

PLYMOUTH White Papers

Issue 1: Ambition

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#PlymouthWhitePapers

An initiative by Luke Pollard MP

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ENVIRONMENT

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Why Fear the Potential?

Someone asked the other day “What is your first memory of Plymouth?”. It wasn’t a difficult question. It is something that has influenced my entire life. The answer? It’s an image of a scorched expanse of grass on the Hoe leading up to a vista of pure blue. A view that millions of locals and visitors alike must have shared over the years and, for me, a defining image of the heatwave summer of 1976.

I still find that view inspirational, and I know I’m not the only one. Like me, generations of young people have moved to Plymouth to study or to work. Many have moved on. But many have stayed and are still striving to build a future for themselves and their families in a city that has the oddest way of capturing your heart and loyalty. It’s a city that inspires dedication and, in my case at least, drove my personal ambition to become a scientist, to inspire and encourage others to understand, care for and protect our planet. Little did I know, on that sunny day in 1976, how difficult it can be to move mountains but, at that point, I hadn’t encountered the sheer determination the city has to offer. I’ve been looking back at what makes my little bit of Plymouth tick, what drives the environmental ambitions I’ve encountered and shared, and what, if anything, limits their fulfilment.

There’s always a right time and a right place and there’s always those who ‘get it’ and those who don’t. Often it is those that understand the bigger picture who are open to the greatest challenges and those who see it as a threat who seek to control what happens. I guess that’s something that happens everywhere and, over the years, my experience of Plymouth has

**“Ambition? If you don’t go after what you want, you’ll never have it. If you don’t ask, the answer is always ‘no’. If you don’t step forward, you’re always in the same place”.
(Unknown).”**

consistently served up a combination of both. So, what influences environmental improvement? What drives the ambition to do better? How ingrained does it have to be?

I've been looking at what could have influenced the generation I grew up with. After all I've encountered both positive and negative views from people of a similar age and from similar backgrounds. We all grew up with the same things happening in the background and there will be many shared experiences so why do people react in such different ways?

It's a long and complicated story but perhaps it is worth starting with a quick assessment of the increasing influence of environmental awareness in recent years. Forget President Trump's 'fake news'. Much of what we grew up with was based on painful truth and an increasing belief in taking action on the issues we felt we could influence. For example, by the 1980's we were getting used to the unfurling of protest banners to 'Save the Whales' and 'Ban The Bomb'. Such campaigns were rolled out in Plymouth even though, surprisingly, many of the usual 'environmental campaign groups' have struggled over the years. I'm not entirely sure why but, contrary to suggestions that they are inappropriate for a military city, it's very clear that Plymouth cares and, over the years green projects have attracted some of the most passionate and persistent campaigners you could ever want. Their ambition for a greener Plymouth, and a greener future, remains undaunted. I suspect there is therefore something 'deeper' that moves us...something remembered from childhood that still prompts a reaction today.

Regardless of the image of the Wombles, Swampy, and 'tree huggers', the media interpretation of increasingly serious environmental risk has only been enhanced by the access to, and immediacy of, the coverage of some of the disastrous environmental events taking place on a global scale. Beginning with the locally significant Torrey Canyon oil spill in 1967, we have become used to the disaster headlineswith the gas leak at Bophal in India in 1984 (perhaps the world's worst ever industrial disaster) being followed tragically quickly by the nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl in 1986 and, in 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Our appreciation of the need for both prevention and recompense has added to a growing sense of injustice. An understanding of the costs to human life and habitats has influenced decision making in much the same way as the costs in financial terms and solutions sought on both a national and local basis.

In response, environmental legislation has increasingly addressed limitations on further damage. Indeed, the 1990 UK Environmental Protection Act introduced many of the everyday terms we are now familiar with; including 'the polluter pays' although it took until 1990 for the Blair Government to sign up to the international Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change and until 1994 for a national climate change policy to be introduced. Much of this change relied heavily

on scientific 'evidence' so it is often difficult to understand why those in positions of command and control have so much difficulty in accepting what is plain to see.

Much of the inspiration for local action on environmental awareness also emerged during the late 1970s, 1980's and early 1990's; with leading businesses, including the MOD, DHSS and Blue Circle undertaking 'Environmental Reviews' that looked at cost savings as well as positive environmental management for the benefit of both resource use and the wider environment. Backed by the emphasis placed on consensus and consultation required by the sustainability principles of the 1992 UN Earth Summit, the focus on partnerships and the introduction of Corporate Social Responsibility only served to underpin the benefits of greening the economy. Being 'environmentally friendly', became a marketable principle. Setting green corporate targets became common practice and being ambitious for the local environment was a hugely popular driver for change.

However, for many, it was not until 2008 that the real impact of legislative action on climate change, and the introduction of the Carbon Reduction Commitment, were to influence business in any significant way. Perhaps unsurprisingly this occurred at the same time as the rise of climate change denial and yet it provided Plymouth with perhaps its most successful commitment to date - the reduction of citywide emissions and the action required to adapt to future threats.

Again, the scope of this evidence is as extensive and complex as Plymouth's contribution to the topic. Quite apart from the ground-breaking, internationally recognised and Nobel Prize winning research on the impact of carbon dioxide on the world's oceans (ocean acidification) being undertaken at Plymouth Marine

Laboratories, Plymouth is also blessed with the expertise of

the Marine Biological Association, the Sir Alistair Hardy Foundation for Ocean Science (SAHFOS), the National Marine Aquarium and, of course, Plymouth University. Plymouth's contribution alone has influenced debate across the world, put Plymouth on the map, and

“Plymouth contribution alone has influenced debate across the world, put Plymouth on the map, and contributed to the global leadership defined by the Paris Climate Agreement. We have every reason to be proud.”

contributed to the global leadership defined by the Paris Climate Agreement. We have every reason to be proud.

Plymouth City Council too should be celebrated for its original commitments to tackling climate change. Targets researched and adopted in 2008 were considered ambitious and challenging but, based on independent research (via Forum for the Future) that, in 2008, rated Plymouth as the third greenest city in the country, they were considered to be viable for a city where so much commitment to best practice in environmental management could be identified.

There was genuine interest in meeting what was identified as a developing focus for the city and, in June 2009, a business-led conference decided that Plymouth should benefit from the challenge that a low carbon economy could provide. Even though the rules on carbon accounting only applied to 27 local 'businesses', including the City Council, over 100 businesses completed related innovative training and developed their own carbon management plans with savings of between £15,000 and £500,000 emerging as a result. For many, it became clear that saving the planet meant saving money too. These moves were welcomed by the 300 strong membership of Plymouth's ground-breaking Low Carbon (186) Network, promoted by the independent and citywide Climate Change Commission that brought together some of the leading experts in the South West and recognised by the Government with one of nine national low carbon pilot projects.

What's more, the city began to track the combined impact of its action on emission reductions with the support of the annual carbon footprint data published by the Government. It was here that 'official' reactions were mixed and, in some cases, were not that supportive of the efforts being made across the city. At the time Plymouth's 'official' Climate Change Strategy 2008 targets were agreed with local businesses and were, eventually, mirrored by the UK's national targets. It was agreed that a 20% reduction in emissions by 2013 and a 60% reduction by 2020 would be ambitious, but for every critic it was easy to find a supporter.

Proof of our faith in Plymouth's determination has been provided over time. With one minor blip (caused by exceptionally cold weather in 2010-11), Plymouth's carbon footprint has consistently fallen. Both the individual (or per capita) and industrial/commercial footprints met the 2013 targets by achieving a reduction of 21.7% and 21.77% respectively and, by 2015 (and the most up to date figures available), these footprints had fallen even further by 36.7% and, for businesses, an amazing 40.5%.

Although the city's overall footprint didn't quite make the 2013 target of 20%, it has now caught up and, by 2015, registered a reduction of 31.9%. In all three cases, it is now estimated that the 60% target set for 2020 will be met and that the city's carbon reduction ambitions will be fulfilled provided the emphasis on action and awareness is maintained. The city's approach and

methodologies were found to be justified and yet the resulting Low Carbon Plan is one of the Plymouth climate change documents that have all but disappeared.

Even more reassuring is the focus on a low carbon economy promoted by the UK Government in their Clean Growth Strategy published on 12th October 2017 but pre-empted by research undertaken on Plymouth's low carbon economic potential almost ten years earlier. Here again, it was suggested that ambitious targets should be adopted for green or low carbon economic growth and investment made in the creation of jobs within the local economy. Although some progress has been made in this respect, and the potential for such 'circular' economies is being recognised to a certain extent, many of the supporting reports, plans, and strategies suggesting suitable ambitions and targets for the city have been removed from accessible websites.

To many, it seems as though Plymouth's excellence as a 'green city' and its ambitions to lead the way in best practice and forward thinking on emissions reduction and positive environmental growth have been 'lost in transit,' supported only by those who understand the potential and support its inclusion in city-wide strategies and blocked only by those who have yet to embrace national and global trends.

Of all the environmental campaigns, Plymouth's response to the call to limit emissions and to tackle climate change locally and globally remains perhaps the most significant, yet underrated, of the city's achievements. Even now, our contribution remains relatively hidden, poorly communicated; without any significant recognition and, perhaps in-keeping with other Plymouth based successes, the subject of ignorance, denial and even embarrassment for some. An 'Environment Plan' for the city (as part of the Plymouth Plan) remains unwritten and the proposals for action on climate change published to date are nowhere near as comprehensive as those worked through with local communities for previous strategies.

However, if nurtured, the city's ability to respond to one of the most complex and publicly debated global challenges of our time could become a focus for national, and even international, celebration. The ambition and the will to take action is out there. We just need more proactive leadership, more positive acknowledgement, and the continuity of a partnership approach to workable and appropriate solutions.

An Environmental Scientist and sustainability specialist, Jackie has a particular interest in unravelling the complexities of climate change and working with local communities and businesses to find practical, eco-friendly solutions. Based in Plymouth since 1983, Jackie currently co-ordinates the citywide Environment Plymouth network having formerly managed the city's Low Carbon Network and Climate Change Commission.

PLYMOUTH White Papers

The Plymouth White Paper are an initiative by Luke Pollard MP. They are designed to provoke, inspire and challenge. The hope is that each set of white papers will contribute to the energy, direction and passion around Plymouth, our economy and campaigning.

These white paper submissions have been written by people across Plymouth. They have been free to voice their own opinions and these are their own words. The white papers are designed to be political and challenge established thinking but they're not designed to be party political.

Want to get involved with a future white paper? Get in touch:

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