

Green Energy for North Herts?

19th March 2016 (Walsworth Community Centre)

1 INTRODUCTION

The meeting was called by Martin Stears-Handscomb and Elizabeth Dennis on behalf of the North Herts Branch of the Co-operative Party, with a view to gathering together those interested in bringing about green energy in North Herts, focusing on community-based and co-operative options.
(28 people attended)

Elizabeth informed the meeting that the Labour and Co-operative candidates in the forthcoming NHDC election were committed to promoting local co-operative energy initiatives.

2 SHARON TAYLOR

Sharon is Leader of Stevenage Borough Council, which has proclaimed itself a Co-operative Council (in addition the majority of its councillors also represent the Co-operative Party).

She told us about two green housing developments in Stevenage, at Peartree Way and Cotney Croft. They were assisted in this by Anglia Ruskin University. They are built to codes 5 and 6, and equipped with energy efficient white goods. Building to these codes costs around twice that of a conventional build, mostly because the materials are expensive. The Government's abandonment of ambition to build energy efficient housing probably means that these materials will continue to be expensive.

3 BEN NIBLETT

Ben wore two hats. He told us about <http://www.maidenergy.coop/> which provides green energy around Maidenhead. They were fortunate to get a seed funding grant of £10,000, to install solar panels on Norden Farm Arts Centre, (complete) and Magna Carta School (in progress – further crowd-fund appeal for phase 2)

You need a community building with a good roof, and lots and lots of time to make contacts to make things happen. He referred to the challenges of the reducing feed in tariffs, etc and the rush to meet deadlines and mentioned a funding model of 1/3 friends and family, 1/3 local seeking good investments and 1/3 from wider sources looking for green investments.

They had received a bridging loan from a fellow co-operative – the Phone Co-op. He also referred to the Network of Local Energy Co-ops.

As Director of Campaigns at TearFund, he told us about the Big Church Switch, promoted by a number of bodies including also Christian Aid, which encourages churches and individual residents to switch to a Green Energy supplier. The current campaign was during Lent and was about to conclude.

4 CLAIRE SPENCER - COMMUNITY ENERGY BIRMINGHAM

Claire told us about a number of different projects, which started at St Mary's Moseley in a prosperous part of Birmingham, but have sought to also involve less prosperous areas such as the neighbouring Small Heath area. They have almost raised enough to install solar panel installations at the Moseley Exchange and the Ackers Adventure Centre. She mentioned the need for a manageable set of partners and using the "Co-operative Society for Community Benefit" Model which ensured that the assets were locked in for the benefit of the community. The group were investigating many different energy options including wind and ground energy.

5 JOSH ROBSON

Josh has held various jobs in the field, and is currently Chair of the Energy Policy Working Group of 'Labour Business' (an affiliated group of the Labour Party) and Head of Public Affairs at Knauf Insulation.

He spoke about the current political framework.

The last Labour Government enacted the Climate Change Act, with a requirement to set periodic carbon budgets. The Coalition and Conservative Governments have actually achieved budgets so far, and will publish a new budget around June time. He felt that FiT rates would never go much better than they are now, but that continued reduction in price of renewable technology would eventually make projects viable again.

Top-level policy responding to Paris will be published this year. There remains a huge gap in mid-level policy, which is what business needs to proceed.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Martin thanked Rachel Burgin, who had organised most of the speakers. He mentioned the work of the Energy Group of Transition Town Letchworth and the Letchworth G C Heritage Foundation Sustainability Forum.

Several attendees had left contact details to be notified of future developments. Martin closed the meeting expressing the hope that those attending would be inspired to future community initiatives in North Herts.

Thanks are due to Peter Willcox of the Transition Town Letchworth who put together this report with assistance from Martin.