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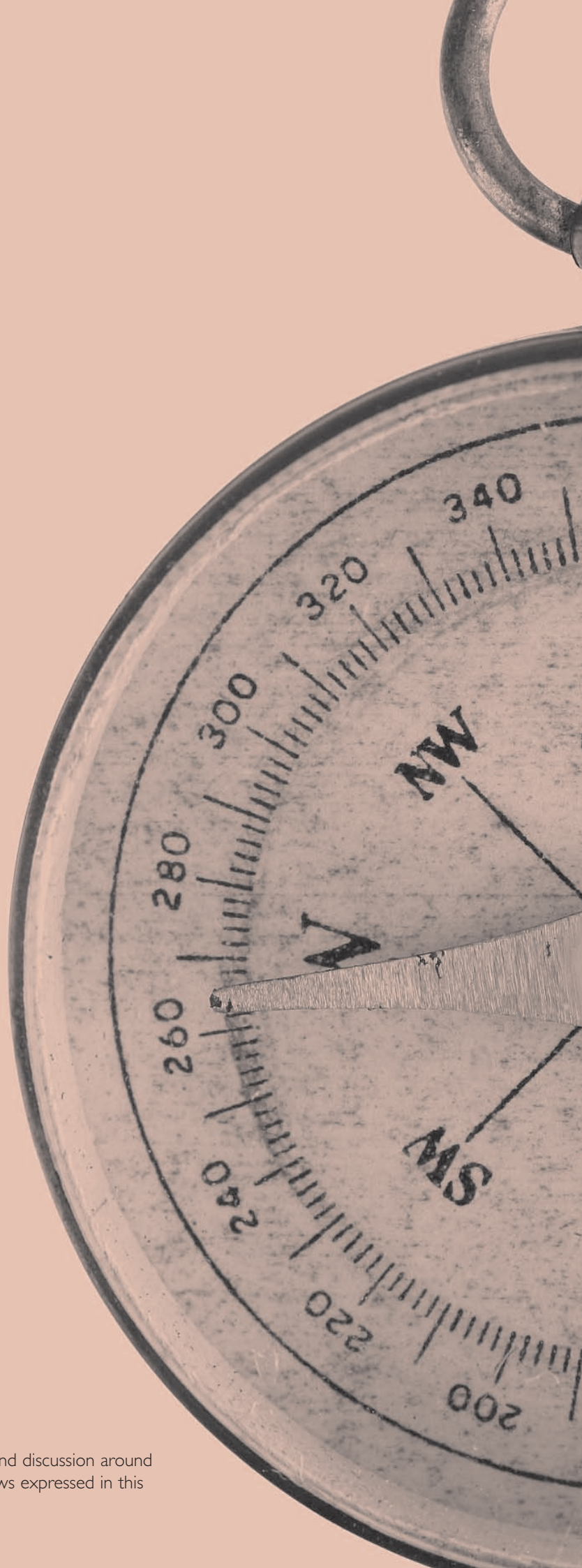
The Local Dimension of Climate Change

By Andrew Judge

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"Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total; of all those acts will be written the history of this generation."

Robert Kennedy



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The greatest challenge that we are likely to face now and for the rest of our lives is how to tackle greenhouse gases and climate change.

Much attention is placed on action at the national and international level and this is vital. But any effective programme must also involve a transformation of hearts and minds. Jubilee 2000 and Making Poverty History have shown how millions of individuals and thousands of communities can be galvanised by a progressive cause to achieve results that would be beyond governments acting alone. We will not meet the challenge of climate change without taking innumerable communities and many millions of people with us.

The modern world can all too easily lead to a sense of powerlessness. But individuals and communities can make a difference: by having the courage to act differently, perhaps to take a risk, to make their local environment a little better. When millions of individuals decide to act differently in their own lives, the cumulative effect can be considerable.

In the UK we aim to reduce carbon emissions by 60% by 2050. Every time a community takes the lead with a local initiative in the climate change battle, we move a little closer to that goal. By taking the lead, local communities can also achieve a much wider impact and influence than the immediate carbon savings achieved. They show the way to a new era.

However, it is true that individuals need help and encouragement to change: good advice that they can rely on, friends able to provide solidarity; communal action to overcome obstacles and make the most of local opportunities; to be able to express their views and support/vote for local democratic activists and parties that meet their needs and reflect their aspirations.

The Individual Household

The average household in Britain is a significant producer of carbon. Overall, according to the IPPR, individuals produce 44 % of total emissions and the average household is directly responsible for about 10 Tonnes of CO₂ per year. However, substantial savings are possible by determined action. By way of example, through the fitting of insulation, double glazing and similar approaches as well as the introduction of two low or zero carbon technologies such as combined heat and power (either neighbourhood or household level micro CHP), heat pumps, solar water heating, biomass, photovoltaics, the average household could deliver more than 50% reductions in carbon emissions.

Other carbon factors that we can reduce in our lives include waste materials, through careful purchasing and recycling, and car use through walking, cycling and public transport. Water resources will come under increasing strain and we can alleviate the issue at an individual level through sprinkler taps, double flush toilets and water butts. Many people already understand these issues, but need encouragement to change. Many local authorities already provide advice to residents to help them to change, but need to do far more. There is a need for effective support and powerful incentives.

There is clearly much that individuals and households can do to affect climate change directly. A key issue is how they can be encouraged to make the change. After all the cost to improve the environmental performance of a UK household could be as much as £10-20k depending on characteristics of the building and locality. Realistically, householders need incentives to spend money on improving their own homes.

The Environmental Contract

David Miliband MP as Secretary of State, along with Douglas Alexander MP as Minister for Transport, has put forward the idea of an Environmental Contract, which has enormous potential. The idea is that of a contract running through different levels in society introducing a sense of empowerment, mutual reliance and obligation. It would bring action on climate change within the scope of everyone, whether as individuals, community organisations, businesses, or local and central government. Each individual and organisation would incorporate the price of climate change into decision-making. Individuals would have tradable personal carbon



allowances, perhaps eventually operating with credit or payment cards to bank carbon savings according to expenditure and to trade them with others, who have been less conscientious: creating an overall balance between what we give and what we take. Through the billions of transactions that individuals and organisations undertake, the goal of deep carbon reductions would become a reality.

However, we face the challenge of beginning to make a difference now and in the immediate short term. In our politics, that means that we need to initiate a comprehensive scheme in this Parliament to be carried into full effect in the next. The need is to give practical form and effect to an environmental contract and to personal and household carbon allowances.

In the immediate future, local councils could be given a crucial role in a national scheme. Currently, DCLG, Defra, DTI and HM Treasury are engaged in a joint study to look at the role of 'community level' approaches to enabling individuals and households to make a contribution.

Local councils should have a crucial role in this regard. They are in the best position to facilitate widespread action that meets local aspirations and needs, but also reflects national and international priorities.

Local government already has the power of well being; to do anything which it considers likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area. Each local council also manages a partnership network of local community, business and public organisations and develops through consultation long term community plans for their local area. Local councils are also obviously closer to residents than any other part of Government: delivering a range of services based on a continuing process of consultation and refinement. They are now more efficient and effective than ever before and have a strong record of improved service delivery.

The Democratic Role

Local councillors are able to act as advocates on behalf of neighbourhoods. As locally elected figures supported by the council's machinery and resources, they can act as brokers, bringing together the resources of different organisations to find solutions to neighbourhood issues and make the most of opportunities as they arise.

Reform of the Council Tax and Business Rate

The reform of the Council Tax and the Business Rate offers a definite opportunity to introduce personal and business carbon allowances in a practicable form.

Given the overall national target of reducing carbon emissions of 60% by 2050, the legal responsibility of achieving comparable local carbon reductions could be passed onto local authorities for activities that they can influence.

UK Emissions Trading Scheme for Local Councils

The Government is already consulting on a UK emissions trading scheme – the energy performance commitment – that would cover businesses and large public sector organisations, including most local authorities. This would cover the direct carbon impacts of a council's activities such as street cleaning or heating the civic centre. Potentially, it could also cover the entirety of carbon emissions by all people, buildings and transport within a council's area. Where a council failed to reduce carbon in its area to meet targets for progressive year by year reductions, then it would be forced to buy carbon credits in the market and pass on the cost to those households and businesses not making a full contribution through higher council taxes and business rates.

Local Carbon Accounts

Local council tax accounts and business rate accounts would therefore become carbon accounts. A household or business that made all practicable adjustments in respect of the characteristics of the building, heating, lighting, transport use and sustainable procurement of goods, would benefit from lower council taxes and business rates. Those that failed to make adjustments would pay more.

The overall financial incentive would become greater year on year. Study would have to establish exactly how great it would have to be to be sufficient to trigger effective action.

The carbon allowance could incorporate different elements.

Environmental Performance Of Buildings

A building's environmental characteristics could be assessed by the Council's building control officers or other licensed independent surveyors through the issuing of certificates. The inspection of new building improvements would be by application. Building regulations might also require all buildings that are subject to a notifiable alteration or sale, or change of tenure, to comply with improved standards.

The consequence of such a system of inspection would be to generate extensive building work in the housing market over the next few years. One concern is that many would be cautious about employing builders who might subject them to shoddy work or overpricing. There is a real need for quality control of the work that needs to take place. Councils should have a duty to inspect the quality of work of all such builders on a regular basis and to maintain a licensing system for individuals and firms that deliver quality. Information about such firms should be readily available to the public.

Energy Production

The less energy consumed from fossil fuel sources the better. The use of renewable sources of energy in buildings could attract a fiscal incentive in terms of carbon credits, or simply not count against the carbon account. Where fossil fuels are consumed then, above a basic minimum to accommodate concerns of fuel poverty, the excess could increase the council tax and business rate. This would require proof of energy used. A system of off-site electronic metering should prove to be technically feasible in this regard.

Transport

Proof of payment of public transport season tickets by individuals registered in a household could lead to a reduced council tax. So could proof of utilising a local low carbon food scheme. Businesses that prove that they operate green travel plans for their employees could earn lower business rates.

Waste

The greater the measured level of recycling and/or the lower the general waste produced for landfill the lower the council tax and business rate to be paid.

The Community

A number of individuals acting together in their neighbourhood are often more effective and generate increased carbon reductions. This is where the political vision of the active and empowered neighbourhood could have most traction. Part of the disillusion with politics and local government is the distance between the citizen and the town hall. The Council and its regulations are widely perceived as something external that is done to an individual and community rather than with them and on their behalf. Yet many active people have formed groups to reflect their own local community needs. Examples are the plethora of community organisations and 'friends groups' set up to protect and extend local services and facilities like parks and community centres. For most people these present a more comprehensible and convenient level of activity. Powerful examples exist where such neighbourhood communities have made a difference to action on climate change.

Community Examples

The advantages of co-operative action are singular. No single individual or commercial body has to have a controlling interest and so the capacity to for many to experience real ownership and collective power in an explicitly democratic structure is enhanced.

(i) The Muslim Khatri Association running a community centre in Leicester obtained grant funding for the installation in 2002-3 of a photovoltaic roof mounted array generating 3570 kWh of free electricity for the centre each year meeting 100% of the building's electricity needs in the summer and around 80% in the winter.

(ii) Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group in Bristol is a local community development project managed by a committee of local residents working on a range of community-led food projects from 'plot to plate' which includes growing their own market garden and running a local food co-op.

(iii) Baywind Energy Co-operative in Cumbria was the first UK co-operative to own wind turbines. After successfully raising £2 million from members through share offers, Baywind has over 1,300 members. It owns six wind turbines in Cumbria and has established a development company to seek opportunities for renewable energy schemes. As a co-op, voting rights are distributed equally amongst the members, regardless of the number of shares held. Baywind has a minimum share holding of £300 and a maximum (by law) of £20,000.



Through such schemes, individual and collective ownership of local environmental initiatives could be within the grasp of many more people today. Many residents in urban areas band together to share ownership of neighbourhood 'alleygate' schemes. Community energy schemes may require a similar type of individual and community commitment, yet deliver substantial benefits in terms of affordability and carbon reduction.

Combined Heat and Power (CHP)

Our current centralised system of electricity generation is enormously wasteful both at the point of production and during transmission over long distances. There is an increasing realisation that local energy production is key to a low carbon future. CHP technology providing neighbourhood heat and electricity is already a cost effective alternative and even when powered by natural gas results in lower carbon emissions overall. Natural gas may also be supplemented by a range of renewables including solar and bio-fuels. This technology for local energy production is available now and important collateral benefits include increasing local employment and the reduction of fuel poverty. Local Councils have led in installing CHP in both public buildings and in housing. Important examples are the Barkantide CHP providing power to homes in Tower Hamlets. Aberdeen City Council has introduced a community CHP in four tower blocks of 288 flats. Near to the blocks it built an energy centre with a gas-fired reciprocating engine. The blocks of flats receive heat through pre-insulated pipes laid underground. 47% of the electricity produced is intended to be sold to flats served by the heat network and the rest sold to other customers. It is estimated that CO₂ emissions will be reduced by 40% along with a proportionate reduction in tenant heating costs.

Energy Service Company (ESCo)

An ESCo can take the form of a public/private partnership. Any local authority can work with private sector partners in establishing an ESCo. The council will typically take less than 20% of the share capital, with the rest owned by an energy supplier or finance house. The purpose of the ESCo is to provide local energy services, rather than energy per se. It can be the most favourable vehicle to invest in local energy schemes. Unlike a local council operating under public sector borrowing constraints, an ESCo has a capacity to borrow money to make the initial investments in CHP and/or energy efficiency measures beyond the resources of individuals or even of communities. There will usually be significant economies of scale involved in acting on behalf of a large number of residents in the same area. The ESCo can also be the repository of technical and professional expertise and resources that can work with local community organisations to realise energy schemes.

Devolution to Neighbourhoods

The Government is encouraging the devolution of power and initiative from local authorities to neighbourhoods. One of the most vital purposes of such neighbourhood structures must be to lead on local sustainability. Supported by the legal and technical resources of local authorities, neighbourhood schemes could be established to improve energy efficiency, deliver CHP, promote renewable energy and alternatives to the car and even to facilitate a local organic food market.

The question arises in the new world of mutual obligation of the Environmental Contract, how residents insist on local action by their own local authority? This would be achieved by legal mechanisms. One possibility would be to require a local authority to hold a referendum in a particular neighbourhood to introduce for example a new energy services, renewable energy, public transport, cycle path or recycling scheme or even to facilitate the establishment of a local farmers or growers market.

One approach would be to establish by description a set of schemes in statute that local residents could, in their discretion, call for. Effective introduction of a scheme might necessitate support for a new neighbourhood community organisation with the consequential transfer of control of assets like land and buildings. Action could be triggered by a petition of say 5% of residents in a particular polling district, when a question would be framed for neighbourhood decision. A vote in favour could then require action within a definite time period and the publication of a report on the effectiveness of the response.

Utilising these two approaches to local taxes and neighbourhood governance will make local sustainable action a reality and achieve what no society has achieved yet: true local sustainability. It empowers individual citizens and grants local authorities a purpose of surpassing importance. It is a credible and practicable way forward.

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Compass is the democratic left pressure group,
whose goal is to debate
and develop the ideas for a more equal
and democratic world, then
campaign and organise to help ensure
they become reality.

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