



Rosemary Gallagher
The Big Interview

'We're burning out three planets with the resources we're consuming, but we only have one'

@SCOTTISHEPA

Climate change has been making headlines this year, with children marching on Parliament and protestors taking to the streets, and these actions seem to have succeeded in pushing environmental issues up the political and business agenda.

Environmental campaigners from Extinction Rebellion have staged demonstrations in cities across the country, and Scottish school pupils have been "on strike" for a couple of days recently calling on the Government to do more to protect the environment.

And shortly after First Minister Nicola Sturgeon declared a national "climate emergency" at the SNP conference in April, the Scottish Government announced more ambitious targets. It said Scotland would aim to be "net zero" by 2045 – emitting the same volume of greenhouse gases as it absorbs through offsetting techniques, such as forestry. It also made the controversial decision, for environmental reasons, to scrap plans to cut air departure tax, which has led to a backlash from some parts of the business community.

With such a spotlight on the climate, and related concerns, the role of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (Sepa) is also gaining a higher profile – and its chairman of four years, Bob Downes, seems to be taking it in his stride. "The environment has fought its way up the agenda again, certainly in this country and around Europe, and I'm really gratified it has happened," he says.

He is in his final year as chairman of Sepa – prior to taking up that position he was on the regulator's board – and has been involved with the organisation during a time of change. Downes is

quick to point that he has also been on the "other side" of a regulator in the world of telecoms, where he dealt with Ofcom while working with BT to set-up Openreach in Scotland. He brings this commercial background to the fore in his role with Sepa and is a firm believer in the need to communicate with business.

"The word independent means quite a lot in regulation," he says. "Irrespective of political party interests, an independent regulator is able to guarantee certain standards that have been agreed by parliament and government. Business needs to have a degree of certainty, so you can't be flip-flopping."

He describes Sepa as having been in a "state of positive change" and believes the organisation has gained credibility among the sectors it regulates. "With any regulation, society has to be accepting of what you're trying to do. That means spending a lot of time investing in relationships and building partnerships," he says.

Sepa has been accused by some as being too close to business to be an impartial regulator, but Downes seems unfazed by such criticism. "Not everybody is going to like how we do things and we might be accused of stepping outside the bounds of the regulator," he says. But he sees Sepa's approach to working with business as "pioneering", saying that he does not know of any other regulator taking such a "beyond compliance" approach.

There has also been a shift in business and investor attitudes to environmental issues, according to Downes, who believes companies now see genuinely green credentials as an imperative if they are to achieve commercial success in the long-term. "I don't want to go overboard on this as there is a long way to go, but companies are now being held



Bob Downes is in his final year as Sepa chairman, and the organisation will soon be starting a search for four new board members, a quarter of its total

to account by analysts if, for example, they are dependent on fossil fuels," he says. "This wasn't the case five years ago."

The approach taken by Sepa's chief executive Terry A'Hearn, with Downes as chairman, is reflective of this shift in attitude among the business community. Sepa has adopted a strategy of "One Planet Prosperity" through sector plans with industries ranging from Scotch whisky to landfill and oil and gas decommissioning, and a focus on the circular economy. It has been estimated there could be a £1 billion benefit for circular economy businesses in Scotland that embrace the concept of using resources for as long as possible, extracting maximum value, and then regenerating products and materials.

Downes says: "One Planet Prosperity is a very simple but real idea. We're burning out three planets now with the resources we're consuming, but we only have one. You can't regulate your way by just setting standards. You have to get into discussions with businesses and public sector organisations about how to change that."

"If you put a regulation in place and you give plenty of warning, a lot of really smart companies start looking at how the products can be applied."

The first sector plan was developed with the Scotch whisky industry. "Sepa has been working with the whisky industry for some time. It's like chalk and cheese now when you compare the industry to ten or 15 years ago," he says.

He says that the entire Scotch whisky supply chain has changed and the sector plan focuses on unlocking the potential of "beyond compliance" opportunities for the industry. It aims to achieve a range of sustainable development goals, building on voluntary environmental targets already set by the industry.

Other sectors, such as landfill, are likely to prove more challenging, with Downes warning that while there is "value in rubbish", it tends to be removed early in the chain, and he warns the industry also suffers from a level of criminality.

Despite there being a number of tough nuts for Sepa to crack, Downes feels in a better position than regulators in some other countries when it comes to attitudes to climate change. "Other places are yet to find their voice, particularly in the USA," he says. "I was asked to go and speak to their Environment Protection Agency [EPA] in Pennsylvania. I realised how lucky we are in Scotland as an agency to have a government that we're in tune with and vice versa."

According to Downes, EPA feels under threat. "They are very proud of what they have done in cleaning up the environment in the US and feel that has been undermined," he explains.

Turning back to what has been achieved in Scotland, Downes points to the success of the Vibes – Scottish Environment Business Awards held annually for the past two decades to recognise and showcase best practice in sustainability. The awards, with

Downes as head of the judging panel, are a partnership between Sepa, the Scottish Government, the Energy Saving Trust, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Water, Zero Waste Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage, supported by a range of business sponsors.

Every year, Downes visits two or three of the Vibes winners to see what they are doing in practice and how other businesses can learn from them. He gives the example of Lobster Pod in Fife – now Todd Fish Tech – a shellfish transportation company set up by husband and wife team Errin and Keith Todd. Their Lobster Pod system alleviates the stress that shellfish being transported to customers can experience – impacting business's profitability as well as the creatures' well-being – and runs other initiatives that promote sustainability.

Downes says: "With the Vibes awards, we are recognising businesses and organisations that are already way beyond compliance in how they use resources, minimise energy and invest in the environment."

With the awards in their twentieth year – and including a special anniversary Best of Vibes category to recognise a past winner – Downes says the plan is to make a "big splash", culminating in a ceremony in Glasgow



CURRICULUM VITAE

Born: Belfast, Northern Ireland

Education: Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art

First job: Town planner

Ambition at school: The 4 minute mile and it still is.

What car you drive: Porsche

Favourite mode of transport: Trains, bike and kayak

Kindle or book: Both

Can't live without: Real tea

What makes you angry: Being late for other people and vice versa

What inspires you: Ideas and the drive to do something with them

Best job about your job: The people I have the privilege to work with

in November, and then review them. "All awards have to be refreshed. We have a good set of sponsors, and as long as companies continue to want to be involved in and value the awards, they are worth doing. The companies I speak to are always glad they participated and winners get great visibility."

Looking ahead, Sepa is about to undergo more change. As well as Downes being in his final year as chairman, the organisation will soon be starting a search for four new board members, a quarter of its total.

He says a major achievement of his tenure is to have helped put the One Planet Prosperity strategy in place, but he adds that building blocks need to be secured to make it effective in practice.

Downes also points to having established a good relationship with the relevant agencies to tackle the problem of serious flooding in Scotland a few years ago, which has led to river basis management plans being established across the country.

He is keen to emphasise that, as well as being the independent regulator for the protection of the environment in Scotland, Sepa is also responsible for the country's flood warning system.

"These are two very important functions we carry out on behalf of the government, but also civic society," he says.

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Bob Downes, chairman of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, is determined to achieve sustainable development goals.
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