What IS a low carbon culture?

How will we find out?
How will we start “doing it”?

A “first steps” report
November 2014
Executive Summary

What is a low carbon culture? We don’t know. This paper of the People’s Environmental Scrutiny Team is not about giving a final answer. It’s about starting a process that the Council and its hangers-on have been unwilling or unable to do. The report:

- Outlines the background to the creation of the term and then justifies its own existence,
- Suggests some reasons why the term has never been defined
- Digresses into “how to explain climate change to anyone.”
- Wrestles (and loses) with the meaning of culture
- Has a top interview with a real live anthropologist (no pith helmet though)
- Reprints some of the answers we got when we asked the question on facebook and email.
- Reprints a portion of an “implementation plan” sent to Manchester City Council in February 2014. Which was ignored, of course. Stands up alright though.
- Closes out with a series of actions that the Council, Civil Society and the Ivory Tower could take in the short and medium term to start doing AND defining a “low carbon culture”.

Background and “Why is this report needed”

On November 17th 2009 the top politicians of Manchester City Council (the “Executive”) agreed the “Manchester Climate Change Action Plan.” It set two headlines goals for the year 2020 (and so, we are HALF WAY to that goal), and both goals are for the City (not just the Council).

The first was a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions of 41%. We are going to miss that by a very long way. But apparently that’s not our fault, because the economy is growing. Or something.

The second goal is a lot more interesting:

“To engage all individuals, neighbourhoods and organisations in Manchester in a process of cultural change that embeds ‘low carbon thinking’ into the lifestyles and operations of the city. 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. Every one of the actions in our plan will contribute in some way to the development of ‘carbon literacy’ in the city. 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. Enabling a low carbon culture in the city will be particularly important if the challenge of meeting even more demanding carbon reduction targets between 2020 and 2050 is to be met.”

The plan was produced so that the Council Leader would not go to the Copenhagen Climate Conference (of Mayors) empty-handed (it had been promised in 2007, and
Goal two must have seemed like a good idea at the time; A nice, bold, headline-grabbing “aspirational target.” (So unlike the realistic, modest and followed-up proclamations that this Council makes on every other topic.)

Here’s the thing; We are halfway to 2020, and no-one in an official position has made any sustained – or god forbid collaborative – effort to define it. There is this tacit assumption that enough people do the “Carbon Literacy” training then it will magically emerge. A couple of problems with this.

a) That’s a ridiculous proposition. “Culture” doesn’t come from individuals watching powerpoints.

b) The target was that by the end of 2013 the number of people having received carbon literacy training would be... 1,000,000. The actual amount (as of June 2014) was... 1,000. And that doesn’t include many of the Councillors, since the Council seems incapable of organising both face-to-face sessions and a computer-based learning system.

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The purpose of this report is to get people thinking about “a low carbon culture”, and lay out some things that can be done to widen the conversation beyond the rich white hand-wringing middle-class people*, refine it and make it useful WHILE TAKING ACTION.

(*To be clear; lots and lots of people of all colours creeds, ages and classes are very concerned about climate change. It’s just that the official structures will only pay attention if it is a brief photo-opportunity. Ongoing policy-making and implementing? Not so much.)

Why has the Council and its Steering Group never defined it?

The simple explanation might be that there were simply not the cognitive or administrative capacities available to those inside “the charmed circle” to do the job. But a cynic might say that they didn’t want to open a can of worm;

1) A low carbon culture “almost” certainly contradicts economic growth. Recently the amazing excuse “we didn’t realise the economy was going to grow” is being rolled out as a reason why goal one (the 41% reduction target) is going to be missed!

2) Manchester City Council owns 35% of Manchester Airports Group. A low-carbon culture is probably one where people are encouraged NOT to jet off for a stag party in Estonia, a weekend in Barcelona, yearly long-haul flights to Australia. Oops, awkward.

3) Culture is notoriously difficult to measure. This makes bureaucrats justifiably nervous

4) Politicians, especially ones not so much “wedded to” but “absorbed by” neoliberalism have an extreme aversion to anything that smacks of the “nanny state” or “social engineering”

5) Meanwhile, all the environmental groups and campaigners who should have been pressuring on this issue have been totally unfit for purpose on this big but unwieldy issue.
What is a culture?

Raymond Williams said it was one of the hardest words to define. He took many cracks at it over his life, but one of the most beautiful is this -

“Culture is ordinary: that is where we must start. To grow up in that country was to see the shape of a culture, and its modes of change. I could stand on the mountains and look north to the farms and the cathedral, or south to the smoke and the flare of the blast furnace making a second sunset. To grow up in that family was to see the shaping of minds: the learning of new skills, the shifting of relationships, the emergence of different language and ideas. My grandfather, a big hard labourer, wept while he spoke, finely and excitedly, at the parish meeting, of being turned out of his cottage.” (Williams, 1958)

Meanwhile, here’s the inevitable Wikipedia entry –

In the 20th century, "culture" emerged as a central concept in anthropology, encompassing the range of human phenomena that cannot be directly attributed to genetic inheritance. Specifically, the term "culture" in American anthropology had two meanings:

1. the evolved human capacity to classify and represent experiences with symbols, and to act imaginatively and creatively; and
2. the distinct ways that people, who live differently, classified and represented their experiences, and acted creatively.

So, perhaps, ‘the things we do without thinking about them so much because and “everyone else” is doing them too.’ Culture is the water around the goldfish. It takes a special goldfish, paying attention, to notice the water, its taste, texture and the changes to it over time.

A couple of other things to consider

Why the focus on “carbon”? We have other, related, environmental problems. If we somehow magically solved our carbon problem, all the others would be at least as bad still (or worse). “Low”? Have you listened to Manchester’s own Professor Kevin Anderson lately? To give ourselves any realistic chance of restricting global warming to 2 degrees above pre-Industrial temperatures, we need to be reducing carbon emission basically 10% annually in the west. Ecological Modernisation – the idea that a few new technologies, a few more people cycling to work- is just not going to do it.
Interview with Hannah Knox

1) If a fellow anthropologist arrived from their home world of Mars, and asked you to define a low-carbon culture, what would you say to him/her/it?

I would say that low carbon culture is an aspiration rather than a description of an existing reality. Since the Industrial Revolution, the development of modern society has depended on the use of carbon-based fossil fuels. These are so fundamental to the political and economic structure of modern society that even the most ecologically-minded communities cannot entirely divorce themselves from products and services that have been made possible by the use of carbon-based energy sources.

In the 1980s however, public awareness of the environmental implications of burning fossil fuels began to grow and people began to experiment with the idea of a society that was no longer based on fossil fuels. Over the years this has moved from a concern voiced primarily by environmental pressure groups to a much more mainstream concern involving technologists, economists, scientists and politicians. Low carbon culture might best be described then, as a powerful science ‘fiction’, through which more and more people are working to imagine and design a future for themselves and for future generations that might operate without fossil-fuel based technologies.

2) What’s the difference between a “culture” and the sum of “people’s behaviours”?

The term behaviour allows us to talk in the abstract about what people do. It allows us to make generalisations about activities and their effects across different settings and across time. Defining a ‘behaviour’ involves putting boundaries around what counts as a particular activity (e.g. turning down a thermostat, turning off a light) in order to make that activity measurable and comparable (hence the ‘sum’ of behaviours). Culture is a contested term, but I think it still remains a useful heuristic ["rule of thumb"] for the way in which it reintroduces the importance of thinking about the context of any behaviour. Culture is generally understood by anthropologists to be that set of norms, assumptions, expectations, material constraints and social taboos that naturalises one way of doing things, and makes another seem strange. Culture helps explain behaviours, by locating any action in the specific web of relations and associations within which it comes about. If behaviour is a useful simplification, the value of the idea of culture lies in its capacity to describe and uncover complexity. I think that this is why behaviour change is so much more appealing as a managed institutional response to an issue like climate change than culture change.

3) Culture changes – women have the vote, there are formal protections for homosexuals, anti-racism laws etc. As Noam Chomsky says, the West is infinitely more civilised than it was 50 or 60 years ago. What are first year anthropology students taught about the why and how and who of cultural change?

The Anthropology 101 view of culture change teaches students about a tension that has long existed in anthropology between a) culture as something that is inherently conservative and traditional, and b) culture as necessarily creative and transformative. Culture as tradition is sustained by all sorts of ceremonies and rituals through which passions and fears are managed, physical and spiritual forces are harnessed and tamed and the reproduction of society is ensured. Culture as creativity on the other hand helps us think about how and when ideas and practices change. It provides a way of thinking, for example, about why contact between cultures in an age of rapid and widespread globalisation has not led to homogeneity but rather to persistently varied ways of approaching life and its challenges.

4) So when does culture change very suddenly? Is it only after an invasion or a plague?

Catastrophic events can, of course, result in rapid cultural change, although it’s important to remember that they can also be subsumed into and rationalised within existing cultural schemas. For me, technological invention is a key frontier of cultural change as it establishes new possibilities for making social worlds, and has the capacity to render current social practice strange in a way that makes change appear necessary. We should be wary,
therefore, of assuming that technological solutions and cultural solutions to climate change are separate from one another – I see them as entirely entangled.

5) What texts – introductory and also more advanced – would you recommend for climate activists who wanted to get their heads around culture and cultural change?

6) Are you aware of any advanced Western countries that have made any sort large-scale transition away from high-consumption/consumerism, besides niche “downshifters”?
I am not aware of any particular country that has made this move for ecological reasons, but there are of course many examples of economies which have seen a transition away from high-consumption due to past and current financial crises, with knock on effects for their carbon emissions. The problem, in carbon reduction terms, is that recession tends to be seen as an unwanted setback to a broader project of increasing wealth and development. Any inadvertent carbon reduction gains made in one place during a recession are either countered by greater economic activity elsewhere or erased when consumption ramps up again during recovery.

7) Anything else you’d add?
We need many more anthropological voices from around the world to join this discussion about what culture change might mean in relation to climate change. Orchestrated cultural change is rarely without its losers and I think we need to be careful about launching enthusiastically into a program of cultural transformation without remaining attentive to all those unforeseen consequences it will bring in its wake.

People’s Responses to the question “what is a low carbon culture and how do we get it”

“A low carbon future (or present) would in my dreams look like this – people no longer trying to fill an empty hole inside with material goods, money, position, power but instead happy and content with simplicity and loving connections to other humans, our companion species and the entire earth. Our intelligence, resourcefulness and creativity would be directed into implementing all the solutions which already exist and developing more rather than putting attention and energy into finances, consumption, petty arguing and war. Food would grow everywhere – in every patio, public space, garden, wall, roof and a plethora of renewable energy sources, each chosen to match local conditions, would generate the minimum of energy that we would need following a maximisation of energy conservation measures. The world would be gorgeous and green as we plant everywhere to soak up all the excess carbon. Human relations would know a new dawn as people mixed and entertained themselves in low carbon ways with music, dance, games, storytelling, food sharing, crafts, art and relaxed with meditation, massage, walking and at night we would see all the billions of stars in the sky and become directly aware (rather than second hand through Brian Cox documentaries) of the amazing universe our precious planet is housed in.”
“A low carbon culture is vegan and grow-your-own, with affordable public transport that makes it worthwhile giving up a car.”

“More quickfire interviews asking the people on the streets of Manchester what they could do to create a carbon neutral/free zone here, few mins insight is often more than you need.”

“With the increased use of wood/multifuel burners in suburban areas, there is a worry, that, due to rising energy costs and households bills more specifically, people in cities like Manchester (which is already designated a smoke control zone under the Clean Air Act) may increasingly resort to burning “less clean” sources of fuel which serves to further increase carbon emissions and pollute the air with toxins and carcinogens, possibly creating a public health risk. We need to revisit the issue of people burning wood, also industrial companies illegally burning tyres, fly-tipped rubbish as well as emissions from other sources sooner rather than later. Increased awareness and education in the form of posters and mailshots could address this. Maybe we need to set up a dedicated independent team of enviro consultants who focus on every aspect of how the city is run from a carbon neutral perspective, from transport i.e: air, train, bus to household/industry energy emissions, to how we can help absorb carbon too, i.e: greening up the city on every spare bit of land that can house a tree or two! It may help some of our declining bird species too. Encourage less internal flights and car use, extension of Metrolink so long as green space isn’t sacrificed. Create a city centre car free zone, delivery only vehicles that run on biodiesel. Free electricity charging points for cars on the city centre periphery as Ikea presently provides for its customers. Introduce carbon zero Rickshaws for cross centre travel! More bicycle parking bays as in Holland where the focus is on the cyclist not the car user. Strict liability as in Denmark and Holland puts the responsibility on the shoulders of the more powerful road user. Could devolution bring new legal powers on this? Otherwise, bring in congestion charges. The greater the emission, the greater the charge? All flat roofs could be fitted with photovoltaic panelling on office blocks that have them. Once the first company makes the leap others are sure to follow, the ripple that starts the wave so to speak, lowering energy costs, thus passing savings onto customers.”

“Windmills. Beasts of burden. get used to the smell of animals. But almost none for eating. But say goodbye to your processed veggie sausages. Fried oat and bean burgers with salt is the closest you’ll come.
We’ll eat more local and funny tasting plants, maybe even some considered weeds currently. Far less fertiliser.
Houses built for the long-term, as a major group effort. Hopefully at least some will look like hobbit holes. And bicycles, thousands of ‘em.
Dribbles of electricity used for essential services like communication. Waking and sleeping with the sun. Passive heating. Jumping while wearing a jumper will replace central heating. More storytelling in the dark. Learn how to knit and wash up in the dark. Quite possibly more sex, due to the long nights. Much of that is taken from my knowledge of medieval and early modern history. For god sake just keep the coffee flowing. if we go back to small beer I’ll curl up and die.”

“Where people know what a Keeling Curve is. And understand the nature of exponential growth. And that if we want everything to stay the same, everything has to change.”
What is to be done?

[From “Manchester Climate Monthly Report for Discussion and Implementation to the Executive of Manchester City Council Subject: Open Letter to City Council on 9 Actions to take on Climate Change (Feb 2014)]

ACTION THREE: Collaboratively defining a “low carbon culture” and creating an implementation plan by Dec 31st 2014

Situation
Goal Two of the Action Plan calls for Manchester “To engage all individuals, neighbourhoods and organisations in Manchester in a process of cultural change that embeds ‘low carbon thinking’ into the lifestyles and operations of the city…. [for full text see page 2].
Currently in Council documents and speeches this second “particularly important” goal is either ignored, elided or reduced to the technocratic language of “embed low-carbon cultural change.”
[“Embed” implies that somebody already knows what a low carbon culture is and can inject it as if with a hypodermic needle. Such hubris! It's almost touching. Almost.]

Mission
Leverage the undoubted and world-class knowledge and commitment of Manchester’s academics, students, activists and residents to create both usable “metrics” and a concrete implementation plan of how to achieve a “low-carbon culture” by December 31st 2014, with that plan being open for consultation and comment from November 17th (the 5th anniversary of the City Council’s Executive signing off the MACF document.) [Hahahaha.]

Execution
Take action. Then start making a plan (see below for some ideas).
Make a public statement to the effect that you understand that even if a) all people who live/work/study in Manchester were offered a day’s carbon literacy training and if by some miracle b) they all took it up, this would still not add up to a “low carbon culture.”
Manage (downwards) all expectations of the “Low Carbon Culture Target and Monitoring Group.”
Monthly progress reports, written in plain English, and open to comments, on the MCC website, with a continuous call for ideas from citizens.

Administration
Ask an anthropology professor or two (or three) to set their undergrads this as an essay topic; “What does a low carbon culture look like, and how do we get it?” Have an incentive (£100?) for the best essay, with the Exec Member for the Environment handing over the dosh. Publish the top five on the Council’s website and on the ever-expanding manchesterclimate.com
Manchester Climate Monthly got the ball rolling a bit recently by asking Dr Hannah Knox a few questions on this topic.
Hold a broader essay contest on this topic open to all people who live, work or study in Manchester.
Publish and publicise the winning entries.
Questions
Has anyone ever managed to ‘create’ a low carbon culture? If so, what can we learn from them? I suspect you don’t “plan” cultural change unless you are a church or a multi-national corporation with very deep pockets. But I could be wrong.

Financial implications
Getting interested and interesting minds focusing on the problem won’t actually be that hard or expensive, if the lead comes not from feral activists but rather from the Executive Member for the Environment and the Chair of the Steering Group. No need for big newspaper campaigns, or funding charities that did little of note with previous sums of money.

Potential multiplier effects
Get this right and the world really would sit up and take notice.

Consequences of non-delivery of this action
Nothing much, since we are toast already.

Next short-term action(s)
Commit to some essay contests and so on. Pick up the phone to some of the big “cultural” outfits and get them committing to some things as soon as their schedules allow. The longer you leave those phone calls, the later it will be…

Medium-to-long term actions
Get started before you have the implementation plan (I know, crazy isn’t it!) Ask the Cornerhouse/Home/Whatever to put on films and public events about climate change. Ask the Royal Exchange to stage Henrik Ibsen’s “An Enemy of the People” with sponsorship from Manchester Airports Group. Commit to annual short-story, essay and film contests. Get a regular column in the MEN. Etc etc etc. There are loads of feasible ideas. If you wait until some Big Plan has been written to deal with something as slippery as cultural change, you will be a laughing stock.

[The Council of course ignored this document, which contained similar detailed suggestions for the eight other actions that citizens called upon them to take. It’s almost as if they are under the impression that they’re doing just fine and don’t need any help....]

Actions to take In the next 6-12 months

Manchester City Council
As well as the actions mentioned above
- The Executive Member for the Environment keeps her commitment (made in February, repeated in April… broken in June) to start blogging regularly about all matters environmental.
- The Executive Member for Culture and Leisure (the clue is in the name) starts a blog about how her actions and decisions are achieving not just emissions
reductions but making the Council an important player in the creation of a “low carbon culture.”

- Accepts the need to start measuring its “Total Carbon Footprint” (as per a promise in the 2009, which set 2013 as the deadline)

**Environmentalists/campaigners**
- Turn the utter lack of action by Manchester City Council into an electoral issue.
- Host a “back-casting” conference for how we want the city to look in 5 years’ time.
- Create a short film on the subject of “what is a low carbon culture?” Perhaps even run a competition on the topic.

**Academics**
Academics don’t usually work on those timescales! But still, a seminar with some anthropology students, sociologists, socio-technical transitions types could be organised, filmed etc. That would help solve the problem, for sure...

**In the next 1-2 years**

**Manchester City Council**
*As well as the actions mentioned above*
- The City Council starts reporting its Total Carbon Footprint by the end of 2015
- It makes the production and actual carrying out of ward plans a priority. As one ambitious councillor said recently, things have to be happening at the ward level.
- It INVOLVES citizens in the creation and implementation of ward-level disaster preparedness/community-based resilience plans and actions

**Environmentalists/campaigners**
- There is a determination to identify current skills, skills-gaps, and to share skills and knowledge using all formats, not just set-piece meetings in the Friends Meeting House with some sages on the stage.
- Engaging seriously with the notion of being ready for interruptions to “core” services (electricity etc) and to extreme weather events, but doing community-based preparation instead of “head for the hills/I have my bunker and tinned goods” mentality

**Academics**
- Academics and departments from both University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University undertake seminars, workshops, the production of articles/books on the subject of “what is a low carbon culture”, with a focus on reaching beyond the “usual suspects”, working in cross-disciplinary and even cross-institution teams.
- Hold a conference to mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of “The Coal Question”, in which Manchester-based economist William Jevons pointed out that increases in “efficiency” lead to MORE of a substance being used up quicker.
And finally – 2 corking ideas taken from the Irwell Group’s 2010 publication-

*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.*

**Conclusion**

Will much of this happen? No, of course not. Manchester’s curse is that – thanks to strong leadership and vision – it has been “winning” the game of inward investment over the last 20 years, and enough prosperity has been created to make everyone think or hope that the pie can keep getting bigger.

Meanwhile, the behaviour of the Liberal Democrats and the weakness of the Greens has meant that there is, thanks to the first past the post electoral system, literally NO political opposition in this city. Winners do not believe the game will change. But it does. And they often suffer more than most.

So, nobody is going to “save us”. We are the ones we are waiting for....

“If we just enlarge the pie, everyone will get more.” This has been the imagery of capitalist growthmanship since the end of World War II.... But the growth of the pie did not change the way slices were distributed except to enlarge the absolute gap between the lion’s share and the ant’s. And whether the pie grows, or stops growing, or shrinks, there are always people who suffer from the behaviour of the cooks, the effluents from the oven, the junkiness of the pie, and the fact that they needed something more nutritious than pie anyway.”

(Gross, 1980, p 98)
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Further Reading


People’s Environmental Scrutiny Team
http://environmentalscrutiny.info

Whether you have days to spare or minutes, whether you are a cross between Noam Chomsky and Martin Luther King or just an ordinary person like the rest of us, YOU and YOUR SKILLS are needed.

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