

Transition Towns... a model for the future?

How will our communities look in the future? What can communities do to build resilience against shocks and pressures from the outside? This is what was asked at our Spring Member's event in March 2009 on the Rural Economy. Our members wanted to discuss the rural economy in Cheshire, but we wanted to avoid duplicating the continuous stream of bad news that the media has bombarded people with recently about the recession. Instead we wanted to give a perspective that explores solutions to our current economic problems and looks at the opportunities it presents.

Therefore, we invited Tania Sayer of Energy Projects Plus (a local charity working to reduce the environmental and social impact of energy use in Cheshire and Merseyside) to introduce Transition Towns and Transition Initiatives as one possible solution.

The aim of Transition Towns or Transition Initiatives is to equip communities for the dual challenges of **climate change and peak oil**. Any community can start a Transition Initiative from a street or hamlet to a town or city. There are examples across the globe of communities coming together to develop Transition Initiatives, including Cheshire. We are all familiar with the concept of climate change which is as much an economic issue as an environmental one, but perhaps not quite so familiar with 'Peak Oil'.

This means that our consumption of oil will very shortly exceed our ability to extract and produce oil, if indeed this has not already happened. As oil reserves dwindle and run out, it will become increasingly more difficult to find and extract oil and therefore make it much more expensive to buy, which will have a

Cheshire Community Action, formerly Cheshire Community Council, is a local charity dedicated to helping you develop your local communities through self-help, encouragement and support.

We are committed to providing funding advice and support for projects which will protect and enhance the communities of Cheshire, Warrington and Halton, building strong and active communities.

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huge impact on our communities. When oil prices rose in 2008, individuals and businesses alike struggled to cope with the increases. We have become very dependent on oil for virtually every aspect of our daily lives, including work, travel, heating, entertainment, clothing and food production over the last 150 years, all based on the cheap oil supply. Our ever increasing demands for oil are jeopardising our current living standards unless our voracious appetite for oil is curbed.

The Transition Movement asks the big question:

"for all those aspects of life that this community needs in order to sustain itself and thrive, how do we significantly increase resilience (to mitigate the effects of Peak Oil) and drastically reduce carbon emissions (to mitigate the effects of Climate Change)?"

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Building Community Resilience

The Transition Model promotes the idea of Community Resilience, which tries to ensure that communities can withstand external shocks such as a sudden sharp rise in food and fuel prices. This is achieved by focusing on local initiatives that reduce our need for oil including: local food production and sale; reducing the need to transport food long distances; supporting local businesses; keeping local jobs and work local.

Did you know that for every £1 spent in a supermarket only 13p stays in your local economy but for every £1 spent in your local independent shop 87p stays in your local economy?

Rural communities are affected by rising fuel prices more acutely than their urban counterparts due to the longer distances travelled to work, shops, access to essential services and also due to lower average temperatures in rural areas. Reducing dependency on cars, being smarter about travel and reducing household energy consumption through the use of more energy efficient appliances, heating sources and insulation are also key aspects of Transition Initiatives.

Round table discussions amongst our members came up with the following interesting Transition ideas for their own communities:

- **Land and garden sharing** between members of the community to make best use of land for growing food e.g. schools tend to have a lot of land available – some of this can be used for growing fruit and vegetables which in turn can educate children in skills about food production. Churches also own large areas of land in rural communities.
- **Improved access to local produce** with better communication e.g. mobile fruit and vegetable vans, local box schemes, farm shops, local produce sales in pubs and village halls
- **Cookery lessons and gardening courses** for children in schools and adults
- **Removal of red tape** to allow local produce/goods to be made and sold locally
- **Allotment provision and protection**
- **Improved communication** about local services e.g. a local business directory
- **Locally organised trading and exchange** e.g. village swap shops
- **Village halls providing more services**, reducing the need to travel to urban areas e.g. film clubs
- **Skill sharing workshops** where people can learn skills that are being lost in modern day society
- **Community car schemes and car sharing**
- **More flexible public transport services** that serve rural areas better e.g. more buses on market days

Many of these ideas may sound very familiar and indeed they are. In the Transition Model, the solutions to climate change and peak oil are also the same solutions for tackling our current economic problems and other community issues, such as rural isolation, poor transport and lack of access to services. Transition Initiatives result in the sustainability of communities and the benefits go far beyond reducing carbon emissions. They foster healthier lifestyles, community cohesion and ownership and stronger local economies, where people have more control over their own lives, share resources and skills and help one another.

For more information on Transition Initiatives, please contact John Heselwood

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There is also a website: transitionnetwork.org that has pages of information on the Transition movement with numerous free materials to help communities develop their Transition Initiatives.