

Renewable Energy Association response to the 'Call for written evidence' by the Local Government Association's Climate Change Commission

Introduction

REA's response to the LGA's Climate Commission will naturally focus on the role Local Government can play in promoting renewable energy. Addressing demand and promoting energy efficiency are fundamental approaches to tackle climate change but to reach the targets recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change will also require a significant increase in the generation of heating, cooling and electricity from renewable sources. A key driver in the UK is the binding target to generate 20% of our total energy from renewable sources by 2020. National government has not produced a plan yet on how that will be realised but Local Authorities, with their procurement, enabling and planning powers will undoubtedly have a key role in helping achieve this.

1. What are the main drivers for councils to tackle climate change, both mitigating climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the impact of climate change? In what way, could the drivers be strengthened?

Making action to mitigate and adapt to Climate Change a key way in which Councils are ranked through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process would be a major step forward in providing a stimulus for action by Local Authorities.

A new Best Value Performance Indicator's to assess the growth of Renewable Energy within the Councils boundaries would be a major step in driving action towards mitigating climate change and helping to reach the governments binding commitment to produce 20% of our total energy from renewable sources by 2020. The BVPI should differentiate between renewable electricity and renewable heating/cooling and be able to show the cumulative impact of a number of on-site installations over a year.

Action by Councils on renewable energy should be coordinated with investment in demand reduction measures to ensure the benefits of On-Site Renewables have a greater impact.

2. What are the main barriers and constraints to councils tackling climate change more effectively? How can they be dismantled?

The principal barrier for Local Authorities is the fact that tackling climate change is not a statutory responsibility of local government nor has central government identified it as priority for them. As such the response from authorities is 'patchy' in the extreme with occasional bright shining lights.

Finance is an actual and perceived constraint for local authorities when considering options to tackle climate change. Actual in that Councils are under constant pressure to demonstrate financial efficiencies year on year and perceived as often financial models which would enable positive action are not applied correctly e.g. applying life cycle cost analysis to renewables as an option in Council projects.

Capital investment in renewable energy installations can result in a significant reduction in a Councils revenue costs. A serious assessment of the financial impact of renewable energy on fuel costs will enable Local Authorities to make informed decisions on whether or not to adopt renewable technology.

3. A number of councils are leading the way in tackling climate change – what are the key success factors? What is inhibiting success in other councils?

The key success factor for leading councils is the impact of 'wilful individuals' who pursue schemes to address climate change despite it not being a statutory requirement for local authorities. This is usually a particular officer or Councillor. It is often easier for these wilful individuals to be effective in larger Metropolitan Councils where there is more capacity to enable the degree of innovation and the flexibility needed to allow time to develop new projects. The size of the Council is an inhibiting factor, the lack of direction by national government, lack of dedicated funding and a lack of political direction in many councils. Government pointing to Councils where 'wilful individuals' have been successful instead of providing the statutory framework needed to ensure action is taken in all local authorities is particularly disappointing.

A key success factor in those authorities that are exemplars in tackling climate change is having sufficient well trained staff and resources available to ensure delivery of projects that mitigate climate change. Kirklees Council has developed the capacity to deliver projects over a number of years. It has to be recognised that supporting the development of skilled key staff is a priority for any local authority that is serious pursuing this agenda.

4. Given constraints on resources, what are the most and least productive areas for council action and what are the implications for more effective action?

Most productive in renewable energy terms are:-

Application of life cycle cost analysis

The application of life cycle cost analysis should be used for all major council procured development projects such as new schools, residential homes etc. It is important that this financial method is applied to the range of available renewable technologies when consideration is given to the sources of energy for the new building. A study by Faber Maunsell for Kirklees Council in 2005 concluded that using life cycle cost analysis that it was possible to justify a 30% On-Site Renewable Energy target in all Council procured developments.

Use of the Planning process

In Local Development Frameworks there is a need to establish realistic but challenging On-Site Renewable Energy targets for all new developments. This target should rise over time to reflect the growing familiarity of architects and developers with the technology and economies of scale that will be realised as the industry grows. A rising target will also maintain the effectiveness of the policy as energy demand in buildings diminishes with improved building regulations. Calderdale Council established the principle of a rising renewable energy target in 2005 when the policy was included in its Revised Unitary Development Plan

Localised Biomass Action Plans

An assessment of the potential for utilising biomass as a fuel within each local authority

Area would enable the Council to assess how much renewable heat could be utilised by the Council in its own buildings. Local authorities manage woodland,

street trees and receive wood as a waste product from households and businesses. Many Councils are also major landowners with land that could be used to grow a range of biomass crops such as willow coppicing, miscanthus etc. Understanding how much tonnage of biomass is there, how it could be produced and the investment required to make it into a viable fuel will help inform the councils capital decisions regarding boiler replacements for public buildings. Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council has established a policy of specifying Biomass Boilers in all public buildings unless there is a financial case not too.

5. How can councils work in partnership in their local areas more effectively?

Existing Regional and Sub Regional Partnership structures can be utilised to promote action to address climate change. Regional Housing Boards offer the opportunity to set standards for social housing and target additional investment. In Yorkshire and Humber the Regional Housing Strategy states that 'Renewable Energy should be considered in all new developments.' While this is welcome it would be more helpful if higher standards in development were not just 'considered' but were an obligation where public funds were being used. Specifically specifying Code for Sustainable Homes Level 5 or 6 would be helpful at an early stage. Councils should specify CSH Level 5 or 6 in their Approved Development Programmes for new Social Housing schemes funded by the Housing Corporation for example.

The Sustainable Energy Networks being established by the Energy Saving Trust offer a framework to ensure Local Authorities and energy advice services are providing consistent high quality advice on a range of sustainable energy matters. A specific renewable energy recommendation would be to recommend that householders only use installers who are signed up to the UK Microgeneration Certification Scheme and the REAL Assurance scheme. The Real Assurance Scheme is a Consumer Code for businesses supplying renewable technology to domestic, community and small-business consumers. The UK Microgeneration Certification Scheme evaluates products and installers against robust criteria for each of the microgeneration technologies. Councils could make promotion of the REAL Code and UK Microgeneration Accreditation Scheme as key conditions of their partnership agreement with the new Sustainable Energy Networks. This would be of real benefit in their role as providers of renewable energy advice to householders.

Local Strategic Partnerships are a key vehicle for joint working between key organisations and agencies in a Local Authority area. Ensuring stretching targets to address climate change are included in Local Area Agreements would enable other public bodies such as the Health Sector to play their part in achieving local targets. The Health Sector is a key user and procurer of buildings and the need to apply renewable energy targets to this sector through the Local Area Agreements process would make a significant impact.

Planning policies that support On-Site Renewables should be co-ordinated wherever possible, between neighbouring local authorities to ensure a consistent development environment for developers. This coordinated approach could make reference to any On-Site Renewables policy that has been developed at a Regional level such as the Regional Spatial Strategy.

6. What policy and practical support is needed to drive further action?

Government Guidance to Council Treasurers/Finance Managers to ensure renewable energy is considered as an option when procuring new buildings and the need to employ life cycle cost analysis to assess the financial viability of each relevant renewable technology.

A requirement by Government on Local Authorities to produce Localised Biomass Action Plans that assess the potential for locally derived fuel and for the installation of biomass boilers in Council buildings.

A requirement to have a target for renewable energy in the Local Area Agreement to assess progress towards the binding 20% renewable energy target.

The provision of a financial incentive to Councils that successfully implement projects to mitigate climate change would provide an important driver to local government. This could operate in a number of ways. One possibility might be a Carbon Reward Grant where Councils are rewarded for hitting targets in reducing carbon emissions. This could operate in a similar way to the Planning Reward Grant system.

7. What are the key messages for local and national government in setting policy for emissions reductions and building adaptive capacity?

National Government

That Local Authorities and the wider Local Strategic Partnerships should be given a statutory key role in addressing the causes of climate change at a local level and the resources necessary to ensure that they are able to fulfil the requirements of that role.

That a BVPI on renewable energy be created to assess progress to achieving the binding 20% renewable energy target. This new BVPI should play an important role when judging the Council's overall performance through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process.

Local Government

That priority and political drive needs to be provided from the highest level within Local Authorities to ensure addressing climate change is one of their core activities.

Local authorities and their local partners will play a key role in local plans to ensure the binding 20% renewable energy target is achieved by 2020. Local Action plans will need to be developed at the earliest opportunity to ensure this target is reached.

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