

Section 5

Introduction

"An increasing body of observations gives a collective picture of a warming world and other changes in the climate system."

*Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
Third Assessment Report, 2001*

Climate change is a natural phenomenon that has occurred throughout the history of the Earth as a consequence of changes in the Earth's orbit around the Sun, the configuration of the continents, the output of solar radiation and volcanic activity. Such influences change the global energy balance, alter the composition of the atmosphere and impact on climate on all time scales up to hundreds of millions of years. However, since the Industrial Revolution of the 1750s atmospheric concentrations of naturally occurring, and latterly synthetic, greenhouse gases have increased at an accelerating rate as a result of human activities. In the late 1970s it was recognised that this anthropogenic influence may be precipitating a 'global warming' resulting in changes to the climate system. Today there is new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last fifty years is attributable to human activities (IPCC, 2001^c) and that human-induced climate change, additional to that caused by natural variability, is now taking place. Unless global measures are taken during the first half of the 21st century to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stabilise their concentrations in the atmosphere, mankind may precipitate dangerous climate change together with significant sea level rise, which would persist for many centuries.

Clearly climate change is a global issue that needs a concerted global response. The international community has put in place a framework for action through agreement to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions reduction. The UK continues to play a leading role in the fight against climate change with its scientists at the forefront of the quest to understand climate change and predict its effects. On the national stage, the Government believes that the UK will benefit from strong action to tackle climate change and has promoted a partnership approach. The UK Climate Change Programme (DETR, 2000) has been developed in close consultation with key stakeholders and recognises that local authorities, amongst others, will be critical to the success of the programme. In addition to taking direct action to reduce emissions, we can influence the way others respond by raising awareness of the need for action and providing practical advice on what people can do to make a difference. Furthermore, we must also prepare for the impact of climate change, which is already affecting local communities.

Purpose

The purpose of this strategy is to identify and prioritise in a coherent and strategic manner the actions expected of Devon County Council by Government to tackle the causes of climate change and to prepare for its impacts.

Scope

The strategy seeks to put global warming and climate change in a Devon context by making the issue relevant to the people of Devon. In particular, it:

- Examines the evidence for climate change and uses projections of future climate to determine how it could affect life in Devon and the delivery of Council services,
- Outlines the actions already being taken at international, national and local level to tackle climate change,
- Identifies a strategic framework for raising awareness of climate change, addressing its causes and managing its impacts
and
- Considers what action the Council could take to address both the causes and impacts,