



# Culture the missing element of *A Certain Future*

*“On the pages that follow, a picture is painted of our city’s future. You may not recognise it at first glance. Some of the streets have changed. The buildings look different. Jobs and workplaces are not the same as they used to be. In our schools and in our homes we’ve learned new ways to live.”*

With these exciting words, Sir Richard Leese, leader of Manchester City Council introduced “A Certain Future”, Manchester’s Climate Change Action Plan.

The plan and the activity that it has generated is impressive and ambitious, seeking to cut more than a million tons from the city’s annual CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions “and to lay the foundations to become a truly low carbon city by 2050”.

Perhaps it is inevitable that the emphasis of the plan should be on technological solutions – engineering technology such as better insulation and more efficient transportation, biological technology such as growing more food locally and human technology such as education on carbon emissions and behavioural change. These things are indeed essential and important, but are they enough? Will they bring about the real step change in ways of living that Sir Richard refers to, and together are they enough anyway both to reduce emissions and to help us all live in the very different and challenging Manchester of 2020 or 2050?

What we argue here is that the missing ingredient is culture. First we’ll set out what we mean by culture, and then we’ll indicate what the missing section of A Certain Future might be, using the same headings of that plan.

## **Culture is ordinary, culture is lived**

When we talk about culture we don’t mean what happens at the Opera House, or the cinema, nor do we simply mean the way people live. We are talking about the whole combination of the way we live, the arrangements and materials that support this and the ways these things are symbolised, reproduced and communicated among us. Culture is around us and also in us. It is in our actions, our work, our leisure, our dreams and our relationships. It is the way we do things and the way we tell the story about what we are doing. Culture is our everyday life at the same time as being what makes possible our everyday life. This complexity makes it difficult to capture in terms of an action plan while making it essential that we do so if the plan is to be anyway near adequate to the challenge.

A Certain Future has a go at this where it says:

*To create a ‘low-carbon culture’ we need to build a common understanding of the causes and implications of climate change, and to develop programmes of ‘carbon literacy’ and ‘carbon accounting’ so that new culture can become part of the daily lives of all individuals and organisations..... However,*

*achieving a new low-carbon culture – where thinking about counting carbon is embedded and routine – can only be delivered as a result of all the actions together, in an overall co-ordinated manner. (p. 5)*

This is true, but we need to go further, seeing the cultural question as primary, underpinning all the actions in the plan. Seeing cultural change in terms of education and behaviour change won't be sufficient, and we need to recognise that culture isn't ours to impart – people devise and live their own cultures within the constraints of their lives, using the resources (things and ideas) around them. So we need to see the task of cultural change as involving the active participation of Manchester's people – Manchester's diverse cultures, while offering information, support and leadership.

## **Low carbon culture –a culture for everyone**

We just argued that culture is all embracing and not just restricted to the consumed culture of t.v., film, theatre, commercial music, and so on. But it is not surprising that culture is so often seen in these terms. In the society where we find ourselves culture is highly commodified: we buy it and then consume it passively, not really engaging in much cultural production of our own. This contrasts even now with the position in some parts of the UK (surviving Gaelic culture for example) and many parts of the world where peoples have retained a much richer cultural heritage that they themselves perform while adding and using resources from elsewhere, retaining a local focus and style that binds people together in shared projects beyond the home. By contrast the level of cultural attainment of most people here is rather low. Without wanting to romanticise folk cultures, a more active local culture means a more resilient community.

Yet in a low carbon world, not only will we have to minimise the impacts of our way of living, our cultural activity and consumption (much of its emissions now outsourced to places like China), but we'll probably also have to get used to living with a lot less. This isn't a popular message but it is a significant risk, maybe a certainty. Likewise, in what could be a long recession or depression, some of this change will be forced on us.

Culture then is important to a low carbon future because 1) we need to find ways of living that are inherently less carbon intensive, and 2) to get there requires the involvement of people creating this richer culture.

So we need to rethink cultural life, being less dependent on energy consumption (for example travel to a music venue, cheap flights to the sun, going for a drive in the country, turning on the plasma t.v.), going forward to "making our own entertainment". For that to happen there could be an investment in low carbon culture, through local cultural centres (based on extended schools or libraries, for example) with education and participative cultural activity. Likewise the ideas on getting more people involved in the growing cycle could be extended culturally from horticulture to community culture and back again. Investing human energy and time in clubs and societies, rebuilding a culture of mutual aid – sharing, caring, doing things together – is the alternative to the high carbon culture-as-consumption and it is the way to strengthen our communities, reducing isolation of older and vulnerable people and possibly reducing crime and antisocial behaviour.

## **A Certain Future: the missing pages**

*A Certain Future* used the following structure to explore its areas of action. Here we give a flavour of what we think are the missing pages.

### ***The Story so far***

Already there is investment in a more fully participative culture in the city.

The city council has provided small grants for local community groups to make their own improvements to the local environment. Libraries, allotment societies and churches already act as nuclei for cultural life.

There have long been local groups of writers – ordinary people sharing their writing together and publishing some of it.

The Moss Side Caribbean Festival, The Asian Mela and the Chorlton Green Festival every year show in their different ways how the city's constituent cultures thrive, with people working together to create, recreating and transforming those cultures in a variety of ways.

On the Merseybank estate a community café became somewhere to share what people have grown in gardens and allotments, combining a social hub with a contribution to household economics.

FC United, the member-owned football club, worked with NEPHRA residents' association in New Moston and ZEST (North Manchester's Healthy Living Project) to set up a play scheme for 8-11 year olds who did a variety of sports and other activities including cookery with locally grown vegetables.

### ***Headlines from the future***

In every ward there is at least one community cultural centre where people learn and practice low carbon performing arts and crafts from music making to drama to furniture making to story telling. There is a local exhibition space. There are sessions for particular interests, age groups and so on, but a lot of the activity is inter-generational and inclusive.

Sixty percent of new gardening tools used in the city come from the Iron in the Soil workshop in Gorton. This workers' cooperative recycles steel from defunct cars, turning it into a variety of traditional and new gardening tools. One of the new designs is an ergonomic shovel usually used for moving compost: it was designed by a gardener from Longsight who needed a shovel that she could use without straining her back.

Manchester apple day is now a popular festival. It was begun as a spin off from the Abundance Manchester project that collected unwanted fruit from people's gardens. Now Manchester is nearly self sufficient in apples with a variety of storage houses that provide apples for 9 months of the year. The festival involves the consumption of apple pies, juice and cider as well as a programme of entertainment by local artists. Twenty five people are employed in the community apple industry. There is a programme of training and mentorship on the cultivation and care of apple trees.

## **Actions**

Establish a low carbon culture commission with representation from arts organisations, the council, community and cultural organisations, business and the education sector. Provide small grants for low carbon projects that pull together culture, community development and green living.

Make the Manchester International Festival reduce its carbon emissions by 20% each year, requiring that all events are audited with the Tyndall centre's event carbon calculator. After 2020 this will no longer be the Manchester International Festival, but the Manchester Festival of Zero Carbon culture.

Use the resources of the media city in Salford to strengthen the production of low carbon local culture.

More public bodies offer use of their local buildings for community activity.

## **Solutions at every scale**

### **Council**

By provide incentives for employees to live in the city, the total length of the working day is reduced. Together with a campaign for shorter working hours and sharing out the work this helps increase people's commitment to the community where they live.

### **Public sector**

Culture becomes a key element of the way public sector organisations work. The police run a drama school for young people at risk of an offending career. NHS and social care providers invest in creative writing, performing and visual arts as part of their menu of interventions. Schools run intergenerational projects, for example retired people come and share cookery and gardening skills with pupils and their parents.

### **Private sector**

Companies invest in artists in residence who work with employees on work-related projects that also strengthen local cultural skills and sophistication. The low carbon culture commission matches £ for £ private sector grants for innovative low carbon cultural projects.

### **Community Groups**

Local community groups work with planners, citizens and businesses towards the aim of a full range of local shops in each neighbourhood, reducing travel, increasing local networks.

Tenants associations set up skill and tool sharing hubs funded on an invest to save basis by housing associations to save on the environmental and financial costs of repairs.

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