

Key Points

Take Back the City: Sustainability

23rd April 2020

Online Webinar

Speakers:

Sean Kane - Build Homes Now! activist, formerly homeless for 16 years.

John Barry - Professor of Green Political Economy, Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action, Queens University Belfast.

Amanda Slevin - lecturer in social policy at Queens University (also Climate Action Network at the Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action).

Davie Phillip - Cultivate, Sustainable Ireland Cooperative / Cloughjordan Eco Village, Co. Tipperary

Peter Doran - Queens Law, International Institute for Sustainable Development (Mindfulness of the Commons)

Attendance:

46 participants



“It’s not a campaign, it’s our baby.” Sean Kane, Build Homes Now! activist and formerly homeless for 16 years

“We would need multiple earths to sustain the developed world’s lifestyle globally.” John Barry, Queens University

“We are prototyping changes for communities to respond resiliently to climate change.” Davie Phillip, Cloughjordan EcoVillage

Purpose:

The Take Back the City webinar series (four in total) aims to provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas on how to bring forward public housing across the City of Belfast. Our rapidly changing world means that there is now more than ever a need to ensure equity in access to housing which addresses at its core the key issues of climate change and sustainability (social, ecological and financial).

#BuildHomesNow will use the information gathered from these webinars to launch a public initiative aimed at crowdsourcing ideas on developing plans for the Mackie’s site which can act as an exemplar and model for other developments to learn from and build upon. This public initiative is being supported by the New York based Dunn Development Corporation and the Community Preservation Corporation in the summer of 2020.

Local Context:

‘Sustainability’ has at times been co-opted to mean economic benefit. An economic system which benefits a tiny minority both entrenches global north/south inequalities (with the global north responsible for the greater share of emissions while the south bears the most adverse consequences) and generates gross social and economic inequalities within individual societies like ours. Governments are failing on two fronts: missing global climate targets; and leaving children and adults in poverty at home.

As such, the Covid-19 crisis is a transformative moment. John Barry spoke of learning from the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity for radical change - to build pressure to ensure society does not go back to the way things were before, but instead adapts towards a more inclusive society. Across the globe, states have shown they can move quickly when they want to, not just at the behest of - or to facilitate - private markets. The crisis has demanded a more active state including reasserting the welfare state, and in the process demonstrating that austerity was a lie - an ideological choice as opposed to an economic necessity.

Indeed, states have shown they have the money to spend if they want to – it is simply a matter of political will and political priorities. The ‘money tree’ exists. The UK Government has found enormous sums of money to bail out businesses. The question we need to be asking is how the political impetus can be created for similar mobilisation of resources into sustainable action to address climate breakdown. We need not only to reclaim the welfare state and the social safety net as a guarantor of equality. We must design, explore and trial alternative models of production, distribution and ownership around the ‘commons’ which make it impossible for people to be excluded from common goods and services.

Key characteristics of the sustainability approaches discussed

Focus on need: activism needs to be concrete and focused on reducing current harm rather than ‘building a just society’ at some point in the future. We need to do away with the ‘after the revolution’ comfort blanket and focus on the here-and-now issues of pressing needs, vulnerability and injustice.

Co-operative approach: climate breakdown is a global challenge that will affect those with fewest resources the most. A co-operative approach must be about allowing different groups to organise their projects and get on with it themselves in a spirit of interdependence, mutual support and inclusivity. Those most affected must be provided with the space, resources and power to develop home-grown solutions.

Key examples and opportunities

Cloughjordan Ecovillage

[Cloughjordan](#) is a cooperative, community-led housing project launched in September 1999. The first builds started a decade later, and the initiative is part of a rich history of agricultural cooperatives and credit unions. [Cultivate](#) is a sustainable workers’ co-operative and part of the European network [Ecolise](#). Currently there are 57 homes, with planning permission for an additional 130.

Cloughjordan promotes a sustainable way to build housing - a change from Ireland’s current development model - with well-being and resilience embedded in the design: high performance houses; open spaces; green infrastructure; edible landscaping; sustainable urban drainage; and a renewable district heat and hot water system for all homes.

But it is also more than that. It is an ‘ecosystem innovation’ - an eco-neighbourhood driven by co-ops and groups, and a prototype for how to transition to a low carbon, resilient society.

- **Mobility:** built near local train station and a local bus link. A walkable neighbourhood which is not designed with the interests of private car owners in mind. There are car clubs/pools with electric car charging points.
- **Work:** a WeCreate co-working space; an enterprise centre; a ‘Fablab’ fabrication centre; a locally-produced food market; and a remote learning classroom. All of these have separate boards – lots of different organisations with different members.
- **Community:** an amphitheatre; a cooperative farm with Community Supported Agriculture and raw milk/egg clubs; a wood fired bakery; a car club; an eco-hostel;

regular community meals; allotments/community gardens; and a wholefood buyers' club.

The community was set up as a non-profit, educational charity with 40 members. The founding members identified the site and initially developed a 3-4 page business plan. This plan was turned down by the bank when they wanted to buy the land (for 1 million euros). To raise the necessary capital, the community managed to secure 500k euro through 'loan stocks' over a period of 4 months. These loan stocks consisted of one-year 5k euro loans from friends and family. On the back of these stocks, they were able to borrow the rest from an ethical bank (Community Finance Ireland). The community was then able to buy the land and get it re-zoned.

The scheme proceeded to a one-year consultation process on the architectural/perma-cultural design scheme. This breadth and depth of the consultation period was such that no-one objected to the development at planning stage. Once the land was zoned for development and had planning approval, it was worth 4.5m euro and the original bank that had knocked them back were happy to set up the build finance. Modern platforms should (theoretically) make such an initial crowd-sourcing fundraiser even easier.

The first phase of the development involved people joining the registered charity and buying the plot required for their house from it. Once this was completed they would build their own house to common design specifications. The approximate cost for joiners was €1500 per square metre (below the average cost in Ireland in at €2000). The second phase of building is in design stage now. Cloughjordan is exploring co-housing models - also including social/affordable homes (cooperative, shared mortgages/assets/resources) - involving mixed-in, senior housing, and homes for migrants and asylum seekers, as well as constructed wetland, tourism (Cloughjordan is on the longest waymarked trail in Ireland), and an education centre. Tipperary County Council are broadly supportive of the second phase to date.

Place-Based Climate Action Network

Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN) works locally, in 3 separate cities (Leeds, Edinburgh, Belfast), under two themes (economics and finance). The Belfast Climate Action Working Group is a collaborative, participatory initiative inclusive of broad civil society. It wants to develop a model for community climate action, bringing new voices to the climate action movement to try to influence policy makers at Belfast City Council and elsewhere. Its work includes building an evidence base for actions at community, city and state levels. It aims to be an impartial analyst of Belfast's carbon footprint and to support a decarbonisation pathway (Belfast needs to reduce carbon footprint by 10% each year over the next decade).

Co-housing projects

Two separate co-housing initiatives in Portaferry (20 units, for individual purchase) and Belfast are in progress, and hope to be up and running in next 5-10 years. Local groups have been working to influence Belfast City Council's policy on co-housing, proposing it as a solution for housing need amongst certain groups in the city. It still has to deal with competition from private developers for brownfield sites where new housing in the city is possible.

Key messages to take away

John Barry: There are hopeful signs from the Covid-19 response that indicate radical action to address the climate crisis is possible:

- states can act quickly and decisively when they want to;
- finance can be found;

- people are adaptable (e.g. social distancing) when they understand the need, as long as it is communicated via a clear simple message (e.g. ‘flatten the curve’);
- individual agency/social innovation thrives in response to crises;
- solidarity and collective self-help are alive and well, and the value of neglected vocational work (e.g. key workers) is appreciated more than, for example, hedge fund managers;
- science can have a powerful voice to guide government policy (if this is possible on health policy, why not on transport policy, etc?);
- once thought impossible policies (e.g. Universal Basic Income) are now seen as necessary;
- the short-term climate benefits of the Covid-19 lockdown (e.g. a drop in pollution) need to persist and be translated into deliberate planning for non-carbon based transport system.

On the planning process specifically, there is a need to shine a light on the developer/council/civil servant power nexus that blocks community initiatives and entrenches profit-driven development that ultimately leaves people homeless. Elected councillors need access to alternative legal expertise in order to challenge unelected officials who tell them they cannot challenge big developers without risking lawsuits.

Amanda Slevin: We are in the midst of an unprecedented opportunity for change now, and to be successful we must bring everyone along. This comes with significant challenges. For example, in Belfast this is must be carefully articulated – ‘community’ is a loaded term given our differences in religion/class/conflict legacy etc. The safety net is for everyone regardless of difference – climate breakdown affects us all and we need an inclusive and egalitarian vision to unite communities committed to climate action.

Peter Doran: The location of the Mackie’s site on a peaceline provides an opportunity for framing any such development in terms of resilience, regeneration and climate action. Such framing can bring in more support using alternative visions, for example ‘the commons’, as a new approach for these times – to address local development issues and state-wide policies. People here don’t have a tradition of taking policy risks, so it helps that there are precedents elsewhere that need to be drawn on, learned from and developed.

Davie Phillips: Cloughjordan’s founding members started out with no expertise. It is a group of groups - different efforts all pushing in the same direction but independent and open. You do not need all of the answers to start acting and draw on resources of groups like Self Organised Architecture, community land, and cohousing initiatives. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals have a lot of waffle, but goal 11 (Cities and Communities) and its targets can be useful leverage for pushing state authorities to take positive steps, such as getting co-housing recognised.