# **Should Stapleford Parish Council declare a climate and ecological emergency?**

*We propose:* ***That Stapleford Parish Council declares a climate and ecological emergency and agrees to consider its actions and appointments against its policy.***

## Introduction

In May 2019, the UK Parliament declared a climate emergency. As of February 2021, 74% of district, county, unitary and metropolitan councils, including Cambridgeshire County Council and South Cambs. District Council, plus 8 combined authorities/city regions had followed suit[[1]](#endnote-1). Scores of parish and town councils across the UK have also declared climate emergencies. Worldwide, over 1,900 local governments in 34 countries have made climate emergency declarations (as of June 2021), covering over 1 billion citizens[[2]](#endnote-2).

This short paper looks at the question of whether Stapleford Parish Council should join them and, if so, what that might mean.

## Is there an emergency?

On 11th August 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its 6th report (read the report here: https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/). The first two “headline statements” of the report’s summary are:

1. “It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred.
2. The scale of recent changes across the climate system as a whole and the present state of many aspects of the climate system are unprecedented over many centuries to many thousands of years.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

At almost the same time, two different scientific studies revealed that both the Gulf Stream ocean circulation system (which among other things moderates the climate of Western Europe so that we experience warmer winters than other landmasses at the same latitude) and the world’s rainforest systems were showing signs of approaching collapse[[4]](#endnote-4). Scientist Niklas Boers from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, said of the Gulf Stream research: “The signs of destabilisation being visible already is something that I wouldn’t have expected and that I find scary…the only thing to do is keep emissions as low as possible. The likelihood of this extremely high-impact event happening increases with every gram of CO2 that we put into the atmosphere.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

This summer has also seen the largest wildfire ever recorded in Southern California, deadly floods in Germany and Austria, huge and unprecedented fires in Greece and Italy, and a heat dome over western North America which claimed over 1,000 human lives and killed untold numbers of sea and land animals.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In short, yes, there is an emergency.

## What does ‘declaring a climate emergency’ mean?

In declaring a climate emergency, an authority acknowledges that [climate change](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_change) exists and that the measures taken up to this point are not enough to limit the changes brought by it. Once an authority makes a declaration, the next step is to set priorities to mitigate climate change[[7]](#endnote-7); in other words, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in every way possible and to prepare for the changes that are already occurring, such as heat stress, extreme weather events and food shortages.

## Ecological emergency too?

We face two crises: the rise in temperature and the decline of nature. The climate and ecology crises are intertwined, and to solve one we must also fix the other. Recognising this, in November 2020, Bristol City Council became the first authority in the UK to add the words ‘ecological emergency’ to its declaration and around 15% of councils have now followed suit[[8]](#endnote-8). This follows well-established research which shows that:

1. climate change is being accelerated by loss of natural habitats which sequester carbon dioxide, such as forests, peatlands and healthy soils
2. loss of these habitats, combined with the effects of climate disruption and pollution, including chemical pesticides and herbicides, is driving a global mass extinction which some scientists call the “sixth mass extinction”[[9]](#endnote-9) and believe poses an existential threat to human civilization
3. nature-based solutions to climate change[[10]](#endnote-10), which range from tree and hedgerow planting to restoring or rewilding meadows and waterways, may be amongst the most effective tools we have to mitigate against potential climate catastrophe whilst also contributing to biodiversity gain.

## How would declaring a climate and ecological emergency help?

Whilst recognising that parish councils’ legal powers are limited, the leadership role of a parish council within a community should not be underestimated and can lead to significant changes. Opinions vary on how important individual actions are, but most climate leaders agree on the need for a community approach: “[M]any say the key to fighting despair is to think beyond the individual and seek community support and solutions — especially those that put pressure on governments and companiesto make the large-scale changes that are necessary to truly curtail emissions.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

In other words, as barrister Paul Powlesland said in his recent speech on the Declaration of the Rights of the River Cam[[12]](#endnote-12), even where the law fails to protect an ecosystem, people who declare themselves to be protectors can take a powerful stand and thus induce systemic change: “They need to declare the rights of the river and act as if they exist, because just declaring the rights on their own has no effect whatsoever, but if you take the rights seriously and hold them in your hearts the impact is very significant.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

## But aren’t we already doing a lot?

Stapleford is a rural settlement overlooked by Magog Down and surrounded by fields and farmland, most of which is greenbelt. Many residents are actively trying to support wildlife and reduce their carbon footprint by planting trees and pollinator-friendly flowers, cycling and recycling, switching to electric cars, etc. It can be hard looking around the village to feel that the crisis is real. Yet our region has amongst the highest per capita carbon footprints of the entire UK and our greenbelt is under threat of erosion from housing and transport pressures. The reasons why have to do with our wealth and consumption, the size of our homes, the inadequate public transport in our area, and our proximity to Addenbrooke’s Hospital and the Cambridge Biomedical Centre. There are no easy fixes and none are under the direct control of Stapleford Parish Council. They do, however, require a community approach to solve and this where Stapleford Parish Council can provide leadership.

## Any other arguments against?

Some environmentalists and others have criticised the trend for authorities to declare climate emergencies. Accusations of ‘greenwashing’ (green talk, no action) and ‘tinkering around the edges’ (tiny changes which have little impact on the global problem) are in some cases justified. Some people also question the language: is it possible to remain in a state of ‘emergency’ for the decades involved in tackling the climate crisis?

Against these arguments are our assertions that: world and local leaders are still not behaving as if the crisis was real (as arguably we see locally with the EWR rail electrification debacle); and environmental education and mitigation are often treated as a ‘nice hobby’ which some people and organisations may choose to take part in, rather than an essential step to avert catastrophe.

However, there are real things we can do as a community. Some of these are discussed below.

## What are other local councils doing?

To date, local council declarations have tended to include certain key policies, including tree planting, connectivity of green spaces, rewilding and restoration, and, perhaps most importantly, placing environmental concerns at the centre of decision-making and policy, including planning and resource allocation decisions.

Across England, one quarter of local councils have plans to rewild or restore green spaces[[14]](#endnote-14). In Cambridgeshire, both the City and the County Council have announced changes to mowing or maintenance schemes to reduce emissions and increase biodiversity. Councils are also looking at the carbon footprint of the buildings, vehicles and processes they control, and seeking to raise the consciousness of their constituents through communication.

Some examples which SPC may find useful:

* Burwell Parish Council Climate Action Plan: <http://www.burwellparishcouncil.gov.uk/_UserFiles/Files/BPCClimateEmergencyPolicy.pdf>
* Barton Parish Council request for neighbourhood input on climate: <https://bartonvillage.org/news/cambridge-carbon-footprint/>
* Grantchester Parish Council is working with local people on a plan to turn fields into woodland in its the Kingswood proposal: <http://grantchester.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Proposal-to-Kings-18.5.205804.pdf>.

## What could SPC do?

Once SPC has acknowledged the emergency, the next step is to review a set of proposed actions that it could help to take forward. We may wish to consult with residents about what they might like to participate in and prioritise, and feed into the developing neighbourhood plan. Interacting more frequently with local environmental groups (e.g. 2G3S) and attending relevant training and presentations might also generate new ideas. However, it is important to emphasise that any action taken for our community should be taken *by* our community and not left solely to Stapleford Parish Council.

Finally, here are 20 ideas from Friends of the Earth on actions parish and town councillors can take, which we strongly recommend that all councillors take the time to read: <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/reports/20-actions-parish-and-town-councils-can-take-climate-and-nature-emergency>. They fall into three umbrella categories:

1. Be a force for good
2. Demonstrate leadership through your own practical actions
3. Use your powers wisely

It is hard to argue against such insight.

## Conclusion

There are many pressing reasons why SPC should join other authorities across the UK and the world and declare a climate and ecological emergency. The wording we choose to communicate this is far less important than our actual actions which, to summarise, are:

* formally acknowledge the global crisis and what it means for the future of our community over the short- and long-term
* investigate ways in which the PC can make direct changes to reduce greenhouse gases and improve biodiversity and empower others to follow suit
* engage with residents to communicate the steps the PC will take and find out about additional community-led actions which the PC can support
* create an action plan
* regularly assess progress.

Signed by,

Cllr M. Gatward and Cllr J. Flynn.

[Unanimously passed by Stapleford Parish Council on 7th October 2021.]

Stapleford Parish Council acknowledges the work of Haslingfield Parish Council in inspiring this submission and contributing to its content.

1. <http://www.climateemergency.uk/blog/list-of-councils/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. CEDAMIA list of global declarations, <https://www.cedamia.org/global/>. CEDAMIA. Climate Emergency Declaration and Mobilisation in Action. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>. IPCC 6th Assessment Report. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. As reported in <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/05/climate-crisis-scientists-spot-warning-signs-of-gulf-stream-collapse> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Boers, N. (August 2021). Observation-based early-warning signals for a collapse of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation. Nature Climate Change, vol. 11, pages 680–688. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Western_North_America_heat_wave#Deaths_and_injuries> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.caceonline.org/entering-emergency-mode.html>. Council and Community Action in the Climate Emergency. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.inkcapjournal.co.uk/less-15-of-councils-have-declared-an-ecological-emergency-why-the-delay/> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ceballos, G. *et al*. PNAS June 16, 2020 117 (24) 13596-13602; first published June 1, 2020. <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/24/13596> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.american.edu/sis/centers/carbon-removal/fact-sheet-nature-based-solutions-to-climate-change.cfm> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. How to Fight Climate Solutions. <https://www.vox.com/22595896/climate-change-fire-heat-wave-anxiety> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Declaration of the Rights of the River Cam. <https://www.friendsofthecam.org/content/midsummer-june-21st-celebration-river-cam-and-ceremony-declare-its-rights> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Quoted in <https://www.cambridgeindependent.co.uk/news/declaration-of-rights-for-the-river-cam-led-by-trailblazers-9204413/> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.inkcapjournal.co.uk/council-rewilding-england/> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)