



# **An Uncertain Future**

## **building a social movement in Manchester**

There is a vision of what life may be like in 2020 offered in “A Certain Future” (Manchester's Climate Change Action Plan). This is unusual and welcome. Few other city action plans have attempted to envisage what our future may be like. The vision is a bright one of a “healthier, happier and more prosperous city”, a low carbon future, with insulated houses, energy efficiency, no waste, public transport, green businesses, and carbon accounting. It's a vision that perhaps few of us would disagree with, those of us who care enough and are worried enough about what the future holds for the people of Manchester.

The vision is written in short, direct sentences, the language is flowing and easy to understand. Each part of the vision is followed by a set of actions which will set us on our way to this future. The language is reassuring in its technical complexity, speaking of life cycles, sustainable procurement, financial incentives and retrofitting, carbon footprints and low carbon zones, and behaviour change. It will be difficult, and costly and of course there are scientific challenges to overcome but the path is clear. If we work together we can build the future. There are people who know and understand more than we do who will work out the solution.

There's a problem, however, the future is not certain, as knowingly implied in the double meaning of “A Certain Future”. The future presented is only one of many possible futures. Perhaps a more accurate vision of the future is one where there are ever increasing levels of inequity, where only a few can afford energy and scarce resources, where the rich live in protected enclaves, where armed gangs of youths from Levenshulme launch raids into neighbouring Rusholme to capture petrol supplies (from an unfinished story by Jess Symons). The point here is not that either vision is “right” but that visions of future society are uncertain things that are created and produced and recreated through discussion, art and culture. Creating the vision is a way of creating the future. There are many approaches, many viewpoints, often conflictual that need to be debated and discussed and fought over before a vision can be agreed.

It seems very unlikely that most of the population of Manchester really, at least at present, want a low carbon future, one where they are likely to have to consume less, take fewer flights or take public transport or be constantly aware of their energy consumption. This is

clearly recognised in the plan as one of its 2 headline actions is to develop programmes of carbon literacy and to embed “low-carbon” thinking. It's clearly a problem, people are carbon illiterate and need to be educated. The problem is that people are more concerned with their immediate day-to-day problems of living than worrying about something that may or may not happen in 50 years.

Not only is the future uncertain, despite the reassuring idea of a plan. We have ideas, we have lists of things that will probably get us a little nearer, there are many people who are committed to bringing about positive change, but we don't know where the money is going to come from. We don't know which of the technical solutions are the right ones, we don't know how to create a low carbon future and we don't know how we are going to get the political will necessary to carry out those solutions.

The writers of “A Certain Future” know and understand that there is a gulf between their vision and the proposed solutions, that a paradigm change is required. This knowledge is reflected in the unusual almost revolutionary language used - “Manchester needs ..... innovative radicals with conscience, who are resourceful, hard-working and confident. People who think “What next? And next?”

So the future is uncertain and even if we did know the future, we don't know how to get there. That may be unsettling, but it's not unusual, much of life is like that, the question is how do we create a vision, a vision that is sufficiently shared and rich that it can guide us toward a desirable future.

## **Partnerships are only the beginning**

A Certain Future was produced through a series of workshops that involved over 100 organisations which is an excellent start, and the intention is to hold an annual stakeholder conference to build on the plan, with possibly other events between, overseen by a steering group.

How can we involve more people in creating a vision? Do we need more partnerships, more meetings and conferences, education and training? Yes, almost certainly, but they will mainly involve the converted, and perhaps deepen their commitment and understanding and maybe change a few. How is it possible to get beyond the “usual suspects”, the people who already realise the threat? How do we engage a much larger section of the population in a discussion about the future and how to get there? In short, how do we create a social movement of such force that it will propel the plan into a reality?

Perhaps, one of the starting points is creating uncertainty. If the

people who are supposed to know are uncertain, this gives permission and space for debate, it provides the motivation to be involved. Should the documents we produce use the language of certainty or do they need to be unsure, hesitant, hopeful, but also a bit fearful, a bit scary, aware that there are much darker futures. There is so much that is out of our control, beyond our ability to predict or plan for, there is so much more that needs to be thought about and discussed.

The job of political leaders is to help us negotiate and create the future. The vision and plan need to be made into a problem for all in Manchester. Imagine a plan that just petered out, left a gap, a hole, a vision full of conflicting viewpoints and unanswered questions, that makes its points through poetry and art. This is a vision that requires participation and engagement. This is a vision that requires a movement. To put this vision into practice requires participation not just from scientists and technocrats but from artists and playwrights and poets and authors, from gardeners and farmers, and children.

In truth many of Manchester's citizens are already creating the vision in a practical, down to earth way, there are already involved in creating a sustainable future. They are growing their own food, getting rid of their cars, cycling, teaching their children about waste, turning down their heating, using local shops and amenities rather than travelling out of town, introducing ideas of sustainability to the organisations they are part of. Most of them will never read "A Certain Future", never sign up to the plan, never attend a conference and, maybe never identify themselves formally as part of a movement. They are loose networks of friends, neighbours, colleagues and kinship held together by values and ideas and hope, rather than bound together by the formal ties of organisations. Each of them is striving to create a new identity, living the values that will create a low-carbon future. They understand that the world isn't right, that the way we live our lives is unsustainable and fails to satisfy.

These are the people who will collectively change the way that the people of Manchester think and behave, through influencing the people they know, through the networks of social connections. We still need the plans and the strategies, we need the scientists and engineers and the skilful public servants. It is not about rejecting a "scientific" approach, it is about engaging a much wider audience in constructing a vision and building the road that leads there.

### **Connectedness, Provoking Debate, Inspiring vision**

For movements to grow they need to realise that they are not alone, that there are others thinking like them, others concerned about the same thing that they are worrying about, they need to learn from others like them, discover new strategies and ideas from people who

are treading the same road. Mostly they do not seek connection with the centre, with authority, with the decision makers, they want to make their own way. They don't want to be controlled or held to account.

Working with these groups of people means recognising their primary interests and drawing the connection from that, rather than asking people to take the massive leap of imagination required to understand what a "low carbon society" might look like. There is a psychological journey to be taken that has to start at a familiar place and provide the opportunity for people to change their attitudes over a period of time.

To take a concrete example. Manchester has many allotment societies and even more gardeners, many with an interest in growing their own food and an interest in the sustainability of the food they eat. A strategy, often used, would be to gather a distribution list and invite them to a conference on creating a low carbon society. Another common strategy would be to write a leaflet or newsletter trying to draw out the importance of growing food as part of a climate change action plan. Each approach will have some limited success.

What if, rather than our aim being trying to get them to sign up to our vision, our aim was to promote connectedness between gardeners interested in sustainability, to provoke debate between them about what sustainability is, and to help them construct a vision of a future with local sustainable food production at its heart. In undertaking this process there is a much higher likelihood that people understand and embrace the connections between their primary area of interest and the wider issues of adaptation and mitigation. Growing food leads relatively simply to bio-diversity, to green stepping stones, to green infrastructure, to eco-systems, to localism, to food poverty, to flooding control, to city adaptation, to well-being. It leads easily to the fundamental theoretical idea of ecology, an interconnected system. This process works equally well with every other issue.

With connectedness, provoking debate and inspiring vision as our aims then many other strategies are open to us. Developing strategies will mean experimentation, failure and of course the involvement of 'gardeners' themselves in creating those strategies. Connectedness can be encouraged through organising visits to sustainable gardens, through social events, through virtual communication. Visions can be inspired through presentations, artworks, stories, street theatre and exhibitions and model gardens. Debate can be provoked by talks, conferences, workshops, training. Of course, some of these approaches are happening already and these are the places to build on, to encourage and embrace. To do

this we need to nurture facilitators, animators and connectors and people who can provoke constructive debate. We are not suggesting that the council should itself undertake all of these activities but that they need to recognise their importance as part of the prefiguring of a low carbon culture, and encourage them through funding and advice. Over a period of time we can expect that the ideas that people create slowly change the views of others in their wider social circle.

The same approach can work for every part of the vision and plan outlined in "A Certain Future", for every aspect of living, working, moving, growing and adapting. It is not a short term strategy, but then again there are no short-term solutions to culture change. This will be a long struggle but Manchester is not doing it alone. This is part of a much broader movement. There is no answer, no plan to culture change and no certainty of success. Sustainability, the core underlying precept of a low carbon society, is a complex idea that can only be realised through continual debate. There is no answer to sustainability only a series of questions that need to be asked and answered time after time. The measure of success in Manchester is possibly the number of people who feel they have an active role in contributing to the debate.