

Alice Owen speech to Green Alliance's local government and climate change summit

Church House, London, 4 April 2007

Thank you Stephen, Councillor and Secretary of State for such a clear, and largely encouraging, exposition of your department's role, and for asking local government to 'show you what it can do'.

I must say that the Sustainable Development Commission welcomes CLG's support for re-empowered local government, convening partners, working with Local Strategic Partnerships and delivering on Sustainable Community Strategies.

You won't be surprised to hear me point out that climate change is a problem rather than a solution. It is an effective 'way in' for local authorities to tackle sustainable development on a broader front. It is certainly the case that climate change is the most visible and challenging evidence of the need to live within environmental limits.

Living within environmental limits is one of the five principles in the UK Sustainable Development Strategy. It sits alongside the principle that is core local authority territory: to ensure we live in a strong, healthy and just society.

It seems to me that much of local government is up for the challenge that has been presented. The number of signatories to the Nottingham Declaration referred to by the Secretary of State is a clear signal of the interest in this area. One of the reasons why I find this so encouraging is that it is being done *alongside* the advice and direction that central government is developing in the halo of activity after the Local Government White Paper. Central government gives local government a great deal of guidance and advice. Local Authorities need to take the initiative, to know that risk taking has its rewards, and to be willing and able to do or act without detailed guidance.

The SDC's own research indicates that progress on tackling climate change, like much other progress on sustainable development, remains dependent on 'wilful individuals', members or officers who act before central government tells them to. I suspect we have a heavy representation of 'wilful individuals' here.

Following what the Secretary of State has said in terms of 'loosening control' from the centre, I think that there is much that government could do to express an interest in what local government is doing rather than telling them what to do. The LGA's Commission on Climate Change is a sign that local government thinks so too. And the enthusiasm of the chair of the Audit Commission to see sustainable development, and therefore emissions, energy and climate change, within the new Comprehensive Area Assessment is very encouraging. We still need incentives and consistent messages for innovators, risk takers and leaders. The Secretary of State's stated support for leadership is welcome --it will take time for the truth of this to be felt.

So what can local authorities do, and why should they do it?

The 'why' first: as the Secretary of State has said, climate change is not an environmental issue in terms of its impacts, but an issue encompassing social equity and economic risk and opportunity. These are exactly the areas where local authorities seek to make a difference.

Also, let us not overlook the role that an issue like climate change has in providing a common cause which can assist community cohesion. Tackling climate change is something where, for example, secularists and faith groups can find common interests.

And then the 'what' can local authorities do?

I think the role goes much further than energy and the council's own estate. Councils can join up the dots and tackle climate change in a way that reflects their area's distinct opportunities. Are the planners working with the economic development team to realise the opportunities from the eco-towns and low carbon initiatives announced by CLG in recent months?

Councils can spend their money, a quarter of all public expenditure, wisely – on local, low energy goods and services. Do the sums for your own budget. If you followed Northumberland's example and spent 10% more with local suppliers, what impact would that have?

Councils can support their communities in developing what the South West is calling 'carbon literacy' through their education activities. My hope is that education for climate change doesn't start and end with telling you what to do, and making you feel bad if you don't do it, but starts with helping us to understand the issues and imperatives, enabling people to take the action that they are wholly capable of.

And how to do all of this? Thorough, considered and comprehensive use of that little deployed but very effective 'well being power' would make a tremendous difference.

Finally, returning to national leadership, the SDC has welcomed the draft climate change bill, truly a world leading and world changing approach. But the draft bill is very light on how the five year targets and budgets would actually be achieved.

The local and regional level is critical here. Local authorities could provide the core mechanisms for delivery within this framework, particularly if carbon budgets are associated with trading mechanisms and local authorities could retain the receipts from sale of unused carbon credits, unused because of the action in the community that the local authority has supported.

This would be the kind of activity where local authorities could lead and others could follow. For me this is the key point - local authorities' own carbon footprints need attention of course, but the measure of success is what our communities, supported and inspired by their local authorities, manage to achieve. I leave my response on that ambitious and optimistic note.