

Relaunch of Kingston Environment Forum, 29/9/22, presentation from the last KEF chair

Introduction - as former chair of a former KEF, and current chair of TTK, I'll start with a little bit of history because "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." (Santayana) - though of course contexts change, as they have quite markedly in the environmental context, with extreme weather events, soaring energy prices, and much greater media and public awareness of climate and other environmental crises. More locally, RBK declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and now has a new Climate Action team/hub and a Councillor with CA responsibilities, and there are several new green community groups on the scene - so it's as well to look around and see what's there already, what they do, and what's been tried in the past.

KEF began life in 2006 as Kingston's Eco-Footprint Working Group, developed into Kingston Environment Group and a member of Kingston Strategic Partnership (KSP), and changed its name in 2014 to Kingston Environment Forum to reflect its role more accurately - mainly to bring a range of local environment groups together to share news and issues, promote environmental sustainability in Kingston and, individually and collectively, and to influence Council plans and strategies. In the early days we had active support from the Council, mainly in the form of admin help from a Council officer, Carlos Qemerel.

And there is value and strength in acting collectively, representing a range of groups. We have produced policy papers together (on water quality and flooding and on air pollution) in the past, initiated by one or other member; we have responded collectively to Council consultations, we used to meet regularly, and we had a place in the Kingston Strategic Partnership, a meeting of the significant organisations in the borough, hosted by the Council. And past KEF initiatives and projects included:

- The Green Pledge (copies available at the meeting)!
- Working with KEC and other green groups, to get the first GreenZone into Kingston Carnival in 2016, and, along with TTK, hosting an on-line meeting in May 2021 to consider reviving GreenZone later that year.
- Starting and publicising a petition to support the Council declaring a Climate Emergency
- More recently, after an initial enquiry from KXR in 2021, getting a group together for an on-line open meeting in 2021 to discuss the possibility of a new Climate Emergency Centre in Kingston, which led to further meetings and the current Kingston Hive project.
- And during 2020- 2021, participating as best we could in the Council's Covid Recovery Task Force (Communities), including the Voluntary Sector and Mental Health and Wellbeing groups, perhaps areas to consider for future KEF participation?

But we lost our supportive Council officer many years ago, member-groups didn't attend meetings, even virtual ones during the Covid lock-down years, no one volunteered to take over as Chair, and groups didn't respond to questions on local issues, which left an

ultimately untenable democratic deficit. Who was the Chair representing when there was little or no feedback from members, and how could I claim to be representing the green community at KSP meetings or expect anyone to take any notice of our concerns? And so I stood down from those meetings a few years ago, and as Chair at the end of 2021.

During the past few semi-dormant years, we have maintained the website and a Facebook page for sharing news with each other and the wider Kingston public, and even now are still sometimes contacted as the only umbrella organisation for green groups in Kingston. When people contact me because they want something from the environmental community, it's not because I run a community garden in North Kingston, it is a relic from when I was chairing a more active KEF.

And there is still a role for a genuine umbrella group, one that consults member-groups, encourages working together for the greater good, can bring groups together for joint projects, can speak collectively on some green issues at least, and can be contacted and consulted by those that need us. In fact, given that recent extreme weather has brought the climate crisis much closer to Kingston, there is more need than ever, both for the range of green groups we have in Kingston, and for us to cooperate with each other.

For example, there is no reason, other than our willingness and good nature, for smallish specialist groups like the Kingston Hive, TTK and We Are the Voice, to be the organisers of this year's GreenZone - far better if it could be KEF in future years. Perhaps KEF could reclaim a place in Kingston Strategic Partnership or its successor, and become the go-to group for Kingston Council and other Kingston institutions seeking advice and input on environmental issues - KEF could at least send enquirers in the right direction, if we all knew what each other's special interests, activities and projects were. And it's good to see some interest tonight from Cllr Manders and Council officers.

There are benefits in working with the Council, especially now with the new Climate Action team. One small example: in 2013 TTK Energy Group ran a small Green Open Houses event and we had just a handful of visitors - 2 to our house as I recall! This year, between our 2 open eco-homes we had 31 bookings - a result mainly of the energy crisis, but helped by the Council's Sustainable September publicity machine.

There is strength in numbers, and together we are many, with much knowledge and experience and many skills between us. My parting advice is to get to know each other again and to revive a collaborative ethos so that we can be a well informed and effective "critical friend" to the Council. But I'm not the one to do this, and this is my final standing down - it's up to you and hopefully a new steering group to decide whether you want KEF or something like it, and, if so, whether and how you want to use existing resources such as the website, the Facebook page and *Kingston Environment News*. Over to you now!

Marilyn Mason