

Annual Report 2009 – 2010

This is the first formal Annual Report from the Chair of GREIN and is being presented to the first formal annual general meeting of the network. This follows our transformation from a loosely based network to being constituted as a democratic, membership based voluntary organisation, through the adoption of our new constitution in September 2009. That big step, followed up by the opening of our bank account, proved to be the start of what became a big year for the development of the network.

At the time of that meeting in September, global interest was already stirring in the upcoming Copenhagen summit; anticipated at the time to represent the most important, and some would say last realistic, chance for coordinated global action to avoid seriously damaging climate change later this century. Whilst political leaders failed abysmally in Copenhagen, through collective action by its members, GREIN at least gave Reading's residents the chance to hear about the scientific projections, the campaigners' demands and the political response from Reading West (then Government) MP, Martin Salter.

Calling Copenhagen! organised by GREIN members in November, attracted a packed house to listen to these perspectives and ask important questions about the UK's response. In addition, our *Message to Copenhagen* presented to Martin Salter MP to forward to the Prime Minister, with its demands for specific and sufficient actions, also attracted the signature of over 50 local voluntary and faith based groups (including that of Mr Salter, who when asked unfortunately said we could not take that as being on behalf of the UK Labour Party). GREIN did invite Reading East MP, Rob Wilson, but he was unavailable to attend. Despite chasing, we also failed to elicit any response to Reading's message from the Prime Minister's office.

Amidst the shock and disappointment of the aftermath of Copenhagen, groups and individuals in Reading met to review the proceedings and outcomes. *Copenhagen: in case you missed it*, organised by Greenpeace Berkshire and other GREIN members, revealed the shocking political skulduggery that led to the vague and inadequate statements of intent that came out of the summit. But, alongside this sat the development of a massive global citizens' movement, which inspired participants to consider how we could continue to play our part locally. GREIN members decided to make a start by staging a collective day of action in Reading town centre on 6 March and to organise meetings where general election candidates' green credentials could be put to the test by the public; both great examples of what is possible through acting together to inform people and facilitate collective action.

The election meetings organised by GREIN members in March gave the people of Reading two (of very few) opportunities to question prospective candidates on their policies in relation to broad issues of sustainability and specific positions on action to combat dangerous

climate change. Unlike his counterpart in Reading West, the Conservative Party candidate for Reading East (Rob Wilson) was not prepared to prioritise this meeting, which was a disappointment, perhaps particularly so for Conservative supporters, many of whom surely have as much concern about these issues as others do. Instructively for future engagement on these issues, the first two questions at the Reading Faith Forum election meeting, which Rob Wilson did attend, were on the environment and climate change!

Having been instrumental in establishing the Reading Climate Change Partnership, GREN's elected representative took our place at its first board meeting in November 2009. The Partnership is intended to facilitate joint working across all sectors to deliver urgent appropriate action to mitigate and adapt to climate change in Reading. Whilst much of its first year has been focused on influencing the shape of the new Vision for Reading 2030 and Sustainable Community Strategy developed by Reading Borough Council together with its statutory, community and business partners with some success, its influence on practical local action to mitigate climate change has been very limited. The RCCP has no resources directly at its disposal and therefore must urgently find ways to effectively influence behaviours, promote, and coordinate action by others if it is to be worth the time and effort it consumes.

Alongside all this political engagement, GREN members wanted to develop better facilities for our sharing of information about and amongst themselves; to this end we wanted to develop a web site with much greater functionality than the Yahoo group afforded. As a network, we were able to secure funding from Reading Borough Council and select a web developer to achieve this. Our chosen developers, Loud'n'Clear, offered much more than the most attractive proposal however; only through their generosity in effectively match funding the RBC grant with a donation of their time were we able to achieve our ambitions for the web site www.gren.org.uk Having gone live in April 2010, with key information about more than 20 member groups from Reading listed, events and news postings increasing and a host of resources available, the site is undoubtedly a success. Traffic to the site has continued to grow since its launch and encouragingly over 50% of visitors in the last month were new. Whilst nearly 70 individuals have so far registered membership through the site, it is disappointing that despite our efforts, we left a good number of Yahoo group users behind. A big thank you is required to Reading Friends of the Earth rep John Booth and Reading Energy Pioneers' rep Gabriel Berry for their contribution to the development and a special huge thank you to Beth and Chin of Loud'n'Clear for their input and ongoing support.

The challenge for the year ahead, in relation to our web site is to continue to build its public recognition as *the* gateway to find out about 'green' groups, news and information in Reading and *the* forum to connect with other like minded people locally. This latter aspect, a key function of the former Yahoo group, has been the least used element of the web site to date. Member groups tend to use their own message groups exclusively, which is understandable for most 'internal' communications; yet for information, comment and discussion the opportunity exists to engage with far greater numbers through the GREN web site message/forum function.

On a hot Saturday morning in June and a follow-up session in July, GREN members from 15 of our groups came together to think about what a sustainable Reading might look like and set out our vision for this. Our thoughts have been fed into the development of the 'official' vision for Reading in 2030 and you may detect elements of this in the resultant consultation draft of 'Sustainable Community Strategy' which can still be commented on at

<http://www.reading2020.org.uk/library/public/file78/> However, the main purpose for our own vision for a truly sustainable Reading was to provide a basis to develop specific proposals for collective community action or to lobby for action by others and to use it to engage with a broader range of community groups, building a much bigger constituency for local action on the environment and sustainability .

When GREN representatives secured a meeting with leaders of the new administration at Reading Borough Council, elements of our vision provided the basis to lobby for action in relation to local initiatives on energy efficiency and renewable generation, a more sustainable local economy and transport. Our vision has also provided a platform for a response from GREN to the draft local transport strategy 2011- 2026 and a follow-up meeting with the lead councilor for transportation and planning is now planned for the New Year.

How and when GREN members might want to develop specific proposals for action based around our vision is yet to take shape – perhaps through working with the newly invigorated Transition Town Reading group?

The Feed-in-Tariffs for individual and community generation of renewable power have been preserved by the new UK government and will soon be supplemented by loans from the 'Green Bank' and Renewable Heat Incentive payments. Together, these present significant opportunities for the development of clean heat and power and energy efficiency measures locally and GREN members have been at the forefront of promoting these. Whilst Reading Energy Pioneers have shown the way for individual householders, a GREN sponsored event this month, led by Reading Islamic Trustees for the Environment (RITE) with help from Christian Ecology Link attracted over 30 people who own or manage community buildings to see how they could take advantage of these opportunities. In the meantime, your GREN representative on the RCCP has formulated a proposal for a community based initiative on the much larger scale that is needed to make a real impact and ensure that less well off community members can also benefit from the schemes, alongside those who have the wherewithal to afford capital installation costs themselves.

So, that summarises the big year since GREN's formal constitution; a busy and generally successful one. We would like to thank Reading Borough Council and the Berkshire Community Foundation for their generous grant support; the latter meeting the cost of our new publicity leaflet which will be available in the next couple of weeks. Thank you also to individuals who made donations at our events, without which these would not be possible.

One final note – 2010 was the International Year for Bio-diversity – yet this has not really featured in the agenda of GREN activities. I think this may be symptomatic of a general lack of emphasis on conservation, flora and fauna within GREN and the possible need to do more to engage with groups and individuals interested in these particular areas; perhaps one of the challenges for the year ahead.

**Paul Harper, Chair, Greater Reading Environmental Network
November 2010**