

## Responding to Growth Network: Greening the Future

28 September 2021, conference report

**Katherine Bennett** introduced the work of the Western Gateway, a partnership formed in 2019 to focus on strengthening the regional Economy across the West of England and South Wales – similar in scope to the Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine. The area covers 4.4 million people and over 2 million jobs and contributes £107 billion to the UK Economy.

The recent independent Economic Review has prioritised the importance of green energy and achieving net zero targets – the Severn Estuary can generate 7% of the UK’s power requirements – and the need for substantial investment in the Gateway, with a strong emphasis on advanced manufacturing and innovation (nb 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of all cyber patents registered are in the Western Gateway). The importance of better transport and connectivity is also a key priority.

Getting business, universities, local authorities, and the wider community to work together for a broad regional vision is at the heart of the Gateway’s work.

**Simon Pickering** described Ecotricity as a “mission led company”, Britain’s greenest energy company. It employs 600 people (most based in Stroud) and produces not only green energy (solar, wind, battery, and green gas) but all kinds of spinoffs, including green phones, diamonds “made from the sky” and vegan food (Little Green Devils supplies 3,000 schools) and a Green Eco Hub.

Ecotricity takes sustainability very seriously and is actively cutting carbon emissions from its own operations, having declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and set strategic objectives to be carbon neutral by 2025.

**Ben Watts** set out the vision for a prototype nuclear fusion reactor to be designed and running in the region by 2040. The STEP (Spherical Tokamak for Energy Production) Project produces nuclear energy without the radiation which comes from nuclear fission. The 100-acre site for the reactor is in Oldbury, with the nearby Berkeley site for a technical centre – both places with a long history of energy production.

**Mark Thorne** described the vision of the 4,500-acre Tortworth Estate in South Gloucestershire for a Garden Village, Buckover, to include not only 3,000 beautiful, well designed, sustainable homes for a mix of residents (private and rented) but farming, businesses and offices, shops, woodland, quarrying and community assets.

Buckover was part of the West of England Combined Authority's development plan, but the Plan was turned down by the Government and must be resubmitted. However, planning for Buckover continues, with a vision for "a rural lifestyle in an urban settlement".

### **Breakout groups**

Bishop Robert asked participants to discuss in groups the question "What has struck us most in what we've heard?"

Key issues which arose in the groups and were fed back included:

- How the county/region address energy issues – with transport, housing and public buildings identified as key carbon producers. Simon pointed out that 80% of domestic energy use can be eliminated by good insulation. The challenges are scarcity of labour to carry out retrofitting and the need for substantial cash to pay for it (it can cost c£10,000 or more).
- The challenge of engaging with people at grassroots levels and how to get buy-in for the Western Gateway vision, especially among young people. Katherine said Catapult has huge apprentice schemes (including Higher Apprenticeships) – so encourage young people to get involved with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths).
- Buckover Garden Village: "building houses which will build communities". Mark said the development process is highly politicised and the process started 6 years ago but is still not progressing as it should. Others commented that the challenge is how to de-politicise planning and encourage decision makers to think flexibly and look to the future. The need is for all sectors to come together (and not let politics get in the way).
- Where is the Region's plan for energy? Ben said that the LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) produced a sustainable energy strategy in 2018, identifying transport and housing as key carbon creators. A comprehensive energy strategy is now needed.

Bishop Robert concluded by thanking everyone for their active participation and the speakers for their important and challenging contributions to such a vital debate.