

The Hollies Sustainable Village

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(this article was published in Building for a Future Magazine in 2001. It gives what is hopefully a useful insight into the work and thinking that goes into the earlier stages of an ecovillage development. *To update, the appeal was refused, and then 16 months later (if you're in a hurry, don't do an ecovillage project!) planning was approved for a first phase of the development, 4 houses and a Study Centre. It set a precedent as the first application in Ireland approved planning on grounds of its sustainability. For more recent developments, visit [The Hollies' website](#).)*

Every time I hear a politician talking about 'rural regeneration' I wonder what they mean. Usually it boils down to more farm subsidies, tourism or forestry. It is my passionate belief that land needs people and people need land. A society which excludes people from land is an unhealthy society, and people who have no contact with the land and its cycles are more likely to be unhealthy. Current policies result in larger and larger farms, less and less rural employment, and a countryside pickled in aspic or cowering beneath the onslaught of intensive farming. There has to be another way, and it is this way that we are exploring with The Hollies Sustainable Village.

Our vision for The Hollies is of a village of 16 energy efficient houses built of mostly local and natural materials, laid out in clusters. Sewage will be treated using reed beds and most of the energy will be from renewable sources. There will be a Study Centre, offering accommodation and a venue for courses and training opportunities in a wide range of green living skills, natural building, green business development and much more. There will be a Visitors' Centre, combining a café and a retail outlet for the wide range of things grown or produced at The Hollies. This will be surrounded by demonstration gardens and aquaculture ponds. The remaining land will be developed as a combination of agroforestry, coppice woodlands, forest gardens and intensive vegetable gardens. One of the main aims is to create as many livelihoods as possible, through good design. Among the potential businesses for an eco-village such as The Hollies are a green building company, a community supported agriculture scheme, an organic brewery, a publishing company, a tree nursery, and many many more (we did a list once, and it was a very long list...). We want to be able to demonstrate how a farm which conventionally can barely support one family can support 16 in great abundance.

That's the vision. Many people have visions similar to this. But how do you turn it into a reality? In this article I will set out the various steps we have taken towards achieving this, as well as any lessons we may have learnt along the way that might be helpful to others trying to do the same thing.

Laying the Foundations (January 1997 - November 1998)

From the outset we spent a lot of time looking at the different eco-village projects that had gone before us, ones that had worked and ones that hadn't, trying to draw out the

lessons that would lessen the chances of our project being unsuccessful. There were four main things that emerged from this. The first was the importance of being professional and business-like. Any project like this is a business. We had to learn many skills in the areas of business planning, spreadsheets and marketing, as well as the practicalities of running a company. We set up a limited company, Baile Dúlra Teoranta (meaning ‘the place of nature’ in Irish), in 1997, the first such project to be granted charitable status in Ireland. Baile Dúlra was set up with its stated objective being;

“to create and manage a model ecological village (“eco-village”) which will serve as an educational, research and service resource for West Cork and beyond. It will seek to demonstrate an economically and ecologically viable way forward to the twenty-first century, as well as promoting its work and findings through a variety of media”.

Our second observation was that most of the projects which had been successful had started small, keeping the working group small until the project was up and running and then other people join in. The “who wants to help set up an eco-village” approach seems more often than not to lead to a large group meeting each other to death, before eventually dissolving acrimoniously. We basically did most of the groundwork with a group of 2-3 people, and only people with specific skills were involved. This kept the group very focused and light. We also set up an Advisory Panel of the leading people in various ecological fields in Ireland which proved to be a very useful resource.

Thirdly, we felt that another component of success is that a project has a good mainstream appeal, that is it doesn’t isolate itself in a green ideological ghetto. People are frightened of things that are too ‘alternative’, but once people feel comfortable and safe with the ideas of green living they usually find them hugely exciting. The Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales is a good example of this. We felt we wanted to create something which, like CAT, appealed to the broader society in a way that they felt inspired by rather than threatened or judged by. As a part of this, we also felt it important to work from where people are at at the moment, rather than where they should be. People who are buying plots/houses want security but also to be able to sell and recoup their investment easily if they decide to move on. People who are renting want to be able to have accommodation in which they can feel settled and secure. Although more complicated structures have their merits, we felt it important to be as familiar to people as possible. Also in Irish law freehold is sacrosanct and anything else is very difficult to do.

Lastly we felt it important to be as transparent and open as possible, as well as being clear about what it is we’re doing. We wrote a brochure called ‘An Introduction to Baile Dúlra’ which set out the whole vision and how we saw it being implemented on the ground. This was sent to our local politicians, heads of various local grant bodies and various other local notables, and followed up with meetings. The contacts we made with people at this stage have proved to be invaluable as the project has progressed. We also sold copies to people who were interested in the project, indeed selling brochures was our only income for a while.

We also sent a copy to the then Chief Planning Officer at Cork County Council. A fortnight later we met with him to discuss the Council's perspective on such a development. He said that the Council was 'interested and supportive' and indicated certain areas of the county where such a development would not be acceptable (i.e. coastal areas or immediately adjoining major towns). He set out how the Council might approach such an application, using developers bonds to ensure the completion of the infrastructure and planning conditions to ensure its sustainability into the future. It was a very positive meeting and gave us all the indications we could have hoped for.

Also, during this period, we looked at funding the project, and realised fairly quickly that just because we were a charity didn't mean people were going to flood us with money. Our first fundraising newsletter raised about £70, the second £100. Barely paid for the printing! At this point in time, eco-villages are not top of peoples' lists of charities they want to donate to. We realised that the project had to be self financing, and stand on its own feet as a business. We began to canvas everyone who had been interested in the project from the beginning and see who would actually put their money where their mouths were and invest some money if we found a suitable site. This, together the personal investments of the two families involved at this stage, meant that we could now begin, fairly confidently, looking for sites.

The Site and the Site Design (December 1998 - September 1999)

After looking at a number of potential sites, we found The Hollies, a 56 acre farm which was ideal for eco-village development. It was mostly south/south-west facing, had good road frontage, a stream, woods, an existing dwelling, pretty much everything we had been looking for. And it was a breathtakingly beautiful place. We were successful in purchasing it at auction (one of the most nerve-wrecking days of my life!) and were able to pull together the necessary finances to pay for it. We then set up a design team, consisting of myself, the overall Permaculture designer, Anthony Cohu, a local ecological architect, and John Dolan, a local reed bed engineer. Over a period of a few months we pulled together the site design and all the information necessary for a planning application. We also raised a mortgage from the Triodos Bank to fund the process of seeking planning permission and the expenses incurred.

We started out by having a contour survey done of the site by a local surveyor. We also spent a lot of time on the land getting to know every part of it, its micro-climates and its different aspects. We identified all the south or mostly south-facing land and also had to take access into consideration. We tried to create clusters which gave a sense of living in a village, but which also gave privacy and varying sizes of land around each house. We also tried to keep access roads as much as possible within existing tracks and left all areas of scrub/emergent woodland intact.

The design we created aimed to give wilderness it's place and to enhance and preserve biodiversity. It also aimed to maximise the levels of tree cover, using productive species in plantings designed to achieve as many functions as possible, i.e., windbreaks, fruit, nuts, timber, water purification etc. We also designed the centre of the site to be car free,

a mixture of public open space, woodlands, a stone circle, 'village greens' and wild areas. We tried to create a water network where water leaves the site cleaner than it was when it entered and it has been through a wide diversity of productive processes, i.e. reed beds, aquaculture ponds, willow beds, swimming places and so on. In most of the clusters we designed car access so that cars are left in a communal car park near the houses and people have pedestrian access from there.

We tried to create a design overview that gave the planners sufficient clarity as to the final appearance and layout but left sufficient flexibility for future residents to be involved in the design of particular areas.

The final 'product', "Site Design Report for The Hollies Sustainable Village", an 80 page report, was designed so as to provide the planners with all the information they needed when making their decision. It was designed to look very professional and clear, containing many maps and plans. It was set printed in an A3 format, so that it could never disappear into a planning department in-tray, whenever we rang the Council and they said 'I can't see your report' we could just say, 'it's that great big thing sticking out of your in-tray'. It was a trick we learnt from Max Lindeggar of Crystal Waters Permaculture Village in Australia. Everything that we prepared was based on pre-planning discussions with our then-planning officer at the Council. Now all we had to do was submit it...

The Planning Process (July 1999 - present)

On July 13th we submitted our planning application to Cork County Council. The wording on the site notice (as worded by our area planner) applied for "site development works for 16 houses, Visitors' Centre, 12 accommodation units, and ancillary works to include aquaculture ponds, demonstration gardens, car parking, reed bed waste water treatment plants - also demolition of dwelling porch and renovation of existing dwelling , change of use of outbuilding to Study Centre and conservatory extension to same outbuilding, Retention of existing dwelling for temporary use". Quite a mouthful! We went around all our immediate neighbours to tell them about the plans, and held a public meeting in the local village. Reactions were mixed, some people being very favourable, saying 'this is just what the area needs', while some others were very opposed to it, basically through fear of the unknown.

Two objections were lodged, both from immediate neighbours. We read through their objections and responded to them, answering all of their concerns one by one. We had a fair bit of media coverage at this point, with favourable articles in most of the local papers.

Then on September 13th we had a letter from Cork County Council, deferring our application and wanting further information. The letter stated that the Council were not minded to approve the whole development and wanted to see it phased. We arranged a meeting with them to discuss the issues raised in their letter. By this point our area planner and the Senior Planner had changed and we were working with new people.

The new senior planner stated that he wanted us to apply for a first phase of 3 houses. We said we could only apply for 3 houses if we knew that subsequent phases would definitely be approved. We had to have 16 sites to make the thing financially viable, as we had no Government nor philanthropic backing. This was not a sustainable argument, he said, as many developers argued that they needed certain large permissions to make a development viable. His bottom line was that to approve the application would require a 'material contravention', that is permission from the Councillors to go against policy set out in the County Plan. Although it seemed to us by our reading of County policy that everything we were doing complied with it, we didn't have the plan with us in the meeting to refer to. We left the meeting feeling despondent, and that the Senior Planner would block the project whatever we did.

After a break of a few days we were back at work, going through the County Plan with a fine toothcomb, finding such gems as "the majority of rural areas in the County are ... some distance from significant towns or major tourist areas, with fairly low housing densities and not subject to serious development pressures. A more liberal policy can be followed in such areas without undue risk" (emphasis added). It also stated that "in (lower density rural areas) more remote and lower density areas that rural services are under threat ... where additional population could be positively beneficial". The County Plan promoted rural enterprise creation, teleworking, and "the best sustainable use of the area's assets to reverse declining employment and static population in West Cork". We put together a document called 'The Case for The Hollies Development in terms of Local and National policy', which pulled together quotes from the County Plan and other Cork County Council policy documents with policy from National Government documents, which very clearly state that sustainable development is now at the foundation of Government policy on rural development, energy, agriculture and national development.

We also prepared a document which outlined all of our dealings with the Council to that date, every letter, every meeting, every phone call. The reason for this was to make the point that the Council had been very positive and favourable up to the point of the most recent meeting and that that meeting should be seen in the context of a longer positive working relationship, and that at no point had any indication been given prior to that meeting that the proposal was contrary to Council policy.

We also redesigned the road network to take traffic away from the quiet back lane and moved a couple of the plots to make the clusters more defined. We were determined not to compromise the vision of the project. We felt it represented an excellent, well planned and researched development which would bring great benefits to the area. We therefore responded to the deferral, on December 2nd, saying that we were unwilling to scale it down to an application for 3 houses, and that we felt the accompanying documents argued the case strongly for a full approval.

So Where to Now?

On February 3rd we heard from Cork County Council that they had refused the application in its entirety. A blanket refusal. The reasons they gave were as follows;

1. The proposed development would be contrary to the objectives of the Planning Authority, as expressed in the County Development Plan, of encouraging the siting of new housing developments in urban areas and discouraging scattered housing development.
2. The site of the proposed development is situated in a primarily agricultural area and the objective of the Planning Authority is to preserve such land for the future development of agriculture. The proposed development would be in conflict with this objective.
3. The proposed development, in conjunction with existing and permitted development in the vicinity, would constitute an excessive density of development in a rural area where there are no public water supply or sewerage facilities and where the public road network is inadequate and the intensification of such a pattern would eventually lead to demands for the uneconomic extension of public facilities to the area.
4. The proposed development could create a precedent for housing developments consisting of a substantial number of houses on open countryside at a distance from established settlements, and so promote an unsustainable pattern of development.”

We immediately set to work on our appeal, on which we spent 3 weeks, and which effectively demolishes the above arguments. Are they really describing The Hollies application with its clustered housing as ‘scattered’ development? Are they seriously saying that all housing needed in rural areas should be built in urban areas? If so that clearly isn’t borne out by the planning permissions being granted in the surrounding area. Do they claim some insight into what ‘the future development of agriculture’ might entail? Even their own policies promote agricultural diversification and diversification of businesses on farms.

Are they seriously arguing that our wells and reed beds will fail? If so why do they allow them elsewhere? And to describe our application as ‘an unsustainable pattern of development’ is proof, if any were still needed, that the Council have no understanding of what sustainability means in practice, and this has produced a situation where they have no means of distinguishing between a sustainable development and an unsustainable one.

What it seemed to boil down to is that the Council was frightened of creating a precedent. Our application is consistent with European best practice on sustainability, it is employment generating, training providing, biodiversity enhancing, energy conserving and generating, community building and ground breaking. It has been advised by some of the country’s leading experts on sustainable development, and it will do much research into materials and practices necessary for the wider move towards sustainability. Surely, at this point in our history, that is the kind of precedent we should be setting?

(The result of our appeal to An Bord Pleanala is due at the end of August).

Source:

<http://www.transitionculture.org>

