

The future is bright - the future is green

With many other articles focusing negatively on the financial challenges local government faces after the General Election, I believe it's important to also look to where opportunities may arise for the sector.

Having visited Cornwall recently and seen at first hand the plans contained within the 'Greening Cornwall' programme, I was heartened to see how leadership from local government can be the critical success factor to stimulating the low-carbon and green industry as the country emerges from the economic downturn.

The potential local economic benefit is huge and the reality of this is that local authorities can keep most of the financial, environmental and employment spin-offs for themselves if they have confidence in their own capability rather than handing over all of this to third parties.

This is one of the best 'invest to save' opportunities I have ever seen with councils building environmental infrastructure to achieve an immediate payback by selling surplus energy raised to the grid. It not only allows them to create local employment or redeploy existing staff but gives them the carbon benefit to meet their reduction commitments and avoid fines.

Technologies such as solar, wind, tidal and geothermal are well established now and there is very little technical ? risk. Southampton has had a district heating network for over 20 years that has reduced carbon emissions by over 100,000 tonnes during that period. The public may be sceptical about wind turbine farms but there is a strong case to be argued – especially if the economic benefit is being kept local.

Many authorities are experimenting with electric fleets and outdated arguments about longevity of battery power or areas being too hilly have long since diminished as advances have been made. Not only is new council housing being built to enhanced environmental standards but retro fitting of existing stock and public buildings will also be required to improve energy efficiency.

APSE's latest briefing calls for skills for green industries to be developed as a local and national priority. Local businesses who invest in renewable technology and advanced green manufacturing by providing wind turbines and solar panels are likely to have a very profitable future, especially as much of this is imported at present. Councils can incentivise this by ensuring they imbed community benefit clauses stimulating demand for low-carbon materials in their procurement practices.

Local government may face some tough times over the coming years, but those who have the vision to get ahead of the game by embracing this agenda may be able to offset reductions in some traditional service areas by making advancements in this brave new world.

Paul O'Brien is Chief Executive of APSE (the Association for Public Service Excellence)