



Briefing 12/28 June 2012

How local authorities can reduce emissions and manage climate risk: Committee on Climate Change report

To: All contacts in England

For Information: All contacts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Key issues

Local authorities can have a wide sphere of influence over carbon emission reduction in their locality. There are a range of services where action can be taken to make a significant impact upon emission levels. Call for low carbon plans to be adopted and extra funding from government to support schemes.

1. Introduction

The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) is an independent statutory body established under the Climate Change Act (2008) to advise UK and Devolved Administration governments on setting and meeting carbon budgets, and preparing for climate change. In October 2011 Greg Barker, Minister of State for Energy and Climate Change, requested the CCC to provide advice on the role of local authorities in delivering emissions reductions required to meet carbon budgets. CCC have previously highlighted the need for a step change in the pace of emissions reductions and are increasingly focusing on the implementation arrangements required to drive this change.

The report states that 'Local authorities are well placed to drive and influence emissions reductions in their wider areas through the services they deliver, their role as social landlords, trusted community leaders and major employers, and their regulatory and strategic functions.'

The report can be found [here](#). Although the terms of reference relate to England, reflecting the fact that local government is a devolved matter, much of the analysis is relevant at the UK level.

2. Key messages

The report emphasises the point that there is a crucial role for local authorities in reducing emissions to meet national carbon budgets highlighting the following:

- Local authorities have significant scope to influence emissions in buildings, surface transport, and waste, which together account for 40% of UK greenhouse gas emissions. There is an opportunity to reduce emissions in these sectors by 20% in 2020 from 2010 levels (30% on 1990 levels).

- The largest opportunity for local authorities is supporting energy efficiency improvement in residential buildings but they also exist in non-residential buildings, sustainable transport and waste management.
- There is also an important role for local authorities in supporting power sector decarbonisation through granting planning approval for onshore wind projects and ensuring that these are designed to benefit local communities. In addition, local authorities can play a part through supporting investment in electric vehicle charging infrastructure, which will result in longer term emissions benefits.
- Reducing local authority own estate emissions is important in the context of carbon budgets, both directly and to underpin the wider leadership role of local authorities.
- A failure to secure reductions across the areas where local authorities have significant influence would leave emissions above levels required to meet carbon budgets.

The report goes on to say that local authorities should draw up low-carbon plans with high level ambitions for emissions reduction (e.g. 20% reduction across buildings, surface transport and waste by 2020 relative to 2010 levels) but focus on drivers of emissions over which they have influence (e.g. number of homes insulated, car miles travelled). Ambition should be set, policies developed to encourage action, and monitoring undertaken to ensure that ambition is achieved in practice. It would not be appropriate for local authorities to set (or be set) binding carbon budgets given the multiple drivers of emissions, many of which are beyond their control.

It notes that there is currently a significant risk that local authorities will not develop or implement sufficiently ambitious low-carbon plans, following the removal of the national indicator framework and given the highly constrained fiscal situation. In order to mitigate this, and the associated risk for meeting national carbon budgets, the Government should seriously consider providing additional funding (e.g. for local authorities to be Green Deal providers/ partners, and to roll out sustainable travel programmes) and/or introducing a statutory duty for local authorities to develop and implement low-carbon plans.

The report also states that there is an important role for local authorities in preparing for climate change, using planning and other policy levers to ensure that buildings and infrastructure are resilient to increased risk of flooding and heat stress. Previous assessments question whether adaptation is adequately resourced and whether climate risk has been given sufficient weight in local authority decision making, and suggest the need for increased focus by local authorities in order that climate risk is managed appropriately.

3. Context

The report notes the different roles and duties local authorities have such as statutory duties to provide services across a range of sectors, including waste collection and disposal, housing, environment and transport, each of which offers a significant opportunity for emissions reduction. As a landlord local authorities in England currently own approximately 2 million dwellings and while there have already been major improvements in energy efficiency in social housing, there is scope for further low-carbon retrofit (e.g. through solid wall insulation). Local authorities can raise awareness about green issues in general and about emissions reduction across their communities. The National Planning Policy Framework calls for local authorities to develop and implement plans that meet the challenges of climate change. As regeneration coordinators in their area local authorities play a major role in driving local regeneration. Plans including projects that offer opportunities for emission reductions, for example through energy efficient new buildings or sustainable transport infrastructure. All of these are ways in which the local authority can contribute.

The report states how the Coalition Government has reformed the way local government operates, with some of the most important changes set out in the Localism Act 2011, including the abolition of national indicators and those for climate change. As such there is no requirement for local authorities to set or negotiate targets to reduce their own or area-wide emissions. This point, in conjunction with reduced revenue funding and encouragement to cap council tax increases means that the question remains as to whether local authorities will prioritise action to reduce emissions going forward.

4. Opportunities for reduced emissions at the local level

The report notes details of how specific areas of business contribute to emissions and the potential to reduce them. It notes building, surface transport, waste and energy supply as sectors and goes on to describe the potential for the local authority to influence them. Examples include planning approval for renewable projects, involvement in low-carbon decentralised energy (e.g. city centre combined heat and power plants linked to district heating) and encouragement for reductions in electricity use (e.g. via information campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of buying more efficient domestic appliances).

The report notes the policy levers available to local authorities. For example with regard to buildings, references are made to insulation, boiler replacements and efficient appliances as well as tackling fuel poverty and employment opportunities through energy efficiency retrofit programmes and the Green Deal. It goes on to mention enforcement powers such as building regulations, energy performance certificates or energy efficiency improvements in return for granting planning permission.

Parking standards, the use of low-carbon vehicles, placement of charging points and public transport provision are all noted in the transport section whilst the levers relating to waste include prevention, separate collection of waste and waste to energy schemes.

The report goes on to mention reductions from the local authorities own estate such as emissions from street lighting, reduced energy use in their own buildings, encouragement of more sustainable travel by staff and the development of a low carbon procurement strategy.

The report provides suggested indicators for a low carbon plan covering buildings, transport, waste, power and estate indicators. It goes on to provide some examples of where low carbon plans have been developed.

5. Local approaches to adapting to climate change

The report outlines some of the main opportunities local authorities have to increase resilience to climate change in their localities and provides an overview of progress and some of the challenges local authorities face.

It notes that from an adaptation perspective, land use planning is one of the most important functions delivered by local government. Planning decisions can directly help to increase resilience to climate risks, but can also lock future generations into a development pathway that increases vulnerability or one that will be very costly to maintain or reverse. By taking a strategic approach to land use planning local authorities can minimise flood risk, plan and deliver green infrastructure and sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS).

Resilient roads and flood defences are examples of infrastructure which is resilient to changing climatic conditions and extreme weather and can be provided by local authorities. Other examples include extending and improving ecological networks, emergency planning and civil protection.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The report highlights the benefits of action, including carbon reduction, energy and fuel poverty mitigation, reduced congestion, improved air quality, urban regeneration, unlocking the value associated with recycling and energy from waste, as well as increased resilience. Recognising these benefits, some local authorities are acting to reduce emissions, but there is a need for a consistent approach across all local authorities.

It notes as a recurring theme the need for funding if local authorities are to fulfil their potential and influence emissions reductions. For example, supporting the Green Deal requires that a local authority commits

significant upfront resources, particularly if it is to be a provider or partner. There are also significant funding requirements for roll-out of sustainable travel programmes and electric vehicle charging networks.

Given the potential for a low level of action, the current budget situation at the local level, and the need for additional funding, there is significant risk that local authorities will not play the role that has been identified, thus failing to make their contribution to meeting carbon budgets, as well as failing to unlock wider social and economic benefits.

The report states that the CCC have suggested that two options which could mitigate this risk are for the (national) Government to provide additional funding to support local authority action, and/or to introduce a new statutory duty to plan to reduce emissions.

- Additional funding could be provided at the national level for local authorities to become Green Deal partners or providers, and for comprehensive roll out of sustainable travel programmes and electric vehicle charging networks.
- A statutory duty to develop an area-wide low-carbon plan and report on its implementation would require prioritisation of low-carbon activity within existing local authority funds, and ensure a uniform approach to local authorities' contribution to national carbon budgets across England. Such a duty and/or funding would provide more confidence that there will be comprehensive action by local authorities resulting in local economic benefit and emissions reductions required to meet carbon budgets.

7. Comment

APSE welcomes the main messages behind this report, namely that local authorities have significant influence over how carbon emissions in their localities and in their own estates can be reduced, that they can have a direct input such as through flood defences and that investment has an impact upon related issues such as fuel poverty. The public sector projects referred to in the report highlight the range of involvement local authorities have and the leadership they can provide.

The confusion and delays around feed in tariffs has not helped the sector and this kind of incentive is vital if investment is to be made in reducing carbon emissions. The market has not yet developed to a point where it will operate without incentives and, in a time of economic downturn demand is unable to sustain the market alone. Central government needs to be clear and consistent with incentives and initiatives if they are to support the sector and lead to significant change.

The removal of national indicators in this area can be seen in two ways. First of all they do focus attention on the topic, highlight the issue to senior members and officers within the council and provide a context within which changes are made. However, there is no single approach which will be right for all authorities and, as this report notes, there are a range of actions which can be taken by authorities to reduce carbon emissions. Local authorities should be willing and able to report progress on carbon emissions reduction as they see fit.

The funding issue referred to is highly relevant. In reality, local authority priority in austere times is concentration on frontline service delivery to meet immediate demand. The willingness to get involved in what are often longer term schemes may exist but the resources may not. Although many local authorities have made steps in schemes aimed at reducing their carbon footprint, as the report points out, there are many more opportunities for them to do so across the range of services provided. This is only likely to happen if there are extra resources provided to enable councils to invest in such schemes. The report notes Green Deal and electric charging points specifically and these are both valid areas for investment, amongst many.

APSE has consistently argued for investment in these areas and has provided evidence that the business cases for investment can be made to stack up. In our work we have found that although service managers, directors and councillors can be convinced of the benefits and financial viability of schemes, it is vital to get the director

of finance on side if schemes are to progress. APSE suggests that this officer is engaged from the start of any project to ensure success.

This report does not provide the technical detail needed to undertake a specific scheme. However it does reflect the scope of potential actions and makes the case for local authorities to have a low carbon plan in place which addresses the myriad of related issues, such as fuel poverty, renewables, behavioural change, finance and others and highlights how local authorities might engage with partners. Such a plan should fit into the annual planning cycle within councils, helping to direct financial resource, identify priorities and set longer term goals.

Whilst APSE believes that the contribution that local government can and is making in the transition to the green economy requires greater recognition and acknowledgement by central government, we would not necessarily welcome a statutory duty to develop an area-wide low carbon transition plan placed on local government unless adequate additional funding was attached to deliver this.

APSE has experience in supporting its members who are taking actions to reduce carbon emissions, invest in renewables or take similar actions through the process from making a business case through to implementation. Please contact APSE Solutions if you need support.

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