



**Friends of  
the Earth**

**Northern Ireland**

# Newsletter

Issue 21 Spring 2011

Friends of the Earth inspires solutions to environmental problems which make life better for people

**The new Assembly has a  
critical decision to make**

**Business as usual  
or low-carbon  
future?**



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## Marian Farrell

**Marian Farrell is a teacher, activist and leading light in Transition Derry. Declan Allison met her to discuss peak oil, time banking and hill walking.**

Marian moved to Derry in 1987 from Manchester where she qualified as a teacher of deaf children. She remembers thinking to herself, 'I'll stay here for a year and see how it goes'.

"There's something about the questioning attitude that attracted me. I grew up in Rostrevor and never imagined I'd be in a city, but somehow I ended up staying here. I enjoyed my job; I was beginning to get to know people; I could walk to the city centre in ten minutes; and I could be up the hills of Inishowen in an hour and a half. I thought 'where else in the world am I going to get that?' So I decided to stay."

Marian took a career break and ended up working in the community sector.

"After a few years I got tired writing funding proposals. I got to the stage where I was writing a funding proposal every month for my salary for the next month. I stayed active in the community sector though."

Marian says her involvement in Transition Derry came through her work with Maor, a group set up in the northwest to support the people in Rosspoint fighting against Shell.

"It was through this campaign that I learned about peak oil. I realised fossil fuels must stay in the ground. We need a sustainable way of heating our houses that isn't dependent on fossil fuels. Something that we're looking at in Transition Derry is wood pellet stoves. Local man, John Gilliland, has just installed one

in Holybush Primary School. The way forward is small-scale, local initiatives."

Marian argues three important areas are feeding ourselves, heating our homes and the means of exchange. She is working on a local currency:

"It means the money has to go back into circulation in Derry. I've had a positive response from the tourist office, the City Council and the Chamber of Commerce and we're planning to run a pilot scheme next year."

Another interest of Marian's is time banking. She explains the concept:

"An hour's work is an hour's work, whether you're a lawyer providing legal advice for a community group, or a street sweeper offering to tidy up waste ground. It's about how to build partnerships and involve everyone. It's in everyone's interest to create a healthy, thriving society."

How would Marian sum-up Transition Derry?

"Transition Derry is about making links with people so they're not by themselves, so there's a strong community network where people can have fun. And that's a big strength of people in Northern Ireland."



**Marian Farrell is a key member of Transition Derry.**

Courtesy of Declan Allison/Friends of the Earth

## Rich countries duck climate responsibility

**As the UN climate talks came to a close in Bangkok in April, it became clear that last year's Cancun outcomes had serious flaws.**

The Bangkok talks saw rich countries stall on pledging concrete emissions reductions targets. Japan and Russia renounced the Kyoto Protocol that required rich countries to cut their emissions in line with the latest science.

Despite having an historic responsibility for climate change, developed countries are pledging only 35 per cent of the total

emissions cuts, with developing countries shouldering the majority.

Analysis of current emission reduction pledges suggests they would lead to long-term warming of up to five degrees – a catastrophic outcome that would result in billions of people losing their homes and livelihoods.

Commenting, climate campaigner Declan Allison said:

"Yet again rich countries are ducking the issue of legally binding targets to cut their emissions while the planet hurtles towards climate catastrophe."



**Emissions reductions pledges following the Bangkok negotiations could lead to dangerous climate change.**

"But there is still time to act - the EU must now show real global leadership by declaring its commitment to the Kyoto Protocol and agreeing to cut its emissions by at least 40 per cent by 2020."

Much rests on a successful outcome to the next UN climate summit in South Africa this December.

## News in Brief

corporate accountability. Here's to another 40 years defending the rights of everyone, everywhere, now and in the future, to live in a healthy, clean and safe environment.

### People power

Planning campaigners from throughout Northern Ireland gathered at the Dromantine Retreat Centre on 5 and 6 February 2011 for a conference entitled People Power for Positive Planning. Delegates learned valuable skills in working with the existing planning system, mobilising activism in their areas, and asserting their rights using the courts.

### Climate change day

Rock fans and church goers joined

environmental activists in Belfast on 4 December 2010 for the annual International Day of Action on Climate Change. A Day of Actions had been organised by Stop Climate Chaos Northern Ireland, including an ecumenical church service and punk gig.

### Cycle city

The Belfast Cycle City campaign held a mass bike ride in Belfast on 13 October 2010 as a protest at the swingeing cuts to the Northern Ireland cycling budget announced by Regional Development Minister Conor Murphy. Over 100 cyclists took part, all happy to express their anger and disappointment at the pro-roads policies of Mr Murphy's department.

### Happy Birthday

In 1971 Friends of the Earth kicked off its campaigns in the UK by Dumping 1,500 non-returnable

bottles outside Schweppes headquarters to make a statement about re-using precious resources. Over the past 40 years we have campaigned on issues as diverse as climate change, genetic modification, right to roam and

**Editor:** Declan Allison **Contributors:** James Orr, Niall Bakewell and Geraint Ellis. **Designed by:** LSD Limited. **Printed on:** Paper made from 100% post-consumer waste.

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# Planning in Northern Ireland: Time to turn over a new leaf?

**Northern Ireland's planning system has had quite a kicking over the past ten years.**

In the face of a declining economy, it has been regularly blamed by MLAs and Ministers as a burden on business and has been challenged relentlessly (and successfully) in the courts by the property industry. As planning fees declined with the property slump, hundreds of qualified planners were short-sightedly sent into exile to other departments and put to work on tasks like tracking agricultural farm payments.

Meanwhile the programme of completing local area plans has been virtually suspended. Perhaps worst of all, the former Minister, Edwin Poots, has proposed what is perhaps the most inane of all planning policies; Planning Policy Statement 24 which suggests that economic factors can override any other consideration in a planning decision - including local plans that have been subject to extensive public participation - and potentially makes a nonsense of environmental regulation. This policy takes the trajectory of the planning system under the stewardship of the last two Ministers of the Environment to a logical conclusion as both saw planning as a bureaucratic technicality and were concerned about the speed of decisions rather than their substantive outcomes.

One of the last legislative gestures of the previous Assembly was to pass the Planning Act 2011, touted as "the most far-reaching changes to our planning system in over 30 years", but in essence a consolidating act preparing the system for eventual handover to a reformed local government.

The attrition of the planning system has had a number of serious consequences - not only is it now badly under resourced, but those staff that do remain appear to be so devoid of morale that fresh, innovate ideas seem absurdly exotic. One only has to look at the perilous state of some of the countries that have followed a laissez-faire approach (the Republic of Ireland) and the healthier state of others (Sweden, Germany) that have invested in more robust (and indeed, more interventionist) planning systems, to see that it can be vital to the delivery of higher levels of sustainability, more prudent resource management and better services.

While there are a range of causal factors for this poor state of affairs, perhaps the most critical has been a failure amongst virtually all our politicians to understand what planning is for. We have had a culture of clientelism where our public representatives saw their real job as being to help constituents (and friends) get their development proposals through the obstacle of the planning system. Very few have seen it for what it should be - a democratic arena for debating the future direction of communities and managing our scarce resources, established precisely because such ideas are beyond the rationality of a free market.

As depressing as this may be, let us end on a more upbeat note. The recent Planning Act has made what appears to be a very modest, yet potentially significant change - that the role of planning is to "further sustainable development and promote well-being". This supports the idea (and gives legal backing to the fact) that planning is ultimately about people and not just about property and profits. Whether this legislative nugget is actually used as a lever to change the direction of the planning system depends on whether the public begin to demand it, and more immediately, whether the new Minister, Alex Attwood, recognises the value of the system he now has control of.



**Dr. Geraint Ellis is Senior Lecturer in the School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering and Institute of Environmental and Spatial Planning at Queen's University, Belfast.**

Courtesy of Queen's University, Belfast.

## Help reform planning

**Friends of the Earth has launched a new planning campaign. Its aim is to embed democratic participation and sustainable development at the heart of the nation's planning system.**

Planning in Northern Ireland is governed directly by the Department of the Environment. Some analysts claim years of inappropriate political interference have left it weak and submissive, and its default setting is for the approval of applications.

Friends of the Earth assists communities and individuals seeking to fight bad development, but they complain the policy and legislation they use to defend themselves is weak or ambiguous, and there is a perception that the system bows easily to developer pressure.

Friends of the Earth Director, James Orr commented:

"Recent reforms to the system have mostly liberalised it in favour of developers, or introduced more chaos and confusion. A new planning policy statement proposed by the Executive, PPS24, is likely to make economic considerations the determining factor in all significant applications, instead of sustainability.

"Meanwhile, the proposed devolution of planning to local councils is being rushed through. Councillors here are not yet qualified to make good planning decisions, and are likely to err far too strongly on the side of developers."

The planning campaign intends to help Northern Ireland leapfrog the rest of the UK and become an exemplar of how a planning system can deliver sustainable development.

At the moment the organisation is gathering evidence through a questionnaire, asking members of the public to recount their experiences of the system. This information will



**Friends of the Earth has launched a new campaign to put sustainable development at the heart of the planning system.**

be collated into a document that will give a broad picture of the current problems people face, as well as laying out a vision for a system that promotes sustainability, transparency and resolutely defends the public interest

rather than one that favours private interests.

Thence the campaign will recruit activists to help lobby to turn this vision into reality. If you would like

more information or to get involved in any way, please email [niall.bakewell@foe.co.uk](mailto:niall.bakewell@foe.co.uk)

## Reformed Planning or Deformed Planning?

**On the last day of business of the previous Assembly legislators approved the final stages of the Planning Bill.**

A whopping 248 clauses were rushed through without meaningful debate or consultation, leaving us with a confusing statutory purpose of planning that harks back to Victorian ideas - securing 'the orderly and consistent use of land' and very weakly suggests that planning should be 'contributing to the achievement of' sustainable development.

The chaos over the Planning Bill highlights the irony that legislation

is not planned but cobbled together. Planning Service was wound up on April Fool's Day with barely three months notice; Local Plans are in a time warp and the much vaunted planned system has not been planned for. That there is too much politics and too little planning in the planning system is summed up by the statement of a DOE planner: "There is an ideology at play here. You can't reform the planning system if you want to get rid of planning".

The draft Regional Development Strategy failed to deliver a coherent long term vision that deals with climate change, the low carbon economy, energy security or ecosystem

services. Of most concern, it promotes even more green-field development.

Just half an hour before the previous Executive ran its course, Minister

Poots' final announcement was to give the green light for a huge Tesco superstore outside Banbridge even though this was against the policies of his own Department. His legacy will

not be the Minister who reformed planning but the Minister who deformed planning.

The nail in the coffin for what's left of our planning system is draft Planning Policy Statements 23 and 24. The first one is meant to serve the environment but is so vague that it can be harnessed to destroy it. Inside the DOE the planners' contempt for PPS24 (economic considerations) is signalled by a consultation document that runs to only two paragraphs. Both Friends of the Earth and the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society are confident of a successful legal challenge to this charter for developers.

**"There is an ideology at play here. You can't reform the planning system if you want to get rid of planning"**

## Strangely like war

**One consequence of there not being an opposition in Stormont is that the Executive has had to look for an opposition. What may go down in history as the least green government ever, found an opposition in the environment.**

First to get dropped was an Environmental Protection Agency. Still reeling from that bad news we are now faced with the Better Regulation proposals that look increasingly like less regulation. Signals were even coming out that the last Executive was considering axing the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Throughout the last term of office the government failed to meet strong environmental targets on climate change, site protection and pollution control. Despite 2010 being the International Year for Biodiversity, the sea bed of Strangford Lough remains unprotected.

An environmental campaigner, weary from endless site battles, had the following to say:

“The last four years have been very difficult. In trying to protect the environment we feel we are taking on the government. It has at times felt strangely like a war.”

In a war the innocent and the vulnerable suffer. Currently in Northern Ireland inner city residents are less likely to own a car but more likely to get killed by one. Fuel poverty reached a scandalous 44 per cent of households and yet our dependency on fossil fuels is as high as ever. The government admits that the vulnerable and the disadvantaged will be badly hit by public transport cuts to support the biggest new road scheme (the A5) ever proposed for Northern Ireland.

In a war, truth is replaced by misinformation. A new plastic bag levy was, bizarrely, used to justify a cut in funding for the DOE. Token funding

of the Green New Deal was used as an excuse to cut two green rate relief schemes and further derogation from the Nitrates Directive was dressed up as success despite three quarters of water bodies being polluted. When additional money did come into the Executive’s coffers, such as the money earmarked to pay for energy efficient boilers, it was redirected to central funds, with one source saying it was used to pay for civil servants’ back pay.

In a war you have to be vigilant and be wary of pyrrhic victories. The excellent campaign to make Belfast a cycle city had the support and endorsement of many organisations and was launched at a packed conference by the Minister for Regional Development. Less than a month later the same Minister slashed the cycling budget by 98 per cent.

Some politicians, and there is at least one in the senior ranks in each party, totally accept the problems of peak oil and climate change and agree on the need for environmental protection. It’s time for their voices to be heard.



Have political parties in Stormont united against the environment?

Courtesy of Iron Shahid stockexchange.

## Green New Deal receives funding

**The Green New Deal housing programme was allocated funds in the March budget. Is the money enough to enable the concept to prove itself?**

Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson announced in his March budget speech that £4million per year for four years would be used to fund the Green New Deal. This has been welcomed by Friends of the Earth as a step in the right direction, but it is well short of the Green New Deal group’s bid.

The Green New Deal housing programme aimed to retrofit 100,000 homes with energy efficiency measures and renewables over a three year period. It was expected the Assembly would contribute £72million which would enable the group to draw down additional funds from the private sector. In this context the £4million per year allocated in the budget is well short of what is required.

The business plan for the housing programme has been redrafted to fit with the budget allocations and negotiations with Ministers and officials continue.

Somewhat cynically, according to some commentators, the Finance Minister has used the budget as an opportunity to cancel two rates rebates schemes - the energy efficiency homes scheme, and the low and zero carbon homes scheme. The money saved will be added to the funds already allocated to the Green New Deal.

Declan Allison, Friends of the Earth Campaigner, said:

“For the Minister to claim that he is scrapping these schemes to help the Green New Deal is disingenuous. The Green New Deal and the rates rebates are designed to tackle fuel poverty, reduce carbon emissions and create jobs. Green rate rebates and the Green New Deal are complementary – the rates rebates would help home owners who fall outside the Green New Deal. This is a devastating blow to families who want to get out of fuel poverty.

## Budget sidelines sustainable development

**In March the Assembly signed off the budget for the next four years. Not surprisingly, sustainable development was sidelined in favour of business as usual.**

The Executive was left in the unenviable position of administering a significantly reduced purse with a £4billion hole. Friends of the Earth argued the budget was an opportunity to redirect Northern Ireland towards a low-carbon economy. The final budget, however, makes attaining a low carbon economy harder.

Some money has been allocated to the Green New Deal - £4million per year for four years. This funding is well short of what is needed and it has given the Minister for Finance an opportunity to scrap two green rate relief measures.

A single-use bag levy will be introduced in order to recover the funds deducted from the DOE’s budget.

Commenting, Friends of the Earth Campaigner Declan Allison said:

“Friends of the Earth supports measures to reduce waste, but the proposed levy seems to be poorly thought through. It’s unclear if it is intended to discourage the use of bags or if it is a revenue raiser. It has to do one or the other – it can’t do both. It appears, therefore, the public is being asked to buy single-use bags, thereby generating waste, in order to tackle waste. This is a perverse and muddled message.”

Other areas of the DOE’s work will be hit such as action on climate change, nature conservation, and the declaration of Areas of Special Scientific Interest. In addition, the Department’s capacity to work on pollution prevention will be reduced.

Regional Development didn’t fare any better. 60 per cent of the transport spend is allocated to just two new roads – the A5 and A8. The Department admits the funding allocation will lead to a deterioration of the existing roads network and a reduction in the use of public transport.

The programme for upgrading our sewerage network will slow down, risking breaches of European law.

The triple challenges of recession, unstable fuel prices and climate change could be met by a shift to a low-carbon economy. It is unfortunate that the Executive has not taken this opportunity to start that process.

**The Budget was a missed opportunity to move Northern Ireland to a low-carbon economy.**

**“Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson announced in his March budget speech that £4million per year for four years would be used to fund the Green New Deal.”**

