

Local government energy action in the UK: from service delivery to community leadership

Joanne Wade
Impetus Consulting
United Kingdom
joanne@impetusconsult.co.uk

Amanda Pearson
Impetus Consulting
United Kingdom
amanda@impetusconsult.co.uk

Brooke Flanagan
Energy Saving Trust
United Kingdom
brooke.flanagan@est.org.uk

Rachael Knowland
Impetus Consulting
United Kingdom
rachael@impetusconsult.co.uk

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Abstract

In October 2006 the UK government published a new Local Government White Paper. This policy statement set the framework for the role of local government in the coming years.

The White Paper is one stage in the latest wave of local government reform in the UK. This reform has aimed to refocus attention away from delivery of specific services and towards community leadership, particularly with reference to sustainable development.

Climate change is given some emphasis within the White Paper, and should become one of the indicators against which local government performance is measured.

This paper examines energy action in local authorities in the past few years, in a situation where most, but not all, were still strongly focused on service delivery. By contrasting this with the results achieved in authorities that have taken a community leadership role, the paper examines the potential of the White Paper.

It addresses the following questions: does local government have the capacity to deliver increased local action on climate change? Does the UK policy framework support and encourage development and deployment of this capacity? And do the national and regional bodies that provide support for local authorities need to change the services they offer in light of recent policy developments?

Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of climate-related UK government policy statements that have emphasised the role of local government in mitigation and adaptation efforts. Alongside this, there has been an ongoing programme of reform of local government, intended to increase the extent to which local authorities offer community leadership on important issues.

In October 2006, the government published a Local Government White Paper (DCLG, 2006a). This included climate change as one of a number of key areas in which local government activity should increase. The purpose of this paper is to explore a number of questions that this raises:

- Does local government have the capacity to deliver an effective programme of increased local action?
- Does the UK policy framework support and encourage development and deployment of this capacity?
- Do the national and regional bodies that provide support for local authorities need to change the services they offer so that they maximise their impact on climate change activity?

Reform of Local Government

In 1980, the Conservative Thatcher Government introduced a range of controls of local government in England, with compulsory competitive tendering for the delivery of numerous services a cornerstone of the reform package. The *Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980* introduced compulsory

competitive tendering (CCT) for construction, maintenance and highways work in England. The list of services subject to CCT was further extended by the *Local Government Act 1988*, to include refuse collection, ground maintenance and catering among others. Further 'blue collar' services were added in 1989 and 1994. In 1991, the Conservative Major Government announced its intention to include a range of 'white collar' services among those which must be put to the market for tender (Wood, 1999). While there were several political motives for the introduction of CCT, it transformed the primary objective of local government across the country to a single focus on the cheapest means of delivering the services required (Wallis and Dollery, 2002). This was further enshrined within the enabling legislation which not only defined the services that would be subject to CCT but also prescribed the process and procedures that must be followed by local authorities in ensuring all services were put to the market.

The result was not only a focus on cost savings at the expense of local governance, community leadership and service outcomes, but also large scale organisational restructuring which further removed attention from the other key areas of local government's role.

In 1997, the Labour Blair Government came to power with a manifesto to 'modernise' local government. This sought to reduce the focus on prescribed processes and efficiency at all costs, and to develop a framework in which local government would function and move towards a greater regard for outcomes.

Blair's modernising agenda was enshrined in the *Local Government Act 1999* which abolished compulsory competitive tendering in England and replaced it with a new duty to achieve 'best value'. Councils were also required to achieve continuous improvement in performance. In addition, the Audit Commission¹ was made responsible for external scrutiny of local implementation of best value. The Government was given extensive powers to intervene where councils were shown to be failing to achieve best value (Wood, 1999).

While the move away from CCT to Best Value signalled a broader objective of improved quality and continuous improvement in the services local authorities provided to their communities, the focus remained very much on service delivery, with an intensive regime of performance management imposed upon local government. Although the regime was to be more about outcomes than the inputs and procedures focus that existed under CCT, the performance measurement and reporting framework, along with the intensive audit and inspection requirements, enshrined a culture of measurement and monitoring of service outputs. For example, reporting on the Home Energy Conservation Act (see below) requires measurement of the number of installations of energy efficiency measures rather than the outcome of this in terms of energy and/or carbon savings.

Since the introduction of the Best Value regime in 1999, the role of local government has continued to evolve slowly beyond the focus on service delivery. With the *Local Government Act 2000* (HM Government, 2000) the government introduced the

Power of Well Being. This enabled local authorities to undertake any activity not expressly prohibited elsewhere in legislation provided that it was intended to improve the economic, social or environmental well being of all or part of the local area. The use of this power is discussed further later in this paper.

In 2005, the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (the Department responsible for administering local government) announced the first round of Local Area Agreements (LAAs). The primary objective of LAAs was to deliver genuinely sustainable communities through better outcomes for local people. LAAs also have the secondary objectives of:

- Improving central and local government relations;
- Enhancing efficiency;
- Strengthening partnership working and
- Offering a framework within which local authorities can enhance their community leadership role².

While initially limited in scope to four policy areas – children and young people, safer and stronger communities, healthier communities and older people, and economic development and enterprise – they are now being seen as a key delivery mechanism for central government's climate change policy objectives, and the early stages of local government taking a leadership role on climate change action within their communities.

The most recent step in the evolution of the role of local government from service delivery to community leadership, has been the publication of the *Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities*, in October 2006. Not only has it signalled a massive scale-back of the central government command and control approach to administration of local government, but it also aims to put climate change at the forefront of priorities for local government action.

Climate change and local government

Local authorities have been involved in energy efficiency action for many years, both in respect of their own energy use and also as a result of a number of central government initiatives. More recently, government policy has also increased local authority involvement in the development of renewable energy supply, in particular of micro-generation. The paragraphs below summarise some of the main legislation and policy programmes that have shaped this activity.

THE HOME ENERGY CONSERVATION ACT 1995

In 1995, the Home Energy Conservation Act (HM Government, 1995) became law. This requires all local authorities with responsibility for housing to develop and publish a plan for increasing the average energy efficiency of all housing in their area by 30 % over the 10-15 year time period between 1995 and 2005-2010. There is also a requirement for authorities to report periodically on progress towards the energy efficiency improvement target. However, there is no requirement for local authorities to actually implement any measures to ensure the delivery of energy efficiency improvements.

1. The Audit Commission is the independent national body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent efficiently and effectively

2. Communities and Local Government at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1163655> (17 January 2007)

THE NOTTINGHAM DECLARATION

In October 2000, the Nottingham Declaration was launched. This is a voluntary pledge whereby a local authority agrees to address the issue of climate change. Following a re-launch of an updated version of the Declaration, in December 2005, there has been significant activity to promote the initiative by the Local Government Association, the Energy Saving Trust and the Carbon Trust. To date, over 200 of the 388 councils in England have signed the Declaration. All local authorities in Wales and Scotland have signed national versions of the Declaration. This suggests a high level of local political recognition of the issue.

THE 2003 ENERGY WHITE PAPER

In February 2002, the Prime Minister's Performance and Innovation Unit published the results of its review of energy policy (PIU, 2002). The government responded to this with the development of an Energy White Paper, setting the long-term framework for UK energy policy³, which was published in February 2003 (DTI, 2003). It detailed a number of specific plans for local authorities, stating in summary that 'in future there will be a greater emphasis on local and regional approaches in delivering our energy objectives'.

Following from the White Paper, the government published an Energy Efficiency Implementation Plan (Defra, 2003). This included: announcement of a competition for the award of Beacon Council status for sustainable energy activity; possible inclusion of energy activities within the performance assessment process for local authorities, and a Carbon Trust scheme to provide advice and finance for authorities to improve the energy performance of their own activities (the Local Authority Carbon Management Programme).

PLANNING POLICY AND RENEWABLE ENERGY

Historically, the spatial planning framework in the UK restricted the development of renewable energy installations: the presumption was that installations would be damaging to the local environment and developers had to prove otherwise if they were to be granted permission for the development. However, this changed with the publication in August 2004 of national Planning Policy Statement 22 - PPS22 - (ODPM, 2004). This required that local authorities presume in favour of renewable energy installations unless there were very good reasons not to. Since the publication of PPS22, further developments within the planning system have ensured that local authorities are able to set actual requirements for the inclusion of on-site renewable energy within new developments (this is discussed below within the section on existing local authority energy action).

In March 2006 the government launched its Microgeneration Strategy (DTI, 2006a), intended to create conditions in which the market for small scale renewable energy technologies could develop. This noted the key role of local authorities in ensuring that local planning policies encouraged the use of microgeneration technologies. Funding to support small scale renewables installations is delivered through the government's Low Carbon Buildings Programme, which can be accessed by individuals and also by community organisations and local authorities.

THE ENERGY PERFORMANCE OF BUILDINGS DIRECTIVE

The implementation of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive impacts on local authority energy activity in two ways: public display of the energy ratings for public buildings will provide an added incentive for local authorities to optimise energy management within their own properties, whilst the use of energy labels on individual dwellings offers a tool which authorities can use to support delivery of awareness raising and other campaigns. Use by local authorities of fiscal policies that will dovetail with home energy labelling is discussed later in this paper.

CURRENT UK POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

In March 2006, an updated version of the UK's Climate Change Programme was published (HM Government, 2006a). This announced funding for local authorities to work with energy suppliers to promote the benefits of energy efficiency investments, and also a revolving loan fund to finance public sector spending on energy efficiency.

In June 2006, the Climate Change and Sustainable Energy Act received Royal Assent (HM Government, 2006b). This included a requirement for the government to publish annually a report into measures that local authorities could take, that may:

- Improve the efficiency of energy use;
- Increase the use of microgeneration using low-emission energy sources;
- Reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and/or
- Reduce the incidence of fuel poverty.

Local authorities will be required to 'have regard' to the report when exercising their functions.

In July 2006 the government published the results of its second energy review (DTI, 2006b). The review noted that '*it is important that local authorities take action to combat climate change, in a cost effective way, taking account of local circumstances and priorities...proposals to provide a real incentive for local authorities to take action on climate change will be set out in the Local Government White Paper*'. This second energy review will lead to a new Energy White Paper in the spring of 2007. Climate change will a major focus for the White Paper, but at the time of writing no further details are available.

In October 2006, the report of an independent review into the economics of climate change (The Stern review) was published by the government (HM Treasury, 2006). This concluded that, whichever way the evidence was analysed, the cost of action to mitigate emissions was lower than that of adapting to the results of climate change and therefore early action should be taken. Partly in response to the review, the government announced a number of new policy initiatives, including a commitment to a national target to reduce carbon emissions by 60 % by 2050.

As noted above, the Local Government White Paper was also published in October 2006. Further details of how the emphasis on climate change action within this will be translated into performance assessment criteria is expected early in 2007, but is not available at the time of writing.

3. The White Paper was discussed in a paper for the 2003 ECEEE summer study (Wade and Leach, 2003)

In November 2006, the government launched a consultation on 'measures to reduce carbon emissions in the large non-energy intensive business and public sectors' (Defra, 2006). This invites views on a number of options for encouraging action from within these sectors, including a mandatory cap and trading system known as the Energy Performance Commitment⁴, and a voluntary benchmarking and reporting system. The measures will be applied to organisations with annual electricity usage in excess of 3,000MWh. At current UK prices this translates to those with annual electricity bills in excess of 375,000 Euro. As a typical local authority may have annual energy bills totalling millions of Euros, it seems likely that the majority of authorities will be covered by any new initiative.

Finally, in December 2006, the Code for Sustainable Homes was launched (DCLG, 2006b). This is intended to be a new national standard for the sustainable design and construction of new homes. At present the Code is voluntary, but the government has stated its intention to use the Code as an indicator for the future development of the Building Regulations. Alongside publication of the Code, the Communities Minister announced that by 2016 all new homes in England would have to be carbon neutral. These developments will have implications for local authority building control and planning activities and some authorities may decide to compress the timescale for the change by introducing new planning policies.

Local government energy action

The Energy White Paper 2003 and the UK Climate Change Programme 2006 have labelled local authorities as 'critical' and 'uniquely placed' to deliver UK government targets on climate change. However the actual role of local authorities has yet to be well defined and, in the interim, the level of activity among the majority has been limited, despite a large number of local authorities signing up to Declarations on climate change.

An assessment of current energy efficiency action by local authorities was undertaken as part of the 2006 UK Climate Change Programme review (CSE, 2005). It concluded that the performance of the majority of local authorities on energy efficiency was either 'weak' or 'fair', compared with only a small proportion falling into the 'good' or 'excellent' categories. This means that the majority of local authorities currently pay minimum attention to energy efficiency within their activities, despite, in some cases, a broad commitment to the idea of improving energy efficiency.

The financial and staffing support allocated to energy efficiency activities is small and activity tends to be limited to the minimum. For example in complying with the Home Energy Conservation Act (HECA) 1995, most authorities will submit HECA reports to Government as required but will pay minimal attention to ensuring meaningful monitoring and useful reporting. In terms of support for activity under HECA, the

average authority rarely allocates more than two person days per week for the implementation of action.

The Energy Saving Trust has 46 Energy Efficiency Advice Centres (EEACs) across the UK. EEACs are charged with providing energy saving advice to householders within their area. In order to generate contacts with individuals, they often undertake outreach and promotional activity in partnership with other organisations, such as local authorities. Local authorities do use EEACs to help achieve their HECA targets for improving household energy efficiency within their area as they have the expertise and reach for greater impact⁵. Whilst they do also provide some support for the EEACs, this is often limited to the occasional distribution of leaflets and modest funding⁶.

Research published in May 2006 by the Energy Efficiency Partnership for Homes (FES, 2006) assessed the high proportion of buildings that are constructed without complying with Part L (energy efficiency) of the 2002 Building Regulations. Local authorities are responsible for enforcing all parts of the building regulations, and investigations into the reasons for failure concluded that Part L is not considered a priority or an area of particular interest (and in some cases this was then reflected with a lack of training in the area).

This is not to say that the majority of local authorities have not been involved in accessing funding from government programmes or schemes to tackle internal or community wide energy efficiency. However, research does suggest that much of this involvement is reactive, rather than proactive and relies on approaches from groups such as the Energy Efficiency Advice Centres or energy suppliers to become involved. This results in one-off activities rather than a comprehensive strategic approach that would result in significant improvements in energy efficiency levels. This ad hoc approach to working with others such as Advice Centres probably stems from a perceived lack of overlap in remit (for example, local authorities have focused on energy use in their own operations and in social housing stock whilst Advice Centres are tasked with engaging the general public). However, this may well change as local authorities take on greater responsibility for tackling climate change.

TAKING A LEAD

While it is tempting to believe that this limited performance by most local authorities reflects the legislative framework they operate under, the performance of a few demonstrates the potential for what can be achieved within the existing political and legislative framework. These authorities proactively improve energy efficiency through the introduction of schemes and ideas.

The Improvement and Development Agency runs a Beacon Council Scheme⁷ that each year has a different theme and seeks out the best performers. Round Six's theme was Sustainable Energy and seven councils were selected for their performance across the field. Among the schemes developed by these councils was the Fenland District Council's 'FenERGY LIVE'

4. The Government's proposed Energy Performance Commitment is essentially an auction-based cap-and-trade programme in which participants would be required to purchase allowances corresponding to their emissions from energy use and then surrender them to a co-ordinator. Government would cap total energy use emissions by deciding on the number of allowances issued for auction. The revenue raised by the auction would be recycled to participants to provide a financial incentive for improved energy efficiency.

5. EEACs commenced operation in 1993. Since then they have had contact with almost 6 million customers who between them are estimated to have saved 23 million tonnes carbon dioxide (lifetime) by investing in the energy efficiency measures recommended and by implementing suggested behavioural changes.

6. As reported in CSE, 1995

7. <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=5127316>

scheme⁸, which, besides energy efficiency advice and grants, offered 'Energy Tax Credits' for householders who made energy efficiency improvements to their houses. A household would be awarded 37.5 Euro, 75 Euro or 150 Euro depending on the level of energy efficiency improvement in their home and advice would be offered on further improvements. The scheme gained popular support from constituents, partly as it was viewed as a refund on tax (although in practice the awards were not funded from tax revenues) and from local politicians as a vote winner.

Seven local authorities in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly joined together to form the Cornwall Sustainable Energy Partnership (CSEP), which was also recognised in the Beacon Council awards. This partnership has achieved substantial improvements in energy efficiency in a county with large areas in receipt of Objective One funding. The development of a sustainable energy strategy⁹ in 2004 was well received and later inspired the London Energy Strategy and Partnership. CSEP has developed a large number of very effective schemes and partnerships in various different themed working groups. The projects developed demonstrate the proactive, ideas-driven approach of the CSEP and the range of partners drawn into their delivery, such as Primary Care Trusts, doctors' surgeries, charities, energy suppliers, local businesses and community groups, demonstrates the ability of local authorities to draw the community together to take joint action.

Shropshire County Council developed a corporate energy strategy that aims to reduce the Council's own emissions by 60 % by 2050 (from 1990 levels)¹⁰. Through concerted efforts across all their activities, Shropshire achieved a 35 % reduction by 2005, despite an increase in overall energy consumption. The council believes the most successful element in securing carbon emission reductions has been improving the efficiency of buildings and the use of actual energy use figures, rather than estimates.

The ability of some local authorities to consider their role outside of the services they are required by Government to deliver is demonstrated by Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council. Kirklees used the Power of Well being to become the only local authority to take part in the UK Emissions Trading Scheme (Impetus, 2006a). The council joined the scheme as an opportunity to secure additional funding for reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. Their approach was very much to work through the barriers to participation, rather than cite the barriers as a reason for not taking part.

The list of local authorities with a strong performance on sustainable energy is not limited to the Beacon Council Scheme Round Six winners. For example, the planning system has recently been in the spotlight for demonstrating the ability of local authorities to look beyond their immediate role and challenge the set rules. The London Borough of Merton stretched the boundaries when they introduced a policy that required 10 per cent of energy used in new developments above a certain size to be provided from on-site renewables.

The planning policy developed by the London Borough of Merton is an example of community leadership: council officers had identified steps they could take that would have benefits for the local community (lower energy bills, reduced greenhouse gas emissions). The community might not have been aware of these benefits at the time, and indeed there was objection to the policy. However, once carefully implemented, the policy has been accepted by the community. Note that the leadership was probably in this case demonstrated initially by one individual rather than the council as a whole, but the initiative would not have flourished unless the culture within the authority supported such actions.

It is interesting to note the wider impact of this example of a local authority taking the lead. Early effects include the translation of the policy into a regional-level planning requirement within the London spatial strategy (Mayor of London, 2004): the team developing the London Plan were actively looking for interesting policy ideas and, once alerted to the existence of the Merton policy, recognised the opportunity to make a difference. Here again, the civil servants were working within a regional authority that had a culture of providing community leadership. Once the policy was incorporated within the London Plan, all other London local authorities had to ensure that their local development plans included similar policies to ensure legally required consistency.

As well as incorporation into the council's home region's spatial strategy, the policy was copied and enhanced by other local authorities from around the country. As national and regional planning policies have caught up with the Merton precedent, other local authorities are once again taking the lead: Milton Keynes has recently introduced a policy requiring new developments to be carbon neutral, some 10 years in advance of the government's target for national implementation of such a policy.

New opportunities offered by a community leadership role

The evolution of local government's role from service delivery to community leadership provides local authorities with a range of genuine opportunities for not only engaging and empowering their communities to take action on climate change, but also an opportunity to take a more active role in large scale energy efficiency behaviour change.

Local government has an important role to play within its community on energy action. Authorities are regarded as a trusted source of information and advice probably because they understand the local area and can be appealed to on a practical level (unlike central government who are considered more remote with little opportunity to be influenced outside of general elections). This level of trust, and greater understanding of their communities, puts local government in a vital position to engage, enable and empower their communities to take action.

If they take on the mantle of community leaders, local authorities have the opportunity to draw together different groups from the entire area, including schools, faith groups, health and social services, businesses and support services for the elderly. Local authorities are uniquely placed to develop strong partnerships that ensure real and practical delivery of community objectives. As proven by those authorities that have

8. http://www.est.org.uk/uploads/documents/housingbuildings/scheme_integration_two_fenland_cs.pdf

9. <http://www.csep.co.uk/page128g.html>

10. http://www.est.co.uk/uploads/documents/housingbuildings/Climate_change_strategy_shropshire_cs.pdf

already taken the community leadership step, this type of role can ensure that even the hardest to reach individuals can be engaged.

By combining increased trust and partnership building opportunities with the belief of their role as leaders in the community, local authorities have the opportunity to move faster on the energy agenda than national government. Renewed local government could lead to the development of low carbon communities by providing leadership, profile and a focal point for action. Local government could also act as a channel for support and delivery of energy efficiency, microgeneration and low carbon transport.

Those local authorities that are already performing well on energy efficiency prove that the current framework for local government does not prevent them taking on this type of role at the moment. So the question is whether officially assigning all local authorities as community leaders, rather than just service delivery agents, will enable them to grasp the opportunities offered. This will be considered in the final section of this paper.

Support from national and regional bodies

THE ENERGY SAVING TRUST AND THE CARBON TRUST

Several organisations provide support to local authorities on sustainable energy, including their own operations and housing stock, and increasingly on their growing role in community leadership. In particular, the Energy Saving Trust and the Carbon Trust have a range of well-developed programmes providing strategic and practical support on a whole raft of local government energy issues.

As noted earlier, together with the Local Government Association and the Improvement and Development Agency, the Energy Saving Trust and the Carbon Trust have updated and re-launched the Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change. Local authorities voluntarily sign-up to the Nottingham Declaration as a statement of political support for climate change and as commitment to take action. Signatories are soon expected to number some 200. In addition to the Declaration, there is a supporting action pack which gives local authorities the tools to develop a climate change strategy for their area and a subsequent action plan.

The Energy Saving Trust also provides a range of programmes to support local authorities along their path to energy action and community engagement. Programme activity has largely fallen into two areas – strategy development and tools for on-ground action. In the past, much of the support activity has been targeted at the development of energy strategies within local authorities to provide direction and focus, as well as ensuring political support for action on climate change. The Local Energy Support Programme had regionally based staff working with several motivated local authorities to develop strategies on energy. Over time, this activity progressed to the development of action plans and support for leveraging additional funding and resources for practical action. A successor programme is currently being planned, based on a key account management approach, working intensively with several local authorities to improve their energy performance and support them as they adopt their community leadership role.

The Energy Saving Trust's central programme for supporting the delivery of energy efficiency within local authorities is the Practical help service. This is a UK wide service for local authorities which aims to support them as they develop and implement strategies and policies to increase levels of energy efficiency and renewable energy. In the past, the programme has focused at a purely operational level but in recent times has expanded its audience to include senior managers and politicians across all local authority activities with the ability to affect energy consumption. In this way it covers strategic and operational levels.

The service comprises a number of free strands of support and advice. An enquiries service provides up to two hours of research time per enquiry and this is supported by a comprehensive website. A quarterly newsletter and monthly email bulletin can be subscribed to, and various guidance documents, toolkits and case studies are also provided. In addition to the desk-based service offered, Practical help provides a number of face-to-face resources. The most basic of these are presentations but over the last year or so, Practical help has developed to include training sessions for all levels of staff and councillor workshops. The training is aimed at developing the knowledge base of the staff so that they feel comfortable speaking to members of the public and colleagues about various topics (such as microgeneration technologies) or understand how to take action going forward (such as how to develop an energy strategy). The councillor workshops were developed on the premise that a local authority is most likely to take action if they have senior level commitment; the workshops aim to achieve this by developing the councillors' knowledge of climate change and its applicability to their locality and gain confidence in their ability to take action.

Practical help provides an additional, expert resource for local authorities and for those authorities that access the service it is extremely useful. It fills a huge gap in helping them develop their knowledge and the potential for services such as the training and workshops to move forward is exceptional. While only a few of the latter have been delivered to date, almost all have resulted in concrete actions and enthusiasm, such as signing a public declaration to take action on the causes of climate change and planning the development of an overarching climate change strategy. With enough financial backing, the Practical help service can provide vital support to a group tasked with playing a critical role in the fight against climate change.

The Carbon Trust offerings to support local authorities include the LA Carbon Management Programme¹¹ and funding support through Salix Finance. The LA Carbon Management Programme is offered to a limited number of local authorities and supports them to cut carbon emissions by developing and implementing a comprehensive programme. The programme includes toolkits, training and technical support in specific areas of energy efficiency.

11. http://www.carbontrust.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/F3B1EA68-5223-43FB-91C9-A827644BC22F/0/20040909_Local_Authorities_Carbon_Management_national_FINAL.pdf

REGIONAL BODIES

In each of the nine English Regions¹² there are a number of regional bodies that have responsibility for setting regional policies and also providing support for the local implementation of these policies.

The Regional Assembly¹³ offers a forum where local authorities meet to discuss issues of regional importance. The regional assembly has responsibility for developing the overarching regional spatial planning document: the Regional Spatial Strategy. Regional Assemblies may also offer support for the development of skills within local authorities, for example when these skills are needed for the successful implementation of regional policy. A good example of this is the joint Greater London Authority / Department of Trade and Industry funding for the development of a toolkit and training sessions for local authority planners and councillors, amongst others, on the use of renewable energy within London¹⁴.

Within each region there is also a Government Office for the region. This body represents 10 different central government departments in the region, and takes responsibility for implementing a wide range of central government policies at a regional level. Government Offices can offer support for innovative schemes to enable sharing of experience and best practice amongst local authorities within the region. For example, the Government Office for London recently piloted a system of mentoring / twinning between local authorities to ensure that best practice in waste management and recycling was shared across the region (Impetus, 2006b).

Business development interests in the region are the responsibility of the Regional Development Agency (RDA). Whilst the focus for these agencies is primarily on the private sector, there is scope for them to support the development of public-private partnerships where appropriate. For example, the London Development Agency supported workshops in 2005 to bring together local authorities and energy supply companies interested in the potential for developing partnership working on energy services schemes. More recently, the North East's RDA, One North East, has been developing an 'Energy Leadership Council' for the region. This is intended to focus on public sector leadership in the region for the development of a low carbon economy.

Effectiveness of the Local Government White Paper

WILL THE WHITE PAPER TURN LOCAL AUTHORITIES INTO COMMUNITY LEADERS?

The White Paper offers a revised performance assessment framework for local authorities that, together with enhanced use of Local Area Agreements, is intended to ensure that local authority performance is linked to delivery of change on issues that are local priorities.

12. England is divided into nine administrative regions. These are: the North West, the North East, Yorkshire and Humberside, the West Midlands, the East Midlands, the East of England, the South West, the South East and London

13. An unelected body comprising representatives of local authorities within the region plus business and voluntary sector groups, except in London where the Assembly is directly elected by London residents

14. http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/environment/energy/london_renew.jsp

Local Area Agreements will identify 35 local priorities. These agreements will be developed by the local authority in consultation with other statutory local bodies (e.g. police, fire and health services) and local community representatives (e.g. from faith groups, the voluntary sector and businesses) via a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), and must be agreed with central Government.

The question here is the extent to which the development of the Local Area Agreement will be driven by ideas from within the local authority. Will local government take a community leadership role, suggesting the issues that should be a priority in the local area, or will these issues come from other members of the Strategic Partnership? Authorities already work with their LSP to develop a Community Strategy, which itself is intended to set local priorities for action. The extent to which authorities have driven the development of these Strategies is unclear.

The Power of Well Being

Alongside the use of Community Strategies, the government introduced a Power of Well Being, mentioned above, to enable local authorities to take a wide range of actions that they identified as being in the economic, social or environmental best interests of their communities. The extent to which this power has been used perhaps gives an indication of the willingness of local authorities to take the lead at the local level.

The Government is funding research into general use of the power. Initial findings (Sullivan *et al*, 2006) suggest that awareness of the power is patchy across and within authorities, and that use depends on the culture within the authority (in particular the attitude to risk and the resources devoted to innovation). Research by Impetus into the use of the Power to support sustainable energy activities (Impetus, 2006a) echoed these findings. It found that only a tiny minority of authorities had thought to use the power to support their work (ignorance of the potential for its use was the largest reason for not using it) and most of these authorities were 'risk takers' and/or innovators prior to the introduction of the power.

Obviously, the Power of Well Being is a tool that local authorities may choose to use, whereas the provisions of the Local Government White Paper are intended to set the framework for required actions. However, the lack of uptake of the opportunities offered by Well Being does suggest that the change to community leadership may require quite a shift in the thought processes and working practices of local government officers: therefore the process may be an extended one.

WILL COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP LEAD TO ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE?

There is an embedded culture within local authorities that results in activity focusing around nationally defined performance indicators. A study for the Energy Efficiency Partnership for Homes (Impetus, 2005) identified the lack of emphasis on climate change or sustainable energy in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment as the major barrier to increased local government activity in this area.

In the new system announced in the White Paper, a set of 200 national indicators will be implemented. All local authorities will report against these indicators, and the set will include something relating to action on climate change. However, the Comprehensive Area Assessment will be key to perform-

ance assessment: an authority's performance will primarily be judged against the 35 local priorities identified in the Local Area Agreement. The question is: will these include climate change?

IS CURRENT POLICY ENOUGH?

The extent to which the White Paper will drive local authorities to take a genuine community leadership role is unclear, and the likelihood that climate change will be identified as one of 35 local priority action areas is unknown.

Experience to date with use of the Well Being power suggests that the transition to community leadership is likely to be a lengthy one, and therefore definition of local priorities in the early years may well be dominated by issues that are already covered by a local authority's duties.

Climate change is, at the time of writing, a current issue that is very much in the public eye. However, there are concerns about mixed messages from central government (for example, statements by the Prime Minister that reducing air travel is 'a bit impractical' and therefore carbon offsetting is a good idea can easily be misinterpreted to suggest that individual and community action to reduce emissions is not necessary). Whilst this will not necessarily impact directly on local authorities, it may make their community leadership role in this area more difficult.

The history of environmental activity by local authorities is also not promising: serious attention to increasing waste recycling only occurred when statutory targets for local authorities, accompanied by fines for non-compliance, were introduced.

Equally, an internal focus within many local authorities on alleviation of fuel poverty seems to have had little impact on the local priorities identified for inclusion in the Community Strategy.

WHAT MORE NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

The climate change indicator within the Comprehensive Area Assessment needs to be one of the indicators against which performance is assessed. At present it seems likely that government will require inclusion of a local emissions reduction target within Local Area Agreements, although the mechanism for this is not at this point clear. Provided that the targets are ambitious enough, they should provide a clear incentive for authorities to show the necessary leadership in this area.

In addition to this, local government officers need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge required to develop effective local programmes.

Skills required include those of partnership development and working and effective community engagement: both areas in which the majority of current local authority staff are unlikely to have experience. Whilst some guidance exists relating to specific policy areas, for example relating to the inclusion of fuel poverty in community strategies (Impetus, 2004), there is a need for more general capacity building in this area. This issue relates to all community leadership work and is probably best tackled at the national level by government and representative bodies such as the Local Government Association and the Improvement and Development Agency.

Knowledge needed for effective action to tackle climate change includes a range of information about sustainable energy, transport and construction. The Energy Saving Trust and

Carbon Trust already provide support in this area, as described previously. However, there is a need for expanding activity in this area: during the present financial year the Energy Saving Trust has delivered training sessions and climate change workshops to less than 5 % of local authorities, and has begun a key account management approach with a similar number. Similarly, the Carbon Trust Local Authority Carbon Management Programme has begun new work with less than 10 % of authorities this year.

In addition to increasing the capability of local authorities to respond to the climate change agenda by increasing knowledge and skills, there is also a need to support innovation. Lack of capacity to support the development of innovative ideas is often cited as a limiting factor for local government energy action. In the past the Energy Saving Trust has provided limited start-up funding to innovative schemes on a competitive basis, and this has produced good results and perhaps should be repeated in some form. However, the mass of less active local authorities would find such funding difficult to access as they do not have the capacity to prepare bids for the competition. Some form of support (perhaps through funded secondments) to assist in the initial development of schemes would potentially be effective in this respect.

Ensuring that the transition to community leadership on climate change occurs as swiftly as possible may involve inspiring 'wilful individuals' within local authorities to drive the process forward. National and regional agencies have a role to play here in continuing to deliver activities that raise awareness of the issues at all levels within local government.

Finally, local government leadership needs to be supported by activities to build general public support for climate change action. The government is already funding a range of community communication activities through its Climate Challenge programme¹⁵ and plans a national publicity campaign around the issues. This activity needs to be continued and supported by consistency across all government policy areas and statements.

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