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

Purpose:
Take Back The City webinar series (four in total) aims 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 Mackies 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, entrenches global north/south inequalities (with the global north responsible for the greatest 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 2 fronts: missing global climate targets plus 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.

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

Indeed, states have shown they have money they can spend if they want to – it is simply a
matter of political will and political priorities. The ‘money tree’ exists. 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 to not only 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 precludes the
exclusion of individuals 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 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 – interdependence, mutual
support but an open tent. Those most affected must be provided with the space, resource
and power to develop home-grown solutions.

Key examples and opportunities

Cloughjordan Ecovillage

Cloughjordan is a cooperative community-led housing 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 design (high performance
houses, open spaces, green infrastructure, edible landscaping, sustainable urban drainage,
renewable district heat and hot water system for all homes). But it is also more than that, an
‘ecosystem innovation’, an eco-neighbourhood driven by co-ops and groups – a prototype
for how to transition to a low carbon, resilient society:

- **Mobility**: built near local train station and a local bus link. 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**: WeCreate co-working space, enterprise centre, ‘Fablab’ fabrication centre,
  locally-produced food market, remote learning classroom. All of these have separate
  boards – lots of different organisations with different members
- **Community**: amphitheatre, cooperative farm with Community Supported Agriculture
  and raw milk/egg clubs, wood fired bakery, car club, eco-hostel, regular community
  meals, allotments/community gardens, 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.

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

The scheme proceeded to a one year consultation process on the architectural/permacultural 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. Approximate costs for joiners was 1.5k euros per square metre (below the average cost in Ireland in at 2k euros). 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, homes for migrants and asylum seekers as well as constructed wetland, tourism (on 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 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 on Portaferry (20 units, for individual purchase) and Belfast are in progress and hopefully will be up and running in next 5-10 years. Local groups have been working to influence Belfast City Council’s policy on co-housing, arguing opening it up 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. To achieve this effective communication is needed with a clear simple message (e.g. ‘flatten the curve’)
individual agency/social innovation thrives in response to crises
solidarity and collective self-help is alive and well. The value of neglected vocational work (e.g. key workers) is appreciated more that, 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 etc. policy? 8)
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. drop in pollution) need to be 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, entrenches profit-driven development that ultimately leaves people homeless. Elected councillors need alternative legal expertise available so that they can 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 Mackies 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 trusts 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.