

Northern Ireland

NEWSLETTER

Issue 28 Winter 2015

Climate change

The defining
issue of
our age



 **friends of
the earth**
see things differently

CONTACTS

Friends of the Earth

7 Donegall Street Place
Belfast BT1 2FN
Tel: 028 9023 3488
Fax: 028 9024 7556
Email: foe-ni@foe.co.uk
Website: www.foe.co.uk/ni

James Orr
Director
Tel: 028 9023 3636
Email: james.orr@foe.co.uk

Declan Allison
Campaigner
Tel: 028 9089 7591
Email: declan.allison@foe.co.uk

Niall Bakewell
Activism Co-ordinator
Tel: 028 9089 7592
Email: niall.bakewell@foe.co.uk

Colette Stewart
Office Manager
Tel: 028 9023 3488
Email: colette.stewart@foe.co.uk

Local Groups

Banbridge and Mourne Friends of the Earth
Bonnie Anley
Tel: 077 3040 1331
Email: bonnie@mournecountrypark.org

Belfast Friends of the Earth
Jaimie McFarland
Email: jaimiemcfarland@yahoo.co.uk

Craigavon Friends of the Earth
Maggie McDonald
Email: maggiemcd@hotmail.co.uk

Queen's University, Belfast
Micheal Callaghan
Email: micheal.callaghan@foe.co.uk

Downpatrick Friends of the Earth
Imelda Hynds
Tel: 028 4461 2260
Email: iehynds@yahoo.co.uk

East Antrim Friends of the Earth
Niall Bakewell
Tel: 028 9089 7592
Email: niall.bakewell@foe.co.uk

Dear Executive Ministers

To me climate change is about much more than the technical challenge of reducing carbon emissions, important as that is. For me the real meaning of climate change is its role as a wake-up call to humanity, telling us something that we actually already know - that a good life is not to be found in acquiring ever increasing quantities of consumer goods: latest model cars and phones, multiple multi-media devices and a steady turnover of Swedish furniture.

Rather we know instinctively, and there is plenty of evidence to support this, that a good life is to be found in relationships with friends, family and fellow workers, in a fulfilling job, in learning new things, in creativity and in being grateful for what we have rather than dreaming of what we don't have.

The point is simple – living according to the things that matter to us most requires relatively few

resources once our basic needs are met. The climate can recover as we recover from many decades of mistaking consumerism for living.

But these twin recoveries won't happen without leadership and the trick for you, our Executive Ministers, is to pursue both together. This means ditching the unquestioning focus on the economy and being up front that the purpose of Government is the wellbeing of citizens which in turn depends on the wellbeing of the planet. Make the economy the servant of the people and not the other way around. Here are three steps in this direction.

First, focus capital spending on energy: saving it through a massive home and business insulation programme and generating it with ambitious support for renewables. This is a big creator of worthwhile jobs – people will love you for it.

Secondly, pretty much the best



Dreamstime

thing you could do for anyone is to help them get a decent job – one that uses and develops talents, that involves working in community with others and that, in the words of E F Schumacher, aims 'to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence'. Make that the mantra of Invest NI and all those working in economic development. Think about what a 'becoming existence' looks like – ask us, the people, what we think. Involve us in your plans. If you help me get a job that values me as a person, rather than a cost to be minimised, I will love you for it.

Thirdly, make a public commitment to work for 'the common good'. That

common good includes being willing to spend money in creating a better life for citizens, so appeal to our sense of solidarity: stick your necks out and unfreeze the regional rates. Require those who can afford it to pay for water. We may not love you for it but we will certainly respect you.

You can create the conditions to help us to get off the treadmill of consumerism and to live lives we have reason to value. Do this and you will be true leaders.

John Woods is a Visiting Research Associate in the School of Law at Queen's University.

Health inequalities

It may seem a bit of a stretch to write about health inequalities in Northern Ireland in relation to climate change. Unfortunately, here as in other parts of the world, the people who suffer most from the causes and effects of climate change are the poorest people. This is where the link between health inequalities and climate change emerges.

As a result of the Volkswagen emissions scandal, we are all

now more aware of the impact of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) on the environment. Frequent exposure may cause increased incidence of acute respiratory illness in children.

There has been no decrease in the average annual mean concentration of NO₂ at Northern Ireland's urban background monitoring sites; in fact, it has remained relatively stable over the past thirteen years, mainly because of emissions from road

vehicles. However, according to the NI Environmental Statistics Report, urban roadside levels have seen breaches of the EU annual mean limit value of 40µg/m³ in most years.

Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) are also harmful emissions and are of particular concern to human health. Benzo(a)pyrene (B[a]P) is one of seventeen PAHs, and has been closely linked to causing some forms of cancer. The UK Government and the Devolved Administrations adopted a threshold annual average concentration of 0.25ng/m³ to be achieved by 2010. None of the monitoring sites in Lisburn, Ballymena or Derry have come near to reaching that target – in fact, in 2013, they were all above 0.75 ng/m³.

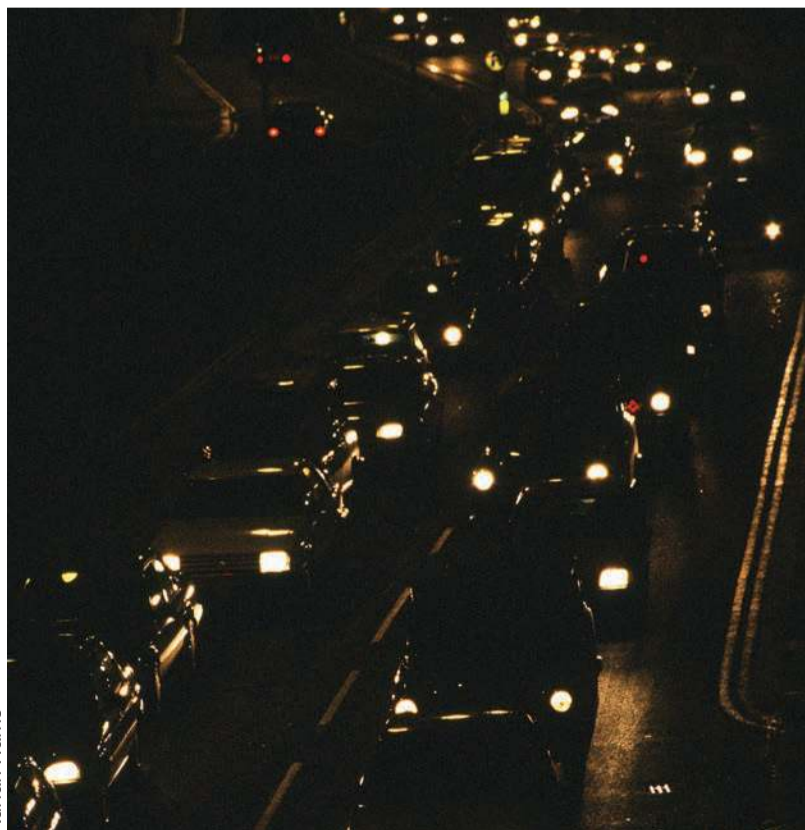
As well as being very bad for health, these are all substances that are contributing to climate change. And here is where health inequalities start to become apparent; in Derry, the monitoring site is in the Brandywell, in Ballymena it is in Ballykeel. Both of these areas are in the top 10% of deprived wards. In fact, poor air quality has been found to be associated with socio-economic status, with people living in deprived areas more exposed to air pollution. Chemicals in vehicle exhaust certainly contribute to that. As a result, when Belfast City Council,

in partnership with Belfast Healthy Cities, carried out a health impact assessment of air quality in the city, it found that air quality around the M1 and Westlink was very high in pollutants that impact on health.

The results of this pollution are disastrous for both climate change and for health. In 2008-12, the numbers of deaths per 100,000 from respiratory diseases was 35.9; in the most affluent 10% of wards, only 20 deaths per 100,000 were from respiratory diseases; however, the number of deaths in the most deprived wards was 82 per 100,000. This represented a 207% inequality gap between the most and the least deprived wards.

There is a very simple way to reduce our climate change emissions and at the same time improve the health of the poorest people in Northern Ireland – stop putting more cars on the road and invest instead in decent public transport. Such a move would also be helpful in meeting the welfare-to-work targets of "making work pay" and getting more people into work. After lack of jobs and childcare, lack of public transport to get to work is one of the main reasons people give for being unable to get or keep a paid job. It's time our Executive started to join the dots!

Goretti Horgan is a Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Ulster.



Adrian Harris

Editor: Declan Allison Contributors: John Woods, Goretti Horgan, Sacha Workman, Rita Harkin, Hugh Ellis, Helen Meech.

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For more than 40 years we've seen that the wellbeing of people and planet go hand in hand – and it's been the inspiration for our campaigns. Together with thousands of people like you we've secured safer food and water, defended wildlife and natural habitats, championed the move to clean energy and acted to keep our climate stable. Be a Friend of the Earth – see things differently.

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Low carbon diet

If we suspend belief for a second and imagine we had a fully functioning Local Assembly, what should we be urging them to do to cut the carbon in our food supply and help us eat our way to a better atmosphere and health? Those with vision and ambition driving genuinely local food culture change have fed me their thoughts.

For starters, healthy soil, that well proven, off the shelf carbon capture and storage process must be the centrepiece say Helensbay and Ballylagan organic farms. Overgrazing, chemicals and erosion have contributed to loss of soil carbon, fertility and water carrying capacity. Yet, the middle men's recipe to feed the world is, remove hedgerow, sow GM crops then liberally sprinkle with herbicide and fossil fuel fertiliser. Really? Reduce the long term viability of the very land required to grow ever more food? The Assembly must take revolutionary steps to connect food production, soil health and climate change: promoting and incentivising organic and reduced intensity farming, no till methods and alternative grazing schemes. This is an emergency and climate change will not make food farming easier.

Next on the table and not unconnected with the relentless intensification of agriculture is the gob smacking 30% of food we waste. The public is alerted and questioning the waste of embodied carbon in food that could feed more mouths. The Assembly must lead on reduction of food waste and its packaging from farm to fork: lobby for supermarket ombudsmen to contest last minute order cancellations; help

make business connections and facilitate innovative processing of "reject" supply. While they are at it, MLAs must enforce a sane hierarchy for surplus food: it should feed people, animals and only then, anaerobic digesters.

A third course of action, a low carbon diet, brings together the vital ingredients of local food procurement; less travel, fewer emissions, and the nation's health. NI eats a third fewer vegetables than the rest of the UK, too much meat and much out of season. Incredible Edible Cloughmills insists that better co-ordinated health & sustainability budgets could be invested now in getting cooking and growing into every community. MLAs could support the explosion of independent food community growing initiatives, legislating to ensure every Council establish banks of public body land for allotments, community gardens and orchards. Schools must be given access to gardens and the funding to support their grow/cook curriculum. Direct buying to collective order costs the shopper less than the supermarket yet sustains organic farms and avoids waste. Boxa says a radical rethink on infrastructure including, local abattoirs and EHOs trained to work with artisan size producers, is essential. Belfast Sustainable Food City is doing fabulous work in the whole food chain including Stormont

procurement, but couldn't the Assembly get serious and take this main stream and Province-wide?

Finally a take-away, keeping GMOs out of Northern Ireland was an excellent step in the right direction - respect. However, our representatives will have bitten off more than

they can chew if they do not fight to stop TTIP and to keep control of our nutritional and climate destiny.

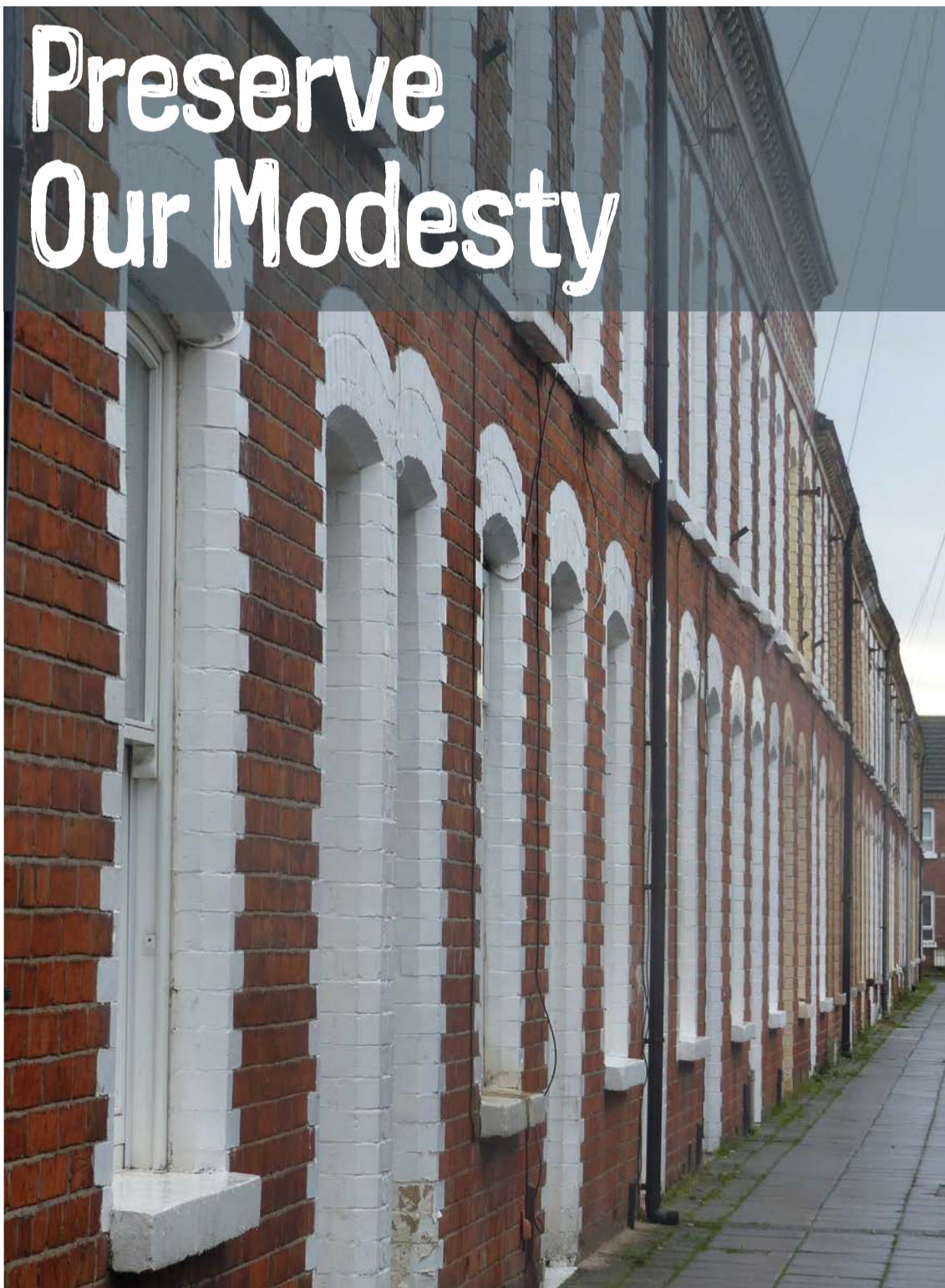
Sacha Workman is an environmental business pioneer in the fields of waste, renewables, and food.



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Preserve Our Modesty

Declan Allison/Friends of the Earth



As George Osborne trumpets the "biggest house building programme since the 1970s", the challenge to encourage our decision-makers to think small, and make the most of what we already have, is ever more daunting. Having been fed a diet of grand designs for years, how do we make modest designs an appealing prospect?

Our culture of waste is deeply at odds with the need to live resourcefully, within our means. And, in fact, there is much to be gained from taking this new tack. Modest, thoughtful design results in a more human environment and higher quality of life, leading to greater long-term prosperity.

A handful of Belfast based examples spring to mind where valuable assets are being wasted in pursuit of a grand plan. The University of Ulster, supported by the Department of Education and Learning and the Strategic Investment Board, is poised to demolish the substantial 1930s Orpheus building, with all the embodied energy and social history it contains. The building is a great example of how historic structures can be saved and repurposed, with the old department store and 'ballroom of romance' morphing into a much loved art college. But its story has been stopped short.

The Department for Social Development has funded the wholesale redevelopment of working class terraced housing through its Urban Renewal Areas, which are still being rolled out in places like the Upper Long Streets. It has also spent a great deal of time and money working with a private developers' consortium on retail orientated proposals for the 'comprehensive redevelopment' of a huge area within the Cathedral Quarter. This is the birthplace of the city and its designated cultural quarter. It boasts a host of listed buildings, in various states of disrepair, and straddles two conservation areas. These 'all or nothing' type proposals serve to stymie, rather than stimulate, urban revival.

Instead of encouraging land-banking, and waiting for the big idea to materialise, government could use its tools to encourage organic regeneration, with historic buildings restored, using traditional skills, for a diverse range of uses. This approach makes the most of unique character and populates individual buildings, creating street life, which acts as a magnet for visitors. Unsurprisingly, human scaled, interesting places are where people like to linger - and spend money too, creating the route to long-term prosperity.

Now that the DSD has pulled out of the development agreement, there is a chance to entirely rethink the new Department of Communities' and the Council's role in shaping the area's fortunes. The Heritage Lottery Fund's Townscape Heritage Initiative and DSD's halted Living Over the Shops schemes still serve as highly inspirational models. The best ideas aren't necessarily new and shiny ones.

It is heartening to hear that DSD has launched an Empty Homes Fund, encouraging the most sensible, sustainable means of meeting housing need. The work of Hearth Housing Association is a shining light, providing social housing in energy-efficient, retrofitted historic buildings like the terraced houses in McMaster Street Conservation Area. It has been quietly ploughing this furrow for over forty years, but perhaps here is a chance to begin to mainstream their modest endeavours.

Rita Harkin is a freelance built heritage adviser and a board member of Hearth, the Irish Landmark Trust and the Architectural Heritage Fund.

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Rewilding

The UK is one of the most ecologically depleted nations on earth. We have lost all our large carnivores and most of our large herbivores. While the global average forest cover is 31%, and the European average is 37%, ours is just 12%. Our ecosystems have almost ceased to function. Because of the absence of trees and loss of soil, our watersheds no longer hold back water. And, perhaps most worryingly, few people have noticed.

Rewilding offers a chance to reverse that. A chance to work with communities to restore to parts of the UK the wonder and enchantment of wild nature; to allow magnificent lost creatures to live here once more; and to provide people with some of the rich and raw experiences of which we have been deprived.

Rewilding is about the mass restoration of ecosystems. It benefits

nature, by connecting nature with nature, creating diversity and increasing the number of niches available, and making room for species to move through landscapes as they adapt to environmental change.

Rewilding benefits the wider environment too. By allowing natural processes to function, rewilding improves provision of ecosystem services. For example, restoring woodland reduces the flow of water downstream, flattening out the cycle of flood and drought. And increased woodland filters out contaminants that affect water quality, and increases carbon sequestration, helping mitigate climate change.

Certain keystone species can have a huge impact. Beavers clean rivers. Their ponds retain silts and trap nutrients. Whales can help mitigate climate change. Their feces

sequesters carbon into the deep sea. And wolves can regenerate forests by reducing deer numbers and creating a "landscape of fear" which allows saplings space to grow.

But it's not just about the environment – rewilding can bring significant economic benefits. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, the world on average has just 60 more years of growing crops. Rewilding can be farming's greatest ally. It helps restore nutrients, worms and mycorrhizal fungi to the soil, provides for pollinating insects, purifies water, reduces flood risk and helps resist droughts. Perhaps rewilding will give us a few more harvests yet.

Rewilding can revitalise local communities. An RSPB report found sea eagle tourism on the Isle of Mull brings in up to £5 million a year to the island's economy and supports 110 full-time jobs.

Rewilding is as much about people as it is about the planet. Time in nature improves concentration and behaviour, benefits health and



Lajos Endredi

wellbeing, and increases environmental awareness. Which is why rewilding is as much about rewilding ourselves as rewilding land. It's about experiencing the enchantment of wild nature, about noticing and experiencing what's around us, about an increased connection with the living planet – "to love not man the less, but nature more".

Rewilding is our big opportunity to leave the world in a better state than it

is today; to turn our silent spring into a raucous summer; to introduce one of the rarest of all species into the UK's ecological vision - hope.

Join the movement at www.rewildingbritain.org.uk

Helen Meech is the Director of Rewilding Britain.

Space for Hope?

In the aftermath of the terrible events in Paris in November one of the many passers-by gave an interview to the camera asking if there was any hope left. The extremism that led to those attacks had multiple and complex causes but one factor in radicalisation is undoubtedly the poverty and social division for which the outer areas of Paris are unfortunately famous. The introduction of US style zonal planning into England is being done with no awareness of how such

a system has been used in many US cities to reinforce racial segregation and poverty leaving a legacy of places scarred by inequality.

These examples illustrate that how we organise space really matters because people and places are indivisible. That's not to say all places have to be the same or even that we can achieve some form of perfect equity but that all places need to provide the social, cultural and economic opportunities

which make life worth living. So the question that's been kicking round Belfast for the last couple of years of whether the city wants to be Detroit or Copenhagen matters now more than ever.

The opportunity of a new Belfast plan and the wider devolution of planning to Northern Ireland's councils obviously needs to be seized. Not just to achieve new approaches to living more sustainable lives but

to begin to soften the social divisions that do so much to hold back personal and collective wellbeing. Some of these barriers are obviously sectarian but there are also urban and rural divisions as well as increasing intergenerational ones over housing and work and, above all, over growing economic inequality.

It is fashionable for politicians to excuse inaction by pleading that these problems simply result from the unchangeable economic laws and that trying to change them is futile. It is a message designed to undermine the debate about hope. In many ways it is designed, perhaps unintentionally, to distract from any collective conversation about the future.

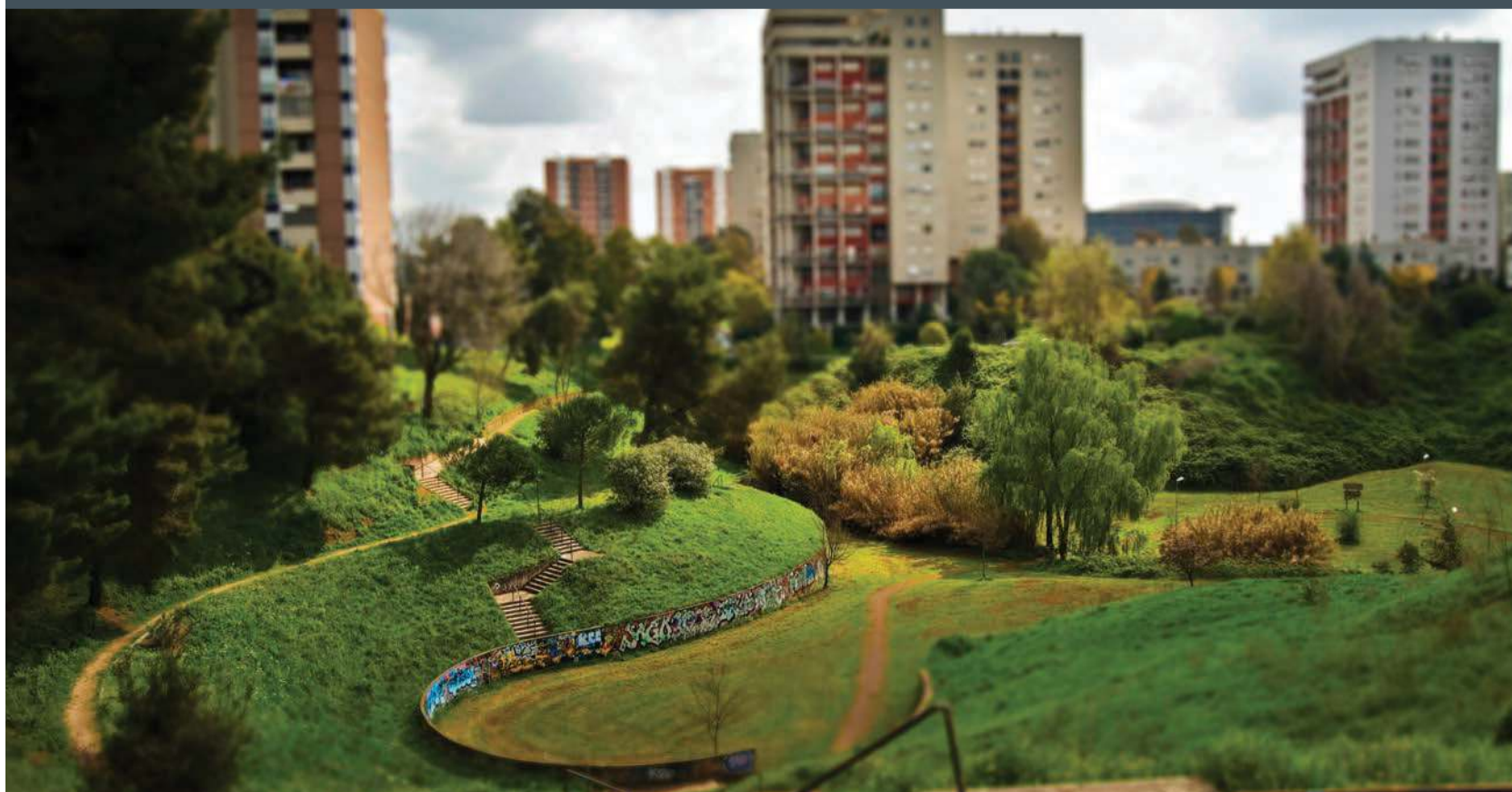
In fact we have much more control over the way we engage with the future than we think. All forms of human society are made by the complex interaction of democratic regulation and the demands of markets. Local food production, and community and municipal renewable energy are all practical solutions to localise our economies to spread the benefits of economic growth more fairly and sustainably.

What is so frustrating is that there are so many countries where this approach really works. These ideas could also create new partnerships between rural and urban populations. But these things won't happen on their own; they need the support of the Executive and of local government and, above all, of visionary politicians.

As England turns its back on the collective enterprise of delivering long term sustainable development, Northern Ireland needs to learn the lesson of smart democratic regulation in building a better society. From seeing the potential of Belfast as the heart of a wider city region right down to street and building level, the challenges of the future creates an opportunity for a better society.

Perhaps above all we need politicians who have the nerve to engage in the Hope game, not in some rhetorical sense but with a practical sense of what is achievable.

Hugh Ellis is the Head of Policy at the Town and Country Planning Association.



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