

## **Greater Reading Environmental Network Press Release**

### **Parties debate environment at GREN Hustings.**

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*There are two versions of this – first a cut-down summary version on this page, and then a full report with a more detailed account of the discussions on subsequent pages.*

#### *Summary Version:*

### **Concerns Shared at Environmental Hustings – politicians agree to tackle climate change but disagree on fracking and local transport.**

Over fifty people came to an environmental hustings at Reading Quaker Meeting House on Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> April, called by the Greater Reading Environmental Network (GREN).

The political parties were represented by Cllr. Ed Hopper (Conservative), Cllr. Matt Rodda (Labour), Jenny Woods (Liberal Democrat), and Cllr. Rob White (Green). UKIP had been invited but did not send a representative.

All parties supported targets in the Climate Change Act to reduce UK carbon emissions - both Greens and Liberal Democrats called for more ambitious targets and both opposed all fracking for shale gas which Labour would allow and Conservatives would encourage, with both parties specifying the need for high environmental controls.

All panellists supported public transport and cycling in the town. Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats wanted to get a Third Thames Bridge built to take traffic out of Reading to reduce congestion and improve air quality. Rob White did not support this proposal - he favoured a really good cycling network and improved bus service.

Ed Hopper commented that the law did not allow Councils to give more revenue support to buses to reduce fares – whereupon Rob White said the law should be changed which won a round of applause from members of the audience.

There was general agreement on the need to put additional development on brownfield sites and to protect green leisure space.

Professor Gavin Parker said:

“The evening featured lively debate about some of the most important topics that face voters in the Reading area.”

John Booth, GREN Secretary, commented:

“It was really good to see broad agreement between the parties on the need to address environmental concerns, although of course there were differences of emphasis and on how to respond to particular issues.”

*END of Summary version*

## Full Report:

### **Concerns Shared at Environmental Hustings – politicians agree to tackle climate change but disagree on fracking and local transport.**

Local electors showed their concern for green issues when over fifty people came to an environmental hustings at Reading Quaker Meeting House to quiz party representatives. The meeting, on Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> April, called by the Greater Reading Environmental Network (GREN), was chaired by Professor Gavin Parker of the University of Reading. The parties had been invited to nominate one representative to debate environmental issues relevant to Reading – covering both parliamentary constituencies and the local Council area.

The political parties were represented by Cllr. Ed Hopper (Conservative), Cllr. Matt Rodda (Labour), Jenny Woods (Liberal Democrat), and Cllr. Rob White (Green). All but Ed Hopper were parliamentary candidates for Reading East. UKIP had been invited but did not send a representative.

*Each speaker gave a short presentation and then they debated four themes with questions from the audience.*

*The first theme was ‘Climate Change – Energy Supply’*

*Scope: Emissions targets, fossil fuels, energy sources – policies and funding.*

All parties supported the target in the Climate Change Act to reduce UK carbon emissions to 80% of 1990 levels by 2050 - with both Greens and Liberal Democrats calling for more ambitious targets – Jenny Woods wanted to see zero emissions by 2050.

In answer to questions on ‘fracking’ – the controversial drilling technique to extract shale gas – both Greens and Jenny Woods thought it should not go ahead, Matt Rodda would not rule it out but said it should be tightly regulated, while Ed Hopper said the USA had benefitted from shale gas and he supported giving tax breaks to encourage exploration.

Rob White was more isolated as the only representative to oppose new nuclear power as part of a future global energy mix - including renewables and carbon capture and storage – which the others said they would support.

*The second theme was ‘Climate Change – Resilience’*

*Scope: Preparing for floods, droughts, heatwaves, and high energy prices – policies on development standards, building regulations, and funding mechanisms.*

There was general agreement on the need to plan to avoid flood risks, and to improve insulation standards. The Liberal Democrats would improve housing stock through a ‘Green Building Act’ offering financial incentives to people to improve insulation and ensuring all rental homes were well insulated by 2027. Matt Rodda said Labour would spend on modernising our infrastructure.

Ed Hopper said that making new homes ‘zero carbon’ by 2018 was a coalition policy, and pointed out that Labour did not count borrowing to invest in their budget-balancing calculations but it was still borrowing.

*The third theme was ‘Transport’*

*Scope: Local transport issues – costs, congestion, public transport, cycling infrastructure, air quality, transport emissions and accessibility.*

The Conservatives were working to get a Third Thames Bridge built to take traffic out of Reading. The bridge would be between South Oxfordshire and Wokingham and residents of all three authorities would be entitled to discounts on the costs of using it, while others would have to pay.

Matt Rodda also supported the Third Bridge proposals as did Jenny Woods, although she said that it was very important to get the details of the scheme right. Rob White did not support the proposals - he favoured a really good cycling network and improved bus service.

Ed Hopper commented that the law did not allow Councils to give more revenue support to buses – whereupon Rob White said the law should be changed which won a round of applause from members of the audience.

Someone from the floor commented that it was wrong that there should be public funding for a Third Bridge - a subsidy for relatively wealthy car owners – when there could be no subsidy for less well-off people who depend more on public transport.

A questioner from the floor asked if the panel would support free bus passes for all funded by road user charging. Ed Hopper said that this was not on, politically. Others agreed that free bus travel for all was unaffordable but the Green Party said they did want to see bus fares reduced.

Another questioner raised the large costs associated with the HS2 (the 'High Speed Two' rail line proposed to link London and the North) - but only Rob White was opposed to this saying he supported investment in 'Slow Speed One'.

*The last theme was 'Growth'*

*Scope: Planning for future development in Reading.*

There was general agreement on the need to use brownfield sites and to protect green leisure space, and concern over the difficulty of regulating buy-to-let in a free market. Jenny Woods thought garden cities should be developed in the arc between Oxford and Cambridge and thought there should be more co-operation between authorities over housing needs. She noted that West Berkshire was releasing land for housing on Reading's western borders.

Rob White pointed out that Reading's housing waiting list stood at around 10,000 and wanted to see more Council Houses built, and regretted that coalition policies had reduced the proportion of affordable homes required in any new development. Ed Hopper welcomed the fact that empty offices were being converted to flats because of coalition policies. Matt Rodda wanted tighter controls on private landlords, including longer tenancies.

Professor Gavin Parker said:

"The evening featured lively debate about some of the most important topics that face voters in the Reading area."

John Booth, GREN Secretary, commented:

"It was really good to see broad agreement between the parties on the need to address environmental concerns, although of course there were differences of emphasis and on how to respond to particular issues. I am very grateful to the speakers and to Professor Parker for giving their time to enable this public discussion."

***END of Full Report***

Notes:

1/. Greater Reading Environmental Network (GREN) brings together groups and individuals around Reading who care about sustainability, environment, climate change, conservation and planning issues. See [www.gren.org.uk](http://www.gren.org.uk)

2/. GREN has 27 member groups and over 150 individual members.