

How we are responding to the climate crisis in Wychavon

The current environmental crisis, in terms of the unsustainable reliance upon fossil fuels, climate change, and ecological destruction, is symptomatic of an approach that has prioritized individual short-term gain over the long term common good. The temptation to abdicate responsibility or delay meaningful change only compounds the problem. Each elected individual has a responsibility to steward the resources within their sphere of influence, and to promote the common good.

Lack of housing is a grave problem and many of the population will never own their own home. Home ownership has much to do with a sense of personal dignity – and some homes are sadly unfit for purpose or are not properly insulated or heated efficiently. As politicians we have a duty of care to ensure that energy efficient homes are accessible to first time buyers, and that all residents are informed and empowered to unlock the Government schemes and initiatives aimed at insulating and heating their homes more efficiently.

At Wychavon, I am proud that all new planning applications that demonstrate ambitions to exceed national carbon emissions guidelines will have their fees waived.

Environmental deterioration and current models of unsustainable development epitomized by the ‘throwaway culture’ are indicative of a wider disregard for the unique dignity of the human person, as the basis for good environmental stewardship. Environmental deterioration and ethical degradation are indelibly linked, so that a disregard for the human person leads to apathy towards the destruction of human habitation.

The desired environmental transformation can only be preceded by a sociological shift that recognizes the value of the human person and considers the duty of care towards the vulnerable and isolated in our midst. Only by first addressing their needs can we undergo the change of heart necessary to sustain the personal sacrifices that such an environmental commitment entails. Likewise, to protect other species more zealously is merely to fail to recognize the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure. This has fueled skeptics and climate deniers, who see hypocrisy in claiming to care for the earth, yet disregarding the value of human life in the face of a utopian vision. These critics can only be won over when they see an integral approach which asserts human dignity as the basis of environmental stewardship.

While embracing a simpler existence when imposed by force or necessity is difficult to accept, as the limitation of one’s freedom, it is accepted that people can become happier and lead more fulfilled lives, if the quality of their human relationships increases. This links to urban design and placemaking, predicated upon the recognition of the ability for the built

environment to contribute to, or hinder, health and wellbeing. We can and must broaden our vision, to direct our communities towards a more integral ‘progress.’

Community enterprises exemplify how Local Authorities can empower cooperatives of small producers to adopt less polluting lifestyles and enable residents to opt for a less resource intensive lifestyle. Local producers can market their goods to residents as part of a closed loop circular economy, where the profits can be reinvested in the community.

As councillors, we must lead by example and seek to embed these ideals in the public consciousness, even as we endeavor to influence our community and harness the aspirations of our residents. We must each acknowledge individual responsibility for changes in actions, such as eschewing disposable plastic, reducing consumption, separating refuse, showing care for other living beings, walking, or cycling where possible, and planting trees. Small actions, such as reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, rather than being viewed in isolation, should instead be seen as fulfilling the overarching aim of improving health and wellbeing of residents, linking the personal to the universal.

An integral approach links environmental policy to the health, wellbeing, and edification of the person and the community. As politicians, we must have the courage to lead by example and demonstrate in our decision-making, good stewardship that reflects due regard for our common home.

The right balance must be struck in terms of economic compromises to sustain low carbon growth. Simple and creative approaches can succeed in harnessing public desire to enact change towards a common good. The Summit will bring renewed focus on local government, and the various strategies employed regionally to achieve the agreed targets. However, for successful implementation, politicians at every level – from Westminster to parish level – must unite to find innovative solutions to reduce the dependence on fossil fuels and encourage expansion of the low carbon economy.

Conservative-led Authorities can lead the way in demonstrating a unified and integral approach to the climate crisis. However, this approach requires a paradigm shift that places the wellbeing of the human person at the heart of all environmental actions, and demands creative approaches and collaborative solutions, as we find new ways of delivering existing services, and accelerate the growth of the low carbon economy.