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Service low carbon

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Service redesign is the inevitable response to climate change and will change how councils are organised.

These days, you'd have to go out of your way to avoid items in the media about how climate change will change our lives. But how will it change local public services? Given the UK's commitment to radically reduce CO2 emissions — and the growing scientific evidence that even these reductions will not be enough to prevent disastrous, runaway climate change — the way we lead, deliver and commission locally will surely change dramatically over the next decade. And declining oil reserves mean that resources are going to be a lot more constrained, whether we like it or not.




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Managing risk

It is easy to see responding to climate change as all about managing risks — after all, we can expect increasing levels of extreme weather at home; and globally we can expect 10s of millions of climate refugees over the coming decades. But I believe that the response to climate change is an opportunity for local government. Who else is going to shape low-carbon communities?



We can begin now to work out how. We do not know the fine detail of what low-carbon communities will be like, but there is plenty that we do know. Enough to make some predictions with confidence and to develop future scenarios and visions. For example, carbon constraints will make it

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inevitable that people will spend less time commuting and more time in their local community. There will be fewer cars on the road. All of us will somehow have to act in a way that closes resource loops more than we currently do. This will mean finding ways to massively reduce the amount of what we currently think of as 'waste' that goes to landfill.

A new vision

The development of a vision for a low-carbon local community also implies a major push of local leadership, to run in parallel with low-carbon redesign of services. Much of what is described above could be presented negatively, for example by telling people 'You won't be able to drive as much as you do now.' But the positive aspects — 'You will feel safer and know your neighbours' — are there for local leaders to sell. This is about real place-shaping, and leading behaviour change. That, however, is for another discussion.

What about local services, then? If you are a service director, and have realised that climate change and, specifically, reducing emissions are things that are going to affect the way you deliver, what is the default option? Perhaps to find a way of delivering, in a few years' time, the same outcomes as at present, using substantially less carbon and, ideally, with a smaller budget in real terms. This would be a major achievement and local government is innovative enough to achieve it. But would it be enough?

I think not, because low-carbon living will change the way we all live. Local Government Association leader Sir Simon Milton (Con) has acknowledged that the level of ambition needed by councils to address climate change is equivalent to that of the Victorian municipal greats, who created the conditions for communities and local economies to thrive in the industrial age. Now is the time to start planning a new type of local state, to enable our communities to succeed in the carbon-constrained world that is just around the corner.

There are two principal things that will happen in the future, if we grasp this opportunity. We will redesign the services we deliver and commission in response to carbon constraints and also to reflect the changing lifestyles associated with low-carbon living. In addition, we will prioritise, set budgets and organise our service delivery very differently from the way we do now.

Local government, with its partners, is well equipped to do this. Why? Because there is already a substantial amount of redesign going on, irrespective of climate change. Recent research for the Design Council, yet to be published, suggests that this is largely a response to national policy agendas around efficiency and customer focus. When the low-hanging fruit have been picked, or when there is no accepted best practice for what you are trying to achieve, as is increasingly the case, there is nothing to do but redesign. We have shown that we can do this.

How to do this in response to climate change? To start with, recognise that it is about both adaptation and mitigation. Adaptation means making changes to adapt to the unavoidable climate change, while mitigation is about lessening our negative impacts by, for example,

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reducing carbon emissions. Then, I believe that we will need to find a methodology, or several, for these low-carbon redesigns.

Take social care as an example. With people spending more time at or near home and being less mobile, communities should be more stable with good social capital. Institutional care will be disadvantaged by the costs associated with high land values and an ageing population, and by the effects of global warming on our building stock, which was not designed to cope with the type of heat to come. Imagine most public hospitals and residential homes in a carbon-constrained world with temperatures like those in France in the summer of 2003, which will be the norm before long.

This demands a lot of creativity and innovation, but does seem to point towards a focus on enabling people to live, with neighbours' support, in their own community. There would probably be a major role for the local authority in building community capacity for this.

The lessons apply across the board. To do this well, a vision is needed of the locality as a set of low-carbon communities, with a low-carbon local economy. This vision needs to have a clear, yet flexible understanding of low-carbon lifestyles and behaviours.

We also need to take account of the utility of local services and potential services. For example, what is important about the parks service might be the urban shade, bio-diversity and public health and fitness benefits it offers in a low-carbon world. This is what is important, rather than parks *per se*. On the back of this shift, we can recalibrate the outcomes that we need from local public services and governance. In our parks for example, the outcomes we deliver and commission for could then include the amount and type of shade and bio-diversity needed.

Once this redesign picks up speed, I think we are likely to change the way we organise the local state. It is inconceivable that the organisational pattern of delivery that has served the local state well enough for the past 50 years is the most appropriate for a low-carbon world.

Ask a typical resident today what their council is responsible for, and the answer is likely to be about collecting waste and recycling, street sweeping and road repairs.

In a decade's time, their answer could be very different, and could include: energy, heating and cooling, wellbeing, bio-diversity, and urban shade.

These will reflect real activities, not the jargon of the 2010s. And these items may become the budget headings of the era, around which local political debates about priorities take place.

Warren Hatter

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