

Sustainable UK cities event, Birmingham, 22 May 2008

The role of local authorities in tackling climate change at the city level

Tony Hawkhead (15 mins)

Coupling local authorities and climate change in the same sentence makes a couple of sweeping assumptions. At one time both of these assumptions would have been questioned – and in some quarters, perhaps, the questioning continues.

The first assumption is that doing something about climate change at a local level in the UK is an important thing to do.

It's difficult to find anyone now in government who disagrees with this statement. Things have changed: it's not very long ago that some would have contended that trying to be carbon neutral in Norwich is akin to declaring Greenwich a nuclear-free zone – well-intentioned but ultimately futile. And there are still those who say we are too insignificant to bother. They are wrong. James' presentation indicated starkly the price of doing nothing.

The second assumption lurking in the title is that local authorities have a responsibility to address these issues right across their communities.

This is not just about the authority getting its own house in order by upgrading its fleet or putting solar panels on the town hall roof. It's about councils acting as leaders and enablers to change the behaviour of local businesses, organisations and residents. It must be more than just worrying about that Carbon Reduction Commitment, or using procurement, powerful tool as that is.

I wonder whether in some quarters this is still up for debate. After all, is it really for local authorities to change our behaviour as citizens and consumers?

I think the Government believes increasingly that we must. I believe we should be thinking in this way. In fact, I am sure it is more important that. This is an historic, one-off, opportunity for local government to show leadership – and the opportunity is there. We've already heard some great examples from Neveille.

The reason I say that is that the whole thrust of local government policy is pointing in the direction of three things – local leadership, the importance of place and the need to engage communities in decision-making.

Listen to anyone from CLG speak about local government – or about anything else these days – and the direction of travel is obvious.

In particular, place is rapidly becoming the policy framework within which everything else sits. Politicians and officials have come to realise that people's quality of life is inextricably bound up with their perceptions and experiences of what surrounds them.

Anti-social behaviour, community cohesion, housing and economic opportunity – all the things politicians and residents are concerned about – exhibit their symptoms and increasingly offer their solutions through place.

Climate change is no different. Its cause and its impacts are very definitely about place. In fact I often wonder whether we'll only be galvanised into significant action when the impacts on place become real. The reaction to the floods last year might indicate that this may have started to happen. It feels very different when the impact is right in our own backyard.

Of course for some people – particularly those who live in more fragile global environments – these impacts on place have been all too obvious for many years – drought, scarcity, extreme weather conditions. Cyclone Nargis is an horrendous reminder of how vulnerable many environments are. It won't be that long before some impacts – though obviously on a different order of magnitude – are being felt in the UK.

Tackling climate change is fundamentally about engaging communities. For a start, we won't be able to tackle it or adapt to it unless we engage with people, individually and in their neighbourhoods. And, second, tackling climate change is part of a sustainable approach to development that demands strong community focus and involvement.

Efforts to address climate change can also be highly effective at building a more concerned, knowledgeable and active citizenship base.

Groundwork, the organisation that I lead, has been around for more than 25 years now.

In the past quarter of a century we have been working closely and strategically with councils to help communities improve their quality of life, but we've also used concern for and interest in the environment as a catalyst for building social capital and encouraging active citizenship.

Much of our work has focused on addressing immediate environmental concerns among residents – neglected and derelict land, the poor quality of parks and play areas, the lack of facilities for young people and a feeling that people want and need to be reconnected with nature.

We've been able to show conclusively that a resident-led approach to dealing with these issues fosters debate and dialogue and delivers confidence and skill. It can also promote understanding and cohesion and can often encourage individuals to take a more active role, for example by becoming councillors.

I would contend that looking at global environmental issues through the prism of local place can be an even more powerful vehicle for achieving these ends. In other words doing something about climate change in your authority can help actively engage communities in decision-making and service provision. It even starts to turn the democratic deficit into something that looks more like a surplus.

But, you may ask, surely the environmental imperative is enough on its own to spur us to action? Won't we all be doing our bit for World Environment Day on 5th June?

Well, sadly, I don't think that's the case – not yet anyway. We shouldn't kid ourselves that addressing climate change is suddenly going to overtake the pressure to live in decent homes, or to invest in health, education and a transport infrastructure. Nor can it.

The fact that you're here means you understand the need to act. But for everyone that is here there are also procurement officers, economic development heads, transport planners and community safety managers who don't necessarily see the relevance of climate change to their work, and certainly don't see it as their priority.

So we need to have other arguments up our sleeves. I want to give you three.

The first is about social justice. There's now a stack of evidence to demonstrate that those people who suffer first and suffer most from climate change are those people who have least in our society.

Whether it's increased pollution levels, higher water and energy bills, rising temperatures in high density inner-city housing or the introduction of green taxes to reduce car use, aviation or waste, people on low incomes will be at the sharp end. And that's a real injustice given that those who are most affluent generate more carbon – through their homes, their hobbies and their food miles. It is one of the bitter ironies of living in poverty that you almost always pay more for life's basics.

And then there is regeneration.

Some of the most effective climate change projects we've been able to introduce with our local authority partners have been funded from regeneration budgets – for example, using neighbourhood renewal funding to address fuel poverty issues.

For three years we employed Green Doctors in Leicester who helped residents in social housing improve the environmental performance of their home and to undertake basic energy saving activities on the spot. A typical visit resulted in savings of 125 kg of CO₂ over a single year. We've adopted a similar strategy in Leeds and are looking at opportunities to roll out the initiative nationally. The crucial thing is that this is about trusted local organisations working with local people.

We're also offering training and support to residents associations, neighbourhood forums and other groups aimed at encouraging them to become community champions for climate change – starting with the things they can change quite easily such as the energy performance of community buildings but then taking that learning back into their homes, families and social networks. This is crucial: most people are more interested in keeping warm than keeping Kyoto on track. And the cost of keeping warm is rising inexorably.

We can also make the case on the economic front: a strong third argument.

As part of their place-shaping focus, local authorities are increasingly being encouraged to lead on the economic development of their areas.

We're already into a period of public belt-tightening, but economic assessments are not all doom and gloom.

The focus on regional economic strategies and city competitiveness has – at least according to the Treasury – begun to deliver and has started to rebalance the UK economy away from the south east.

However, those same Treasury officials – and the more enlightened strategists within RDAs – would admit that the picture is patchy. Although Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield may be thriving with new investment and high profile developments, there remain many hundreds of communities and hundreds of thousands of people who are still cut off from the economic mainstream.

Areas of high deprivation remain – and they're the same ones we've been trying to regenerate for the last thirty years, sometimes even longer. They are at risk of going even further backwards as the economic trough deepens.

I believe addressing climate change can offer significant opportunities here.

Green businesses looking at reuse and recycling, landscape management and local energy generation can all operate on a relatively small scale. They're needed in our most deprived neighbourhoods and can operate using the skill-sets that already exist in many of those communities.

Greenestate Ltd in Sheffield is an excellent example of a social enterprise that uses creative land management as a focus for a range of income generating opportunities.

There is huge scope for developing this through local energy schemes and the productive use of local green spaces, generating biofuels that do not damage our food producing capability. Barnsley is way out in front in adapting its energy infrastructure in this way and there are many other local initiatives – often developed by the voluntary sector – that can provide models of good practice.

Focusing economic development strategies on green enterprise in deprived neighbourhoods not only helps bridge the gap between those areas and the economic mainstream. It also promotes local money-flows, which are absolutely vital to developing an economic base that is truly sustainable in the long term.

The key to all of this is ensuring that climate change mitigation and adaptation are embedded in the core priorities of mainstream public service providers. Oddly, I have a worry that in many areas the environment and climate change have been added as a fifth LAA block.

Yes, it's good to see it given that priority and there is a need for thematic activity but the long term aim surely has to be connecting carbon reduction to the way we deliver education, promote skills or drive forward regeneration. Isn't it a core driver rather than a separate, isolated, block all in itself?

The new performance framework supports this approach. Some of the key indicators relate directly to climate change but the priorities in the LAAs are a step to embedding sustainability into everything we do. This is the only way to accelerate and make progress as quickly as our world needs. Local authorities themselves can also set standards and drive up performance in many ways. Using procurement power is an obvious lever. It's interesting to note that here the private sector is way out in front. If you want to be a supplier to M&S these days you have to show your commitment to their plan A by demonstrating that you're working towards a recognised environmental management system. Indeed, Groundwork's environmental management performance was a factor in M&S choosing us as its partner to receive the profit from its recently introduced plastic bag charges.

If similar standards were applied to the supply chains of local government – both through direct procurement but also commissioning frameworks – the impact would be enormous. Collectively you spend about £50 billion through your supply chains each year : that's a huge influence!

Adopting standards across an authority can also have other powerful knock-on effects. A corporate commitment to EMAS, for example, can be the trigger for schools to seek help in improving their environmental performance. And when that help comes – often from voluntary sector providers – it opens the door to a “whole school” approach linking building and grounds management to the curriculum and providing opportunities for extended school activity.

The LGA's Climate Change Commission conceptualised it as a dartboard. In the middle are the things over which you have direct control – the buildings you manage, the equipment and technology you use. Beyond that are the things you can influence directly – what you buy and how you buy it. Beyond that are the things you can influence indirectly – the attitudes and behaviour of your communities.

As you travel outwards from the middle the more important it becomes that you involve others in a coordinated and collective effort. A partnership!

The good news is that in this area innovation abounds. Particularly within the voluntary sector – but increasingly through other vehicles such as social enterprises and community interest companies – there are examples of activities, which are having a real and lasting impact on behaviour change at both organisational and individual level.

The most obvious conclusion anyone can draw on this subject is that only by working together can we go forward. That means collective action across an authority, within local partnerships and between sectors. As Benjamin Franklin said, “we must hang together or, assuredly, we will all hang separately”. Or, to put it another way,

Thank you.