

u3a goes to COP: An account of the experiences of some of those who attended

In November 2020, Brenda Ainsley attended a meeting with fellow Climate Reality Leaders, setting out to plan activities to take place during COP26 in Glasgow. The group was very keen to demonstrate all kinds of diversity and wanted to include the voices of all age groups. Brenda recognised that u3a could play an important part in this. The Trust u3a group 'Countdown to COP' was then founded by Brenda and Neil Deuchar and quickly grew to a membership of over 40. Along with several Scottish members, the group organised and ran a series of four workshops in Glasgow, to look at the topic of Intergenerational Climate Action*. As guests of the Climate Reality Project and a consortium of partners, these workshops took place on an electric bus at the First Bus Depot in Glasgow.

Approximately 30 u3a members took part in the workshops – here are the reflections of some of them: Everyone came away with their own stories to tell:

Ann MacGarry was very struck by one of the sessions she went to in the publicly accessible Green Zone. African women were talking about the grassroots action happening in their countries. At the end someone asked them what could we do? One passionately talked about the need for us to pressurise our own governments. Clive Teague also spent time in the Green Zone: he experienced Virtual Reality trips into space with Helen Sharman the astronaut, a fully immersive visit to a Moroccan farmer who had lost his house to the desert and a planetarium experience entitled 'Our place in the Cosmos'.



Figure 1: The Green Zone

Brenda's lasting memories included learning that more than 500 delegates at the conference were linked directly to the fossil fuel industry - bigger than any country's own representation. Brenda was also moved by hearing Tina Stege, Climate Envoy from the Marshall Islands: the Marshall Islands could disappear under the sea over the next 50 years.

Several images were indelibly imprinted. None who took part in the Climate Justice March on Saturday 6th November, along with over 100,000 others, will forget it in a hurry! Nick Ward remembers that there were lots (and lots and lots) of police everywhere but not a single gun in sight. Presumably there were armed police present, but they were invisible – this was probably quite remarkable to many of the international delegates – and made Nick proud to be British! Ann was delighted to (somehow) meet up with her friends from The Woodcraft Folk and Brenda found her fellow Climate Reality Leaders somewhere in the crowd (that was due to a bit of mobile phone location-magic!). Nick reminds us of the hanging globe in the foyer to the Green Zone: everyone's favourite for a photo. Another unforgettable iconic image was from Tuvalu in the Pacific, of Simon Kofe, Foreign Minister standing at a podium, up to his knees in the sea – or the XR protester (a 'Red Rebel') having tears wiped from her face by a woman with an indigenous heritage.

There were moments of humour though!
The u3a work- shops took place on an electric bus –
with all mod cons.



Figure 2: Day 2 workshop attendees

As Clive says, it worked well – comfortable, tiered seating, no disturbance from other people, and fully equipped with audio-visual equipment. And then there were the edible coffee cups! We learned later these were made in China... There was a fair bit of getting lost; marches and pop-up events played havoc with the buses. Ann found herself being interviewed by a film crew – because she asked them for directions!

Another highlight was meeting people face-to-face, not least friends only previously met via Zoom! For Brenda, the highlight was meeting former Vice President Al Gore. Mr Gore set up and leads the Climate Reality Project. Brenda was one of the nine Climate Reality Leaders chosen to meet him at his hotel for a 'meet and greet'.

Brenda said "He was really interested in learning about our u3a workshops about Intergenerational Climate Action. He was well-briefed and totally charming". Ann was struck by a representative of the Transnational Institute researching the military and climate change. For Nick, it was undoubtedly the Youth Climate Ambassadors for Wales. They were incredibly knowledgeable, articulate, confident and committed. They ran a 1½ hr public event in the Green Zone... one of them chaired the whole event and two of them were on the panel.

So, how did the Countdown to COP group come away feeling? Brenda left feeling exhausted but with a strong sense of achievement. She had met in person with over 30 u3a members (and an even larger group of Climate Reality Leaders) who had only ever been on a zoom call. Through the workshops, members really started to thrash out what they meant by 'Intergenerational Climate Action' and came away convinced that this is an important area to be involved in. Nick said he was glad that he had the opportunity to be in Glasgow, albeit only for a couple of days and very much in the fringe.



Figure 3: Youth Climate Ambassadors

Some members generated much media attention! Brenda was interviewed twice while in Glasgow and then again, back at home. Clive had a starring role in his local newspaper.



Figure 4: Cotgrave Community Garden

The COPs are, as some media outlets have commented, a big jamboree, but they are critical to the world making progress on climate actions. It felt good to have witnessed the buzz that was Glasgow during COP26. Ann came away feeling “a bit low but thinking about how to inspire hope”. Most of the group left Glasgow before the conference finished, so at that stage the final Glasgow Climate Pact was not known. Several members felt a sense of ‘stubborn optimism’ - and still do - despite disappointments about the final Pact. Much more needs to be done, but the commitments coming out of the COP are definitely moving us in the right direction. Now it’s up to us *all* to keep up the pressure and the momentum, so that we can get to where we need to be to meet the 1.5 degree target. As Ann said: ‘I feel our focus must be on our government's continued support of fossil fuels and their failure to do the obvious and win-win things like providing an effective advice service for everyone on energy efficiency in homes and other buildings’. She drew attention to Prof Kevin Anderson, who makes the useful point that if the richest 10% of the population just reduced their emissions to the European average the global emissions would go down by 30%.

There are lots of questions. As Clive points out, COP26 was a unique opportunity to experience and possibly influence the future of the world. The decisions made there will be critical to us all. How - and will - carbon trading be agreed? Will financial help be given to the poorer countries? Can countries agree how to measure and report their carbon emissions?

More importantly, many positive promises have been made to reduce carbon emissions. In the fullness of time, success will be achieved only if they are carried out in full and if nations **return each year** with even bolder Nationally Determined Contributions.

***Intergenerational Climate Action**

Some members of the Countdown to COP26 group have become very interested in how they can support and encourage younger people, as they become increasingly concerned about the climate emergency. There is a [podcast on our website](#) in which Irish octogenarians Frank Dorr and Eileen Lynch explore this in some detail. More resources on Intergenerational Climate Action to follow!

Contributions from Ann MacGarry, Brenda Ainsley, Clive Teague and Nick Ward.