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Natural England Interview

Allen & York interview with Paul Hinds, head of sustainability at Natural England

Natural England has committed itself to reduce the carbon emissions of its business travel and estate by 50 percent by the end of 2010.

A&Y: What factors contributed towards wanting to decrease carbon emissions by 50 percent?

PH: The organisation was formed in 2006 to be the adviser to the Government on the natural environment. As an advocate of mitigating carbon we felt we had to “walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk”, hence we set a very ambitious target. We also wanted to demonstrate that carbon could be reduced without the need to either offset or pass on the carbon burden to our customers, stakeholders or employees. We also wanted to demonstrate that carbon reduction brings significant financial benefits as well as productivity and work-life balance benefits to our staff.

A&Y: What are the long term impacts on Natural England as a result of reducing carbon by 50 percent?

PH: We have instilled a “low carbon culture” in the organisation whereby everyone now questions the carbon costs of decisions and actions in much the same way as they would consider the financial costs. As a result we take a more balanced approach to how we do our business but continue to maintain our levels of customer service. Whilst this is a hugely significant achievement, it is the first step towards the agency being a truly sustainable organisation. We are now looking at the environmental impact of our suppliers, commuting, waste etc. and will be setting targets later in the year.

A&Y: As The head of sustainability, have you had previous experience with reducing carbon emissions?

PH: I have previously worked for organisations and led partnerships with carbon reduction goals, but nowhere near as ambitious as 50 percent. This is what attracted me to the job in the first place, particularly as most of my peers at the time thought I was setting myself up to fail! Prior to joining Natural England I was more involved in the strategic development and influencing side of environmental management, both working with collaborations between private business and the public sector as well as lobbying within Whitehall. The job offered me the opportunity to show that, like Natural England, I could both “walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk”. On a personal level I have reduced my carbon footprint by well over 50 percent as a result of cycling and using public transport more and becoming much more energy conscious around my home (despite 3 kids with a fascination for light switches!)

A&Y: How will you implement a 50 percent reduction carbon emissions at Natural England?

PH: Through a combination of energy efficiency and “right-sizing” our offices, giving ownership of carbon to our staff whilst providing them with the support and tools needed to work in more sustainable ways and strong leadership from our senior decision makers. My role has been very much about facilitating these programmes of work which has varied from rolling up my sleeves and pouring over endless spreadsheets of data to presenting to the Board. To use a football analogy it has been very much a “player manager” role with me both managing people to deliver whilst also delivering myself.



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A&Y: What strategy is involved in reducing carbon by 50 percent at Natural England?

PH: There is no distinct step-by-step process in the delivery as a lot of things have to be delivered concurrently. However, for us, the most important area was getting the data right – both the methodology and the timings by which we report our carbon emissions. This was important for two main reasons:

1. Because we are an “evidence based” organisation with lots of very clever people who immediately challenge any data they don’t feel is right.
2. We wanted our staff to “own” as much of their carbon footprint as possible, so accurate and regular reporting on how successful they were in reducing their carbon footprint was essential in order to maintain buy-in.

If we couple this with the commitment of our senior management team to reduce their own individual travel carbon footprints (thereby showing that we are all in it together) with the organisational dialogue we have created with our staff, then we have created a strong base on which to achieve our savings.

Our methodology follows Defra’s published guidance and uses its emission factors and is accredited to the Carbon Trust Standard and has been audited by PwC. We use utility bill data to calculate and monitor our estate energy carbon emissions, but have begun to move over to real time monitoring of our offices

The largest proportion of our 2007 footprint and the biggest opportunity for carbon saving has been through improving the energy performance of our estate. We have closed and moved from inefficient offices to more sustainable locations and also encouraged our staff to realise the work-life balance benefits of flexible working and touchdown centres rather than commuting to a Natural England office on a daily basis.

We have established a system that quantifies the emissions of working at home to ensure that we are not passing on the carbon burden to our staff when working in a flexible way and we are supporting staff in improving the energy efficiency of their homes by providing advice on insulation, behavioural change and grants.

A&Y: Are you on target so far?

PH: We have already made considerable progress with a 48 percent reduction (as of the beginning of December 2010) and plans to ensure we meet the target by mid-January 2011. Our office energy efficiency programme and rationalisation of inefficient estate has reduced our working office carbon footprint by just under 44 percent as of November 2010 with an estimated annual utilities cost saving of £380,000 (against our 2007 baseline). During the first year of implementation (2009-10) the Natural England travel carbon footprint fell by just under 23 percent.

Our thanks to Paul Hinds and if you are interested in taking part in our series of Sustainability Industry Leader Interviews please email - our Communications Team



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