

PACT AGM, 7th October 2020.

Chairman's Report.

Looking back at my report given to last year's AGM in September, I was enthusiastic about the prospects for PACT for the coming year, buoyed up by both Eden District Council and Penrith Town Council's formal recognition of the Climate and Ecological Emergency. As I said then, I was looking forward to PACT working with these authorities, with CAFS, and with other organisations from the voluntary, public and private sector within Eden, and above all with local communities, in devising and putting into action strategies that address the challenges to be faced.

I was also encouraged and inspired, as we all were, by the talk given to us by Mike Berners-Lee, a couple of nights before the AGM, and by the excellent CAFS Cumbria Climate Action Emergency Summit in Carlisle the weekend before. In the week following the AGM, PACT was represented at Eden District Council's "Vision for Eden District 2019 – 2023" consultation event at Rheged, where delivering sustainability in the face of the climate crisis was the central theme.

At that time, each of these positive outcomes and events gave rise to optimism, that there really was a groundswell of recognition and support for environmental actions.

Taking a look at that part of this reporting year before the onset of the pandemic, here are some of the events or activities participated in by PACT members and supporters....(and before saying more, please accept my apologies if I've omitted to mention anything of note, and especially so if I've failed to mention those of you involved in any of these).

Rethinking the Rural Landscape event at Tebay on 9 October

EDC Waste / Recycling Scrutiny Committee Meeting 24 October, attended by Chris, Geoff, Jaki and myself.

Plastics Community Workshop at Lancaster University, 4 November, hosted by the Environment Agency, attended by Lucy, Caroline, Geoff and myself.

At the request of EDC's Jane Langston, during the autumn I attended some informal meetings on behalf of PACT, to look at their draft Zero Carbon Eden documentation and to provide advice.

At our November meeting, Andy Lloyd gave us a very informative presentation on Co-housing, citing the Lancaster example as an exemplar.

Geoff and I alternated our representation of PACT on the Eden Community Fund panel.

Chris, Malcolm and their skilled assistants maintained their invaluable work with the Repair Cafes, and as well as the usual electrical, sewing, and bike repairs, they achieved a metaphorical hole in one, with their successful repair of an electric golf trolley!

Joan, Malcolm and their wonderful helpers continued their brilliant work with the Community Gardeners, following on from their Gold Award at last year's Britain in Bloom Awards, not to mention their Wilding award for the nature reserve, and a special Community Involvement award. For anyone who hasn't yet seen it, I commend the short video produced on behalf of the Community Gardeners, which can be found at <https://vimeo.com/455173252>

During the latter part of last year, and the early part of this, Chris Cant put a great deal of time and expertise on behalf of PACT, into the CAfS bid for the Zero Carbon Cumbria project, and we'll hear more on this from Geoff, a little later.

At the end of January, we held an enjoyable social evening, our numbers swollen by the presence of the excellent BlueJam folk band, and with a couple of quizzes for good measure.

Shortly before lockdown, at the beginning of March Jaki and I attended Penrith Town Council's Climate Change Steering Group, which included discussion of their draft strategic plan, entitled "Penrith, A Carbon Neutral Town", a document that was subsequently (and deservedly) adopted formally by the Town Council. Although these initiatives have had to be put on hold, there is a further meeting of the Steering Group on 20th October, at which PACT will participate. One matter of particular interest to PACT is the wish for the Town Council to fund a "hub" property, somewhere in the centre of Penrith, which would be an outward and visible signpost for their Carbon Neutral Penrith programme. As a shared facility for all like-minded community groups, and where PACT could play a very helpful role, I am personally extremely hopeful that this will come to fruition.

Lockdown from the middle of March put a halt to any community activities, and our PACT meetings since then have been conducted by Zoom. Perhaps as a result of the need to remain in contact and focused, we have met at monthly intervals rather than bi-monthly. Despite the generous hospitality provided hitherto in their homes by Peter or Geoff for our meetings, the prospect of turning out on cold and wet evenings over the course of the coming winter becomes less attractive when one can meet virtually, in the comfort of one's own home (and with the occasional benefit of enjoying a wee dram, for medicinal purposes).

Other initiatives that had to be put on hold, included Chris and Jaki's ideas for a pilot hitch-hiking scheme between Shap and Penrith, to encourage people to share transport. On the positive side, a few of us carried out a socially-distanced litter-pick along the shore of Ullswater in July, and a new member, Jo Pattinson, was busy in promoting the Pesticide Action Network locally. Meanwhile, several of us reduced our lawn mowing by supporting CAfS "Long Grass for Nature" campaign, which I can vouch has produced immediate benefits for wildlife in my own garden. We also registered PACT's support for the Local Electricity Bill, being promoted by Rupert Meadows at Power for People, which seeks to unlock the potential for more community-scale renewable energy schemes across the country whilst benefiting local communities in the process.

We had hoped to visit our "new" MP Neil Hudson, to inform him about PACT's activities and interests, but in the event, Nigel and I wrote jointly to him, and this was followed by a twenty-minute phone conversation that I had with him in May. I appreciate the value of maintaining a link with him, not least around the ethos of "Build Back Better", and this should be an objective over the coming months, given that climate and ecological issues have largely been subsumed, first by Brexit, and now by the pandemic.

Also in May, Jaki arranged for us to host an online screening of The Story of Plastic. This was watched by around 130 people in their own homes, and followed up later that month by a Zoom discussion, hosted by PACT, with a panel including Amy Bray and Doug Lawson. Huge thanks must go to Jaki for her work in organising this, as well as all her other input to PACT, not least in assembling and issuing our PACT newsletters.

Meanwhile, over in Appleby, Lucy Teather had been working away at trying to establish an Appleby Sustainability Hub, although her efforts were thwarted by the current closure of the Heritage Centre. However, Lucy continues to keep us informed of a range of issues around permaculture and local food growing initiatives, including Appleby Edibles.

At the start of lockdown, there was much frenzied discussion in Penrith over Covid 19 restrictions placed on vehicle movement and access within and around the town (in common with most other

towns and cities in the country), issues that in many instances generated more heat than light, and which became divisive and, sadly for Penrith, even toxic in one instance. Members of PACT have a direct interest in these matters, particularly around issues of pollution from vehicles, safety for pedestrians and cyclists, and the need for a sustainable vision for our towns and high streets, and in June, we hosted an evening's discussion, to agree PACT's position in these matters, notes of which can be found on our website. There is now a separate, informal and apolitical group of people looking at the future of both the town centre and the wider area, given the rapid changes wrought not only by the pandemic, but by the decline of the high street that has been accelerating over recent years. These discussions are underpinned by the theme of environmental and economic sustainability, and are attended by Geoff and myself, on behalf of PACT, the next one to be held later this month.

However, the most significant matter to happen this year with regard to PACT's mission, has been the successful outcome of the CAfS Zero Carbon Cumbria lottery bid for £2.5 million, for which Hazel Graham and her amazing colleagues deserve enormous credit. Within PACT, we are indebted to Chris Cant, who was instrumental in formulating our part of the bid, from which we will benefit some £42,500 over the next five years. In fact, I'll take this moment to thank Chris on behalf of all of us, for his unstinting work with PACT over much of the past 14 years, across a range of issues and activities. I understand that Chris wishes to take a well-earned break as one of our directors, but that he will continue to assist with repair cafes and events around re-use and recycling, food growing and biodiversity, as and when these can again take place.....so our enormous gratitude to you, Chris.

In a moment, Geoff is going to give us a brief update on the position with PACT and the lottery bid. Over the past couple of months, a small ZCC sub group of PACT comprising Geoff, Nigel, Jaki, Christine and myself, has been discussing our approach to managing the award, including the role of a part-time self-employed contractor. There is much scoping work still to be done, but it is planned to have a job description in place early in the New Year, with the chosen person taking up their appointment in March. At the moment, there is quite a range of issues to discuss and, as with other beneficiaries of the award, we are learning and adapting our ideas as we go along. We will of course say more about all this as soon as we have an agreed framework for action, at least in draft form. What is not in doubt, is that there will be opportunities for people to volunteer with - as yet to be identified - specific tasks and projects, and we will certainly be extremely glad of any help as soon as these are better defined.

At this point I'd like to reiterate my thanks to all of those in PACT who continue to help in their different spheres of interest and experience. I am so grateful to our Treasurer Philip for keeping the PACT finances up to date, and our special thanks again go to Jo Heeley for preparing the accounts, at no charge. I cannot end without thanking Christine, our secretary, who is so diligent in issuing minutes which are always an accurate synopsis of a range of agenda items, and for fielding the various enquiries that are received regularly.

At our AGM each year we seem to gaze at our navels, metaphorically that is, and wonder if PACT can survive with just a small number of active members and, indeed, would it matter if PACT ceased to exist. Well, I strongly believe that PACT still has a role to play, in being the only unattached local voice on issues around sustainability, most especially the climate and ecological crisis, and how we as a community can explore and put into practice ways to become more resilient to a rapidly changing environment. I see that in the last couple of my reports I've mentioned the latest recorded current level of atmospheric CO₂, Last year at this time, it was around 410 ppm. Although the rate of growth has, for obvious reasons, slowed during the earlier half of the year, the latest average figures show it to be around 413 ppm, and rising. Also, we hear today that the month just gone is the hottest September on record.

To conclude: We hear a lot about “pandemic fatigue” arising from the constraints under which we are having to live our lives, and there is no doubt that this has had severe impacts on many, many people. But these impacts are miniscule compared to the changes that will occur if we don’t get to grips with the climate and ecological crisis, and to do all we can to raise awareness and build community resilience. We now have the real boost provided by the lottery award, which is a huge incentive for all of us, were that needed.

PACT does have a voice, even if at times it seems a still small voice.....and since doing nothing about the environmental crisis isn’t an option anyway, at the very least PACT absolutely must (to paraphrase the words of Alan Bennett), “keep on keeping on”.

John Bodger, Chair, PACT.
7th October 2020.