

## **Climate Friendly Communities Conference, April 2007.**

Ashton Hayes, Cheshire:  
*Going Carbon Neutral.*

This is a report of a conference attended in Chester, 14<sup>th</sup> April by Stephen Eades and David Levy, Wiltshire Friends of the Earth. The conference was organised by the village of Ashton Hayes, Cheshire which, with financial assistance from Defra (UK government), is addressing the reality of climate change as a community and seeing whether it can go “carbon neutral” i.e. reduce its carbon footprint and, where that footprint remains, take such actions as would offset that residual footprint.

This initiative, which is approximately one year old and is part of Defra’s Climate Friendly Communities Campaign, was launched in Ashton Hayes by a small group of committed residents who felt a sense of personal responsibility and the need to act upon that responsibility. The conference reported on their initial progress and the steps taken to go “carbon neutral”, and to offer their experience as a guide and encouragement to other communities to do the same.

The initiative has been developed by the interested individuals in conjunction with Ashton Hayes Parish Council – a move seen as being able to give “democratic legitimacy” to the aspirations of these individuals – and in conjunction with parts of the local community such as the Primary School – which enabled the individuals to spread the message through the community by means of the children and events at the school – and by means of signing-up local businesses and the local publican.

### Actions During Year 1.

The primary aim of their activity had been consciousness raising – there is a problem, you have a responsibility, and you can do something about it – accompanied by the provision of ideas on how to act and effect change in each household.

This raising of consciousness, and the engagement of people with the issue of climate change at a personal level – how actions in their own lives count – has been the principal achievement of the campaign in Ashton Hayes to date.

This has been accompanied by:

1. A limited survey (in terms of number of households) to determine the carbon footprint of each household in the village (the design is limited – designed by a university lecturer/resident – because it does not differentiate between households on the basis of the number of people living in that household). Note: Defra is due to publish a “carbon footprint” tool shortly for standard use throughout the UK.
2. Advice on how to reduce fuel and energy usage (carbon use), primarily through improved insulation, low energy light bulbs and energy efficient boilers/appliances. This advice has largely been general in nature, rather than focused on securing grants or finance for specific projects.

The degree to which Ashton Hayes has moved towards becoming “carbon neutral” is essentially unknown. Many people in the village have taken actions which assist this objective e.g. use a bicycle more often, are more conscious about the use of water (a great deal of energy is used to create potable water) and the capture of rainwater, use shopping bags instead of plastic carriers, and so forth. Thus it is clear that changes have definitely been made, but the change is as much “aspirational” as it is actual. However, the villagers do appear to recognise that the first 10% of carbon reduction towards carbon neutrality is relatively painless, whereas the last 10% will cause them to scream (i.e. will involve fundamental change in their lifestyle and socio-economic behaviour).

## The Way Forward.

Ashton Hayes sees itself as a beacon – an inspiration and a trail-blazer which will inspire other communities to also aspire and work towards becoming “carbon neutral”. It is for this purpose that they have received Defra money – to give publicity to this idea, hence the conference.

The organisers in the village now realise that they have to start thinking fundamentally if they are to achieve their next 10% in carbon reduction, but what is less clear is how far the majority of residents are also committed to start beginning to implement radical change in their lifestyle and behaviour.

One of the key tenets of the organisers’ approach in the village is to sell the idea as fun and wholesome, and they have deliberately excluded any political context from their work. Indeed, they have a set of objectives which explicitly state that the campaign to go carbon neutral should not be confrontational.

Whether the next 10% of carbon reduction (and beyond) can be achieved without breaking this non-confrontational principle is unclear. For example, can they install and purchase (as a community) a 1MW wind turbine on the Danish model? Can they persuade the County Council to collect all their household kitchen waste for aerobic in-vessel composting to create a local agricultural/horticultural compost, and see that this results in effective carbon sequestration in Local Authority budgets leading to “carbon credits”? Can they persuade the County Council to collect all their plastic waste (a hidden use of carbon) and to recycle this plastic rather than allow this plastic to be burnt in an county-based incinerator which will also burn their kitchen waste? At the present time the way forward remains unclear.

### Is Ashton Hayes unique, and can this happen elsewhere?

One of the questions asked by attendees at the conference was how to replicate the Ashton Hayes “phenomenon”. The organisers strongly recommended getting the Parish Council on to one’s side and to behave co-operatively, and to work through local opportunities such as the school – if you get the children involved you get the parents involved.

However, this is a very “rural model”. Most of the UK is urban, and Parish Councils do not exist in this context. Also, many towns and cities lack a sense of community. Therefore, before one can develop a “climate friendly community” campaign, one actually has to first create and develop a sense of community – a considerable socio-economic-political task.

Nevertheless, many urban communities (particularly ethnic based communities in towns and cities) have a direct interest in climate change – their country of origin and therefore their kin are likely to be seriously affected by climate change. Therefore, this is a reality that affects everyone.

A major shortcoming of this conference was its failure to consider how the “climate friendly community” campaign can be replicated throughout the UK. Thinking on this issue is at present very limited and almost naïve.

### Can you apply a Carbon Neutral model to your community?

The answer to this question is almost certainly, yes, if you want to. However, you will certainly need to be a little more incisive and savvy in your thinking than the present model if you are seriously going to succeed. However, do not be daunted by this. This is what makes the challenge worthwhile! See:

**Ashton Hayes website and DVD/CD** [www.goingcarbonneutral.co.uk](http://www.goingcarbonneutral.co.uk)

**Wasteless Household Energy Service** (carbon footprinting tools) [www.wasteless.co.uk](http://www.wasteless.co.uk)

**Contraction and Convergence** (how to reduce national carbon usage) [www.climatejustice.org](http://www.climatejustice.org)

**Community Action for Energy [CafE]** : projects of the Energy Savings Trust [www.est.org.uk/cafe](http://www.est.org.uk/cafe)

**Engaging the Media : Passion for the Planet** [www.passionfortheplanet.com](http://www.passionfortheplanet.com)

## The thoughts of David Levy.

This conference made the same mistake that many make, which is a failure in design to cater for different levels of experience in the plenary sessions and during question opportunities. This made for a frustrating time for those of us who wished to engage with more in-depth discussion on carbon neutral issues. Most of the audience just wished to engage at an entry level and those who organised the event had not given sufficient thought to their own progress outside of their own immediate national and international success as to how they took their journey onwards.

It was clear that after this first initial stage many of the organisers were feeling the weight of the obligation laid on them by Defra and it was clear to me that some may become casualties of this campaign. For there is no doubt that it has impinged on home life and available free time to oneself.

There was a call for a follow up conference in a years time and it will be interesting to see what progress this community makes towards the next 10% reduction of their carbon footprint. A proposal is being considered by the community for a joint wind generating electricity turbine, which will bring with it all the accompanying planning and objections that have served other communities. That experience will be worth listening to.

I gained insight from their media session and the tool kit provided was professionally put together and worthy of praise and use by all campaigning and non campaigning groups.

What was most encouraging from this conference was the level of cooperation between the community and the way they had used the skills within their own community most effectively. This is a lesson we all need to learn. This task was made easier by the finance provided by Defra which cynically demonstrates the government commitment to grains of sand solutions whilst avoiding the avenues of change that impact on mass carbon emissions. However, I do not decry the efforts made by this worthy community or on the impact it could make on other communities who will have to tackle the carbon neutral issue without Defra backing, and who will be like the rest of us relying on personal financial sacrifice.

As a person who has endured his own personal war of attrition for the past 14 years I cannot agree with the organisation of Ashton Hayes Carbon Neutral Community who are committed to non confrontation methods. Directions taken by this and past governments have led to an increase in carbon output by industry and most importantly the current drive towards incineration in power stations and cement kilns, via energy from waste / refuse derived fuels is a negative and retrograde situation that is in overdrive and currently engages countywide waste decisions. This is where Defra money should be targeted not on grains of sand solutions.

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