

Empowering local authorities in the development of sustainable plans for low carbon heating and cooling: a UK perspective

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‘Empowerment ...’

implies that local government is straining at the leash to be allowed to get on with it but is facing obstacles preventing it from doing so.

It is not clear that this is the case in the UK – with many honourable exceptions.



Move in opposite direction: Alton Estate, Wandsworth (1964)





UK behind the curve

- Alton Estate constructed in 1960s with large district heating scheme.
- Largely removed in 1980s and 1990s in favour of individual gas boilers in each apartment.
- 81% of UK heating provided by individual boilers attached to gas network.
- Scope to increase district heating but requires political will.



2012 government report

- Local authorities have a critically important role in setting the strategic context for, and initiating the development of, district heating networks, due to their local knowledge, capacity for organisation, and key functions as planning authorities and service providers.
- It is in the early stages of scheme development where barriers arise, e.g. initial mobilisation, technical feasibility and financial appraisal.



2012 government report

- Most schemes that have progressed during the last 10 years have benefited from some form of grant support.
- Some form of customer charter and/or standardised contract mechanism would help.



2012 government report

- Most viable UK schemes are likely to be small-scale gas-fired combined heat and power plants (i.e. producing both heat and electricity). However, the selling electricity by non-major suppliers remains fraught with difficulty.
- There needs to be a stronger sense that district heating is supported by central government.



Role of local government (1)

- Information-gathering – can map local needs and opportunities – what supply is needed, when, what are the capacity requirements, what resources are available.
- Direct involvement through own energy use for services, social housing etc. – direct investment in CHP with district heating, solar panels or windfarms etc.



Role of local government (2)

- Create local energy companies (but risk of reputational damage if things go wrong).
- Create a local ‘buzz’ – people more likely to trust local concerns than national energy companies (to a point).
- Taking on economic risk and wider functions e.g. marketing, lobbying and publicity which may be out of the scope of small companies.
- Fostering trust among players.



But ... tensions remain

- District heating is a 'natural monopoly' (very high capital costs' – reputational risk.
- Many uncertainties – political, demand, financial policy.
- Some scepticism, both about the merits of low carbon futures and about government's commitment to the same.