



## **Local Elections 2016 - Environmental Question Time**

Local elections are on 5th May 2016 so the Greater Reading Environmental Network ran an 'Environmental Hustings' on Friday April 15th. The meeting was in a 'Question Time' format and was chaired by Prof. Gavin Parker.

Councillors Tony Page (Labour), Ed Hopper (Conservative) and Rob White (Green) debated key topics in the Quaker Meeting Rooms. Councillor Ricky Duveen (Liberal Democrat) had been expected to take part but was unwell.

The panel made introductory statements and then discussed five topics: housing growth plans; local energy policies; local transport; LED street lights; waste and recycling.

### **Introductions:**

Tony Page said Labour led locally by example, had a good record on carbon emissions, owned the best bus company in the country, and was putting solar panels on council houses and setting up a wholly-owned housing company to build more homes.

Rob White said the Greens had pushed the Council towards a climate change strategy and proposals to divest pensions from fossil fuels. He was very concerned about homelessness and wanted councillors to be elected who give high priority to environmental and social justice.

Ed Hopper said the Conservative government had reached the climate deal in Paris and overseen tripling of renewable energy in the UK, reformed the energy market, and were backing a new nuclear power station. Locally he wanted Reading to improve its poor record on recycling.

### **New Local Plan – housing numbers:**

All three parties agreed that many more homes should be built in Reading. Rob White also recognised that the South East had a very high environmental footprint so favoured rebalancing the economy to other areas. Ed Hopper warned that Reading will remain under pressure until London's 'bubble' is addressed.

Tony Page said it was important to get the right mix of types of houses and over 400 per year should be affordable. He was critical of central government preventing local authorities from setting high standards for energy-efficient homes.

**Local Energy – saving and supply:**

The panel were asked if they would like to see a publicly-owned non-profit local energy company to invest in energy saving and renewable energy, and offer fair, affordable prices. All agreed that this was worth investigating.

Rob White emphasised his concerns over fuel poverty and that the government had shut down the 'Green Deal' funding scheme. Tony Page said the Council was discussing working on energy with other Labour councils and mentioned Nottingham's 'RobinHoodenergy' scheme.

**Transport:**

Ed Hopper said Reading was extremely congested and backed the proposed Third Thames Bridge to improve air quality and reduce congestion. He liked the improved cycle lanes in neighbouring Wokingham where roads were wider. Rob White said the Air Quality Management Areas were not working. He opposed bridge-building schemes and supported 20 mph areas and more money spent on cycling.

Tony Page commented that Reading buses were very successful and private car use in Reading was falling, but Reading was the regional capital so needed good transport links. He wanted to see an eventual end to use of the internal combustion engine - for a cleaner, greener, quieter future - and more park-and-ride and a managed Third Thames Bridge.

**White (blue-rich) LED Streetlights:**

Campaigners argue that Reading's proposed change to 'blue-rich' LED streetlights will have adverse effects on people and wildlife. The panel was asked if there should be more consultation and assessment before the nine million pound contract goes ahead.

Tony Page said that LEDs would save energy and money and he had received technical advice from Public Health England that adverse effects would be 'negligible'. Rob White said he would support a longer harder look at the question and Ed Hopper thought the Council should give the objectors an opportunity to make their case, even if it did not change its decision.

**Waste and Recycling:**

Panel were asked what should be done to lift Reading's recycling rate from 33% of its waste towards the 2020 target of 50%. Rob White said we needed to remember the hierarchy 'Reduce, Re-use, Recycle' and the Council should support initiatives like Freegle, the Repair Café, and the Bicycle Kitchen. Kitchen food waste should be seen as a resource.

Ed Hopper said it should be made easier to recycle and favoured kerbside glass and food collections but he would not support reducing the size of the 'general waste' bins. Tony Page said waste to landfill had fallen and announced that the waste disposal sub-contractor re3 was about to launch a new strategy based on educating people. He wanted licensing powers to require take-aways to use recyclable packaging, and to fine landlords if tenants failed to recycle, but did not think kerbside glass collections were needed.

Notes:

1/. Agenda for the meeting with topics, context and questions, is at  
<http://www.gren.org.uk/resources/GRENHustingsTopics2016.pdf>

2/. getreading's coverage is in an article at

<http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/reading-berkshire-news/reading-councillors-talk-transport-housing-11194749>

and in a blog (start at the bottom)

<http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/local-news/updates-reading-politicians-debate-first-11189117>