

Local Area Agreements: progress towards local leadership on climate change mitigation

Report to
the Pilkington Energy Efficiency Trust
and the Energy Efficiency Partnership for Homes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The new performance framework for local authorities includes a set of 198 performance indicators. One of these is National Indicator 186: community carbon emissions, which measures the extent to which per capita carbon emissions in a local area are reducing.

Through this study we investigated what impact the introduction of this indicator is having. We determined a set of 'ideal' outcomes based on the preferences of a series of key stakeholders, and then compared these with the reality in 25 of the 152 local areas in England.

These local areas were selected to represent all regions of England and all types of lead local authority (Counties, Unitary Authorities, Metropolitan Districts and London Boroughs). We also selected authorities that had chosen action on community carbon emissions as a priority within their Local Area Agreement and those that had not.

The work involved interviews with representatives of 19 key stakeholder organisations and with approximately 75 local authority officers. We also held a workshop to discuss preliminary results. Participants at this workshop included local authorities and their representative bodies, central and regional Government and energy efficiency industry representatives.

Key findings

Selection of NI 186 as a priority indicator

Two-thirds of all local areas have included NI 186 as a priority indicator in their Local Area Agreements. Regionally, the proportion varies from 50% in the North East to 78% in the East Midlands. Selection of the indicator as a priority is most prevalent in two-tier local areas (where the lead authority is the County Council). It is least prevalent amongst London Boroughs.

The most common reason for choosing NI 186 as a priority was that it is consistent with existing local priorities. Other reasons included recognition of carbon emissions reduction as a new priority, a desire to encourage partnership working between the local authority and other members of the Local Strategic Partnership, and the drive from central Government as expressed by Government Offices.

The main reasons for areas not choosing NI 186 as a priority were: having other priorities that were more important locally; wanting to reduce local authority emissions before exhorting others to do the same; and concerns about the achievability of progress in this area.

Targets have been set against the indicator for those areas where it has been selected as a priority. These targets are broadly consistent with national emissions reduction targets. The majority of officers we spoke to regard the targets as ambitious and opinions differed greatly, both between and within authorities, as to whether the targets are achievable.



The current situation

There are gaps in local authority understanding of local carbon emissions and of the most cost-effective ways to reduce these. Many authorities are not convinced about the robustness and usefulness of nationally compiled local emissions data but the responses to this vary, with only some authorities collecting local datasets to supplement the national data.

There is plenty of guidance and a wide range of tools available to local authorities to help them with their carbon emissions reduction activities, but authorities would like more tailored help, and assistance with selection of useful tools.

Potential commercial delivery partners are unable to access information about local authority delivery plans, and find it difficult to locate the most appropriate officers to talk to. These potential partners also find the sheer number of local authorities a barrier to partnership.

Senior managers in the majority of authorities recognise action on climate change to be important, whether or not it is one of the top priorities included in their Local Area Agreement. However, there is a lack of confidence in the ability of local authorities to have significant influence on local emissions, as a large proportion of emissions are perceived to be outside local authority control.

An increasing number of authorities are developing more strategic approaches to carbon emissions reduction, together with longer term aims or targets. Programmes to reduce emissions tend still to be implemented on a department by department basis within local authorities, but there is increasing co-ordination of these efforts at the local authority level. There remains scope for better sharing of information and expertise within a local authority, and also between similar authorities: peer group learning is not as well used as it could be and many existing peer groups are based on geography rather than similarities between authorities.

Where NI 186 has been included as a priority indicator, authorities are starting to look at taking action in sectors outside their traditional service delivery areas. However, only a minority of authorities are active in seeking external resources to support climate change activities. All the authorities we spoke to are active in managing their own emissions, with NI 185 (local authority emissions), NI 186, the Carbon Reduction Commitment, and the Use of Resources element of performance assessment all being important drivers.

Local authorities have not tended to be involved in the delivery of area-based approaches to carbon saving, although recent Government policy initiatives such as the Community Energy Saving Programme and the pilots of Pay As You Save may change this.

The impact of NI 186

It will be some time before the full impact of NI 186 can be seen. However, this study suggests that at the very least it has raised the profile of carbon emissions reduction, within local authorities and also amongst members of their Local Strategic Partnerships.

Inclusion of NI 186 in Local Area Agreements tends to be linked with a somewhat greater level of delivery experience and confidence within the local authority. In many cases, this is likely to be more a reflection of action prior to the introduction of the indicator than an indication of the influence it has had. However, including the indicator in Local Area Agreements does seem to be enabling more partnership working, increasing the engagement of LSP members and perhaps also encouraging more coordination of work within the local authority.

Recommendations

There is a clear need for more explanation of national data, and justification of the necessary delays before publication. There is also a need for more discussion about what constitutes good practice in terms of the data required for a satisfactory and useful understanding of local carbon emissions.

The lack of confidence within local authorities in their ability to deliver emissions reductions could develop into a major barrier to progress. Central government must deliver the significant proportion of emissions reductions that are within its control. Also, the Audit Commission needs to ensure that the public results of Comprehensive Area Assessment enable fair and robust comparison of the relative performance of different authorities in this area, particularly in the absence of up to date carbon emissions data.

Guidance on efficient approaches to sub-regional and peer group working may encourage more use of these mechanisms. The development of disaggregated targets for individual departments, to encourage cross-authority working, is another area where some authorities may value external help.

Commercial organisations that wish to engage in a proactive way with local action need to work together, to take the lead in developing mechanisms that will give them the information they need on local authorities and local action.

There are a number of potential mechanisms that could increase resources available for climate action at the local authority level. These include: more communication between central government and local politicians; asking local authorities to manage the use of CERT money or PAYS schemes; and making NI 186 a mandatory, statutory indicator.

The full report

The full report can be accessed at
www.impetusconsult.co.uk/LAAclimatechangereport.pdf

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