

Application Form submitted by the initiatives to participate in the Transformative Cities People's Choice Award

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Location:	Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary, Ireland
Title of the Transformative Initiative:	Cloughjordan ecovillage
Name of organization:	Sustainable Projects Ireland CLG (SPI), the company set up in 1999 to establish and manage Cloughjordan ecovillage
Type of organization:	SPI is a registered company and an educational charity. All ecovillage residents are required to be members; decisions are made by members and by consensus.
Website:	www.thevillage.ie
Category and Edition:	HOUSING. Transformative Cities Award 3er edition (2020).
STORYTELLING	
Summary	
<p>Cloughjordan ecovillage models the transition to a low-carbon society and shares the lessons through educational activities. With 55 low-carbon homes, Ireland's lowest ecological footprint, a carbon-neutral district heating system, a community farm, green enterprise centre, and a planned reed bed treatment plant, the ecovillage models ecological, economic and social sustainability.</p>	
Context and problem definition	
<p>The project emerged 20 years ago from a group of pioneers concerned at how unaware the public were about climate change impacts and the need to build sustainability. They wanted to show what could be done by developing Ireland's first ecovillage. The project primarily addressed national and global concerns at a local level and the ecovillage also seeks to model economic sustainability and show how this can contribute to social regeneration, especially in rural areas.</p>	

The main resource was the group of people who had come together in Dublin in an organic food co-op, some of whom were examining the feasibility of a co-operative housing project in the capital. This provided a group with common values and objectives cohesive enough to begin planning the more ambitious ecovillage project.

It addresses the whole of humanity and the urgent need to provide living models (sometimes called 'living labs') of how we can transition to a low-carbon society. Once the decision was made to buy land adjacent to Cloughjordan, the project could focus on how to integrate into a village in decline with a population of around 500 people.

People from a range of social classes and backgrounds participate in ecovillage activities.

Design and Implementation

Initiated by a group of activists in the mid 1990s, the first task was to build a critical mass of membership. An educational charity was established to manage the project and a board of directors carefully chosen with the skills required, including a journalist, an architect, an engineer, a builder, and experts in sustainability and in co-operatives. Different projects, both in Ireland and the UK were visited. Contact was made through the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) with other ecovillages such as Findhorn. Permaculture designer Marcus McCabe was brought in to initiate a participatory design process and a group of environmental architects, Solearth, facilitated design workshops. Between 20 and 35 people were initially involved and the participative planning methodologies helped them develop their ideas about the project.

An advertisement was put in Ireland's leading farmers' newspaper seeking suitable sites; out of this, eight different sites around Ireland were identified. Choosing Cloughjordan was influenced by the fact that local community leaders saw that the project could help reverse its economic and social decline. A participatory process lasting more than a year was then initiated with the community, working with children and adults in the two primary schools who created models of the ecovillage. This helped develop relationships between members of the project and local residents and laid the foundations for a smooth transition to the development of the ecovillage which began in the mid 2000s.

Resources were mobilised through members' fees and loans, and a loan by an ethical investor. When the site at Cloughjordan was bought in 2002-03, a deposit of €15,000 was required from members before buying a site to build on. Initially, there were deposits on all 132 sites but many members lacked finance to build and left the project. Eventually, 55 houses were built by 2013 but 25 site owners were not able to build, and 47 sites remain for sale. The 2008 recession put an end to site sales, eroding the company's financial basis and

forcing it to cut costs drastically to survive. This slowed the company's ability to meet the planning conditions of Tipperary County Council which was necessary before permission to build more houses could be lodged. Plans for a reed bed treatment plant were being finalised in 2020 as the final step before moving into a new development phase which would see between 30 and 40 units built, including social and affordable housing.

Results achieved and Evaluation

The principal result is the existence of a community that illustrates the potential to live a low-carbon lifestyle while developing livelihoods and a vibrant social and cultural life in rural Ireland.

The most relevant impact is the learning provided by the educational courses and tours in the ecovillage. Over 1,600 attended these events in 2019 in addition to hundreds of people who came to a range of festivals such as a permaculture festival in August and an apple festival in September. Universities in Ireland and in the US bring students on study visits as part of their academic courses, allowing for immersive learning experiences. The impacts are measured through systematic gathering of feedback, and through keeping a record of all those who have visited. The ecovillage is also a place where students and academics from Ireland and overseas undertake research on aspects of low-carbon living. A database of academic papers published on the ecovillage is maintained on the project website (www.thevillage.ie/research/research-database).

In 2014 an outside expert measured the average ecovillager's Ecological Footprint at 2 global Hectares (gHa). This compares with 4.8 gHa for the average Irish person, as measured by the Global Footprint Network.

A vibrant cluster of new businesses includes an eco-hostel with 34 beds and a national award-winning wood-fired bakery and bakery school within the ecovillage and, on the main street, a book and coffee shop and also a community café using the produce of the farm and the bakery. An ecovillage company provides internet and telephone services. National organisations headquartered in the ecovillage include the educational NGO Cultivate and the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability, FEASTA. Consultancies include event management, low-energy and sustainable building techniques, and renewable energy. A Green enterprise centre in the ecovillage contains Ireland's only community-based Fabrication Laboratory (FabLab).

Political Strategies

The first step was to establish a company, Sustainable Projects Ireland (SPI) in 1999 with responsibility for building and managing the ecovillage. All residents are members and contribute at least 100 hours voluntary labour annually. The company is a not-for-profit cooperative with decisions made by members at monthly meetings. The company also is an educational charity. These strategies established the project's governance structure based on its values and ethos.

In 2002, 67 acres of land were bought behind the main street in Cloughjordan and outline planning permission received from North Tipperary County Council. Finances were raised from members, from an ethical investor and by borrowing, and the infrastructure installed in 2007-08. The first houses were built in 2009; by 2013, 55 houses had been built. A district heating system was installed heating all homes in a carbon-neutral way and a green enterprise centre was built in 2011. Cloughjordan Community Farm was established in 2008 as a community supported agriculture farm developing a resilient food system.

These strategies successfully initiated the ecovillage and its constituent elements. A range of people with relevant skills in project management, architecture, energy and planning contributed their services at no cost. Officials in the county council were supportive while also having to implement national regulations. One example that has held up the project concerns public lighting which has not yet been installed despite pressure from the council. The national water utility, Irish Water, in 2017 required installing a reed bed treatment plant to treat sewage, despite plans for this having been refused permission at the initial phase of the project.

Local and national politicians have been supportive and the President of Ireland has visited the ecovillage on two occasions. A joint parliamentary committee examining the issue of climate change visited in 2018.

Communication and Cultural Strategies

Cloughjordan Ecovillage has an active communications strategy to raise public awareness about the project, to publicise events and to invite groups to visit and become members. Its website (www.thevillage.ie) is updated regularly, and a newsletter is sent out three times a year to a list of over 2,000 people, and has a number of videos have been produced about

aspects of the project. A three-minute video 'A Day in the Ecovillage' was made in 2013 to show at the International Awards for Liveable Communities (LivCom) in Xiamen, China. The ecovillage had been entered for this award by Tipperary County Council and it won a gold medal. Since the ecovillage began, guided tours are offered every Saturday and Sunday afternoons throughout the year. When Covid-19 required that we temporarily discontinue them, we produced a virtual tour which is available on our website.

The ecovillage has been regularly featured in newspaper articles and radio and television shows (see database on website). Readers of The Irish Times have voted Cloughjordan one of the ten best places to live in Ireland. Key national environmental programmes such as EcoEye regularly visit the project and Nationwide, Irish state television's flagship programme profiling local projects has devoted a whole programme to it. It has also featured in international films (see 'The Path of Ecovillages' documentary on the website). One member, Bruce Darrell, hosts his own YouTube channel documenting his RED Gardens project in the ecovillage (<https://youtu.be/AvpJPEp5Uks>). A number of book chapters have been written on the ecovillage and the farm has produced its own Cloughjordan Community Farm Recipe Book. A four-page case study of the ecovillage is published in the textbook for the module Politics and Society, part of the curriculum for Irish secondary schools. Active Facebook and Twitter accounts keep followers informed of activities.

Resources, Financing and Transformative Economy

Cloughjordan Ecovillage is recognised as a unique project modelling not only ecological sustainability but also economic resilience. Unlike most ecovillages, it has chosen to integrate into an existing settlement to which it has contributed significant economic, social and cultural renewal and vibrancy. Through its membership-based community farm, and knock-on projects like the Middle Country Café on the main street using produce from the farm, or the Cloughjordan Community Amphitheatre providing a venue for festivals, concerts and plays, it is demonstrating the viability of localised production, exchange and consumption. Its Viable Systems governance model (VSM) demonstrates an alternative to traditional hierarchical forms of governance, facilitating grassroots creativity while combining it with accountability to the ecovillage community. The uniqueness of the rich synergies that have been developed was recognised in it being identified as one of the 23 most successful 'anticipatory experiences' of the transition to a low-carbon society of the 1,700 examined in Europe by the Milesecure research network for the European Commission.

Given its innovative nature, Cloughjordan Ecovillage has been a pioneer in its field. It has drawn on local skills and capacities for the building and development of the project, supplemented by financial resources (such as the EU Serve funding received for the district

heating system). More recently, it has got LEADER funding for a feasibility study that aims to further develop the capacity of the whole village of Cloughjordan as a destination for learning, for heritage and for the arts. The ecovillage is working with the Sustainable Energy Agency of Ireland (SEAI) developing an energy plan for the whole village that envisages it becoming a model low-energy community. Through its membership of the Irish Environmental Network, the ecovillage collaborates in policy-oriented discussions and activities. Ecovillage members are actively involved in European networks ARC2020 and ECOLISE.

Related legislations

The project has received a range of supports from public bodies. North Tipperary County Council designated the lands bought by the project for sustainable development, the first time such a designation was given by a local authority in Ireland. The Council has also designated the field contiguous to the ecovillage for sustainable development, providing opportunity for further expansion if needed. The building of the district heating system was supported by a Concerto grant from the European Union under the SERVE project. This also funding the retrofitting of houses in the district to make them energy efficient. However, on other matters policy has not assisted the project's development. The local council did not sanction social housing in the original plans and plans for a reed bed treatment plant were refused. Both of these now form part of the new development plans, with council approval. While no direct influence on public policy can be identified, political and policy leaders are showing an interest. Michael D. Higgins, the President of Ireland, has visited twice and the joint parliamentary committee on climate action has visited to learn the lessons for public policy. The advisory board of the Environmental Protection Agency also visited in 2019.

Ecological Transitions

Key principles and energy standards are contained in the ecovillage's Ecological Charter that include prioritising natural and local materials, that prohibits the use of toxic materials or those produced with low-cost labour, and that requires using as environmentally friendly materials as possible throughout the ecovillage. The community develops its land using permaculture principles and it has planted a wild forest area of 17,000 native varieties of trees as an aid to biodiversity.

The Cloughjordan Community Farm which feeds over 100 people throughout the year works to enrich the soil through biodynamic methods. This includes crop rotations, fields set aside to grow green manures (food for the soil), diverse crop species, on-farm seed saving and compost making. It was awarded a grant in 2020 by Patagonia to develop a syntrophic agro-forestry project, growing agro-forestry strips to provide shelter to crops growing between them giving protection from adverse weather conditions due to climate change. Over 2,000 trees will be planted and they will provide more food for pollinating insects. In these ways, the ecovillage fosters biological diversity and contains a biodiversity walk. A polytunnel and cabin are being prepared for social farming, bringing groups with disabilities for farm experiences.

Lessons learned

- **Importance of governance structures:** need to move away from hierarchical to more flat structures that allow for maximum bottom-up creativity while ensuring accountability to members. Such structures also need to be flexible and to evolve as the project develops and in response to challenges.
- **Pay close attention to building community:** while building our ecovillage has required incorporating new technologies and ecological building techniques, we have learnt that building a resilient community is the greatest challenge. This approximates to the growth phases of any individual's life as early idealism meets severe challenges of implementation and moving through difficult times. Our project has developed processes and groups to address these challenges in flexible and creative ways as they have arisen, and to foster skills of conflict-resolution, facilitation, mediation and community-building.
- **Understanding the multi-faceted nature of sustainability:** as we developed, we came to realise that achieving a low ecological footprint is not sufficient and that sustainability must also ensure economic, social and cultural needs are being satisfied. Fostering small local enterprises, rich social interactions and a vibrant cultural life have become features of our ecovillage and the ways it interacts with the wider village community, lessons learnt from the co-operative movement. Co-operative enterprises such as the Middle Country café and Cloughjordan Community Arts, and private business such as the award-winning RiotRye bakery and bake school, Django's ecohostel, and Sheelagh na Gig book and coffee shop are examples of our eco-system of innovation.

Sharing these core lessons is central to our educational activities. As we move into a new development phase, ideas for new businesses are being actively pursued, such as modular wooden building, the production and commercialisation of different foodstuffs from the farm (apple juice is already being produced and sold), and professionalising our education, with a part-time administrator already employed.

Conclusion

What surprises many visitors to the ecovillage is the multifaceted nature of the project and it is this aspect that we are most proud of. Despite many challenges to build out the ecovillage and the impacts on our project of events beyond our control, the community has shown a remarkable creativity which has helped build resilience. The project has been through difficult periods which have taught us ways of respectful listening and giving voice to those disaffected. There is a constant challenge to maintain momentum, but the original vision continues to find expression in the most imaginative ways.

EXTRA INFO

Supporting documents

Forthcoming chapter in Robbins, D., Torney, D., and Brereton, P. (eds): *Ireland and the Climate Crisis*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, in press. Chapter 16: 'Cloughjordan Ecovillage: Community-led transitioning to a low-carbon future'.

Covid-19 outbreak impact

Covid-19 closed down our educational work and guided tours overnight, as well as disrupting our community meetings. We quickly graduated to Zoom for internal community meetings. However, work continued in a socially distanced way on our community farm and in Riot Rye bakery in the ecovillage so that production continued normally. With our programme of guided tours every weekend discontinued for the first time since the project began, we filmed a half-hour virtual tour of the ecovillage which is available on our website and was sent out in our May newsletter.

The pandemic motivated us to develop new ways of offering our educational programme through developing a series of what we call Deep Listening webinars. The first of these was offered in mid-June in a conversation with Professor Michael Cronin who recently published a book on the Irish language and ecology, written in both English and Irish. This bilingual webinar proved very popular with over 100 participants registered and has provided a template on which further sessions can be developed. We are also filming a short promotional video promoting tailored webinars for university and school groups. In these ways, the ecovillage is drawing a wider participation in its educational activities.