



West Side Community Centre – a supportive, local ecosystem. Podcast with James Coyne

Transcript

Maeve: Welcome to this series of Pobal-funded, climate-connected podcasts, where we talk to people involved in community climate action all around Ireland. Energy Cooperatives Ireland has worked with dozens of Irish sustainable communities and has established 5 fully operational energy cooperatives. Many of these communities have become innovators and promoters of the carbon-free society at the local level and in some cases at the national level. So today we're talking to James Coyne, who is the CEO of the Galway Westside Resource Centre. You're very welcome, James.

James: Thanks so much, Maeve. Thanks for having me.

Maeve: Now, I know there's a lot of fantastic work going on in the Galway Westside Resource Centre. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about the beginning of the centre and how it has evolved because it's a great model that could be replicated elsewhere, I think.

James: Thanks a million, and thanks for the opportunity as part of the Climate Connected project to come on and give a bit of the background of the work that we do here. And I suppose we'd be delighted if some of what we do would be an inspiration, giving to other community groups elsewhere.

I suppose the beginning of our story really is way back in 1994 when this organisation was founded. And then a few years later, we had a purpose-built community resource centre, which opened up in just after the millennium in 2001. The organisation very much has community development roots, I suppose. The West Side area was not a

particularly affluent area of Galway City and local people came together, formed this organisation with the view to helping people that are disadvantaged and were disadvantaged in the community.

Maeve: Fantastic, as people have done all over the country, of course, and created thriving local centres for themselves.

James: Exactly.

Maeve: So when did you become involved, James?

James: Okay, I've been here for, I guess, about 17 years at this stage. And over that period of time, there's been a good lot of change, I suppose, in government policy and so on and so forth. We were a kind of a formal community development project at one point. And then over the years, I suppose our emphasis has kind of always stayed the same as being here to help individuals, schools and community groups in the local area. We've tried to build up the resource centre as a focal point for community development work, voluntary community and voluntary work. We try to be the venue of choice if somebody is holding an event or something in the West Side area. And in that way, we're linked in with many of the local community groups, government agencies, all of that kind of thing. We have a very broad range of clients that use the centre.

Maeve: Can you give us an idea of the type of groups that are active there at the moment?

James: Okay. So, one of the defining characteristics of our organization, I suppose, is that we operate as a social enterprise. We're partially funded by government under the community services program, fantastic programme, without which we wouldn't really be able to operate. And under that programme, we operate as a social enterprise. So, we charge for the services that we provide here in the resource centre. And over the years, we've attracted in a wide range of organisations so that they can be based here in the centre and provide their services to people in the community.

So we're home to a cluster of different organisations now, community groups, government agencies, community voluntary organisations, ranging from childcare service groups that work with the young people in the area, groups that work with adults, older people, people with disabilities, new communities, traveller organizations, small community groups, men's clubs, women's clubs, environmental groups, you name it. They come and use our services on a regular basis. Some of the organizations have offices here in the building, so they're kind of permanent residents and other smaller scale community groups then would use us once a week, once a fortnight, once a month, whatever suits them.

Maeve: But it's so important to bring people together, isn't it? Like in our modern world where people are becoming more isolated and more atomized in so many different

ways, like the local community centre is a hub for all kinds of activities that bring people together, I guess.

James: It is, and that really, really came home to us, I have to say, during the COVID pandemic. We were closed for just a few weeks, and then we reopened again for some of the services that were based here, which were deemed to be essential services. So we reopened in a very careful and very organized way in the height of the pandemic. But what really struck us here, we were only a skeleton crew that were working at the time, but what really struck us was our empty meeting rooms. You know, you'd walk down the corridor, and normally they'd be laughter and fun and a bit of crack going on and the community groups in using the spaces for their workshops and their meetings. And this place was really so silent. It was absolutely bizarre because our very function in life, which was, as you say, Maeve, to bring people together to work on many of the issues in front of us as a society, we couldn't do anymore. You know, it was really a bizarre time for us. But anyway, we passed through all that, thankfully.

Maeve: Thankfully, thankfully. Now, in relation to the environment and sustainability and so on, on, Westside in Galway has been designated a decarbonisation zone. So maybe you could explain to us, James, what that means?

James: I will indeed, yes, no problem.

It's a government policy that each local authority in Ireland would designate part of its area as a decarbonisation zone. And in Galway City, Galway City Council has named this Westside area here, where the resource centre is, as the decarbonisation zone for Galway City. And the practical import of that, I suppose, is, and the idea behind the decarbonisation zones, is that whatever targets that the government has put in place for the country as a whole, the country keeps on working towards, but there are higher targets for the decarbonisation zones.

They see the decarbonization zones, I guess, then as kind of test beds and places where they might trial ideas and implement new schemes or new approaches or whatever and to see. will that take root and will it have an effect? And then those examples could be used more widely across the country in general.

Maeve: Okay, so it's a way to have pilot projects to test them out?

James: That is that's definitely one of the ideas behind it, you know, and because of the general work of the resource centre, we're linked-in with so many different community groups, voluntary organisations. We work very closely with Galway City Council on many of their projects. It's an initiative. So, we really welcome the fact that the decarbonisation zone was in the West Side area because we felt that it may actually induce interesting projects to take place in the local area. And that would be in the long term, that would be of benefit to the community.

Maeve: Of course. And in practice, what has happened in relation to decarbonisation?

James: So there's a couple of different projects that have taken place. because of the [decarbonisation] zoning and there's work ongoing on it. I suppose one of the projects that's been up and running here for the last year or two is a project called '[The Air We Share](#)', and it focuses on air quality in the West Side area. Very interesting project combining community inputs, creativity, working with artists, but also working with scientists at the University of Galway. So, it's been ongoing for a while. And again, I think that one of the reasons why that project took root here in particular was because of the decarbonisation zone.

Maeve: I see, I see. And have there been any findings or results yet from that project?

James: It's the creative part of the project is coming to its conclusion now. There's a very interesting exhibition that's been running at the Galway Arts Centre where the three different artists or artistic practices have looked at the issue, they've worked with people in the community and they've kind of explored this whole issue of air quality. It's a very difficult thing to see. It's almost invisible, you know, and that was one of the catch lines of the project was making the invisible visible. So that's been very interesting. The artists involved came out from very, very different perspectives. So, the resulting artwork is great. And that's still running in the Galway Arts Centre, if anybody would like to see it. I think it runs until the 28th of September.

On the scientific side of things, then there's an array of air quality monitors that have been put up in the local area and they've been recording the air quality over a period of time. And the scientists have been looking at those and you can clearly see sort of daily movements in the air quality, where at sort of peak traffic times and busy times, you can see the air quality change over time, and you can also see seasonal. movements in it and weather-related movements when the weather is very calm. Any particles that are in the air aren't being dispersed by the wind, for example. So, they kind of sit here. So, it's quite interesting. And I hope that I hope to see more work on this team, you know, in the future as well.

Maeve: It sounds like something we should have all over the country, really, because it's so fundamental to our health, isn't it? The quality of the air. And we're learning more and more about these micro particles that we're breathing in all the time, even from the tires on the road.

James: Absolutely. And I think it's I think it's important that projects like that have a community element to them because you could say we'll solve all of that problem by nobody driving a car or nobody having a fireplace or whatever. And for the ordinary person, I suppose, they may not be able to move and change their own homes as quickly as all of that. You know what I mean? They may have difficulty with being able to heat their homes and stuff like that. And they may feel there aren't good enough public

transport alternatives for them to give up the car and that. So, it's good in these kind of projects, I think, to have that input coming from the community because there are real challenges for people in making adaptations and, you know, moving forward.

Maeve: Absolutely. And I think we've all experienced that indeed, but it needs to be a bottom up rather than a top-down approach.

James: I think that's a very important element in it. It's maybe 10 or 12 years ago. I suppose we started to see that there was going to be a kind of a convergence between community development work, community voluntary work, and work on the environment and on climate change. Issues like that are so big and so complex that the penny eventually drops that it's a kind of whole of society approach that needs to be taken into it, without necessarily blaming people or whatever, but trying to get everybody behind the, what needs to be, as you say, a movement from the ground up as well as policy imposed from above, I suppose, is the way that we would look at it.

Maeve: Yes, and things like artistic projects and exhibitions and so on are really important, I think, in terms of raising awareness about these issues.

James: Very much so. And our approach over the years, I suppose, and it has kind of built up in a very steady way. We're not about beating people over the head on some of these issues. I suppose it is, like you say, it's about raising the awareness. What we've tried to do over the years, really, is we have tried to build in the conversation about climate into our normal calendar of events that we have throughout the year.

We work with so many different organizations and there are lots of different opportunities along the way, I suppose, to raise the awareness. and to build in that conversation about the environment and preservation of the environment, but also about climate change and how it's going to affect the climate and the natural world, but also how it affects people in their daily lives with being able to afford to heat their home and so on and so forth.

We've tried to do community education classes with a focus on environment, mental sustainability. We've had public events where we've had invited speakers come in and talk about it. We've taken the opportunity to take part in programmes that Galway City Council have run.

Some years ago, Galway was given a green leaf city designation from the European Union. And that was a great opportunity to discuss some of these issues. And we put on public workshops here in the resource centre, which were, you know, free of charge for people to come to, and they were accessible. So, we used Galway's City of Culture designation in 2020, we ran a very nice project that really focused on people's use of materials and waste and looking back at traditional crafts and things that were much, much less impactful on the environment overall than some of our modern behaviours

with plastic and with clothing and that. And then we would do events for the likes of Culture Night and Bike Week and some of those kinds of things as well. And again, it's just kind of building the whole idea of that respect for the environment and that consciousness of climate change into the conversation as we go about our work.

Maeve: Yeah, that's so important really, because like there's nobody on the planet who's not affected by this. Like every age group, like every nationality, this child of climate is in front of us all.

James: It's very interesting that you mentioned the age group there, and I'm really glad you did. So, we kind of moved from a situation, or we evolved from a situation, where we were taking part in... sort of government programmes and national events and stuff like that. And then we started doing some events and activities of our own that had the environment really at its core, as it were. And one of those was a creative project called Painting the Planet, which looked at the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It's a fairly big topic to take on, as it were. And it's a lot of the themes are very international, but of course you can boil those down and make them relevant to people, to local people in their own lives, and that was a really interesting project. We really enjoyed that one.

On the age cohort thing, we were very lucky last year, we were approached by a lady called Jacinta Barons who wanted to run a climate action course specifically for the over 60s. But Jennifer's retired herself, a very, very accomplished individual and a really nice lady to work with. And she's decided to focus on that particular cohort and bring the climate action course to them. And she's been running it very successfully. And I'm glad to say we were the first place in Ireland that hosted that. Her very first course took place here in Westside Resource Centre. And I really hope that continues on. And I wish her success with it.

Maeve: Fantastic. And do you find that there is interest generally from people from all age groups, James, in relation to sustainability and looking at climate?

James: That's really the question of the day, I have to say. And I think a lot depends on how you go about it in the sense that if you say something is just about something, people can roll their eyes and say, God, what am I supposed to do about that? Like, you know, I'm just a retired person living in a small bungalow in West Side or something like that.

I think there's great value in trying to bring the subject up in a creative way and in a way that doesn't intimidate people and in a way where the benefits become clear in what you're saying and what you're doing. Like we, as well as doing the educational side of things and the creative stuff, we've worked on longer term projects such as the West Side Community Garden.

The garden started off being a social and community project, and it still is, and a very successful one, but it really is so much more. because under that umbrella of the community garden, you get into all kinds of territory, like community resilience, reducing air miles that food travels, biodiversity, pollinators and bees and stuff like that. We're in a suburban setting here, but I know that they've got hedgehogs in the community garden, which is absolutely amazing.

Thinking about biodiversity and the bird life and there's so many other things you can get into. They don't have healthy food. When the garden started off again, we try to inject this whole kind of conservation value of the natural environment. We put in a rainwater harvesting system on the little garden shed so they wouldn't have to be relying on mains water to water the garden and stuff like that. And again, the idea is to build it into the project already, just make it part of what you're doing and people roll with it and they're comfortable with it because they can see the benefits.

Maeve: And who manages the garden? Who does the work? Is it local volunteers?

James: It's local volunteers. There's a core of maybe 12 to 15 and maybe a slightly wider group, maybe 20 or 25 altogether that same. They participate, I suppose, as their own schedules allow them. Some people are looking after kids, they're looking for grandchildren, or something like that. But they have turned what was a kind of a vacant plot beside the resource centre here into a really bountiful, productive garden with fruit and vegetables and all the rest of it. But as I said, at the same time, being a really nice and creative community project, where people can come and learn skills and all the rest of it. And just because it has that great environmental benefit as well, it doesn't mean that all those other additional benefits aren't there too. They're very complementary to one another, if you understand what I mean.

Maeve: It's a very tangible effort. for a distance really where people can actually see the physical results of their work and eat it even as well.

James: Very much so. And it's really lovely to have the practical example that you can hold in your hand and you can eat it, as you say, because we have.

And we're involved in so many other bits and pieces on the creative and artistic side. Like we're one of the main organisers of a long-running community arts festival here in Westside, a fantastic event that's kind of grown organically over the years. We organised it in conjunction with a group of community and voluntary groups, local agencies, local people, and we put on a four- or five-day festival with 30 or 40 different events all together each summer. It's been a kind of a unique event for a good many years. It was a kind of a festival within one of Galway City's neighbourhoods, as opposed to a festival for the whole city, if you know what I mean. And we took it as a great compliment when active citizens over on the east side of the city have decided to try and replicate West Side Arts Festival with an East Side Arts Festival.

Maeve: OK, there's going to be a bit of competition there, I guess.

James: There might be a little bit of friendly competition. Anyway, good luck to them.

So, it's great to have that kind of pairing of very practical things like the garden with formal creative things like the arts festival. And we would have lots of events during the festival with an environmental team or a conservation team or an energy, theme, that kind of thing. So, it's nice to be able to mix and match because what attracts one person, might not necessarily be of interest to another person, if you follow me.

Some people really want to get stuck in, and they want to go to the garden and they want to dig and all the rest of it, whereas others like to come in and sit and think and watch a performance or an event or whatever and engage with it that way. So, people have all different kinds of ways of engaging and it's a matter of trying to cater for those as much as possible.

Maeve: Of course. That's the great diversity of humanity, of course, which is our greatest strength, that so many people have different perspectives and different angles and come up with new ideas in all kinds of ways. So, you guess you're providing people as many opportunities as possible to engage with the ideas.

James: It is. And it's also looking at the local community venues.

Like, we have a cluster of buildings here in West Side where we have the resource centre here, we have the community garden, we have our West Side Library, fantastic, and we have the West Side Church, West Side Community Centre. So, there's a kind of cluster of buildings here together in one place. And the festival kind of reuses them for a couple of days each year for slightly different purposes than they might have been intended originally. And we have great fun with that because you know, you could find yourself walking down the corridor here in the resource centre and there could be a classical music concert on in one of the meeting rooms. Or you could say, go into the community garden and find there was a yoga class or a sculpture or painting or something going on, you know. So that's great fun and hopefully it makes it accessible for people as much as possible.

Maeve: Absolutely. And draws in people from all parts of the community, which is what the goal is, isn't it really? That it's inclusive.

James: Absolutely.

Maeve: Yeah. So do you feel overall, James, that people are willing to engage with the whole idea of climate change and sustainability. I think one of the problems is that it makes us all feel guilty when we hear about these ideas because... possibly we feel we're not doing enough for our life. Even if it's fairly humble, it's still, you know, once we're in a developed country, we're fundamentally contributing to the problem more than solving it. Would that be true?

James: That's true to a degree. And I think each of us in our own lives and our own families or whatever have probably steps that we could take and should take and all the rest of it.

What we found particularly came to the fore on one of the first meetings that we had here, the first kind of public meeting, on The Air We Share project, for example, we met with some people that were volunteering in the community garden and we kind of felt they might be interested in this new project that was coming along. So, we had a chat with them and we talked about kind of what you're talking about now in how do people feel about this. And it was quite interesting. There was a number of people there. I remember one lady in particular who her response was, 'well, you know, I'm just one individual. I'm a single lady. on my own. And some of the things that I hear and that I read about in the news and all the rest of it, they seem to be gigantic problems. This isn't something that I feel that I'm empowered to do anything about kind of thing.' And I happen to know the lady, she'd been a volunteer in the community garden for a number of years. And I also know that she cycles everywhere she goes, because I see her cycling as I come and go from work myself. And on the spot, I had to say, but lookit, you're already doing some of the things that some of the rest of us should be doing. You know, she was already contributing in various different ways, but that hadn't necessarily registered with her personally as being of a benefit in the overall scheme of things. But of course it has, you know what I mean?

And there were loads of people there who, when we talked through how they themselves order their own lives at home and so on and so forth, they were doing bits and pieces, like people were doing the recycling, they were very conscious of the biodiversity, they were trying to keep their gardens, they were trying to not be using chemicals, they were trying to not be wasteful of energy and so on.

And also, it's, I think it's really important that in this kind of discussion, and particularly from the point of view of local government or the state more generally, that people's efforts are actually valued. People are doing stuff already and that needs to be valued and celebrated and encouraged, and I think there's an old colleague of mine used to talk about 'how to eat an elephant'. We'd have a big problem on the agenda and he said 'this is like eating an elephant and this is the only way to eat an elephant: "one bite at a time"'. So, I suppose you have a go at things and you do nibble away at the edges as best you can and where people are doing well and are contributing themselves then to, that that be acknowledged and celebrated and appreciated, basically.

Maeve: For sure. And I can understand completely that I think many of us feel like that. It's a bit overwhelming, the whole issue of climate and what's happening to our climate and our weather. And we can all see the changes, obviously, and we can see these climate disasters from all over the world, you know, every day of the week, really.

So, I guess the resource centre there in West Side gives people at least an opportunity to come together and pool their resources and their efforts and feel that they're not so alone in trying to make changes.

James: Absolutely, absolutely. I think that's very important. And I think it's important to build in the right thinking on these issues into the work of community centres and community groups that are working with people on the ground so that they can, they have a voice as it were.

So we know that many people are trying to, or are being encouraged to, make changes to their houses, for example, to cut down on the use of fossil fuels and that. And like that's a very challenging thing to do. Do you have to move out of your house for a couple of weeks whilst there's big works going on? Where do you go in the current climate? So, I think we can improve how we do that feedback mechanism to, you know what I mean, to hear in people's voices coming at it from where they are, you know. 'How I'd love to do this. I'd love to improve the house, but What do I do? What steps can I take? Or I can't afford it at the moment', you know what I mean? Then directing people towards the right services, towards the grants that are available to people to make those changes. So there's I think there's a lot that can be done. And as the political phrase went, 'there's still a lot to be done' as well.

Maeve: For sure. And we should just mention there's a lot more information for anybody interested on climateconnected.ie, which is an Irish website.

James: Just to bring it back to though today's podcast and the Climate Connected Project, we became part of it because we saw the value in it of using those positive examples of things that our communities are doing right across Ireland that other groups and organizations may dip into and say, 'oh, look, there is a website there that has these resources and there are very good examples and positive ideas all over the country'.

And just going back to what you were saying a moment ago, yes, people do feel challenged by it, and they do feel that the issues are very difficult to have a go at. But for every time that feeling comes up, that there is a community group doing great work someplace on their local biodiversity, or there's an active travel scheme that's up and running and people are cycling more. So,...we can't let the doom and gloom stop us or keep us down. We have to keep going and celebrate the positive examples. And it's in every sphere.

We're involved in a scheme called the 'Upcycling of Bike Scheme', which was funded through Pobal, with on [Meitheal Rothar](#) here in Galway. And it's diverting bicycles from landfill and upcycling them and recycling them. It's training employees here in the local area. It's encouraging cycling. It's providing lower cost bicycles to people that are on

lower incomes and so on and so forth. A lot of different core benefits going on from one simple project, it's fantastic.

So, it's about having a go at all different areas, whether it's the likes of the garden, working on the food, or working on transport, or bringing in the creativity to raise awareness, and that all of these different things can be can be done in a very community focused, very friendly, very accessible way.

Maeve: It's really a way to bring people together, isn't it? For sure. With the common area. Just finally, James, you've been there 17 years now working in Westside, you're now the CEO of the Westside Resource Centre in Galway. Do you feel that awareness about climate and sustainability and all these pressing issues has changed a lot in those 17 years?

James: I think it has come very much to the fore, and as I said, I've personally felt many years ago that was going to be the case, that there was a kind of coming together of community work and work on environment and climate.

Like the advice that I would give to local community groups and organizations that want to do something on this is to look for the opportunities that are there. You know, you can start off in a small way. You can have a couple of once-off events or something like that. Try and be open to collaborating with your local council or other community organisations and try and be positive and creative with the message, you know what I mean, to celebrate people's progress that there's no point in hiding around the issues or whatever.

There are challenges that need to be faced, but there are people working on those challenges right across the country and be prepared to explore, you know, to think about things in different ways that they hadn't looked at before, to bring the community voices, to bring the voices of ordinary people to this discussion because that's really important. as a whole, the term just transition kind of kind of covers that aspect a small bit, but to acknowledge the barriers that people are facing and let's try and solve some of those and just and just keep going.

Maeve: Going, absolutely. And you have a good foundation there, obviously in the resource centre. You have an established centre that's been there now since 1994, really. So you have a track record there as well in terms of the local community, in terms of service provision and so on.

James: Absolutely. And that's very important to us, to be able to dwell on all of these issues as we progress over the years. The area has changed, you know what I mean? The unemployment was a big focus at one point, and things moved slowly over the years. But this environment and climate issue has come to the fore, you know, it is affecting people. People are finding it more expensive to heat their houses and so on and so forth.

So, I think everybody's conscious of it and they're not always conscious of and even the bits of progress they're making themselves as individuals. And it's important that we celebrate that, I think, and encourage it.

Maeve: And bringing in ordinary people, as you say, like ordinary people are full of creativity, full of ideas and full of perspectives and angles on things that maybe we don't think of. So the more we can kind of harness that, potential like among the local community. Like I think the more we can progress in this area.

James: Absolutely. And I think trying to highlight the alternatives that are there. In some cases, there's a challenge, you know, maybe our public transport is not as good as we'd like it to be and so on. But, you know, people have alternatives. They can, you know, you can switch to a lesser polluting fuel once you're maybe thinking about getting your heat pump fitted or changing over to electricity. People can make incremental steps. Like it's great if somebody has the money to make a big change to their home to do the deep retrofit, as they call it. But not everybody is in a position to do that. But that's not a good enough reason then, to not encourage them to take the smaller steps that they can take.

Maeve: Of course. So, James, just give us your own website there at the resource centre and website in Westside.

James: It's WestsideResourceCentre.ie

Maeve: WestsideResourceCentre.ie based in Galway City. So, thank you so much, James Coyne, CEO, for speaking to us. today and for more information about climate sustainability and the changes that you can make, go to climateconnected.ie.