

climate

change

THE MJ FOCUS

The carbon clock is ticking



The new carbon reduction league must not be a name-and-shame exercise, but an urgent catalyst to link climate change considerations consistently across frontline services, says

Paul O'Brien

Messages about climate change are undoubtedly getting through, and examples of good practice in reducing carbon emissions by councils across the UK abound.

And while local authorities are already taking action, the Carbon Reduction Commitment (CRC) brings a necessary sense of urgency by providing a formal framework within which energy use will be measured.

The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) is due to publish its response to the consultation on the new mandatory carbon trading scheme, which comes into force next April.

Councils know that public sector organisations are to be ranked in an annual league table alongside private firms – with financial rewards for those which perform well, and penalties for those which do not.

But they have been slow to react, according to Stephen Cirell, who has been seconded to head up Cornwall Council's green agenda. He told delegates at APSE's Frontline services, climate change and the carbon reduction commitment conference that while there was awareness of the scheme at a technical level, 'chief executives, elected members and heads of service are the ones who need to be convinced... Savings could be substantial. But we need to understand it properly and plan for the next five years'.

Assessment will be based on improvements from 2013, but an Early Action Metrics formula will ensure councils are not disadvantaged if they are already ahead of the game on measures to reduce energy consumption. Some local authorities have expressed anxiety over

CRC key points:

- as a Climate Change Bill commitment, the scheme is aiming for an 80% reduction in CO₂ emissions by 2050
- it will apply to all organisations using more than 6,000Mw of electricity in 2008, which would mean an average bill of some £500,000 annually
- it is designed to complement existing climate change policies and mechanisms
- the scheme applies to council buildings, including schools, but not to transport
- local authorities' position in the league will be based on 2010-11 information, with bonuses for those on the top of the league and penalties for those at the bottom.

the scheme, which appears complex. The Government has not made clear what support it will provide those local authorities which are grappling with new CRC requirements.

We at APSE have argued that this scheme must not become a name-and-shame exercise that penalises those authorities which are struggling. Naming and shaming would not only demoralise the workforce and damage a council's reputation among its residents, but financial penalties would also leave that council with less resources to remedy its problems.

Instead, the DECC should be pro-active in assisting organisations through the early stages of the scheme, particularly in relation to informing them of deadlines

rather than resorting to enforcement. There should also be a package of support for those organisations which appear lower in the league table.

We suggest advisers should go into every authority to provide high levels of assistance in getting to grips with this new system. Sharing of the good practice that is certainly already out there is vital.

Above all, this must be about mindset, not just tick-box legislation. There is a need for buy-in on CRC from the corporate policy and performance centre, through every department of every council and for best practice on the ground to be shared across and between councils.

Local authority managers on the frontline are increasingly aware of the big difference that measures on their part can make, as our conference revealed.

Newcastle City Council's use of energy-efficient traffic signals, for example, means up to 70% power savings. Gateshead MBC has reduced CO₂ emissions by 350t in two years and delivered £300,000 efficiency savings through use of new fuels and technologies and more efficient driving.

Such knowledge needs to be harnessed and linked effectively across services and to the new CRC framework. Councils have come a long way in addressing climate change, but this new scheme means a need to act urgently – for the sake of their reputations, balance sheets and the planet. ▀

Paul O'Brien is chief executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)