Climate change and sustainable public services

ILC-UK/British Society of Gerontology Think Piece
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About The British Society of Gerontology

The British Society of Gerontology (BSG) are delighted to launch this first 'think-piece' for ILC-UK by one of our members, Simon Evans, from the University of the West of England.

The main objective of the BSG is to promote the understanding of human ageing and later life through research and communication. It seeks to foster the application of this knowledge to the improvement of the quality of life in old age. BSG's main activities are concerned with promoting the exchange of ideas and information. An important element is the programme of meetings, which as well as providing venues for informal discussion and formal presentations, create opportunities for members to publish and disseminate their work. The Society is also increasing its activity in the promotion of research.

About Simon Evans
Simon is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute for Sustainability, Health and Environment at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He also sits on the Executive Committee of the British Society of Gerontology. His research focuses on quality of life for older people in relation to housing, health and social care. He has published widely in this field, including a book entitled Community and Ageing, which explores quality of life issues in retirement housing settings. His other interests include user involvement in research and research ethics.

Summary and Recommendations

- Recent Government policy for the public sector has included a strong focus on addressing climate change and promoting sustainability in the commissioning and delivery of services.

- Public sector responses to climate change must address two issues:

  ▪ 1. Adaptation - taking measures to ensure that services can be delivered effectively in the face of the effects of climate change; and

  ▪ 2. Mitigation - reducing the extent to which services contribute towards climate change, largely through reducing carbon emissions.

- A range of strategies and tools have been developed to address these issues for health services but the sustainability agenda is far less developed in the social care sector.

- A recent research project highlighted several examples of good practice in developing sustainable systems of social care. These included incorporating sustainable outcomes in commissioning decisions, reducing the travel miles incurred through delivering care, implementing telecare solutions as a core part of care packages and appointing green champions within each service.

- Many of these examples go some way towards achieving environmental and economic sustainability, but dramatic cuts in public spending mean that we also need a fundamental rethink about how services are provided.

- New ways of providing public services based on principles such as co-production, mutualism, timebanking and localism have the potential to offer services that are sustainable - environmentally, socially and economically.

- Increasing environmental, financial and social pressures make this the ideal time to mainstream innovative ways of providing public services.

- However, in order to make these changes on a sufficient scale to fill the emerging gap in public services the right conditions need to be put in place urgently. These conditions include long term thinking, resources, imagination and leadership.

- Personalisation is another important factor in respect of developing public services that are sustainable. Greater use of personal health and social care budgets will lead to more of us commissioning our own services. We therefore need to be encouraged and supported in putting sustainability at the heart of our commissioning decisions

- More research is urgently needed in the area of both policy and practice for sustainable public services.

Introduction

Climate change is widely recognised as the greatest challenge facing society, and this is reflected in a raft of policies and strategies that have emerged during recent years.

Securing the Future (HM Government 2005) outlined the Labour Government's strategy for sustainable development and highlighted the risks that climate change poses for the most vulnerable people in society in particular. A range of subsequent documents have developed policy, guidance and good practice for addressing the role of private commerce and public services in responding to climate change.

The Climate Change Act (DECC 2008) provided a legally binding framework for cutting carbon emissions and created a duty for every local authority to develop a strategy for addressing the current and predicted impacts of climate change on services. This Act also introduced the CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme, a system of financial incentives for public and private organisations who reduce their carbon emissions. This agenda was developed in more detail through the Climate Change Plan (DH 2010), which emphasised the inextricable link between health and the environment and set out initial priorities and actions for both health and social care in terms of responding to climate change. These include reducing carbon emissions through reducing travel, making buildings more efficient and implementing sustainable procurement.

More recently, the coalition government has stated its aim to become the 'greenest government ever' and to mainstream sustainable development across the public sector.

On a global level, a recent United Nations report warns that inaction on climate change puts at risk decades of progress on education and health [1].

1.   Sustainability and Public Services

a.   What is sustainability?

What does sustainability mean in the context of public services? In essence it is about taking an integrated approach to development that aims to improve quality of life and meet the needs of current and future generations, whilst simultaneously protecting and enhancing the natural environment on which we all depend. The ageing of the population is also a crucial factor in the sustainability of our public services because older people are more likely than other age groups to use these services. For example, people aged over 65 account for 40% of NHS expenditure and make up 72% of all social care clients. At the same time, 50% of people aged 60-79 use public transport.   Sustainable development is often mistakenly interpreted as being driven by a purely environmental agenda. However, one of its key features is that it focuses on the relationship between social justice, human health/well-being and economic development.

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[1] http://www.unep.org/climatechange/

b.   Adaptation and mitigation

The relevance of climate change to public services has two facets, each with their own challenges, adaptation and mitigation.

Adaptation is the process of taking measures to ensure that services can be delivered effectively in the face of the effects of climate change, such as more frequent flooding and heat waves. Some guidance has been developed to help health and social care professionals develop emergency plans to address these situations (DH 2009). Some councils have prepared detailed plans for adapting their services to respond to a range of scenarios. A good example of this approach can be seen in the the work done in Hertfordshire, which includes a report on Climate Change, Health and Adult Care Services [2].

It is important to note here the concept of environmental justice, based on the growing evidence that the impacts of climate change (such as increased flooding, heat waves and air pollution) fall disproportionately on deprived communities. This is particularly relevant to public services such as health and social care, which aim to support the most vulnerable members of society. However, it is also important not to underestimate the challenge of adapting public services to the effects of climate change at a time of reduced funding.

The second facet, and one that is arguably even more challenging, is mitigation: the process of reducing the extent to which services contribute towards climate change, largely through reducing the carbon emissions associated with service delivery.

A few statistics are useful to illustrate this point. For example, it has been estimated that NHS health care in England generates 21 million tonnes of equivalent carbon dioxide per year, which represents 25% of all public sector emissions and 4.4% of total national emissions. Similarly, an average county council emits about 30,000 tonnes of equivalent carbon dioxide a year. Therefore, if we accept that it is in the best interests of society to reduce the amount of carbon that our public services emit, there is considerable scope to do so.

This has been widely recognised and tools have been developed to support those running public services to introduce appropriate measures. Of particular note is the Good Corporate Citizen scheme (www.corporatecitizen.nhs.uk), which is based on the principles of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy and provides a web-based self-assessment tool focusing on six areas of sustainability: travel; procurement; facilities management; community engagement; workforce; and buildings. 80% of NHS organisations have signed up to this scheme, while 48% of NHS Trusts have a sustainable development management plan approved at Board level.

The sustainability agenda is less developed within the social care sector (Evans et al, 2010). Although many local authorities are aware of the issues and committed to taking

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[2]http://www.hertsdirect.org/envroads/environment/greenissues/climatechange/whatwearedoingaboutcc/icch cs/

action, there is little national guidance in support of reducing carbon emissions and fewer indications of specific measures being implemented by those who commission or deliver social care. One of the biggest challenges is the complexity of social care provision. In 2008/09 a total of £16.1 billion was spent on delivering adult social care in England by 13,000 provider organisations with 1.3 million employees. Just over half of this provision was privately purchased.

3. Good Practice

A recent research project commissioned by the Social Care Institute for Excellence highlighted several examples of good practice in this area (Evans et al. 2010). One of these examples comes from Bristol, where the impact of the City Council's sustainable city initiative can be seen across a range of public services, including planning, housing, transport, health and social care. At the heart of this approach has been a willingness to invest in the resources required to support sustainable working. This includes the purchase of EMAS, an internationally recognised environmental management and audit scheme standard, established by the European Commission in 1993 to help organisations comply with environmental legislation and improve their environmental performance. Another important action was the appointment of environmental advisors, who sit in each directorate and report to the Sustainable City group.

In another example, Cornwall County Council is using a care planning tool to reduce the environmental impact of business travel. This enables health and social care staff to access client information across agencies, and to co-work on individual care assessments, care plans and contingency plans. This avoids duplication and leads to time efficiencies, more accurate and up-to-date client information, an integrated response and improved quality of service for the service user. It also reduces the mileage associated with duplicate and unnecessary client visits.

3b. The economic case for greening public services

These and other examples demonstrate how measures introduced primarily to mitigate climate change by reducing carbon emissions can bring other benefits, including greater economic sustainability. For example, in North Yorkshire, savings of £1 million a year are reported through the use of telecare in place of traditional care packages. In Bristol, the council has calculated savings of £66,000 from the introduction of energy-saving measures in care homes and day centres.

Details of many further examples of how 'greener' ways of delivering public services can also produce financial saving can be found elsewhere [3].

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[3] See for example www.localgov.tv

However, in the context of the current fiscal crisis and the government's commitment to a £155 billion deficit reduction, it is doubtful that savings of this magnitude are sufficient. We need to go further and to completely re-think our approach to public services in order to make them truly sustainable, i.e. environmentally friendly, socially inclusive and affordable.

A good example of an innovative attempt to deliver on all three of these objectives can be found in the Time Together Gorseinon (TTG) project in Swansea, South Wales. This project emerged from concerns over the sustainability of existing models of social care in the context of climate change, the fiscal crisis and an ageing population. It challenges the traditional 'professional gift' model of care and support by adopting a community development-type approach.

TTG is based on a partnership between people who live in the Gorseinon area of Swansea, service commissioners and providers, and other agencies and community groups that provide recreational, social and health services in the local area. Alongside this alliance sits the Time Together Network, comprising individuals who want to use their skills and experience to provide mutual care and support. In return for this they are rewarded with time credits, which they can use to access a range of community activities, events and support provided by other network members as well as public and private sector organisations.

The project is supported by Time Banking Wales, which has experience of taking an asset-based approach to community development, although this is one of the first projects to do so in partnership with a local authority on such a large scale. Timebanking [4] and co-creation[5] are long standing systems for developing a dialogue between citizens and statutory and community organisations. The overall aim of these approaches is to move from a culture of people being passive recipients of services to one where they become active citizens for change.

One of the most innovative elements of the TTG pilot is its focus on promoting co-creation through a person-to-agency model of time banking, rather than the person-to-person model that is more commonly used. The key resources for this approach come from the local community, individual citizens and the voluntary sector. The benefits of time banking, co-creation and mutualism as ways of delivering public services are increasingly being recognised, which has brought them a renewed political currency of late. However, it is important to adopt a long term approach. The success of these models depends on local communities and the third sector having access to the resources required to engage with public services in a meaningful and productive way, particularly during the early stages of development.

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[4] www.timebankingwales.org.uk/. Timebanking is a system whereby participants 'deposit' their time in the bank by giving practical help and support to others and are able to 'withdraw' their time when they need something done themselves.
[5] Designing and/or providing services in partnership with those who use them and local communities

4. Conclusion

The drive to develop public services that are sustainable in the context of climate change has become even more imperative in the light of substantial cuts in public sector spending.

This programme of spending cuts is based not only on the reality of the fiscal crisis, but also on a belief that existing public services are not fit for purpose. In their report on delivering world class public services, the CBI suggested that parts of the government are using outdated and inefficient approaches. They called for transformation in how services are commissioned and delivered in order to encourage innovation, promote public involvement and reward excellence.

However, we must avoid the temptation to focus solely on economic factors in this process. There is much that can and should be done to promote public services that are sustainable in the context of climate change, as demonstrated in some of the examples above. However, only by mainstreaming new and innovative models of service delivery, such as those based on localism[6], co-creation and time banking, can we deliver public services that achieve the 'triple bottom line' of environmental, social and economic sustainability. This needs to take place in tandem with the ongoing cuts in public spending, but can only be so if the necessary conditions, support and incentives are urgently put in place.

In developing sustainable public services we also need to consider the impact of the continuing move towards person-centred services. Implementation of the personalisation agenda can impact both positively and negatively on sustainability. For example, greater choice for service users could mean increased provider travel if several people receiving community meals in the same street choose different providers, but it could also lead to reduced use of resources if people choose to purchase care from friends and neighbours.

A recent poll suggests that there is a long way to go before public concerns about climate change are reflected in a belief that the behaviours of individuals can make a difference (Downing P, Ballantyne J. 2007). Considerable attention has quite rightly been paid to implementing sustainable commissioning by professionals within the public service sector. As more of those who use services also become commissioners, they too must be encouraged and supported to adopt sustainable practices.

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[6] Prioritising the local in terms of production and consumption

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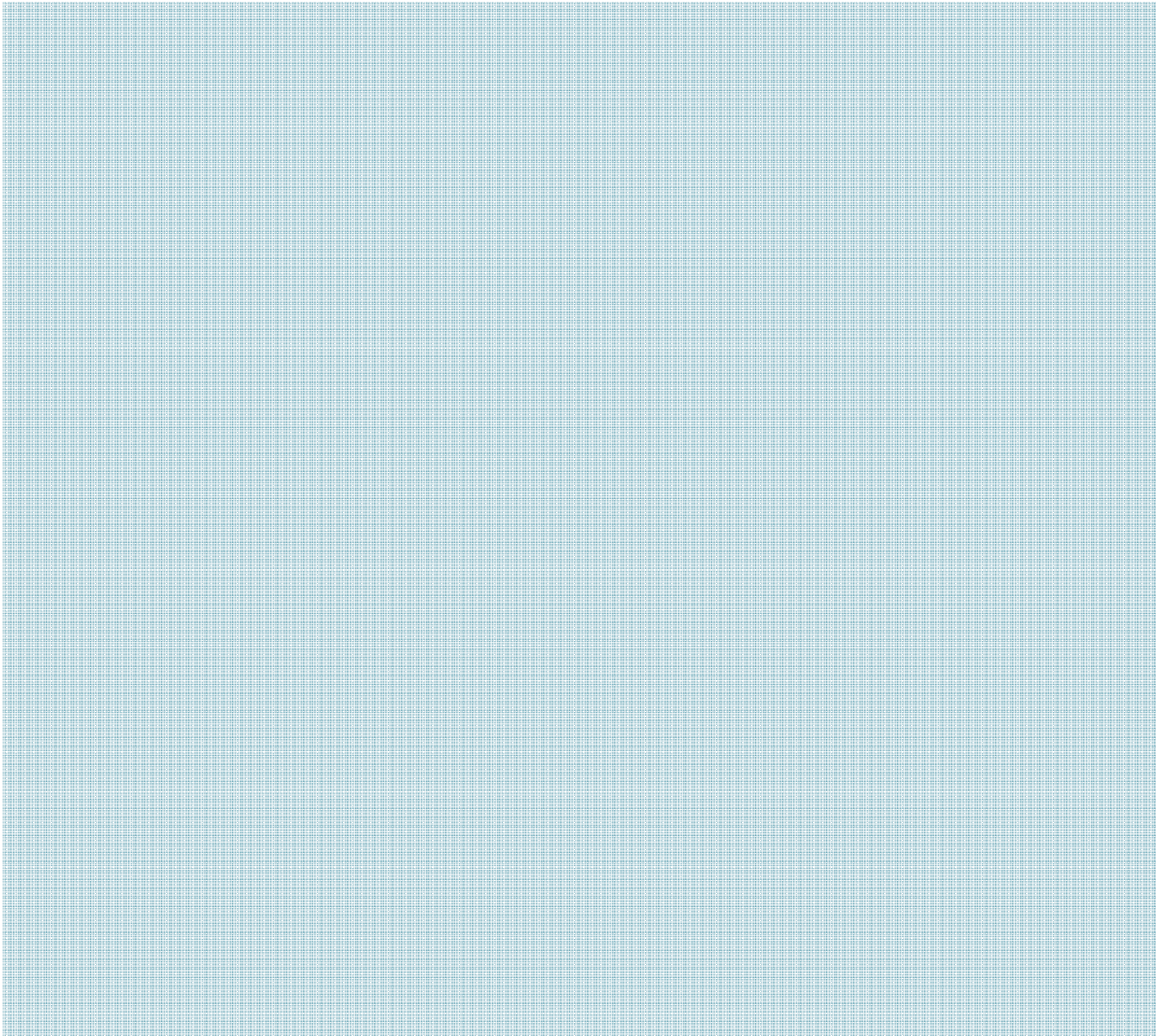
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