



Speech to SNP conference Fringe Event 2007

What are local authorities doing to tackle Climate Change?

Firstly I would like to say thanks for having us back for the second year running on the fringe programme at your conference. Last year in Perth we had about 70 delegates talking about the 'transformational government' agenda, although I don't think Jack McConnell quite expected the transformation that occurred.

On then to the thorny subject of Climate Change and what local authorities can do to tackle the issues which are emerging. Some of you may start from the premise that whatever we do is irrelevant because of the impact of American and Chinese economic policies. Some of you may believe that climate change is an over exaggerated problem and that Al Gore and his inconvenient truth are merely his way of gaining revenge on George W Bush for cheating him out of the American presidency. However, hopefully most of you will realise that Climate Change is a real and present danger and one that we have a moral obligation to try to do something about.

My view is that there are 3 or 4 main things that local government and the wider public sector can do to tackle climate change. The first and probably most important is for the **public sector to be that champion of change** in the way society lives its life and consumes services on a daily basis. By definition local authorities and the way they operate are integral to daily living. They educate and feed our children, look after our elderly, plan and design our local housing and environment, have a key role in how we travel and impact heavily on the quality of our free time. In this I am referring to education, social services, housing, roads and highways, streetscene, waste management, sports and leisure and parks.... the list is endless. Therefore the design and delivery of these services becomes crucial to creating a more sustainable future for all and not only has that but set an example to the rest of society.

My second point is around the issue of **Procurement**, in U.K. terms the public sector spends around £150b per annum with about £40b of this spent by local government alone. In Scottish terms the block grant is

about £30b with local government and the wider public sectors share of this being more than marginal. One of the main challenges we face is changing manufacturers behaviour and we need to realise that the collective economic power that the public sector can bring to bear is very significant. We have all heard recent speculation about charging householders for waste; however it is significant that only 9% of landfill is household waste, with over 60% coming from construction alone. Whilst individual citizens have a role to play in changing not only their own behaviour but also that of manufacturers, surely it is flawed and potentially regressive to tax them rather than the main perpetrators of environment crime. Let's make sure that every pound that is spent from the public purse contributes public value. Efficiency and value for money are terms we are all too familiar with, but a short term lowest cost based approach achieves neither of these notions. We need to ensure that we get a long term sustainable benefit from the money we spend.

On to **Service Delivery** and I want to first of all say that I have come across countless examples of best practice across local government with regards to environmentally sustainable approaches. At APSE we do our own annual awards scheme and from the last couple of years alone I was able to provide Government with in excess of 100 case studies of local authorities pushing back the boundaries and really making a difference on the ground. From intelligent premises and green offices to self hydrated parks, from local organic food suppliers in the school meals chain to local authorities fleets running on bio diesel. Not only these initiatives happening at present but through education programmes they are ensuring that our children are already engaging in practises that are sustainable for the future. My problem is currently these initiatives tend to be happening in individual authorities or isolated departments, we really need to mainstream these ideas across all areas of the public sector and local government. I know we live in a rapidly changing world but local authorities need to be outward looking to share the best practice that exists to ensure that they are not lagging behind, from my experience excellence has no geographic boundaries.

My final point is on **Mindset**, still too often at present it is easy to say that 'climate change' is something that the environmental services department deals with or someone somewhere else in the organisation is responsible for. The reality is if we are to face the challenge posed by this issue then it is something we all need to realise we are responsible for. That means elected members in the policy making and scrutiny process, it means those responsible for strategic and local procurement, thinking of sustainability alongside price, it means senior officers building it into business and service plans and it also means the highly visible public sector workforce setting a role model for others to follow.

I made a quick check before I came up to conference and I think I am correct in saying that the SNP are either in control or in coalition on 11 of Scotland's 32 councils, therefore you are in a position to do something about this issue, to lead from the front. Mike is here today as the Scottish Government's Environment Minister, Scotland has led the way on the smoking ban and hungry for success in recent years and others have followed. There's an opportunity here for a Scottish Government and SNP councils to lead the way on tackling climate change, if you are bold enough to do so others again will follow. Having said that I believe this is an issue which crosses party divides and one that local government generally will wish to work in partnership with the Scottish Government on.

In conclusion, the four points I have made are about tackling climate change by achieving long term public value. It's about the public sector in general and local government in particular acting as the champion for change, it's about using your purchasing power for maximum sustainable benefit, it's about mainstreaming the best practice I spoke about to ensure it becomes the norm across all services and it's about creating a mindset where we all realise that we have a role to play in tackling the biggest challenge this planet has probably known.

Delivered by Paul O'Brien to the SNP conference 2007 Fringe Event on Climate Change with Mike Russell MSP, Environment Minister, Scottish Parliament