

How Cork applied the EcCoWeLL approach to developing holistically as a learning city

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Introduction

EcCoWeLL is a concept that has been developed by PASCAL international Exchanges (PIE), the organisation which emerged from work done on lifelong learning by the OECD.

Since 2012 *EcCoWeLL Cork* - a cross-sectoral steering group representing Economic Development, Environmental Awareness and Action, Healthy Cities, Arts & Culture, Community, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion - has been exploring ways to apply these concepts and thinking to current developments in the Cork City region in Ireland.

The application of holistic and integrated thinking in all city development, advocated by Peter Kearns, then co-director of PIE, in his papers on EcCoWeLL¹, has been applied to the development of Cork as a Learning City. It was given added impetus following the publication by the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL) of the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities and Key Features of a Learning City in 2013.

This paper outlines the experiences in Cork City between 2013 and 2016 on building itself into a learning city, following the UIL guidelines, and using the EcCoWeLL approach. It is intended that the paper may be a useful stimulus to promote discussion among cities and city-regions that are identified as EcCoWeLL cities or Learning cities, Healthy Cities, Smart Cities, Green Capitals – any city concerned with creating a more balanced, holistic and sustainable vision of its own development.

The paper explores two themes: the features of Cork City that, on reflection, proved key in enabling the adoption of an EcCoWeLL approach, and a report on Cork's progress, using an EcCoWeLL approach, in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities while working with UIL to improve its Key Features of a Learning City.

¹ Kearns P., *Living and Learning in Sustainable Opportunity Cities*, 2012, <http://cn.pascalobservatory.org>

Why Cork? – Key features of Cork as an EcCoWell Learning City

Peter Kearns in his presentation on Learning City developments worldwide during the PASCAL conference in Hong Kong in November 2013 posed the question 'Why is it that has Cork taken up the EcCoWell approach?.' He offered the possible answer that Cork, through the medium of the Lifelong Learning Festival, has developed a culture of learning.

This view was expressed by Kearns in a paper entitled 'The Learning Festival Pathway to Sustainable Learning Cities', published in the Irish Journal of Adult Education in 2013, co-authored with the co-ordinators of the Lifelong Learning Festivals in Cork and Limerick cities - Tina Neylon and Yvonne Lane. The EcCoWell Cork steering group have considered this question and have some further observations to make.

City Overview

Cork is a harbour city with a city charter since 1185, located on the south coast of Ireland. It has a population of about 120,000 in its centre, and approximately 289,000 if its greater metropolitan area is included.

The following paragraph from the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL) publication 'Unlocking the Potential of Urban Communities – Case Studies of Twelve Learning Cities'² offers a useful introduction to the city in relation to the themes of this paper:

As the second-largest city in Ireland and the main economic driver in its region, Cork has a strong learning infrastructure that includes two major higher education institutions (University College Cork [UCC] and Cork Institute of Technology [CIT]), three of the state's (Republic of Ireland) five largest colleges of further education, a wide range of complementary and second-chance education opportunities, and initiatives tackling educational disadvantage in both formal and community settings. The city council has been committed to developing Cork as a learning city since 2002³ and formally adopted the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities in 2014. Cork has developed many initiatives that work towards this aspiration. One of these is the Lifelong Learning Festival which runs annually and has grown each year since its establishment in 2004. Furthermore Cork enjoys an international profile as a learning city thanks to its membership of Pascal International Exchanges (PIE), a project that fosters exchange on lifelong

² UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, 2015, Unlocking the Potential of Urban Communities, Case Studies of Twelve Learning Cities

³ Cork City Council, 2001b, Imagine Our Future: Cork 2002-2012 Integrated Strategy for Economic, Social and Cultural Development, Cork, Cork City Council. Available at http://www.corkcitydb.ie/imagineourfuture/new_strategy_document.pdf

learning between local, community and city organizations throughout the world.

Set against this background, the following key features, on reflection, have contributed to creating conditions that were suitable for the successful propagation of the 'seed' idea of EcCoWeLL that Peter Kearns and PASCAL International Exchanges presented to us in Cork:

1. Networks: A number of informal and formal networks pre-existed, aided by the size and scale of the city. Over many years they have built up a sense of solidarity and trust between organisations. That meant they were all available to apply themselves to the EcCoWeLL challenge. The method used to invigorate these networks was an invitation to a small number of committed individuals as representatives of a cross section of organisations. First a small number were invited to hear about the concept of EcCoWeLL from George Osborne representing Hume City in Australia, a member city of PIE, during the Lifelong Learning Festival in 2012. That group immediately decided to work to develop a Steering Group to apply the concept in Cork.

Each member of the Steering Group then took a similar approach to identify individuals across the four sectors of Learning, Environment, Health and Economy who have good track records in collaboration to attend a seminar where Peter Kearns gave a presentation on his EcCoWeLL thinking during the Lifelong Learning Festival in 2013. The challenge that was laid down to those attending was: 'How can we in Cork City apply the EcCoWeLL approach as outlined in Peter's presentation?' Members of the networks who were there on the day have provided the energy and impetus for all our subsequent growth and engagement, attending subsequent events organised by EcCoWeLL Cork.

2. The presence of an underlying or overarching strategy: In accordance with government policy, in the previous decade Cork City Council had put in place a 10 year City Development Plan (2002-2012), outlining the strategic objectives for the overall development of the city. 'Cork as a Learning City' was one of only seven key themes in this document. The plan provided the rationale for establishing the Lifelong Learning Festival.

EcCoWeLL is an umbrella under which all of the work carried out by the different sectors – Economic Development, the Environment, Community, Culture, Health and Wellbeing, Lifelong Learning, Social

Inclusion - fits. It provides an opportunity/forum for us to get together to collaborate on mutually beneficial objectives. The beauty of EcCoWeLL is that it validates that work and solidifies our collaboration. It can be an uncomfortable space e.g. Economics and Health traditionally have not collaborated, but the benefits of Cork being a WHO Healthy City has had a knock on effect on the economic potential of the city, as does the economic development of the city on the health of its citizens. Yet traditionally these sectors have been operating in silos, separated from each other.

3. Trust: An obvious but elusive element, built up slowly and eroded all too easily. In Cork the exponential growth of the Lifelong Learning Festival over 13 years was in building trust across a range of sectors. By valuing equally the participation of partners that are engaged in all forms of learning: formal, non-formal and informal, this has meant a wide range of 'non-traditional' organisations and individuals have begun to consider themselves as 'learning partners.'

The festival's inclusive approach encourages the participation of the disabled, Travellers, older people, the 'new Irish' and isn't confined to statutory organisations, it also welcomes organisations and individuals from the voluntary, community and private sectors.

The festival, through its leadership, has generated a lot of goodwill towards lifelong learning and subsequently EcCoWeLL. This has meant that, as was stated in a paper written by Cork for the PIE Cities Learning Together Conference, Hong Kong, 2013: 'it was easy to get committed representatives from Healthy Cities, Cork Environmental Forum, the Economic Development unit at Cork City Council, and the education sector together to be introduced to EcCoWeLL'.⁴

4. Freedom: The model used in the development of the EcCoWeLL approach to date has been to invite participation on an open and voluntary basis. While there is organisational support for participation, no-one is formally attending either the steering group, or any of the events organised under the EcCoWeLL banner, on behalf of their parent organisation or representing senior management. This has meant that all those who are giving of their time and experience are doing so because they choose to engage and to contribute what they can. This may not always work in other contexts or cultures but it is working for us to date.

⁴ Neylon, T. & Barrett, D., *Why Cork's Lifelong Learning Festival is committing to EcCoWeLL*, PASCAL Cities Learning Together Conference Proceedings 2013

5. Inspiration: The part played by PASCAL and PIE cannot be overstated. The fact that Cork City was invited to be a member of PIE was a great motivator as this gave recognition to the voluntary efforts of all those non-traditional learning partners and gave our city, small by international standards, a place on a global learning city stage. In particular the contributions made by both co-directors of PIE, initially by Peter Kearns in March 2013 and subsequently by Mike Osborne in September 2013, have helped to inspire and drive on the development of EcCoWeLL in Cork. Peter's travel from Brisbane Australia to Cork, and his patient but persistent probing questions by email ever since, were the initial inspirational spark that was needed for the seed idea to take hold and to grow. This was added to by Mike Osborne's contribution as a keynote speaker at the EcCoWeLL International Conference in September 2013, and subsequently in instigating Cork's participation in the UNESCO Beijing Conference on Learning Cities in October 2013 through an invitation from UIL Director Jin Yang. Cork's exposure internationally matters a great deal to the leaders in the city and has helped secure increased buy-in for EcCoWeLL. That was recognised by the Civic Reception awarded to EcCoWeLL Cork by Lord Mayor of Cork Catherine Clancy in the City Council Chambers in December 2013.

A new process-model:

Informality plays a key role in creating an innovative space where process has overtaken the outcome. The process has become the key focus of our work, which is difficult for large institutions in particular, as they are not used to letting go of the need to decide the outcome. Our methodologies have allowed us to focus on the process above all else - a key principle of how we work.

Need to record the model:

The organic nature of the development of the EcCoWeLL initiative in Cork to date has been a factor in its energy, and in its innovation. However, there is a real danger that the key strategic decisions and steps being taken by the Steering Group are not being captured. If the experience of Cork is to be of use in the future, either to other Learning Cities or to future leaders in the city itself, it is important that the model is recorded in a robust and transferable way.

International EcCoWeLL Cork conference 2013: The first opportunity to capture a range of inputs in the Cork City context around the themes of

Economy, Environment, Health & Wellbeing, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion was the International Conference held in September 2013, entitled 'Cities for the Future – Learning from the Global to the Local'. It was attended by almost 250 delegates - local, national and international - from across these sectors.

The format chosen was to follow keynote speeches with an 'open space' approach, where delegates were divided into small groups and gave short presentations about their own projects and exchanged information with each other. Among the keynote speakers was the Minister for Research and Innovation at the Department of Education and Skills.

On the second day delegates were taken on site visits, which were chosen as case studies of projects in each of the sectors – Economy, Environment, Health and Well-being, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion.

One of the outcomes of the conference was the creation of a wide body of support for working on specific projects that can gain added value by applying the EcCoWeLL approach.

Included among the cross sectoral events hosted to date are:

- the reimagining of a former hospital site, as a present day Health Campus and 'a Wellbeing Campus for the Future';
- a cross sectoral engagement event with the draft City Development Plan;
- Cork Harbour, present and future, economic, environmental and community considerations;
- Cork's docklands 2116;
- A series of open networking and ideas exchange events.

Opportunities since 2013: In 2014 two significant opportunities provided the EcCoWeLL Cork Steering Group with a new means of recording the process-model and the lessons learnt to date:

- taking an EcCoWeLL approach to Cork City's adoption of the UNESCO Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities;
- the invitation by PASCAL to lead an international network to consider the application of the EcCoWeLL concept to other cities.

UNESCO Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities:

During the Lifelong Learning Festival in April 2014 Norman Longworth travelled to Cork to take part in an EcCoWell Open Networking event, where he spoke about the Declaration; he also briefed Cork City Councillors on the Declaration.

As a result, Cork City Council voted to adopt the Declaration on April 28, 2014.

A high level Working Group reflective of the EcCoWeLL approach was then set up to conduct an initial audit of key features and work towards implementing the Beijing Declaration, using an EcCoWeLL approach. This Working Group has been meeting regularly since Autumn 2014.

Learning Cities Networks:

A Network of EcCoWeLL cities was initiated in 2014 by PASCAL as part of their Learning City Networks Programme. The following cities have expressed an interest in joining Cork as members of the EcCoWeLL group: Glasgow; Taipei; Tampere. Other connections exist with Vitoria Gastiez (European Green Capital 2012); Swansea (Twin City with Cork); Bristol (European Green Capital 2015); Belfast (Healthy City and Lifelong Learning Festival partner); San Francisco (Twin City and City of Scientific Culture partner); Cologne (Twin City and Smart City partner) and Limerick.

A series of events have been hosted to date, and will be in the future, to provide the backdrop for a growing network to which these city partners will be invited to contribute.

Among the significant city networking events we must include the Seminar during the annual Lifelong Learning Festival. In 2015 Glasgow and Swansea were represented at an EcCoWeLL Learning City seminar that featured UIL's Raul Valdez Cotera as the keynote speaker and was live-streamed for other cities.

In 2016 a seminar and plenary meeting featured speakers from Espoo and Swansea, (the other two European UNESCO award winning learning cities), representatives from Belfast, Derry and Limerick Learning Cities, and had Leona English of UIL and Norman Longworth former consultant to UIL as keynote speaker and rapporteur.

An application made to ERASMUS + in 2015 included Tampere, Glasgow and Swansea as partners but was unsuccessful. These events are an impetus for future developments as a means of growing and strengthening our learning city networks.

UIL Global Network of Learning Cities:

In 2015 at its second International Conference on Learning Cities in Mexico UIL launched the Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) and presented an inaugural UNESCO Learning City Award to Cork.

Cork was chosen as one of 12 cities to be recognised for having demonstrated exceptional commitment to progressing the UIL Key Features of Learning Cities and implementing the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities.

Cork, with the other 11 learning cities awarded, was featured as a case study in its publication – *Unlocking the Potential of Urban Communities*. Other cities that are formally joining the GNLC since its launch are potential partners in further learning exchanges and learning city networks.

Professional Development:

Adopting an EcCoWeLL approach has provided an opportunity to those of us working in the different sectors, of collaborating, breaking down barriers between them. It has greatly contributed to the professional development not only of the individuals involved but also our institutions. It unlocks traditional approaches and drives innovation in how we work and connect with others. It's what Peter Kearns calls 'cross pollination.'

Next steps: The features identified above have formed the basis of a framework for the application of the EcCoWeLL approach to Cork City development and may provide a starting point for other cities. They could also help develop the content of dialogues and exchanges with other city network members. It is intended that this framework could be used as a means of cities identifying their readiness to adopt an EcCoWeLL approach to their own development, particularly when applied to Learning City development, and as a stimulus to generating reflective contributions from the experience of other city development leaders internationally.

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