

CHAPTER 9

LOCAL AUTHORITIES DOMAIN

Scope

The wide range of functions and responsibilities undertaken by local authorities. Consideration is made of County, Unitary and District Councils, but not of Parish and Town Councils. Despite the importance of this domain, time has permitted only a limited enquiry in this area.

See Also

All other Impact Domains.

Baseline

Local government within the region is organised through 6 County Councils, with 36 District Councils and 9 Unitary Councils.

The prospect of an increasing role for regional governance is increased following the release of the recent White Paper *Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions (May 2002)*

At present such changes are unlikely to be imposed upon regions, but will probably follow local referendums. Nevertheless, within the time frame of anticipated climate change such changes seem likely.

The majority of the proposals suggest an enhanced role for elected regional assemblies but there is also a strong implication for changes at County and District levels. A growth in the number of Unitary authorities, and a reduction in the number of County Councils, seems the most likely outcome of such changes.

Other Drivers of Change

Local Authorities operate under increasing influence from central government. This applies to over-arching concepts of governance, such as 'Best Value', and also to specific targets to be achieved in discrete policy areas, such as 'Law and Order'.

The full impact of Cabinet government in local councils is yet to be realised, but it will change the relationship between councillors and officers, and probably give increasing influence to senior elected members.

Local authorities therefore experience increased pressure on limited resources with the growing perception that they are asked to achieve increasingly more with increasingly less.

One of the requirements recently imposed on local authorities is the creation of Local Strategic

Partnerships (LSPs) for the purposes of developing Community Strategies (or Community Plans). LSPs are non-statutory, non-executive organisations which bring together at a local level the different parts of the public sector as well as the private, business, community and voluntary sectors, so that different initiatives and services support each other and work together. These partnerships will become increasingly important mechanisms through which local authorities will develop and implement policy.

Key Issues

The wide range of activities for which local authorities are responsible means that climate change, both adaptation and mitigation, impacts on many different areas. Local Authorities need to identify those areas that are vulnerable to climate change as a matter of priority in order to develop appropriate responses.

Strategic responses on climate change are being carried out by many local authorities but generally the focus is on mitigation rather than adaptation.

Local Authorities are encouraged to sign up to the Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change. Again, there is only limited reference to adaptation issues within the text of the Nottingham Declaration, despite the fact that the declaration represents the key initiative on climate change for the public sector.

Many of the climate change adaptation issues that face local government are similar for all authorities. Certainly, neighbouring authorities are likely to experience similar changes in climate. There will be considerable benefit through co-operation between councils, both at County and District levels.

It is unlikely that adaptation to climate change will achieve sufficient priority in competing council agendas to become a major policy driver in its own right. Therefore, it will be important to find appropriate policy frameworks within which adaptation issues can be nested.

The potential hazards of flooding are acknowledged, and the statutory and advisory roles of the Environment Agency and Local Planning Authorities seem appropriate to deal with these issues.

Local Authorities have an important role in emergency planning, both in preparing and co-ordinating local arrangements. Responding to extreme weather events will now become an important part of such planning.

Building designers, engineers and surveyors, and their consultants identified potential litigation as major concerns. It was unlikely that projects that were already completed would be re-visited, but new projects will need to be designed to new, future-proof standards. We were advised

therefore, that changes in performance standards, codes etc. that reflected potential changes in climate would be a highly effective mechanism for improving performance.

As well as considering the more obvious and statutory functions of councils, Local Authorities should also be encouraged to consider potential lifestyle changes that might be influenced by changes in the weather. For example, the greater use of the external environment in parks, pavement cafes, cycling and other leisure activities, may require significant changes to present planning policies.

We need both to adapt to the effects of climate change to protect our communities and to act creatively NOW to cut the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. In addition to providing a challenge, climate change offers an opportunity to address issues like fuel poverty, which have dogged our communities for a long time.

Community Leadership and Climate Change 2001

Discussion

The Structure of Local Governance

Although local councils operate at county, unitary or district levels the main findings of this study do not distinguish between the different functions of different types of council. Nevertheless, we did encounter some significant differences between authorities, but this reflected geographic location rather than authority type.

Workshops conducted in the south-western part of the region revealed a strong sense of isolation and remoteness from the corridors of power and influence in Whitehall. For example, it was suggested that, despite extensive lobbying, central government did not appreciate the strategic importance of road and rail links into Devon and Cornwall, and their increasing vulnerability due to climate change. Such political concerns are beyond the scope of this study but they should be taken into account in considering adaptation responses from the South West region.

Diverse Roles

The publication 'Community Leadership and Climate Change' identifies three principal roles for local authorities in relation to climate change. These are:

- LAs as service providers
- LAs as corporate managers
- LAs as community leaders

As service providers local authorities are responsible for a range of functions which include the following:

Development Planning/Land Use Planning
Transport (GTPs)
Develop Control
Housing (both as landlord and enabler)
Building Control
Engineering including drainage
Roads maintenance, snowploughs, salt, etc.
Conservation of buildings, parks, trees etc
Economic Development
Social and Economic Regeneration
Education
Culture, Libraries etc
Tourism and leisure
Urban Design and the Street Scene
Environmental Health and Pest Control
Waste Management
Emergency Planning

As corporate managers councils have responsibility for all of the functions that fall upon any large organisation. These include:

Buildings and other Estate Management
Health and Safety
Vehicles
Procurement
Personnel Management
Risk Assessment and Management
Environmental Management
Potential Litigation

As community leaders councils are called upon to be proactive with regard to the following, both in a leadership role, and as examples of good practice.

Strategic Vision for community
Social, Economic & Environmental well-being
Economic Development
Community Planning
Regeneration
Sustainability Strategy for community
Climate Change Strategy for community
Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change

Links to Sustainability

There is some evidence of regional enthusiasm for sustainable development amongst local authorities, driven by a mixture of central government edict and local enthusiasm. This is likely to increase as Community Strategies are developed and further commitments are made to the Nottingham Declaration. The sustainability agenda seems the most likely policy framework through which to pursue adaptation to climate change. A few authorities (e.g. Devon County Council, Cheltenham Borough Council) are now pursuing specific climate change strategies which deal with both mitigation and adaptation agendas.

Data availability and understanding

There appears to be little published literature that specifically addresses the role of local government in the advent of climate change. A useful initiative has been carried out by a partnership between the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (DEFRA), the Local Government Association (LGA), the Improvement & Development Agency (I&DeA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). Amongst other outputs they have published a short manual on "*Guidance for Local Authorities*".

Generally the evidence is of some general awareness of sustainability issues amongst those with environmental responsibilities (such as LA 21 officers). For others, even those with technical responsibility, the phenomenon has only just registered. In fact the workshops that were run as part of this study proved to very useful in catalysing understanding and awareness of potential impacts.

Some local government officers in the South West acknowledge the issue of climate change, but for most practitioners climate change means mitigation; reduction in energy usage and greenhouse gas emissions, not adaptation. There is little evidence that local authorities have made any use of the latest scenarios published by UKCIP. Again, this was a beneficial outcome from some of the workshops.

On the other hand we have evidence that lay people seem to have a good grasp of some of the predicted changes in climate and some of the significant impacts.

As part of the process of developing its Climate Change Strategy, Cheltenham Borough Council recently carried out a survey across the local community. This revealed high levels of awareness not just of the potential causes of climate change, but also some of the likely impacts. Such understanding was not just replayed headlines from the tabloid press, but was soundly based on knowledge of the locality and the complex inter-relationships between the natural environment, human society systems, and the weather.

So, if lay people seem to have a good basic grasp of the issues, why is it that local government officers and members seem reluctant to engage with adaptation issues? There appear to be three main reasons for this;

- the type of data available.
- the degree of uncertainty attached to the data.
- adaptation to climate change is nowhere near the top of the political agenda.

This is an aspect which warrants further research, as our increased technical and scientific

understanding is of little value without the prospect of this understanding being incorporated into all organisations, but particularly those in the public sector.

Data

It appears that, even in a sector which takes its strategic responsibilities seriously, the presentation of climate change scenarios represents a barrier to understanding and consequent action. Even where quantitative data are available, most officers and members find it difficult to relate the numbers on climate data to their own experience.

On the other hand, some more sophisticated data is required for technical purposes, if environmental engineers (amongst others) are to bring some quantification to bear on technical issues, such in the built environment, for example.

Uncertainty

There are many aspects of uncertainty in the latest UKCIP02 scenarios. These are explicitly acknowledged in the Scientific Report, and dealt with very thoroughly. In fact one significant feature of the latest scenarios is that of increasing certainty and confidence in the models. Nevertheless, there continue to be misgivings about the reliability of the data and the willingness to make investment decisions on what is perceived as dubious data.

It is this aspect that represents the biggest challenge. Perhaps it is only the empirical evidence of the changing climate over the next few years that will persuade those with responsibility to make tough (spending) decisions. Is it the newly empowered elected members or the technical officers who will wield the greatest power, and be the best target for persuasion?

**We commit our council to:
Work with key providers, including health authorities, businesses and development organisations, to assess the potential effects of climate change on our communities, and to identify ways in which we can adapt.**

A clause from the Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change

Political Priorities

The tenure of locally elected authorities is even shorter than that that of national government. This is intrinsically at odds with the long-term nature of climate change.

The world of local government is increasingly driven by edicts from the centre; targets, outputs and disparate but circumscribed agendas. Unless

such targets include those associated with climate change, we are unlikely to see real action in the immediate future, except perhaps in those areas vulnerable to major flooding. Whilst local government is a political phenomenon, the politics are increasingly those of the centre, of Whitehall and Westminster, and not at local level.

The Way Forward

Recommendations for Change

The following are recommendations for areas within which change can be initiated by local authorities:

- Sign up to the Nottingham Declaration.
- Identify key adaptation issues for each authority.
- Support the national initiatives on climate change already begun by the Local Government Association (LGA), the Improvement & Development Agency (I&DeA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).
- Encourage officers in relevant departments to pursue further climate change understanding through networks of professional bodies, local government officers, Local Government Association etc.
- Encourage sub-regional groupings of County, District and Unitary authorities to share best practice in both technical and managerial aspects of adaptation. It may be appropriate for a regional organisation such as the Regional Assembly to orchestrate this process.
- Undertake a more detailed exploration of the UKCIP02 scenarios and their implications for sub-regional locations. This might include the presentation of climate scenarios in ways that relate more directly to people's experience of the weather. The outcomes of such work can be disseminated by local authorities to the wider community.
- Explore the most effective policy framework within which adaptation responses might sit. In particular, investigate the suitability of Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Strategies as appropriate vehicles.
- Local plans need to take account of climate change impacts – for example in zoning areas suitable for particular purposes, and in policies designed to protect biodiversity.