

Fuelling change

Supply Management Awards 2007 CATEGORY Best contribution to corporate responsibility
WINNER Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council. Paul Snell explains how Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council is pushing the environmental agenda with its biomass heating policy

In a town that has its roots in the coal mining industry, it is surprising to find the council leading the way in the development of sustainable fuels. But Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council has tackled its need to reduce carbon emissions by 14,000 tonnes by 2050 with what the awards judges described as a "truly innovative" and "futuristic" project.

In June 2004 the council introduced a biomass fuel heating policy. This meant that for all future public or commercial buildings and refurbishments, burning wood chips for heating would be the preferred option. Wood pellets, which are mostly compressed sawdust, would also be burnt in the council's 133 remaining coal-fired boilers, to reduce carbon emissions without extra expenditure.

"This was a cross-functional effort," says Alan White, the council's assistant executive director for property and procurement. "It started as an engineering project to find out what alternative suppliers there were to coal, and it quickly turned into our strategy for the future."

Some buyers have found schemes such as this are often scuppered by a lack of suppliers, but luckily the geography of the town has paid off. Fallen trees and branches, and wood pruned from forests in South Yorkshire can provide up to 60,000 tonnes of waste wood each year. The council estimates it could reach 330,000 tonnes if the catchment area included the whole of Yorkshire and Humberside.

The South Yorkshire Forestry Partnership worked closely with the authority to identify suppliers who could provide 45,000 tonnes of wood a year. "Most of the wood is our own, so our fuel costs are very little," says White.

And it's not only environmental responsibility the project has pushed. In a region once dominated by collieries, this alternative fuel is providing professional and social benefits. "South Yorkshire Forestry were keen on the scheme with its potential to create jobs and because of the growing demand to put proper forestry management in place," he says.

There is a small cost in converting the waste wood into chips that can be burnt, but it is cheaper than buying it in or having to pay landfill costs. Wood pellets are also more expensive per kilowatt of heat than the equivalent from coal (3.1p per kw, compared with 1.8p), but the environmental benefits outweigh the price increases. Wood chips are now being used to heat blocks of flats and will also provide hot water at the council's new headquarters.

Judges were impressed by the way the council had developed the strategy as an action, rather than an audit process: "It shows what can be done with some focus."

And White agrees. "It's nice to be recognised for good procurement. It shows we're really taking action on CSR."

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