



The full interview from ICLEI publication **Connections #38**, which focuses on the topic of adaptation.

**Sandy Taylor, Head of Climate Change and Sustainability, Birmingham City Council and Member of the EU Adaptation Steering Group and Chairman of the Eurocities Air Quality Energy Efficiency and Climate Change Working Group is in the hotseat.**

### **What is the most recent extreme weather event you can remember?**

The latest one was in the summer 2010, when there was severe flooding due to intense rain for a few hours and the city's old drainage system could not deal with all the water. Usually, we expect heavy rain-fall in spring time, now heavy rain can fall in June, July and August. Within a few hours, an amount equal to the average of a month or more can lead to the flooding of small rivers and brooks and the drainage system cannot cope with water run-off anymore.

### **Are there separate draining systems for surface water and sewage in Birmingham?**

Yes, currently we have some particular projects that look at the flooding hot spots to try to alleviate the blockages in the system. These apply engineering solutions. In other projects, we have identified the areas that qualify as retention basins. The plan is to identify and allocate the areas for accommodating the storm water run-off for every new development. For instance, flood attenuation has been installed beside the new city's library and has water storage of about 180 m<sup>3</sup> and has a 20 percent increase for climate change built into its design.

### **What other main adaptation activities are ongoing in Birmingham?**

Two of our main focus areas are schools and our special care villages for older people. We have a schools modernisation programme, where we have established new heat management facilities in two schools to increase comfort levels during heat waves. This includes glazing, the orientation of the building and proper insulation. However, due the UK's public expenditure reductions there may be some decrease in future funding for adaptation in our schools. We have also rebuilt some special care villages, including the orientation of the buildings and heat adaptive design criteria including green roofs.

### **What are you doing to encourage private adaptation efforts?**

Currently we do not have any financial incentives or building codes but a review of our planning regulation is upcoming, so we will have a new spatial planning framework by the end of 2011. This will follow a period of public consultations. We have supported "green roof" installations with a small special fund which has now ended.

### **How do you rate the political leadership and commitment of the Birmingham's Councillors?**

The Council is a strong political driver. Following the agreement on our new climate change action plan in March 2010, Birmingham is now moving towards a target of 60 percent CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction by 2026. This agreement followed an intense two

year dialogue, in which the Vice Mayor took a leading role. The formation of a Cabinet Committee on Climate Change and Sustainability is driving the city forward towards this key commitment. The Committee includes two observer members – one from the business community and one from the Forum for the Future.

The Committee also includes a monitoring process in their regular political meetings which take place every three months. Our monitoring still needs more refinement, but the scrutiny process is well set-up. The City Council has a Scrutiny Committee which oversees the performance of agreed targets and priorities including climate change. This is a strong mechanism that drives members to closely observe the implementation of the action plan.

### **Do you have indicators and targets in place to monitor your climate adaptation efforts?**

We are currently working on evidence based performance indicators. With the University as a partner, we have developed work to understand Birmingham's urban climate model. More refined data is being used to develop a set of trends, including local air quality. However, this is a challenge, as we currently only have three monitoring points in the city, although new funding has been found to expand these points more widely across the city.

### **What do you see as the main role of a local government – and more particular the Birmingham one - in climate adaptation?**

The critical role stems from the local authority being a democratic organisation. Citizens expect authorities to serve them and their quality of life. They ask, can our local government help the city become more resilient? They expect us to bring together relevant stakeholders to share their concerns and then come forward with positive solutions. The Council has to ensure that civil society is given the correct information based on the likelihood of what can happen. Council members have a special role in this, as they can communicate this to citizens in the right manner.

### **Is global responsibility an issue in Birmingham, and how is this reflected in your local climate change activities?**

Birmingham is a city of people from more than a hundred countries – from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, which all suffer as a result of extreme weather events. There is a substantial disaster relief fund-raising involving many young people. In our Basic LA 21 school programme, we support pupils in understanding sustainability, climate change and global responsibility with the aim of reducing our impact on the planet. A number of neighbourhood eco-groups tackle issues like energy efficiency, material re-use and recycling and traveling. However, they tend to see adaptation aspects as quality of life issues, eg. addressing maintenance of green spaces and water courses. Birmingham City Council takes a supporting role in particular activities and ensures to link these with the adaptation strategy.

### **Do you believe cities receive enough support from the national and EU levels?**

Well, there are never enough resources. But what we as local authorities really need is greater confidence of communication to interpret the knowledge correctly for the debate with civil society. We need the European Commission to provide communication packages that help to facilitate the debate between citizens and local governments and present data more clearly. The cities in Europe are ready to help to design and disseminate this information. Apart from this, it would help if Member States and the Commission considered climate adaptation as a major concern at a local level. This would make it easier for us to make a case for a longer term commitment at city level rather than just responding to an immediate disaster event.

And of course no city is an island, but fits into a wider eco-structure. The EU has a leading role to play in helping Member States and cities to see the effects of climate change in both their own country and other Member States, and to help cities to exchange on what adaptation is and how it can be appropriately approached.