

● public sector: *heca*

High quality applications for 1997 grants show how LAs have risen to the challenge of the Home Energy Conservation Act.

Success breeding success

Complying with legislation rarely stirs the imagination. However, the Home Energy Conservation Act has unveiled a hidden enthusiasm for energy conservation.

Introduced in November 1995, it requires every local authority to prepare detailed plans as to how it would cut energy consumption in its homes by 30 per cent. There is no compulsion on authorities to actually do anything, just say how they might go about it. However, to qualify for funding from the Energy Saving Trust for the proposed projects, authorities had to submit plans by September.

Remarkably, over 200 authorities submitted applications with bids worth over £24 million. Seventy, involved in 72 projects, were selected to share in the £5 million on offer. The EST hopes that the winning schemes will stimulate £55 million in energy-saving measures.

With the deadline now passed for second year awards, it seems the enthusiasm shows few signs of waning. The EST has recently revealed that 99 bids have been received for the 1997 round. Although this is down from the 150 received last year, the EST insists that the quality is substantially better than last year. In addition, many of the bids have been submitted by consortia of local authorities who are realising that a pool of resources can have wider benefits. Awards are expected to range from £50,000 to £250,000.

As in 1996, the emphasis has been placed on sustainable schemes i.e. private sector partners must provide 30 per cent leverage. Priority areas are the private rented sector, employment creation, fuel poverty

and energy services.

One highly acclaimed project is being run by South Somerset District Council in conjunction with four neighbouring authorities. With a £55,000 award a Somerset Energy Club was established whereby all owner occupiers have access to free energy advice and discounted insulation and heating products. Over 210,000 letters and surveys were sent out and 40,000 replies were received. In addition, training was provided in both energy awareness and energy advice for health care workers.

According to Alasdair Bell, the

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authority's environmental health manager, the challenge for the future is to maintain the momentum. However, he is confident that further funding will be forthcoming from the authority. "We will have to have another blitz in a year's time," he said.

Meanwhile, Derby City Council received £220,000 to implement a city-wide scheme to co-ordinate information, advice marketing and training to promote energy awareness and stimulate investment in home energy efficiency. At the heart of this was a newsletter to 95,000 homes with the back-up of a freephone number. Although funding for this has now ceased, Derby intends to keep the newsletter published with the help of technical features spon-

sored by suppliers of energy efficiency products.

In addition, the council has run a successful voucher scheme for DIY products through builders merchants. Almost 1,000 people have taken advantage of the low-price insulation. The builders merchants are keen to continue running discounts after the end of the HECA grant as it attracts customers keen on buying products such as bathrooms. "No matter how much you talk to people, you still need financial incentives," said Martin Gadsby, one of Derby's team leaders. "We have also learnt how to become marketing experts."

Derby has applied for a further grant under the 1997 HECA Action awards. Emphasis this year has been placed on providing training to the unemployed in the Babington area. Also, it is proposing to install solar panels on a sheltered housing scheme.

Another scheme, using an integrated approach is underway in Norfolk. King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council is demonstrating how the 30 per cent energy efficiency target can be achieved in a pilot project involving the entire village of Syderstone. "The Village Energy Reduction Assessment (VERA) project takes best practice theory into the community," said Catriona Reeby, the council's energy manager.

Over half of the village's population attended a meeting (tempted by the offer of a free low-energy light bulb!) to launch the event. This was followed up by the formation of a residents energy group to help co-ordinate the project. The local authority has also established a short-term energy centre and an energy project worker has been appointed to give face-to-face advice and carry out energy surveys for villagers.

Reeby added: "We are trying to encourage a high take-up of energy efficiency measures by encouraging a typical cross-section of the public through bulk purchase discounts, raising awareness, promotion, and training."

However, the council now has to maintain the project's momentum. It is planning a series of open days at a council project and further demonstrations. "Now's the time we start learning," concluded Reeby. **EIBI**

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