Tackling Climate Change and Biodiversity at a Local Level

A Talk by Pippa Heylings

Chair of SCDC Climate and Environment Advisory Committee

6th September 2021

Pippa began the evening by introducing herself and describing her diverse background. She has worked in Education and been involved in managing fisheries sustainably in Zanzibar; and also in The Galapagos Islands, where she gained experience in facilitating community action to move from conflict to consensus, and influence policy to create the Galapagos Marine Reserve.

Pippa is currently a Local Councillor for South Cambridgeshire District Council and is Chair of the Planning Committee and Climate Change and Environment Committee. She is also a member of the National Policy Board for Environment, Housing and Transport for Local Government; and is Lead for a national Cross Party Task Force on Climate Change for all Local Government. This group is meeting with ministers in the run up to COP 26.

1. **The Urgency of Response Needed – Just got More Urgent**

Pippa outlined some of the current understandings of Climate Change based on reports from the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). It has been reported that despite an era of ‘climate denial’ 98% of all scientists believe that Climate Change is caused by humans. In reports made by the IPCC every single conclusion has to first be agreed by all of the scientists, and then agreed by 197 Governments from around the world.

The IPCC report in 2018 was shocking as we learnt we had only 12 years to make significant carbon emission reductions to limit global warming to the target of 1.5 degrees above preindustrial levels. The most recent report, released in August 2021, contained even more disturbing news as scientists have noted that we have crossed ‘tipping points’ much quicker than anticipated. We have started irreversible cascades of events that are starting to interact with each other. For example, Rainforests are changing from carbon stores to being a new source of carbon due to deforestation and forest fires; ocean systems/dynamics are changing so fast that they are not able to function properly; not just glaciers but the permafrost is now melting, exposing soils which are releasing more carbon. In the UK peat lands are drying out and being used for agriculture so they are also now emitting carbon that has been stored for generations. This change is not currently even included in our carbon accounting system in the UK, if it was, the carbon footprint of Cambridgeshire would increase by 45%.

The Lancet (international medical journal) publishes a ‘Climate Countdown’ each year and has declared that we are facing not only a climate emergency, but also a Public Health Emergency as it is “the greatest global health threat facing the world in the 21st Century”. Every child born today will have their health, development and their life profoundly affected by climate change. (To find out more go to: <https://www.thelancet.com/countdown-health-climate>).

The recently published UK Climate Change Risk Assessment has found that we have been so slow to change we are not prepared for the impacts of climate change that we cannot avoid – “we are woefully unprepared as a country”. For example, we know there will be more flooding and of a higher intensity across the country. Heat wave mortality will also increase, in the 2020 heat wave there were 2556 excess deaths due to heat, but 99% of UK hospital buildings are at risk of overheating. (To find out more go to: <https://www.ukclimaterisk.org>).

**2. LGA cross-party national Climate Change Task Force: the “ask” of Ministers in the run-up to COP 26**

What are we going to do about this?

Since 2010 in Copenhagen, world governments have been trying to come up with a single global agreement to take collective responsibility and limit emissions. Such global governance has never been done before.

COP stands for Conference of the Parties and includes 197 Governments from around the world. November 2021 will be their 26th Meeting to be held in Glasgow. In 2015, in Paris, it was agreed that the 197 governments would all do what they could to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Each government would put forward their individual national climate pledge and action plan. Although these plans were the first time that all countries were committing to reduce emissions, collectively the plans submitted by governments did not add up to significant enough levels of change to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees, so it was agreed that everyone would increase their ambitions and resubmit their plans to the meeting in 2020. That meeting was delayed due to covid, so will now be COP26 in November 2021 (1st-12th). COP26 is the most important global climate meeting since the Paris Agreement for this reason.

It was also agreed in Paris that $100 billion a year in climate finance would be made available to help poorer countries develop within the limits of the Paris agreement. This recognises their opportunity costs e.g. of not building coal plants and leaving forests in the ground. Currently only $10 billion has been made available, which affects the trust between nations to support increasing climate ambitions and goals.

Global emissions have continued to increase since 2016 despite the pledges. We have to reduce emissions globally by 50% by 2030 if we are to keep the world within 1.5 degrees, we then need to reduce to 0% by 2050.

Each government’s plans to reduce emissions are called NDCs – Nationally Determined Contributions. Currently there is a large gap between the collective total of the NDCs and the emissions reductions required to stay within 1.5 degrees warming. There is a large gap in the NDCs to even keep global warming within a 2 degree rise. The UK is hosting COP26 so it has a leadership role to motivate all of the countries to increase their NDCs and raise the required finance.

The current UK plan states we will reduce our emissions by 68% by 2030. However, the Net Zero Strategy on how we will achieve this has not yet been published so there will be insufficient time to consult and improve the plans before it is presented to COP26 in November. The Transport Decarbonisation Plan was published in August. A Heating in Homes Strategy is due to be published soon. The plans need to mobilise everyone from national to local community levels.

90% of Local Authorities in the UK have declared a Climate Emergency. However, Local Governments don't have the powers and resources to tackle the breath of the issues. Pippa, as an elected member of The Cross Party Local Government Policy Board and Cross Party Climate Change Task Force, is campaigning for Local Government to be empowered as a partner to help achieve the Net Zero Strategy, by devolving the necessary powers for councils to be able to set and enforce net zero standards, have the funding necessary for action, and for this to be recognised in the Glasgow COP 26 agreement.

The National Cross Party Climate Change Task Force has been meeting with UK Ministers responsible for climate ambition including:

* Alok Sharma MP who is the President of COP26. His focus has been on raising the finance for the agreement.
* Eddy Hughes MP (Minister for Housing and Homelessness) is the COP26 Champion for Housing.
* Andrew Griffith MP is the COP26 Champion for Net Zero Business.
* Rachel Maclean MP is Champion for Transport
* Rebecca Pow MP is Champion for Environment.

**3. There’s a Biodiversity Crisis, Too**

Before the Climate Summit there is a UN Biodiversity Summit in China. It is not well known about; perhaps this is because the UK has only achieved 4 out of 20 of our ten-year targets we set for the summit. We have failed on the health of our Rivers, Seas and Streams, funding for protection and the amount of land managed for wildlife. This summit is due to launch ‘the UN decade of Eco System Restoration’. Hopefully there will be a lot of financial pledges for nature.

The current Environment Bill does not go far enough, we need legally binding targets to aid the recovery of nature by 2030. We need to increase Biodiversity Net Gain targets in planning from 10% to 20%, to protect and enhance nature.

**4. What can we do locally at a Local Government Level?**

The Council has been commissioning evidence to understand the situation locally. ‘Biodiversity Opportunity Mapping’ has shown that between the 1930s – 2018 the impact of growth and land use change has led to a loss of orchards and grasslands in Cambridgeshire. The remaining patches, mostly in villages, are important to connect. A study of water ‘Let it Flow’ and the local chalk streams has also been commissioned.

The council has three spheres of influence: Direct influence over its own estates and operations that equates to 1% of emissions in Cambridgeshire; Indirect influence through planning policy; and leadership through example. They have declared a Climate Emergency and developed the Zero Carbon Strategy; they have declared a Biodiversity Emergency and developed a Doubling Nature Strategy for the district. One action plan addresses both sister documents.

For more information:

<https://www.scambs.gov.uk/nature-and-climate-change/zero-carbon-strategy-and-action-plan/>

<https://www.scambs.gov.uk/nature-and-climate-change/doubling-nature/our-doubling-nature-strategy/>

When the new Local Plan is finalised (in 2 years time) there will be opportunities to change policies with improved standards that can be enforced. In advance of that, they have developed a voluntary ‘Developing with Nature Toolkit’, for early adopters who wish to improve their building practices. They have also launched a new Sustainable Design and Construction Supplementary Planning document, and are currently consulting on a new Biodiversity Supplementary Planning document until the 17th September: <https://www.greatercambridgeplanning.org/biodiversityspd>

The new Local Plan has a vision for being a zero carbon, biodiverse, place making plan for wellbeing. Plans for jobs, homes and infrastructure have to show that they can be achieved in a zero carbon way, whilst looking after nature, biodiversity and water.

To support development of the new Local Plan they have commissioned a carbon footprint analysis of ‘spatial options’. This shows the likely carbon cost of all aspects of place-making: carbon cost of construction, heating and use of homes and the transport required to get to school, work and basic services, depending on where they are built. The analysis shows that if new homes were to be built in villages it would have the highest carbon cost.

An integrated water management report was also commissioned which concluded that we cannot extract more water from the chalk aquifer to support new houses, without causing more environmental damage. The council has said that if the government wants targets for new homes to be met they need to help bring forward plans for alternative sustainable water sources. If the council doesn’t hit central government housing targets they risk the new Local Plan not being approved.

The council has also been ground-breaking in putting out a request for green sites in the statutory Call for Sites - land that could be made available for strategic green infrastructure, to help increase biodiversity, carbon offsets, connecting nature and recovery.

**5. What can we do locally at Community Level?**

* Zero Carbon Community Grants, engaging local communities in tree planting, and nature recovery
* Office for National Statistics can show you by postcode the tree canopy coverage for your area, and the impact on the health burden on the NHS

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/ukairpollutionremovalhowmuchpollutiondoesvegetationremoveinyourarea/2018-07-30>

* 18-26 September Great Big Green week

Discussion:

* Relationship between central and local government – don’t we need central government plans before we have local plans, and currently they are missing? We don't have time to wait, we have to develop things at all levels simultaneously and in partnership.
* Query of the need for new houses and development in the area which is at odds with enhancing local green spaces – a lot of the development is central government led, we need to participate in consultations, push for environmental standards and challenge planning reforms through lobbying.
* Is there really a housing need in Cambridgeshire? – a million homes have already been given planning permission but have not yet been built. There is a housing need, residents with fewer resources are being pushed out of the area, who then have longer commutes which has huge social and economic cost for the family, and which is also carbon-intensive.
* Why is South Cambs supporting the busway over other sustainable options, which will support walking and cycling over car use? – Voices are being heard, evidence and assessments are crucial, especially in light of changing circumstances since covid.
* We need to get the message out to the General Public, we need to reduce the amount of movement especially by cars and unnecessarily large cars, encourage people to be more untidy, put the mower away, we need nettles to encourage insect life, we have to go dirty a bit e.g. by reducing the frequency of showering.
* Can we get the word out through the Great Big Green Week? Can we raise the sense of urgency locally? Only 11% of the population know about COP26.
* The reuse of water in the design of new housing is not seen as desirable currently. Habits of cleanliness have gone overboard, we have to change newer habits.
* Can we promote the ’10 big things we can all do’ during the Great Big Green Week? Achievable things e.g. the carbon footprint calculator.
* How can we communicate/educate people to wean them away from SUVs as they emit much more carbon dioxide?
* The media can help e.g. The Saturday Times has a challenge ‘are you too clean? Why it is good to be a bit dirty’. 2 minutes in the shower is enough! Can we push those prompts further? Cambridgeshire residents use more water than the UK average.
* The New Scientist has provided readable visions of what it could be like to live in 2050, allowing readers to choose which future they would prefer. Can we use those ideas in our own communication package?
* If trees are too big - Have a hedge week! May be more achievable for people?
* Can we promote the easy wins to people, the changes that are simple to make that doesn’t involve lots of sacrifices
* Can we use the ‘carbon conversations toolkit’, to facilitate conversations with friends and neighbours?
* Can we engage libraries and schools to help spread the word during the Great Big Green Week? For example displays, hand outs, assemblies.
* Can we have car free school days? If people are made aware of the air pollution of cars idling outside schools, the public health message can be powerful at motivating change.
* ‘The last mile’ - The NHS has been working with 6 new developments to design healthy towns and has researched the implications on diabetes, obesity and air pollution of the last mile of journeys to home. Using public health messages can engage people more readily.
* South Cambridge District magazine could be used more to highlight these issues.
* Should we return to what we can achieve locally, that is more directly in our control, e.g. can we work on the energy efficiency of our homes? Can we spread the word on lessons learnt from Anglian water on how to save water in homes?
* Could we use CO2 meters to measure and then improve air pollution? Perhaps a project for schools to get involved with?
* Parish councils and District councils are open to be contacted if people would like to enquire about tree or wildflower plantings in their area. Stapleford PC are actively discussing wildflower verges, communication with villagers will be key. South Cambs have the doubling nature strategy so they can be challenged to increase wildflowers on their land.
* Need to encourage composting, initiatives such as No Mow May.
* To help people retrofit their homes the council has become a ‘trusted Broker of Technical Information’. If you go to the Zero Carbon Communities Webpage at the council you can ask for technical advice from trusted and certified suppliers.
* We could invite trusted traders e.g. solar panels to a local ‘ecofest’.
* Can we use the village news to promote small actions that can help – e.g. the ‘list of 10’.
* We need to get COP26 into local conversations to raise the profile. “It will be the biggest global climate conversation, the Olympics of sitting people down and asking ‘what are you going to do about the future of our children?’” We need to be part of that conversation.
* Shall we have a local COP? What are we going to do towards achieving net zero?