

West Berkshire Green Exchange AGM

23rd September 2020

Chairman's Report

Welcome to this, the tenth WBGE AGM and the first to be held via Zoom.

What an eventful year! With all the focus now on new Covid restrictions to reduce the effects of a second wave of infections, it is easy to forget that since our last AGM we have had a general election resulting in a new Conservative government with a significant majority, and, for us, a new Conservative MP, Laura Farris, and the UK has left the European Union. Before the general election WBGE organised a very successful hustings in St Bart's School, Newbury, with the hall filled to capacity, something which would not be permitted now. I do hope that in any future general election, hustings of some kind will continue to be organised and held, as they are a really good way to get to see and hear the candidates.

And then in March came Covid-19 and the lockdown, and all our lives changed, probably for ever.

But while all this has been happening the climate alarms have been ringing ever more loudly. In January this year Australia suffered its worst bush fires ever, and now the west coast of the USA is suffering the same fate, with the loss not just of homes but of whole towns. Recently we have been hearing of the melting of the arctic permafrost in Siberia, something which scientists have been warning for years is a tipping point for climate change. Worse, some of the tundra is actually burning, with the prospect of fires extending deep into the peat and being inextinguishable. Inhabitants whose homes were built on ice now fear them sinking. And these unprecedented fires are all contributing to the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere.

In the press in this country, man-made climate change is a much more accepted reality than it used to be, and I think that acceptance is true for the general population too. That makes it easier for the government to introduce climate-related policies, which is good. Unfortunately our prime minister has not shown the commitment to change that we would like, and that has to be worked on. We in

WBGE, with WBCAN, Friends of the Earth and others, have had several Zoom meetings with Laura Farris, and I believe she has learned much about the climate change issues since her election to parliament, which we all should take some credit for. But we all would like this government to do more and quicker. A recent report that the prohibition of the sale of new petrol and diesel cars is to be brought forward from 2040 to 2030 is welcome. So too is the £40 million Green Recovery Challenge Fund, part of the government's wider green economic recovery, jobs and skills package, which brings forward funding for environmental charities and their partners to start work on projects across England to restore nature and tackle climate change. But we only have until next week, 2nd October, to make any applications for funding under it.

Locally, this summer saw the publication by West Berkshire Council of their Environment Strategy, and we look forward to hearing more about it from Councillor Steve Ardagh-Walters immediately after this meeting. It also saw the launching of Friends of the Earth's Lockdown Wood project led by Susan Millington.

I should like to thank the committee for all their work during the year, especially in the organising of the hustings last November.

Finally, we still have money to support local environmental initiatives. At the moment the organising of any kind of public event is very restricted, but when restrictions ease, anyone who is thinking of organising a local event and wants financial help towards venue hire and publicity, should please get in touch.

Thank you.

Richard Foster