

# As national politicians drag their feet, cities are taking the lead in meeting national low carbon ambitions

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*It is cities, not national governments, that are increasingly taking the lead in pursuing lower carbon growth. Ed Clarke summarises [research by the Centre for Cities](#) that highlights the innovative and practical ways that cities are tackling environmental and economic challenges.*



UK cities are critical in driving down emissions and supporting more carbon efficient growth. Whilst much of the rhetoric about going green takes place at the national level, in reality it is cities in the UK and across the globe that are increasingly taking the lead in pursuing lower carbon growth locally, rather than waiting for national politicians to act. And the best approaches are tailored to target the chief sources of emissions locally by working with businesses and residents to achieve shared goals. For example, according to [official statistics](#) Southend's largest source of emissions is from domestic energy use while Bristol's is from transport and Middlesbrough's emissions are dominated by industrial and commercial sources. The Centre for Cities' [latest report](#) instead highlights practical ways that cities such as these and others around the world are tackling the environmental and economic challenges they face.

The report identifies five interventions that cities are using across their departments, organisations and activities to achieve change: supporting businesses; regulation; incentives; procurement; and, financing and funding. These interventions – combined with effective leadership, accurate information and established networks of public private and third sector organisations – are empowering cities to take direct action towards boosting green growth.

To support growth in low carbon businesses, cities should first and foremost create an environment where businesses are able to grow. This means improving networking opportunities so firms can learn from one another, building supply chains, local skills and growing the scale of the market to attract investment. In Belfast, the city identified fuel costs as a barrier to growth for local businesses. Acting on this, the city council is creating a green business park, located on a former land fill site, using waste gasses to localise energy production at a low cost. Belfast has also worked with local 'green businesses' to encourage them to move to the park, and co-located relevant departments of Queens University to develop a cluster organically.

Secondly, cities are addressing carbon emission sources directly through regulation. For example using land use planning, building regulations and licensing to target the largest local emitters. They can also negotiate with government to remove red tape that hinders green growth and implement national policies. UK cities have far less regulatory powers than many of their international counterparts, giving them less scope for action. For instance, green building codes have proven successful in New York. In the UK, Liverpool has instead targeted reducing the regulatory burdens for green businesses using their City Deal. By understanding local businesses' constraints and restrictions, cities are well placed to support their low carbon growth locally through innovative regulations like these.

Thirdly, cities are using incentives to encourage emissions



reduction, often using national funds, for example [The Recycling Rewards and Recognition Scheme](#). Birmingham City Council used this fund to trial a reward scheme offering Nectar loyalty points to encourage residents to recycle. This has resulted in a [5% increase](#) in paper recycling tonnage. Incentive schemes can be run at little cost and can build awareness and goodwill amongst residents and businesses.

Fourthly, some cities are going beyond 'paperless offices' by using their procurement strategies to support new and innovative low carbon products and services while supporting local businesses. In Hamburg, the city acted as a test bed for new products, in this case through procuring recycled road materials from a local business. This enabled the city to get a tailored, low carbon product and the local contractor to develop commercial methods with a public partner. Local authorities in the UK spend around £62 billion each year, some cities are proactively using this to open and support low carbon markets and products locally.

Finally, with increasingly stretched funding and capacity, cities are exploring new models of sharing risk and rewards and are using innovative co-investment models and supporting local co-operatives to help green projects get off the ground. London for instance has used urban development funds to ensure projects are realised for greener social housing, energy efficiency investments and waste to energy facilities that would otherwise be unviable.

Some cities are bringing these interventions together in a coherent programme aimed at making going low carbon work for their local economy as well as the environment. Bristol is a good example of this approach. It has long been considered a 'green' city becoming one of the UK's first cycling cities in 2008 and more recently winning the European Green Capital 2015 bid. The Mayor and the local authority reflect public opinion with strong leadership as 'green champions'.

Bristol has supported their local economy and reduced emissions through a comprehensive, integrated approach. After identifying that businesses are put off the national Green Deal by overcomplicated regulations, the city is supporting them with individual case managers to simplify the process. Bristol is also using the limited regulatory powers available to ensure planning regulations favour renewable energy sources in the city (through planning policy BCS14). Meanwhile the city created a successful 'Carbon Challenge' programme, incentivising businesses to cut their emissions by 10% over four years in return for branding and networking opportunities.



A Hydrogenesis boat in Bristol

Bristol is also using public money to support and highlight innovative industries that would otherwise go un-funded. For example the [Hydrogenesis Ferry](#) is acting as a test bed and billboard for local advanced manufacturing and low carbon businesses. The city is also actively seeking innovative financing models, leveraging in €100m ELENA funding from the European Investment Bank to form the Bristol Energy Services Company providing businesses with stable prices for low carbon energy. By using these complementary interventions, Bristol are actively seeking ways to encourage low carbon growth in their cities, setting the agenda locally and driving green growth.

These different examples highlight how cities are taking the lead and are best placed to support local businesses through co-ordinated long term strategies, guided by strong leadership. Effective networks between public, private and third sector organisations enable these opportunities to be shared and developed; and, underpinning this, cities

have uniquely detailed knowledge about the business structure and sources of emissions so that local resources can be effectively targeted.

Cities that are succeeding are not waiting to be told by national government what to do. They are taking action themselves, working with their business and residential communities to find practical responses to the low carbon imperative.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the Author**

**Edward Clarke** is an analyst at the Centre for Cities with a particular focus on Housing as well as Low Carbon policy. He is also an LSE alumnus.

