



Update for SMDC Councillors and Climate Change Working Group June 3rd, 2021

Recent MCA Activities

HUG Festival, Foxlowe Arts Centre, Leek June 26th. A full range of participants is in place for MCA's main event of the year, including RSPB, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, Friends of the Earth, Sustrans and many local artists and community groups. Proceeds of the day will go towards providing energy efficiency improvements to the Foxlowe building.

Refill Staffordshire Moorlands Scheme. The first new Refill locations have been signed up in Leek; now that retail is fully open volunteers are signing up locations. Biddulph Town Council is keen to support the scheme; further engagement with the Leek and Cheadle Town councils is planned.

SMDC has apparently withdrawn a commitment made in 2020 to support the scheme and work as a partner with MCA to promote Refill Staffordshire Moorlands. We are seeking an explanation for this change of heart.

Engagement with councils. MCA presented to the Parish Assembly, and as a result of this, was invited to and then presented to Biddulph Town Council. MCA will in future work with the Biddulph Climate Working group.

MCA has also presented to Kingsley parish council and has similar meetings in preparation.

Cheadle Town Council has recently set up a Climate Working Group and through MCA's representation on the Leek Group is fostering cooperation between the towns on climate action endeavours.

In Leek, MCA has continued its participation in the Climate Group meetings and worked with councillors on projects including horticultural advice on the Russell Street planting, more ecologically sensitive management of verges, and meeting with school heads to encourage nature projects, including those that may be undertaken under the SMDC Community Climate Fund.

MCA will shortly publish its first Parish Newsletter, aimed at disseminating climate and ecology-related news and information.

At the same time, MCA will publish its own 'Guide to Tree Planting', a one-stop information compendium for parishes and community groups.

External engagement: MCA committee members instigated an informal Zoom meeting with the senior board member of the Peak Park National Park responsible for Climate Change. This covered a wide range of climate and nature-related topics in the Peak Park and the Moorlands.

MCA members have continued to expand their links with similar groups in the county and nearby, attending several virtual Climate Action events in Buxton, Rugeley and Macclesfield in recent weeks.

MCA was recently asked to present to Leek Quakers; as part of its wider Community Outreach Programme, MCA is in the process of establishing links with other faith groups.

Market Stall. MCA held its first quarterly market stall, in Leek, selling and advising on climate-friendly gardening, including peat-free compost. MCA is exploring taking up an offer to launch a similar stall in Biddulph.

Engagement with SMDC officers. MCA committee members met Mark Forester four times over the Spring to discuss our response to the draft Plan unveiled at the start of the year. Our following comments on the next stages of the Plan and the role of the Working Groups reflect in part these discussions.

The SMDC plan

Part One. We look forward to the publication of Part One of SMDC's Carbon Neutrality Plan (the most recent promised deadline for this is 'by Spring'). On the most generous interpretation of this timing we assume that this means the Plan will go to Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel on June 21st (*Reference: Cllr Porter reply to Cllr Yates February 7st*).

We recognise that the Climate Change Working Group is not a default Scrutiny Committee but would ask for clarification as to:

- How any of the work of the Council Working Group was taken into account in Part One
- Whether the Climate Change Working Group will have any opportunity to comment on the only substantive part of the overall plan to have emerged.

We assume that this document will be fully costed, measurable and achievable, as repeatedly promised, with the baselines, stepping stones and pathways to the final target that are standard in the plans of other authorities. Derbyshire Dales DC declared a climate emergency in May 2019 and published their [Part 1 report](#) in July 2020 – why has it taken SMDC twice as long to get to this position? We suspect it is the lack of internal capacity linked with a decision not to engage a specialist consultancy.

We note the belated introduction of the Anthesis consultancy into the process and assume that the final SMDC document will be as rigorous and robust as that they have helped produce elsewhere.

Public consultation: We note that a public consultation is planned for the summer.

We point to central government guidance that consultations by public authorities should only take place when there is something substantive for the public to be consulted on.

We presume this cannot be on Part One proposals; these should already have been published as a Plan by the end of June and it is unlikely the public would anyway have much to say on what are largely internal council measures.

This suggests that to be meaningful, the consultation will largely cover ground that was thought to be the province of the Working Group. It must be an uncontroversial statement that the working groups have yet to produce a comprehensive enough body of work to be incorporated into a consultation on Part Two.

Does this mean that SMDC and Anthesis will have produced substantive Part Two proposals to be unveiled almost immediately after Part One, and that these will then form the basis of the public consultation?

MCA therefore asks:

- Will any future working group suggestions to be incorporated into any of the material that goes to public consultation, or will they be a bolt-on to the final plan to merge in the Autumn?
- Will the working group have any say over what goes into the consultation (the subject matter of the working groups is after all the part of the Climate Action Plan that will most affect the residents of the Moorlands)?

In the absence of answers to these questions it can only be concluded that the contorted and compressed sequencing during the summer and autumn of the Anthesis report, Part One, consultation and Part Two is an inevitable result of constantly missed deadlines on the part of the Portfolio Holder and the absence from the very start of a coherent work programme for the production of a final Carbon Neutrality Plan.

Part Two. Part Two of the Plan is by far the most difficult part. It covers the great majority of emissions in the district yet involves areas over which SMDC has the least direct influence and requires difficult choices which will need substantial behaviour change and extensive public mobilisation. We have already expressed concern over the confused sequencing of key steps in the summer and therefore the possibility of a failed opportunity to engage the public on the solutions with which the Working Group is grappling.

We anticipate that having dealt with the council's own operations, Anthesis will reinforce the message that the focus should now be on the key sources of

emissions in the district, including housing, transport and energy, as well as behaviour change. We understand from our meetings with Mark Forester that the hope is that the working groups will now start to produce focused suggestions on these areas.

That is a heavy task if a serious plan is to emerge for Part 2 by October. We only have five months to get all this done.

Two years on from the declaration of a climate emergency there is certainly no public evidence of any serious work yet done inhouse on these critical areas. Instead, the energies of the Portfolio Holder and SMDC seem to have been almost completely focused on the biodiversity part of the role, and at the expense of Climate as such.

We note the relentless focus on soft options and 'Quick, easy wins' such as community orchards, eco schools (now unveiled just as schools are set to close for the summer) and the attempts to use the existing commitments under the Green Infrastructure Strategy to create a nascent Nature Recovery Network.

These are laudable in themselves but are no substitute for real action on key sources of emissions in the district. Community orchards, whether there are 30 or even 100, will not even cause the emissions dial in the Moorlands to flicker.

Climate results from biodiversity actions are of the second order (indeed, as the Wildlife Trusts and others point out, the two aims can be contradictory). Even fully-fledged Nature Recovery Networks can play only a relatively small role in the timeframe envisaged, and certainly not in producing a 'fully costed, measurable and achievable plan' for the district to become carbon neutral by 2030. (Nature Recovery Networks are also very likely to become a County Responsibility under the new Environment Bill.)

A blueprint for accelerating climate action and a green recovery at the local level. MCA has on a number of occasions suggested that SMDC follows many other councils and bodies (including MCA) to urge the national government to commit to the Adept (Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport) Blueprint for priority actions on climate. We urge this again and suggest that these priorities should inform the next stage of the SMDC Climate process, including crucially, the Working Groups.

These priorities are to:

1. Invest in low-carbon and climate-resilient infrastructure including public transport, renewable energy and electric vehicle charging
2. Support reskilling, retraining and research to accelerate the move to a net-zero economy
3. Upgrade our homes to ensure they are fit for the future
4. Make it easy for people to walk, cycle, and work remotely
5. Accelerate tree planting, peatland restoration, green spaces and other green infrastructure

<https://www.adeptnet.org.uk/news-events/climate-change-hub/show-your-support-five-immediate-priorities-green-recovery>

As a result of national government policy changes on areas such as gas boilers and electric vehicles, the need for action in these areas has become even more imperative.

As said, we anticipate that Anthesis will reinforce this message. But we are totally unclear as to whether Anthesis and the Working Groups will ever have contact.

We therefore ask:

- Is there a more focused map for the next stage of the Working Groups, in terms of priorities for Part Two?
- When and how will the Working Group have sight of any Anthesis work on Part Two?
- Who will bring this work together, and how?

To achieve any traction on Part Two issues, SMDC will have to engage with other authorities such as the County and crucially, other stakeholders in the District. It will have to put in place a climate communications programme that is far more effective than at present.

We welcome the prospect of the CAT Zero Carbon Innovation Lab, which must involve wider engagement. But this is, as its name suggests, experimental, and its scope as yet remains unclear. It seems unlikely that it will produce any results in time for November.

We therefore ask, what are SMDC's plans for

- Effective and publicly accountable engagement with the County and other authorities on these matters?
- Effective engagement with other stakeholders in the District and the County?
- Action to move on the crucial issue of behaviour change in the District?

Above all, and for the purposes of this meeting, we remain unclear about the role of the Working Groups in the next stage of the production of the Carbon Neutrality Plan, we fear we are not alone in this confusion, and seek clarity on this crucial matter.