

### Alexia Coke

# Where do we go from here?

Transition strategies for a low carbon future



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Prosperity and Sustainability in the Green Economy (PASSAGE) is a Professorial Fellowship held by Prof Tim Jackson at the University of Surrey and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant no: ES/ J023329/1).

The overall aim of PASSAGE is to explore the relationship between prosperity and sustainability and to promote and develop research on the green economy.

The research aims of the fellowship are directed towards three principal tasks:

ecological macroeconomics for postgraduates and young research fellows.

- 1) Foundations for sustainable living: to synthesise findings from a decade of research on sustainable consumption and sustainable living;
- 2) Ecological Macroeconomics: to develop a new programme of work around the macroeconomics of the transition to a green economy.
- 3) Transforming Finance; to work with a variety of partners to develop a financial system fit for purpose to deliver sustainable investment.

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#### Abstract

This working paper outlines the main findings of a qualitative PhD research project that explored the strategies for a low carbon future being adopted within the UK Transition movement, and highlights potential policy, practice and academic learning in relation to community action on climate change and resource scarcity.

#### **Aims and Methods**

The aim of this PhD research<sup>1</sup> was to explore the strategies being employed within the UK-based Transition movement to bring about a resilient low carbon future. It focused in particular on the food, energy and transport activities that Transition Initiatives (local groups) are undertaking within Britain.

The research involved:

- · in-depth interviews with 35 'grassroots activists' from 18 different Transition Initiatives in England;
- 'observant-participation' (Moeran 2009) I attended over 25 local, regional and national Transition events and meetings, and was actively involved in attempting to start two Transition Initiatives;
- analysis of many of the materials produced by the Transition Network, in particular its books and films; I also followed a number of Transition Initiative websites as well as Rob Hopkins' blog, *Transition Culture*.

#### **Findings**

Drawing on concepts that have been established as a result of studying other social movements, the research found five main emerging and interlinked strategies that are being adopted within the Transition movement. The first three of these strategies are focused on mobilising people to become involved in the movement (mobilising strategies), whilst the other two are focused on promoting particular forms of collective action (action strategies) for particular types of change (change strategies). These strategies are elaborated in the following sections.

#### Defining the Transition

The first strategy adopted within Transition, as with many other movements, has been the framingof what the movement is about. The Transition Network, the small umbrella organisation set up by Rob Hopkins (widely recognised as the movement's founder) and Ben Brangwyn in 2006 to facilitate the spread of the movement, has been instrumental in initiating and leading this strategy. Within books such as *The Transition Handbook* (Hopkins 2008) and *The Transition Companion* (Hopkins 2011) and the two promotional films produced by the Network, Transition 1.0 and Transition 2.0, the Network outlines the problems the movement aims to address (its 'diagnostic framing' [Benford & Snow 2000]): the 'twin threats' of peak oil and climate change as a result of society's collective addiction to both oil and the energy services it provides.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> I would like to gratefully acknowledge the insights and support that I gained both from my supervisors at the University of Surrey, Prof. Tim Jackson, Dr. Nicola Green and Prof. Yacob Mulugetta, and from those I interviewed and talked to about their experience of being involved in the Transition movement. Thank you.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This is not a term that they themselves would necessarily have used to describe themselves.

Moreover, these materials set out how the Network believes these threats are best dealt with, and what the envisioned role of the movement within this is (its 'prognostic framing' [Benford & Snow 2000]). In essence, the proposed solution aims to localise the economy through community-based action in order to reduce demand for energy, and therefore decrease reliance on oil and other fossil fuels. The presumption is that this will cut carbon dioxide emissions and thus mitigate climate change in the process.

Originally the Transition approach to facilitate such localisation was framed by the Network as 'the 12 Steps', in conscious imitation of 12-step addiction programmes. This involved outlining a dozen stages for setting up a local Transition group ('Initiative'), such as running awareness-raising activities about peak oil and connecting with the local council. However, as a result of Initiative experiences, the Transition approach has been re-framed as a selection of 'ingredients' to avoid representing the evolution of Transition Initiatives as rigidly linear (see Hopkins 2011).

Like previous movement framings, Network presentation of movement goals adopts language and images which aim to convey the urgency of the problem (that action is needed now), (b) the efficacy of proposed solutions (that the movement will have an impact), and (c) the propriety of being involved (that we have a duty to participate) in order to persuade potential recruits to join. But in addition to these recognised aspects of 'motivational framing' (Benford & Snow 2000), the Network also employs a vocabulary of desirability which has not been noted before within social movement literature. In essence, Transition Network uses language that suggests the approach being advocated is fun and the resulting 'powered down' future will be 'preferable' to the present.

This definition of 'transition' developed by the Network, particularly the practical community-based approach outlined in the prognostic framing, has been key in inspiring the participation of the activists I interviewed.

#### Creating Transitioners

The second strategy emerging within the movement is that of creating a movement identity to which activists feel they belong. This is common within social movements, but is particularly important for Transition because, as was apparent from the interviews, the kind of community-based activism advocated by the Network is high-cost in terms of the time and energy involved. Therefore, not only is there a need to attract people to become involved, but a need to sustain their involvement. Creating a Transition 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991), as the appearance of the term 'Transitioner' within the movement suggests is occurring, can therefore be viewed as a strategy for sustaining participation through ties of allegiance, obligation and distinction.

However, the outcomes of such a strategy are not always predictable or desired. One element of the movement's emerging identity is that it tends to be seen as middle-class and white, reflecting – it appears – the demographics of many of those involved (although not all). This is seen as a problem by a number of Transition activists, as well as the Network who have attempted to cultivate a movement identity that is inclusive. Indeed inclusiveness is a core value that underpins the Transition approach as promoted by the Network, and this apparent lack of diversity risks undermining the imagined community of Transition that the Network is promoting.

The Network has therefore been actively attempting to realign the movement's collective identity with the inclusive imagined community that is desired. This has involved employing a diversity officer for two years to assist Initiatives to become more diverse, and reframing Transition as being not only a distinct part of the environmental movement, as portrayed in

The Transition Handbook (Hopkins 2008), but a part of the social justice movement, with the incorporation of 'equality' alongside 'happiness' in the Network's mission statement.

But the movement's imagined community is still largely environmental in nature. Within this, there are two distinct green identities emerging: one of alternative 'hippy' lifestyler associated with 'Inner Transition', and the other of professional environmental expert, associated more with 'Outer Transition'. Whilst Network framing embraces both 'inner' and 'outer' work, with the former focused on one's own psychological and spiritual well-being and the latter on delivering community food, energy and other projects, these identities arguably reflect different ecological strategies, 'deep' and 'shallow' respectively. This has sometimes caused tensions on an individual, group, even movement level.

The main concern of those interviewed, however, was how to convert passive members who were on their email lists or came to an occasional event into 'active' ones, willing to get involved in organising activities. Despite often having hundreds of people on an email list, many Initiatives rely on only a handful of active members to take forward ideas. This is seen as a major reason for activist 'burn-out', and therefore a number of Initiatives are attempting to find ways to encourage those with an interest to become more actively involved, e.g. through providing internships, time-limited inputs, and welcoming social gatherings.

#### Developing Initiatives

The third strategy adopted for mobilisation has been the development of a federated movement structure of independent locally-focused Initiatives, underneath the umbrella of the Transition Network, Transition's small social movement organisation. Relations between different parts of the movement are based on the weak ties (Granovetter 1973) provided by "belonging" to an idea" (the imagined community), a model of movement organisation consciously adopted by the Network (Hopkins 2011: 77): formal accountability mechanisms are almost non-existent. By being loose and dispersed, the movement structure is well-suited to the movement's core action strategy of catalysing community action for localisation that is fundamental to Network framing of Transition. It also facilitates the adaptation of Initiatives to the circumstances within which they evolve, including the make-up of their membership.

Many Initiatives in the UK have adopted the organisational structure recommended by the Network of core/steering group and thematic sub-groups, such as for food and/or transport. It is a franchise structure that caters to the ebb and flow of member participation as a result of changes in personal circumstances (e.g. moving away, getting a job, illness) and/or group dynamics (e.g. shifts in priorities, burn-out, disagreements). In consequence, there is a lot of variation in the detail of how specific Initiatives have evolved despite a relative commonality of structure. Such differences are sometimes ascribed to context – and indeed local opportunities are a factor – but the perceptions, interests, skills and availability of local activists, together with the interactions within the group, have been key in shaping the trajectory of the individual Initiatives I explored.

This personalised (Lichterman 1995) and largely voluntary mode of community-based organising adopted within the movement allows individual activists to build on their own enthusiasms, providing an impetus for involvement. However, not only is the ongoing incorporation of a range of voices required by such a mode of organising potentially challenging unless discussions are well-facilitated and decision-making processes transparent, it is a style of organising that, in the United States is associated with white, middle-class environmental groups (Lichterman 1995) and may therefore also serve unintentionally to reinforce this undesired aspect of the movement's identity.

#### Catalysing low carbon community action

The fourth strategy employed within the Transition movement is the core action strategy of catalysing low carbon community action. The roles adopted by Transition Initiatives in order to achieve this, range on a spectrum from (a) implementing activities themselves to facilitating other organisations to implement activities, and (b) whether they focus on Transition members and/or the broader local community.

The development of partnerships, particularly with third sector actors and local government, has often been an important aspect of this catalytic strategy. Whilst engagement with councils has sometimes been challenging because of the delicate balance required by the 'critical-friend' role usually adopted, it has sometimes yielded useful support for particular Transition activities, and even on rare occasions facilitated the influencing of local government policy in support of low carbon community action.

Whatever the approach to implementation of individual groups, Transition's action strategy has centred on the development of a broad range of community-focused activities that promote local action on a range of themes, such as food, energy and transport. But what is interesting is that the commonality between the activities that Transition groups around the country are catalysing within each of these themes provides evidence that a number of theme-based 'tactical repertoires' (Balsiger 2010) are emerging within the movement in the UK. For food, the repertoire of activities includes Community Supported Agriculture schemes (CSAs), garden-sharing, apple-pressing events, and seed swaps. For energy, it includes eco-home open days, energy monitoring equipment loan schemes, energy fairs, and the setting up of energy services companies (ESCos). For transport, it includes bicycle maintenance courses/support, car-sharing or waste chip oil fuel clubs, and commenting on county council transport plans.

There are also similarities between the three thematic Transition tactical repertoires of food, energy and transport. These similarities lie not only in the change strategies that underpin them (see next section), but in the nature of some of the activities. For instance, group-based behaviour change activities appear in all three repertoires because approaches like Carbon Conversations, GAP's eco-teams or Transition Town Totnes' 'Transition Streets', all of which have been used by a number of Transition Initiatives, focus on a range of household practices related to food, energy and/or transport.

However, there are also differences. The most striking of these is the variation in the level of maturity of each of the repertoires, whether judged in terms of the number of groups initiating a specific type of activity, the range of activities within a theme or how well-established such activities are. The food repertoire is the best developed, whilst transport is the least mature of the three repertoires. This variation is largely a reflection of differences in the current governance arrangements of the existing food, energy and transport systems (and related policy), and thus how easy it is to find entry points for community-based strategies for change. For example, setting-up projects to produce and sell local food is much easier – from a financial, technical and planning perspective – than setting up projects to generate (let alone sell) electricity locally.

In addition, there are perceived differences in how embedded current mainstream social practices related to food, energy and transport are within present lifestyles and livelihoods. Shifting existing household transport use is seen as being particularly challenging, and there is evidence that such perceptions impact on Transition Initiative strategy, and therefore on the evolution of the relevant tactical repertoire. Network framing has also tended to highlight food as a focal area, giving least attention to transport, partly due to perceptions of where community-based action can make a difference in localising economies.

But differences in maturity are also likely to be attributable to how developed corresponding repertoires in each of the broader movements (local food, community energy and sustainable transport) on which Transition draws and to which it contributes. It is apparent that most Transition-related activities being implemented at local level are inspired by existing examples from these broader movements (of which Transition is arguably a part). As such, Transition acts as a means for 'circulating' (Shove & Pantzar 2005) such activity ideas through its formal and informal communication mechanisms – films books, conferences, websites, training and meetings – where experiences and lessons of catalysing different activities, both from within and beyond the movement, are shared.

But Transition not only plays a role in diffusing and replicating activities from related movements. Assisted by its structure and approach, the Transition movement also facilitates the 'reinvention' of such activities (Shove & Pantzar 2005). Reinvention involves adaptation of activity ideas by Initiative members to local circumstances and perspectives, sometimes leading to novel riffs that result in activity innovations which may themselves circulate, thus contributing to the evolution of the repertoire.

A good example is the garden share scheme. It was first developed in Transition Town Totnes in 2007 by a paid member of Network staff, apparently based on an experience of seeing a similar project fail (Pinkerton & Hopkins 2009: 74). It involved 'match-making' between people who had spare space in their gardens they were willing to loan to someone who wanted to grow vegetables and fruit, but had no access to land, usually for a share of the harvest. Documented by Transition Town Totnes, in Transition Network's book on local food (Pinkerton & Hopkins 2009), there have been at least 40 Transition Initiatives in the UK that have attempted to implement a version of the garden share idea since then, sometimes in partnership with other groups, though with varying degrees of success.

Apart from the mushrooming of garden share experiments within Transition, the Transition Town Totnes project also inspired the setting up of a non-Transition national web-based scheme by the TV chef, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, and Channel 4. Called 'Landshare', it arose out of their filming of the Totnes project for one of Hugh's programmes, and led to generating commitments from the National Trust and British Waterways to provide land for community food growing, where feasible. The processes of activity circulation and reinvention are apparent in the fact that later I came across a couple of cases where Transition activists had used Landshare to find land for new community food projects, one for a new form of allotmenteering.

Such activities are largely invisible in the tactical repertoires of protest, public campaigning, and lobbying of national and international corporations or policy-makers that preoccupy social movement studies. It is these forms of tactical repertoires which, whilst not completely novel, make Transition of such particular interest for both academics and practitioners.

#### Manifesting the Transition

The fifth strategy that is being employed within the Transition movement is its overarching change strategy of manifesting the Transition. This involves using the tactical repertoires to prefigure the desired low carbon lifestyles and livelihoods (and associated values) of the communal future envisioned by the Transition Network and wider movement. This is accomplished through envisioning, promoting, demonstrating and practising aspects of the ways of living being advocated (e.g. encouraging the purchase of locally-grown food and locally-generated energy, and of walking and cycling as much as feasible).

But it also involves attempting to reconfigure current food, energy and transport systems in ways that support such desired practices (e.g. setting up a community grocers shop that

sells local food, or a local energy services company to provide renewable energy [even if the National Grid does not allow for local distribution], or lobbying the council for more cycle lanes). This is a much more transformative agenda than the place-based resistance to globalisation or the influencing of consumption choices that social movement literature usually acknowledges for community and lifestyle-focused movements respectively.

The specific change strategies that support the manifestation of Transition to which the activities in each of the tactical repertoires aims to contribute are:

- · awareness-raising and skills-building;
- · supporting doing-it-yourself (self-provisioning);
- reducing fossil-fuel use and/or promoting local sourcing of products;
- setting up local providers based on a social/community enterprise model;
- enabling the creation of local food, energy and transport systems.

The purposeful adoption of the strategy of setting up local providers based on a social enterprise model, as increasingly promoted by the Transition Network, appears to be both new<sup>3</sup> and radical. This is because it is about creating an alternative to predominant values and ways of organising the economic system. Transition change strategies therefore are not only about prefiguring and experimenting with future ways of living sustainably, but attempting to reconfigure the systems of the present in order to make such lifestyles and livelihoods a reality.

#### **Potential Lessons**

#### 1. The role of community action

What is interesting about Transition's action strategy is that it involves tactics that go beyond individual awareness-raising about consumption choices and practices, the simplest and most contested of behaviour change approaches. Indeed the creation of local providers to provide the soft and hard infrastructure to support more sustainable household practices is a very different approach to low carbon (behaviour) change than the financial incentives, social marketing and 'customer insight' approaches of UK government.

This challenges prevailing policy and practice assumptions about the role of community action in promoting a low carbon future. Both the Coalition and Labour governments of the past eight years have tended to see the role of community action as a non-controversial means of diffusing particular behaviours (in this instance to lower the carbon-intensiveness of household practices) because of assumed networks of trust. Yet Transition experience challenges this one dimensional view of the role of community action. Whilst behaviour change is an aspect of the Transition approach (as the creation of behaviour change programmes such as Transition Streets indicates), Transition community action, as framed by the Network, ultimately aims to support the creation and expansion of low carbon systems of provision (particularly food and energy) at local-level.

The potential lesson here is that focusing on shifting the nature of local systems of provision may be equally important to the more usual individualised deficit-based awareness-raising or championing strategies of sustainability that still dominate policy and practice understandings of the role of community action in social change. I suggest that this is because social practices are an integral part of such socio-technical systems, and in contextualising behaviour within the soft and hard infrastructure which shapes it, more points of entry for change become evident.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Unless the rapid expansion of social enterprises within the UK is itself called a movement.

#### 2. Scaling up

Another potential lesson from Transition experience is that the dominant policy and practice discourse of diffusion, replication and scaling up fails to understand the dynamics behind the spread of activities from place to place. They miss the importance of the role of reflexive local agents, place-based adaptation and cross-fertilisation in the creation and development of local reinventions to which a strategy of community action can particularly contribute. This suggests that learning efforts, rather than focusing on identifying particular examples of 'best practice', might be better focused on the mechanisms that facilitate circulation and reinvention of activity ideas. The aim of those attempting to facilitate scaling up would therefore become to assist in ensuring activities are well-adapted to their circumstances and purpose, and to support local inventiveness in application, rather than simple replication. But this needs further research.

#### 3. Sustaining activist involvement

Creating an effective structure and instituting processes for Initiative renewal to take account of the voluntary nature of activist involvement appears to be important, if a community group is to weather the disruption caused by the arrival of new members and the departure of old. Within Transition, there is some evidence that the Initiatives and sub-groups where activists have paid attention to developing strategies for ongoing recruitment, retention, communication and conflict resolution have been more successful in sustaining activity levels. However, the challenge of transforming passive members into active ones remains, even for these groups. Reducing the costs of Transition activism, for instance by attempting to play a catalytic rather than implementational role, may be one way to attempt to cope with the risks posed by activist burn-out.

#### 4. Engaging communities

Another potential lesson arising from this study of the Transition movement is about the utilisation of an environmental collective identity. Whilst this appears to be important in attracting and sustaining activist participation, broader public engagement in Transition-initiated activities may be facilitated by actually avoiding labels associated with Transition or the wider environmental movement because of their association with particular social identities that may be off-putting to those who are not the 'usual suspects'.

#### Conclusion

I would argue that not only is Transition striving to be a social, cultural and political movement, as Hopkins has suggested himself (2008), but an economic one. This both blurs the lines between cultural and political movements that still tend to underpin much social movement theory, and calls attention to the economy as a field of movement action which such terminology tends to obscure, despite numerous studies on the anti-globalisation movement. Transition's agenda, and thus its strategies, as depicted in the diagram on the next page, therefore represent much more ambition than either scholars of cultural and lifestyle movements, or policy-makers advocating community action, usually allow.

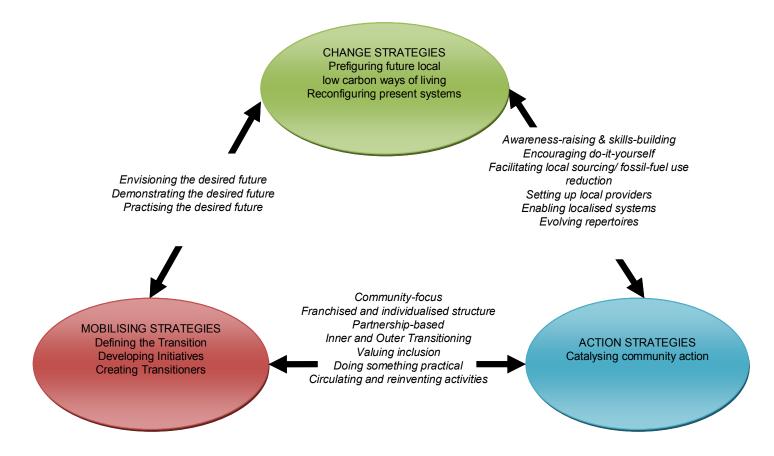
But Transition is still very much a 'niche' movement that is in its infancy. How it will develop, what impact (if any) it will have in the long-term, whether these are the impacts hoped for, and what this means in terms of the evolution and efficacy of its strategies, are very much open questions. Transition activists recognise this, and this makes some more circumspect about the prospects of large-scale success – and the contribution their community action

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Although case studies of novel and interesting practice are likely to remain important.

can make – than the public proclamations of the Network might suggest. Not only do Initiative experiments in mapping what food and energy localisation might be able to deliver in particular districts highlight some of the difficulties and limitations of Transition goals, but, like many environment-related groupings, activists have often found it hard to reach out beyond those who are already interested in the issues.

But relative to the number of people actively involved, I believe that Transition has 'hit above its weight'. This is first in terms of the interest and influence it has garnered, such as Ed Miliband's request to attend part of the 2009 Transition annual conference, when he was still Minister for the Department of Energy and Climate Change. Most important, however, from the perspective of a community-based approach to a low carbon future, is that despite the challenges involved, the Transition movement has already managed to catalyse an impressive array of community-based activities that aim to contribute to enabling a move towards a resilient and low carbon future.

#### **Transition's Strategies**



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## Transition activity repertoires categorised by theme & change strategy

	Food	Energy	Transport
Inc	reasing knowledge & skills	Increasing knowledge & skills	Increasing knowledge & skills
Awareness-raising (e.g. films,		Awareness-raising (e.g. films, talks,	Awareness-raising (e.g. talks)
	talks, visits etc)	visits etc)	Re-skilling courses &
	Re-skilling courses &	Re-skilling courses & workshops	workshops (e.g. bicycle
	workshops (e.g. permaculture)	(e.g. on draught-busting or building	maintenance, bike riding)
	Food events (e.g. apple days,	solar panels)	Transport events (e.g. cycling
	wassailing)a	Energy events (e.g. energy fairs)	road show)
	<del>-</del> ,	Tips on what individuals can do (e.g.	
•	Tips on what individuals can do		Tips on what individuals can do
D	(e.g. recipes)	Eco-home days)	(e.g. article in paper)
Pro	omoting growing your own	Promoting generating your own	Promoting self-mobility: walking
•	Seed/ling swaps	renewable energy	& cycling
•	Garden share	Eco-home open days	· Group cycle rides or walks
	Community food growing	Grant provision for household-level	· Walking/cycling maps/routes
	ventures (e.g. community	generation	· Installation of bike racks
	gardens, allotments and	· Buying coops	· Bicycle servicing & repair
1	orchards)		· Walking school bus
•	Growing food in public & other		· Pavement & road crossing
	spaces (e.g. guerrilla gardening)		campaigns
	couraging sourcing & eating	Encouraging reduced building energy	Encouraging reduced car use
loc	eal food	use	· Encouraging self-mobility
	Local seasonal food recipes	· Building energy audits	<ul> <li>Public transport campaigns</li> </ul>
	'Eating local' challenges	· Encouraging take-up of insulation	· Car-share clubs
	Local food directories	· Energy monitor loan schemes	· Car free neighbourhoods
	Local food mapping	· Eco-home open days	· Group support for energy-
	Local food celebrations	Draught-busting workshops	related behaviour change
	Group support for food-related	Group support for energy-related	
	behaviour change (e.g. Carbon	behaviour change	
	Conversations)		
Cre	eating local food providers	Creating local renewable energy	Creating local non-fossil fuel-
•	Local food markets	providers	based providers
	Community local food shops	· Local renewable energy (service)	· Cooking oil rickshaw taxis
	Buying coops & hubs	companies	· Bicycle delivery scheme
	Local food box schemes	Buying coops	Waste chip oil fuel coops
	Community-Supported		· · ·
	Agriculture (CSAs)		
	Transition farms/market		
	gardens		
	Processing infrastructure (e.g.		
	bakery, brewery)		
En	abling a local low carbon food	Enabling a local low carbon energy	Enabling a local low carbon
	stem	system	transport system
	Engagement with existing food	Engagement with existing power	· Engagement with existing
	retailers	companies	transport providers
	Local produce in local food	Building sustainable buildings	· Creating an electric car
	outlets	Community Land Trusts	· 20mph zone campaigns
	Local food plan/vision	Local energy plan/vision	Local transport plan/vision
	Mapping potential of local food	Mapping potential of local energy	Mapping city hubs
	system	system	Railway inquiry
	Voice on local food forums	Neighbourhood retrofitting	Public transport meetings
	Support to and linking of local	Street lighting projects	Transport hustings
	food enterprises	Business energy resilience	Voice on transport forums
1	1000 Chtorphioos	assessments	Commenting on county
		Commenting on national energy	transport policy consultations
			liansport policy consultations
		policy consultations	