

## Future vision

# Making the transition

In the Environment Agency's recently published *50 Things That Will Save the Planet*, Transition Initiatives is listed in the top 10. Co-founder Rob Hopkins talks to **Henry Widdicombe** about how the initiative to make us become less dependent on peak oil started and what the future holds

In September 2005, Rob Hopkins was teaching his first class at Kinsale Further Education College in Ireland when he decided to show his students the American peak oil documentary *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream*. It was a decision that started a chain of events leading to the creation of Transition Initiatives – a proposal that aims to solve the twin environmental threats of peak oil and climate change by utilising local action, and one that is now spreading its way throughout the UK and beyond.

The concept of peak oil – the point at which the maximum global petroleum production rate is reached, before the advent of a terminal decline – was new to Hopkins in 2005, but the documentary affected him and his students profoundly. "I hadn't even thought about peak oil before," remembers Hopkins. "Some of the other members of staff said, 'What's happened to your students? They've looked grey all week.'" But rather than running from a problem that to many would seem insurmountable, Rob and his students asked whether there was anything they could do to respond to the challenge of reducing global consumption.

"We looked around on the Internet and we couldn't find anything. So I set them a project which first of all looked at a vision for an oil-free town and backtracked from that to formulate how we actually get there." And from this, Kinsale's Energy Descent Action Plan was born.

The students looked at every aspect of life within Kinsale that was impacted by the availability of cheap oil, including food, energy, transport, health, education and wellbeing. The students consulted and communicated with the local population about what they were doing

and then drew a vision and plan for each area before publishing and launching a document that set out a path towards achieving energy descent by 2021.

"When we first produced it we didn't really appreciate quite what we'd actually done in terms of how important it was," Hopkins recalls. However, after making it available online, it wasn't long before people were getting in touch to find out more and it dawned on Hopkins exactly what they had achieved. "They were saying things like, 'This is fantastic. This is just what we've been waiting for'."

“ Each initiative needs to be allowed the freedom to evolve and find its own solutions to peak oil and climate change ”

It was when Hopkins moved to Totnes, Devon, however, that the concept of transition was really born. "I wanted to explore the idea further; it felt like something that was really important somehow."

From what was initially nothing more than Hopkins and co-founder Ben Brangwyn showing films and doing talks to local audiences, they built what has become a template for other communities to follow in order to make the transition to a world without cheap oil.

In September 2006, Transition Towns Totnes held its 'official unleashing', a community event that heralded the dawn of a new era in Totnes. "Within a month of us having started, people from other places began asking, 'What are you doing? How are you doing it? What did you do to get here?' which meant that we had to try and work out exactly what we were doing and how we were doing it."

Learning lessons from his experiences in Kinsale and Totnes, Hopkins, together with partner Brangwyn, began to draw together a 12-step process containing the 'elements and tools' that any community thinking about transition would need to consider. The *Transition Primer* aims to provide a reference point rather than a prescriptive set of instructions. Indeed, one of the steps states, 'Let it go where it wants to go' – allowing each initiative the freedom to evolve and find its own solutions to peak oil and climate change. With a pool of over 400 communities already involved in Transition after only 15 months, the wealth of skills and intellect held within them is, according to Hopkins, astounding.

Transition Initiatives strives for the process to be a positive experience for the communities involved, focused on the solutions to peak oil rather than the fear of it. "This isn't about saying 'you shouldn't have

a car, cars are evil'. It's about saying that this is a problem; it's not a choice, it's an inevitability; how are we all going to readapt to this really?" Transition does not believe in laying blame at anyone's door for what has happened in the past; it spends its energy focusing on solutions that will lead to a better future. "It's one of the things we've tried to really develop, the idea that you can go and watch a film about peak oil and leave feeling really good about it. The only thing that is going to get us through this is if we can generate a sense of where we want to go as something that is more enticing than where we are now."

Physical manifestations of the project are encouraged in order for the transition process to become truly embedded within the communities. Totnes, for example, decided to become the nut tree capital of Britain by planting species throughout the town. Perhaps even more thought provoking was the launch of the Totnes Pound. At a cost of 95p per Totnes Pound, residents are effectively given a subsidy to shop locally. The vast majority of people may be unaware of the principles of Local Multiplier 3, whereby the Totnes Pound helps measure how income entering an economy then circulates within it, but a manifestation such as this begins to introduce the issues of how to make the most of the money that a community does have so that it

remains a vibrant place to live, in a fun and exciting way. Perhaps more importantly though, the scheme gives the project a physical re-localisation tool linked directly into the most powerful symbol in our society.

Hopkins is a firm believer that the transition process has to be coupled with a move away from the current national economic model of continual growth and towards the development of local economies providing for local needs: "I think that inherent within the problem that is peak oil and climate change is the potential for the most extraordinary economic, social and cultural renaissance we've ever seen." Hopkins describes it as "a collective call to adventure that is so truly historic and exhilarating and rich that our lives would feel bereft if we didn't actually engage in it". When asked how he gauges success, he refers to "the amount of people who now think about peak oil and climate change with a sense of anticipation at the possibilities and potential of it all".

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### THE 12 STEPS TO TRANSITION

- 1) Set up a steering group and design its demise from the outset**  
A core team to drive the project forward during the initial phases.
- 2) Awareness raising**  
Build crucial networks and prepare the community in general.
- 3) Lay the foundations**  
Network with existing groups.
- 4) Organise the 'great unleashing'**  
Create a memorable milestone to mark the project's 'coming of age', moving the project into the community.
- 5) Form working groups**  
Set up smaller groups to focus on specific aspects of the process.
- 6) Use open space**  
An effective approach to running meetings for Transition Initiatives.
- 7) Develop visible, practical manifestations of the project**  
Create practical, high visibility manifestations in your community.
- 8) Facilitate the great re-skilling**  
Reverse the 'great deskilling' of the last 40 years by offering training in a range of skills.
- 9) Build a bridge to local government**  
Cultivate a positive and productive relationship with your local authority.
- 10) Honour the elders**  
Engage with those who remember the transition to cheap oil.
- 11) Let it go where it wants to go...**  
Act as a catalyst for the community to design its own transition.
- 12) Create an Energy Descent**  
**Action Plan**  
Combine the practical actions to form the Energy Descent Action Plan.

Go to [www.transitiontowns.org](http://www.transitiontowns.org) for more information on specific Transition Initiatives.

Rob Hopkins' website [www.transitionculture.org](http://www.transitionculture.org) also provides information on Transition, peak oil and climate change.

*The Transition Handbook* is out in February.

