

SHAPING LOW-CARBON COMMUNITIES

Local Authorities' primary role should be shaping "low carbon communities". This was the call from the lecture given by Warren Hatter to the PMPA this October. Speaking to an audience from across the public, private and voluntary sectors, and academics studying the role of local government, Warren, a former director of Forum for the Future, described the context, responses and challenges faced by local government in tackling climate change.

Climate Change Context

Local authorities operated in a context defined by three aspects. The first was the potential economic impact of climate change, as set out in the Stern Report, published in Autumn 2006. It argued that, because of the time-lags in climate systems, if action was not taken now, there would be catastrophic changes in climate that would threaten the world's continued economic growth.

The second context for local authorities was local public opinion. Although 2/3 of people now agreed that climate change was happening, it did not appear in people's list of main concerns, which still focused on the NHS, crime education etc. If public policy were to track public opinion, the time lags already in the system would mean that action would be too late.

The third aspect of context was local authorities' growing role in place-shaping. On the back of improved service delivery performance, local councils were increasing positioning themselves as community leaders, driving and shaping the nature of their local area.

Climate Change Responses

Local authorities were, of course, responding to this agenda already. The draft Climate Change Bill would place considerable new duties on councils, and there were already plenty of examples of local authorities demonstrating innovative practice in this area. Woking's Combined Heat and Power plants, Kirklees's free energy checks, Birmingham's ESCO were all examples, followed by the Local Government Innovation Unit's work to set up a Carbon Trading Councils Group. But although there were many examples of innovative practice, and although most local councillors thought that tackling climate change was something their council should be doing, in reality change was slow and at the margin.

Climate Change Challenge

Local authorities were struggling with this agenda, Warren Hatter argued, because there was no vision of what a "21st century low carbon economy" would look like, and no route map to get us there. There was no aspiration to return to the 1950s lifestyle, but no other model of an economy that didn't depend on carbon fuels, and particularly oil. Sustainability campaigners had so far preferred centralist models (particularly national legislation), rather than encouraging locally-led responses.

What was now needed was a new municipalism that built on the great traditions of local government as creating the conditions for the economy and community to thrive. Such an approach would drive councils to rethink the way they did their business – encouraging travel reduction, promoting decentralized energy generation, building local produce distribution networks, reducing demand and closing the resource loop and refurbishing the housing stock to make it energy efficient. These were not extensions of current services, they would be radical changes in the role and activities of the local authority. They were, however a necessary response to the challenges of climate change, and a natural extension of the place-shaping role that local authorities were now adopting.

Leadership and Learning

In the questions and debate that followed the lecture five main themes emerged:

- The value of economic drivers in making some of this change happen. The development of “carbon as a value” through measurement of carbon emissions, and then of carbon-trading schemes, was thought to be a key step in changing the behaviour of organizations.
- The challenge to capacity within local authorities. There were very few people within councils who currently had the mix of technical and change management skills to lead this sort of “low-carbon-led” change programme.
- The fact that, although 2/3 of people now believed climate change was happening, there was still a body of opinion challenging the scale of the issue, and others who took the view that, for example, tackling poverty and AIDS in Africa was a more pressing human challenge.
- The difficulty of making the case for change at a local level in the context of international growth, emerging high-carbon economies in China and India and the continued domination of the US in fuel and resource consumption.
- The necessity of visionary political leadership if local authorities were to take the route of creating “low carbon economies”. It was the role of politicians to promote to local people the vision of a community that would benefit from this approach, and to lead the arguments for change.

In concluding the discussion, Ed Cox, Director of Policy and Public Affairs at the Local Government Information Unit, who chaired the lecture, said that it was clear that local government did have a role in saving the planet, but that success would depend on this being only one step in a worldwide programme of action, and would depend on local leaders taking up the challenge of leading their communities positively into a future vision of low-carbon living.