ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL ELECTIONS - MAY 5TH 2022

Where do the candidates - who are seeking your votes - stand on climate change and biodiversity issues?

Deeside CAN supporters live in places that straddle (mainly) three Aberdeenshire Council wards:

- Ward 15 - Aboyne Upper Deeside and Donside
- Ward 16 - Banchory and Mid Deeside
- Ward 18 - Stonehaven and Lower Deeside

Deeside CAN sought to hold a Climate Hustings on 28th April, and invited all the various candidates standing in these wards to take part. Unfortunately, we could not gain enough public interest to make the Hustings worthwhile, so instead we asked the various candidates who had agreed to attend the proposed Hustings, if they could answer 6 questions, (as submitted by the public to be used in the Hustings).

We have received answers so far from Anouk Kloppert, SNP party, Ward 15 and Rachel Shanks, Green party, Ward 18. Geva Blackett, Independent, Ward 15 has also sent a statement.

The following are the questions (in red font), and answers received so far.

Q1 – What are your/your party's top 3 priority areas in tackling the climate/ecological crises in our area?

Anouk Kloppert, SNP Ward 15:

1) Aberdeenshire council needs to declare a Climate Emergency *in order to show leadership in taking the climate/ecological crises serious. By declaring a Climate Emergency, the Council acknowledges it needs to act on the causes and impacts of climate change. The Tory/Lib Dem-led administration of Aberdeenshire Council has so far prevented declaring a Climate Declaration* ***on two occasions****! To declare a climate emergency would be a major leap forward from simply* ***meeting statutory responsibilities, laid out in legislation.*** *As this Tory/Lib Dem administration shows, political commitment is often the hardest part. It means more financial commitment to sustainability and a more restricted freedom of action. The council made a Climate Declaration on the 24th June 2021, similar to what the council has been declaring from 2009, for a number of years.*
https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/25146/climatechangedeclaration.pdf?msclkid=8daa6d3ac74011ecb318a731f3ceed5e

2) Stop further biodiversity loss and work towards restoring it on land that Aberdeenshire council is in charge of*. With greenspaces covering 54% of Scotland's urban area, Aberdeenshire council's towns and villages have great potential to form safe havens of biodiversity. This would assist and counterbalance the vast Aberdeenshire agricultural lands, where positive action is happening on some farms, but many others are still catching up with modern environmental enhancing practices.*

I wrote an article about the importance of our towns and villages supporting biodiversity safe havens, back in 2020 which you may find of interest. I wrote it in protest because I was frustrated with local councillors playing a role in preventing local biodiversity initiatives being more actively offered through Aberdeenshire council's Greenspaces project, under the disguise of "lack of consultation". The Greenspaces project has been extremely difficult to come off the ground because many in Aberdeenshire residents are not aware or still do not acknowledge that the loss of biodiversity is the twin of climate change, forming together an accumulating global crisis, but more acutely felt far away from Aberdeenshire. Some awareness is growing through the recent floods and storms, and the council could play a much more encouraging role in this. I have always highlighted this, and asked for information to be made available on the council website, and a start has been made on this.
https://www.grampianonline.co.uk/news/councillor-highlights-the-importance-of-ellon-as-a-biodiverse-safe-haven-201712/#:~:text=Councillor%20Anouk%20Kloppert%20has%20expressed%20her%20views%20on,across%20the%20river%20when%20entering%20the%20town%20centre.?msclkid=6941e128c73d11ecb80a1ccd7f1af692

3) Harnessing our area's renewables potential, a commitment in our present Aberdeenshire SNP Local Government Manifesto. *Harnessing Scotland's vast renewables potential is the only way in which we can secure our future energy security, keep energy bills low and tackle the climate emergency. As the Opposition spokesperson on the council's sustainability committee, I introduced at full council, my motion on behalf of the SNP, Labour and Communities Partnership for the council to support the Westminster Local Electricity Bill in February 2021. The Local Electricity Bill, still being reviewed in Westminster, has the potential not only to assist local generators in selling energy to their own communities but, if made law, would make the setup and running costs of selling renewable electricity to local customers proportionate by establishing a Right to Local Supply. Renewable energy plays a vital role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the measures proposed in the Local Electricity Bill mean that local renewable generators can contract directly with communities rather than large utility companies – real localism in action.*
https://www.grampianonline.co.uk/news/aberdeenshire-s-sustainability-role-recognised-by-councillors-227864/?msclkid=d628c174c73f11ec8e5811e2cb9fefeb

Rachel Shanks, Green Party Ward 18

1)*-Setting ambitious targets for achieving net-zero and developing detailed, robust and integrated plans for achieving these targets. This includes supporting carbon budgeting to help meet climate targets in the most cost-effective way and to ensure accountability to the public.*

2)*-Reducing energy use in council buildings, with delivery of energy efficient and zero carbon emissions heating; supporting homeowners to retrofit their homes, saving energy and money; and promoting the use of local heat networks, all supported by our work in government on net-zero buildings.*

3)*-Ensuring the indirect impacts of council business on the climate are reduced, by pushing for divestment from fossil fuels and the arms trade and by carrying out a climate assessment of council procurement and any public funding of arms-length organisations****.***

Q2 - With the urgent need to protect and improve biodiversity across the country, what steps should Aberdeenshire Council be undertaking to improve the biodiversity within the enormous amount of land for which it is responsible across the shire? As an example, many hectares of grass verges and other such areas could be much better managed to grow a much wider range of flora, which would in turn produce large numbers of sorely needed pollinators?

Anouk Kloppert, SNP Ward 15:

Work with communities to invest in green spaces: invest in urgent education of the public, invest in more rangers/wildlife/litter officers who can educate. There are still far too many Aberdeenshire residents who believe the green spaces and parks are best kept as easily maintained lawns "looking nice", not realising there is huge potential for looking after your mental and physical health in beautiful urban wildlife havens and long grasslands in addition to looking after nature in a better way.

In order to have the grass growing less intense throughout the year, the council needs to remove grass clippings each time they mow green spaces to stop -over feeding the grass. By removing the grass clippings, the soil becomes less nutrient rich, which encourages biodiversity. Solutions are needed to be found for the grass clippings be composted as local as possible or find new things to do with grass clippings.
Soil low in nitrogen is great for encouraging biodiversity and it has been proven that after a few years of the ancient hay cutting regimes (twice a year/removal of grass cuttings) the returning growth each new growing season becomes more biodiverse and lower in height.
Global biodiversity assessments show excess nitrogen in the air and water is one of the most significant biodiversity threats. The effects of nitrogen pollution on UK meadow and woodland habitats are significant.

I have engaged and encouraged over the last years, for the council's Landscape services to support road verge biodiversity beyond some pilots, and raise awareness of old hay cutting techniques encouraging this. This practice is already in place in many English councils and requires less yearly cuts. Again, we face in Aberdeenshire a specific problem: picking up of grass clippings is less sustainable with over 5400 kilometres of roads in Aberdeenshire. Plus, there are concerns that drains and gullies will be even more difficult to be kept clean to avoid unnecessary wear and tear of road surface.

For both greenspaces and grass verges, the Council should start investing in, as soon as possible, the move to a complete electrical fleet of vehicles, especially grass cutting vehicles. These vehicles need to be strong enough to cut the initial longer grass. Going electrical is necessary as otherwise the carbon footprint will only increase again removing the grass clippings.

Rachel Shanks, Green Party Ward 18

- *Aberdeenshire Council should put its duties to conserve and restore biodiversity and tackle the climate emergency at the heart of how it manages land and carries out its work.*
- *Aberdeenshire Council should have an ambitious plan in place by 2025 to create a Local Nature Network, that sets out the enhancement and restoration needed to deliver a nature-rich connected network of habitats across the whole of Scotland.*
- *Aberdeenshire Council should commit to the Local Nature Network by transforming management of council land so it maximises natural carbon capture and becomes nature-rich, with wildflower*

meadows and verges that benefit pollinators, tree planting and wetlands all creating spaces for nature within our communities.

- *The Council should support habitat restoration by others, particularly where it benefits communities and enriches biodiversity.*
- *The Council also needs to invest in the staff needed for these tasks and invest in existing community expertise required to manage land well, advise others and engage communities actively in this process.*
- *The Council should protect and invest in parks and green spaces, providing places for people to access the outdoors, benefiting their health and mental well-being, and for wildlife to flourish.*

Q3 - What does a Just Transition mean to you?

Anouk Kloppert, SNP Ward 15:

I would agree with the Scottish Government: a just transition is both the outcome – a fairer, greener future for all – and the process that must be undertaken in partnership with those impacted by the transition to net zero. It supports a net zero and climate resilient economy in a way that delivers fairness and tackles inequality and injustice.

To make sure that our communities can maximise the benefits of the energy transition in a fair and sustainable way means to me that oil & gas trained and experienced people are given a fair chance to make the transition with their community. Aberdeenshire has strongly benefitted from the energy sector so the move to net zero will be felt most keenly in local communities in terms of changing patterns of employment requiring new skills, and new development linked to the green economy.
This presents huge opportunities for the north-east, including the potential to be a world leader in navigating the energy transition in a way that maximises the benefits for communities.
Ensuring buy-in from all sectors of our communities is essential if we are to realistically meet the goal of net zero, but to do that we have to engage everyone at an early stage to work out the best way of moving forward.

The buy-in is as usual the most difficult part for Aberdeenshire. Change means fear of the unknown and loss of income which can be very much affecting families and those slightly more older workforce who may think it is impossible to change career. Going net zero is in times of the rising cost of living and fuel poverty for many an alien concept and the least of their worries.

The council has a huge role to play, by showing leadership, supporting communities in their journey and embracing Net Zero.

From the Audit Scotland Best Value report (2020) I quote:

"At the centre of this change is the need for clearer and more focused high-level priorities and better demonstrating continuous improvement."

"Such clarity is vital for challenging times ahead: at present it is difficult to gauge what the council is trying to achieve; how it performs against objectives and compares to other councils; and where it feels it needs to improve or focus resources. "

"The council must step up its efforts to ensure communities are empowered and to focus on areas with higher levels of poverty. It needs to be much clearer in its purpose, direction and pace in order to improve services and the lives of all local people."

https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/best-value-assurance-report-aberdeenshire-council?msclkid=ec133e6fc77f11ec9cda75b8a80d95b1

Rachel Shanks, Green Party Ward 18

For me a Just Transition means ensuring that at the same time as moving to net zero we eradicate poverty so that we have a fairer society which provides benefits for everyone.

Q4 - What will you do to improve low carbon transport across your area, especially re cycle paths/provision and EV support infrastructure?

Anouk Kloppert, SNP Ward 15:

***Expand the Integrated Travel Town projects**. Aberdeenshire council is working with communities in Huntly, Inverurie, Fraserburgh, Portlethen and Ellon to help support more sustainable and active travel in these towns. The Integrated Travel Town (ITT) project, supported by Sustrans and Paths for All, engages with local communities to develop ideas which have informed a masterplan of proposals. The council will mostly be in the right position to deliver these proposals.*
The ITT masterplans set out a number of proposals, from infrastructure developments designed to support more active and integrated travel, to softer interventions such as mapping, signage, events and promotional activities, which are hoped will have a wider community benefit.

***Introduction of Twenty minute neighbourhoods in planning**. 20 minute neighbourhoods are places that are designed so residents can meet their day-to-day needs within a 20 minute walk of their home; through access to safe walking and cycling routes, or by public transport.*
Many places around the world have made commitments or drawn up plans to support the realisation of the concept. However, only a few have made 20 minute neighbourhoods a reality.
Communities should be empowered to make changes in their neighbourhoods to allow them to meet their daily needs in a fair and equitable way. I have a feeling that the council's corporate approach of consultation and then deciding not being able to do initiatives is rather off-putting for communities and certainly not empowering. Information and engagement need to be upped but it is difficult to reach the age groups, u-18, 55-plus, proportionate larger groups in Aberdeenshire, but perhaps most likely the users of locality.
The Twenty Minute neighbourhood concept should enable people to travel actively in support of their health and well-being, without access being limited by the cost of transport. Again, the council is in the right position to take this forward but there has to be political will and engagement with the community.

***Investment in foot paths and multi-paths**-which have over the recent years seen budget cuts rather than investment. With no investment, paths may have to be closed and be taken out of the network. A rather corporate way to become less and responsible for public connectivity.*
Equality impact assessments with regards to the council's budgets over the last two years shows that specifically those with a disability, the young and the elderly are impacted by budget cuts.

***EV infrastructure**. Responsibility for this needs to be eventually with some kind of "fuel" stations and new ways to charge be found (changing batteries in fuel stations). EV charging needs to become the norm, but we have to start paying for the service.*
The council has many schemes for their employees available to buy electrical vehicles. However, they do not encourage the installation of EV chargers at the school campuses as too expensive to install. Shooting themselves in the foot while getting their own staff has to travel elsewhere in town to charge up. Why not at Community Campusses, inspiring the public showing leadership.

Rachel Shanks, Green Party Ward 18

We are keen to increase active travel, walking and cycling, with cycle paths and to increase the infrastructure for electric vehicles. We aim to create "20-minute communities" wherever possible so that essential services are within 20 minutes of active travel where people live.

Q5 - The 3 major storms that hit Aberdeenshire this past winter gave a foretaste of what the climate change induced increasing severity and frequency of extreme weather will mean for the public across the region. What steps would you seek to achieve in the Council to improve the resilience of our communities to the risks of extreme winds, floods and wildfires that are all set to increase each year?

Anouk Kloppert, SNP Ward 15:

As per my leaflet, you see I pledge to support local resilience groups to plan and coordinate crisis management. In the SNP Aberdeenshire manifesto will focus invest in preventative flood working. We have protected budgets for such work in all of our yearly budget proposals – and we will ensure that they are not cut in the next council period. Further, we will look to create a scheme to offer flood defence equipment at a discounted rate to those who could otherwise not afford it.

We will support communities in beginning and expanding resilience plans, with funding in place to help them with initial steps.
What is a councillor's role in all of this? It is to consider the council's finance and funding as a central part of all decision making and to ensure that the council provides value in all of its services and lowest on carbon footprint. There is unlikely to be sufficient money to do everything the council would wish to provide. Therefore, councillors need to consider their priorities and objectives, work together and ensure that these drive the budget process.

Rachel Shanks, Green Party Ward 18

- *Ensure the Council uses nature-based solutions to manage flooding, coastal erosion, urban drainage and pollution wherever possible, and invest in the expertise needed to do this.*
- *Encourage local food production through increasing the accessibility of land and support available to community gardens, allotments, school growing projects and more.*
- *Support local consultations and contributions to the Land Reform Bill and Regional Land Use Partnerships Pilot, and the rollout of the National Register of Ancient Woodlands.*
- *Champion sustainable land use, including crofting and small-scale farming, promoting the contributions these make to the local economy as well as environmental enhancement.*

Q6 - What is your vision for your area of Aberdeenshire in 2030? 2045?

Anouk Kloppert, SNP Ward 15:

I have to admit I don't think that far ahead as a single parent I am too busy in the here and now but generally, if we are able to keep our young people here, I would always hope there will be a sustainable small scale wellbeing community. One that works together, is well informed and knowledgeable, grows their own food in allotments and garden. Planning will be completely environmentally sustainable, with housing associations and the council providing small scale housing offering a home for any stage in life, have their own small scale energy economy supplying each other, each house with their own energy equipment, and supporting each other and the environment in equal measure, knowing that without regard and respect for the environment and nature we will destroy it and that we will be destroyed with it.

Rachel Shanks, Green Party Ward 18

For Stonehaven, as for all of Aberdeenshire, my vision is that in 2030 we are making really good progress to a just transition and have greatly reduced reliance on fossil fuels, increased active travel and improved resilience for extreme weather events. People will see the benefits of rewilding for their local communities and wildlife. Homes will be warmer as a result of retrofitting measures and local renewable energy projects will have reduced bills as well. We will measure progress in terms of quality of life for individuals and resilience for communities rather than in terms of economic growth. My vision is a healthier and greener Stonehaven that is both ready for and protected against extreme weather events.

In addition, *Geva Blackett, Independent, Ward 15* submitted the following statement in place of individual answers due to pressure of time:

As a grandmother of a rising three-year-old with two more babies due in May I am acutely aware of how what we do today, impacts on their tomorrow. As a councillor I take these responsibilities seriously and believe leading by example is vital.

We all know the impacts of our throwaway society on our planet with food waste, a fashion industry churning out cheap garments to be worn once, unnecessary lights left on in office buildings all night, heating tuned up high while sitting in a t-shirt – what's wrong with putting on a jumper to keep warm? No one able to mend fridges and hoovers – and why does a cucumber need to be wrapped in plastic for goodness' sake…!

The silver lining to Covid has been on-line meetings, saving mileage, expenses, time and carbon. I of course welcome more active transport initiatives and incentives for car sharing/community buses where public transport is poor in rural areas. I also support more segregated cycle paths linking main settlements.

We know the importance of well insulated homes and the introduction of solar panels on council house roofs is a positive move but batteries must be supplied if tenants are to reap the benefits. It is encouraging that the CNPA, of which I am a Board Member, is supportive of at least some solar panel farms in the national park.

The Braemar hydro scheme is a great way to produce green energy and at the same time make funds to benefit community projects.

I am encouraging the council to provide more wildflower areas; without out pollinators we have no future.

Aberdeenshire Council was amongst – if not The First – to set a carbon budget each year.

I want briefly to touch on the lifeblood of Deeside – our River. I do not have a scientific brain – and am not particularly proud of my educational achievements. I am a creative person and that seems to bring different attributes.

Like most of us, I lived through Storm Frank and the devastation it wreaked; I saw first-hand the pain and anguish of those who lost their most treasured and irreplaceable possessions, displaced from homes for months. I have helped some of those for whom the scars are not yet healed. The initial reaction from the council was to try and find a solution that protected Ballater from a further flood of that magnitude and thus 'Option 3a' was pushed through council committees as the only way to stop potential loss of life. In recent weeks, listening to the Ballater Flood Improvement Group and others, I have come to realise that Option 3a is NOT the solution. It is vitally important to understand the broader management of the Dee catchment to limit the impacts of flood events and drought. With warming temperatures, less snowfall is predicted. Yet all along the Dee, communities depend on the river for water. Flooding is part of climate change – and so is drought. If re-elected I will work hard to understand the challenges and to work with others to find solutions to managing our water upstream so that our communities are not flooded and we have water to drink.

The recent storms highlighted the vulnerability of our communities – you may be aware of my petition urging Ofcom to pause digital roll out until emergency communication is resilient in rural areas https://chng.it/HP7t8gKg, launched because many of us did not even have the means to call for emergency help – in Aboyne a resident stood and watched their home burn down, totally unable to call for help. We need to ensure that trees growing near powerlines do not pose a threat going forward

I absolutely recognise there is urgency in delivering change, but we must do it at a pace that is achievable and not burden the less well off with higher prices for basic requirements while new supply chains and products are developed, tested and available at scale and at an affordable price for all. The recent fireplace debate is an example of change happening at a pace dictated by policy not by realities some residents face in remote rural communities. That the SNP and the Lib Dems voted down a motion put forward by Cllr. Paul Gibb and me to re-examine the policy in the light of storms and sky rocketing fuel costs is simply shocking; particularly when the Scottish Government has said the removal of fireplaces from council houses is not required to meet energy efficiency targets.

Of course, I support the planting of trees but again this must be at a pace achievable – not at a cost to those who are not well off. In light of Brexit/Covid, rising food and fuel costs and now the horrors of Ukraine (where only 5% of their crops have been planted), NFUS have said government to that in the current food security crisis, all productive land should be prioritised for food production rather than carbon offsetting by non-agricultural businesses. We are all aware of the poverty in our communities and I fear it will get worse.

We have to find a balance. A balance that will make life on earth in the future viable for man and beast.