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Why Bother With Saving Water?

Water is a precious commodity. In the UK all our water is treated to a drinking water standard, irrespective of its use which might be for manufacturing, drinking or flushing the toilet. As demand grows and climate change impacts it's vital that we adopt more water-efficient practices everywhere. With water meters becoming more common, saving water cuts unnecessary costs. Using water wisely also means being cautious about what ends up down the drain and into our sewerage systems. Saving water also saves the energy that is used to treat water, and pump it to your taps.

Changing behaviour is about becoming more aware of how much water we use in our offices and buildings, and using water-saving devices where appropriate. Many of the ideas are common-sense; we need to adopt more of them.

Saving water – first steps

- Mend dripping taps, leaking cisterns and pipes
- Install volume-reducers in toilet cisterns (e.g. Save-a-Flush, Hippos)
- Ask people not to overfill kettles – boil just the amount you need
- Use a washing up bowl rather than leave taps running
- Put water-saving reminders above taps and sinks – use humour or an encouraging tone
- Use leftover water or kettle dregs for watering office plants
- Use washing up water for rinsing out containers for recycling
- Investigate fitting water-saving fixtures and devices e.g. dual flush toilets; water-saving urinals, flow restrictors and regulators e.g. sensors on taps. Some actions may have to wait until office renovation is underway.
- Capture rainwater if you have space for a water butt? Use the rainwater for watering office plants, grounds, washing vehicles etc

Other ideas

- Contact your water company for information and local promotions (free volume-reducers, water butts etc). Companies often send out leaflets with water bills.
- Check your water bill – be aware of how much you are paying (organisations in rented office space may not have access to this information). Saving water helps if your water is metered – it can affect your service charge.
- Have a water meter installed – you only pay for what you use. It allows you to monitor and set targets for reducing water use.
- Why have bottled water at meetings or events? You can save resources and money by providing jugs of tap water or use a water filter jug?

- Is the office water cooler really necessary? If so, are the plastic cups being collected for recycling?
- If you have office grounds you are responsible for, consider planting schemes using low-water/drought-resistant plants and mulching (compost or bark chips are ideal) to retain moisture and cut maintenance.
- An office move or building work may provide opportunities for investigating the use of rainwater (termed 'greywater') for toilet flushing if there is space for a storage tank.
- We take water for granted. Elsewhere in the world other people can't. Organisations such as WaterAid are dedicated to helping people escape poverty and disease caused by living without safe water and sanitation. Supporting its work can be a way of raising interest within the office about water use, <http://www.wateraid.org.uk>

Cutting pollution

- Use environment-friendly detergents, toilet cleaning materials etc (buying in bulk cuts packaging waste too) If you have an external cleaning contractor, ask them about the products they use.
- Make sure all staff and building users are clear about not using drains and toilets for disposing of substances like motor oil, paint and chemicals.

Green cleaning

Using ecological cleaning products helps cut environmental impact, and the products are gentler on the skin too. Made with plant and natural mineral ingredients rather than unnecessary chemicals such as optical brighteners and chlorines, they biodegrade faster and have less impact on wildlife. Used appropriately (sometimes they need more time to work rather than the instant 'fix' of chemicals), they work well. A growing range of brands are available via usual retail outlets, office product suppliers and mail-order. Buying refillable bottles cuts packaging waste.

Saving water in your toilets

Most toilets don't need a full cistern to flush effectively. Toilet cistern reducers vary from simple bags of harmless crystals that expand in contact with water to plastic 'Hippo's'. All work by displacing a certain volume of water meaning that less gets wasted per flush. Make sure you fit the right device for your toilet e.g. Hippo's are designed to work with a 9 litre flush or greater whilst 'Save-a-Flush' bags are for smaller cisterns. A simple option is a 1 litre plastic bottle filled with water.

- A dripping tap can waste up to 140 litres a week

Other information sources:

- Waterwise www.waterwise.org.uk
- Environment Agency www.environment-agency.gov.uk
- Envirowise <http://www.envirowise.gov.uk/water> (aimed at businesses but some advice is applicable to VCS organisations)

- Your local water company – details in telephone directory or website. Most supply 'cistern reducers'.
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Your local DIY centre for a range of water-saving devices or via retail outlets stocking eco-products, or online source.