

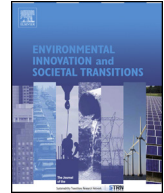


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Local authorities and energy governance in the UK: Negotiating sustainability between the micro and macro policy terrain

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ABSTRACT

Local level decision-making can provide a vital and practicable means through which to deliver carbon reductions at individual, household and community levels. This paper explores the opportunities and challenges associated with the role of local government action in delivering a resilient, low carbon future. Drawing on qualitative data gathered through interviews with six case study local authorities in the UK, the paper examines in particular the ways in which they have tried to address energy and environmental goals in their areas of jurisdiction. The principles of Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) are employed to provide fresh insights on the potential for local government to encourage 'niche' level influences on economic, technological and social/behavioural innovation. In doing so, we identify the enabling factors and drivers that have given rise to success in linking microlevel goals with existing macro-level objectives, as well as highlighting some of the persistent obstacles that continue to hamper progress.

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1. Introduction

Whilst growing evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2013) on the causes and consequences of climate change has meant that there is increasing urgency for political action on sustainability, effective policy initiatives must address the problem of changing or transforming complex systems of production and consumption, and economic, political and social 'lock in' (Unruh, 2000). The fact that this transition implies the involvement of multiple actors and institutions, whilst simultaneously addressing a variety of different issues, values and worldviews, means that there is clearly no single point of intervention that will be effective in dealing with the problem of sustainability in isolation.

Organizing action, influence and change from the local level has become a core focus for the encouragement of sustainability pathways and processes by a range of stakeholders and decision makers. This perspective gained momentum from the time of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, when *Local Agenda 21* became the first substantive political programme to actively encourage grassroots level action to be incorporated more fully into both national and local policy frameworks on sustainability (Fudge and Peters, 2009). The appearance of *Local Agenda 21* itself signified an increased acknowledgement that sustainability is a 'wicked issue' which requires a much more nuanced and broad ranging approach than traditional top-down policy measures are likely to deliver. Whilst conventional policy agendas around environmental pollution have traditionally evolved around 'end of pipe' solutions, as Fudge and Peters (2009) have suggested, the growing impetus around sustainable energy for instance, now includes 'an increasing consensus amongst policy-makers that projects which can be "embedded" within bottom-up social, cultural, and economic particularities hold the potential to be more effective than top-down solutions in enabling individuals to recognize their own role in contributing to more sustainable levels of energy consumption and also in encouraging citizens to engage more fully in the wider political debate on sustainable living' (Fudge and Peters, 2009: 34). A range of similar studies concerning local authorities and their role as intermediary agents confirm these points of interest and demonstrate the relevance of UK local government activities in this area in a broader European context (e.g. Späth and Rohrer, 2010; Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Bulkeley and Kern, 2006).

The role of local government has been seen as critical to this agenda and is identifiably a key medium through which to coordinate and influence workable local level responses to the problem of developing more effective policies around energy and environmental issues. In the UK for example, the 2012 Committee on Climate Change Report *How Local Authorities Can Reduce Emissions and Manage Climate Change* (CCC, 2012) makes particular reference, for example, to the role of local authorities in providing an effective local interface between technological innovation and diffusion, business practice, institutional change, and broader community and individual behavioural change. More recently, whilst the introduction of a Feed in Tariff, a Renewable Heat Incentive, and proposed roll out of Smart Metering in homes, is likely to encourage new entrants and innovations in the energy supply market (Fudge et al., 2012), unless the technology choices in this pathway are accompanied by associated levels of social and institutional learning, and due consideration is given to social acceptability and consumer engagement, they are likely to fall short of expectations. It is clear that the transition to a low carbon economy will involve a 'step-shift' in the beliefs, values and ideals held by citizens in respect of the kind of society that is ultimately desired. This will require greater political will to act, which will inevitably involve making some hard choices in relation to overhauling current systems of production and consumption, decision-making processes, and institutional arrangements.

1.1. Aims of this paper

The paper sets out to explore the influence and changing position of local government in relation to energy and environmental issues, through an exploration of six local authorities and different ways in which they have been able to influence the governance of energy in the UK by developing or instigating their own indigenous low carbon programmes. Through a combination of literature review and empirical research, the paper suggests that, in recent years the UK has witnessed a shifting regulatory regime around energy, part of which has been instigated through the actions

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