

Edinburgh Councillor blogs – Councillor Jim Orr on sustainability in cities

✘ *by SNP Councillor Jim Orr who represents the Southside/Newington Ward. Councillor Orr is the Vice-Convenor of Transport and Environment and is the council spokesperson on cycling. He is currently in Copenhagen on a trip to find out about sustainability in cities.*

I'm writing from Copenhagen and a two day "Study trip on sustainable city solutions". The visit is sponsored by the Danish version of the CBI and the European Commission. Copenhagen has been chosen to host this conference, and to be European Green Capital for 2014, because of their ambitious plans to be carbon neutral by 2025. We in Edinburgh have similar ambitions (40% reduction by 2020), and a genuinely great vision in "Sustainable Edinburgh 2020" (check out the annual report online) and many projects under development – but as yet we have no step by step "road map" to get to where we need to be in terms of carbon emissions. So I'm here to learn from the Danes.

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David Sim

I arrived early in order to meet some useful contacts. First appointment was with Gehl Architects, who have done a lot of work in Edinburgh, and an illustrated lecture on some of their projects and their city design philosophy. "Cities for People" is one of Jan Gehl's most recent publications and this title sums up their philosophy. They kindly gave me a free copy and it was interesting to hear their case studies on liveability; from their involvement of the famous revamp of Times Square to simple things like getting people to spend

time outdoors at all costs. The importance of public space, architectural variety and sustainable transport forms and other staples (trust me, it's very hard to summarise a "philosophy"!) Edinburgh is already a very livable city, but its still vitally important that new developments retain this quality, and that we regain it in the city centre which has become too crowded by traffic, with or without tram works.

David and I also spoke about the transport challenges in the city centre and he gave me some new ideas.

Next appointment was with Niels Hoe of the Danish Cycling Embassy who's really a self-employed cycle infrastructure professional and clearly someone with a real passion for cycling. Niels is currently working on the new cycle hire scheme for Copenhagen and his thoughts on the merits and demerits of different cycle hire schemes around the world proved to be very insightful. Let's just say such schemes seem to be easy to get right and just as easy to get wrong. He's especially sceptical of handing the project over to big companies, who might have other objectives than optimising usage. The bikes which are planned are e-bikes (e is for electric). They are on the rise Europe-wide and would be great in Edinburgh – you can imagine zooming up the Mound on one. A cycle hire scheme is something we're considering in Edinburgh.

It was a good opportunity to compare Copenhagen to the cities in the Netherlands I visited in June from a cycling perspective. Copenhagen seem to have a simpler system of cycle lanes which are a small step down from the pavement but above the road and with cyclists always travelling in the same direction as cars for simplicity. Even this relatively simple solution costs \$1.5m per kilometre to install Niels told me, in part due to the double drainage systems required.



Copenhagen cycle lane comes to an

abrupt end – reminds me of home!

There's much more I could report from our conversation.

School catchment areas are based on cycle access so that busy roads don't need to be crossed. Niels also specialises in attractive, innovative cycle parking schemes and communicating positively with cyclists. For example, when pot holes are fixed a little stencil diagram is often painted on top to tell cyclists "this is for you". Cyclists are often given similar messages to thank them for cycling. He gave me two hours of his time for free so I promised to put in a good word for him at the Scotland-wide cycling summit which the Transport Minister is organising in Edinburgh City Chambers on Tuesday.

Also I took a short trip across the sea (by the wonderful new 10km causeway/bridge) to Malmö. They appear to have good cycling rates with a reasonable quality of infrastructure in the city centre; mainly cycle and pedestrian paths adjacent to each other made possible by quite a few streets in their grid system being traffic free.



Jan Elleriis

The first event of the conference proper was a lecture on district heating (DH) systems in Copenhagen by Jan Elleriis of the Metropolitan Copenhagen Heating Transition Company. DH systems involve bringing heat to entire districts by pipes buried under the road. Everyone can have a connection (metred) and they are typically supplied by combined heat and power (CHP) plants but may also be fuelled by energy from waste or industrial excess heat (as already happens with Tynecastle High School). The CO2 reduction is hard to estimate but, with economies of scale and designed-in efficiencies, it is substantial. Just as importantly, it has more or less eliminated fuel poverty in Copenhagen. The University of Edinburgh has a little DH scheme from a CHP unit

in George Square for example.

From my notes, the following points are also important:

All thermal plants in Denmark must be CHP to optimise the heat generated. They can't just be used to generate electricity and waste the heat.

All DH distribution companies are not for profit, by law. The distributors get the heat from big energy companies and pass it on the municipalities or co-ops who feed the heat to the end users.

Municipalities are advantaged by low borrowing rates and indirect subsidies on other heat sources.

Morten Jordt Duedahl from the confederation of Danish Industry continued with further background.

DH systems have the following advantages: Good for jobs and exports (of services). Brings down CO2 and fuel costs.

Eliminates fuel poverty and increases home comfort. In Scotland we have a DH Action Plan but at local authority level, it appears that most of us need better goals and plans.

We also have a complex incentivisation approach in Scotland with a lot of different schemes such as the Energy Savings Trust and the Green Deal. While good progress is being made with renewables in Scotland, DH has possibly been neglected and we need to look closely at whether it could be an important part of the sustainability solution for our city.



Retro-fitted elevator in
Copenhagen