

So what's all this about sustainability?

And, am I bovvered?

When I tell people I'm in Harrow U3A's sustainability group they often ask me "Sustainability – what's that about? And what do you do?" Then I draw a deep breath – there's no quick answer! Sustainability covers such a wide range of things, from wasteful packaging and weekly bin collections to global warming and threats to biodiversity; from loft insulation and recycling to immigration and power stations; and much, much besides.

But there are common threads that make sense. Casually we think of the world as a big place but in fact it's relatively small as planets go, and its resources aren't infinite. Some resources that we rely on like rain and vegetation normally recur and regrow as long as we don't interfere too much. Others, like fossil fuels, don't regenerate: once we've used them they're gone. Think of worries about "peak oil."

Or take habitable land: they're not making it any more, so how should we allocate what we've got between growing food, housing, manufacturing, transport routes.....? and how about our Green Belt, wildlife habitats, rainforests... you can put so many profitable palm oil plantations in their place for bio-fuels when the oil runs low, pity about the orang-utangs and macaws. We need to make sensible decisions so that we don't spoil the land's capacity to provide for us and other species.

So, part of sustainability is to do with how we use the earth's resources, and manage them so that they can continue to support us. And our children. And theirs. We make individual decisions that have small effects, such as whether to compost our kitchen waste, or buy food with low air miles, or refuse plastic bags at checkouts. And we make collective decisions, through our politicians: locally, on how areas are developed or protected; regionally, on policies such as growth and transport; nationally, by legislation and tax on things like nuclear power and whether/how to tax air fuel; and internationally, through treaties, aid and agreements – on climate policies, development assistance, carbon trading etc.

We also influence how our world is treated through our trade and investment, for instance should my pension fund invest in agriculture and forestry? How will habitats suffer? - and through our charities – save stray cats or threatened tigers? St Luke's, or Friends of the Earth?

We make decisions like these all the time. If we think about the wider and longer-term effects of what we do on our planet, the environment, and future generations, then we are thinking sustainably. The term frequently used to describe these ideas in action is Sustainable Living. It was neatly summarized in 1987 by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the first woman Prime Minister of Norway, as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Sustainable Living recognises the fact that we can easily damage the earth's capacity to continue supplying us if we are not careful. If everyone on earth lived in the same way and consumed as much as average UK residents do, it's estimated we'd need three planet earths to provide for us. Of course we've only got one, and trying to get too much out of it risks degrading it. Growing populations add to our demands and the

risks. As people have realized this, a global “one planet living” initiative has been started based on ten principles of sustainability.

What do we do in Harrow U3A’s sustainability group? We get together because we are concerned about or interested in various of these matters. For a start we want to be better informed, so we usually have an informative topic at our monthly meetings. Recent subjects have been materials and embodied energy, carbon capture and storage, family planning and CO₂ reduction, the nitrogen cycle, and the environmental costs of beef production. And next term we will look at carbon footprints, offsetting and trading; algae and how they might help; supermarkets and sustainable food; and the report *Growing Pains: population and sustainability in the UK* recently published by Forum for the Future.

We’ve also done occasional outside visits, eg to Ecobuild at Earl’s Court and to the BedZed sustainable housing development in Sutton; we’d like to do more. We swap ideas and experiences regarding our own sustainable living, for instance why one member decided not to install solar water heating. And we tell each other about interesting forthcoming events that we hear of, and report on them when we attend them; the LSE’s free public lectures have yielded some gems.

But from the start we have always wanted to do more than just learn things. We’d like to make a difference to the wider community, with Harrow U3A’s general members a prime target. Alas, so far we haven’t managed to engage with them apart from the odd email alert; we’d welcome suggestions.

Beyond the U3A we have involved ourselves in some of Harrow Council’s public consultations during the past three years, for instance on Harrow’s Climate Change Strategy, Sustainable Community Strategy, and Local Development Framework: we have studied and debated proposals and have put forward our comments and suggestions. Early on we were invited to join Greener Harrow, an umbrella group for local residents and environmental groups which the Council meets with every other month for ideas and feedback; we’ve contributed our tuppence-worth. Some of us belong to local environmental bodies such as Harrow Agenda 21 and Harrow FoE.

We also come across regional issues which we’re not really equipped to take on properly. Under Ken Livingstone the GLA obliged Harrow to plan for an extra 10,000 inhabitants by the year 2025, without any consultation, and our Council had to comply. Now BoJo is saying that London should grow by another 1.3 Million people by 2030. So what after that, we wonder? We know that perpetual growth is not possible and believe that London should work towards a stable steady-state economy; research and persuasion are needed, our group is small and weak in the London context but someone, somewhere, has to start and identify the issues.

If you’re concerned about any of the matters that I have outlined, or you’re just mildly curious, do come along to some of our monthly meetings. We’re friendly and we’re open to your ideas about new things we should try; your agenda is ours. We start the Autumn term in the Grimsdyke room at Harrow Arts Centre on 6 September, and thereafter on the first Monday of each month. Meanwhile please feel free to contact me at rmaylan@ntlworld.com with any queries. If you’d like to see notes from our recent meetings, Mike Allen has kindly put links to them in the downloads section of the Harrow U3A web site.

With best wishes - live long and prosper - Richard Maylan