

An open letter from members of the York Environment Forum

15 April 2009

>> Councillors and Senior Officers of City of York Council

>> Members of the Without Walls Board and its constituent partnerships

Dear colleagues

Implementing the Sustainable Community Strategy

The York Environment Forum contributed to the preparation of the Sustainable Community Strategy [SCS] and wishes to play a constructive role in its implementation. Yet documents and policies repeatedly ignore our arguments and evidence and the commitments to which they led, without even reasoned rejection following proper debate. We are therefore once again forced into taking a critical stance – to our great frustration.

The latest example is the Report *Prioritising Prosperity* prepared for the Council by the Centre for Cities. Like the earlier Future York Report [FYR] we believe it to be fundamentally flawed and inconsistent with the SCS (and references to FYR are arguable since that report has never been formally endorsed by the City Council). We hope that this time the serious and difficult issues regarding the future of the City will be addressed in true partnership. If this does not happen we shall have to conclude that the sustainability commitments in the SCS were empty gestures.

Prioritising Prosperity analyses features of the York economy. Its central thesis is that present economic troubles are merely temporary and that conventional growth will shortly resume on much the same path as before. Given that assumption it then details various measures that the consultants believe the City should pursue. We have many reservations about the analysis but stress here our profound reservations about the assumption – and about what is not discussed.

multiple global problems

In our critique of Future York we drew attention to the contrast between its business-as-usual scenarios and the fragility of an economic system built on excessive credit and financial manipulation. Our worst fears are now being realised. It is alarming that the new Report does not discuss the probability that the model of lightly-regulated capitalism, unquestioning reliance on market forces and over-stimulated demand is dead. The Council must explore the implications of very different models, including more emphasis on people and their welfare and less on globalisation, new collaborative types of business and a rediscovery of local economic relations.

We were surprised that FYR did not mention climate change or the low-carbon economy. Some eighteen months on it is extraordinary that *Prioritising Prosperity* does not mention them either. The scientific consensus is that if drastic actions to cut emissions are not taken immediately then catastrophic consequences are likely. If the City Council does not accept that warning it should say so and thus enable people to draw their own conclusions. To proceed as though the warning had never been given is irresponsible and a dereliction of its duty to protect its citizens.

The same point applies to the likelihood of a scarcity of many of life's essentials and of rising prices for food, energy and minerals as the human population presses up against the absolute limits of the earth's physical capacity – and we have to avoid the fallacy that, because the rich West is so dependent on consumption, resources and technologies will somehow turn up to prolong it. The idea that 'prosperity' based on maximising throughput can be expanded indefinitely is absurd, yet this new Report, like FYR before it, promotes this concept. We note that the Report fails, like so many others of its kind, to define the word 'growth': we have therefore to assume that it means growth as traditionally measured by GDP or GVA and hence that it ignores the busy debate about less materially-oriented and now more appropriate metrics which emphasise well-being.

the unresolved inconsistency at the heart of the Sustainable Community Strategy

These points illustrate the unresolved inconsistency at the heart of the SCS. On the one hand its economic assumptions are conventional, on the other the Sustainable City chapter proposes to drastically reduce York's carbon emissions and ecological footprint. *Prioritising Prosperity* explicitly focuses exclusively on the Thriving City chapter and blithely ignores the others. The argument that their concerns will be attended to later is unacceptable. This confusion cannot go on.

We would start with clarification of the meaning of 'sustainable'. It is apparent, not for the first time, that what the *Prosperity Report's* authors mean is 'that which can be sustained'. This yields the oxymoron 'sustainable economic growth'. It may be intended only to imply continuity, but in practice it perpetuates the misconception that growth can go on as before. It cannot. A Sustainable Community Strategy must plan for life within the immutable constraints of one planet.

The age of cheap energy, easy consumption, short-life goods, disregard for natural limits and a sort of prosperity for the few while the many suffer is over. And the sooner York starts adjusting to the new reality the more resilient it will be to survive in the coming steady-state economy.

a different dream

The facts facing the human race are the stuff of nightmares. However, as Hilary Benn recently pointed out, Martin Luther King did not talk of a nightmare. He had a dream. That is what we have, a dream of transition to a different way of living. It may be imperative but it is also desirable.

The Forum's vision is a society that is fairer within and between nations and to future generations, that promotes collective values over the pursuit of individual interest, that honours good work, active leisure and a better balance between them, and that accepts fundamental responsibility for stewardship of the earth.

In economic terms a robust strategy for the City must therefore include policies such as these:

- maximising local food production;
- insulating buildings in mass programmes and installing small-scale renewable energy plant that yields direct financial rewards for communities;
- encouraging local companies to find alternatives to oil-derived plastics in all their products;
- helping organisations not to squander resources such as heat, food, water and paper;

- developing businesses which repair clothes and equipment or recycle goods for reuse so that the community rediscovers the virtues and resource-efficiency of long-life products;
- seeking out local replacements for products whose manufacture abroad and transport over long distances cannot be justified in energy or carbon terms;
- discouraging the use of cars, reducing the volume of travel by shortening and cutting out journeys as relocation decisions are taken, and building up communal systems (living streets, buses, trams, trains) of outstanding quality for the journeys that continue to be made;
- promoting light-impact tourism based only on land travel;
- protecting and enhancing biodiversity, landscape and green open space and shunning development that uses green field sites when brown field sites remain available;
- educating citizens about the energy and carbon implications of their behaviour in preparation for the inevitable introduction of some form of rationing;
- promulgating the idea of sharing equipment of all kinds to get away from the obsolete notion that every household must have everything; and
- examining what the Council could achieve under the well-being powers in the Local Government Act 2000 and under the Sustainable Communities Act 2007.

We do not expect that all of these can be implemented at once. It is the absence of any discussion of the need for them that alarms us (and other environmental groups), together with the presumption that economic growth self-justifies expanding the City. Unless we choose to emphasise human development over material objectives the Climate Change Strategy and the Sustainable City chapter of the SCS will be meaningless words whose disregard future generations will not forgive. It is time for some tough debate and hard decisions, and especially over the options for the design of York North West.

The same analysis should also be applied to the specific issues that *Prioritising Prosperity* addresses. We give two examples where wise discrimination is called for.

First, the Report discusses the City's strength in its science and technology cluster and proposes ways in which to foster it. We have no difficulty with the principle, but we are unhappy with the implication that *any* science or *any* technology is equally valid. In our view the world situation is such that effort expended on corporation-dominated bioscience, military research, resource-wasteful products or the more frivolous media projects must be transferred to urgent endeavours to improve organic agriculture (including carbon-beneficial bio-fuels), restore damaged ecosystems, find sustainable substitutes for plastics, maximise the efficiency of renewable energy and our use of scarce resources, and redesign land-use and transport for an energy-scarce and less mobile world.

Second, we note the suggestion that business entrepreneurship should be introduced into schools. This should not be from the perspective that all business is good business, for that is no longer tenable. It is essential that all new businesses should be truly sustainable, community-oriented and imbued with a sense of responsibility. They should focus on the science described in the previous paragraph and on the objectives in the list of points above. We believe that a generation of children that is acutely aware of the world they are inheriting would respond to that agenda.

Finally we make a crucial point about democracy. It is clear that many, particularly younger people are losing patience with a political system that appears incapable of responding to patent and huge threats. At the least that perception is driving an undemocratic battle between radical, 'nimby' and corporate interest groups. It may increasingly precipitate direct action. The Council must show that it can act on big challenges if it hopes to foster the responsible participation of its citizens in creating a fairer, more secure and happier community.

We look forward to open constructive debate about these issues. We would particularly welcome the opportunity to discuss them with the Economic Development Board. Because of their seriousness we decided that members of the Forum would individually signify that they endorse this letter.

A copy of the York Environment Forum's critique of the Future York Report is also attached.

"The clearest message from the financial crisis is that our current model of economic success is fundamentally flawed. For the advanced economies of the western world, prosperity without growth is no longer a utopian dream. It is a financial and ecological necessity." The Sustainable Development Commission, March 2009.

Steve Carney [Origin Energy]

Chris Chambers

John Cossham

Philip Crowe [York Tomorrow]

Carole Green [Bishopthorpe Parish Council]

Richard Hampton [North Energy Associates]

Edward Harland [York in Transition]

Ron Healey [CTC – North Yorkshire]

Barry Otley [Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group]

Mick Phythian [York Natural Environment Trust]

Barry Potter [York Natural Environment Trust]

Sara Robin [York Cycling Campaign]

June Tranmer [The Healing Clinic]

Jonathan Tyler [Passenger Transport Networks]

Karin de Vries

Isobel Waddington

Bryony Wilford [York in Transition]

Guy Woolley [Campaign to Protect Rural England]

published by Jonathan Tyler on behalf of the York Environment Forum