

North Yorkshire Council Election 5 May 2022

NY Climate Coalition survey of candidate views on key environmental issues

Candidate name	Party	Division
Mick Johnston	Labour & Co-operative	Thornton Dale & Wolds

Thanks for taking part in this survey. We hope you will see this as an opportunity to share your thoughts with voters on important climate and environmental issues. While we would ideally like candidates to answer the survey in full, we appreciate that some of the points are quite technical. Candidates come from many different backgrounds and may be drawn to local government because of a passion for other aspects of service delivery and community interest. Please feel free to focus on the questions you feel are most relevant to you. You can always add more information later if you wish.

1. The newly elected members of North Yorkshire Council (NYC) will be responsible for overseeing the county's net zero strategy. Would you support the provision of carbon literacy training (e.g. through the [Carbon Literacy Project](#)) as part of the induction programme for new councillors?

Certainly would.

2. Transport, agriculture and domestic energy are the biggest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in North Yorkshire. In your view, how should the new NY Council tackle these most effectively?

The Labour Party manifesto deals quite well with the aspects which are under its direct control with the following pledges:

All public transport vehicles to be electric by 2030

Improve public transport ensuring all communities have effective access to shops services and leisure.

All NYC's own vehicles to be electric by 2030

Encourage and facilitate cycling especially for shorter journeys

Develop a network of cycleways , meeting the Sustrans safe design standards and connecting every settlement in the county.

Dealing with private and commercial transport, agricultural activity and domestic energy consumption is harder for an individual council to tackle. I would support everything that NYC could unilaterally do such as:-

Requiring sustainable energy systems in all new development. This would mean confronting the national government as planning powers do not currently allow this.

Direct action to ensure a comprehensive network of vehicle charging stations.

It is hard to see how major progress could be made on retrofitting insulation and sustainable energy systems or converting commercial, agricultural and private vehicles and plant without a comprehensive national strategy incorporating incentives, grants and legislation. However NYC should promote these, use whatever leverage it has and use its position to lobby government for a national strategy.

3. Many politicians support net zero commitments, but some argue that “green” measures to protect the environment and climate are too expensive, will cost jobs and need to be delayed. Where do you stand on this?

It’s not strictly true that ‘green’ energy is more expensive than fossil fuel and it is certainly not true that it costs jobs. Investment in green technology will on the contrary create new and often higher skilled and better paid jobs. There are considerable potential economic and social benefits in converting to green technology. The costs of not tackling climate change would in the long run be colossal and far outweigh costs of achieving net zero. Far from delaying we should be speeding up the switch to ‘green’ technology.

I have a caveat though. Net zero has become the objective of governments but the concept assumes the availability of practical carbon capture technology. This does not exist at present. The idea that we can carry on using fossil fuels at some level is without exacerbating climate change because is not necessarily sustainable.

4. As we seek more energy independence nationally, what role do you see in our region for onshore wind, solar farms and fracking?

The Labour Party manifesto commits to:

A total ban in NY of gas and oil fracking

Support for wind, solar, biomass and water power. The location of onshore wind farms does need to be handled carefully with respect to community attitudes and sensitive environments.

I would encourage local community ownership and co-operative energy generation schemes.

5. How could the future NYC use its powers under the planning system to promote sustainable development? Should there be a presumption against high-carbon development proposals in NYC’s planning policies?

The objective I assume is to use planning powers to ensure new development is sustainable in design and constructed using sustainable building practices. I would strongly support this. However, my understanding, as a retired Chartered Town Planner, is that current government Planning Policy Guidance does not give local authorities these powers. Government has been eroding local authority planning powers progressively for years and the white paper 'Planning for the Future' continues this trend. It will take a major nationally co-ordinated campaign to turn around this government's laissez faire attitude to planning. Planning is in fundamental conflict with current Conservative Party 'Libertarian' philosophy.

6. There are plans (in the [NY Local Enterprise Partnership strategy](#)) to double the current area of woodland in the region. Would you actively support this target?

Yes. There is not much woodland in NY so doubling it is not particularly ambitious in itself. However, I do not accept the principle of carbon offsetting. Acres of forest planted should be an objective for its own sake and not be used to justify continued CO2 emissions.

Tree planting must also be caveated by wider environmental considerations. In particular where and what kind of trees. For example, Dalby Forest is an ecological desert because of blanket forestation with coniferous species. The peat bogs it was planted on retained more CO2 than the forest does, arguably.

7. Will you sign the UK Divest Pledge: "If elected, I pledge to support the council divesting its pension fund out of fossil fuels and redirecting those amounts into sustainable investments and the local economy over an appropriate time-scale. I promise to do everything in my power to make sure this happens within the first year of my term in office."

Yes.

8. Would you support net zero measures as a spending priority for the new council?

Yes. Note my reservations about net zero and carbon offsetting stated above.

9. Most districts/boroughs in NY and around 75% across the UK have declared a climate emergency. In your view, should the new NYC adopt a similar motion to underpin its decarbonisation and planning policies?

Yes. It's just a statement of scientifically established fact.

10. Is there anything else you'd like to add on your environmental or climate views?

Natural Environment

Over and above the climate change driven imperatives the NYC has a crucial role to play as guardian of the natural environment. To date it has been in denial about this. There are four areas which I would highlight for action under this heading.

Terrestrial Conservation

Terrestrial Conservation is partly managed through declaration of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) which give statutory protection under the planning system and are the responsibility of Natural England, a government funded Quango based in York (as it happens). There are 240 or so of these across North Yorkshire ranging in size from less than an acre to thousands of acres. Although there are occasional threats to SSSIs they are largely effectively protected.

However these cover a pretty small proportion of the land of ecological value and the system for protecting these other areas appears to have fallen into disuse. It was underpinned by the Regional Spatial Strategy, which was torn up by the Tory Government and old Planning Policy Guidance. It is based on defining Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINCs). Detailed criteria for designating these were established, by the North Yorkshire SINC Panel and then the job of defining, designating, monitoring and protecting them was passed down to the District/Borough Councils. They were required to produce Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs). However these contain little substance and are ten years or more old or unobtainable. The system seems to have fallen into disuse so there is currently no effective comprehensive protection of large areas of ecological importance in NY.

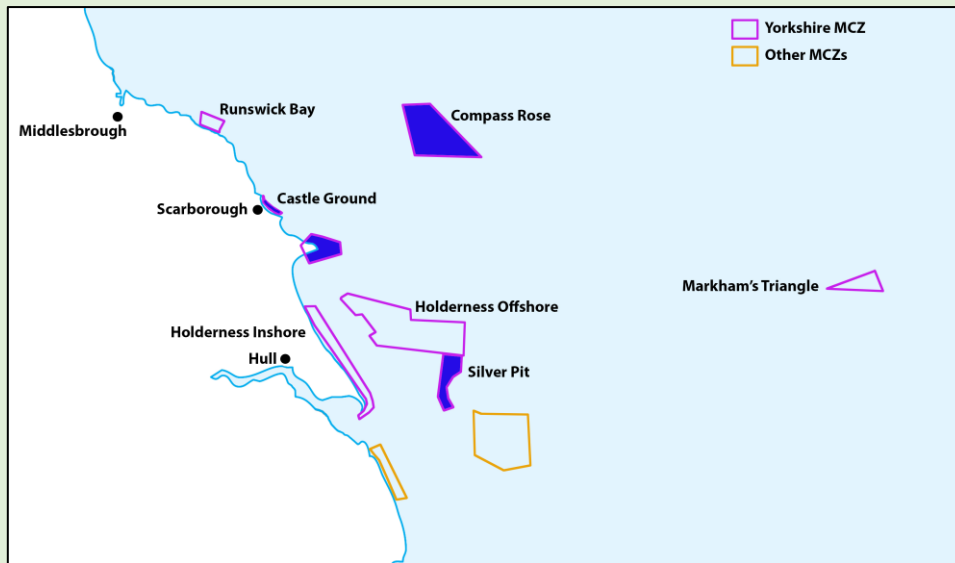
I would therefore call on NYC to:

- Take prime responsibility for protection of all areas of ecological value outside of SSSIs
- Complete the formal ratification of all Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation that meet the SINC Panel criteria by 2027.
- Produce a strategy for protecting designated SINCs
- Publish an annual monitoring report on progress in designation and action taken to protect sites.

Marine Protection Areas

The North Sea is unique in our coastal waters in terms of the diversity of wildlife it supports, with over 230 species of fish, a vast sea bird population and, in small numbers large aquatic mammals. These are all dependent on a complex ecosystem which ultimately depends on the health of the sea bed. Damaging and invasive fishing practices have and continue to dramatically disturb the North Sea and this in turn threatens all the wildlife in the dependent ecosystem. Marine Protection Areas control activity, protect the sea bed and all the organisms dependent on it. Only a small part of the North Yorkshire coast has MPA protection, at Runswick. Another two small MPAs are proposed but not approved at Scarborough and Filey Brig. In contrast the whole of the East Yorkshire sea coast is covered by an approved MPA.

- NYUA should engage with conservation bodies and actively work to extend MPA protection to the whole of its coastline by the time of the next NYUA election in 2027



Source [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_Conservation_Zone).

Wildlife Crime

NYC should work with North Yorkshire Police to :

- Encourage reporting of criminal activity
- Increase prosecutions
- Raise awareness through publication of crime and prosecution statistics.

Pollution of Rivers and Coastal Waters.

There are shocking levels of regular sewage pollution in some North Yorkshire rivers due to the inadequacy of sewers and sewage treatment facilities. Coastal waters are also affected by direct sewage discharge. Since the Tory government privatised these functions there is no democratic channel to rectify this. The other big source of pollution is phosphates from arable farming run-off. In the absence of any other locally elected body to take up these issues NYUA should

- Hold Yorkshire Water to account for the sewage pollution it is directly responsible for and press it publicly to produce a plan for eliminating sewage pollution within ten years.
- Work with the Rivers Trust, NFU and other agencies to monitor and improve agricultural practices to address the issue of damaging chemicals entering the watercourses through surface run-off.

In Addition

Flooding

The national body responsible for managing flood risk is the Environment Agency. It relies in part on local authorities to implement plans. NYUA will be responsible as the Lead Local Flood Authority for North Yorkshire for preparing and maintaining a strategy for local flood risk management.

While a flood management strategy is already in place, with respect to those responsible for producing and acting on it, public confidence in it is low. Severe weather is increasing as is the frequency of flood warnings and North Yorkshire is a high risk area.

NYC should

- Carry out an urgent review of its risk assessment addressing both river overflow and surface water drainage.
- Develop a strategy which is based on prevention rather than management.
- Immediately ban all housing development in flood plains.
- Work with local communities and the Environment Agency to develop and implement flood protection schemes in all areas at risk.
- Work with landowners to develop and implement schemes to reduce surface water run -off

Domestic Waste.

The current recycling rates of the local authorities in North Yorkshire fall a long way behind the best performing local authorities (See table below). A significant benefit of the establishment of a Unitary Authority is that it gets rid of the complex administrative and funding problems which arise from inter authority responsibilities for waste collection and disposal, currently involving seven local authorities. East Yorkshire Unitary shows what can be done.

The NYUA should:

- Bring the recycling rate in North Yorkshire up to the level of 64% currently achieved by the most efficient local authorities by the time of the next NYUA elections in 2027.
- Stop using single use plastic containers throughout its own operations by 2027.
- Take a lead in reducing the volume of waste generated across North Yorkshire.

Domestic Waste Recycling by English Local Authorities 2019/20

Ranking. 1 is top	Local Authority	% of waste recycled
1 (Best)	Three Rivers District	64.1
4	East Yorkshire Unitary	63.3
73	Hambleton District	51.1
98	Ryedale District	48.6
102	York Unitary	48.4
114	North Yorkshire County	47.4
185	Selby District	42.7
189	Harrogate Borough	42.4
212	Scarborough Borough	40.4
227	Craven District	39.2
232	Richmondshire District	38.2
341 (Worst)	Barrow in Furness	18.8

Sources: [Letsrecycle.com](https://letsrecycle.com) [DEFRA](https://defra.gov.uk)