People's Spatial Framework: A Letter from the Future[i].

Dear Greater Mancunians,

The lovely, liveable, City of Greater Manchester

We are writing to you from 2035, and are delighted to tell you that Greater Manchester has been transformed into a liveable countryside city. It has met its carbon targets ahead of the 2038 deadline set back in 2019[ii], although the climate has changed greatly and still gives cause for concern as a result of he build up of emissions during what we now call the "consume and dispose period".

So, what are our lives like now? The City and towns have been transformed and nearly all the everyday functions and events happen in our neighbourhoods. This means we don't have much need for travel, but when we do, to visit friends and relations, the buses are frequent, reliable and free, and those roads that still exist are full of bikes, trikes and people walking and children playing: there are very few cars about, those that are, do not emit the polluting emissions of yesterday, and the great majority of small motorised passenger vehicles are to enable disabled people to get around and provide collective transport – a bit like the community transport you are familiar with. If we have to travel to other places a long way away, we go by train – fares are cheap and there are plenty of stops so we can get to the stations easily. We've all got used to travelling relatively slowly. We look back wryly at the idea, which never came to fruition, of getting to London in an hour, although the railways have been improved greatly with new lines built. A lot of the former roads have been transformed to green and blue-ways, sometimes with community allotments in them but often just beautiful places to be. We live in close contact with nature, not in what could be seen as "the big car park" of the past. Front gardens are a treat to see – where there used to be parked cars there are now thickets and rockeries and sometimes ponds.

City and town centres are places we go to, just to be or to meet people. They are such lovely places they are a joy to be in. Nearly everyone knows their neighbours these days and there are frequent community bring-and-share collective meals. These cut down on energy use as well as encourage us to socialise.

We are using far less energy altogether. Our household appliances have become much more efficient, and in some places, neighbours are sharing fridges and cookers, all of which have been converted to electricity. Appliances do cost more than they used to but they last longer and anyway, people have less interest in acquiring "must have items" to demonstrate their status with unnecessary, vanity items. But the source of our electricity has changed too. We have a district energy centre in every neighbourhood: this is a hub of renewable energy which differs according to the conditions in each area. In some areas hydro power contributes, in others it is mostly solar or wind and there is some strictly limited use of biomass. All of our houses have been well draught-proofed and we have nearly all changed our window dressings to insulate better[iii]. Most houses have their water heated by solar thermal panels and everyone is careful not to waste hot water. Older and private rented homes are fully retrofitted, leading to almost zero energy bills.

You wouldn't recognise our high streets or what used to be out-of-town retail parks. Many of the old retail units have been transformed into work spaces, so many people work very close to home, always with revitalising gardens nearby (and very few of us work longer than 5 hour days). A lot of the businesses around are workers' cooperatives, and we are pleased to say there are repair and share shops in every neighbourhood. Most neighbourhoods have two or three small workshops and there has been a resurgence in the use of traditional crafts, often using the abundant woodland products from the Red Rose Forest. However, there are many workshops using and maintaining modern technology, in energy-frugal ways.

Most of our food comes from within 50 miles of the city and much of it is from local suppliers who we have met and got to know through the weekly farmers' markets. Instead of large monoculture uses of farm land, farmers grow smaller amounts of a greater range of crops – they know what we need and when. Some neighbourhoods have fish ponds, the best of them integrated with other water and waste management systems. You will know about supermarkets – they now include food preparation workshops, and we long ago got used to taking our own bags and jars to fill with produce. They, too, have developed great links with local farmers and food companies, so you will find different things in different places, which is lovely. People still eat some meat but it mostly comes from rabbits, squirrels (still a bit of a pest) and backyard pigs. There has even been a revival of the former practice of building dove cotes to harvest pigeons, popularised as "dove-chicken".

Each neighbourhood is surrounded by woodland and green spaces and have become, in effect, urban hamlets. The cities and towns have begun to shrinksomewhat as many people have moved to more rural areas, and those have been revitalised as more people have moved in. They now have community services and facilities in every village as well as decent rural bus services. The former retail centres in the city and towns have been drastically re-modelled. As work has become more local, many of the large office blocks have been turned into good quality social housing and the surrounding areas made into parks. Part of Deansgate in the centre of Manchester is a large boating lake – rather like the one in the Palace of Versailles. Some of the former office buildings have become exhibition hubs – taking exhibitions and collections out to the neighbourhoods rather than expecting people to travel in to the centres to see them. Other poorly built ones that took far too much energy to run have been demolished and scavenged for materials. Controversially, some of the traditional Cottonopolis legacy buildings which cannot be made carbon neutral are also being recycled: reclamation technology and the certifying of re-used materials have made great strides in recent years, largely to avoid the carbon emissions from steel and concrete production.

Lastly, we should tell you that there are lots of people living here from all over the world. They came as climate refugees but enrich all of our neighbourhoods enormously. Many came, out of necessity, by plane, and the airport is now a large welcoming place, where incomers can get to know something about the different neighbourhoods, meet local people and decide where it is they would like to live. The airport supports only a few essential flights (emergency response, for example). Let us tell you, the places we live in are now so enjoyable, we hardly even think of overseas holidays any more!

How we got here.

You'll be wondering how it turned out like this and it is a little difficult to reconstruct the history, but we'll try.

The 20s were a time of turmoil when it seemed like the country was at a crossroads. Many people, from distinct sections of the population, felt betrayed by the governing class and for some, nationalism and xenophobia seemed attractive. However, the traditions of standing with one another and working together were also strong and they won the day. Somehow, common cause was made between those seeking a fairer and more equal society and those who wanted more local control over decision-making. This was helped along by the new government that came into power in 2024, a surprise win for a coalition of parties that united on a reforming platform of climate action, increased equality and deepening democracy. The outgoing Tory government had grudgingly adopted some stronger climate policies, faced as they were with the gathering storm of the climate emergency which was having devastating consequences. The new government's Devolution Act of 2026 was actually a new national constitution with a Parliament for the North West and strategic councils based largely on eco-regions: ours was, at first, rather unprettily called Manchester Upper Mersey catchment. This meant that there was an increasing focus on making the best uses of all the region's resources, with an emphasis on energy conservation and waste reduction. A public competition resulted in a much better name that people could identify with: “Greater Manchester Towns and Country”.

The re-election of the Greater Manchester Mayor in 2020. and the coming to prominence of a new generation of leaders at Manchester City Council, led to an increased seriousness in both tackling the ecological and climate crisis with a realisation that to do this and to respond to the intractable social and economic problems of the region required a break from the old, globalisation focussed,inward investment, boosterist, economic model. Perhaps Steady State Manchester's work on an alternative economic and social model (as in the 2020 publication, *The Viable Economy … and Society*[iv]) had some influence. The examples of radical municipalist administrations elsewhere[v] were also important, as was the progressive greening of some of the more innovative and progressive think tanks and consultancies such as CLES and IPPR North.

Before its replacement by the eco-regional strategic council, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority took the brave step of completely rewriting the Spatial Framework document[vi] (under sustained pressure from campaigners) using the concept of the 20 minute, polycentric city, which had already been gaining traction in places such as Melbourne, Portland, Barcelona and Paris[vii]. This meant an end to the hubristic plans for “growth corridors and hubs”. Perhaps the crises in global supply chains were a key influence in this change in direction. The unforeseen economic impacts of the coronovirus pandemic and the impact of the Middle East conflicts on oil supplies (the Second Oil Shock, harking back to that of the 1970s) had led to shortages in a variety of things from foodstuffs to petrol to car parts and electronic equipment. The global recession that came in its wake also meant an increased emphasis on what Steady State Manchester had been calling for since 2012, “*endogenous development*” or the use of local wealth and resources to power needed, and selective, economic development[viii], as well as the maintenance of an economy that was more localised and

which increasingly prevented wealth leaching out as corporate profits for companies headquartered and owned elsewhere. However, something closer to home also necessitated radical change. After many months of continued flooding from the Irwell, Medlock and Irk, swathes of the city and suburbs became uninhabitable. The destruction from flooding resulted in many living in emergency accommodation for many months, and a surge in homelessness. The entire social support infrastructure barely escaped wholesale collapse and there was considerable civil unrest. It was looking like Manchester society was going back to conditions not seen since the nineteenth century.

Leaders, demonstrating a welcome new humility, worked with citizens and other organisations, public and private, to turn the crisis into an opportunity to hasten a new trajectory towards the locally robust, polycentric eco-region that we can now appreciate.

The establishment, in 2019, of the Greater Manchester Co-operative Commission[ix] (previously called for in SSM's 2016 *Policies for the City Region*[x]) catalysed the development of co-operatives, large and small, which became over the coming two decades the dominant sector in the eco-regional economy.

The supply chain disruptions, together with the collapse first of more large retail chains and then some of the internet trading giants, led to a reconfiguring of the way the city provided for its needs. Public, private, and community-based initiatives sprang up for local food production and supply: the economics of doing this had changed markedly as energy costs meant supplies from further afield became more costly and wages in the horticultural sector became more competitive (though prices increased). Sections of the population began working part time in formal jobs and spending part of the working week in local food production for themselves and families and/or for local markets. The land reforms enacted nationally by the coalition government in 2027 undoubtedly helped. They combined a land value tax for large holdings together with the step by step public ownership of land under the new regional land trusts: just as in many indigenous societies, individuals were not allowed to own the freehold for land[xi]. Nobody was displaced or dispossessed as a result of this as the granting of long leases or usufruct agreements replaced freehold. This had the advantage of stopping land-banking and speculation dead, while democratising and increasing access to productive land. This helped catalyse the horticultural revolution across the eco-region. The government's controversial but groundbreaking adoption of a Universal Basic Land Right[xii] (2032) was another factor. It meant people had a stake in the land, whether directly through a land holding, or indirectly via a share in a land-based enterprise.

Manchester had always been good at building innovative partnerships. Now the focus of these was ecological and social transformation. An early example was the partnership brokered by the city council and the GM Combined Authority with the alliance of social housing providers and, initially, two large energy companies and an association of building contractors. The core of this was the “18 degree warmth offer”. Rather than paying for electricity and gas, the householder paid for guaranteed minimum standard of warmth in two or three rooms between October and April. This was provided by the Warmth Partnership which combined traditional energy supply together with insulation and local generation measures (high quality insulation and heat recycling, low tech insulating curtains and draft proofing, and solar panels for water heating and/or electricity

generation). A key part of the programme was boiler replacement. Starting with the older more inefficient gas boilers, over a period of 12 years, all the gas boilers were replaced by a combination of heat pumps, green gas boilers (in certain neighbourhoods where the gas supply was greened with biogas from composting and hydrogen produced by electrolysis from surplus electricity), district heating, and back up electric heating for those houses near passivhaus insulation standard. The programme was so successful, that once teething problems in the financial model were sorted out, it was adopted across Greater Manchester, not just for social housing but for private tenants and owner occupiers alike. It helped to have an investment from the Greater Manchester Pension Fund[xiii], which sold first its coal mining holdings (2020) and then over the next five years its remaining fossil fuel holdings, much of them invested in local renewable energy and public transport. Eighteen degrees was the minimum standard: people, unless they had special needs for additional warmth, were discouraged from overheating their accommodation because of the reverse tariff for additional energy purchase (the more you bought, the steeper the cost). The 18 degree standard also meant an end to damp and cold homes: it was a win-win all round. As the model spread across the country, there was a change from a large number of overheated houses and a smaller number of cold houses to a situation where average internal temperatures fell from above the 2007 average of 17.5 back to the 1990 figure of 16[xiv]. However, almost all houses had two to three rooms at the comfortable temperature (wearing warm clothing in winter) of just over 18 degrees.

As the polycentric development model took off, commuting reduced. In any case the impact of the oil crisis and the stalling of electric vehicle manufacturer and distribution made this inevitable. Of course many people still commuted, using the new, regulated bus system which increasingly linked up with trams, collective taxis, rail, and active travel options. The reduction in motor car ownership (helped by the growth of car pools, car hire and car share schemes) meant that roads could be narrowed, car parks repurposed as squares, playgrounds and market-places, and the streets de-cluttered and greened. The scrappage of many cars led to the growth of a local recycling industry with climate refugees from the global South teaching locals many skills and techniques. A surprising spin off was the resurgence of blacksmithing and other metalwork crafts and trades. We must say, though, that in all of this, disabled and older people had a very loud voice, so motorised transport for those who needed it remained, but mostly in collective form.

Re-use, recycling and refurbishment became the norm, conducted by a burgeoning of sole proprietor and co-operative enterprises, as well as community based initiatives including repair cafés, needlework and woodcraft groups, and maker centres. It isn't a medieval craft economy though, since the judicious use of appropriate technology[xv] is valued. However, the emphasis has changed to making equipment, including electronic equipment, last for years and years – some computers from 2020 and before are still in use, running open-source software[xvi] - there isn't much incentive to replace perfectly serviceable equipment since the demise of Microsoft, Apple and Google and the rapid rise of the international Open Tech Co-op Federation.

Flash flooding and rain run-off problems, a feature that the hard townscapes inherited from the Consume and Dispose Period, exacerbated with the changing climate, were resolved by innovative water management schemes. This led to an increase in urban wetlands with reed beds for water

purification, fish production and general amenity. It also helped stabilise temperatures which, with the diminishing of the North Atlantic currents, a result of Greenland's ice melting, meant colder winters, but also heat waves as a result of the general increase in global average temperatures. The best designs used the reflectivity of water in winter to direct sunlight into the south aspects of buildings.

From 2020 onwards there was a groundswell of interest in trying to confront both social inequality and environmental justice. The widespread carbon literacy programmes were adapted to include economic, and alternative economic literacy. This meant that by 2025, it was the norm for people to discuss alternative ways of living and of organising in their neighbourhoods. This was supported by the development of Neighbourhood Development Plans, now within the revised National Planning Framework which includes a presumption against development[xvii]. Most councillors adapted well to their new roles of community animators. You will have heard that the youth climate strikes continued with huge amounts of popular support. The increased involvement of everyone in discussions and thinking about the issues facing us put pressure on the politicians and the companies to act and to implement some of the changes outlined above. We'd say from about 2023 the mobilisation of large sectors of knowledgeable people, taking action in their own households and neighbourhoods, but also via frequent lobbying and pressure on the power-holders, made a really huge difference. It took the 3 years from 2020 to 2023 to increase knowledge and understanding and for the majority of people to say ' Enough!', and that's the word that came to be used as a shorthand for the new economic and social settlement.

So, to finish off

Looking back, it seems remarkable that so many things came together so that we were able to transform our city and region so well. It took an enormous amount of work, organisation, and a big dose of creativity but, although ecological, social and economic problems still challenge us, there really is no comparison with the sorry state we were in back in 2020. What's more, nearly everyone feels they are part of this collective project. Yes we grumble and argue but that's because we are still trying to make things even better.

i Notes.

It isn't usual for a letter to have footnotes, but we though readers might like to have some background to some of the ideas.

This piece draws upon letters drafted by participants during Steady State Manchester's People's Spatial Framework workshop, 23 January, 2020 https://steadystatemanchester.net/2019/12/10/event-a-peoples-spatial-framework-january-23/
We are grateful to Mike Duddy for comments made on an earlier draft.
Our main aim, both for the workshop and this letter, is to help clarify what could be the alternative, or alternatives, to the "official story" about spatial development for GM. We see that as a gap; it is all very well knowing what we are against but what are we for? So we'd want this to be circulated widely but our main audience is people already engaged in working for a better set of options: we'd like them to pick it up and run with it, deepening and broadening the clues that we give, as they see fit. We wouldn't be able to do a detailed road map all by ourselves and nor should we wish to: it has to be a collective product. It might also be of use to some of the insiders who have disquiet about the direction things are going in. They could be politicians or officials interested in simultaneously addressing the ecological, social and economic challenges.

A similar exercise by the Australian permaculturist, David Holgren, was something of a model for this exercise and his ideas, although for a very different context, are also worth reviewing. See https://holmgren.com.au/a-history-from-the-future/

ii https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/greater-manchester-sets-out-concerted-activity-designed-to-decarbonise-the-city-region/

iii https://www.notechmagazine.com/2012/11/retrofit-measures-can-achieve-energy-savings-comparable-to-new-replacement-windows.html
https://www.lehmans.com/blog/making-old-time-window-quilts/

iv https://steadystatemanchester.net/2020/02/14/the-viable-economy-and-society/

v https://steadystatemanchester.net/2018/08/13/fearless-cities-could-we-have-the-new-municipalism-in-greater-manchester/

vi https://steadystatemanchester.net/2019/03/15/steady-state-manchesters-response-to-the-2019-greater-manchester-spatial-framework/

vii https://steadystatemanchester.net/2019/11/20/the-future-is-20-minutes-away-20-minute-neighbourhoods/

viii https://steadystatemanchester.net/2014/05/12/where-will-the-money-come-from-endogenous-economic-development-for-the-viable-economy/

ix https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/greater-manchester-launches-commission-to-support-the-development-of-the-co-operative-sector/

x https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/policies-for-the-city-region-the-longer-version-v3-final.pdf

xi https://www.cusp.ac.uk/themes/s2/blog-bg-usufruct/

xii See “The Viable Economy ... and Society” https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2020/02/the-viable-economy-revision-for-2nd-edn-v2.4-final.pdfpage 31.

xiii http://fossilfreegm.org.uk/

xiv Data from note to UK 2050 Pathway Calculator
http://2050.hellings.webfactional.com/assets/onepage/29.pdf

xv https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appropriate_technology
https://www.pachamama.org/appropriate-technology
https://www.appropedia.org/Appropriate_technology

xvi https://opensource.com/resources/what-open-source

xvii Davey, B. (2019). Land planning policy at the limits to growth. *Feasta Website*.
http://www.feasta.org/2019/05/30/land-planning-policy-at-the-limits-to-growth/