

14th October 2021

Climate and Ecological Crisis Conference

Working together Staffordshire can become a
green and thriving community

°Climate
Matters
STAFFORDSHIRE

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Introduction

In October 2021 Climate Matters Staffordshire hosted a conference with over 80 people at the Bridge Centre in Stoke-on-Trent. The aim of the conference was to open a dialogue between the local authorities, businesses and importantly the community on climate change and to begin the process of understanding what is happening and how Staffordshire moves forward. The conference was preceded by four climate forums across Staffordshire collecting the views and solutions of Staffordshire people to the crisis. The conference took place just two weeks before the world came to the UK for COP26, giving us an opportunity to consider what action needs to be taken locally to tackle the global issues of climate change and ecological breakdown.

Climate Matters Staffordshire Chair, Michaela Fyson, opened the conference, reminding attendees of the severity of the current crisis, including the stark fact that concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere still continue to rise despite the COVID-19 lockdown and that the UK has lost over half of its biodiversity. The Chair also emphasised the important role that local authorities have in tackling the climate crisis, quoting figures from the Committee on Climate Change, which emphasise that Local Authorities have the ability to influence up to one third of emissions in their local area and have multiple mechanisms and responsibilities which relate to climate change.

This was followed by some short opening words from two of Climate Matters Staffordshire's Patrons.

Jonathon Porritt, long time environmentalist and Chancellor of Keele University, unable to attend in person, stated that this was "an important conference, at an important time, with an appropriate emphasis on actions rather than yet more words"

Joan Walley, former MP for Stoke-on Trent North and Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, attending the event in person, emphasised the fact that we are all in a race to reach zero carbon and in a race to link that to nature recovery. She further brought to the attention of the audience the need for collaborative solutions to the crisis a subject which would soon become a key theme of the conference

Opening Speakers

Young people and their children will be the most impacted by the climate and ecological crisis. This important reality is the reason Climate Matters Staffordshire invited two local young people to give the opening talks at this event, addressing their hopes and fears for the future and how they see the way forward.

Saad Butt, former head boy of JCB Academy, currently completing a degree apprenticeship in mechanical engineering with manufacturing at Babcock International, began the proceedings. Saad, highlighted his dire concern for children and their susceptibility to water insecurity and how this was predicted to worsen over the coming decades as a consequence of the climate crisis. However, Saad found hope in the changes he is currently witnessing within the mechanical engineering sector as businesses take the crisis increasingly seriously, creating innovative solutions which have reduced the emissions of producing certain goods. A point the Chair picked up afterwards was the potential to create millions of high skilled, high paid jobs, across the UK and globally.

Chloe King, recently completed an MSc in Sustainability and Behaviour Change from the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) and is currently a GP receptionist, working on the Green Impact for Health scheme. Chloe spoke on the issues of emissions within healthcare, giving nuanced solutions, which take a systems based approach to emissions reduction such as the connection between air pollution and inhaler emissions. Chloe then spoke powerfully about her fears for the future, emphasising that the impacts of this crisis are not spread equally, instead it is low income, indigenous and marginalised groups which face the brunt of the impacts whilst being least responsible for our global emissions. Chloe finished with her hope that systemic change could happen, shepherded by our leaders, including the councils, as solutions emerge from events such as the conference.

Local Authority Climate Action Plans

Following the inspirational words of local young people, Jeremy Lefroy, one of Climate Matters Staffordshire's Patrons, invited each Local Authority to give a short presentation outlining their climate action plans and the next steps they have planned for ongoing initiatives across the region.

Stoke-on-Trent City Council

Andrew Briggs, Sustainability and Green Infrastructure Manager at Stoke-on-Trent City Council, began the session as the city where the event was taking place. He began by outlining the City's current target of being net zero by 2050, aligning with central government targets.

Existing initiatives in the City include:

- Decarbonising key public buildings through mechanisms such as air source heat pumps, improving energy systems, replacing inefficient equipment and digital smart energy systems
- Investing in LED lighting enabling carbon emissions reductions of 68% across the authorities' estates
- Rolling out solar panels on 5,500 of 18,000 social houses, reducing emissions by 6000 tonnes
- Actively promoting active travel through the cycling and walking fund
- Participating in the delivery and development of a district heat network using geothermal or waste heat from waste to energy facilities
- Utilising the Transforming Cities Fund to facilitate the creation of multi modal transport solutions
- Creating a local authority delivery scheme investing in private sector housing insulation
- Creating a Digital Strategy aiming to reduce unnecessary travel across the city
- Investing in electric charging infrastructure as a key priority
- Installing 1Mw of solar power on the council's corporate estate with plans to increase this by 3.5Mw over the next year

Future plans for the City Council include:

- Working in partnership with the county council to redevelop the energy to waste plant in Hanford, with the potential to produce 20Mw of energy and 60mw of thermal output
- Decentralised solar panels and battery storage

In total the plans of the City Council are expected to reduce emissions by 11,000 tonnes per annum and reduce emissions from council buildings by 65%.

Cannock Chase District Council

Councillor Bryan Jones, deputy leader of the District Council, started by stating that they had passed a motion in 2019 to be net carbon zero by 2030 across the whole district.

Existing initiatives in the Borough include:

- Commissioning a baseline study, to understand the key sources of emission locally
- Creating a senior officer group and a portfolio holder for Environment and Climate Change
- Commissioning a costed action plan on becoming carbon neutral by 2030
- Completing carbon literacy training for all members and key employees
- Introducing a Cannock Chase Climate Emergency Hierarchy
- Upgrading the boilers at Rugeley Leisure Centre and Pool
- Planting over 23,000 trees and shrubs

- Developing partnerships including EQUANS on Zero Carbon Rugeley and Chase Community Solar Project
- Ensuring council houses are built with electric vehicle charging and solar panels
- Working with schools to roll out climate education

Future plans for the District Council include:

- To introduce a supplementary planning document
- An electric vehicle trail day for local taxi drivers
- Working to create the Council's first Passivhaus homes

Cllr Jones, concluded by reiterating that councils do face challenges to taking action, particularly financial, and highlighted the importance of working with the community when making decisions.

East Staffordshire Borough Council

Mark Jeffcote, the Borough's Climate Change Officer, outlined the recent emissions pathway in East Staffordshire, emphasising welcome emissions reductions. He recognised that the emissions trajectory of East Staffordshire was misaligned with that trajectory recommended by the Tyndall Centre if the council were to remain Paris aligned. He then outlined the ambition of the authority to reach net carbon zero by 2040 within their estate with the ambition to achieve this for the whole district.

Their 57-point action plan includes:

- Developing a stakeholder engagement plan working in partnership with schools and Parish Councils
- procuring five electric vehicles
- Improving domestic energy efficiency
- Tree planting initiatives
- Washlands Enhancement Project

Future plans for the Borough Council include:

- A climate change supplementary planning document
- The introduction of electric vehicle charging points across the council
- LED lighting in parks

To conclude Mark Jeffcote said that he hoped that the discussions today's conference would influence East Staffordshire's climate action plan.

Newcastle-Under-Lyme

Councillor Trevor Johnson, the Borough Councils portfolio holder for Environment and Recycling, stated their target was to reach net zero carbon within its own operation by 2030 and stressed the need for collaboration. Cllr Johnson highlighted existing projects including:

- Switching to renewable electricity procurement
- Installing solar panels at the main operational depot
- Starting a programme of switching to electric vehicles
- Investing in route planning software to reduce operational mileage
- Embedding carbon reduction plans into procurement work.
- Agreeing an Urban Tree Planting Strategy linked with the Queen's Platinum jubilee

Future plans for the Borough Council includes:

- Switching to renewable gas procurement
- Assessing the feasibility of a major new solar energy farm on Council land
- Carrying out urban native tree planting on a range of Council owned sites
- Implementing electric vehicle chargers as part of the Low Emission Taxi Infrastructure consortium scheme
- Working with the County Council to implement Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

Cllr Johnson concluded by highlighting that Newcastle-under-Lyme will play its full part in a cross district Joint Environmental Sustainability Strategy.

South Staffordshire Council

Ryan Taylor, the Council's Performance and Envirocrime Manager, stated that the current target was to reach net carbon zero by 2050, however, this is being reviewed with the ambition to bring it forward. The council's climate change strategy comprised four key areas: raising awareness, strategic planning responsibilities, influencing partners, and council operations.

The council's Action Plan includes:

- Hosting two parish summits on climate change
- Creating a councillor champion and service area leads
- Switching to green energy and increasing energy efficiency within the council hub
- Working to reduce energy consumption in leisure centres and industrial estates
- Promoting walking and cycling schemes
- Planting 1,500 trees and planting wildflower meadows to increase biodiversity
- Placing solar panels and battery storage on council buildings

- Taking steps to raise awareness including a climate change festival in 2022, promotional activity and publishing carbon saving targets
- Working with several partners including the parish councils, the county council and registered retrofit providers

Future plans for the Council include:

- Implementing their climate action plan
- Completing workshops with Keele University
- Completing annual climate reports

In addition, South Staffordshire’s emissions plan see emissions cut in half by 2040 and reaching zero carbon by 2050.

Stafford Borough Council

Tim Clegg, Chief Executive of the Borough Council, stated that the Borough aims to be a carbon neutral authority by 2040 and has integrated climate change as one of the authorities’ key objectives in their corporate plan.

The Borough’s Action Plan includes:

- Adding solar panels to the Civic Centre and Depot with plans to add solar panels to multi story car parks
- Implementing hybrid working to reduce staff mileage
- Completing a baseline study for emissions from the operation of the authority
- Working to reduce energy consumption in leisure centres and industrial estates
- Agreeing a Climate Change and Green Recovery Strategy
- Establishing a multi-disciplinary officers group
- Developing partnerships with Keele University, Centre for Alternative Technology, Staffordshire Districts and community groups

Future plans for the Borough Council include:

- Creating a community stakeholder panel to improve plans and with the aim of working with the local community
- Completing carbon literacy training

Tim Clegg finished by emphasising the need for all people to lobby business and government to change the legislative frameworks to align with lower emissions and that the council aims to embed climate change in everything it does.

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council

Councillor Joe Porter, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Biodiversity outlined the ambitious plans of the council to reach net carbon zero by 2030 across the whole district with climate change a key objective in its corporate plan

The District's Action Plan includes:

- The launch of a Green Infrastructure Strategy
- Collaborating with the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust to increase climate resilience and increase biodiversity
- Recruiting a climate change officer
- Partaking in Carbon Literacy Training delivered to all Heads of Service by Keele University
- Carrying out a Climate Change Attitude Survey
- Introducing a Climate Change Community Fund for schools and groups
- Introducing LED lights in the council's leisure centres
- Joining the UK100 group, a group of the most ambitious councils across the UK in tackling climate change

Future plans for the authority include:

- The development of an electric vehicle strategy
- The roll out of a new fuel mix for local buses with the scope to reduce emissions from buses by 98%
- The development of a communication and engagement strategy

Cllr Porter concluded by emphasising that climate change is the most important issue of our time and the need for councils to be at the forefront of action.

Staffordshire County Council

John Henderson, Chief Executive of the County Council, stated the importance of working together to influence individual behaviour change and stated that council aim to be net carbon zero by 2050. The council are working on five key themes which they believe need to change to reduce emissions: waste, air quality, organisational carbon reduction, natural environment and behaviour change.

Initiatives already underway include:

- Bringing household waste recycling back in house to create high quality recycling for manufacturing in the UK
- working with community groups and charity to think about recycling and resale
- Introducing 45,000 LED streetlights
- Setting up a bike ability scheme offering training sessions to 10,000 Staffordshire children
- Introducing smart working taking 100 cars off the road

- Planting 10,000 trees annual with the aim to plant more

The CEO stressed that climate change is here to stay and the need to continue to improve the county's resilience to climate change outlining the need for collaborative solutions. He concluded by suggesting that Local Authorities and Climate Matters Staffordshire primary role was to influence the public.

Lichfield District Council

Apologies were received from Lichfield District Council that as a result of COVID-19, they were unable to attend. After the conference, they sent a short presentation outlining their current progress:

- A net zero carbon date of 2050
- Recently commissioned baseline emissions study
- Granting over £1.3m of funding from Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme to complete work to 3 buildings reducing carbon generation
- Creating an officer task and finish group to work with APSE to design a Carbon Neutral action plan.
- Switching to green energy tariff
- Completing of carbon literacy training

Climate Matters Staffordshire Patron Jeremy Lefroy in summing up the councils' contributions, highlighting how impressive it was that the councils had moved so far and the continued need to consider biodiversity in climate change decision making. He finished by emphasising the need for regular meetings to enable ambition to be raised.

Keele University

Professor Zoe Robinson reported on the work Keele University are completing in partnership with the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) with Local the Authorities across Staffordshire to provide support in meeting their climate ambitions.

She then described how the University had worked to co-create an innovation lab, aimed at identifying the systems which needed changing and to provide council officers with knowledge, practice and confidence to help deliver individual climate action plans.

Professor Robinson outlined the innovation lab process which is currently focused on understanding the local systems and identifying appropriate leverage points. She explained that workshops completed in partnership with all local councils, enabling the sharing of best practice and overcoming barriers.

Key findings and recommendations from the collaborative work with the Councils include:

- The discrepancy of Council targets and their scope
- The importance of focusing on the emissions being produced today and driving them down as fast as possible
- The importance of working together to raise climatic ambition across the Authorities
- The importance of collaborative lobbying
- The importance of collaborative communication
- The importance of sharing best practice, training and solutions
- The need to create spaces to ask challenging questions
- The role of increasing officer agency
- The importance of bringing in external stakeholders to help create solutions, through mechanisms such as a multi-agency carbon hub

She finally stressed the commitment of Keele and CAT to work with Local Authorities in Staffordshire both through the innovation lab and by offering support in the form of student projects, research opportunities, training and funding for partnership working.

Discussion

Following presentations from Councils and Professor Robinson, there was an open discussion facilitated by the Chair which listed concerns, initiatives and suggestions from organisations and members of the public in attendance. These discussion points have been reported thematically rather than in order of presentation.

Net Zero Targets

- Someone highlighted the differential targets of the Local Authorities and questioned if the targets were a consequence of variable political will
- Representatives from Lichfield Dioceses, CAFOD and the Royal Institute of British Architects all have 2030 net carbon zero target to drive change quickly, supported by an attendee who also highlighted the need to collaborate on targets
- A representative of CAFOD announced a new award across 220 parishes to encourage people choose to live simply sustainability and in solidarity with people around the world
- The National Farmers Union have a 2040 net zero carbon target

Waste and Consumption

An individual questioned what was being done to resolve the stink at Wally's Quarry. A recycling and waste expert explained the current issues at Wally's quarry were a short-term problem, but the emissions leaking from landfill and our throwaway culture were a major climatic issue and that decisions made today about the need for landfill sites like Wally's quarry will have implications 30-40 years later. The CEO of Staffordshire County Council stated that the issues at Wally's Quarry were being resolved

Buildings and Planning

- Moorlands Climate Action, raised concerns about financial provisions for retrofitting
- Beat the Cold noted the extensive work going on through the Warmer Homes scheme, however, recognised that there were issues of public perception around certain types of insulation
- Staffordshire County Council highlighted the need to shift social norms in buildings and that the Council were continuing to financially support retrofitting initiatives
- The Chair of Climate Matters Staffordshire emphasised the importance of insulating houses
- Two architects stated that there was a need for greater collaboration between local stakeholders to ensure all new buildings are zero carbon and the need to utilise the planning system to increase sustainable and ecologically sound design, further highlighting the need for supplementary planning documents
- Moorlands Climate Action thought that the local authorities must consider reopening their local plans

Transport

- Concerns were raised that public transport links in North Staffordshire were substandard, leading to them driving rather than using the buses
- Nottingham was suggested as an example of good practice in public transport
- An individual emphasised that the cycling infrastructure is not sufficient and coupled with poor driver behaviour they feel unsafe taking their children cycling
- Stoke-on-Trent has an initiative whereby most primary school children can access cycling education
- Staffordshire County Council has an initiative to operate demand responsive buses and recognise further work was needed to improve cycling infrastructure

Food and Farming

- The NFU emphasise that farmers want to be part of the solution, however, they need to be involved with the decision making and not be forced to change without consultation
- Sustainable Society highlighted the need for a just agricultural transition and support to enable farming to become low carbon and buying local produce
- An individual noted that farmers offer the key to increased biodiversity and the importance of wild verges
- An individual emphasised the importance of being more self sufficient
- Staffordshire Community Foundation has changed the Best Kept Villages award to encourage wildflowers and reduce verge cutting and wish to work with parishes and farmers

General Questions, Initiatives and Comments

- A representative of the institute of civil engineers, questioned if commitments today would be forgotten as has happened historically such as with Local Agenda 21
- what obstacles stand in councils' way and asked how we could help to empower them?
- Why is the speed of decarbonisation so slow? As the current situation made them scared for their children's future
- Staffordshire County Council, invited attendees to be part of a behaviour change communication campaign next year
- Staffordshire Moorlands District Council called for greater collaboration between councils including the need to collaborate to when lobbying central government
- An individual highlighted that there was energy from local people to volunteer
- A representative from Keele University suggested it would be useful for local authorities, businesses and individuals to come together and address challenging areas of decarbonisation
- A representative Staffordshire University informed us of a new degree in climate change and society
- The New Vic Theatre have been collaborating with Zero Carbon Rugeley to develop innovative communication techniques
- Someone apologised for being emotional in regarding climate change, but a representative from Keele University stated there was a need to bring emotions into discussions
- An individual from Staffordshire University highlighted the prevalence of youth eco-anxiety and their interested in collaborating
- Both universities highlighted that they could potentially leverage funding

- A representative of Middleport Matters Community Trust, emphasised the accessible communication for low-income communities
- Someone from both Zero Carbon Lichfield and South Staffordshire Community Energy emphasised the importance of recognising the economic value to the local community of a green transition and the need to recognise the embedded carbon in carbon accounts
- A businessperson emphasised the need for councils to work with businesses
- A representative from Staffordshire County Council highlighted the need to shift the electorate to enable the council to make changes
- An individual called for greater leadership locally

Film

In June 2021 Climate Matters Staffordshire commissioned a filmmaker to create a short film exploring climate change in Staffordshire. The film listened to people across the county hearing local initiatives, concerns, and initiatives. The film premiere at the conference was well received. Named after the demand of the children involved, “[Do Something](#)” is available on [Climate Matters Staffordshire](#) website where you can find more information or on YouTube.

Keynote Speech

Dr James Dyke, climate expert at the University of Exeter, completed the day via Zoom providing a clear message from the latest climate science. He said time is running out to take decisive action and the longer we wait the more turbulent our future will be. He concluded on an optimistic note reminding everyone “Its groups like yours which are ultimately making the change which is really important”. A recording of Dr Dyke’s talk is also available on [Climate Matters Staffordshire](#) website or [YouTube](#).

Messages from the Conference

- Attendees enjoyed the event and particularly liked hearing what the Councils were doing and having an opportunity to discuss the emergent issues with Councils and others
- Many attendees planned to share best practice and connect with other organisations working on climate positive initiatives locally, including wanting to connect more with Councils, reiterating the importance of collaboration
- Some noted that the event gave them ideas and energy to continue and expand their actions

- 60% said that Staffordshire should aim to be net zero carbon by 2030 or earlier only three people said we should wait until 2050

What did people want Climate Matters Staffordshire to do next?

- To continue to bring people together
- To continue to support collaboration
- An annual event similar to the conference for further updates
- More events and spaces to share best practice and successful local initiatives
- Publication of how people can get involved with such initiatives
- To improve our process people said that we should try engaging more people and groups, particularly community groups

The feelings of the day were summed up by one person:

“Keep Learning, keep sharing, keep making changes but faster”.

Conclusion

Overall, the conference was seen to be a valuable exercise, bringing together councils, business and local people to listen, understand and share their experience of tackling the unprecedented crisis we all face. The event highlighted where councils are already taking bold action and emphasised areas where local people thought more action should be taken.

However, the clear message which emerged from the conference was that taking on this challenge as individual councils, businesses and people will not lead to the successes we all need for a viable planet; instead, collaboration on key issues to share knowledge, develop capacity and enable collective lobbying is necessary to accelerate climate action in Staffordshire. This was true for the range of emergent and complex topics from decarbonising transport to reducing waste.

There was a shared understanding that we are in a crisis and that we need to be more ambitious, bolder and remain positive if we are to limit Staffordshire’s impact on global temperatures. Finally, this event enabled local authorities to learn from one another, the public and for many to have greater sympathy with the local authorities. Overall, this process created a space for nuanced discussion focused on co-creating solutions which considered multiple sides.

In her concluding remarks, the Chair reminded us that in our film, local schoolchildren had asked adults to do something about climate change. She said that we have to show them that we can and will do something, and must all work together.

Postscript

Reflecting on this Conference and COP26 in Glasgow, I find reasons for both despair and hope. It was encouraging that coal and the need to stop using it was written into the agreement but worrying that scientists show that we are currently not on target to contain global warming below 1.5°C and that some poorer islands may be uninhabitable as early as 2030.

Interviewed by the BBC, the UK's Chief Scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance said that, while the pandemic had been awful, Covid might be a two- to four-year problem, rather than a 50- to 100-year problem that could be "really, really damaging".

Solutions will require that climate change is embedded in all plans and actions, in Staffordshire this means local residents, businesses and, above all, our Councils with their overarching role. It will have costs, but delay will be greatly more expensive.

Staffordshire's emissions are a miniscule part of the global total today but our industrial heritage had unforeseen consequences. We now have the opportunity to contribute to a fairer, more sustainable world which benefits both humans and the natural world.

I remain hopeful that by all of us working collaboratively, Staffordshire can play a valuable part and promise that Climate Matters Staffordshire will do our best.

Michaela Fyson, Chair