

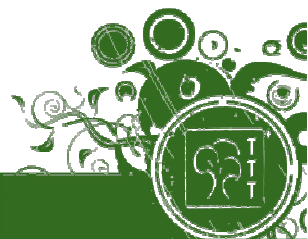


Towards a resilient Taunton Deane

375 voices : one story

compiled from conversations, debates
and reflections during a series of workshops
for Taunton Deane Borough Council staff and Members
on climate change and Peak Oil
run by Taunton Transition Town
between July and September 2009

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Taunton Transition Town
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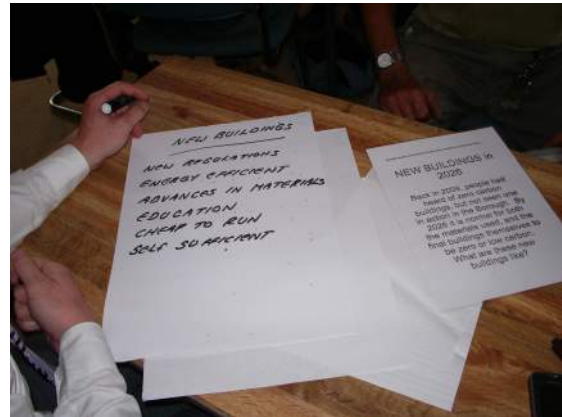
Towards A Resilient Taunton Deane

Introduction

In July, August and September of 2009, something historic happened. For the first time (as far as we know) a UK Local Authority decided to take a whole staff approach to their responsibility for tackling the community's carbon footprint and dealing with the potential effects of climate change and Peak Oil. That Local Authority was Taunton Deane Borough Council. In those three months, over 350 staff and 26 Members attended an eventual 11 half day workshops, led by volunteers from Taunton Transition Town. Plumbers, planners, environmental health officers and car park attendants mixed with senior strategy officers, carpenters, Members and tree surgeons. In and of itself, this was extraordinary. On no other occasion have the people who make up this organisation come together in this way.

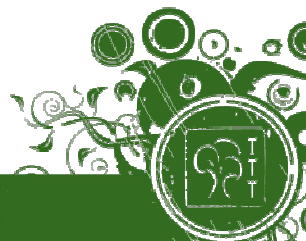


From that rich mix of backgrounds, skills, interests and political leanings emerged a story, a surprisingly consistent story about what a resilient Taunton Deane might be like in 2026. Together they envisioned a future in which the Borough has developed a successful low carbon,



“localised” culture and infrastructure, capable of withstanding upheavals in the wider world likely to occur as a result of our changing climate and increasingly expensive and insecure oil and gas supplies.

This document is a record of that story. It is also a record of the unifying voices of over 375 people, committing to change in their own lives right now to create that low carbon future; willing to take action in their own communities to spread the word; and – crucially – calling for change within their own organisation.



Why this story matters

Changing minds, changing expectations and changing what we do in our day to day lives has never been more pressing. Climate change isn't something that will happen to future generations: it is happening right here, right now. Some parts of the world already suffer deeply and regularly with droughts, failed crops, dying livestock, floods, fires, destroyed homes and shattered lives. In Europe alone in 2003, an additional 30,000 deaths were attributed to the effect of heat waves.



The often heard voice in the UK saying "we'll be all right, we'll get a Mediterranean climate" pales when considering what the Med itself might

become. It falters when we realise that we import over 60% of our food, much from countries which in future may struggle to source enough water and increasingly expensive oil-based fertilizers to grow that food. It fades when we start to appreciate just how much we have based the very fabric of our lives on cheap supplies of oil, a world commodity that will peak in production soon (and certainly within the next decade) and then start to decline - for ever.



But the Transition Town approach isn't one of doom, gloom and huddling over a candle flame in a chilly garret! It is about fostering a response to the challenges we face at a community level. It is about getting people aware, interested and willing to take steps to make a difference. The ingenuity and creativity we used to invent so many ways to use oil are still with us as we start to reinvent our lives from a low-carbon perspective. This story is part of a growing set of stories emerging here, across our country, across the world. Bring those stories together, take those first steps, and unimaginable change suddenly becomes possible.



Taunton Deane in 2026

What follows is a synthesis of what 375 people said about a low carbon vision for the Borough, in response to ten themed narratives. With the intention of keeping this document manageable in size, we have kept this brief, but sincerely hope we do justice to the energy, imagination and

engagement of those who took part in those conversations. There were too many ideas to include them all here, but this captures what we hope is the compelling vision that collectively emerged.

Energy

“As the ongoing international energy crisis made the national grid (gas and electricity) more unreliable, the Borough set out to become more energy resilient. By 2026 its communities, businesses and local Council are producing over 50% of their own energy needs.”

A radical overhaul of the planning system helped local communities to take energy generation into their own hands. A surge in locally managed energy co-ops has made small scale community heating systems, solar and wind farming and anaerobic digesters commonplace, not least because of the Council’s flagship grant scheme to support such initiatives. The Council itself has invested in energy generation schemes including harnessing the River Tone to generate electricity which, in a highly popular move, is sold to an upgraded National Grid, with the income used to lower Council Tax bills.

However, it is not just that the Borough is generating so much of its own energy, it is also that people are using far less. The annual winter infrared photo programme led to much “naming and shaming” of those householders whose homes were seen to be leaking valuable warmth, and gave a vital boost to the home insulation programme. Householders have also taken advantage of the more efficient, cheaper micro-generation devices which

are locally manufactured (thanks to the Council’s innovative scheme to attract “green businesses” into the Borough) and solar panels are commonplace on homes, and mandatory on public buildings.



New Buildings

“Back in 2009, people had heard of zero carbon buildings, but not seen one in action in the Borough. By 2026, it has become normal for both the materials used, and the final buildings themselves to be zero or low carbon.”

The Deane’s first, fully carbon zero housing development hit the national press as an exemplar of what changes in planning laws can achieve. Now, the lucky residents of these and all the other zero carbon houses since built, talk proudly of their ground source heat pumps, their shared biomass boilers, the effectiveness of their straw bale or sheep’s wool insulation and triple glazing, and the efficiency of their solar water heating systems. They are rather smug too about

how low their water bills are thanks to the inbuilt rainwater harvesting and grey water recycling systems.

The biggest, and most radical shift in Council planning policy also saw new homes with far bigger gardens and community green spaces (owing to the ever increasing popularity of growing vegetables), made affordable by reducing available car parking space in favour of community bike sheds.



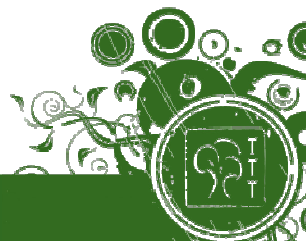
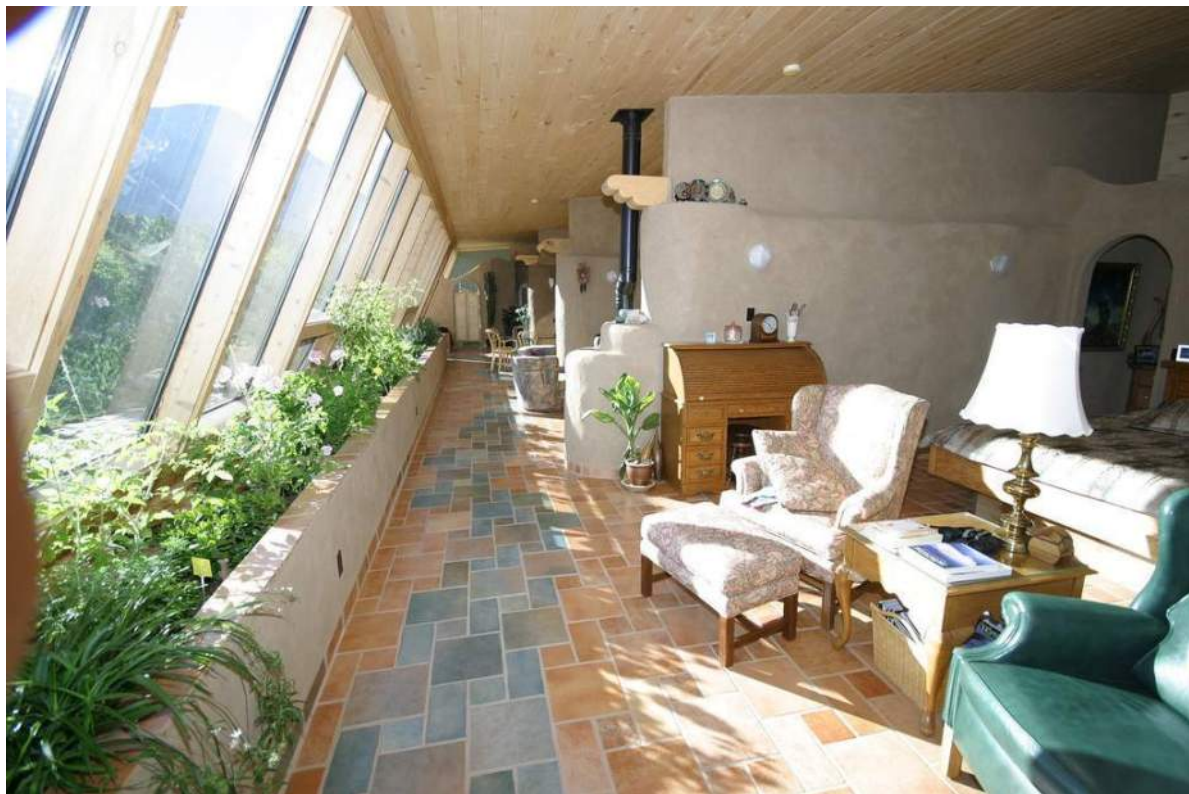
Homes

“In 2009, homes were identified as the largest single source of CO2 emissions in the Borough. Over time, energy prices continued to rise. Yet by 2026, emissions from households had dropped by a dramatic 85%, and energy consumption overall dropped too.”

In addition to the vast increase in home insulation, carbon neutral heating systems, and a healthy market for energy efficient appliances, one of the biggest changes was in individual people’s habits. Just as it became completely socially unacceptable in the early days of the 21st century to drink and drive, now it was just as unacceptable to leave things switched on unnecessarily. Equally, as people got more used to turning their thermostats down, an overheated house was considered to be unhealthy as well as

anti-social. Tumble driers were only used in emergencies; the sale of jumpers rocketed; and slow-cookers were the top-selling Christmas present for three years running.

Once energy efficiency became a storyline in the ever popular Eastenders, a note of competition could regularly be heard in pubs and clubs as people shared their own top energy saving tips over a locally brewed pint.



Water

“Even with its comparatively modest droughts, the UK’s water is now seen as a valuable resource, not least because of the energy it takes to purify and deliver simple tap water. By 2026, people and buildings in the Borough use water very differently, both to conserve supplies and minimise the water carbon footprint.”

The Council quickly moved to requiring all new builds to have water saving measures installed, such as spray taps and duoflush toilets, as well as water harvesting and recycling measures - and their free water butt scheme was also an instant hit.

However, it was again in people’s attitudes and behaviour that change was most visible. Public opinion rose against the sale of bottled water, inspired by the ongoing move away from plastic packaging. The Council were the first local organisation to do away with water coolers in favour of the humble tap, and others soon followed suit.

Sales of home water saving devices rocketed, and the sound of a hose became a thing of the past. Even car washing began to be frowned upon. Water meters were more and more popular as a way of people being in control of their water consumption, and the “Shower with a Friend” T-shirts became as commonplace as the yellow smiley face was back in the 1970s.



Food

“Rather than relying on high levels of food imports to the UK (as in 2009) Taunton Deane and its surrounding neighbours have become over 80% self sufficient in food.”

What started as a surge of interest in vegetable gardening blossomed into nothing short of a food revolution. The Council could barely keep up with demand for allotment space, whilst garden share schemes and community gardening clubs became increasingly popular, as did seed swaps and “glut giveaways”. The Council also set the trend for businesses to give employees an hour a week to work in their “green gyms”, and their high profile tree planting scheme hit the headlines for its focus on publicly available food bearing trees.

As people got more and more used to what foods were in season at any given time, their appetite for the increasingly expensive imported goods waned. Sales



of local meat and fish rose as people chose to eat less meat but pay a bit more for good quality local produce. The now commonplace food co-ops, able to trade directly with local farmers, together with the increase in farm shops and local food markets, saw some of the Deane’s supermarkets closing their doors for good. Village food shops and the baker’s and butcher’s vans also contributed to the increasing localisation of food sourcing and distribution.

Local food production on a commercial basis became more and more diverse as the changing climate made cultivation of many new crops possible, and the Taunton Flower Show’s new Deane Wine competition became hotly contested.



Shopping

“By 2026, there is less (mainly plastic) “stuff” around to buy, and fuel costs make imported goods expensive. We also tend to keep things for longer. With more goods (including food) coming from within the UK, and indeed the local area itself, the face of shopping has changed in towns and villages.”

Not only has people’s attitude to food changed the nature of food shopping, but shopping generally in the Deane has changed too. Taunton has become a far more vibrant shopping centre as people are more reluctant to travel to Bristol or Exeter, whilst in the rural areas the village corner shop has come back into its own.

Locally owned retail businesses made a comeback, selling locally produced goods, many of which are linked to helping people live a low carbon lifestyle. For example, the locally designed quick-dry

fabric has become available in a range of practical clothing, and “repair and mend” businesses are very popular. The demise of the throwaway culture means that goods are of a higher quality, made to last and designed with repair in mind.

However, it is the enthusiastic uptake of the Wivvy Pound, closely followed by the Taunton Groat that has really changed the way people shop in the Deane, and the local currencies are now accepted by most independent retailers and trades across the Borough.



Transport

“With cheap petrol a faint memory, the way people travel has had to change, and so have their reasons for travelling. Yet in 2026, people still work, shop, see friends and family – but with a vastly reduced carbon footprint.”

The electric revolution in vehicle manufacture changed local transportation completely, and electric charging points for cars and electric bikes are as common as the petrol station used to be. However, before mass manufacturing made the electric vehicle relatively cheap and transport was still reliant on petrol, public behaviour had changed to cope with the steep prices. Car sharing and pooling became the norm, as well as the purchase and running of community minibuses in rural settlements. With more and more people opting for home working, roads became far less busy, which in turn encouraged even more people to get on their bikes. “Walking buses” to get the kids to school replaced the old school run, and indeed no one would now dream of driving on short trips that were easily walkable.



However, it was the Council’s integrated public transport strategy that really changed the face of the Borough. The Taunton Deane electric tram system was immediately popular, as was the re-



opening of the branch lines to Wellington, Langport, and regular commuting trains between Minehead and Taunton. Electric bike hire at Taunton Station competed with the new but thriving rickshaw service as the only way to get about town. The increase of dedicated cycleways across the Borough, together with secure cycle parks meant that the proposed congestion charge for Taunton town centre was never implemented – as there was no congestion any more.

But the jewel in the Deane’s crown was the full restoration of the Taunton to Bridgwater canal, plus its River Bus scheme on the Tone, both of which proved popular with residents and the increasing number of UK based holidaymakers. The need for speed had been replaced by a delight in seeing the world go by at a more leisurely pace.



Leisure and Holidays

“Time off is just as important in 2026 as it was in 2009. But a low carbon life has changed what people want, or are able to do. Climate change here and in the wider world has also affected people’s habits.”

“Staycationing” became the new vacationing. With a warmer climate, Britain’s desirability as a holiday destination for its population increased – and Taunton Deane was no exception to that. Once British beaches were full up, people started to look for alternatives.

Homeswaps took off as families traded their homes for an economical holiday break. Camping became a far more reliable event, and the rise in eco-holidays, particularly those involving volunteering or learning rural skills, were very popular. People also became happier



just to stay put and get out in their gardens, which in turn led to more local socialising and an increase in Mediterranean style al fresco dining.

In general leisure terms, the increase in localisation meant an increase in demand for local facilities, and the first Deane gym, powered by its own exercise bikes and treadmills was a headline grabber. There were more community based leisure activities such as community plays, local sports events and community eco projects, and an interesting trend with some parents installing cycle generators for their kids to power their own X-boxes.



Work

“Having to think Green has changed the jobs we do, how we do them, and even where we do them. There are also a whole new range of businesses emerging, and by 2026, the local economy has been transformed – in a good way!”

Not surprisingly, all the changes mentioned so far had an extraordinary impact on jobs in Taunton Deane. The international shift away from a global market fuelled by oil to more sustainable national, regional and local markets has played in the Deane’s favour and employment has never been stronger. The Council’s policy to encourage Green Business development has meant a huge increase in jobs in the green sector, such as micro-generation manufacture, installation and repair; manufacturing from local recyclable materials; trades associated with zero carbon building; and jobs stemming from the upgraded public and private transport infrastructure.

The local food industry has seen a huge surge in jobs, such as manual agricultural work, cheese making, cider and beer



brewing, organic farming, meat curing and processing, flour milling, bread baking and manufacturing a whole range of vegetable and fruit products. Food co-ops and markets are also a source of employment. Local energy generation has impacted on jobs in woodland management and coppicing, hydro-electrical engineering and wind turbine maintenance. Traditional trade skills are in high demand as people want things made and built locally.



The leisure industry has also expanded as people call for more local leisure facilities, and the Taunton Deane tourist industry has responded to the increased demand for UK-based holidays, including offering canal breaks, eco-retreats, volunteering holidays and rural skills courses.

With people demanding a better work life balance, and work that is close to home, a whole range of other industries and businesses have sprung up, particularly those that enable people to work from home, or to make use of IT to maintain national and international links. Flexible working has become far more common, with a four day working week balancing people’s desire for increased time spent growing their own food.



Education and Training

“In the period 2009-2026, some undervalued skills became crucial. Many forgotten skills were revived. A whole range of new skills became essential to the local economy – and the community as a whole.”



One delightful result of the greening of Taunton Deane was the recognition that older members of the community had been born into a far more localised economy than existed in 2009, and had skills and knowledge that people were now really keen to value and tap into. Skills such as making and mending in the home, preserving food, and cooking seasonally became hugely fashionable to know how to do. Skills exchange workshops and events became common.

Apprenticeships within existing industries became the focus for a whole new generation of skilled trades people and engineers, and colleges quickly picked up on the demand for new style NVQs and Diplomas in, for example, sustainable technology, eco-building and woodland

management. School curriculums flexed to allow young people to learn practical skills from an early age, such as gardening, cooking, design and construction. At the same time, the increased use of IT at work called for greater computer literacy which again was reflected in the curriculum.

The provision of even wider Higher Education opportunities at a local level, as well as a greater sense of a community worth staying around for meant that more young people developed their skills and knowledge locally, and then stuck around to make use of them. Both formal and informal learning changed as people grasped the opportunities that opened up to be part of a strong, sustainable, low carbon local life.



So what needs to happen now?

Whether or not this is an accurate picture of a possible future for 2026, this is what people thought could, and should happen. There was, without question, a shared sense of urgency that things need to change, and change soon. There is a Chinese proverb that says “The best time

to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The next best time is now.” So, in the light of that urgency, this is what people said were the immediate priorities: for themselves, for their communities, and for the Council as a whole.

Me

People at the workshops are prepared to use the car for fewer trips, or to car share, and to walk and cycle more. They want to insulate their homes more effectively, switch things off, make a point of buying energy efficient appliances, and become far more aware of energy and water usage. They are prepared to shop differently, prioritising locally produced food and goods, and buying seasonally. They want to grow much more of their own food, nourish it with their own compost and water it from harvested

rainwater in a water butt. They are prepared to recycle far more, but reduce the need for recycling by avoiding unnecessary packaging. They want to stop wasting so much food, and get better at mending things. They are interested in finding out about home-based energy generation. Most importantly, they are ready to talk to their family and friends about this stuff, to get across just how important changes on an individual level can be.

My community

People were less sure how to make change at a community level, partly because there was a growing sense that we needed to get back in touch with what “community” is first. So people were keen to take steps that would help build relationships, through raising awareness of the issues of climate change and peak oil, and through practically banding

together to get stuff done. Practical ideas included promoting skill swaps; creating community gardens or garden share schemes; setting up local energy generation facilities; car sharing; encouraging more local recycling; supporting local suppliers in small communities; and planting trees.

My Council

Lead from the front

People called for a far stronger lead from the Council itself. They want to see a commitment to actually making a

difference, with Members taking the politics out of carbon, able to be brave enough to be honest about the facts: that change has to happen now. From a base of clear information about issues and



options, less talk and more doing needs to lead to far more green policies and actions.

More joined up thinking between Members and Officers can support genuine vision and creative thinking, raising barriers to making things happen. With a council that is more proactive rather than reactive to change, a long term climate change strategy can emerge that will drive future initiatives, with all service plans referencing environmental issues. With ongoing reporting on achievements and actions, all Members and staff can promote and reward forward thinking.

Individual Members are encouraged to have a Green manifesto, each committing, as of now, to effecting change in their own Wards. Taunton Deane Borough Council can become a genuine Transition Authority.

Change planning legislation

“We are dinosaurs, aren’t we”, said one Planning Officer on the workshop. Without doubt this area emerged as a key priority for people, with a call to make energy efficiency, conservation and generation a top priority. To achieve this, planning legislation needs to be both tightened up to raise standards – and relaxed to allow for more environmental projects.

Firstly, all 18,000 planned new homes are to be carbon neutral, with the Authority saying “no thanks” to developers who don’t want to conform to these new standards. From now on, all new builds would have to use sustainable building materials, with compulsory energy efficiency measures.

Planning laws need to encourage/enable local power generation schemes, minimising bureaucracy, and working with energy companies to use the ‘set aside energy efficiency moves’ in a better way to invest into renewables. Appropriate, mainly south facing buildings should have permitted development rights for solar thermal energy or photo voltaic. It should become easier to provide insulation measures for hard to treat older homes.

Community needs can be better met through planning law too, through providing green spaces, bigger gardens and local shops and services through planning legislation. To do this, the Council needs a properly staffed and supported planning service

Encourage new business/help local enterprise

People felt strongly that now is the time to highlight green economic opportunities in new developments, and to make the Economic Development Strategy capable of attracting businesses to the area to make Taunton the forefront of technology in the SW for wind turbines, solar energy, energy heat pumps and so on. The Council can also make a huge impact through its own procurement policy to support local (green) businesses. There is the potential to build the skills now, and to promote and support those skills in a strong green economy.

Upgrade the transport strategy

Given that the cross-section of people attending the workshops was not untypical of a cross section of the working population of Taunton Deane as a whole, the near universal commitment to walk and cycle more, and drive less has potential to make a huge impact if more



are encouraged to join in. There was a call for a car free town centre and other zones, together with more - and safer - cycle networks, and safe cycle routes to schools becoming a priority. People wanted cheaper public transport, with bus passes for the under 18s, and cheaper park and ride. The Council could promote incentives to walk or cycle to work, and lobby for more fuel efficient transport. In the slightly longer term, the idea of a tram system, and reinvigorated local train system were very popular.

Raise awareness in the community

No one expected the Council to “do it all”. The issues of climate change and peak oil will affect everyone, and everyone has a responsibility to respond to this. The Council’s role in promoting best practice, promoting green energy measures and being in better dialogue with its community to get them on board and taking direct action is ready for a step change.

Ideas included rolling out this type of workshop activity; holding more public meetings and debate; providing programmes of education and training in relevant skills and information; raising awareness specifically with youth groups and schools so they appreciate the urgency; and having a series of awareness raising articles in the Gazette. All this could create opportunities for communities to ‘find each other’.

Help the community

A more aware community then needs more practical help. Schemes to enable ideas and facilitate projects included reward schemes for carbon reduction (including Council Tax reduction); prioritising funding for climate change

community groups or groups which will promote eco-friendly activities; and grants for energy efficiency measures. Other measures included subsidised solar/wind power developments; free water butts and free compost. Landlords could be incentivised to make their properties more sustainable, and a range of simple measures, such as providing powerdowns to all sheltered housing could help the Council’s own tenants. Recognising the huge range of relevant skills within the DLO could also lead to that expertise being used to mentor people in how to grow and make stuff.

Make allotments a top priority

Time and again, people called for both more time and more space to grow food. To start, the Council can create more allotments, with greater choice of smaller plots. They can look to waste land for more allotment potential, and even facilitate a scheme to collect and distribute excess produce from local allotments.

Recycle more and more

Whilst the habit of recycling has become commonplace, there is still more to be done, particularly in terms of increasing what can be recycled at the kerbside, and emptying recycling bins more often

Find a budget for trees!

Despite universal appreciation of the Council’s need for financial stringency, there was little realisation that cuts had included cutting the tree planting budget. There is a strong call for this to be reintroduced, and indeed increased. People wanted to see the Council planting trees to offset Council’s carbon footprint, even as many as 10,000 trees a year.



They wanted a forward thinking approach, with a 20-year perspective, so that community orchards and other food producing trees become a feature, including drought tolerant species. There was also interest in making Long Run Farm a country/biodiversity park

Make a difference in-house

Firstly, almost every one of the 11 workshops threw up requests for a more flexible approach to the working week, either through a 4-day week, or more home working with a resourced infrastructure for teleconferencing. An organisational culture change would be needed for this shift to become easy and possible.

On a more day-to-day basis, there were hundreds of ideas, but here are the most popular. It should become compulsory to switch off things; to print off less stuff and cut paper usage. Plastic cups for hospitality should be banned, as should little containers for milk and coffee (“what is the matter with a jar of coffee and a pint of milk?”) In-house recycling could be much better, including at the Priory Depot. Heating could be turned down, and procurement of ongoing consumables could be re-looked at to become greener and more localised.

Managers could use pool cars rather than their own (having walked to work!) and there could be more car-sharing to and from work – and van sharing at work. The Council could introduce electric vehicles for grounds maintenance, and allow people time to work on clearing land for new allotments as an alternative to going to the gym! The introduction of an internal Green Team would help keep people on track, and also train new colleagues in good green habits

Create capacity

For all this to become possible, the Council needs to make sure it has the capacity and skills to carry it forward. To complement those Officers already working on climate change issues across the Deane, more resources are needed in-house, and the new budget should take this into account. However, the Council can also build on what has begun in these workshops, and establish long term, practical relationships with committed community groups such as the Transition Town movement, who see their role as raising community awareness and helping people take responsibility for their own part in creating a low carbon future. The potential of such partnerships on capacity must not be underestimated.

375 voices: one story

There is no single right answer to the challenges that face us all. However, the consistency of stories, ideas and answers that have emerged suggests that similar stories, ideas and answers will emerge elsewhere in our communities too. The level of support for change here suggests that there might be equal levels of support for change elsewhere.

From the Transition Town point of view, this is an inspiring moment. We would like to offer our deepest thanks to Taunton Deane Borough Council, and Kevin Toller in particular, for taking this unique step into the debate.

Chrissie Godfrey and Paul Birch
6th October 2009

