

How to be green in a recession

The green city agenda need not be sidelined by the immediate needs of battling recession and the public sector downturn. **Robin Hambleton** draws recession-proof lessons for the UK from one of the greenest cities in Europe



Green dream: The Freiburg suburb of Vauban is like so much of the city... a paradise for eco-enthusiasts

Imagine a city with a population of 220,000, where car ownership is going down, and the citizens are proud of it.

From having no bike paths in 1970, the city now has a network of more than 300 miles of bike lanes.

The railway station has its own 'bike station', with 1,000 supervised spaces, together with repair and bike-hire services, a cycle shop, a café and a travel agency.

Large parts of the city centre – not just the odd street – are designated as pedestrian zones, and have been entirely reconstructed to support car-free living.

Some neighbourhoods have been designed to achieve zero-energy or 'energy plus' development. Yes, that's right, here you will find solar-powered houses contributing to the electricity supply – not taking from it.

Critics will murmur... 'OK, so this may be some kind of eco-paradise, but what about responding to the recession? Having a green city is all very well but clearly, a place like this cannot possibly succeed in the global economic competition for jobs'.

Wrong answer. This place is one of the fastest-growing cities in Germany for both population and jobs. Indeed, most German cities are losing inhabitants.

The largest solar research institute in Europe – the Fraunhofer Institute for Solar Energy Systems (ISE) – chooses to locate here, and solar technology has created at least 1,000 new jobs in the last 10 years.

Environmental awareness is highly developed, and the city council organises 'Solar tours' to enable visitors to learn from the practical experience of some of the 500 solar projects which are now up and

running in the city. Freiburg, Germany's southern-most city, can now claim to be a world leader when it comes to responding to climate change.

So, what is the background to this success story?

The origins of the community activism that underpins current innovations can be traced to the late-1970s. A successful, local and regional campaign against a proposal to locate a nuclear power station in nearby Wyhl provided the original impetus.

Those involved recall that the campaign was both creative and inclusive – it united farmers and conservative businessmen, students and activists, old and young – in

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a new kind of political movement, a 'green' movement.

A colourful coalition of anti-nuclear activists was born and, from small beginnings, success spurred further success. As early as 1986, the year of the Chernobyl disaster in the former Soviet Union, the council decided to abandon nuclear power.

The Green Party has strong roots here, and the city council, which has 48 mem-

bers, currently has 12 Green Party councillors. In 2002, Freiburg became the first sizable city in Germany to elect a member of the Green Party – Dieter Salomon – as mayor.

The point to highlight here is that the population at large has a strong commitment to environmentalism, one which has stood the test of time. Many young people are now choosing to move to Freiburg precisely because of the strong, green values it stands for.

A key strength of the 'Freiburg approach' is that the city is not complacent. Visitors from across the world now flock to the city to learn about the achievements of the place – in public transport, solar energy, green jobs, urban design, and the creation of communal forests and green spaces.

But the city is keen to redouble its climate protection efforts. Deputy mayor, Gerda Stuchlik, who leads on environmental and educational matters, has recently promoted

plans to reduce CO₂ emissions to 40% of 1990 levels by 2030.

What lessons can we draw for UK local government?

First, the Freiburg story illustrates the value of strong, local political leadership. It provides an inspiring example of localism in action. Local leaders, unconstrained by centrally-imposed performance indicators, have developed a forward-looking strategy – and delivered on it.

Second, it is also clear that the officers and professionals appointed by the city to push at the boundaries of good practice have played a crucial role.

It is not surprising that Wulf Daseking, director of planning in Freiburg, picked up the 2010 international prize for high-quality urban design from the UK Academy of Urbanism. As he explained in his acceptance speech in London last November, the work of planners and designers is highly prized in Freiburg.

And third, there is a clear lesson for the Big Society agenda. The community activism in the neighbourhoods within Freiburg is lifting.

The commitment to green values and collective purpose is highly developed, because local people have a high level of control over what happens in their area. ■

Key lessons:

- strong local political leadership, unconstrained by central government targets, can promote unprecedented levels of local innovation
- planners, designers and urban professionals should be given space and encouragement to try out radical new approaches
- local communities should be given much more control in shaping the design and management decisions which affect their neighbourhood

Robin Hambleton is professor of city leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol, and director of Urban Answers. A longer version of this article, with links to further resources, is provided on the LGID website: www.idea.gov.uk/climatechange