

Report to the North Yorkshire Council Harrogate & Knaresborough Area Committee

Meeting: 28th November 2024

Item: 10

The work of Zero Carbon Harrogate

1. Zero Carbon Harrogate (ZCH) formed as a local response to the Paris Climate Accord of 2015. It sought to address the question: How could a local civil society group in the Harrogate area become relevant to the global challenges facing the challenge of a stronger response to the danger of climate change?
2. The group has transitioned from being a collection of friends with a common goal to be a formally constituted charity and now operates with 6 trustees, over 50 active volunteers and about 560 supporters. In 2021 it became an employer for the first time and now has three part-time employees. ZCH's ethos can be summarised as being community-focused, collaborative and non-party political. It seeks to represent and serve the local community. We are very grateful for this opportunity to address the Area Constituency Committee and hope this contribution will help inform your policy debate and future action.
3. We have three focuses for our activity: to educate, to advocate and to encourage around the challenges of climate change.
 - **Educate:** Although the science of climate change is increasingly non-contentious at a fundamental level, the process by which the planet is heating up is not widely understood. It is important that all members of the local community have a good basic grasp of the link between the emissions of greenhouse gases – what are the greenhouse gases - and the heating up of the planet and the long-term changes in weather patterns that this creates. We work with a number of schools to support them not just in teaching the science but how to respond to the climate in the way that they operate and respond to the concerns of their students. We also work with businesses to help ensure they have access to the help they need to respond to the concerns of their customers and other stakeholders.
 - **Engage:** We also engage with political processes so that we can advocate for policies pursued by our public authorities – including this Council – to ensure the issue of climate change is not just 'another policy area', but that all our activities are seen through the lens of climate impacts, and that urgent action is taken to change the ways in which public services are delivered to ensure that we protect our environment, our people – particularly those adversely impacted. Action on the climate must transcend the needs of the political cycle. Persistent, sometimes radical, action over decades is essential for the UK to operate within the constraints of the Climate Change Act 2008. We play a leading role alongside the other 25 members of the North Yorkshire Climate Coalition is seeking to provide a countywide view of the community-based climate action organisations.

- **Encourage:** We believe that we only deserve our voice to be heard through our engagement if we are taking meaningful action to encourage people and organisations to take responsibility to mitigate as actively as possible and adapt well to climate change. This is often at a relatively small scale but many of the actions are readily scalable. Currently we are involved in a number of local projects to address the issues in a highly practical way, as we will explain in our presentation to the meeting. But our level of activity in this area is tightly constrained by resources: staffing (both volunteering and paid) and financial.

4. Our main current projects are in the areas of:

- Domestic energy retrofitting
- Schools
- Business engagement
- Transport

and we will expand on these at the meeting.

5. In addition to these current projects, we are interested in three specific area of activity where there appear to be significant opportunities for ZCH to play a role:

- **Community Energy:** We believe that alongside the changes that are taking place at a national level to decarbonise the electricity grid and reduce the use of fossil fuels for space heating, there are opportunities for smaller scale, local initiatives to generate and distribute energy with benefits to be shared within the local community. We are engaged in local discussions as to how headroom in the capacity of the local grid can be better used and expanded at relatively low-cost to enable new renewable generators to be linked into the system. Our goal is to see a local community energy company able to co-ordinate local generation and deliver lower-priced electricity to our local communities.
- **Transport:** It is our desire to facilitate local action which enables the demand for 'active travel' to grow, for our roads to be safer for pedestrians and cyclists/wheelers and various forms of vehicle sharing (including public transport) to flourish.
- **Local land-use planning:** We believe a sound planning framework can play a significant role in improving the town's sustainability in the period ahead. We have therefore undertaken an initiative working in partnership with the Harrogate Civic Society to build the foundation allowing a Harrogate Neighbourhood Plan to emerge. We also want to engage fully with the Local Plan review that is now underway. Two of our prime concerns are: the need for much stronger policy framework around climate change, and the way in which additional housing development in and around Harrogate and Knaresborough is managed.

6. ZCH seeks to expand its role and play a more confident and influential role as the climate emergency intensifies and the need for more radical action at all levels of society increases. Whilst the general case for addressing anthropogenic climate change is now widely accepted, there remains a resistance to co-ordinated action, particularly where this is not perceived to be financially advantageous. The dangers of underplaying or ignoring the impacts of climate change and the

risks we are now running tend to be poorly understood, we believe. So, there is a continued need for civil society groups like ZCH.

7. But we need to develop and professionalise our activities and for that we need long-term resources to push forward in all our areas of activity. We have typically developed in a piecemeal manner to date and eagerly desire the opportunity to put ourselves on a more secure footing. We are therefore seeking opportunities for funding on a three-year timescale and involving more employed members of staff. However, we also need a more secure and committed volunteer base and the full backing of our local authorities. We hope that this Committee is supportive of this strategy.
8. As we've travelled this path, the role of the Council has not always been as supportive as we would have wished. In particular, we have suffered a major threat to our domestic retrofitting work through the Local Energy Advice Demonstrator (LEAD) project over the past year and this led us to lodge a complaint to the Council which has not, in our view, been treated with the depth of concern we consider it deserved. From a project that was conceived as a partnership between equals, we have ended up with a service contract delivered late on non-negotiable terms. The council's response to our complaint is appended to this report. In our view this is an inadequate response, that further imperils joint working in the future. Despite this set-back, we continue in our vigorous attempts to deliver a successful, albeit scaled-back LEAD project.
9. Despite previous setbacks we want to emphasise our desire to work in conjunction with this Committee and its membership as part of our 'engage' workstream. We are fully committed to working with the grain of the political process and look forward to developing relationships with the new Town Council when it is formed next year, as well as our ongoing activities as part of the North Yorkshire Climate Coalition. We are also in the process of building strong relationships with the Mayor and the new Combined Authority. Following the statement we made to this committee in June 2022, we stand ready to support the work of your Climate Change Sub-committee that was constituted at that meeting.
10. In conclusion, we propose that the Committee may wish to:
 - Comment on our current work;
 - Express your support for specific elements of our activity;
 - Note our proposed strategy and indicate how you might help us deliver it;
 - Suggest how we might work more closely and effectively with this Committee and the Council generally in addressing the Climate Emergency;
 - Invite us to update the Committee at an appropriate future meeting.