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Paul Howey

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Dear Paul

Election of County Councillor for the Rothbury Ward

I am writing to you on behalf of members of Rothbury CAN. We are a group of residents who aim to do what we can to help mitigate climate change and help nature. You can find out more about us here: www.rothburycan.org

We are surprised, and delighted, that so many candidates have put themselves forward to represent our community. However, we are disappointed that it has been impossible for a Hustings to be organised. We feel we need to know more about what you stand for, in terms of environmental matters.

Because there are so many candidates, we decided to write to you all with the same set of questions, which are of major importance to us. We look forward to reading all the replies, so we can make a balanced judgement about who is likely to represent our views, most sympathetically.

Questions

1. What can you/ do you intend to do to help remove sewage from our waterways? Do you feel developers should share the cost of upgrading sewage treatment plants that are beyond capacity to get planning permission?
   What will you do to ensure new development does not increase flood risk?

It's illegal to release sewage or waste into a waterways, and regulation is enforced by the Environment Agency. I'm not aware of any current systemic issues relating to effluent release into waterways in Rothbury area.

I have worked with the EA in my previous role as an officer in NF&RS, and also since then regarding potential unsafe discharges…. They're very approachable of those who need to improve their processes and offer advice and support to ensure our waterways are clean and safe. So the way forward in removing sewage from waterways is to report such cases to the EA in the 1st instance and work with them and the alleged offender to ensure compliance.

Developers sharing costs…. This *should*n'*t* be an issue - as if the current sewage system doesn't have the capacity to accommodate additional homes, they wouldn't (shouldn't) have planning consent granted. In more remote rural areas where individual sewage management systems are required they must comply with BS EN 12566 and also subject to planning consents.

Where planning permission has been refused due to sewage control issues any developer would have no other option than to work with Northumbrian water to find a compliant solution.

Flood risk caused by new development – again, this is an important part of the planning consent process. Run off from potential developments is assessed and responded to during the planning process - saying that, specific local issues can and should be highlighted by those with concerns and raised through the right to response to planning requests process and through the local parish council/county councillor

2. How would you ensure that all residents, particularly those in social or rented housing, have access to solar energy and battery storage to reduce their household bills and reduce global warming?
   EV Charging: residents who cannot park near enough to their homes to have a home charger. What will you do to ensure these residents can cheaply and efficiently charge their cars?

I know NCC has begun installing solar panels (PVs) on its owned houses. So far over 1200 I believe. NCC has also recently been awarded £9.5m in grants from the Government Warm Homes Programme to help residents reduce energy bills and lower emissions - £3.5million of this (plus an additional £3.5million from NCC) will be used to upgrade up to 400 Council owned homes with more energy efficient systems – so with that in mind, it would be the local representative to argue that a relative amount of that funding is available to, and spent on, housing in the Rothbury area

NCC has begun establishing an EV charging network and are targeting areas as a priority where there are known challenges due to residents not having access to off-street parking. NCC has identified initial locations for the first phase of Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure funding which will be delivered through the North East Combined Authority and specifically targets locations for residents without off-street parking. So again, the local representative (in partnership with parish councils and groups like RCAN) should be making a case to bring funding from the second phase of this project to the Rothbury area.

Those without driveways, or off-road parking, can also request that NCC installs a channel under the pavement outside their house to charge their EV at the roadside. A caveat to that - there is a charge for this but residents can apply for a grant to help with the cost

3. Compared to many other counties, the provision for doorstep recycling in Northumberland is extremely limited. What will you do to improve this and increase the proportion of waste that is recycled?

I disagree that it's 'limited'. Many other local authorities have residents using 4 recycle bins, and at face value that appears 'better'…. NCC has one recycle bin.

An example - Stockport Council has 5 bins in total - however the same items are recycled (with the exception of glass). In NCC's area, the recycled waste items are sorted by NCC at large processing facilities, eg West Sleekburn. in Stockport the local authority requires the householder to sort it – Although Stockport council still has to process that recycled waste. There is an going trial in some parts of Northumberland where glass bins have been given to households to use, and it's been received well…. and could be rolled out further.

I think where the biggest improvement to recycling can be made is to promote it. Outside of household bins we have a large number of recycling points and some excellent large waste facilities that are well managed and focus on recyling

NCC regularly re-assesses it's policies and how those policies are applied, and it's up to us as residents to push for improvements through councillors if we feel they are needed.

4. Hedge-cutting and chemical spraying. What are your views on when hedges should be cut, and how? Will you join with us to request an end to the spraying of pollinator killing weedkiller, by NCC on our paths and building edges, etc?

Hedge cutting is best carried out late in the back end of the year – to ensure fruits/berries are available for the birds that rely on hedgerow fruit. Or very early spring to avoid nesting birds' preparations….. But what's a 'hedge'? If we are talking about roadside hedges and hedges used for stock control, there's clearly a need to maintain size and growth. And in the case of roadside hedges maintenance is essential to maintain good visibility for road users…. Over the last handful of years I've noticed an increasing number of uncut hedges on some of our minor roads which has an impact on visibility and road safety, especially for walkers and cyclists. I think that needs to be improved.

If it's a hedgerow not for those purposes, eg alongside stock fencing or planted for the purpose of biodiversity… is there a need to cut them at all? – ultimately, it's for the owner to decide how to manage their hedgerows in a way they think best…. So with that in mind, groups like RCAN can make information available to landowners, so however they decide to manage their hedgerows it's from an informed position.

The use of weedkillers to manage weeds on paved footpaths and at building edges is done out of necessity in most instances, I'd argue. I've not seen the risk assessment regarding footpath spraying and what environmental impacts it considers, or what is currently used as a weedkiller.

But I'd certainly support CAN in questioning the scope of weedkilling and/or looking for viable alternatives to managing weed control where it's currently carried out.

5. What would you do to increase biodiversity at the Parish level?

Things that can add to biodiversity at parish level – I'd like to see more trees planted. I'm not talking about blanket coverage of productive farmland, but localised planting. An NCC initiative currently available to parishes, schools and organisations like RCAN supplies free packs of trees of up to 120 (a total of 15,000 per year) and also for residents to apply for smaller numbers for gardens. Applications for the next phase will reopen later in the year and I would encourage our Parish councils and school in the Rothbury area to apply…. Regarding schools - introducing the importance of the environment at a young age will mean the next generation will grow up with proactive view of its importance.

I'd like to see the re-establishment of applications by the government for Sustainable Farming Initiative stewardship schemes (SFI). This is a massive hit for both farming businesses and also biodiversity development…. It's a huge own goal by the government in terms of working towards it's claimed desire to promote sustainable farming practices – at present, its hill farms that are most hit by this SFI suspension with current applications at well below 10% of uptake before new applications were stopped - Rothbury ward has a significant proportion of it's farms falling in to that category, so it directly impacts the area.

As a local councillor, it's obviously not possible to change national government policy, but it is possible to lobby local MP's and (as part of the whole elected council) government, to re-establish SFI applications.

6. How do you feel about the purchase, by the Wildlife Trusts, of the Rothbury Estate?

Since the estate was announced for sale, many have had concerns over it's future. Was it gong to be Brian May, or other wealthy individual buyer? And what would they do with it?

As we now all know, it's now partly owned (with the option to buy the rest) by The Wildlife Trusts (WLT). What concerns me at present is how their ownership might impact on those living on the estate, especially those on one of the 12 farms on the estate.

The WLT has spoken about low impact sustainable farming and said "we're looking forward to working with local people to create an exemplar of how farming, economy, nature and community are integrated". But what will this look like? Does it means farm businesses will be required to reduce sheep/cattle stock? Move to organic farming practices? I grew up and worked for many on our hill farm so know how hard it can be to make living from it - given now that the government has stopped new applications for funding under the Sustainable Farming Initiative, where does that leave tenant farmers on the estate? feeling concerned and vulnerable about the future sustainability of their business - And would The WLT support applications for it's tenants should they re-open?

The WLT recently celebrated the arrival of 'Casanova', a Red Luing bull that will "boost songbird numbers and biodiversity'", while suggesting their aim is to reduce stock levels to help 'improve biodiversity'. I think there's a contradiction there that needs discussion.

The aim to increase and support native species in the area is fantastic…. But as it is at present there's a vacuum of information to explain how that will be worked towards *with* the community having their views considered…. And that has to include the views of farmers who live and work there (some for generations) and have a huge knowledge and understanding of the landscape. It's a little known fact that the heather moorlands we see around us today aren't the result of nature on it's own, but largely as a result of farming practices over the last few 1000 years that continue today.

The WLT are holding a presentation evening at the Jubilee Hall on Thursday 24th April at 7.30pm that will hopefully be filling the gap's, clarifying their vision and explaining how the development of that vision will impact/affect those currently living there. They want to work with the community… hopefully this will be the beginning of that collaborative process.

Do please take this opportunity also, to tell us what you feel are the most important aspects in representing the Rothbury Ward? What do you feel the main role of a County Councillor is?

My views are as I've presented them here, but saying that, it's important the elected representative reflects the views of the community and listens to argument, views and opinion that might differ from their own…. So it's a partnership - with the parish councils, groups such as RCAN, Northumberland National Park, The Wildlife Trusts and all those who live and work in the area. Whatever the objectives of the elected councillor, they need to be able to engage with the local authority, it's administration and it's committees to try deliver those objectives