

Commentary on “*Ahead of the Curve*” Manchester's climate change consultation for 2016-2050

This consultation closes on Sunday 16th October. Make your comments on it by [clicking HERE](#).

A little context.

Manchester has had a climate change strategy since 2010: *Manchester a Certain Future*. The city council saw the need for such a strategy in keeping with the UK Climate Change Act of the last Labour government. Initial attempts to construct it lacked ambition and a coalition of campaigners from the environmental movement wrote an alternative strategy, *Call to Real Action*. While its radical proposals were not adopted, its message about involving the community was, and as a result, the existing strategy has emphasised engagement with non-governmental sectors. Why? Because reducing emissions requires action in all sectors of the economy and society, not just in local government which does not have the levers to make these reductions happen. And because most of the expertise on climate change and strategies for addressing it is outside the council, in campaigning organisations, universities and some business sectors. Despite the attempt to bring other actors in, as annual reviews and the current strategy have admitted, the ambition to cut carbon emissions by 41% by 2020 (from 2005 levels) will be missed. Only a 32% cut seems likely. And the level of engagement from other organisations has also been disappointing. These disappointing results should be viewed in context. The world in general is also failing miserably on climate change with atmospheric carbon dioxide now above the symbolic threshold of 400ppm, highly unlikely to return, and global average temperatures now at least 1°C above pre-industrial temperatures. With positive feedback processes that are being triggered (reduced reflection from polar ice, reduction of ocean ability to absorb CO₂ and heat, release of methane from frozen deposits in polar regions, forest and peatland destruction and fires....) we are on the brink of a runaway warming catastrophe and radical action is required now to avert it. So far there is no sign of that happening, despite the much trumpeted Paris agreement that sadly has no credible strategy nor commitments behind it. Manchester was the first industrial city, founded on the exploitation of coal for industrial production. It has a historic debt to the world as a major emitter of greenhouse gases, something it continues to do today via what despite huge inequality and severe poverty in the city, are extravagant and unthinking patterns of consumption, from international flights to private motoring to the importation of foods and consumer goods, to illuminated advertising

hoardings urging us to buy more. So while Manchester can only make a small contribution to the global total, it could show inspired leadership and begin to make reparation for its historical (and to be fair, mostly unwitting) contribution to the climate crisis.

What does the new strategy cover?

The new strategy covers the period until 2050. That's a long time – 34 years, by which time I would be 98 and my grandchildren already middle aged. There is nothing wrong with a long timescale for a vision, but action on cumulating emissions is urgent so the next 5 years is critical.

The strategy covers five areas and the summary is worth quoting in full:

- **Supporting a sustainable economy and jobs** – action

on climate change will become an increasingly important part of the city's sustainable, dynamic and competitive economy. Manchester-based businesses and universities will be playing a strong and growing role in delivering solutions locally and to cities around the world. The city's businesses will have access to a rich pool of Carbon Literate local talent, fed by our world-class universities, and our excellent schools and colleges. Businesses, workers and visitors will come from around the world to experience our liveable, resilient, green city.

- **Supporting healthy communities** – Manchester's

residents will be leading increasingly healthy lifestyles that are underpinned by access to high quality parks and green spaces, clean air, healthy local food, safe walking and cycling routes, energy efficient homes and affordable supplies of energy.

- **Adaptation and resilience to climate change** –

the city's businesses and communities will become increasingly resilient to the warmer and wetter winters, hotter and drier summers, and extreme weather that we expect to come with a changing climate.

- **CO2 reduction** – recognising the leadership role and

carbon reduction potential of cities, we will reduce our emissions ahead of national and international CO2 reduction targets, setting milestones for 2020, 2030 and 2040, on route to the city being zero carbon by 2050.

- **Low carbon culture change** – *climate-positive decision-making and behaviours will become progressively incentivised and embedded within the lifestyles and business operations of the city.*

What do we think about the strategy?

In what follows we'll follow the structure of the questionnaire that the strategy is using for its consultation. We don't respond to every point in detail. It is important to note that while we will be saying some critical things, **we do respect the integrity of those who have worked hard to pull together this strategy**, let it be said, **in the face of a dominant economic strategy in the city, country and world, that is absolutely toxic** for people and planet. The focus here is on Manchester, but it is the city region that is the more relevant focus and we look forward to the completion of the GMCA climate strategy with which this Manchester one should dovetail.

Consultation questions and our answers

1. How important is it for residents in Manchester to take action on climate change?

Somewhat important (the issue is very important but individuals can only do so much: to over-emphasise personal agency is to distract from the systemic factors).

2. How important is it for businesses in Manchester to take action on climate change?

Extremely important (since they account for a large part of the economy and its emissions, directly and indirectly).

3. How important is it for schools, colleges and universities in Manchester to take action on climate change?

Somewhat important (probably limited in immediate impact).

4. The draft strategy sets an ambitious aim for Manchester to be a zero carbon city by 2050. There are 2 main reasons for this. a) To help make the city a better place to live, work and visit, with lower energy bills, better air quality, more green spaces, new jobs, and many other benefits. Do you think it is important for Manchester to act on climate change for this reason?

Extremely important (to be carbon zero, though 2050 is far too late: rapid and immediate cuts are needed).

b) To be a leading city for our contribution to global action on climate change. Do you think it is important for Manchester to act on climate change for this reason?

Somewhat important (very important because of Manchester's historical responsibility for the carbon-based economy. But let's not exaggerate the city's current importance in line with the boosterist mind-set of our city leaders!)

5. Do you think the vision and objectives in section 3 of the draft strategy are the right ones for Manchester

Not ambitious enough

Please explain why you chose that answer.

OK:

1) **Low carbon economy** is fine but it is vital to state which sectors will need to shrink. Aggregate economic growth will make the task of radical carbon reductions more difficult: you need to set out an indicative reduction strategy for material flows into and out of the economy and translate this into indicative levels and targets by sector. Certain sectors, including private motoring and aviation are particularly damaging and reduce overall quality of life. Just promoting the growth of the green economy on its own is tantamount to denial of the problem. And what about rebound?

The section on improving energy efficiency of all businesses identifies correctly the importance of energy efficiency but fails to indicate the overall levels of energy input reductions that are needed. It is also couched in terms of the overall business growth narrative which is actually the root of the problem: the material size of our economy is too big so we have to find ways to equitably shrink it while maintaining the ability to create and share surplus – it's not easy, but let's not delude ourselves that we can expand our way to climate safety.

Appropriate technology is going to be needed but the section has an unfortunate technological, even technocratic optimism, failing to recognise that all our lives and consumption patterns need to change radically to a low energy model.

2) **The section on health is vague.** How are you / we going to move towards healthier, low carbon, life-styles. How will the dominance of the car, for example, be addressed. What about the health-damaging practices of big business (for example the food industry)? How can Manchester and GM use its place-shaping power and influence to create radical shifts in this area?

3) **The section on adaptation is broadly sound.** We would add a requirement to add climate shocks and events to the city and region's disaster risk management planning. Have you engaged police, fire, ambulance and other NHS, army in your plans and consultation?

It would be good to see an options analysis on densification versus a more distributed, model of the city and city region with more local employment/housing/green areas reducing the need to travel within the city

region, on [a kind of retrofitted garden-city model](#). The evidence on densification is at best equivocal and nuanced¹.

4) **Climate science now tells us very clearly that the targets on zero carbon are extremely inadequate**². 2050 is far too late.

[Runaway climate change is here already](#). We need to make massive cuts to emissions and this strategy is mere tinkering. We suggest as a minimum going zero carbon by 2025, and even that is too slow. This requires an energy descent plan as a minimum. We recognise that the power of the city/MACF is limited here, but that does not excuse a timid and fudged target. Rather it defines the work that is needed to bring in the other sectors, and the powers that need to be acquired and assumed.

5) **Low carbon culture change**: The strategy says "*The question is sometimes posed whether low carbon culture change initiatives should be focussed on 'behaviour change' activities focussed on citizens, to directly try to influence their behaviour, or on low carbon 'skills training' in schools, colleges and the workplace to encourage the development of products and services that offer a low carbon alternative to the norm.*"

This misses the point. Both these strategies if pursued alone are individualistic: they ignore the context within which behaviour changes. Culture is not reducible to behaviour. Sure critical understanding and information for citizens is important, but without the structures that require, encourage and support them to make change, then such approaches are little better than victim-blaming.

6. Do you think section 4 of the draft strategy [carbon emissions reduction] covers all the areas where action is needed?

Partly

1) **The setting conditions identified are broadly OK but the content is too weak.** We suggest something a little like the idea of "planning agreements". The idea is that city leaders sit down with leading firms and organisations in each sector and identify the kinds of indicative limits and targets that I've mentioned above. These are then monitored and publicly posted so that there can be a cultural shift to accountability with acclamation and shame as key levers.

And yet again, relying on a growth strategy is inadequate - you need to set clear reduction targets and priorities for the damaging sectors. Yes the airport is a problem that needs more than [the worthless international carbon trading offset](#) agreement to force change - which means reduction in aviation and the city's [aviation dependency](#).

1 Waters, J. (2016). Accessible Cities. In D. Simon (Ed.), *Rethinking sustainable cities: accessible, green and fair*. Free download from <https://oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=613676>

2 McKibben, B. (2016). Recalculating the Climate Math | New Republic. Retrieved October 10, 2016, from <https://newrepublic.com/article/136987/recalculating-climate-math>

2) **Energy.** Particularly given the problem you identify of Manchester not having autonomy in its energy mix, you will not be able to rely on energy mix decarbonisation alone to reduce CO2. Therefore you need to set clear energy reduction targets.

There are some good ideas on buildings. It is worth trying to get near passivehaus standards imposed for all new build and considering street by street deeper retrofit schemes for existing housing stock.

There is also scope for promoting low embodied carbon technologies in building and retrofitting - [see the work of CAT](#) on this.

Indeed concrete is one of the major CO2 emitters but there are alternatives that need scaling up for many construction tasks.

3) **Transport.** This section is very disappointing, falling under the sway of the fantasist visions of the city and GMCA. **Manchester is a car-orientated city.**

How will the step change to one without significant numbers of cars be reached? How will car travel be disincentivised: car parking levies as in Nottingham, protected cycle space on all but the smallest roads, as in most Northern European

cities? Bus regulation and the taking back of control under the public sector (the norm in Europe) is required as that will facilitate low energy/low carbon options including some further tramway routes, possibly trolleybuses (for faster and cheaper deployment - cf Salzburg), biogas (already in Metrolink) from landfill and possibly some other sources (caution though on imports and tree-based biomass³) for buses (see for example Malmö), and new housing development that designs out the car (cf. Gothenburg, Freiburg etc).

Please do stop pretending the airport is part of the solution. If it is not going to reduce, and is even going to grow, then state where the deeper cuts will be made to compensate. Believe us you won't be able to do it!

4) **Green spaces and waterways.** This section needs to work towards proper analysis of the carbon sequestration potential of these areas with quantified options appraisal for alternative planting and restoration plans. This needs balancing with biodiversity and other eco-physical dimensions (nitrogen, phosphorous etc). That's a big bit of work so you need to propose how it will be done.

5) **Food system emissions** are very very significant and it's good you mention them, but more detail is needed.

7. Please list all the things you do to tackle climate change?

This question is unnecessary, suggesting that individuals, by changing their behaviour, can make a significant impact on climate. This is only true to the extent that they can exert leadership and act together, politically.

3 <https://www.carbonbrief.org/investigation-does-the-uks-biomass-burning-help-solve-climate-change>

8. What else would you like to do and what support would you need?

So: Anything that amplifies the above actions.

9. What should we do more of as a city to help tackle climate change?

Some ideas:

Press very hard on Greater Manchester Pension Fund to divest from its fossil fuel assets. 5 year plan starting with no new investments, pulling out of coal, fracking and tar sands, with full divestment over 5 years. Reinvestment will help your green economy plans too.

All councillors and senior managers should be required to complete carbon literacy training and a series of workshops held for the graduates with civil society activists and campaigners for radical carbon reduction.

10. Please leave any other comments here

We make a lot of critical comments but we hope they are also constructive. This whole area is frustrating given the slow progress and we do recognise that it is not easy being an environmentalist who works with a large bureaucracy, with its own logic. It is good that Manchester does have a CC plan and at least officially makes some of the right noises. We need to push for more ambition in this, adequate to the almost stupefying scale of the challenge facing humanity now.

Mark H Burton
for Steady State Manchester