

The tantalising smell of chips lingered in the air at a summer fair in Leicester this month, but the odour could be traced to two electrical generators, not the food stands.

"They're running on recycled chip shop oil from Wales," said Oliver Savage from the organisers Environ, a local eco-charity.

It was his idea to hold a festival run - as much as possible - on renewable energy.

The live music stage and movie marquee were powered by nearby wind turbines and photovoltaic panels. The only concession to conventional fuel was the bottled gas used by some of the caterers.

Savage said: "Ten years ago we would not have been able to do this - not because people were not interested, but the means did not exist."

The festival marked Leicester's tenth anniversary as an Environment City, an award by the Royal Society for Nature Conservation.

The title - which was later given to Leeds, Peterborough and Middlesbrough - was in recognition of the cities' commitment to sustainable development and as a challenge to further action.

Has Leicester risen to this challenge or is it "all hype and very little action" as local Friends of the Earth member Roger Jones believes?

One flagship scheme is the Bike Park with city centre parking, showers, repair facility and shop. More than 300 cyclists a week use the park which is run by businessman Alex Webster with the support of the city council and Environ.

The EcoHouse, Environ's environmental showhome, has re-opened this year after a major re-fit at a time when many similar facilities are opening for the first time.

And the council has tightened its own operations, becoming registered with the EU's Eco-Management and Audit Scheme.

Alistair Reid, of the environment and development department, said: "Four or five other local authorities are on the EMAS register, but we are the biggest to apply it to the whole council system."

This has led to significant savings in paper and water use. The council's energy consumption has dropped too - by 8.4 per cent in ten years.

Ross Willmott, leader of the Labour-run council, said: "We have achieved quite a lot from locating sources of air pollution to the council's use of renewable energy in its own buildings."

The city's record has been noted within the EU and even at the Rio Earth summit in 1992. A survey by Environ this year found that twice as many

local residents considered Environment City status a benefit compared with those who considered it a PR exercise.

But Jones is not alone in his analysis.

The council conducts numerous surveys of public opinion, but Nick Jukes, an independent green activist from Leicester, is still angry at the council's rejection of a plan by residents to convert disused allotments into community gardens.

Other bones of contention for him were the construction of an out-of-centre shopping and leisure development and more recently the council's plan to axe healthy trees along a 200-year-old walkway. The aim was to recreate its original look, but public protest has forced a compromise.

As for transport, the city has one park-and-ride scheme and the council hopes to get government approval for four more. Real-time information bulletins on three bus routes in the area are also being provided through a partnership between the city and county councils and bus companies.

A 3,000-home urban village, designed to cut energy use and car travel, is another council plan.

A key indicator is recycling. The authority operates a comprehensive kerbside recycling collection, although its recycling rate is a mid-table 10.5 per cent. It hopes to quadruple this, though, through a £25.8m compost machine.

But Jones said: "The weaknesses lie in the city council's efforts. They start out with good ideas, but when the novelty wears off, they move onto something else.

"We were going to be a showcase for others to learn from, but we have been overtaken by others doing better things."

He criticises the city council for its work on litter, tree-planting and park maintenance.

Andy Brooks, of Leicestershire Transport 2000, said: "Environment City caught people's imagination, but in the past two to three years the impetus has been flagging."

He is optimistic, though, that statutory public consultation will highlight the people's concerns - and money will follow.

Willmott considers that the impetus is still there. He said: "The waste plant will be a really big thing if we get approval from the government as will the new park-and-rides."

This attitude of "the council should do more" angers Savage.

He said: "People think Environment City is about the council, when it's about personal responsibility."

"Why don't people instead of grumbling come up with a way of doing things better.

"It's easy to pick holes, but I think that there is almost no other city that is doing so much on so many fronts."