

Sustainability Forum: 7th February 2024

Theme: Volunteering

The evening was divided into two parts, 4 presentations with time for questions, followed by a roundtable and feedback session. The slides for the presentations are attached, and a brief summary of the presentation is included here.

The presentations were:

- Friends of the Earth and Great Big Green Week;
- Friends of Cassiobury Park
- Rediscovering the River Colne
- Community Energy Fund

The next Sustainability Forum will be on the evening of **Wednesday 10th July 2024 (6:15pm for a 6:30pm start).**

Feedback from 24th October meeting:

The council fed back on activities relating to discussions at the previous meeting:

- Across Hertfordshire, through the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP), work is being done on how to encourage and improve retrofitting in the county.
 - HCCSP has a survey – open until 12th February – circulated with the invite.
 - HCCSP has reviewed what other councils are doing and identified the following document from Cambridge City Council as a good example. It gives housing archetypes and potential solutions. You can review it here:
<https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/media/11676/retrofitting-your-home-report.pdf>
- Watford BC are currently reviewing and updating the sustainable Watford aspect of their website. They will seek to make information more easily accessible and sign post to other relevant information.

Friends of the Earth (FoE) and Great Big Green Week (GBGW):

Friends of the Earth are an entirely volunteer run group, with a wide range of activities and time commitment options. They have 3 fixed roles of Coordinator (Chair), treasurer and linked roles to councils. The groups covers Watford and Three Rivers. They also have a number of fluid roles, including:

- Campaign leads
- Media / publicity
- Social media
- Website
- Admin

They run a number of events, which people can volunteer to help with, including events for children and campaign and awareness raising events.

One of the major events they run is the South West Herts Great Big Green Week. Great Big Green Week is a national initiative, which in 2024 runs from 8-16 June. There is a significant

amount of work required to run this, and this is done through a working group of volunteers and, depending on the grant funding received, paid roles for specific elements.

South West Herts Great Big Green Week includes events across Watford and Three Rivers. This includes a Green Market Takeover on 9th June in Watford town centre, and an ecohomes event in Three Rivers.

To find out more go to: <https://greenwatford.uk/>

Questions:

- What is the relationship between FoE locally and nationally?
 - Local groups are more like a franchise – they buy into the national ethos but implement what is relevant to their local area and capacity. There are national campaigns which will be run locally, along with local specific campaigns.
- How do you get to see and consult on plans and strategies?
 - Am on lots of mailing lists! When see the responses from consultations there isn't always a narrative explain the results and the activities undertaken.
- How come you have some paid positions?
 - Volunteers apply for grants, depending how successful we are depends on who we can employ and for how long. These are project specific.
- Are you a charity?
 - We are a constituted local group. We made the decision not to become a charity.
- Could there be a GBGW market in Three Rivers? There is a market in Rickmansworth, is there anything planned for GBGW?
 - No plans to do anything as yet. They have a green market which doesn't tie in with GBGW and there is no space to do anything during GBGW. We are planning an ecohomes event in Three Rivers in GBGW so there is a big event in both areas.
- Wood Oaks farm is a good area, and could be a good place to do something?
 - Agreed. For those not aware of Wood Oaks Farm, here is the link: <https://woodoaksfarm.com/>

Friends of Cassiobury Park (FoCP):

Friends of Cassiobury Park are a volunteer led organisation, celebrating their 50th year. They aim to make Cassiobury Park welcoming and accessible to all, including people, dogs and cyclists. They have around 300 members, but always welcome more. The annual membership fee is small at £5. They are also always looking for volunteers to help, whether in work with Cassiobury, its associated nature reserve and Whippendell woods, or with communications type roles or in the running of the organisation.

They hold a volunteer day on the 3rd Saturday of every month.

To find out more see their website: www.friendsofcassionurypark.org.uk or follow them on social media.

Questions:

- We are doing something at St Mary's church, can you help? Yes
- There are some very big trees along the canal, which I am nervous about. What is the council doing?

- There is ongoing tree management, as you can see with the works in Whippendell Woods due to Ash dieback. We have an arborist who regularly checks the trees. If the trees are along the canal – directly either side – this is managed by the Canals and Riverside trust. If you can give us a specific location we can highlight it to them. Area of concern was from the marina to the grove hotel.
- Is there more than one Walnut tree? Are there plans for more? It's good to have trees which are flowering and fruit bearing, which provide food and are of broad span for shade.
 - There is a plan for tree planting, and Watford BC will consider fruit and nut bearing trees where appropriate. **WBC to report back on tree planting progress at next Forum.**
- Community Orchard Project – are there any? Can there be more?
 - Working with the Chamber and others there were a number planted a couple of years ago. The trees went in on green space, not always a designated orchard. We are looking at doing more. This was done as the 'Feeding our Future' project, and you can find more details here: <https://watfordchamber.co.uk/urban-orchards-1/> The website includes where trees have been planted as part of the project, but not as a map.
- Lighting is a problem in the park, are there any plans to increase lighting?
 - There are no plans to increase lighting. The park is a nature reserve.
- How are the Friends funded?
 - The funding is through membership and through fundraising. Watford BC does support on capital projects, through grant funding, but not for revenue.

Rediscovering the River Colne:

This is a 10 year Watford Borough Council (Watford BC) project, aiming to restore, protect and enable people to enjoy the river and its green corridor. The project is structured around a number of themes including:

- River improvements
- Landscape and access
- Environmental engagement
- Environmental monitoring.

The council works with a number of partners to deliver this project including Groundwork, Community Connection Projects, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT), the Environment Agency and the water companies.

There have been a number of in-river works to date, and the next will be in February 2024, at Timberlake. While there is already a good group of volunteers to do this work, there will be more opportunities later in the year to get involved.

There are a number of environmental monitoring activities, including ARMI Riverfly surveys, Invasive and non native species monitoring, outfall monitoring and water chemistry (see slides for more detail). There are opportunities to join in this citizen science activity and Groundwork will be running taster sessions if you are interested.

For more information:

- See website: <https://www.rivercolnewatford.co.uk/>
- To volunteer or find out more about the in-river work volunteer opportunities or citizen science taster sessions email: Adam.Asquith@groundwork.org.uk

Questions:

- Thames Water monitoring the river, how does that work as they can be the polluter?
 - We need to work with Thames Water and Affinity, and there are distinct areas of the business doing the monitoring and are actively supporting the project. They have also identified and fixed 6 misconnections in Watford that were polluting the river. We need to work with Affinity Water as they own land upstream of our area.
 - The River Colne is a chalk stream which is a rare habitat so we have to do all we can within our remit.
- Can all local authorities get together and take the water companies to court?
 - The Environment Agency is responsible for regulating the environment, including in relation to water quality and resources, and overseeing the environmental performance of water companies.
 - Watford BC is developing and supporting the local water quality forum, which is looking to coordinate across the catchment to address key issues.
 - There is also a ColneCAN (Catchment Action Network) which we support.
 - Watford BC continues to look at routes to highlight water quality to the appropriate people.
- Are there any trout in the river?
 - Not at the moment, although fish are coming back. One goal of the project is to restore the ecology for fish.
 - Metrics we use for the project are around;- is the river attractive, is it healthy using ARMI, monitoring outfalls, invasive species etc.
- Are the Gade and Grand Union Canal monitored?
 - Yes the river Gade is managed by Sandy (Community Connection Projects) but not part of the River Colne project. Grand Union canal is managed by the canal and rivers trust
- Are volunteers trained on Japanese Knotweed?
 - Sandy deals with Japanese knotweed if found. Volunteers are trained in how to spot it, and then report back.

Community Energy

This talk was slightly different, and was to raise awareness of a current government funding opportunity and to find out the appetite for look at community energy more generally.

The community energy fund is managed by the Greater South East Net Zero Energy Hub, and aims to increase the level of community and locally owned renewable and low carbon energy assets. It helps to support communities to reduce energy costs and promotes job creation.

The fund has 2 stages of funding, and you need to apply for stage 1 of funding first. Stage 1 is to pay for professional support to scope a project, and can be up to £40,000. Stage 2 grants are only awarded to those which have good chance of success and again help with professional fees. Neither grant will pay for capital expenditure.

Some examples of typical projects are:

- [Swaffham Prior Renewable Heat Network](#)
- [Chelson Meadow Community Solar](#)
- [Gamlingay Community Turbine](#)
- [North Kensington Community Energy](#)

The fund runs until March 2025, and there will be 5 rounds, with one already gone. Interested groups can submit an expression of interest at anytime. To be able to apply for the grant you need to be a constituted community group. Local authorities, except parish councils, cannot apply.

We also talked about an initiative the Transition Towns developed that Grand Union Community Energy (GUCE) run locally, called Transition Streets. This is about getting members of a street together (ideally 6-8 households) to discuss a range of environmental issues which can help transition to a more environmentally sound way of living. This includes energy as well as travel, food, water, resource use and nature. Part of this is working on things you can do within your own household, but at the end, often a more community project develops.

For more information:

- If you are interested in progressing a community energy project further information is available: <https://www.gsenetzerohub.org.uk/community/community-energy-fund/>
- If you would like to discuss how you might take it forward please email sustainability@watford.gov.uk and we will get back to you.
- If you are interested in Transition Streets please register your interest on this [form](#). If there is sufficient interest we will look at how we might take this forward for Watford residents.

Questions:

- A representative from Grand Union Community Energy, Sarah Burgess introduced what they are doing, particularly in a potential project in Kings Langley. More details can be found here: (<https://guce.org.uk/>)
- Will the Grand Union Energy project, taking heat from aquifer, harm the waterway/wildlife.
 - That's part of what the feasibility studies, hopefully funded by the Community Energy Fund, will investigate.
- Some of the technologies on the list seem a little worrying. How will we have oversight over what is installed in Watford, i.e. anaerobic digesters?
 - Projects will be applied for by community groups (not the council) and planning permission will be rejected or given by us as the local planning authority, against planning requirements.
 - The list is purely examples given in the government guidance, not what is appropriate specifically in Watford.

Feedback:

- The format of the Forum works well and it is good with different groups involved.
- It would be good to have a dedicated website.

- We will be including more information on the forum on the revised website, so people can see previous discussions and links.
- Proposed topic – Transport, and how to find transport in Watford.
- Why are roads so bad in Watford?
 - It is the county council who look after the roads. WBC works with them on transport issues, including strategic cycle routes etc.
- Community orchards
- Recycling – thin plastics
 - We have had a presentation on recycling recently. The government has brought out the simpler recycling policy, which is being implemented.
 - Herts WasteAware does an annual report on how each local authority in Hertfordshire is performing. You can see the latest one here: <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/doc/waste/wasteaware/hwp-annual-report-2022-23.pdf>

AoB:

- A member of the audience raised a concern about the effectiveness of the Environmental Strategy consultation and invited audience members to meet with them to discuss how to engage in future consultations.
- A proposal was presented by a member of the audience on getting students from University of Hertfordshire and West Herts college to critique council projects and strategies as they may have the energy, facilities and resources. The member of the audience has engaged with the university and the college.
- Anna Addison encouraged people to amplify what is already happening, which is how GBGW works. WBC encourage you to invite friends and colleagues to attend these forums.