

Quantum

Mistra Urban Futures

Greater Manchester Local Interaction Platform (GM LIP)

IMPACT CASE STUDIES

Thinking without walls

Governance and Policy for Sustainability (GAPS) Project

Alternative voices and unusual connections

Realising the Value of Community Assets

Translating & transplanting

On the Platform

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Louise Marix Evans

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UNIT APPROVAL	Name	Date
WRITTEN BY:	Louise Marix Evans	7 July 2014
ISSUED BY:	Quantum Strategy & Technology	
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Quantum Strategy & Technology

Halton Mill
Mill Lane
Halton
Lancaster
LA2 6ND

Tel (Office): +44 (0) 1422 844172

Tel (Mobile): +44 (0)7867 961549

Email: louise@quantumst.co.uk

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- **Social value** – understanding social impacts, engaging workforces, customers and communities, developing and supporting ethical & sustainable supply chains.

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1. Background

What is Mistra Urban Futures?

Mistra Urban Futures (M-UF) is an international centre for sustainable urban futures, with headquarters in Gothenburg, Sweden. It believes that co-producing knowledge between different urban stakeholders is the way to achieve sustainable urban futures and that this process should focus specifically on the creation of Fair, Green and Dense cities.

The co-production of Fair, Green and Dense cities is a complex challenge that requires interaction between a variety of bodies. To meet this challenge, M-UF has established Local Interaction Platforms (LIP) in four cities – Cape Town, Gothenburg, Greater Manchester and Kisumu (Kenya) and supported collaboration and learning across and from the LIPs. Each city's programme has taken its own individual approach. This report focuses on the Greater Manchester Local Interaction Platform.

The Greater Manchester Local Interaction Platform – what is it and what does it do?

The Greater Manchester Local Interaction Platform (GM LIP) is hosted by the Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures (SURF) in the School of the Built Environment at the University of Salford Manchester. Its overall aim is to improve the relationship between research and practice in creating a sustainable Greater Manchester.

Its approach involves working with a broad range of bodies across Greater Manchester on a range of research, practice and capacity-building activities to address two central questions:

- What is happening to the sustainable cities agenda in the context of the economic, political, social and ecological crises of the 21st Century?
- In this context, how can the knowledge and skills of different stakeholders and communities be brought together to support a more sustainable urban transition in Greater Manchester?

The GM LIP has four anchor partners who meet regularly and are involved in delivering projects themselves, and in providing match-funding:

- The Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) Low Carbon Hub
- Creative Concern (Manchester-based sustainable communications company)
- Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations (GMCVO)
- SURF (Centre for Sustainable Urban & Regional Futures, at the University of Salford Manchester)

Other partners have also been involved in the work, including the Biospheric Foundation and the Social Action & Research Foundation.

2. Introduction to the Impact Study

In 2015 the Mistra Urban Futures Centre will undergo an interim evaluation of its activities from 2010-2015. This requires an assessment of the extent to which the Centre as a whole has met its objectives. A central objective is to capture the excellence and quality of the scientific and academic work that has been produced.

Mistra Urban Futures has also made additional resources available to support local impact assessments within each LIP. This is important to learn about how co-production might make a difference to the exchange of knowledge between research and practice.

The GMLIP commissioned Quantum Strategy & Technology to conduct an independent impact study to gather and report impacts on the GMLIP in order to inform the formal MISTRA Urban Futures evaluation.

The study was carried out at a mid-point in the Phase 3 project delivery stage from 2013 – 2015. At the time of work (April-July 2014), several project were in mid progress and others had not yet started. As such, the intention was not to capture final impacts. However, it attempts to consider the likely future effects of the programme. At the outset of the study, the GM LIP participants were very modest about the likely impacts of the programme, and the study has shown some unexpected positive impacts as well as delivering some of its aspirations around co-production and capacity building.

Methodology

The study took place between April and July 2014 using desk research – a review of documents, papers and publications plus a review of articles on Platform, the digital portal for sustainability. A mix of face-to-face and telephone based semi-structured interviews were carried out with the GM LIP Partners, workshop participants and project participants. The evaluator also attended the April GM LIP meeting, a Platform editorial meeting and a GMCVO community hubs meeting. An online survey was conducted for Platform subscribers. (Annex 1: Bibliography, Annex 2: Interview list, Annex 3. Survey Results).

Given the ongoing nature of many of the projects, the impact study did not aim to be exhaustive. It aimed to cover a range of concrete, actual and potential impacts and highlight key themes in relation to the programme. The aim was not to carry out a quantitative study, as the GMLIP has already been collecting its own data. Rather, to highlight qualitative and narrative impacts. An approach was agreed in which a series of overarching themes would be identified across the projects – and then illustrated through three specific cases.

The key questions the Impact Case Studies sought to address included:

- How has new knowledge been produced?
- What has been the influence of creating new connections or networks between people who normally don't co-produce knowledge?
- How does knowledge become intelligence (as opposed to just creating more information?)
- How has this had an impact or changed things? At an organizational, individual or infrastructural level, has it increased or enhanced capacity?

- In what way was it new or different?
- What has it changed, if anything?
- What might NOT have happened without it?
- What might happen in the future?

This report outlines the programme timeline and activities, introduces the overarching impacts, explores three themes that characterize the programme and explores impacts through three project case studies. Voices of those interviewed have been used as much as possible through quotes that sum up the impacts and findings.

3. Project Timeline and Activities – what happened when?

The GMLIP programme had three phases of development and delivery. A diagram has been produced as part of the GMLIP's own evaluation and is re-produced below.

Phase 1. 2010–11: SURF engaged locally through engagement, network building and profile-raising in Greater Manchester and shaped the international context for collaboration.

Phase 2. 2011–12: A large-scale mapping exercise took place, “Mapping the Urban Knowledge Arena”. This entailed pilot activities with SURF and policy, business and community partners to explore issues, experiment with approaches to engagement, identify gaps, challenges and identify potential projects. A report was produced which can be accessed here: <http://ontheplatform.org.uk/article/mapping-urban-knowledge-arena-report>

Phase 3. 2013–15: Flagship Projects – a range of activities are being delivered. Projects currently in progress include:

- Governance and Policy for Sustainability (GAPS)
- Realising the Value of Community Assets
- Platform, a digital portal for sustainability
- Creative Urban Environments
- Values and Learning in Urban Environments
- Comparing Urban Futures
- The Univer-city

Profiles of these projects are included in the main Appendices to the Mistra Urban Futures evaluation and so are not included here.

There have also been events, publications, Perspectives essays, interviews, workshops and activities including arts, storytelling and an exhibition (which involved speakers and live visual notetakers). Community researchers and policy-makers have worked alongside academics and events have brought together different people who would not normally work together – with the safety net of an informed facilitator, in the form of the GMLIP team. Alongside this, academic papers, conferences and book chapters exploring and reflecting on the process, knowledge and lessons from the programme have been produced by the GMLIP team.

At the time of writing, mid-way through Phase 3 (summer 2014) more recent projects are developing which are likely to contribute further to the impact of the GM LIP and the potential it has to build greater understanding of, and eventually further action on, sustainable urban development. These include:

- SIRCUS (Salford Interdisciplinary Research Connecting Urban Society) which aims to build the capacity of universities to link academic sustainability knowledge with communities of practice in Greater Manchester and beyond.

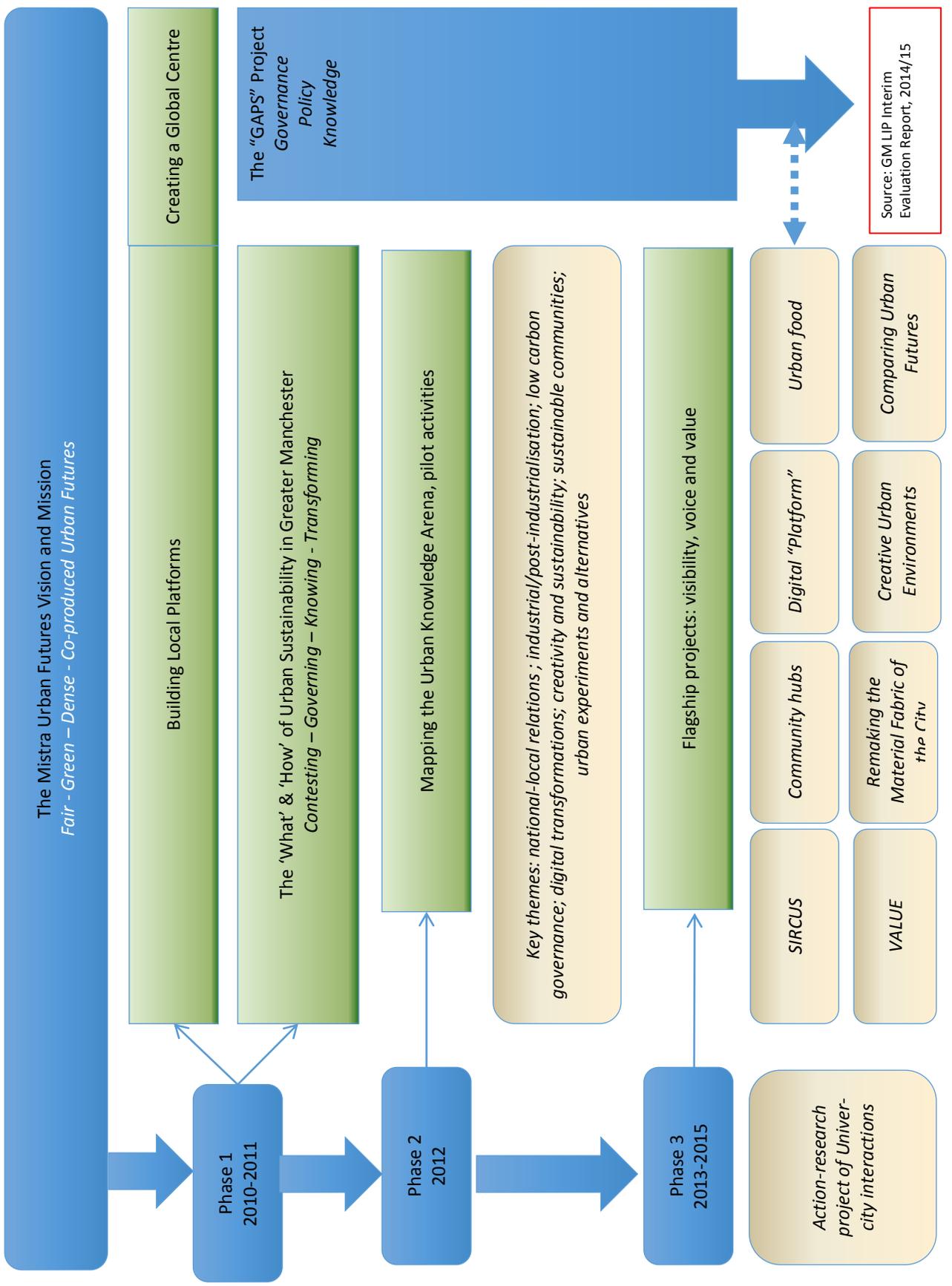
- Biospheric Foundation Collaboration 2014 – gathering the learning from the Biospheric Foundation¹ and its consequences for city-regional governance and policy. Director, Vincent Walsh will produce an academic paper, lessons report, Platform article and workshop/seminar.
- Urban Food: Evidence, Policy and Practice: research into the governance of sustainable food policy in Greater Manchester – SARF (Social Action & Research Foundation) will work with SURF and the GM LIP to develop practical thinking on how to create policies around sustainable food that can be implemented in the city-region, and how to include community perspectives (local traders, growers, food poverty) in the development of a Greater Manchester food strategy.

Beyond the specific projects, the establishment of the GM LIP has added an action-ready group of public, private, voluntary and academic partners with the capacity to develop new projects and bid for funding to further sustainable urban development across the city-region. This is illustrated in the first submission of a bid to the EPSRC Digital Economy programme, which is in development at the time of writing between the Biospheric Foundation, Social Action Research Foundation and SURF.

For the purpose of this report, three projects will be focused on, which are at different stages of development:

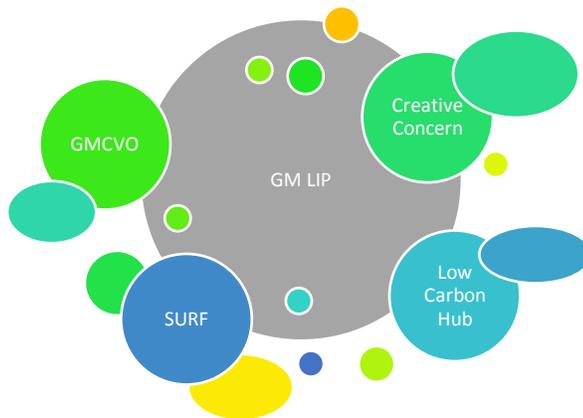
1. Governance and Policy for Sustainability: the only comparative cross-LIP project looking at the challenges and pathways for more sustainable urban transitions, bringing the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of sustainable urban development debates together. In the GMLIP, this project was carried out as with the Greater Manchester Low Carbon Hub, the Social Action Research Foundation and the Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures. At the time of this impact case study, plans were being developed to co-write academic and policy reflections between the team. A two-page summary produced by the research team is included as Annex 1.
2. Realising the Potential of Community Assets: through 2013, a partnership was established with the Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organizations (GMCVO) to look at the values of and for community hubs. This involved an academic placement, joint research and analysis activities and the initiation of an action learning set with the community hubs to help them network and support peer-to-peer learning. At the time of this impact case study, the empirical work and first action learning set had been carried out and plans were being developed to present the work jointly at the Royal Geographic Society Annual Conference and a poster was in development (see Annex 2).
3. Platform: <http://www.ontheplatform.org.uk>: In 2012 a feasibility study for a digital platform was undertaken, leading in 2013 to the launch of ‘Platform’. By mid 2014, Platform had already made substantial progress in becoming *the* portal for Greater Manchester-wide sustainability communications. The project was developed as a collaboration between SURF and Creative Concern, an ethical sustainability communications company.

¹ <http://ontheplatform.org.uk/article/alternative-biospheric-foundation>



4. Summary

To an external audience, the activities of the GM LIP and its partners may appear to be a collection or movement rather than a family of projects within a defined programme. Different people and organizations have interacted with the GM LIP and its related projects in unique ways, so report their relationship with the project differently. For example, some organizations have been involved in one particular project while others have been involved in several elements. Some report they have been working with specific people, while others refer to the GM LIP, GMCVO, SURF or Mistra Urban Futures etc. depending on their level and type of involvement.



While the anchor partners are aware of the defined programme or work and sets of questions the projects seek to address, they are not directly responsible for coordinating the reporting to Mistra Urban Futures. They are focused on their own projects as well as working as a group and they are 'protected' to an extent from the bureaucracy of targets and rigid expectations and have therefore experienced the project in quite a free, creative way.

Each GM LIP anchor partner is acting as an intermediary at the boundary of its own organization and at the boundary (gate-keeping) of its stakeholders. As explored below in the Thinking Without Walls section, they have been free and liberated to question and explore, whilst simultaneously experiencing the constraints, context and norms of their own sector/organization.

A wide range of impacts have happened because the GM LIP partners are involved in so many aspects of Greater Manchester. Their influences, contacts and touch points emanate out like ripples in a pond across the city-region. The range of impacts is broad because the GM LIP approach was to seek to explore questions at the research-practice interface and to build capacity, rather than setting out to deliver specific quantifiable outcomes narrowly defined from the start. This has given the GM LIP flexibility, openness and an ability to innovate. Martin Hall, Vice Chancellor of The University of Salford explained how bringing together different sectors means the university is not only researching and simply providing a critique, but is much more involved and active in its community:

“Mistra Urban Futures is about establishing a trusted intermediary standing between the mechanics of governance on one hand and socially driven issues on the other – the intermediary can act as an interpreter. The danger is they provide a critique. But they do more than that; the idea of the Local Interaction Platform is that of an expert intermediary accountable both ways, acting as interpreter, guide aggregator and enabler to sides to act with each other. It’s not just a channel, as it adds expertise (Martin Hall, Vice Chancellor, University of Salford Manchester.)”

Impacts have varied for different people and organizations.

These are explored in the three themes in the sections below, which are:

- Thinking without walls
- Alternative voices and unusual connections
- Translating & transplanting.

These themes have been chosen because they stand out as characterizing the GM LIP approach. They have been mentioned time and again by those interviewed as being unusual, refreshing, useful and as having created an impact, made a difference or simply started a train of thought that might lead to something happening in the future.

The three case studies explored feature a different GM LIP anchor partner that has been involved in co-producing knowledge and capacity building. These are:

- Governance, Policy and Knowledge for Sustainability (AGMA Low Carbon Hub)
- Realising the Value of Community Assets (GMCVO)
- Platform website (Creative Concern)

The free-flowing nature of the programme makes evaluating its impacts challenging. Usually an evaluator looks at whether the objectives and outputs of a project have been achieved, gathers evidence and explores the lessons learned about what worked and why (and what did not work and why). In this project there was a lot of ‘what if?’ ‘why?’, ‘let’s see what happens when we...’. This means that the GM LIP is more of a journey than a start-to-finish project.

“The Greater Manchester group sought systemic change by a diffuse approach” (Martin Hall, Vice Chancellor, University of Salford Manchester).

Overarching impacts

A range of impressive overarching impacts have been achieved. These are outlined in brief below and supported with quotes from different partners and stakeholders. They are examined in more detail in the thematic sections and case studies.

The GM LIP Director has successfully recruited key anchor organizations from the public, private and voluntary sector, engaging senior catalytic people from key institutions in the city and maintaining their engagement and involvement. This is much more than a project steering group: it has been a collaboration with meaningful involvement, investment and ownership by each anchor partner. Ian Taylor of GMCVO explains what it's meant for him:

"It's refreshing to have a different approach and different perspective on stuff we do. I would not normally make the time to read academic papers, but I've started to do so. And the Platform has become my magazine of choice. And it's good because it's too easy to put your head down and work in isolation than try and keep in touch with what else is going on" (Ian Taylor, Community Hubs Manager, GMCVO).

The GM LIP anchor partners have been facilitated to undertake structured deep thinking and develop related spin-out projects on sustainable urban development. This project has delivered the Mistra Urban Futures values and built capacity across the partner organisations in a variety of ways, including the capacity to co-produce knowledge with a university:

"The difference with the GM LIP is obviously we were a partner more than a deliverer of services; and a co-creator of something. I hadn't really properly clocked when they started to talk about being active intermediaries in the governance and deployment of sustainability at city level; I hadn't really thought what that might mean – and what it actually meant was getting stuck in and doing stuff and then seeing what happens as a result" (Steve Connor, Chief Executive, Creative Concern).

The project has explored and demonstrated new mechanisms for university engagement with the city-region which will hopefully set a precedent for ongoing engagement. The University of Salford is keen to learn from this approach and develop the implications for other areas of university work. The SIRCUS (Salford Interdisciplinary Research Connecting Urban Society) aims to examine, and actively contribute towards, the creation of conditions for knowledge-sharing between epistemic communities and communities of practice on and off campus around interdisciplinary urban research. The GM LIP has also played a role in catalyzing the establishment of a Low Carbon Research Forum of Greater Manchester universities to link closely with policy in the city region:

"We want our university to focus much more on the state and future of cities, and it's something we should be doing and be distinguished for. We're developing an approach to getting more understanding of social impact. Groups like these [GM LIP] are achieving social impact: 'research to benefit' and I want that kind of passion [put] into it" (Martin Hall, Vice Chancellor, University of Salford Manchester).

"I'd like to explore how we can embed the principles of Mistra Urban Futures in health, and other things we can use that process for" (Nigel Mellors, Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Salford Manchester).

"I have learned that there is an appetite for better engagement in public policy development from the academic sector..." (Mark Atherton, GM Director of Environment).

The project has created a digital knowledge-sharing website, Platform, establishing a digital location where knowledge and thinking can be shared and alternative views and voices heard. The momentum behind the GM LIP and the wider connections through SURF's other projects with arts and cultural organizations in Greater Manchester have helped to build up the Platform website so it is used by other organizations for their communications, to reach audiences and to share resources, lessons and ideas. Significantly, the Greater Manchester Low Carbon Hub, the Manchester Climate Change Stakeholder Group (Manchester: A Certain Future) and Manchester Arts and Sustainability Team (MAST) are all using Platform as their preferred online communication mechanism.

“Platform seems to be brought up in conversations when you meet new people who are from different sectors, a few of them have mentioned Platform to us so we have got MAST on there. As we are so small in our set up, the public had no way of engaging with us, apart from our own websites – we did not want to set up yet another website sitting on its own. The beauty of clumping it all into the Platform site... is that it helps people brush up against us and get involved” (Jack Thompson, Technical Director, Manchester International Festival and Manchester Arts and Sustainability Team).

The formation of the GM LIP has proved to GM partners that a collaborative, novel and purposeful partnership with a broad-brush approach to sustainable urban development can be achieved. The broader agenda of sustainable urban development taken in the GM LIP has held up a lens to single-issue organizations, enabling them to see their issue or community in a different light. This has led them to understand how their issue affects or is affected by other issues (promoting a more inter-disciplinary or inter-linked holistic viewpoint) which is helpful in that it includes more people and organizations, and therefore more solutions.

“I’d thought about the links between sustainable urban development and poverty before, but it became stronger after speaking to them (GMLIP)” (Daniel Silvery, Social Action and Research Foundation).

“GMCVO would support on-going work of the partnership to establish a cross-sector approach to sustainable development in Greater Manchester; we are aware that we have only just begun to explore the depth and breadth of the challenge.” (GMCVO comment in SURF feedback, impacttomay2014).

“We are starting with the question of knowledge: who needs to be involved, how to make a policy, how to structure it. We often do this in the wrong order: identify a problem, set up a partnership, invite businesses and it’s always about a formal structure. We are part of a third wave, from government to governance, from governance to governing” (Beth Perry, Co-Director SURF Centre).

The approach has demonstrated that taking risks is acceptable, which is a novel approach for many organizations constrained by budgets, public accountability or risk-averse attitudes. Mapping the Urban Knowledge Arena (Phase 2) used risk-taking methods e.g. holding an exhibition with limited materials to display and using creative cultural methods of engaging people in talking about sustainability. As Steve Connor points out:

“There was the sustainable stories exhibition which I thought was on one level hilarious because we didn’t have an exhibition to speak of; so... the visual note takers had to create it... speakers’ corner was a good idea, it was bold because there was no mechanism to drive footfall in to that space, so it is really hard to pull off anything in there but it brought voices in, so I think that was really good, I really got it and it is really nice to realise as well that not all things in a programme like this will work, and that’s really important” (Steve Connor, Chief Executive, Creative Concern).

The project has made links and connections between people and groups— either face to face at events, in projects or online in the digital sphere. In some cases, this has informed people’s thinking, given them ideas and inspiration, and in other cases, they have gone on to develop new projects. Rachel Summerscales, Centre Manager at Hulme Community Gardens was one of several Community Hub representatives who were keen to build on their June 2014 meeting and continue to support each other through Action Learning Sets:

“Peer to peer networking? I’d like to do it at our centres, so we do a 20 min walk round, then a topic or two to discuss and see how we’ve moved on. I’d like to see this as leading from the heart, can we move forward? I don’t want to lose that...” (Rachel Summerscales, Hulme Community Garden Centre).

The GM LIP has provided space, time, permission and value to ‘alternative’ voices and to mainstream people to think about, discuss and write about sustainable urban development beyond their customary boundaries.

“We were interested in it because of the topic, what makes a sustainable city? It’s very live for us and our sector and in Greater Manchester generally... it’s one of the big questions of our time and a good job academics are asking it. I’m really interested in it as well, and the connection with international partners is interesting, because the rise of cities is a global phenomenon, and we can learn from other contexts” (Alex Whinnom, Chief Executive, GMCVO).

The GM LIP co-production approach enables translating or interpreting between different sectors who often use different languages and have different cultures. This has opened up knowledge between groups and broken down barriers.

“It’s been a good opportunity to work with different people, especially within this field. It’s been more formal, more productive and it was a good thing because SURF have the Low Carbon Hub on board so they have a stake in it... so you know someone is going to listen” (Dan Silver, SARF)

“There are more commonalities between the academic, private and voluntary sectors than expected; and influencing change in the public sector both in terms of policy and culture requires persistence and stamina.” (GMCVO Comment in SURF Feedback, May 2014).

The project has created a new cross-sectoral group in the GM LIP that is developing further projects and exploiting suitable funding opportunities.

“The partnerships have worked well because we’ve liked each other” (Beth Perry, SURF Co-Director).

Alongside these impacts, there are some important lessons emerging, which should inform future similar projects.

Emerging lessons

There is a refreshing, light-headedness to a project that is not restricted or bound by very prescriptive outputs and outcomes with quantifiable impacts that have to be measured and proved or explained to funders (e.g. number of jobs created, tonnes of CO2 reduced, number of people trained). The academic

team have had to provide financial and activity reports to Mistra Urban Futures. However, for those in the voluntary and policy sectors stepping back to do thinking rather than non-stop nose-to-the-grindstone delivering has been liberating. This free-flowing approach enabled risk-taking, trialing engagement methods and responsive project development based on researching together. All too often projects are designed without the research, engagement or thinking and planning in a specific context. The GM LIP has moved away from this within the Mistra Urban Futures project. That's not to say organizations won't go back to design-deliver projects however, because their context and funding often dictates such an approach. In this respect, the project cannot change the wider context that limits many organizations which can deliver elements of sustainable urban development. For example, the funding cuts affecting Community Hubs and the ongoing pressure on them may restrict the potential positive impacts of the GMCVO project (see case study below).

Co-production entails a different or non-traditional approach by academics. Establishing and maintaining relationships for co-production is time consuming, complicated and exhausting. This needs to be taken into account by universities wishing to use this approach in future. It is also questioned whether this is supported by existing career development criteria within universities which value and reward academic publications rather than innovative community engagement projects. Can it be 'career suicide' for an academic? Deep engagement at the research-practice interface can create opportunities for further projects to be developed in collaboration, but can create a sense of obligation beyond usual professional duties (e.g. to support partners on funding bids) and organizations need to be aware of how to resource and support this. The co-production approach is valued by policy makers, local leaders and community organizations who are frequently the subject of academic research or the customers for it but who are not always part of conducting, analysing and authoring the research.

However, the project raises the issue of whose responsibility it is to act on the knowledge produced and because it is more 'hands on' (including practice and capacity-building) than many university research projects, it has raised an expectation that very practical projects may be started by the GM LIP. This may be the case in future, and handling these expectations in the final stages of Phase 3 of the project will be important to share the wider impacts the project has had, how the involvement of the many partners has been important, and to reflect back ideas for further projects that others may want to take forward.

Another lesson is that organizational timelines vary. Community projects may start and end in a year before a new funding stream comes into play; policy timeframes are around three or more years, governed by political elections; university timelines can be longer – over four years for a big research project, so ensuring that the different partners are aware of the timelines and of when feedback or follow up is likely is an important factor in keeping communications and momentum going.

5. Thinking Without Walls

*“Our world is so rushed, there’s no time. We need to create thinking time and explore things further”
(Nigel Mellors, Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Salford Manchester).*

The GM LIP and its projects have brought together a range of different people and organizations in different ways. Some have been involved in more than one way – being interviewed by SURF, writing for Platform, reading articles and some report their involvement as being with a particular project, or with SURF, Mistra Urban Futures or with a GM LIP anchor partner. This gives the sense of the programme being more a movement with touch points and ripples than a formally named branded project. For the academics involved, the approach has also enabled them to work in a new way, co-producing and working very closely within their urban contexts.

A key theme of the apparently free-flowing nature of the research approach has been to create a sense of freedom that contrasts with the everyday operating environment of the non-academic GM LIP partners, which are bound by funding requirements, reporting obligations, client budgets and deadlines, political and strategic policies and organizational rules, norms and traditions. The research approach questions, seeks out the views and opinions of a wide range of people, listens and explores, then identifies opportunities to develop or support projects enabling the knowledge gathered and produced to be used and further explored. This is the research-practice interface in action.

The GM LIP has created some space and funding for those normally involved in transactional, target driven or service driven or policy-making work to do thinking, researching, debating and reflecting. Creating ‘safe’ valued space for thinking, permission to think and space to go beyond one’s own remit or traditional role has been done in a number of ways, through:

- The governance structures and the Greater Manchester Partners group, regular meetings bringing the anchor partners together
- The Alternatives Series
- The Perspectives Essays
- Funding for research, analysis and co-writing in the GAPS and Realising the Value of Community Hubs (ring-fencing and funding time for people to step back from the day-to-day on a valid, serious and funded project)
- The role of SURF in conducting interviews with different stakeholders for essays, projects and for research papers. The time spent talking to researchers has enabled people to step back and consider wider questions, even if only for an hour or so.
- A series of other projects not covered by this evaluation, which have involved many tens of people from different sectors and roles, ranging from the Leader of Manchester City Council to community researchers, teachers and school children.

The projects in Phase 3 are closely interconnected and interwoven with influences and impacts spreading between them. This is particularly the case in the GM LIP’s role in mediating between the policy world and the community and voluntary worlds, creating an area where projects can feed back into the LIP and in doing so inform the context of the other projects and raise the voices of different people, whether they are expressing alternative views or raising their visibility.

The GM LIP approach and make-up of the partnership has taken down some walls between organizations, providing space and time and value to thinking about the sustainable urban development questions, and in doing so also raises some expectations and hopes. However, there are, of course limitations and the walls can only be taking down temporarily or within the GM LIP projects. The presence of the policy partner on the GM LIP seems to send a message to some people that they can influence policy, and the GAPS project is indeed examining Governance and Policy for Sustainability. The role of the GM LIP working together protects the project from too much expectation. The case study of the GAPS project below outlines some of the very real impacts that the project has had beyond the research element.

“What’s changed? Nothing at all – it can’t change things, it’s a tiny initiative in a complicated city-region environment. What it can do is enable some people to do something they’d otherwise not have the opportunity to do. This project provides us and agencies with ammunition and evidence to use for years to come to tweak and push policy directions” (Alex Whinnom, Chief Executive, GMCVO).

Despite GM LIP’s sense that very modest impacts may have been made, the interviews showed that there have been real impacts made by the project in different ways, some practical and some based on new ideas or questions they are asking. For example, the Social Action Research Foundation (SARF) were involved in the GAPS project and ran workshops bringing community voices into the discussions over the challenges of and options to address sustainable urban development. As a result, SARF’s work will become more rounded, more inter-disciplinary and will be able to plug into more agendas than anti-poverty work. A consequence of the project is that more groups have more contact with one another across the city:

“From our perspective, seeing it (poverty) from a wider perspective of sustainable urban development, was the real standout. Also working formally with a university, and how it was done in different levels – university, public sector, community – it was novel. It shouldn’t be, but it is (Dan Silver, SARF)”

The presence of the Low Carbon Hub on the GMLIP meant there was a real reason for engaging with the project, and for community involvement. The engagement with policy makers then communities (rather than the other way round) interested SARF, who would normally begin the other way around. A tangible impact from the GAPS project is a spin-out project on food which emerged as an issue people felt strongly about, were interested in and there were clear connections between food and sustainable urban development: *“When you talk about sustainability it can be nebulous (Dan Silver, SARF).”*

For Jonny Sadler, Environmental Strategy Manager in Manchester City Council, participating in the workshop enabled him to take away ideas and principles from the Mistra Urban Futures questions about knowledge, policy and practice and considered them as they relate to his own experience:

“How do you translate the academic and policy stuff into meaningful practice on the ground? How do we put the things in place that enable the bottom up activity and creation of networks? How do you create an environment with sufficient parameters and an environment that you get something out of it and you create spaces and networks that are organic, not working to a pre-defined brief? (Jonny Sadler, Environmental Strategy Manager, Manchester City Council).”

Manchester City Council are trying to do just that, through their proposed Eco-Neighbourhoods programme, which provides support around what neighborhoods want to do that fits into the

parameters of the 2020 vision of vibrant, green, low carbon places. The Eco-Neighbourhoods programme translates policy devised at a desk in city hall into something real. This was partly born out of the challenge of the Mistra Urban Futures project, which promoted thinking about top down policy to action on the ground.

Might that have happened anyway? *“It might, but me sat here in the town hall writing policies – rather than being constantly challenged ‘what does that look like?’ (Jonny Sadler, Manchester City Council)”*

After reading the Mistra Urban Futures Annual Report Jonny has also recognized the need for ‘engaged’ research, inspired by the embedded PhD student in Cape Town City Council. As a result, Manchester City Council wants to house some PhD students to help them with research they need and can use to feed back into policy, e.g. CO₂ measurement and other areas.

“There is a need to create the space to continue to think – but there’s a long overdue need to do some real life output focused research with the universities who do really interesting stuff all the time, even if it’s outside the policy making brief, or at the wrong time (Jonny Sadler, Manchester City Council).”

This is a point echoed by Vincent Walsh, Founder and Director of Biospheric Foundation makes; that the GM LIP ethos and practice helps turn knowledge into something that can be used. What is the point of producing knowledge, he asks, if it’s not accessed by anyone? The impact of this approach, echoed by Platform, tries to break out of a cycle of knowledge being produced then lost again, as policy initiatives go round and round. Vincent hopes that new thinking around sustainable urban living will come out of the collaboration between SURF and Biospheric Foundation, and that policy makers come and see it and can learn from it. Drawing on the GM LIP work, a successful funding bid was submitted for Biospheric Foundation to be the focus for a proposed new piece of research looking at food austerity and digital technologies. The critical issue, shared by different partners is, *‘how we wrap critical research around urban communities and position it where it’s needed (Vincent Walsh, Director, Biospheric Foundation)’*.

Nigel Mellors, Pro Vice Chancellor at Salford University, explained the importance of the GM LIP approach:

“If you have the free-flowing debate you can generate innovation, and it’s so important to support cross-community and cross-discipline to stimulate the debate. Its purpose in life may not be to solve the problem but to encourage people to think about things differently.(Nigel Mellors, PVC Research, Salford University)”

The experience of an international research project with a strong emphasis on local interaction between organizations to co-produce at the research-practice interface, and to build capacity has had an impact on the university. Both the Vice Chancellor and Pro Vice Chancellor have said that they would like to see this approach taken more widely to build the university’s links with the community, in Salford and the city-region. This has the potential to take university engagement beyond senior figures in the leadership being on boards or committees to a more actively engaged role in the city with support from within university structures to do this. At the same time, universities need to ensure they do not force a narrow focus on measuring social impact which could limit the free-flowing questioning nature of research.

To this extent, reflection on the process of engagement, about what the city means to the researcher and what the researcher means to the city, has also been a key feature of the GM LIP. The GM LIP has

tried to tackle what they term 'the missing middle' the gap between academic/knowledge and the policy, voluntary and community sectors with a commitment to 'theory, practice and action'. The academic researchers pointed to the advantages and challenges of this way of working, in particular, the time-consuming nature of this approach which, if it is going to be promoted as an approach the university wants to take in future, needs to be supported by university administration, performance reviews and financial backing. In short, support needs to be in place so an academic can carry out this co-production practice and still have career progression.

"There was much more work involved than we had planned, more time spent on the core work and more time in meetings, organizational stuff, debriefing, making sure everything is going to plan...(Alex Wharton, Researcher, SURF)"

This approach is certainly not straightforward 'funding bid -research project delivered'. It requires match or co-funding (a concept familiar to the policy and voluntary sector), which itself needed a year's worth of agenda setting, pump priming and liaison with partners and on-going juggling of changing funding regimes and budgets, further bid-writing and reporting by the project director and GM LIP partners throughout the project.

As this evaluation shows, the additional benefits, impacts and appreciation of the Mistra Urban Futures and GM LIP approach by project partners are very valuable.

Alex Whinnom, CEO of GMCVO ,was asked what was new or different about the GM LIP and explained *"a university actually working collaboratively in genuine partnership and being prepared to share some of its money is a real novelty, a genuine reaching out."* He refers to previous disappointing experiences with some universities as *"they want our knowledge and skills and don't pay for it, produce work that's not useful."* The GM LIP was *"very refreshing, very good effort to make it a proper partnership."*

Case Study: Governance and Policy for Sustainability (GAPS) Project

"I believe that everyone needs to be involved in the sustainable urban development agenda for it to be successful, so the NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have as much a role to play as business and the public sector. A lack of resources will always hinder scale, but arguably the best innovation comes from the grassroots (Mark Atherton, GM Director of Environment, Low Carbon Hub)"

This case study looks at the GAPS Project which involved the AGMA Low Carbon Hub collaborating with SURF and engaging third sector and local authority partners. This reflects the theme of 'Thinking Without Walls' but also produced some concrete impacts, including:

- Many people interviewed believe the Low Carbon Hub now has a greater appreciation of the role the voluntary and community sector plays in delivering sustainable urban development.
- AGMA communications staff met with community and voluntary sector groups to discuss engagement and the Low Carbon Hub/AGMA is building in broader stakeholder engagement and use of social media into its communications plan. The Low Carbon Hub reports that it has widened its stakeholder base (this seems to be the number of organizations it communicates to) from 89 to 262 organizations and its newsletter is now sent to 624 people (it was 298 people in 2011).

- The challenge of how and why to engage GM residents is perceived by the Low Carbon Hub to be hampered by the two-tier governance structure, AGMA/local authorities, and the under-resourcing of the third sector making it difficult to engage. The Low Carbon Hub is considering using the Manchester: a Certain Future model of engagement. The challenge of how to respond to diverse views remains. The Low Carbon Hub is considering a range of options to increase engagement. These include On The Platform, developing the 2050 pathway calculator; representation of the third sector on the Low Carbon Hub sub-groups, events including the third sector, strengthening links with Local Authority climate change leads to make links with their own communications teams.
- As mentioned above, the Low Carbon Hub is increasing the representation of third sector organizations on its sub-groups. For example, Lucy Danger, CEO of Emerge (who wrote a Perspectives Essay with Dr Debbie Ellen), volunteered to lead on the Food element of the Sustainable Consumption and Production sub-group.
- The Low Carbon Hub/AGMA is strengthening the availability of environment and low carbon indicators as measurements of success. It is difficult at this stage to say whether the ‘availability’ of these indicators will be taken up and acted on – they will presumably need promoting and capacity-building support will be required to enable policy leads to understand them and how they relate to their own narrower indicators.
- The Low Carbon Hub is now using on The Platform as a wider communications vehicle. A link has been installed and articles written and uploaded. See: <http://ontheplatform.org.uk/gmlch>
- Engagement with the Universities for this project coincided with New Economy (AGMA) looking to improve their engagement with universities, which has made it easier for the Low Carbon Hub to establish a Low Carbon Research Forum, making more efficient use of resources. The Research Forum includes key contacts from the GM universities. This shows the presence of a research forum and the readiness of policy-makers to engage in saying what research they need and can use, has the potential to address the research-practice gaps in Greater Manchester and bring policy-makers closer together with the wealth of skills and knowledge within the city-region’s universities.
- GM LIP is supporting a long-term horizons scanning workshop with the universities as part of the review of the Climate Change Implementation Plan.

The interviews highlighted the dilemma of engagement and what we can and can’t change and whose responsibility it is to act on sustainable urban development. An outstanding challenge to policy makers (perhaps not understood or processed in the challenges of Phase 1 of this project) is for them to move away from policies that ‘deliver’ or ‘do to’ people and communities and let real engagement happen to inform their policies (rather than just one-way communications from the governance organization). This indicates a need for capacity building within the policy-making organizations on true engagement as opposed to providing outward looking communications. The project and related interviews demonstrate that:

- Policy makers and community groups want to engage/be engaged on topics that are specific.
- Policy makers do not want to engage community (or other groups) on topics that policy makers have no remit to act on or change.
- This project has shown that debates and thinking are useful, that risks can be taken in a defined safe-space.
- Policy makers are fearful of raising expectations and then being judged that they are not delivering.

- There are diverse views which people do not know how to handle – e.g. climate justice/vs climate information.
- Some people think you need consensus before you can have action.
- GMLIP has had a useful role as an intermediary adding value and skills.
- There is a demand for action rather than further questions and research (or alongside that).
- As a public organization, the Low Carbon Hub has been brave to open itself up to analysis (and potential criticism) and has put in time, energy and effort in producing the research. This was published in the Mapping the Urban Knowledge Arena Report 2012) and published as a short report/paper by MISTRA Urban Futures/SURF – Governance, Policy and Knowledge (IPP), Phase 2: Options within the Greater Manchester City Region.

6. Alternative Voices and Unusual Connections

It is noticeable in people's reactions to parts of the project that there can be a discomfort taking one's own work into a different environment. For example, the worry about consulting communities on topics beyond the policy-maker's ability to deliver; expressing the value of a community hub without moaning about the 'same old stuff'; restating the situation without presenting practical solutions; making a profit out of a social issue etc. There can be a fear of being judged, perhaps a defensiveness towards someone who is not familiar with the sector, who uses a different type of language, has the 'moral high ground', or who holds some kind of power or funding reins.

A benefit of the co-production and questioning approach of the GM LIP has been the creation of space and permission for Thinking Without Walls, discussed above. Alongside that, has been a theme of bringing different people together. These Unusual Connections have been facilitated within projects, and also through commissioning of essays and through interviews, asking similar questions about sustainable urban development to different people:

"Rather than the same elites talking to each other, the GMLIP sought a space in which people could express views that might be at variance with their public and professional viewpoints (Tim May, Co-Director, SURF)"

Essays have been published together on the Platform. Putting different voices (not the same elites) and views together (on paper, even if not in person) has been an interesting way of making unusual connections, and has put 'alternatives' forward, and given different people the same platform and the same value, creating a more level playing field for a rich variety of voices.

The Alternatives series (<http://ontheplatform.org.uk/collection/rethinking-sustainability-series-perspectives>) has explored a range of organisations, published on a common platform, including:

- Biospheric Foundation
- 5 Oaken Clough Terrace
- Incredible Edible Beer Garden, Eagle and Child
- Transition Town Bolton
- Cornerhouse
- St John's Sunshine
- Manchester International Festival
- The Wall
- Greater Manchester Hydrogen Partnership
- Hough Lane Community Garden
- The Fallowfield Loopline
- Didsbury Greening and Growing Group
- Action for Sustainable Living
- Greeniversity
- Envirolution

While in Phase 2 of the project nine Perspectives were written by:

- Sir Richard Leese, Leader of the Council, Manchester City Council

- Eamonn Boylan, Chief Executive, Stockport Council
- Caroline Downey, MERCI
- Debbie Ellen and Lucy Danger, Emerge
- Walter Menzies, Independent Advisor on Sustainable Development and Partnership and Partnership Development and Management
- Roger Milburn, ARUP
- Alison Surtees, Creative Industries in Salford (CRIS)
- Alex Whinnom, Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO)
- Paul Haywood, Professor of Creative Community Engagement, University of Salford and Artist

“GMLIP helps us facilitate with the local community in Greater Manchester, we need to work more closely with our local authorities, to engage with local authorities and communities on the big issues which may not have right or wrong answer but complicated solutions (Nigel Mellors, PVC Research, University of Salford)”

The interviews and research by SURF has been instrumental in gathering alternative voices and articulating them in relation to sustainable urban development in the city region. Many of those interviewed gained insights via the questions and analysis of the academics. In a way, for busy practitioners this in itself was an unusual connection, it gave them a voice, gave them a better way of exploring and articulating their thinking and experiences, helped them understand or consider their wider context and was like a form of sustainability counselling!

As Vincent Walsh of Biospheric explained:

“Working with them I’ve understood power and possibilities for the Foundation from a completely different perspective. I’ve always been an action-led researcher doing things then writing about what I’ve learned (Vincent Walsh, Director, Biospheric Foundation)”

This has helped close the gap between the grassroots and policy, bringing different sides and sectors together. Dr Debbie Ellen, an independent researcher co-authored a Perspectives Essay with Lucy Danger, CEO of Emerge, a Manchester based environmental charity focusing on resource efficiency. The essay focused on food to address sustainability in Greater Manchester. In particular they illustrated the significant part played by food in the city region’s carbon footprint but the difficulty in producing a coordinated GM-level response. The essay was published as part of the Perspectives series on the Platform website. It has been one of the most read pieces on the Platform.

“It’s really nice to know I’ve written something that’s being read. When I do academic research I generally feel frustrated – you write a report and it sits on a shelf or sits as a pdf or a journal article that gets read by very small numbers of people” (Debbie Ellen, independent researcher).

Alex Whinnom, CEO of GMCVO also wrote a perspectives essay. He says it has made a change to his own knowledge and work:

“I’m really interested in reading the long essays, in how very different and incompatible most visions were, it’s something I had an instinct that that was the case. It was laid out in black and white and you need to see where your own position needs to change, and other people’s. My feeling is we won’t get change in Greater Manchester until we get consensus...(Alex Whinnom, GMCVO)” However, Alex does acknowledge

that the biggest thing that changes in doing this thinking is the relationships, and that can lead to change.

The feedback overall has been that there has been a genuine two-way sharing and development of knowledge and thinking about sustainable urban development.

“It’s been great, and they are nice people to work with (Dan Silver, SARF).

Case Study: Realising the Value of Community Assets

“It was really useful. We did not know the community groups in depth. You would not normally have the luxury of time to hang out at their centre... you go out and visit, it brings home why we do what we do...(Morag Rose, Community Partner Researcher, GMCVO)”

This section looks at the Greater Manchester Council of Voluntary Organizations (GMCVO) and SURF project Realising the Value of Community Assets. This project highlights both the need to bridge the gap between city regional governance and engagement with local groups and to include alternative voices in policy and practice. This highlights the diversity of the community and voluntary sector. Based on feedback from the groups attending the GMCVO Community Hubs action learning set, held by the GM LIP, many of these groups are massively under-valued, under-funded and some may lack the dynamic management needed to thrive in the current cuts context. Yet they are delivering extremely important services to vulnerable members of the local community with huge commitment and skill.

The research will also be used directly by GMCVO and the community hubs themselves to articulate their value to other stakeholders such as policy makers, funders, local communities and partners or clients. Restating the value of such community hubs with the backing of a university and under the umbrella of the GM LIP and stating the challenges they face, will hopefully keep the ‘unglamorous’ members of the community and voluntary sector on the agenda.

The community researchers said *“So much is founded on individuals, policy-makers are quite removed from these people. They might not understand what goes into delivering services out of those centres and the fundamental issues they are still facing to keep open, whilst delivering very essential services on a shoestring, with no reward or recognition (Community researcher, GMCVO)”*

“For GMCVO this project reinforces the benefits of collaboration and co-production. We have undertaken research with academic partners with varying degrees of success and the co-production model is the most satisfying model (GMCVO Feedback, May 2014)”

Other studies of the value of community hubs have been carried out in the past, such as social return on investment, which apparently produced something ‘clunky’, a Bristol study into voluntary sector infrastructure which was said to be rather lightweight, and currently a study looking at five wards in Greater Manchester looking at what they contribute to early years provision. Indeed, Joseph Rowntree Foundation has just produced community research looking at neighbourhood approaches to loneliness

and well-being². The aspiration, with a wider look at the value of community hubs through the sustainable urban development lens, is that it will provide more traction on more topics that people care about or relate to, rather than providing a single-issue or economic-value based study.

Ian Taylor of GMCVO pointed out that they've looked at what community hubs contribute to food or health etc. in the past. *"We know they are assets in communities, it's not just the physical asset, the other stuff is important, and it becomes a focal point for activity and it's some additionality around getting a number of activities happening in one place. I feel like we could come at the same issue from a number of perspectives and the answer will always be that it's better to build on assets within a community than to import a formulaic solution from outside (Ian Taylor, GMCVO)."* His hope is that this project will be holistic enough and robust enough, with academic input, and deeply researched by community-based researchers to produce the 'right' evidence.

The co-design of the project with GM LIP and GMCVO working together was an important step in producing something useful for everyone and has been a useful experience for the community researchers and for SURF: *"[It's important that] We do sit down together and draw up a proposal, [It's] useful in getting everyone together right at the start [to build the team and in working out strategic and operational issues]" (Alex Wharton, SURF).*

Mid-way through the research there were differences of opinion about what the framework will actually be – GMCVO see it as a best practice toolkit/fact sheet or guidance while SURF seem to consider it to be a statement of what should happen. GMCVO strongly want any follow up to be of a practical nature – *"it's got to be practical and can't only lead onto MORE research, if you just restate the problem. We could have guessed what the problems are by talking to people regularly"*

However, the process was also felt to be important to open up channels of communication and visibility between different sectors: connecting researchers into corners of the city they were not aware of, reconnecting the community researchers in depth with the centres they visited and spent prolonged time in and raising the visibility of the voluntary sector within more traditional urban policy-making arenas:

"There is more activity than first thought already occurring in communities and voluntary sector organisations which will support the transition of GM through sustainable urban development. These groups appear to require two things i) funding and ii) to be heard - access to a channel for communication which will be listened to (Mark Atherton, GM Director of Environment)."

"It is important for us to give them a voice and to state the obvious. That's one of the main reasons money is not spent on hubs – what they do isn't visible and they are not heard. My anxiety around this [the project] is what difference will it make? We can articulate the value of hubs, and community activists can articulate it, but no one is listening in the media – it's not headline worthy (Alex Wharton, SURF)."

GMCVO Chief Executive Alex Whinnom had a slightly more hopeful view of what impacts might result. He reflected that it might *"provide ammunition and evidence to use for years to come to tweak and push policy directions"*. He added that *"This could have an indirect impact on public service reform, the other*

² <http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/bradford-programme>

big one is the micro-economy, we're trying to look at how we drive this with initiatives that are working." And he is hoping to stay involved in the GM LIP, to see what comes out of the project. He hopes it will prove that community hubs and sustainability are interlinked, and that the academic rigour and evidence will help to prove that investing in a certain way will create better outcomes. Ian Taylor of GMCVO agrees, and hopes that the GM LIP will help get the message out there *"loud and clear"*.

Aside from the external messages that might result from the project, what are the potential impacts for the Community Hubs and their users? The community researchers were concerned that they may not be able to continue capacity building support or provide an ongoing network because they are so busy with a range of projects and would need further resources:

"We know peer networking is valuable and useful... it might give us more evidence for the need to apply for funding, and it might be pushed within GMCVO and having an academic partner in it adds to the evidence, and opens a few new avenues for funding and support and networking around community hubs (Community Hubs worker)."

The participants at the GMCVO meeting in June 2014 shared a huge amount of information and support in the Action Learning Sets in a very short space of time. Those attending now want to visit each other's centres and continue in Action Learning Sets, which is an ongoing commitment of the GMLIP in 2014/2015. The meeting demonstrated the knowledge and skills that the staff of the centres have, and the potential they have to support one another on issues like funding, management committees, managing volunteer placements, self-care and much more. A resource enabling them to continue in a network would have a big impact on enabling the centres to tackle some of the challenges identified in the research and to take on an even more active role in sustainable urban development.

7. Translating & Transplanting

A third theme that emerged from the reading and interviews about GM LIP's activities and impacts is that of Translating and Transplanting.

Bringing together partners from different sectors is challenging, because they use different language and have different motivations, values, timelines, funding and so on.

The role of the GM LIP in creating a place where the language of the different sectors can be brought together to develop a common understanding is important, and the barriers of institutional languages have been raised in interviews. It takes an effort for a non-academic to read academic research, as it does for many of us to read policy documents and strategies.

The role of GM LIP as translator has developed over the course of the projects and it's not always easy to get it perfectly right. One person interviewed mentioned *"I found the meeting discussing the notion of essays daunting, because there was quite a lot of posturing... someone who was going to write an essay was fixated with definitions..."* while another referred to *"academics talking language to each other we could not understand..."*

In order to co-produce it has been important for the partners to spend time and effort translating. Morag Rose, GMCVO Community Researcher who has also been involved in other research projects said *"it was challenging, all together in a centre, reminded me that the research was applied, not abstract... working with a university brings rigour but there are cultural issues around language, and a sense of 'are we really understanding each other?' I sometimes thought I meant one thing, even the word 'framework' means something different in a university context. There are some words we would not use to describe groups, it was weirder than I thought it would be (Morag Rose, Community Partner Researcher) ."*

Transplanting ideas, views, projects and solutions has been enabled by these projects. Transplanting can be done by one person taking an idea from a different person to use it in their own project, work or sector for example, in the Action Learning Sets at GMCVO where solutions and ideas were shared. Transplanting can also be a transplanting of inspiration, something hard to evaluate, but by sharing what is known and what is taking place in the sustainable urban development arena in Greater Manchester (and beyond) certainly transplants inspiration and energy.

Ian Taylor explained that he now reads academic papers and that the Platform is his "magazine of choice". He found inspiration in the Mistra Urban Futures research into the role of markets in Kisumu and the flea-market in Gothenburg as *" places people go to for one purpose but get the benefits of going there – social, meeting people, rubbing shoulders with other people you have nothing in common with (Ian Taylor, GMCVO)."*

Case Study: Platform

This section looks at On The Platform, the website/digital governance project developed by Creative Concern and GM LIP. It responds to an identified need to capture, share and manage knowledge about sustainable urban development in Greater Manchester. It tackles the loss of intelligence and regional

data and evidence that can continue to be useful to many people and organizations. By doing this it should be able to avoid some of the endless rehashing of evidence bases during policy and organizational changes. It hopes to make information available to maintain momentum in the transition to sustainable urban development. That's quite a tall order and has been tried in the past in websites such as Manchester Is My Planet and Manchester Knowledge Capital which ended when funding ran out... but the use of digital technologies as a specific project to ensure knowledge dissemination and management of digital knowledge (from the GM LIP), is key to capturing impacts. According to Martin Hall, Vice Chancellor, University of Salford, *"Platform needs to be the preferred place where people go for information."*

The survey and interviews about the Platform show that it is valued, that it has an important role translating and transplanting knowledge, intelligence, examples and inspiration. It acts as a connector between people in leadership roles, those in policy and governance roles, community activists and researchers and it is attractive and readable, with high quality writing and photography. There are high expectations and hopes for its future development and what it can deliver for the city-region.

On 1 September 2013 the Platform was given a soft launch (i.e. it was not massively promoted or launched at an event). It had been developed and designed, tested with editorial groups and was populated with articles around thematic areas such as energy, food and transport. It has grown organically, and has around 200 readers per day, most based in Greater Manchester. Key topics have been the Alternatives series, Perspective Essays, events reports, with the most popular story so far being on food waste. People spend time reading, with some articles read for ten minutes. Platform has over 300 articles with a wide variety of contributors and three newsletters had been circulated. Between 1 September 2013 and 30 June 2014 there had been 10,500 sessions, 7,500 unique users, over 24,000 page views, 33% of visitors were returning visitors, average time per session was just over 2 minutes (which is a high number for a website), and a bounce rate of 65% (bounce being people popping on and immediately off the website). There were 214 subscribers to the newsletter.

"The desire to bring diversity of voices in the GM LIP – and doing things like the community reporters type stuff is quite bold I think and really refreshing and sometimes works and sometimes doesn't ... and you manage to get a series of seriously heavyweight people to give their perspectives on urban sustainability, at length, and with great attention to detail (with trepidation of 'us' marking them down) (Steve Connor, Creative Concern)".

There is now a website where there was not one before (following the demise of similar past websites, Manchester Is My Planet, Manchester: Knowledge Capital etc.). It aims to *reduce a democratic deficit in terms of awareness and understanding of what's being done on sustainability in the city region. And make work towards a sustainable future better known and more transparent.*

The GM LIP team refer to it as 'digital governance' and describe Platform as a knowledge sharing facility, online news source and information portal for building sustainability and innovation across Greater Manchester. It is aimed primarily at decision makers in business, government and the third sector but is also be designed and written in a form that will bridge the gap between those who 'govern' the city region and the 2-3 million people who live or work here. It is an ongoing digital experiment, and will be interesting to see how it fares into the future.

For now, Platform seems to be becoming greater than the sum of its parts, in that it is now attracting organizations and networks with a sustainability focus to use it as their chosen route for

communications. This will help it build a critical mass of audience and will help it to spread and multiply information, views, examples and ideas. The challenge is to see how it can continue beyond funding streams and generate ongoing sustainability.

“Currently it’s done on a shoestring – so it’s hard to get a paradigm shift in people’s practice – would need more editorial power, introducing sub domains and want to use film and put in a library function so we can rescue reserves of knowledge (Steve Connor, Creative Concern).”

My only criticism is that there aren’t enough people looking at it, because not enough people know about it. (Jack Thompson, MIF Technical Director).

An on-line survey in June/July aimed to gather reader views on Platform and its impact. Fourteen responses were received and the detailed results are in Annex 3. The respondents were from local government, higher education, commercial business, not-for-profit, community/voluntary sector and two were from outside Greater Manchester. Their areas of influence were: cultural, higher education/research, energy, community farms/food, energy.

The reader profile is due to its organic growth (i.e. it has not been targeted at particular audiences, e.g. social housing). It will be interesting to see how this changes over time, particularly as sub-sites on Platform bring their own subscriber base with them. It could also inform marketing of Platform to pick up ‘missing sectors’ e.g. social housing sector, which is acting strongly on sustainable urban development in many ways. Most of the respondents visited the website prompted by the newsletter, which means that to increase the reach of the Platform, getting more subscribers signed up from a range of sectors will be required. This could possibly be done using ambassadors to increase the reach across sectors.

Happily, everyone who answered the question ‘Do you read articles you would not normally come across’ answered yes – so Platform puts different subjects and views in the way of people interested in sustainable urban development – thus helping to marry up topics and cause linkages.

Some of these people gave an example:

“I liked the one about the excess fruit being made into jam”

“The piece about Central library - that is the sort of thing that appears in Society pages in the Guardian - which I don't buy anymore so I don't see them.”

“Anything that shows evidence & achievement of a shift in culture to an emerging ecological economic living”

They explained what leads them to read these articles:

Two people were led in by the photographs, others wanted a broad picture of what’s happening in Greater Manchester, another wanders in and ‘has a gander’ at interesting pieces having landed on the site, *“The site has well researched articles from a wide range of interrelating disciplines and fields”.*

What they liked best about Platform encompassed what it aimed to do really – the design and photography, well-researched, well-informed and well-written articles produced in a ‘bohemian and humble, rather than ego’ [sic] tone, the breadth of interesting articles is appreciated, and the local aspects so the reader can find out what is happening in their area.

Examples of impacts Platform has had for readers included:

- It has shown me that there are a lot of people and groups out there trying to do something and none of us knew each other existed
- Mechanism to communicate research results in more or less real time
- An essay I co-authored was published on Platform and has been quite widely read, which is good - hearing about how many times it's been landed on is great. This has since led to other work which is really good - so it's working on a networking level for me.
- General insight into the many activities that are transforming a large regional economy.

It is hard to tell at this early stage whether the Platform will address the *democratic deficit in terms of awareness and understanding of what's being done on sustainability in the city region. It will make work towards a sustainable future better known and more transparent.* But the early results seem to show that it has the potential to contribute towards it. It communicates grassroots and community-based events, actions and projects on a wide range of sustainability topics into a readable format for people in policy-making, research, governance positions and brings policy and top-down projects into the gaze of practitioners (or people who are doing stuff on sustainability). Its non-egotistical, down to earth tone adds to the possibility of collaboration, which takes the discomfort discussed in the section above, away from those reading about other sectors to their own.

It particularly helps with *understanding* what's being done through the mediation by skilled writers from Creative Concern's own team, their freelance writers, the SURF team and invited essayists. There is a big difference between providing information on things that are happening, and helping explain and translate what that means for the city-region, for different communities or organisations and putting it into a wider context. This interpretation also helps transplant ideas across boundaries between sectors and between top-bottom (policy makers/communities).

MAST, MACF and Low Carbon Hub have all decided to place sub-sites on the Platform, which further acts to communicate and share what is being done by different actors on sustainable urban development, and which recognises there are lots of facets and topics to sustainable urban development. This will help spread knowledge and understanding between groups that may not normally interrelate with each other.

"I really like the model. I'm not a journalist, we just drop one of Steve's team or freelancers into a meeting or event and they get a take on it. It gives us a Platform to talk about what's happening in the city in far more interesting way than in a council report or press release, it's done by professionals who are good at making this sound exciting (Jonny Sadler, Manchester City Council)."

"We don't even need innovation, but need to share the information we have. It seems simple to us, but lots of people think it's black magic... it's telling people, showing them. Show them a beautiful picture with it and that really sells it (Jack Thompson, MAST)"

It helps support the 'thinking without walls' theme which provides permission to people to think beyond their own role and across a range of topics. This thinking can be taken back into their own organisation (or not) and can be used as inspiration by others either on a personal or professional level.

It has filled a media gap on sustainability knowledge and practice in Greater Manchester for policy, third sector and business, filling the spaces between more narrowly focused digital channels, Guardian

Environment, GM Chamber, New Economy, MACF and probably filled a local gap left out by other sustainability sites, such as Forum for the Future.

The Platform's whole purpose is to spread the ripple impacts as well as direct knowledge and understanding. It does not demand action as a result of reading and thinking about its content, and is not intended as an action-based public-facing website.

- The document bank soon to be installed will enable people to source information, evidence and pick up past lessons which will inform their research, policy or project planning.
- The events calendar also soon to be installed on the Platform will further support networking, activities and involvement.
- The Low Carbon Hub Bulletin has 600 subscribers so there will be an opportunity to draw in stories from this to the Platform and presumably to drive Low Carbon Hub subscribers to a wider range of topics within the Platform website. This will be similar with MAST and MACF lists.
- It has the potential to share knowledge from other GM LIP projects, so if it can package up the Realising the Value of Community Assets project findings and disseminate them it can magnify the impact of that project, hopefully bringing community hubs and policy-makers closer together.

The Platform Editorial meeting in April discussed challenges and ideas for the site's future development including:

- Observations that business stories are not covered very much – there are some excellent examples of business led sustainable urban development in Greater Manchester, but the site does not want to become a site for corporate public relations materials.
- There was discussion about driving traffic from other sites through tweets and whether content can be shared externally to other sites.
- Discussion also covered the geography of the site – should content cover North West or global stories? It was agreed it should focus on Greater Manchester, going beyond the boundaries but returning to the city-region.
- Contributors debated about how critical or controversial and challenging articles should be (a view reflected by the survey respondents, that Platform should not become too satisfied with progress).
- The group discussed bringing in community reporters' voices while maintaining the journalistic quality. Perhaps using film as well.

GM LIP do not consider themselves as 'owners' of Platform. Creative Concern have overall editorial control, with other members of the GMLIP having editorial rights. As the site evolves decisions will have to be made about its approach and values, and it will need to maintain a focus on the two-way role it has to tackle the 'democratic deficit' so it does not end up as a policy communication site (one way from policy-makers).

8. Conclusions and next steps

To recap, the GM LIP's overall aim is to improve the relationship between research and practice in creating a sustainable Greater Manchester.

Its approach involves working with a broad range of bodies across Greater Manchester on a range of research, practice and capacity-building activities to address two central questions:

- What is happening to the sustainable cities agenda in the context of the economic, political, social and ecological crises of the 21st Century?
- In this context, how can the knowledge and skills of different stakeholders and communities be brought together to support a more sustainable urban transition in Greater Manchester?

The GM LIP has without a doubt brought together a broad range of bodies across the city-region to consider the questions about what is happening to the agenda and to further ways to bring the knowledge and skills of different stakeholders and communities together in supporting a transition. In setting the terms of reference for this evaluation the group were very modest about what the project may have achieved. Just getting the people involved in the GM LIP to turn up to meetings and get involved is quite an achievement, as everyone is so busy, this in itself is a credit to the energy and focus of the GM LIP team.

This evaluation provided a fresh pair of eyes on the projects and gathered a snapshot of some of the impacts at the mid-point in Phase 3. These have been explored above, but are summarised below.

Thinking without walls – the projects have provided space, time and funding to facilitate fresh thinking on sustainable urban development by people from different sectors and to allow them to consider the big picture beyond their organizational boundaries, and to consider the micro projects that make up that big picture. The academic interviews conducted as part of the different projects have in themselves helped different people to think in a structured way about their work and the insights they have gained are feeding back into their own projects and approaches.

Case Study: Governance, and Policy for Sustainability – *this project has provided an opportunity for the Low Carbon Hub to think beyond the economy and carbon targets into more holistic sustainable urban development and to connect with the potential the community sector has to deliver a transition, but has not yet worked out how to harness that community's knowledge and skills to inform policy. It has also connected with the academic sector to form a Research Hub with a view to making use of the resources that GM's universities can offer the city-region in terms of applied, localized research. An additional tangential impact of the engagement in this project is the plan Manchester City Council has to house PhD students and to consider neighbourhood-initiated initiatives to deliver schemes that are vibrant, green and low-carbon.*

Alternative Voices and Unusual Connections – the Alternatives series and Perspectives essays have provided time and value to allow people to write about different topics within the sustainable urban development realm. This has allowed people to step back and consider and then share their views. The chance to take time to read these essays has been taken up by readers of the Platform. The project has enabled the University of Salford to make strong links with its local community and it is being examined by the university leadership which hopes to replicate the approach with different departments, on

different topics. This will not be straightforward, as co-production and deep connections take a lot of energy and time and require a different kind of management and administrative support from university structures.

Case Study: Realising the Value of Community Hubs – provides a demonstration of the disconnect between different sectors and shines a light on the under-recognised and under-resourced knowledge, skills and assets in the city-region. There is an opportunity to provide capacity-building and recognition for this sector through the rest of the project. Finding a way to close the implementation gap between policy and practice is an ongoing challenge as is getting resources to the grass-roots in light of ongoing cuts to the third sector. Effective communication through the Platform of the value of the community hubs may have a potential longer-term impact on policy makers.

Translating and Transplanting – throughout the evaluation it has been clear that different sectors of the city-region use very different languages. The word *framework* had at least three different meanings to different people involved, and in reading documents an element of translating academic or policy language into ‘everyday’ language has been necessary. The role of the GM LIP in helping to translate between sectors has highlighted similarities which different groups did not know were there, and it will help ease the discomfort that can be felt between groups when they come together.

Case Study: On the Platform – the Platform website has had a strong start and is attracting organizations to use it, it is engaging people on topics they would not normally read, and now it needs to grow its audience and subscriber base. A document library and events calendar are planned. Marketing it now seems to be vital to keep up its momentum. If the Platform becomes too comfortable it may not help move things forward, change can be uncomfortable, challenge is important, and both need space for thought processes to help people ‘get their heads’ round new ideas or work out how to do things. So the Platform will have a role that SURF and the GM LIP have provided in allowing some risks to be taken in order to progress knowledge and understanding of sustainable urban development in Greater Manchester.

What is next for the GM LIP?

The GM LIP has proved itself as a means to bring together different organizations, sectors and projects across the city-region. It has credibility and momentum and through its achievements expectations for what else will happen have clearly been raised

GM LIP has tried, tested, taken risks and developed space and time for thinking, meeting and sharing ideas, thoughts, arguments and discussion on the context and actions around sustainable urban development in Greater Manchester. It has endured and kept people on board, involved and committed.

It has had practical impacts, like a website and publications, meetings to develop capacity, and has developed evidence but above all it has demonstrated a process which is likely to be used again. Whilst a lot of the language is about governance, policy, digital governance, value, hubs etc. it very much seems to be a project about *people*. Everyone interviewed seemed to like the people involved, which is a credit to the approach taken, there was not one owner, no big ego, and a shared aim without huge pressure being put on to achieve a pre-determined conclusion or set of objectives.

The project has either created, or allowed people to express, a hunger for action. Action on individual topics, such as food that is common to us all and across policy and practice and individual levels; as well as action across the city that is not confined to separate silos.

Some people have expressed a need for agreement or consensus about what sustainable urban development is or what it means to the city-region. The Low Carbon Hub has expressed concern about dealing with diverse views during community engagement. The GMLIP seems relaxed about different views, yet repeatedly people seem to want consensus in order to take action (even though they may already be taking action!)

For community organizations being a partner and shaper rather than a deliverer of services is very different to the normal transactions that ordinarily take place in city-region groups. The fear of policy-makers is that what they co-create is too risk-taking or innovative to be taken neatly back into policy which tends to demand scalable, replicable, cost-able and often too simple solutions to complex contexts.

Does that matter if what is produced through giving space for thinking and engagement (thinking without walls) can help put new insights, ideas and inspiration 'out there'. Communicating the experimental nature of research needs to be clearly communicated. So many practitioners are so passionate about their subject area, it can be easy to forget this is about research-practice interface, rather than a top-down consultation (which so many community organizations are used to) coming up with models and solutions that will be scooped up into policy and be rolled out across the city.

A loosely shared vision might be enough, with people and organizations finding their own routes towards it. Or following suggested routes. This can't be owned or sorted out by a single organization, but there is enough experience in Greater Manchester of consensus facilitation (using the ICA:UK methodologies that Quantum uses in working with groups) to have a try at tackling these tensions. Indeed, there are strategies, policies and roadmaps to do just this. Perhaps they need more engagement in order to make them happen? Many people involved in the project have found it useful and inspiring but now want to take action – perhaps they now need to get on with it or continue to get on with it, instead of waiting for someone else to coordinate it for them?

“When you go to see other people, new organizations and you mention all these organizations, SARF, SURF, it builds up and gives you more confidence and makes it more real within a completely different context (Vincent Walsh, Biospheric Foundation)”

“I hope it develops, and not necessarily driven by hard tangible matrices. I'm a great believer in freedom of thought and people getting together to think about things. Its [GM LIP] purpose may not be to solve the problem, but to help simulate people to think about things differently...(Nigel Mellors, PVC Research, University of Salford Manchester.”

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Annex 2. Interviewees

Grateful thanks to those who agreed to be interviewed (listed in alphabetical order below).

Alison Crush, Community Hubs Development Officer, GMCVO
Debbie Ellen, Independent Researcher
Martin Hall, Vice Chancellor, University of Salford
Nathalie Long, GMCVO
Professor Tim May, Director SURF, University of Salford
Nigel Mellors, Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Salford
Dr Beth Perry, Associate Director, Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures (SURF)
Director, Greater Manchester Local Interaction Platform for Mistra Urban Futures
Morag Rose, GMCVO
Jonathan Sadler, Environmental Strategy Manager, Manchester City Council
Dan Silver, Director, Social Action & Research Foundation
Ian Taylor, Business Development Manager, GMCVO
Jack Thompson, Technical Director, Manchester International Festival
Vincent Walsh, Chief Executive, Biospheric Foundation CIC
Alex Wharton, Research Associate, SURF
Alex Whinnom, Chief Executive, GMCVO

Attending the GMLIP Meeting April 2014:

Steve Connor, CEO, Creative Concern
Mark Atherton, Head of Environment, Low Carbon Hub, AGMA
Ian Taylor, GMCVO
Alex Wharton, SURF

Prof. Tim May, SURF
Dr Beth Perry, SURF

Attendees of the GMCVO Community Hubs meeting and action learning event 12 June.

Thanks to Rachel Whelan, Creative Concern for support with the statistics and survey for On The Platform.

Annex 3. Online Survey on the Platform

It was completed by 14 people, who responded to an invitation in the Platform newsletter.

Bearing in mind the very small sample size, the findings may not be significant but have proved useful in complementing the interviews and gathering reader insights.

Most people looked at the survey weekly (5) or monthly (5) with a couple of people looking at it daily (probably someone at Creative Concern who works on it/monitors it).

Why do they look at it? Most (8) people are prompted by an email/newsletter – so the importance of having a regular newsletter to promote visitors to the site is important. While others (5) visit it to catch up on what's going on. The fact that new articles go up regularly, and that a wider range of organizations are now using the site for their communications will mean it is worth visiting, because there will be new content and information on it.

What makes readers choose an article? Most (7) link from one article to another (so this is very much like browsing through a magazine), others (5) are attracted by the photograph and others (3) read the headline articles while a smaller number (2) seek out a topic that interests them or read an article recommended by someone else.

We asked which topics readers are most and least likely to read:

The most popular topics were: Society (10), Green & Blue spaces (8), Living (8), Nature (8), Food (8), Culture (7), Energy (6), Health (7), Economy.

The least likely to visit topics were: Transport, Housing and Education.

Things readers liked least was a sense of scattergun topics – seeking more precise commissioning on key themes, another reader thought there were a lot of headings, and another wish was for more critical or challenging pieces.

Before Platform was launched readers got their information on happenings in GM mainly from newsletters (5), existing media (4) word of mouth (3) or attending meetings (3). While readers currently read for similar articles media including: updates from New Economy (2) and GM Chamber of Commerce, Guardian Environment (via Twitter) (2) Manchester Climate Monthly and Manchester a Certain Future updates.

What value did readers think Platform has?

For me	For Greater Manchester
Interesting on a personal level	Publishing strong independent important voices
Good resource to help me learn more about what is going on and how I can do things in a more sustainable way	Good to know all the people 'doing' things - for more joined up approach
A valued source of information - a good new addition to my information scanning.	A place where everyone can see how simple things can be, we all need to start doing something and here you can start
Keeps me informed in an entertaining way	A network / community of interest, though not sure how far this spreads, or who to. Who does it engage?
Significant – a narrative of change	General interest
Good & interesting “I didn’t know that!”	Long-term - transparency - two way of policy to citizens and community initiatives to policy
It's really helpful to keep me updated as articles are often relevant to my research	Huge - distils the acknowledged complexities of transformation into an engaging forward looking media
	Keeps connections

Three respondents were aware of impacts that Platform has had for Greater Manchester which were:

- MAST and Manchester a Certain Future
- MACF subsite, MAST subsite, GM Low carbon hub
- Low Carbon Hub has a recognised broader national recognition of bold, forward looking organization & action

What could it do that it doesn't do yet?

- It could perhaps include more light hearted - or rather, less academic - articles so as to bring more people in
- More pushing to expand the name so that everyone knows where to look for help on green / Sustainability issues
- Share information about readers / 'number of hits' / most read articles
- I think that it would be easier to head straight to the articles that are most relevant/interesting to the reader if the website was broken down into categories/themes from the home page.
- Have more voices; do more challenging; showcase research/findings on GM
- Have (more?) content written by younger people
- Maybe start to report the progress against the well publicised AGMA plan

Only one person had a view on what it should stop doing which was to resist being too satisfied with progress - balance with criticism and opinion.

Six people were interested in contributing articles to Platform.

The respondents were from: local government, higher education, commercial business, not-for-profit, community/voluntary sector and two were from outside Greater Manchester.

Their areas of influence were: cultural, higher education/research, energy, community farms/food, energy.

¹ Ibid.