

Summary of Climate Emergency Meeting in Newton Abbot 4-7-19

On the July 4th I attended an initial meeting in Newton Abbot organised by the 'Teignbridge Climate Emergency Action Group'. It was a packed house, attended by over 200 local people.

By way of background, climate change and global warming are terms used by scientists to describe the apparent progressive increase in the planet's average temperature over the past 100 years or so. Scientific opinion is now overwhelmingly that climate change is the result of human activity - in particular the problem is caused by carbon dioxide entering the atmosphere following the burning of fossil fuels.

We now have overwhelming scientific evidence that climate change is causing ice sheets and glaciers to melt at their fastest rate for thousands of years; the resultant sea level rise is expected to damage coastlines, increase flooding and erosion, and ultimately result in large-scale human population movements from low-lying regions of the world. Climate change is likely to exacerbate existing pressure on natural resources (in particular on biodiversity which is already under unprecedented pressure globally) and could result the risk of conflict. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which advises the UN, has advised that carbon emissions must reduce globally by at least 45% by 2030 from 2010 levels and reach net-zero by 2050 if we are to avoid the worst effects of climate change by keeping warming below 1.5 degrees.

The 4th July meeting was called in support of a recent 'Climate Change Emergency' declaration by Teignbridge District Council. The UK parliament also declared such an emergency at the beginning of May 2019.

The Teignbridge Climate Action Group is an informal grouping of concerned individuals working together to support TDC in an attempt to help it roll out initiatives aimed at meeting a declared target of 'carbon neutral by 2025'. This is ambitious; many local authorities have adopted 2030 as their date.

The first half of the meeting consisted of a series of talks by individuals from the Group. Teignbridge DC was represented by Jackie Hook, their Climate Emergency Portfolio Holder, and there was an extremely thought-provoking presentation by a 13 year old schoolgirl who highlighted the concern felt by many of her generation in respect of environmental change. As well as speaking about climate change, she highlighted a number of other (in my view equally pressing) issues, including plastic pollution and the impending extinction of many wildlife species across the globe.

It was clear from the meeting that concern for the environment is part of a growing movement. In the UK, Teignbridge is one of 169 regional and district councils to have declared a climate emergency. In terms of local action, Devon County Council have set up the Devon Climate Emergency Response Group (DCERG) which has now agreed proposals for a Net Zero Task Force consisting of 12 people with expertise in areas relevant to carbon reduction. The Groups' website states:

"in collaboration, we will engage Devon's residents, businesses and visitors to develop and implement a plan to facilitate the reduction of Devon's emissions to meet IPCC recommendations. We know this transformational change will be challenging and will include:

- *Deploying renewable, decentralised and smart energy systems*
- *Retrofitting energy-efficiency measures into existing buildings*
- *Constructing zero-carbon new buildings*
- *Travelling less and using improved walking, cycling and public transport infrastructure more often; using electric and hydrogen vehicles*

-
- *Changing consumption to use less, re-use more and choose low-carbon options*
- *Challenging all economic sectors to review practices and the values of those they do business with*
- *Divesting from fossil fuels*
- *Changing dietary patterns and reducing food waste*
- *Changing agricultural practices to reduce emissions associated with farming operations, manage soils sustainably and replenish soil carbon*
- *Encouraging carbon storage such as through tree planting, the use of wood in construction and peatland restoration*
- *Empowering the people of Devon with the knowledge and skills to act collectively.”*

Quite daunting, however, many town and parish councils in Devon have also passed resolutions, made declarations or set targets for climate action and in our area there are a growing number of Parish Councils who are doing the same and putting climate change and the environment at the core of their thinking. Locally these include Ide PC, who declared a ‘climate and nature emergency’ on 20th March 2019. Their website states:

“It might seem that a Parish Council can’t really do much, but Climate change is relevant to many of our activities... e.g:

- *Creating green space in the village;*
- *Working to improve public transport;*
- *Providing feedback on wider council strategies for transport, housing as well as (providing) specific feedback on planning applications;*
- *This proposal provides justification to treat climate change as a factor in future (Parish Council) decision making.*
- *All levels of government, national, regional and local, have a duty to secure our community from the negative impacts of climate breakdown.*
- *Local government should not wait for national government to change their policies”.*

The second half of the 4th July meeting involved informal discussion between the organisers and attendees, with many people signing up to offer expertise or offering to assist in more general ways. If anyone is interested in getting involved in the Climate Change Action Group their contact details are on their website (address below).

I came away from the meeting on the one hand feeling positive that an issue I have been professionally aware of for over 30 years is finally becoming mainstream, but also with concerns - in particular whether local authorities are up to the scale of the task given their chronic lack of funding from central government and the relatively short timescales over which significant change is needed. ‘Business as usual’ no longer seems an option however and I personally feel that if we don’t make changes voluntarily we risk change being forced upon us.

A sobering statistic is that by the time some of our children are in their 80s the global population will be approaching 11 billion - a rise of around 4 billion from present levels. I personally can’t escape the conclusion that our current way of life will no longer be possible in the future and we need to start thinking about trying to make significant lifestyle changes now.

On a positive note I have set out a link below from Wedmore Parish in Somerset which shows what a motivated local community can do. ‘Green Wedmore’ is an umbrella organisation who “*co-ordinate, explore*

and encourage sustainable living as it could apply in practical terms to Wedmore and the surrounding villages'. Their website sets out three broad choices:

1. *Rely on central and local government to legislate out of trouble;*
2. *Ignore the scientific evidence and continue to overuse energy, refuse to recycle, fly at a whim to the closest destinations and eat strawberries from Egypt in January; or*
3. *Work together as a community to find ways to reduce our environmental impact"*

As a small Parish Council it may seem there is little we can do to make a difference in the face of a global emergency, but I take heart from parishes like Wedmore and I feel anyway that we have a responsibility as an organisation to engage positively in the process. I recommend therefore that we should follow Ide's example and make climate change and the nature crisis central to our work. The phrase from a United Nations environment report written over 30 years' ago called 'Our Common Future' is even more resonant today than it was when it was written - 'Think Globally, Act Locally'. I commend this statement to the Parish Council as the basis on which we move forward with this.

Events:

In the short term, a few events – firstly 'Transition Exeter' is holding a meeting for local councils in Devon to share ideas and experience about practical ways forward in respect of climate change. The meeting will be on Thursday 18th July, 6.30 - 8.30pm in the Palace Gate Centre, 3 Palace Gate, Exeter, EX1 1JA. For further information contact Gill on 01647 24789. In addition, Devon County Council, in partnership with the University of Exeter, have organised a half day workshop on the 23rd July as an introduction to carbon foot-printing. This may be particularly interesting to those councils signing the Devon Climate Declaration. There are 25 places available (one place per council).

The course is free of charge and will run from 09.15 - 12.45 at the Exeter Community Centre on St David's Hill.

Useful websites:

<https://www.cat.org.uk/>

<http://www.wedmoregreengroup.co.uk/Power.aspx>

https://www.campaigncc.org/councils_climate_emergency

<http://idevillage.org.uk/parish-council/climate-emergency/>

<http://teignenergycommunities.co.uk/climate-emergency/>

<https://www.devon.gov.uk/energyandclimatechange/devon-climate-emergency/devon-climate-emergency-response-group>

<https://www.facebook.com/events/coombeshead-academy-theatre-newton-abbot-tq12-1pt/teignbridge-climate-emergency-action-group-public-meeting/1609575769174689/>

Cllr Andrew McCarthy