

The Colin Wiles blog

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A climate emergency

HQN has around 1,200 members yet fewer than 100 sent delegates to its annual conference on Tuesday 16 July in London. The fact that the day was devoted entirely to climate change could have something to do with it.

Sadly, the results of HQN's recent members' survey suggests that the sector is not taking climate change seriously. Almost three quarters of respondents felt that their organisation is not doing enough to cut emissions. Only half had a climate change strategy and four in ten had set no targets for future carbon emissions. This at a time when the climate crisis has emerged as the single most important policy issue for young people.

If you weren't there, then you missed some informative and thought-provoking presentations and discussions.

Kicking off was **Lord Deben** (**John Selwyn Gummer** for those with long memories) who chairs the independent [Committee on Climate Change](#) set up under the 2008 Climate Change Act to provide independent advice to government.

He's come a long way since he was in the Thatcher and Major Cabinets. Do you remember when he encouraged his daughter [to eat a hamburger](#) during the BSE crisis? Now he's urging us to consume less meat (agriculture is a primary source of methane, one of the main greenhouse gases – the others are carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide).

The UK has legislated to achieve net zero greenhouse emissions by 2050 and the committee is critical about the lack of progress. Lord Deben's approach has been to follow the science, and the scientists are telling us that urgent action is needed to restrict global warming to 1.5°C. "We can do something about it" was his key message. Advanced nations need to do more because of our historic legacy, he said.

He took a hefty swipe at the house-building industry. Nine housebuilders are building 80% of new homes and "they are crap". You find the same bland product ("The Cotswold") from Dundee to Dover. The industry is failing to take any initiative on climate change.

As an aside, **Lord Deben** said we should think about a return to high W.C cisterns (more pressure means less water) and making sure that all properties had mixer taps and sensor lights to cut down on water and energy use.

He urged housing providers to think about the total cost-in-use of their homes, rent plus running costs. Those with low running costs should be free to charge a bit more rent, he said.

George Bond from the [UK Student Climate Network](#) gave an impressive presentation on the Green New Deal. Their approach is to tackle climate change but add on a series of policy aims such as dynamic ownership models, climate justice, building resilient communities, and greater fairness – the thesis appeared to be that capitalism would never solve the problem.

For some unforgiveable reason this reminded me of Stanley Owen Green, the “Less Lust by Less Protein” man who used to parade up and down Oxford Street with a handmade sign warning against the proteins that caused passion, with “and sitting” tacked on the end of the list as an afterthought. It made me think that we should just focus on climate change and then decide whether our saved world is best served by capitalism, communism or some other ism?

Other speakers showed the way forward. [Catapult](#) spoke on the deep retrofit that is required on our 29m existing homes. The challenge is enormous. At present, the average house emits 2.7 tonnes of carbon dioxide annually - that equals three hot air balloons. 80% of the homes that'll be available in 2050 are already built, and 70% of English housing was built before 1974 when insulation and building regulations were either scanty or non-existent.

Deep retrofitting means heavy investment in insulation, heat pumps and heat networks, conversion to electric heating, solar panels, shading, and better water efficiency in order to achieve net zero emissions.

Planners also need to encourage higher densities with more opportunities for cycling and walking. It's no good simply switching from petrol to electric vehicles. Lifestyles will need to change in order to reduce the total demand for energy.

One of the livelier presentations came from **John Grant** of **Sheffield Hallam University**. Houses, he said, are built upside down: we should live upstairs and sleep downstairs where it's cooler. He presented details of the Hockerton houses, which are partially earth covered and require no space heating at all. But he pointed out that not everything in climate change policy is simple. On one estate that he studied a couple had saved £940 per annum as a result of energy efficiencies. What did they spend it on? A holiday in Ibiza that used more carbon than the saving in the home.

John insisted that planning for 1.5°C of warming was naïve – we should plan for 4°C.

It was pointed out that the present inaction on climate change is costing us dearly. 30,000 excess winter deaths in the UK and 2,000 heat-related deaths in summer are costing the NHS at least £1.4bn annually, so there's an opportunity cost to inaction.

My concluding point is about leadership. This was the key point raised by **Tom Chance** from the **Green Party** – the lack of leadership on facing up to climate change at all levels of our society, from government downwards.

UK housing accounts for about 18% of all emissions, so we have a big role to play, yet the response to date has been sluggish. Sad to say, there appears to be an absence of effective leadership from boards, councillors and senior executives on climate change. The sector really needs a collective kick up the backside to respond to this existential threat. If you're reading this and you agree that your organisation is not doing enough, then make sure that your voice is heard.

About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

