

# the Ecologist



## CASE STUDY: recycling waste wood

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**Mel Poluck visits a flagship environmental project that rescues, reuses and recycles tonnes of wood destined for landfills, doing much the same for those it employs**

As more of us rightly bow to pressure to reuse, recycle and save energy in our homes, it is worth reminding ourselves that householders account for just nine per cent of the UK's waste. The construction industry, however, accounts for approximately a third. Some 10 million tonnes of waste wood are produced in the UK each year according to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

Meanwhile, the Brighton and Hove Wood Recycling Project has for the last decade, been steadily tackling this huge source of waste wood. The not-for-profit initiative collects discarded timber mainly from building sites, receives a fee for collection then it sells on what it collects.

Piled floor to ceiling with timber, 'the woodyard,' as it is affectionately known, is nestled between Brighton's now defunct fruit and vegetable wholesale market and the art faculty of the University of Brighton, a stone's throw from Brighton beach. Laboratory tables, telegraph poles, timber from the defunct Brighton pier, stage sets, beams from demolished and renovated Victorian hotels and joists from English Heritage sites all find their way through the project's gates.

On a typical day, the place is abuzz with customers including home improvers searching for that coveted "rustic" shelving, project DIYers, tradesmen, or students enquiring about the timber they need, or poking around timber stockpiles. 'My loyal customers say they love coming here and having a rummage,' says co-founder and managing director Richard Simpson.

The project has grown from humble beginnings. One day back in 1998, Simpson's friend Richard Mehmed found himself at a packaging company and was shocked to stumble upon heaps of waste wood which, he found out, was going to landfill. As a Green Party member and becoming increasingly dissatisfied with his day job, the prospect of trying something new that would confront this waste problem became increasingly appealing. Mehmed approached Simpson with the idea of starting a community recycling project.

'I was working as a freelance architect. I was bored in my job,' says Simpson, over the sound of drills and electric planers as staff sand down and remove nails and paint from salvaged wood in preparation for its coming incarnations. 'I thought I could use my knowledge of design. When I first started [with the project] I thought, when am I going to get a proper job? Now it is my life,' he says.

Until the day that the duo made the momentous decision to give it a go – with £7,000 of investment from Mehmed's pocket and no experience of setting up a community initiative – there was no service in the country that collected waste wood from building sites for re-use. The pair began networking with voluntary and community groups, construction companies and the council to discover what was being done to tackle excess waste wood locally.

'When you start, you haven't got a clue,' says Simpson. The sustainability team at Brighton and Hove City Council helped them find a rent-free site in a park from which to base the project and with the help of volunteers, they built two polytunnels in which to store wood, running electricity to a shed which served as the rudimentary office. It may not have been much, but the base 'put the project on the map' according to Simpson.

### **Starting blocks**

But scouring Brighton's skips for discarded timber became increasingly difficult, partly because it turned out there was a glut of waste wood across the city and partly because they were using a clapped-out camper van to transport their stock. 'We had to start charging companies to take their waste away, otherwise it wasn't a viable business model,' says Simpson. The project began to charge for collection, undercutting skip hire companies, as it continues to do today.

After approaching several local companies for sponsorship, Simpson and Mehmed came to an agreement with a local building firm: in return for the use of a large, efficient van, they would collect the company's waste wood. For the first time, money was coming in.

Simpson looks back on the challenges of those early days. 'One big hurdle was convincing building companies not to chuck everything into a skip, but to separate waste,' he says. Although he would first approach the company director when arranging collections, the trick to salvaging waste wood from construction sites was to 'win over the foreman,' Simpson says.

This is an ongoing challenge. 'They are commercial and we are a community project. They see us as a bit rough around the edges,' he explains.

To answer the call, the project issues certificates to building companies every quarter declaring how much waste wood they have saved in both weight and financial terms. It is a simple incentive. 'We've started to see a big difference,' he says.

Simpson says they have received relatively little in the way of grants during its lifespan ('Often we didn't fit the criteria'), but a real turning point was when it was

awarded a £5,000 grant, promptly spent on buying a decent vehicle and employing two full-time staff. Ten years later, the Brighton and Hove Wood Recycling Project has six full-time staff and up to 10 volunteers.

Although not one of the original objectives of the initiative, creating and providing training and volunteering opportunities for local people has become a key tenet of the project. In particular, it helps those who might find it difficult to enter the jobs market because they lack skills, have a criminal record or mental illness, or have been longterm unemployed. Strong links with schools, the Government's Job Centre Plus, The Prince's Trust and probation offices ensure a steady stream of volunteers and staff. 'A lot of these people have since gone back to education or employment. It's a platform for people to move on in their life,' says Simpson.

While volunteers are a vital cog in the machine, 'an absolute asset,' they can pose their own challenges. Simpson is aware that he is 'relying on the good spirit of local people. Sometimes we've had to drag them out of bed in the morning.'

Last summer, the project certified its first 'graduate' from a pilot 13-week volunteers' training course designed by Mehmed to instruct on tool handling, Health and Safety, administration and basic carpentry. The student, who was previously homeless, has since gone on to a part-time job and two more trainees joined the scheme in October. 'The course adds another string to our bow. It brings a lot of value – they'll benefit and the quality of work will improve. Everyone's a winner,' Simpson enthuses.

### **Grass-roots**

Regardless of their background, project values are instilled in staff and volunteers from day one. What unites them all is the desire to reduce and re-use waste resources. 'We all feel something has got to be done about saving timber. Generally, it's not seen as a valuable asset like metal and glass,' says Simpson.

The net is cast wide, since local craftspeople also sell their products through the project, so the yard is often scattered with furniture and ornaments made from recycled wood. In addition, through word-of-mouth, it generates business for local tradesmen. Martin Cox, a carpenter who specialises in using reclaimed wood, says the project is an invaluable source of not only materials, but job leads too.

'I buy the majority of my timber from the woodyard,' says Cox. 'My clients love it, because the wood always has more character. There's a strong chance of good quality wood coming up, because the guys there are constantly collecting wood from all over. If one of my clients wants a hardwood kitchen worktop, they don't have to feel guilty that a tree has been chopped down just for them – and nor do I,' he says.

To date, the Brighton and Hove Wood Recycling Project has diverted some 6000 tonnes of waste wood from landfill, the equivalent weight of about 6000 cars. Simpson cites support from the local council as having bolstered the project immensely. 'We're seen as a real asset,' he says. And it's no wonder. It benefits the local authority by enabling local targets for recycling to be met, boosting the local environmental reputation, helping people get off benefits and diverting waste from landfill, which ultimately saves councils money in the form of landfill tax.

In fact, it is likely to be the threat of rising landfill tax, set to peak at £48 per tonne by 2011, that will make construction companies take waste more seriously. Pressure on the construction industry is stepping up a gear. Companies can face high costs if they dispose of their waste as landfill and prosecution if they dispose of it illegally. Introduced last April by the Environment Agency, Site Waste Management Plans are now a requirement for construction projects in England worth more than £300,000. These aim to encourage designers to consider cutting waste as integral to projects and are updated from preconstruction to completion.

Since its humble beginnings a decade ago, the Brighton and Hove Wood Recycling Project has become a model for a community wood recycling network nationwide. Its co-founder Richard Mehmed has gone on to help establish a remarkable 21 wood recycling projects in Cambridge, Glasgow, Llandudno, London and Manchester among others, using the original Brighton and Hove initiative as a template. These other projects save approximately 2800 tonnes of wood from going to landfill every year.

With some great achievements under its belt, including an award for the best national social enterprise from the former Department of Trade and Industry, the future also looks exciting. Simpson has plans to expand the staff team and start a line in recycled wood gifts and homeware. Organisers of large-scale events such as music festivals increasingly commission them to build furniture and structures from its recycled wood. They even helped create a green-themed garden for this year's Chelsea Flower Show.

Simpson cites a positive change in public perception of waste materials as a major boon. 'People don't see it as crap any more.'

But challenges remain. Since the project's inception, Simpson and his team have battled to find a suitable, permanent site. Today this need remains undiminished – the current base is soon to be sold for redevelopment.

## **Gathering fuel**

In future there will be more demand for recycling initiatives such as the Brighton and Hove Wood Recycling Project, as virgin materials become increasingly scarce and expensive. 'The economic situation has meant we're being more resourceful. It's an opportunity for us to improve our infrastructure,' says Simpson. 'There may be a slowdown in the construction industry, but household waste is still on the increase.'

But anyone considering initiating a scheme would be wise not to take the task lightly. 'Each stage has been part of a massive learning curve,' Simpson reminisces. 'To most people, we were just a bunch of hippies, but we were the first initiative to go to commercial building sites in the country. We started to see the bigger picture,' says Simpson. 'But you have got to be so hungry for it. I've had to commit my life and soul. We've pulled it off with sheer guts and determination.'

<http://www.woodrecycling.org.uk/>

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**Photography: Phil Fisk**

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