

Basingstoke Clean Air Campaign
Notes from Hustings meeting at Christ Church, Chineham, 7.30-9.30 pm, Tuesday 23rd
April 2019

Martin Biermann was in the chair.

Representatives present:

Cllr. Paul Harvey, Labour (Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council)

Cllr. Gavin James, Liberal Democrat (Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council)

Cllr. Iain James, Green (Bramley Parish Council; candidate for Bramley ward)

Cllr. Tristan Robinson, Conservative (Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council; chair of Planning Committee)

The audience consisted of about 25 people in addition to the above.

The four representatives spoke briefly on the questions posed by BCAC and their attitudes to pollution, the environment and climate change. The audience then posed questions.

I have reported below without attributions, because there seemed to be general agreement on the points made, and so I regard all four parties represented as being accountable for keeping to the suggestions and promises. I make one exception: in my view the most remarkable statement of the evening was from Tristan Robinson, in which he suggested that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is not an effective measure of a society, and asked to what extent we were willing to sacrifice our society to it. The Greens have been asking questions like this for years, but it had not that evening been mentioned by any of the other reps including the Green one; unsurprisingly since it's not obviously a local issue. I wish the representatives had run with it, perhaps introducing discussion of a local currency or community trading schemes.

That aside, the meeting produced positive actions that both the councillors and we can take. Top of these is to get stronger words, such as "must" and "will", into the next Local Plan in place of the "should", "could" and "may" that have given the developers wiggle room. We need to be able to "hold their feet to the fire" to get commitments to the developments we want. Central government has imposed demanding house-building targets on the Borough, and although we need the housing (because people live longer) we might need to push back against these to preserve the environment. The new Local Plan will be outlined soon, and early comments will be most effective. Reading's local plan, at present before the Inspector, would be a good example to follow as it contains demanding targets.

Second is to get action as if there really is a climate emergency, whether or not the Council declares one, as some other councils have done. This requires specific, demanding targets to be set that take effect within the next five years. Action includes a procurement decision for the Council to obtain its energy from 100% renewable sources, and the transfer of Council investments from over-concentration in commercial property to public/private partnerships, for example in social ("council") housing, community energy, water reclamation, transport provision (e.g. a non-profit public transport corporation similarly to Reading Buses) and innovative building, tapping into the talents of local small enterprises. The Council's large estate should be exploited to maximise local energy generation. The Council could also act as broker for partnerships between other Borough institutions and enterprises, including the local NHS trusts.

Fuel poverty needs to be addressed: the Council should be doing insulation projects like one in Oakridge 20 years ago (by a housing association) that brought bills down by 70%. The Council could insist on new houses being built to be net exporters of energy: the Centre for Alternative Technology has demonstrated such a house. At the very least it could insist on every house having a south-facing roof on which solar panels could be installed.

In planning, the Council could insist on an environmental impact statement for every application, and require one for each plan of its own. We could then hold planners and developers to account. All the panellists agreed on this being beneficial. The effect of the Leisure Park development, for instance, might be to exacerbate the existing trend of loss of commercial sites in the town centre to residential development. That trend encourages commuting and the “dormitory town” rather than local enterprise and employment; and the town centre flats lack gardens and green space. The needs of commuters are unfortunately being subjugated to profit by the railway companies, which have resisted for years having a station at Chineham, and are not favourable to one at Manydown, because these would slow the trains and cause scheduling difficulties.

An engineer in the audience suggested that no new building be allowed to incorporate “resistance heating”, i.e. electrical heaters that convert electricity directly into heat, such as convectors, fan heaters, electric fires and infra-red heaters. This rule needs to be in place soon because the government has to get fossil fuel heating phased out by 2050, which will otherwise lead to widespread installation of this carbon-intensive form of heating. Low-temperature water systems, capable of using waste heat or solar or ground-source heat, should be mandatory instead. The panellists agreed to look into this.

There is a deficiency in local democracy. Local campaigns such as South West Action Group (SWAG) have been successful in putting residents’ views across to the Council, but the 8-member cabinet sometimes seems to be impervious to both the Council’s and local people’s views. In addition, the Borough Council has no more than lobbying power with the County Council, which is responsible for highways and transport strategy, and with central government; and it has little control over quangoes controlling health, public transport and motorways. Highways England, for example, insisted on the Black Dam roundabout redevelopment to prevent traffic queues on the M3: the traffic jams have been transferred into the town instead. The County Council was responsible for the narrowing of Kingsclere Road at the railway bridge and creation of a poorly-designed shared pedestrian/cycle path with a downhill run terminating abruptly in a “cheese-grater” under the bridge.

Local democracy is also impeded by the Councillors being expected to digest 600-700 pages of documents for Committee meetings. The Council officers need to be able to prepare short, non-technical summaries.

Transport was a key theme, given the focus on it by BCAC. Bramley Parish Council has made efforts to reduce engine idling by motorists waiting for the level crossing and outside local schools; but people don’t like being told to switch off. “Pester power” by schoolchildren is also being exploited by the Borough Council’s projects with two local schools, along with education about pollution hotspots outside primary schools. Reducing car use by adopting Netherlands-like pro-cycling planning was advocated – one in two bicycles sold in the Netherlands is electrically assisted, and we should be going that way too. The Borough Council subsidises transport to £800k but bus operator Stagecoach has to make a profit and has no incentive to introduce newer technology, e.g. electric

buses, in Basingstoke. Cleaner public transport could be subsidised by raising car parking charges in the town centre. There were more problems than solutions expressed about transport - one young person present said flatly that they were too scared to cycle in the town - but the solution most useful at Borough Council level is for everyone to comment on planning applications to point out deficiencies in provision for cycling, electric car charging, public transport and parking. Section 106 money is available to support initiatives in these.

We were reminded to take local action to mark national Clean Air Day on 20th June; and that young people are passionate about preserving the environment and taking action against climate change, and they would like to know how to influence the Council.