption, waste-management, fuel-supply, etc. By working alongside our existing suppliers we have entered into a process whereby we liaise with them as to what we expect from our contracts from an environmental perspective. To our delight, we have found that most of them are keen to get involved in “greening” supply/contract arrangements as part of their CSR commitments. In the case of our electricity supply alone, our supplier was able to provide us with certification that our electricity supply – which was previously supplied with a CO ₂ footprint of 0.644 t/CO ₂ /MWh - would now be 100% renewably sourced, thus reducing our operational CO ₂ footprint by over 2000 tonnes per annum. We have also worked to tighten up the tendering/procurement process to ensure that in the context of any new contracts, environmental sustainability must be one of the core considerations on which a contract is awarded.

Performance and results

- Over the 2014/15 academic year, the “Let’s Green SWC” campaign has helped to reduce SWC’s basic environmental footprint (t/CO₂ from electricity, heating, water, waste) by over 44%.
- The “Let’s Green SWC” initiative has helped increase the numbers of staff/students actively engaging in sustainability has from a baseline of 15 – 20 (2012/13) to over 150 (2014/15).
- The objective of “Let’s Green SWC” to encourage a holistic approach to sustainability within the College has been met through successful investment in renewable/energy-efficient/low-carbon technologies, the changing of behaviours at student (curriculum, projects, competitions and student engagement), staff (car-pooling, cycle-to-work, sustainability briefing sessions), and community (SWC’s role as a beacon for sustainability in the region, industry outreach through CREST, etc.) level, and through the greening of our contract management.

The future

Lessons learned

- As an educational institution it is vital that you we advocate a “do as we do, not just as we say” approach to sustainability. This allows students to see the tangible benefits of pursuing environmental sustainability and provides them with access to demonstrator models, expert staff, etc. which can help them to develop a strong environmental ethos to take with them into the future.
- As each year passes, the “low-hanging fruit” or “easiest” options to improve environmental performance are picked off meaning that in order to continually improve there is a need to develop a strategy – such as Let’s Green SWC – which has a clear focus on particular areas of interest.
- It is essential to talk to your contractors to discuss your specific requirements – particularly with regards to the environment. It is often the case that your environmental ambitions/objectives are shared by some of your contractors/suppliers who are keen to enhance their CSR performance. Developing a rapport with your contractor/supplier can often result in the mutual progression and achievement of environmental goals.
- There is a need to think outside the box as the “low-hanging fruit” gets picked off. One area that the College has found was often neglected was water-management. In recent years a series of projects has helped to reduce water consumption by over 30%. Further projects, such as waterless urinals and installation of sensor-taps, are also due for consideration over the coming months.

Sharing your project

- SWC have extensively promoted their “Let’s Green SWC” initiative – and particularly our shortlisting for the Green Gown Award of “best newcomer” - through the College’s social-media channels. This has greatly enhanced our visibility both within our student community and - at a broader community level – as a beacon for sustainability in the region.
- The College have also promoted the “Let’s Green SWC” initiative and its achievements through local, regional and national media. Press releases have been issued for several of our individual projects while the completion of our passive-house standard CREST pavilion was covered extensively in the national media (BBC newline, national papers, etc.)

What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

Being shortlisted for an award at the 2015 Green Gown Awards is considered a fantastic achievement for the College. The nomination serves as just recognition for the efforts of all College staff and students – both past and present – who have worked tirelessly to progress the sustainability agenda within the College. The positivity surrounding the nomination has also served to galvanize the sustainability community and environmental movement within the College. Also, as the only institution from Northern Ireland shortlisted for this year’s Green Gown Award finals we are hopeful that we can continue in our mission to act as a beacon for sustainability in the region.

Further information

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