

Going Green: The BIALL Sustainability Working Group

Abstract: ‘Going Green: The BIALL Sustainability Working Group’ was a parallel session presented by **Christine Baird** during the BIALL Annual Conference ‘Gaining the edge: investing in our skillset’, held in Belfast in June 2023. The session aimed to provide an introduction to the newly formed BIALL Sustainability Working Group. The session, and this subsequent article, outlines the group’s aims, projects and structure, as well as the wider contexts which motivated the group’s establishment. It discusses the ways in which information professionals can develop more sustainable working practices, both individually and by leveraging the power of our professional networks. This paper explores the opportunities for legal librarians to engage in community activism, and the importance of both this concept and of ‘cathedral thinking’ in responding to the climate crisis.

Keywords: BIALL; sustainability; legal information providers; hard copy services

CONTEXTS

It doesn’t seem controversial to state that, as a society, we are currently at a historic watershed moment in terms of our relation to the world around us. The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that if we hope to limit global warming to a liveable 1.5degC then carbon emissions generated by everything that we do, buy, use and eat must be reduced by almost half by 2030.¹ Jim Skea, co-chair of the working group behind the report, remarked: “It’s now or never if we want to limit global warming to 1.5degC. Without immediate and deep emission reductions across all sectors, it will be impossible.”²

This is a depressing statement, but we believe it’s important to acknowledge the magnitude and urgency of the situation. However, we are all too aware that attempting to comprehend the sheer scale of the climate crisis can be overwhelming and extremely disempowering. Skea’s statement is a call to action, but without an overarching sense of how the necessary changes can be achieved it can feel impossible to know where to begin. For legal information professionals this situation is exacerbated by the lack of available data on the environmental impact of our services and a lack of clear guidance on where to begin implementing changes.

This is a momentous challenge, and while we should encourage governments and business to legislate and advocate for change, we can play our part by considering the effects of our day-to-day actions. As conservationist Jane Goodall once said: “You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”³

THE WORKING GROUP

The BIALL Sustainability Working Group was formed by a group of BIALL members and legal information professionals in February of 2023 to respond to the present climate crisis and to reflect the importance of this issue within our industry. Our goals are:

- To identify opportunities to establish more sustainable working practices
- To work collaboratively with internal and external stakeholders to reduce the carbon footprint of our industry
- To act as a network for sharing ideas and knowledge

The Working Group is the result of over a year of planning. The proposal to establish a group was initially tabled the previous summer at the BIALL Annual Conference 2022, in Wyboston. This was followed by a period of consultation including a number of speculative meetings with members of the BIALL community. In addition to gauging interest, these allowed us to get a sense of the sustainability issues that impact BIALL members and learn about the projects they would like to see us undertake. This feedback has been instrumental in establishing the group’s aims, so we would like to extend our thanks once again to all those who attended or provided feedback at this early stage.

The group itself is made up of the following six people:

- Beki Herbert – Information Services Manager, Michelmores LLP
- Kirsty Edginton – Information Assistant, Linklaters LLP

- John Miller – Subject Librarian for the School of Humanities and Law, Liverpool Hope University
- Helen Dods – Senior Assistant Librarian, House of Lords
- Ruth McMahon – Information Services Manager, Arthur Cox
- Christine Baird – Information Services Officer, Pinsent Masons

It includes representatives from each of BIALL's jurisdictions and from a mix of different organisations (including legal practices, academia, and judicial and parliamentary libraries). We hope to use this breadth of knowledge to identify and tackle sustainability challenges faced across the profession. The group's aim is to be as inclusive and transparent as possible, with opportunities for all BIALL members to get involved. Information on our activities will be shared via the BIALL website and Jiscmail, and every third meeting will be open to all BIALL members and other interested parties. There will also be opportunities to get involved with research gathering activities, chances to share your views and experiences, and to contribute to and influence the outcomes of our projects, which are listed in more detail below.

PROJECTS

The Working Group currently has three main areas of interest, based on the issues we've identified in meetings with the BIALL community and through our own experiences as legal information professionals. In our initial year we carried out research aimed at gaining a more comprehensive overview of the sustainability concerns that are important to BIALL members and those that are having the greatest impacts. For example, we sent out a survey to BIALL members and other legal information professionals designed to learn more about your views on sustainability in the workplace and about the work that's already happening in this area. This was designed to ensure that our projects are as relevant and as joined-up as possible. As such, our plans may shift slightly as our priorities change and we gather new information.

Our three main projects are as follows:

1. **To work with publishers and suppliers to reduce non-recyclable waste and emissions associated with hardcopy procurement, and to facilitate recycling and sustainable disposal practices for material such as books and looseleaf binders.**

Plastic waste associated with journals and looseleaves was the issue that initially inspired thoughts of a BIALL-wide sustainability project. Paper wastage is often noted by those concerned about sustainability, but most paper used in office settings is recycled and its carbon footprint

is relatively low. Plastics and laminated papers are another thing entirely, though – plastic lasts a long time and laminated papers are heavy and their transport will have a heavier carbon footprint. For many of us, returning to the office after the Covid-19 lockdowns and processing a considerable backlog of magazines, postage and looseleaf updates was an eye-opening experience. Spaced out on a regular basis the amount of waste received pre-pandemic seemed minimal, but seeing the enormous amount of difficult or impossible to recycle material in one go demonstrated just how quickly it accumulates. To gain a more complete picture, we tried to produce a metric for how much of this waste we received on average. [Figure 1](#) represents one month's soft plastic waste generated by journals, looseleaf and magazines in the UK offices of Pinsent Masons.

The image in [Figure 1](#) is from 2022. Since it was taken a number of suppliers have already moved to paper or compostable plastic packaging, or to digital-only services, which has considerably reduced the amount of non-recyclable waste our services produce.

Our aim is to carry out a survey to compile data on plastic waste in legal library services to create an informed estimate of how much is produced overall. We'll also be talking to publishers who have switched to paper or compostable-plastic packaging to see what benefits and challenges they've experienced. We will then carry out a cost-benefit analysis on switching to eco-friendly packaging which will be distributed to plastic producing publishers to encourage them to make changes to their packaging. We'll also investigate opportunities for recycling and sustainable disposal, particularly of hard-to-process materials like looseleaf binders.

Another hugely important area of consideration is the carbon footprint of our library materials. Electronic resources are currently thought of as the 'green' alternative, but it can be very difficult to find information relating to their environmental impact, making it harder to make informed procurement decisions. Industry estimates suggest that, operating at full capacity, a single Google server in Oregon could require as much power to run as would be needed to supply every home in Newcastle. In addition to learning more about the carbon released during the creation, storage, and delivery of hardcopy materials, we'll be working with suppliers to provide more transparency around the carbon impact of electronic resources.

2. **To identify and put in place measures to reduce the carbon footprint and waste associated with the running of BIALL, working with the BIALL Council and other BIALL committees.**

We are working with the BIALL Council and Committees to establish the desired outcomes for this project, after which we can finalise our project plans accordingly. We are currently examining the potential of producing a

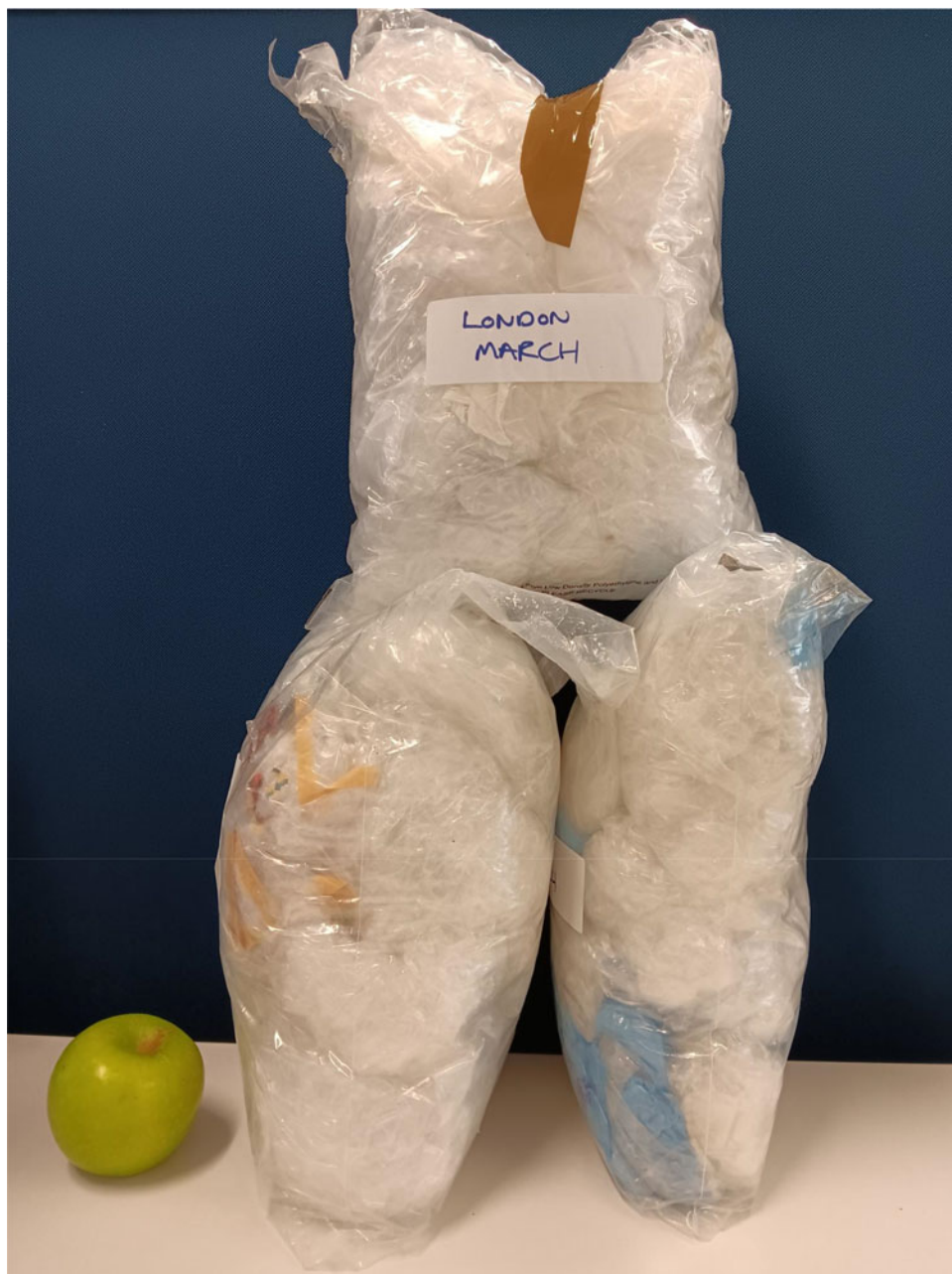


Figure 1: One month's soft plastic waste received with journals and looseleafs in the UK offices of Pinsent Masons (apple for scale)

carbon audit to measure the overall carbon footprint of BIALL, producing a baseline which we could then use to measure improvement. As many of BIALL's activities take place online, we'll aim to reduce the electrical waste and emissions associated with these activities. Simultaneously, we will work to reduce the environmental impact of in-person events and physical outputs such as the annual conference and training courses.

3. To produce a library of guidelines, tools, case studies and other practical resources supporting sustainable working practices for information services professionals and the organisations they work for.

Over the next few years, we will be undertaking research aiming to draw together guidance on sustainable working practices and to raise awareness of environmental issues, impacts and solutions. We'll then make this information available online for BIALL members to create a 'one-stop-shop' for sustainability guidance for legal information professionals. In addition to our own research, we hope to provide a platform where we can bring together information that already exists throughout the sector, and to celebrate and share the work that so many organisations are already doing to make our industry more carbon-neutral and environmentally friendly. By drawing all this information together in one place, we'll produce a resource that can inspire and assist us as an industry to take action more easily and effectively.

SUSTAINABLE WORKING PRACTICES

During the Sustainability Working Group session at the BIALL 2023 conference, we held a discussion with attendees about straightforward, everyday actions legal information professionals could incorporate into their working practices to create a more sustainable workplace. These included:

- Encouraging library users to limit printing or go 'paper free'
- Limiting energy waste
- Choosing recyclable or plastic free library stationery (for example, recycled printer paper)
- Recycling packaging and waste received with hardcopy material
- Recycling or donating weeded library material

All these examples are suggestions you will likely be familiar with. In our conversation with attendees at the conference we found each of these points had been implemented widely, though perhaps not across the board. Individually, it can be easy to feel that none of these behaviours necessarily make much of a difference. However, small actions such as these are the fundamental building blocks of a sustainable library service. When you multiply the effect of each of these small actions by the entire membership of BIALL, and then by the entire sector, you can see how they can begin to have a genuinely positive impact.

Taking time every day to consistently accomplish these small tasks can also help you establish a mindful approach to sustainability at work, creating habits that keep environmental concerns at the core of your daily working practices. For example, the decision to establish a Sustainability Working Group was the result of a growing environmental awareness which began with a single issue encountered in the workplace – soft plastic packaging. Small actions can thus produce attitude shifts which can in turn create long-term impact.

The examples offered by the session at the BIALL Conference are actions we can take as individuals, but a core principle of the Sustainability Working Group is that we can make more effective change when we work together as a community, rather than on our own. We can utilise our existing networks – networks like BIALL, our connections within our own firms, or our relationships with suppliers – to encourage wholesale change by acting as advocates for action on sustainability. A few examples of ways we can do this are as follows:

- Talk to publishers and suppliers about their sustainability policies and ask for more information on the carbon footprint of the resources they provide. In addition to enabling you to make more informed procurement decisions, this is an easy and direct form of consumer advocacy which allows us to

demonstrate the importance of this issue to us as customers.

- If your organisation employs a sustainability manager or team, talk to them about ways in which your library service could contribute to your organisation's ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) strategies and goals. If you don't have sustainability contacts within your firm, you could instead talk to the facilities team or office manager, who may also have suggestions for ways your service could be more environmentally friendly. In addition to being a first step towards making practical changes, starting these conversations can also bring about positive changes to your organisation's culture by encouraging further discussion about ESG.
- Consider joining (or even starting!) an employee sustainability network. An employee-led network will allow you to make contact with like-minded people across your organisation, in addition to taking part in some exciting sustainability projects. Networks like these also help to embed the conversation about environmental impact into your organisation's day to day life and can come to influence your organisation's ESG policies.
- Take inspiration from other groups and individuals working in this area – such as the CILIP (The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) Green Libraries project and the ARA (Archives and Records Association) Environmental Sustainability Group. Keeping up to date with their activities and projects via social media or by attending their events can provide an ongoing source of ideas and motivation.

The climate crisis can feel overwhelming, and it can be hard to know where to start when taking action. It's easier to achieve effective change and to maintain the morale required to keep acting on this situation when we work together.

CATHEDRAL THINKING

Collective action is also a central tenet of another concept related to sustainability, which is 'cathedral thinking'. The Macmillan dictionary defines cathedral thinking as "the concept of long-term projects or goals that must be realised for the sake of future generations".⁴ When we employ cathedral thinking we invest time and resources for the benefit of future generations, treating the future as something that matters as much as the present. More detailed explanations identify the following as defining characteristics:

- Collective – involving the work of a large group of people, working towards a common purpose, and employing a diverse skill set
- Large scale – generally involving enormous, complex projects

- Taking place over a long timeframe – often to the extent that those involved probably won't see their goals fully achieved in their lifetime.

In her book *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, Greta Thunberg says: "Avoiding climate breakdown will require cathedral thinking. We must lay the foundation while we may not know exactly how to build the ceiling."⁵

The Sustainability Working Group is our attempt to begin laying the foundation, providing a platform for us to work together as a community to build sustainability into our working practices for the benefit of generations to come.

GET INVOLVED

If you would like to learn more or to become involved with the Sustainability Working Group, you can do so in the following ways:

- Tell us about your sustainability projects. We are looking for case studies of projects BIALl members

have undertaken to be more sustainable at work. If you or your workplace have any examples that you would like to share, we would love to promote them. Contact us at sustainability@biall.org.uk for more details.

- Help us with our soft plastic research. We'll be looking for volunteers to collect the soft plastic packaging you receive with library hardcopy materials over a month to enable us to produce a rough average metric for all BIALl members. Contact us at the email address above for more information.
- Attend our open meetings. These will be advertised via the BIALl Jiscmail discussion list and will be an opportunity to learn more about what we have been working on and to provide feedback, ask any questions and make suggestions.
- Contact us at the email address above with any sustainability questions or concerns.

Footnotes

¹ IPCC, '2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability' (Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge University Press 2022) <www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/> accessed 01 September 2023

² Fiona Harvey, 'IPCC report: "now or never" if world is to stave off climate disaster', *The Guardian* (London, 4 April 2022) <www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/apr/04/ipcc-report-now-or-never-if-world-stave-off-climate-disaster> accessed 01 September 2023

³ 'Nations Trust WNPS public lecture features Dr. Jane Goodall', *Colombo Gazette* (Colombo, 16 June 2021) <<https://colombogazette.com/2021/06/16/nations-trust-wnps-public-lecture-features-dr-jane-goodall/>> accessed 1 September 2023

⁴ Nick King 'Aspiring vision: Cathedral thinking in the modern world' (*IEMA*, 2 October 2020) <www.iema.net/articles/aspiring-vision-cathedral-thinking-in-the-modern-world> accessed 01 September 2023

⁵ Greta Thunberg, *No one is too small to make a difference* (*Green Ideas*) (Penguin 2019) 31

Biographies

Christine Baird is the founder and Chair of the BIALl Sustainability Working Group. She is a Green Champion for the Climate Change and Sustainability employee network at Pinsent Masons, where she works as an Information Services Officer. Before moving into legal librarianship Christine worked in the libraries of institutions, including the Glasgow School of Art and the National Museum of Scotland. In 2017 she graduated with a MSc Information Management with distinction from the University of Glasgow and has since studied sustainability at the University of Glasgow and the Open University.

John Miller is Law and Humanities Librarian at Liverpool Hope University, and was Senior Librarian on the African Law Library project, and Library Director of UNESCO (where he set up and ran its annual carbon audit and co-wrote the UN System's Sustainability Management Strategy). He was previously Library Director at College of Europe, CEU and Radio Free Europe, and the British Council's Information Coordinator for Eastern Europe. He undertook several projects in Kazakhstan, Albania, and SE Asia for the EU and USAID, and projects for UK law firms. After leaving the EU Commission, he became Chief Librarian at Allen & Overy and Information Services Director at McKenna's and is a former CLLG (now CLIG) Chair. Interests: fighting climate change, international law, history, politics, demolishing Brexit, visiting unusual places.