

Co-operation & Sustainability Conference

Co-operatives can lead the way in creating a greener, more sustainable UK

Co-operatives can lead the way in creating a greener and more sustainable society, a conference in Reading heard.

With community-led action and the Big Society high on the agenda, new co-operatives are emerging to face the challenges of climate change and the opportunities presented by the political drive towards 'localism'.

Experts from the fields of building sustainable communities, producing renewable energy, promoting green travel and creating low-carbon housing led discussions at the Co-operation and Sustainability Conference organised by Co-operatives South East in Reading.

They were joined by constituency MP Alok Sharma, who opened the conference by defining the Big Society and considering the role community activists could play in it.

"Voluntary and charity groups in communities are the backbone of

society in towns and cities," he said.

"The Big Society idea is nothing new – what government is trying to do is give power to local communities and people.

Mr Sharma highlighted the Asset Transfer Unit, which would support communities in buying shops and pubs at risk of closure, and the Pathfinder for Mutuals, which encouraged public sector workers to take control and deliver services, as the Big Society in action.

He gave the £850m regeneration of Reading railway station and the proposed Reading bike hire scheme as examples of local and central government investment in greener transport.

And he applauded the work of community projects including:

- Tilehurst Globe, who recently encouraged 150 people to participate in a community clean-up.
- Pangbourne and Whitchurch



Sustainability Group for their work in reducing the carbon footprints of local people.

- Theale Environment Group, who planted 2,010 trees in 2010 with the support of the local council and sponsorship from the business community.

The conference, which attracted 65 delegates from across the South East representing co-operative businesses, community groups and the public sector, explored four key areas: low carbon housing, green travel, sustainable communities and renewable energy.

Reducing consumption, slashing bills



Phil Beardmore, of the Confederation of Co-operative Housing, highlighted the work of Greener Together.

This behavioural change project, sponsored by Defra, asks members – including eight housing co-operatives – to take pledges to reduce their carbon footprint.

“This co-operative approach to climate change helps people live greener lives,” he said.

“This is about lifestyle changes, not installing solar panels. Participants make pledges to change their behaviour, like reducing waste, or using the car less.

“The legacy of Greener Together is that there is now a new level of green leaders in the co-operative movement.”

Carol Biggs of Hastings Trust explained how her organisation had

retrofitted a Victorian terraced house – a former B&B – with insulation, new windows and a passive heating system to conserve energy by 76 percent.

Meanwhile, local tradesmen, who worked on a voluntary basis, learned new skills centred around eco-refits.

“We wanted to prove this kind of work could be done in an old property. The work has reduced energy consumption and utility bills,” she said.

Charlie Baker of Urbed (*pictured left*) took delegates step-by-step through his project to turn a Victorian semi into a carbon neutral house, and explained how housing associations could employ the same techniques to help their tenants reduce their energy bills.

“The UK is one of the world’s major CO₂ producers and we are not doing much about it. We have pledged to reduce emissions by 34 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050.”

“Around 85 percent of the current housing stock will still be standing by the time we have to hit those targets.

“There are four million homes in Britain that are considered ‘impossible’ to retrofit, and we showed it was possible.”

Promoting green travel



“Giving people ownership of the solutions to the problems in their lives builds empowered communities,” Dan Harris of Oxford Cycle Workshop told the conference.

“Travel is more often than not a local issue that affects more than just how people get from A to B – it includes issues of quality of life related to on-street neighbourhood parking, traffic noise and air pollution.”

Dan introduced delegates to the Oxford Cycle Workshop, whose work has recently been celebrated in The Co-operative’s national television advertising campaign, *Join the Revolution*.

The ‘little green bike shop’, a worker co-operative, encourages the public to cycle more, by refurbishing and selling used bikes.

Its community-owned training division teaches members to maintain and repair their own machines, and instructs enthusiasts to become fully-qualified cycle mechanics.

Meanwhile its Cycle Oxford club promotes bike-related fun through events including the annual Cycle Festival and the Oxford Bike Bell Orchestra.

Gemma White, business development executive at The Phone Co-op, explained how even a business with customers nationwide

could adopt a green travel policy.

“I am based in the Chipping Norton office, a small market town on the edge of the Cotswolds, five miles from the local train station,” she said.

“My usual business trip starts with a walk from either the office, or my home to the bus stop to then take me to the train station. This can involve getting up at the crack of dawn and experiencing many changes on the train as well as on the bus.

“All of our business trips are faced with the challenge of using environmentally friendly transport, something requested by both our members, and also to set an example to other businesses that it is possible.”

Producing renewable energy



Mike Pickering, of Midcounties Co-operative, explained how his chain of retail outlets was working to reduce its own carbon footprint and that of its customers by investing in green energy, reducing packaging and reducing the amount of food waste sent to landfill by setting up a Foodbank project.

All of its new property developments are scored against a green checklist and the co-operative is using 100 percent green energy across all of its sites.

Midcounties has been wind-testing at its Oxford HQ, has invested in a hydro power project in the Forest of Dean and has installed solar power and heating at its new Warwick HQ,

said Mike.

One of the green energy initiatives Midcounties Co-operative has invested in is Westmill Wind Farm on the Swindon / Oxfordshire border, whose 2,500 co-operative members had raised £4.6m towards the construction of five turbines, with the Co-operative Bank lending the remaining £3.4m.

The turbines produce enough energy every year to power 2,500 homes, said chairman Mark Luntley (*pictured*).

The turbines are safe, don't pollute the environment, and produce free power, said Mark.

And the energy spent in erecting the turbines was recovered in seven months.

Future plans for the 85-hectare organic farm include commercial solar panels.

Solar power is the area of expertise of Stuart Major, of the Solar Co-op, who explored the benefits of the co-operative model for green enterprises.

"A lot of people have been put off by big business and are looking for an alternative," he said.

"It's a robust business model, and there are people out there looking for what we are doing; people who want to be involved."

Building sustainable communities



"Transition is one of the most exciting experiments anywhere in the world, and it stands on the shoulders of what the co-operative movement has done for 160 years," said Rob Hopkins, co-founder of Transition Town Totnes and the Transition Network.

"The transition movement is about creating a new, more appropriate infrastructure," said Rob.

"It is a response to specific challenges like climate change and peak oil. We ask: what will society look like when oil costs \$180 a barrel, or when we start taking carbon reduction seriously?"

"Community energy companies producing wind and hydro power will be a key part of that future.

"Social enterprises will take over local shops and sell locally-produced food in them.

"Eighty percent of our food can be grown and produced locally.

"Local currency will stop the wealth leaking out of the local economy.

"Communities will own assets and become the builders of their own society."

"Transition is a tool for turning problems into solutions like the Rochdale Pioneers did at the start of the co-operative movement," he said later, in a keynote speech.

Louise Rutterford, of the Centre for

Sustainable Energy, talked about the twin challenges of climate change and rising energy costs.

She introduced PlanLoCal, a three-year project that links together statutory planning and low-carbon issues, and aims to empower communities to undertake low carbon projects.

Communities who want to take steps to tackle energy use can access assistance and advice through Community Energy Direct, whose representative, Anna Eagar, took delegates through the process of becoming a Community Power Co-operative, from understanding the Green Deal to installing community-scale renewables and micro-generation.

For more information about starting a co-operative business log on to www.cooperatives-se.coop or email info@cooperatives-se.coop