

## HOW THE BRITISH PUBLIC SECTOR IS LEADING THE WORLD ON CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION

Richard Rugg, Managing Director of Programmes at the Carbon Trust, explains how the UK's public sector is setting a global example on how to take action on carbon emissions.



It was on a recent trip to Mexico, talking to legislators and local government about carbon reduction, that it really became clear to me how the UK is perceived internationally. There are many countries around the world that want to learn about what the UK is doing about climate change and how it is doing it.

There is a British tendency towards modesty in achievements, a preference to grumble about problems rather than cheer for successes. And there is clearly an important place for humility and to continue to understand and challenge the barriers to greater progress yet I think it is also time to recognise and celebrate the fact that the UK's public sector really is an international leader on climate change.

Action has been driven by government. The UK was the first nation in the world to set legally binding targets for reducing carbon emissions, and the first to introduce mandatory greenhouse gas reporting for businesses. Businesses are taking advantage of the opportunity. In 2010-11 the UK exported low carbon and environmental goods and services to 52 countries around the world, totalling £11.2 billion. And according to the CBI over a third of the UK's economic growth in 2011-12 was likely to have come from green business.

Yet when it comes to setting an example on how to take local action on carbon emissions, then the UK public sector really stands out amongst the world's highest achievers. In forward thinking local authorities, hospitals, universities and colleges across the country carbon management plans are being progressed that collectively are having a huge impact. Between 1990 and 2011 UK public sector emissions decreased by 46%.

I have now spent over ten years working at the Carbon Trust. Much of that time has been spent helping the public sector to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, we have helped public bodies across the UK to identify total lifetime carbon and cost savings of 94 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> and £2.8 billion, with over 17.5 million tonnes and £700 million net saved to date despite exceptionally challenging economic times. To put that into context, 17.5 million tonnes is similar to the annual emissions of a country like Slovenia.

More importantly there is the opportunity for public bodies to have influence and impact emissions far beyond their own operational boundaries and estates. The Committee on Climate Change recognises the ability of local authorities to have an impact "through the services they deliver, their role as social landlords, trusted community leaders and major employers, and their regulatory and strategic functions."

This influence extends over buildings, surface transport and waste, which collectively account for 40% of UK emissions – areas where there is an opportunity to reduce emissions by 20% in 2020 from 2010 levels. New smart technologies have the potential to unlock even greater reductions in the longer term, with the public sector critical to developing the low carbon and smart cities of the future.

To look at some examples, Glasgow City Council are helping to do this through an ambitious planning policy to lower the city's carbon footprint. This policy requires developers to consider energy efficient design, increased renewable energy generation and the use of low or zero carbon technologies. Glasgow has also just announced plans to install 10,000 new, energy efficient street lamps that will use at least 50% less energy than the old ones, cutting emissions by more than 50,000 tonnes over 20 years.

The willingness of the public sector to take collaborative action has been hugely impressive, with the impetus often coming from the grassroots rather than top-down from government. For example more than 50 councils

have signed up to the Local Government Association's Climate Local Commitment, and in Scotland all 32 Local Authorities have signed up to the equivalent, Scotland's Climate Change Declaration. The Local Government Association also signed a memorandum of understanding with DECC, recognising the role of local authorities in carbon reduction and helping set a framework for sharing information on greenhouse gas emissions.

HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, has responded to the commitment of universities to reduce emissions and embrace the savings from energy efficiency. HEFCE released its first sustainable development strategy in 2005, and has since then coordinated action across the sector. Three funding rounds from a Revolving Green Fund have helped around 130 institutions to implement carbon-cutting projects – ranging from hydropower at the University of Chester to major energy efficiency retrofits at the University of Exeter.

One of the world's largest employers, the NHS, has a very successful and influential Sustainable Development Unit helping to coordinate carbon reduction across an enormous and sometimes unwieldy organisation. Some of its most impressive work has been looking into the indirect emissions from the NHS (known as Scope 3), outside of its operational boundaries. For example it realised that around 20% of the total end to end carbon impact of the NHS was from pharmaceutical products. This gave the NHS a platform to engage with the pharmaceutical industry, helping spur them on to make their own reductions.

There is still an awful lot to do, no question about it. But sometimes it is useful to be reminded just how much has been achieved to date and to learn how replicate these successes more widely and at an even greater scale. The UK public sector has a lot of reasons to be incredibly proud of what it has achieved so far on climate change. Having worked with them for over a decade and seen their resilience to the worst economic conditions in a generation, I have every confidence that they will keep up this vitally important work.