

EcCoWell Community Recovery Program

Cork Learning City Report

Denis Barrett and Willie McAuliffe, City of Cork

The Cork Learning City has been a pioneer in EcCoWell learning city development and in 2017 hosted the UNESCO Third International Conference on Learning Cities with the Cork Call for Action on Learning Cities, resulting from the Conference, reflecting EcCoWell principles of integrated and holistic development. Cork has also innovated in experimenting with learning neighbourhood development across the city. The Cork report addresses the theme of strengthening community bonds and citizenship in learning neighbourhoods and addressing exclusion, including ways of keeping older people socially engaged. A second theme in the report is finding ways to promote digital learning for all age groups.

Rethinking learning city and learning community responses to ‘a world of fast moving radical change’, in the context of Cork city we reflect on what Peter Kearns states in Rethinking Sustainable Learning Communities for Extraordinary Times¹:

While the effects of the coronavirus pandemic means that we need to rethink our world in all dimensions, (the) UNESCO call for action on knowledge, education, and learning is a good starting point as key aspects of building a sustainable world.

In the context of Cork city:

1. What can be learned from 2020?
2. What do we as a city community need to learn now?

This report is based on the perspectives of the authors, drawing on learning from a range of their roles in the city of Cork, and is not presented on behalf of any organisation that they are members of, or that they represent.

The reflections contained in this report include the following observations:

1. A framework for an integrated holistic response for sustainable development at community level that was established in Cork during 2020 as a means to co-ordinate a ground up response to the needs of vulnerable people during Covid-19 can be the basis for ongoing ground up flexible responses to other community needs.
2. The inter-agency cross sectoral approach that was applied during 2020 to respond to issues faced by citizens caused or exacerbated by Covid-19 can be a basis for an ongoing sustainable response to the ‘wicked problems’ faced by the city.

The context for Inter-agency, holistic, sustainable city development in Cork

Integrated holistic city development is a strong and consistent feature of practice in Cork city over many years. Initiatives such as RAPID, and Cork City Development Board Report Imagine Our Future 2002-2012, and Pure Cork the Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2021 are examples of this approach.

¹ Kearns, P. Rethinking Sustainable Learning Communities for Extraordinary Times, PASCAL EcCoWell 2 BP1 2020.

The leadership group who formed EcCoWell Cork in 2012 were working in the context of a strong inter-agency culture and building on city-wide structures in keeping with Govt. Policy at that time. The story of the development of EcCoWell Cork is captured in the 2016 EcCoWell Cork paper².

As Peter Kearns' paper BP1 states: 'The city of Cork became the international leader in EcCoWell development with its status as a leading innovative learning city confirmed when Cork was invited by UNESCO to host the Third UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities in 2017'.

The EcCoWell Cork leadership group was comprised of key link persons working with a number of city-wide Networks, including the Lifelong Learning Festival, Cork Healthy Cities, Cork Environmental Forum, Cork Community Education Networks, Cork City Council Strategic Planning and Economic Development, Cork Opera House and Cork Learning City. The role played by strong networks in applying EcCoWell principles and in implementing integrated holistic city wide development is outlined in the paper.

This leadership group of middle ranking representatives of mostly statutory agencies, developed a range of events and initiatives that tested and applied the EcCoWell principles, with the support of the Chief Executives of their various statutory organisations – Cork City Council, Cork Education and Training Board, Cork Institute of Technology, and the Health Service Executive.

Cork city response to Sustainable Development Goals and UNESCO Cork Call to Action

The 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals supported by Governments worldwide have framed the approach in Cork to deliver integrated sustainable development for the city since then.

This approach to the indivisible SDGs is at the core of the outcome document of the 3rd UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities whose theme was *Global Goals – Local Actions*. This UNESCO report 'Learning Cities and the SDGs'³ includes the Cork Call to Action and it explores how Learning Cities can implement the SDGs by using the three policy pillars below.

The policy pillars built into the Cork Call for Action "to build mindful learning cultures in our cities that foster global consciousness and citizenship through local action to implement the SDGs" (UIL 2017) have been the focus for learning city development since 2017. They include a call to develop Learning Cities that are:

- Active and Inclusive;
- Green and Healthy;

and that support

- Decent Work and Entrepreneurship.

Cork has taken these themes to advance the approach for integrated holistic development across all initiatives since 2017.

The Global pandemic of 2020 brought new challenges, and new opportunities for the city's inter-agency, cross-sectoral and holistic approach to be applied to a co-ordinated community response to Covid-19.

The Community Response to Covid-19 in Cork

On March 27th 2020, following the announcement by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar of a nationwide lockdown in response to rising Covid-19 cases, Cork City Council convened a meeting of an Inter Agency Group to consider formulating a strategy to respond to Covid-19 following a request from the Minister for Planning and Local Government. The main purpose of the meeting was to review one of the action areas identified under Action 4 of the National Action Plan which '*is to mobilise community coordination to collaborate in meeting the social care and other needs of 'at risk' and vulnerable groups*' in light of the new restrictions announced by an Taoiseach, where the Govt., local authorities with community and voluntary groups and other public sector workers and the public are identified as key organisations. The meeting also sought a means to identify current services available and existing local initiatives being developed to respond to COVID-19 which will assist more vulnerable people at a community level. In Cork the

² Barrett, D. & Neylon, T. How Cork applied the EcCoWell approach to developing holistically as a learning city. Cork Learning City 2016

³ Learning Cities and the SDGs, UNESCO, UIL 2017

Learning City Co-ordinator (CLC Co-Ord.) was identified as role most appropriate to convene and co-ordinate this new Forum.

The action plan and tasks proposed to the forum by the CLC Co-Ordinator were to:

- Identify and Record the range of community responses currently being provided to (a) avoid duplication and to (b) identify opportunities for provide further support to local efforts.
- Identify particular geographic areas and/or vulnerable groups where additional community supports may be needed and a strategy to respond.
- Lead the establishment of small Inter Agency Area based Community Response Teams, jointly local lead by two co-ordinators, with authority from Agency Senior Management.
- Task the Team Co-ordinators to identify where there are gaps, and how the most vulnerable can be reached at a local level, for example through targeted community contacts, through community structures, awareness campaigns, etc.
- Explore the need for a city centralised emergency number or similar facility.
- Identify measures to facilitate people in communities who wish to volunteer; including linking with Cork's Volunteer Centre.
- Define the nature of the supports that could be provided by community volunteers.
- Identify measures to encourage the relevant community structures such as Community Networks, Sports clubs, Community Associations, interagency teams to consider the needs of vulnerable people in their locality and to take appropriate and safe action.
- Communicate the most appropriate guidance and protocols that are available for community structures and volunteers to ensure that both volunteers and the general public are safeguarded.
- Agree unified communications and key messages from the Advisory Group, as far as practicable, in relation to external communications.

City wide Community Response Forum Membership

In line with the guidelines issued by Govt. and adapted for local circumstances the Forum was facilitated by Cork City Council and membership included the following:

- Health Service Executive - Social Inclusion and Community Work Depts
- The Police Service - *An Garda Síochána*:
- The Postal Service - *An Post*:
- Cork Education and Training Board:
- Dept. of Employment and Social Protection - Community Welfare Service
- The Statutory Child and Family Agency - *TUSLA*
- Cork Age Friendly Network
- RAPID Programme
- Local Community Development Committee – Public Participation Network Members:
- Cork Volunteer Centre:
- Local Development Company – Cork City Partnership
- Voluntary Emergency Services: Red Cross/ Civil Defence/Order of Malta/ St Johns Ambulance:
- Voluntary Sporting Organisations;
- Citizen's Information Service:
- Migrant Forum:
- Religious Leaders

The Cork City Covid-19 Community Response Forum membership agreed the following objective and strategy:

Objective:

To translate city wide services and public sector organisations into locally flexible and responsive action oriented inter-agency teams.

Strategy:

1. Mapping of existing actions:

- Undertake a quick audit of current City Council community actions in response to Covid-19 being delivered, to include current work streams in Cork City Council Community Services relevant to Covid-19 (e.g. Age Friendly, Social Inclusion) and gaps that need to be addressed;

2. Area based community response teams:

- Divide the city area into defined local areas. Use the RAPID areas as an initial basis and build out to cover the full map of the city, including the suburb areas, (18 provisional areas were considered);
- Identify the key service providers in each area;
- Identify a small flexible team of 6 inter-agency and cross sectoral in each area, involving public services with local community voluntary and sporting bodies that can be repurposed;
- Nominate and request 2 people with excellent local knowledge and local contacts to jointly lead the co-ordination of the local core team;
- Identify a nominated rep. from City Council, Health Service Executive, the Police Force, and the Child and Family Welfare Agency assigned to each local team to support and respond to requests;
- Identify the current services relevant to Covid-19 that the local providers are now in a position to provide – staff, venues, transport, communication networks, volunteer teams, other;
- List the identified ‘wrap around’ set of relevant services in each area that will support the work of the community response team and will respond to the requests channelled through the co-ordinators;
- Use the co-ordinators to send unified communications across all city areas;
- Review teams as appropriate and back fill team membership and co-ordinator roles as necessary;
- All work of teams to be co-ordinated by a central co-ordinating committee and reporting to the High Level Community Response Forum chaired by City Council.

In line with this approach Area Based Teams were established in 16 areas of the cities, defined in consultation with local leaders to build on local identity.

Learning Neighbourhoods and local Area Based Community Response Teams

The learning neighbourhoods are one of the strengths of Cork as a learning city and we recommend them as models for other cities. Limerick has taken on and applied the concept using the model developed in Cork built on the ideas and writings of Peter Kearns.

Six areas of Cork city have identified themselves as Learning Neighbourhoods as part of the city wide Programme co-ordinated by Cork Learning City partners, and lead by UCC. The Learning Neighbourhoods programme is a ground up, locally lead approach, based on the findings of a 2015 pilot, that built on the work of Peter Kearns. Cork Learning Neighbourhoods are co-designed with local leaders that include members of Community based Adult Education Networks that have been established in the city since 2002.

The leadership for Cork Learning Neighbourhoods has been provided by local networks, lead by Community Development Projects, Family Resource Centres, Youth Services, Schools, Community Associations and Early Years Education and Childcare Settings. These Networks were also the basis of the Area Based Community Response Teams in the six areas of the city that are Learning Neighbourhoods.

In the other ten areas of the city, other relevant local networks formed the core of the Covid-19 area response, for example the Youthwork Network, the local Community Association, or the RAPID Area Liaison team. As each area was empowered to create its own team, and was supported in its efforts by the organisations represented on the citywide Forum, this approach was an empowering combination of Bottom Up from the Area Based Teams, with Top Down from the City wide Forum.

The Area Based Community Response Teams as examples of flexibility, agility, and sharing ideas

These Area Based Teams demonstrate the essence of the EcCoWell 2 Recovery Program in that they are based on flexibility in response to local needs, agility in adapting new ideas, and creativity through a process of building on shared

ideas. The City wide Inter Agency and Cross-sectoral Community Response Forum provides both a means of securing relevant support by Statutory Agencies, and of working with these Agencies to implement new thinking and to co-create new sustainable solutions to the 'wicked' problems faced by the city.

City wide Community Response Forum Task Group - Bridging the Digital Divide in the context of Covid-19

Having identified that the Digital divide was having increased effects on disadvantaged families and older people, and exacerbating digital exclusion, the Community Response Forum convened a series of scoping meetings to outline the needs around Educational Technology and communications technology needs with statutory educational, youth services and ICT support partners.

Following these meetings, issues experienced by two target groups have been agreed:

1. Families without appropriate access to Digital devices to access online education
Strategy based on feedback from School Completion Programmes (SCPs) and Youth Services to date..
2. Older people without appropriate access to technology to connect with family and the relevant outside world online; Strategy will be based on feedback through Age Friendly Forum.

A range of solutions, including virtual solutions, were discussed through engagement of all partners, incl. industry – partners it@cork and DeLL technologies. Two solutions are currently being trialled in Learning Neighbourhoods with the support of the branch libraries in each area. Scale: 500+ devices approx. across the city.

Reflections

In considering the questions posed in the introduction: **in the context of Cork city:**

1. **What can be learned from 2020?**
2. **What do we as a city community need to learn now?**

The following are the authors observations:

1. A framework for an integrated holistic response for sustainable development at community level that was established in Cork during 2020 as a means to co-ordinate a ground up response to the needs of vulnerable people during Covid-19 can be the basis for ongoing ground up flexible response to all community needs.
 - 1.1 The Area based Teams have been retained during the second wave in Autumn 2020 and refocussed on citizens needs.
 - 1.2 Cork City Council has committed to the Area Response Team infrastructure as a means of engaging with communities and co-designing sustainable innovative responses to local needs and issues.
2. The inter-agency cross sectoral approach that was applied during 2020 to respond to issues faced by citizens caused or exacerbated by Covid-19 can be a basis for an ongoing sustainable response to the 'wicked problems' faced by the city.
 - 2.1 These can include tackling some of the themes below. The Digital Divide Group established by the Community Response Forum can be a base for tackling theme d. below:
 - a. Strengthening community bonds and citizenship in learning neighbourhoods and addressing exclusion, including way of keeping older people socially engaged.
 - b. Building further community learning strategies for health and well being, with an initial focus on mental health.
 - c. Encouraging enterprise development and entrepreneurship neighbourhoods.
 - d. Finding ways to promote digital learning for all age groups.
 - e. Action towards developing a green stimulus program for the post-coronavirus society, and economy.
 - f. Harnessing cultural institutions and libraries in building a sustainable learning culture in the community.

References

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