



South Shropshire Green Party

Officers 2005/6



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Please let the Editor have articles for the next edition of Grapevine by Monday March 13th 2006

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Those who object to this decision might ask themselves why they are still buying produce at supermarkets, thereby supporting the retail giants? While it can be argued that extending the season for English strawberries helps cut down air-freight miles it doesn't necessarily cut down food-miles. Furthermore, why not buy fruits in season? Isn't there a good case in these dark winter days for looking forward to the first crop of rhubarb, gooseberries and then strawberries at their best.

Surely this would be no sacrifice when seen against a world where so many go hungry.



Grapevine



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QUESTIONING SOUTH SHROPSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

One of the actions which an elected member of the District Council can take is to question the administration on its activities. Over the years John Lloyd has been a diligent questioner of South Shropshire District Council on matters 'green'.

Although some of his questions get reported in the local press many do not – partly because one of the tactics which is adopted by the administration is to arrange meeting agendas so that such questions, which can be awkward or embarrassing, are left to the end of the evening – quite often when the reporters present have given up and gone home.

In November John Lloyd asked two questions. The first was about affordable homes and the steps being taken to bring long term empty properties into use as affordable homes. As a supplementary he asked whether the new appointment of an Affordable Homes Officer would have such a remit.

The Leader of Council, Mrs Heather Kidd, explained the measures being taken to survey long term empty properties and find grants for their repair. She also stated that the Council's new Housing Officer would have the remit of targeting long term empty properties and bringing them into use. An important answer - which failed to make the local press.

The second question concerned the steps being taken to ensure that senior council staff are covered by the same rules on declaring potentially prejudicial interests as are elected members.

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Grapevine helps South Shropshire Green Party debate the issues of the day.

Questioning the Council *(contd)*

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The Chief Executive Graham Biggs explained that a national code of conduct for council officers did not yet exist but that the Council's own Staff Handbook made it clear that personal and prejudicial interests should be declared openly. The register of such interests was available for inspection. It was clear from the answer that this was a matter of personal responsibility.

To many of us the fact that

such a register is not compulsory and that senior staff who can influence council decisions do not have to declare interests is news. While the probity of local authority staff is rarely doubted it does mean that there is no absolute safeguard and in the case of contentious planning decisions in particular it raises potential questions.

Whether the local press have ever checked that register is unclear. They may not even be aware of it.

Have you got a question you would like to hear the Council answer?

John Lloyd is open to ideas for your questions. The aim is not to embarrass the Council but to get out into the open important issues which raise the awareness of councillors and senior staff that there is value for the whole community in observing a green agenda, and secondly to try to ensure that public scrutiny of the council is a public affair.

Two more questions have been tabled under Procedural Rule No 11.3 for the January council meeting.

Question to the Leader of the Council:

Seeing the urgent need for affordable homes in Church Stretton, why has the scheme for this type of housing not commenced at Street Meadow, adjacent to Swains Meadow, given that permission to build was granted nearly a year ago?

If you have a question you would like John Lloyd to consider asking please write to him - address on page 8

Question to the Lead Member for Economic and Environmental Policy:

- 1) Since the introduction of the Wheelie Bin throughout the District what increase in waste collection has there been?**
- 2) Has there been a reduction of waste going into landfill in the same period?**
- 3) What new initiatives do the Administration have in order to move towards waste reduction rather than collection?**

Planning and its dilemmas

John Lloyd asks some green questions as he reflects on a recent decision

No doubt before many Grapevine readers are up and about, Radio 4 broadcasts its daily farming programme. This is essential listening for me as now and again I get an interesting slant on topics of the day which are useful in the council's Planning Committee.

This is well illustrated by a snippet they transmitted on polytunnels. There has been considerable publicity about plastic covering acres of agricultural land in Herefordshire and much the same seems to be happening in Surrey.

This story was about a local authority which decided that polytunnels were not exempt agricultural buildings and issued an enforcement notice for breach of planning consent. When the landowner appealed the inspector, after a lot of careful consideration, backed the council. The inspector's conclusions were that the agricultural 'needs would be far outweighed by the harm to the countryside arising out of the scale and appearance of the polytunnels', mirroring the council's belief that this development was unsuitable for the character of the area and that it would mean a loss of amenity for local residents. He also decided that the development of supporting infrastructure (which included a 'temporary' caravan park) constituted a change of land use from agriculture and therefore required planning permission too. This is a landmark judgement.

What is at stake here is whether agriculture should be

immune from the planning laws which normally impinge on other business enterprises. Since the 40s and 50s agriculture has been in a privileged position, created when home grown produce was top priority. Times have changed and the pace of change is increasing.

This planning decision sums up the dilemma in which farming finds itself today. Strawberries are in demand and the growing season is extended by bringing cultivation under plastic covers. This helps the growers sustain contracts with big supermarkets, who would otherwise be importing from Spain and elsewhere, and maximises whatever summer sunshine is available. Soft fruit growers are one of the success stories in farming, having joined together to counter the rapacious demands of the supermarkets. Economies of scale are all important to service this market.

The question, however, is how far should the countryside, especially in areas of outstanding natural beauty, be disfigured to maintain (or expand) this system?

The Surrey ruling hinges on the extent of the polytunnel installation. It is a question of balance in applying the planning laws, which always have to be considered in the light of local circumstances. In this case the council decided the developments were industrial rather than agrarian and that they should be governed by the law pertaining to the former.

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The Elixir of Life

Julie Cowley challenges us all to appreciate and conserve our water

Three quarters of the earth's surface is covered by water and yet only 0.6% is readily available to man as underground or surface freshwater. There is a growing demand to access and conserve available water.

Fortunately it is a renewable resource. Described as the hydrological cycle, where water evaporates from the earth's surface and goes into the atmosphere to form clouds. It is then precipitated over land areas to flow eventually into streams, back to the sea, and the cycle is repeated.

However, water is not evenly distributed over the earth's surface and consequently we have drought, famine and flooding. By the year 2050 it is estimated that the world population will have grown by 35% and this is likely to become an even greater burden on water supply.

This powerful resource should be respected, as it is vital to our existence. We need to make a conscious effort to ensure that we consider carefully how we use it, and also to ensure that we do not pollute

it. With the increasing threat of climate change regions that were once considered to have plentiful rainfall may find water shortage becomes a part of every day life, particularly during the summer months.

Where does the domestic supply fit into all this? The energy used to provide the water in your taps and toilet (through reservoir supply and treatment works) may well be a contributing factor to global warming. This suggests that running the tap when brushing your teeth is an unnecessary use of water and energy.

Whilst in the short-term water resources may not seem a problem, perhaps we should consider the future and try and develop habits that will reduce the impact that a shortage in water may have on us.

Not only is this elixir of life important to man now, it will always remain so, and this essential liquid deserves to be appreciated in the same way as any good, fine, wine.

Tackling Tesco – a local approach

We all complain about supermarkets, packaging and waste. Not content to wait for government action Jo Callaghan & Jo Phelps got a good reception when they set out to challenge Tesco, the UK's largest chain

Tesco have a very comprehensive web site and present a caring image with respect to environmental issues. They are obviously conscious of customer interest in the environmental impact of a supermarket.

Yet their claims seem to contradict: they claim that they are "committed to minimising waste production throughout our operations" while they are also committed to increasing the percentage of store waste recycled every year – 60% last year, 65% this year and aiming for 68% next year.

It is perhaps because "increase in recycling" is more of a positive buzz-phrase than "creating less waste" that the emphasis is more on the recycling than on the paring down of packaging in the first place.

A meeting was set up with the manageress of Ludlow Tesco (Julie) to see if it were possible to come up with some ideas to be tried out, locally at first but with an eye to the greater picture. Tesco working with the local Green party was a concept that seemed to be acceptable. Although managers of supermarkets have very little autonomy, Julie was very willing to consider the proposals that were put to her, and to pass them on to Head Office.

We mentioned:

- the very liberal way in which carrier bags were handed out
- the availability of discarded boxes at the tills, to be used rather than numerous plastic bags (even though theirs are now biodegradable)
- the fact that the "bags for life" weren't available at the time
- some supermarkets are offering paper carriers (as in USA)
- that Safeway used to offer large plastic reusable boxes, and that Sainsbury's have just introduced a similar idea
- that while a good recycling record is very commendable, it would be so much better for the industry as a whole not to accept excessive packaging as the norm
- that the majority of plastic used for food packaging is class 5, while local recycling can only offer classes 1, 2 & 3 (mainly milk and soft drinks' containers)
- some types of packing materials are now starch-based (rather than polystyrene) and are very easy to dispose of (but could this present any other problems?)

Julie was very positive, and requested any more information we could give her and also a copy of the suggestions to pass on to Head Office.

DIARY

Fri 6th Jan AGM followed by Bring-and-Share Party - Acorn Restaurant, Sandford Avenue, Church Stretton at 7.00pm.

Sat 28th Jan WM Regional AGM - 12.30am
At Welsh Congregational Church Bath St, Birmingham

Mon 6th Feb Church Stretton mtg - Acorn Restaurant at 10.30am

Tue 14th Feb Ludlow mtg - Unicorn, Lower Corve St at 8.00pm

16th to 19th Mar Green Party Conference

Local monthly meetings are held on 1st Monday in the month in Church Stretton and 2nd Tuesday in the month in Ludlow.

Global Warming - a very brief survey

Derek Barker looks at the evidence for global warming and considers its impact on the UK

It has been said that the fluttering wings of a butterfly in Brazil might start a chain of events which lead to floods in Bangladesh. The story was devised in order to illustrate the complexities of Earth's climate and not as a scientific fact!

The basic fact is that Earth is dynamic and is also subject to the influence of extra-terrestrial phenomena. The consequences are varied and operate over time scales which themselves vary from hours to millions of years.

Nevertheless, they interlock; they form part of a chain of events which are of interest to the geologist, the palaeontologist, the climatologist and the family deciding whether to spend a holiday in Sumatra or New Orleans.

Indeed, today we are all concerned with climate - Global Warming - the evidence for which has been emerging for at least two decades and in this article I will review causes and effects with special attention to the Northern Hemisphere and, in particular, the North Atlantic - Arctic littoral which includes Great Britain.

The fundamental question relates not to evidence for climate change (which see below), but to the causes. Are they part of a "natural" process, or a product of homo sapiens' activities? Or are they a combination?

My own view is the latter with the output of greenhouse gas-

ses over the last two centuries tipping a natural development into free-fall. I also suspect that even if we were to cut out all our pollution tomorrow our climate would take a very long time to recover - if at all.

Will any government, such as in China, or even its population, willingly give up its enormous and environmentally filthy industrial base?

Is a little gesture here and there better than nothing, or is it a waste of time trying?

One thing is certain and that is an unending round of conferences in exotic places for politicians to utter meaningless words!

The Evidence

In the Northern Hemisphere there are a number of well-established and continuing events which are, unquestionably, climatic warming on a global scale:

1. reduction of the Arctic sea icecap over some ten years
2. melting of the tundra/permafrost along the Arctic littoral and "unfreezing" of methane gas
3. general ablation of glaciers
4. decline in snow fall e.g. in Scotland last ten years and high mountains
5. extension of warm season for plants and insects with some insects moving north
6. serious decline in rainfall along 30 to 49 degree N .latitude.

This list is not complete but will suffice.

Causes and Implications

The circulation of Earth's low level atmosphere and near-surface ocean currents is determined by Earth's rotation W to E, but is modified, as in the Atlantic, by disposition of continents.

At the high level there is an Equator to Pole component and, if we take the Northern Hemisphere it is divided into three N-S circulation cells: 0-30 N, 30-60N and 60-90N latitude named Hadley, Farrel and Polar respectively. An extension northwards of the Hadley taking warm, dry, air with it, might be a cause of Evidence 6 above, but this is speculation on my part.

Our main concern here is the relationship of Arctic and N Atlantic Oceans, or to be more precise between the N Atlantic thermo-haline current (THC) (the Gulf Stream) and the temperature of Arctic water. The THC originates in the upper level warm salt water of the Gulf of Mexico and travels NE, past Britain, to around Iceland where it meets the cold Arctic waters. The THC cools and becomes more dense, sinks and turns S down the Atlantic and peters out in the Pacific via S Indian Ocean. The THC warms Iceland and the NW littoral of Europe - notably Britain.

However, if Arctic water becomes colder then the "sink zone" (my term) of the THC moves S and Britain becomes much colder: on the other hand, as at present, the Arctic Ocean is becoming warmer from melting fresh water (Evidence 1 and 2 above) and the sink zone is possibly already moving north. Britain warms.

However, there can be a catch here: if the temperature/salt content differential between the Arctic and THC approaches equilibrium then the THC will cease to sink and the whole current can shut down. This would lead to much colder conditions along the Atlantic littoral.

Soil profiles in England covering the last few tens of thousands of years demonstrate by their structure and insect remains etc that such movement of the sink zone and complete THC shut-down are not new phenomena.

I have mentioned the release of methane which is frozen in along continental shelves and tundra. During the Permian-Triassic crisis 251 million years ago global release was almost the last straw following a period of intense volcanism. 95% of all species were wiped out. Things are not that bad, but it demonstrates the complexity and uncertainty of life on Earth.

Conclusion

There is the prospect over the next century of major crises in sea levels (eg Bangladesh) water shortage from Portugal to S China, major changes in agriculture and mass movement of peoples, with some doubt as to how this will be handled.

The Green Party has produced many ideas concerning the reduction of pollution which should be taken seriously, but let us not be under any illusions about the potential problems. We might grow our own bananas, but don't throw your thermal undies away,