

## **SOUTH EAST CLIMATE ALLIANCE**



### **Lancaster Climate Emergency Conference – 29 March 2019**

**Headline messages – Geoff Barnard (Coordinator, Greening Steyning)**

#### **Background**

This Conference was organised by Kevin Frea, a Lancaster City Councillor, and the person behind the excellent [climateemergency.uk](http://climateemergency.uk) website, that tracks progress with the climate emergency movement across the UK. It brought together about 200 people involved in the Climate Emergency (CE) movement, a mix of councillors, council officers, campaigners, researchers and others. Discussions were organised in a series of parallel workshops, many with interesting sounding titles – so it was difficult to know which ones to go to. It was a lively, if hectic, day with loads of ideas raised and a lot of experience in the room – much more than can be distilled here. This note is a personal reflection of the headline messages I took away. It's divided into those relevant to councils, and those for campaigners.

#### **Messages for Councils**

##### **Why focus on councils**

Some within local councils might argue that they are only a small part of the climate picture, with limited statutory powers, and even tighter budgets, so climate isn't really their problem. The whole thrust of the conference was that this is not the case and that councils really matter. One reason is because national leadership on climate change has largely evaporated in recent years, after the bold start made with the 2012 Climate Change Act. This has not been helped by the distractions of Brexit. Another is because of councils' jurisdiction over crucial areas such as transport, planning, minerals and waste. If local councils are not showing leadership, and building climate considerations into in to local democratic processes, they risk becoming blockers of climate progress not agents for change.

##### **Declaring a Climate Emergency is only the first step**

"It's what you do afterwards that counts". Some councils have grabbed the bull by the horns and have set up meaningful processes and accountability mechanisms. But participants admitted that some of the climate declarations around the country have been little more than box ticking or point scoring exercises. Agreeing a motion without any targets and asking for a report in 6 months can amount to little more than kicking the issue into the long grass. This achieves nothing. The whole focus of the conference was on how to turn declarations into action.

##### **Cross party collaboration is vital**

Climate Emergencies have been declared by councils of all political hues. But cross-party collaboration is notable by its absence in many councils. There was a widespread recognition that this is the vital if CE motions are going to get turned into meaningful long

term action. Lasting, radical change only happens when there is widespread buy in from across the political spectrum, but it can happen under the right circumstances.

### **The scale of the task**

Hitting the carbon neutral by 2030 target is a big challenge, even if you're only talking about the council's direct operational footprint. It's massive if you are referring to the whole geographic area covered by the council and all the homes, businesses and transport within it. But scenarios like the [Zero Carbon Britain](#) study show it can be done – and with technology that's already proven (like wind and solar), or in advanced development (e.g. battery storage). There were plenty of examples cited of ambitious council backed schemes where councils have gone out on a limb – solar farms, energy saving retrofits of council properties, biodigesters for food waste, electric vehicle fleets, energy service companies (ESCOs), and more. If you look at what's happening in Germany, Denmark and elsewhere the envelope of what's possible seems a lot bigger. Technology isn't the barrier - it's political will and the challenge of bringing communities with you on the journey.

### **How to get started**

Getting cash-starved councils to shift their frame of thinking from modest low-cost incremental measures to a radical multi-year transformation plan is a big ask. Small wins in the short term are undoubtedly helpful in getting things started, but if councils are going to really get a grip on the climate issue they need to set up processes that acknowledge the scale of the challenge and begin to chart a realistic course to dealing with it. Councils don't need a comprehensive and fully costed plan to get started, though, and they don't have to do this alone. There's loads of experience to draw on from elsewhere and lessons to be learned - e.g. Stroud Council has a 9 point action plan covering all areas from energy generation and storage, to cutting the energy footprint of supply chains, and carbon storage through tree planting.

### **Building local alliances**

Councils can gain much by reaching out to local organisations as they draw up and implement their climate plans. This includes green groups, community bodies, universities, business organisations, and others. This can bring in much needed expertise, as well as opening up channels for community engagement that are vital if constituents are to be brought with them on the journey. Few councillors are climate experts, and many are starting out with a very partial view of the nature of the climate challenge and the potential solutions. It is good to spread the net beyond the obvious suspects, otherwise there's a risk of one bubble (the environment team in the council) talking to another bubble (local green groups). One council invited the local Transition Town group to take part in council meetings, and invited 10-12 year old school children to debate what their climate priorities were and present it back to the council.

### **How to engage**

Some councils have set up 'citizen assemblies' or multi-stakeholder climate committees to engage with citizens – in some cases, delegating the management of these to a local partners. There was good advice given on the need to meet stakeholders on their territory – rather than requiring them to come in to councils and get their message over in a 2 minute speaking slot during a council meeting. Showing a bit of humility and acknowledging that the Council does not have all the answers and needs help is a good place to start. While it's true that opening the debate up like this risks losing some control over it, it does provide opportunities to share the real world dilemmas that councils face. The opposite tactic of keeping deliberations under wraps and in house creates the converse problem of then having to sell 'solutions' to a sceptical electorate. This may not be an issue for a minor energy

saving step but will be a much bigger challenge for any far reaching measure. The more radical you want to be as a council, the more you need to engage.

### **Money needn't be a barrier**

Cash-strapped councils find it hard to look beyond the acute budget squeeze they are currently facing. Raising £20,000 to pay for a part time environment advisor post or a consultation exercise can be challenging enough. So how are they going to raise the millions needed to pursue more radical and far reaching strategies? There was lots of encouragement at the conference about the scope for low cost initiatives, and others where the council is can show leadership and open up doors for local business and others, rather than funding measures themselves. The recent Friends of the Earth briefing on [“33 actions local authorities can take”](#) includes 19 measures that are ‘no or low cost’ – such as installing LED street lights that will pay for themselves within 8 years. For more ambitious measures, there will be a need for innovative funding mechanisms such as local authority bonds. But even these are hardly new. Much of the civic infrastructure like parks and swimming pools in towns and cities across the country was paid for in Victorian and Edwardian times by the profits from municipal bonds. There are also plenty of examples elsewhere in Europe of cooperative or local government owned energy schemes that generate profits for local people and contribute to public coffers rather than draining them.

### **The New Green Deal**

Initially proposed in 2008 as a response to the global financial crisis, the [New Green Deal](#) is getting headlines recently and has been picked up by leading politicians in the US and elsewhere. It proposes a comprehensive package of green stimulus measures that, it argues, can enrich local communities, create jobs, and stimulate a much more sustainable and equitable kind of development than consumer led growth. A transformation this radical may seem far-fetched at first glance, but as one speaker put it *“Tipping points in climate politics are non linear, like in climate science”*. So it is certainly worth a look to see what measures can be adapted for local council use.

### **Addressing inequality**

Several contributors highlighted the danger of green initiatives that are only accessible to the middle classes and wealthy. That is not the way to build widespread support. *“Make the poor the pioneers of clean”*, as one put it, citing a plan for a electric vehicle car club scheme in a low income housing development, linked to the scrapping of their old polluting bangers.

## **Messages for Campaigners**

### **Let young people make the case**

The decision by Lancaster Council to declare a CE was unanimous, and was influenced strongly by the fact that the motion was proposed in a school student petition in the first place, and the gallery being packed with school children on the day of the debate. One of their activists, 12-year old Ada Wood, spoke at the conference and nailed it with a comment from a letter she'd written to a Labour politician *“The world is dying – can't you see that”*. Faced by this kind of direct testimony, few politicians can remain impassive. Even in political terms, the voice of young people can't be ignored. As one councillor put it, *“if you haven't listened to them when they are 16, why will they vote for you when they're 18”*. The upcoming school strikes on 12 April and 17 May are dates for the diary.

### **The tactics of fear**

The CE movement is founded on the principle that declaring an “emergency” is essential to galvanise action. We badly need a wake up call. But how much doom and destruction can

people take? The climate catastrophe predictions are pretty scary once you factor in positive feedback loops like the Amazon catching fire and the ice caps melting. These certainly grab people's attention. But too much of this risks prompting denial or evasion rather than action. A balance has to be struck depending on the audience. Saying "it looks pretty scary but it's not too late if we take urgent action now" seems like a workable compromise in most situations.

### **We don't have time to change the system first**

Quite a few in the room came from activist backgrounds where they have been critiquing mainstream political parties for years, and argue that the only real solution in dealing with climate is to overhaul our entire political system. But the majority were of a more pragmatic bent and said we simply don't have time for that. We've got 12 years to turn this around – there isn't time to organise a global revolution first.

### **Diversity is a strength**

The fact that climate change impinges on so many sections of society means no one group 'owns' the issue. It is not just the preserve of green activists. Though coordinating messages become harder with multiple interest groups, it makes the overall movement much stronger if pressure to take action is coming from a diversity of sources – WI groups, wildlife organisations, chambers of commerce, public health campaigners, young people, churches and others. For green groups, there is a need to reach out to these wider stakeholders to explain the CE message, and encourage them to build it into their campaigning.

### **Keeping the pressure up on councils**

Once councils have passed CE motions, there's a big job to do in keeping the pressure up for change. Though there will be a need for thoughtful research and strategy development, which takes time, councils should be encouraged to begin taking small actions straight away. You don't need a fully-costed 5 year plan to get started. Encourage councils to focus on some aspect of climate change at every meeting – so the Climate Emergency stays in the spotlight, and doesn't slip onto the back burner.

### **What if the council won't play ball?**

If your council is reluctant to engage with outside players, why not create a parallel citizen's assembly that challenges them to take action, and monitors and reports on what they are doing? This kind of pressure gets headlines in the local papers and puts pressure on councils to engage. Writing letters to councillors and publicising their responses is another tactic.

### **What next?**

This was the first conference of its kind. Judging by the enthusiasm in the room, it is likely to be followed by others. More detailed reports from the conference and recordings of some of the sessions will be made available in due course. A dedicated online knowledge sharing platform has also been set up which will be open to all. Further details will be appearing on [www.climateemergency.uk](http://www.climateemergency.uk)