

## Greening businesses

Transition Town Kingston hosted a “Greening Business” panel discussion on the evening of Monday 16<sup>th</sup> November, at C-SCA IPE, Kingston University. A very varied panel of local business-people told the audience why and how their businesses had taken steps to “go green” and also heard about local advice and assistance available to businesses wishing become greener.

- **Claire Harris, “green helper” at Kingston’s branch of Lush**, told the audience about how the Lush factory recycles all its waste for compost or to produce hot water for the factory, how seeing palm oil plantations had persuaded the firm’s directors to find substitute oils for its soaps, and how product containers were now being recycled into refillable containers that customers could use over and over again.
- **Dr Bob Bhamra of Jiva Dental**, the world’s first carbon neutral dentist and winner of a Green Guardian business award, explained how a career break travelling the world had inspired him to create a new kind of dental practice, how committed his staff are, and how attractive this could be to some patients.
- **Liz Crisp, director of the sustainable architects The Cave Cooperative** described the co-operative business model that enabled her practice to develop sustainable building designs using “new” materials such as strawbale, cob and other low-tech sustainable construction methods.
- **Reena Mehta, store manager of Boots in the Bantalls Centre who looks after Corporate Social Responsibility**, said that the chain has always had environmental sustainability embedded in its policies and practices, for example in its transport of goods and back-loading, and how they were working on reducing packaging, sometimes by improving packaging materials, sometimes by reducing its weight. She had discovered that when she switched off the store’s lights at night, it also switched off the store’s fridge (not a good idea!) and so was having these decoupled.
- **Lou Raggatt who looks after environmental matters for Kingston First**, which manages Kingston town centre, spoke about how her role had grown in response to small businesses wanting to recycle more, and how recycling had now grown to the point where businesses could recycle many of the materials that householders do, not just the cardboard the scheme had started with.
- And **Sunny Lee of Go Green Plus**, gave a brief outline of the free advice and support (funded by the European Regional Development Fund and RBK), her project offers to local businesses, to develop and implement environmental action plans – which could save the business money, help a company to meet UK and international standards, and help the planet.

Other good practices described included: installing smart meters and promoting an element of competition on energy-saving between store branches; using a green energy supplier and offsetting unavoidable carbon production; ploughing some profits back into green charities; Fair Trade sourcing; and sharing information, such as Lush’s recipes for products that don’t require palm oil, with competitors.

What emerged clearly from a very constructive discussion was that there were real business and personal benefits for businesses undertaking “greening”. There can be financial savings (though not always), staff feel good about what their business is doing, and customers appreciate it when they know about it – which can be an issue: many of the audience were surprised and encouraged to hear about the various green activities and projects going on. Green products and services are bigger than a niche market these days, though businesses still had some reservations about how much customers were prepared to pay for ethical products and how much they were aware of some environmental issues.

From the audience came encouragement for more action on unnecessary packaging and plastic bags, and requests for help for all businesses to recycle more and for town centre businesses to provide sites for recharging points for the next big thing, electric cars. Questions included ones on

where the impetus from change comes from (customers, staff or management? – the answer varied from company to company) and about the cost of carbon-offsetting.

Informal networking and exchanges of information continued once the formal part of the evening was over. Transition Town Kingston's Business Action Group, who organised the evening, were delighted by the range of green undertakings described by the panel and believe that everyone present, whether a business, a business advisor, or a consumer, will have learnt something useful and interesting. TTK steering group member Hilary Gander commented: "This was a great way for members of our local business community to share ideas about ways to make their businesses more green."