



**East of England
Liberal Democrats**

A Green future for the East of England?

**Policy Paper
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Lasting jobs in a successful green economy are critical for the future wellbeing of the people of the East of England. Liberal Democrats believe that there are at least two key reasons why the development of a Green economy in the East of England is critical to our future. First, the region is well suited to benefit from the long-term jobs and improved quality of life that should flow from Green economic development. Second, the region is especially vulnerable to drought and sea level rise, so anything that can reduce the carbon emissions that are the prime cause of climate change and that can cut our demands on the region's natural resources is especially helpful here.

One welcome example is the Liberal Democrat-led Green Deal initiative by the Coalition Government. From next year, households will be able to borrow up to £10,000 to improve the energy efficiency of their homes, repaying the costs through savings on their energy bills. This will have the triple benefit of cutting people's energy bills, reducing climate change emissions, and creating around 100,000 new jobs. The scale of the opportunity is demonstrated by the intention to upgrade up to 2 million homes a year.

The East of England needs to make sure that it takes full advantage of this opportunity. This means persuading as many householders and landlords in the region to apply for funding and ensuring that, as far as possible, the work is carried out by local firms.

We will:

- i) Encourage local authorities, charities and voluntary groups to work together to ensure that householders in the region understand the benefits that they can gain from the Green Deal and make the application system as simple as possible;
- ii) Work with local groups - especially neighbourhood councils - to promote local group purchasing schemes for energy efficiency work in order to reduce the cost to individual householders through bulk buying;
- iii) Call on the region's Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to work to ensure that the region has enough trained and qualified installers to meet the demand;
- iv) Urge regional organisations to examine the potential for an East of England Green Bank, possibly funded partly through bonds sold to the public, to help provide the necessary Green Deal loans.

Of course, the Green economy goes far wider than upgrading the energy efficiency of homes. The proactive approach we propose to maximise the opportunities offered by the Green Deal must also be applied to other sectors if the region is to make the most of the economic and environmental benefits of switching to a Green economy.

Our priorities for the other sectors are:

Water efficiency

The East of England already suffers from water shortages and these are likely to be exacerbated by climate change. However, there is much that can be done to conserve water as vast amounts are wasted at the moment. We propose:

- i) Extending the Green Deal to include water efficiency;
- ii) Giving water efficiency - including greywater and rainwater recycling - a higher priority in the planning of new residential and commercial developments;
- iii) Changing the water abstraction licensing system to encourage agricultural irrigation methods that maximise efficiencies;
- iv) Encouraging the construction of more reservoirs to store winter rainfall for use in the summer.

Green buildings, products and materials

Using market forces to drive the demand for Greener buildings, products and materials provides a powerful complement to the regulatory measures. In particular, we want:

- i) Local authorities, hospitals and other major public sector purchasers to use their buying power to encourage the use of Green products. For example, where there are reliable certified sources - such as timber and fish - purchasing should be limited to these sources.
- ii) Both the public and private sectors should be encouraged to utilise the considerable expertise within the universities and other research organisations within the region to develop more efficient and sustainable products and services. The LEPs have a key role in promoting this.
- iii) Retailers, manufacturers and consumer groups should work to provide the public with information needed to make Greener buying choices.

Renewable energy

There are huge opportunities for the East of England to become a major provider of renewable energy. We welcome the establishment of the Orbis offshore renewable energy centre in Lowestoft as an excellent example of how bringing together the expertise and interests of companies in a particular sector can boost its development and benefits for the regional economy. We would like to see similar approach taken to some of the other renewable energy opportunities, including the development of fuel cells which are a key to the development of electric vehicles and; the rapidly growing solar energy technologies; and the use of wood and other biomass.

We recognise that there are currently substantial planning obstacles inhibiting the development of onshore wind and, recently, biogas plants. Sometimes the objections from local people are entirely reasonable, especially with regard to the impact on outstanding landscapes. However, we believe that the planning system is too often influenced by unjustifiable objections and that environmental and economic benefits are being lost for no good reason. We urge planning authorities to do more to ensure that issues raised by objectors are subjected to proper testing and are balanced against the benefits. We also urge companies proposing substantial onshore renewable projects to do more to give individual households and local communities directly affected by the development a share of the financial benefits.

Transport

Transport is still the main sector where climate change emissions are still increasing. Local authorities, of course, have a key role in reversing this trend, not least by working to provide quality public transport alternatives to the car.

One key issue for the East of England is the poor quality of some of our rail services, in particular overcrowding and unreliability. We are concerned that the huge investment required by the proposed development of the high-speed rail link to Birmingham and Manchester will undermine the resources needed for the more mundane but essential improvements required here. In particular, we believe that investment in more capacity on the rail routes into London and on modernising the Norwich-Liverpool Street line to improve speed and reliability deserve as much priority as HS2.

We also want to see more done by businesses, neighbourhood councils and voluntary groups to encourage car sharing, carpooling and the establishment of car clubs.

Finally, we believe that many highway authorities are so focused on tackling the problems of car travel that they pay too little attention to provision for pedestrians and cyclists. We would like to see some energetic campaigns to improve facilities for both of these groups.

Waste and resource management

Minimising the use of natural resources is a key to future prosperity, as we are in danger of running out of some key commodities within the foreseeable future. Within the region, we propose:

- i) Utilising the buying power of public bodies to favour products and services that use resources efficiently;
- ii) Encourage LEPs to develop programmes to help companies reduce their resource needs, recognising that this can lead to increased profits as well as environmental benefits;
- iii) Work to ensure that the commercial and municipal waste collection and treatment systems in the region are developed to maximise the long-term recovery of useful materials.

Land management

The way we manage land is critical in many ways, from the sustainability of agriculture to the role of the green environment in people's physical and mental health. Some agricultural practices are so unsustainable that we believe they should be banned: for example, growing turf on the valuable but disappearing black Fen soil.

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that attractive green spaces in urban areas have an important role in the health of local residents, both in terms of encouraging exercise and promoting mental well-being. Too often - and especially in areas already suffering deprivation - open spaces are little more than a derelict dumps uncared for by the local authorities or housing associations responsible for them. With a little help and advice, handing over the management of such spaces to local communities can have a significant effect, often turning them into attractive, and sometimes food-producing, green spaces.

There is even evidence that such a transformation can lead to high levels of employment and thus have a direct, as well as indirect, impact on the economy.

Summary

The opportunities for creating tens of thousands of jobs and improving the quality of life for everyone in the East of England from a comprehensive programme to switch to a Green economy must not be missed. The keys to success include maximising collaboration between the public and private sectors; exploiting the research and science expertise within the region; leveraging the buying power of public bodies, commercial sector, and groups of individuals; and ensuring that the region has the necessary skills and investment capacity.