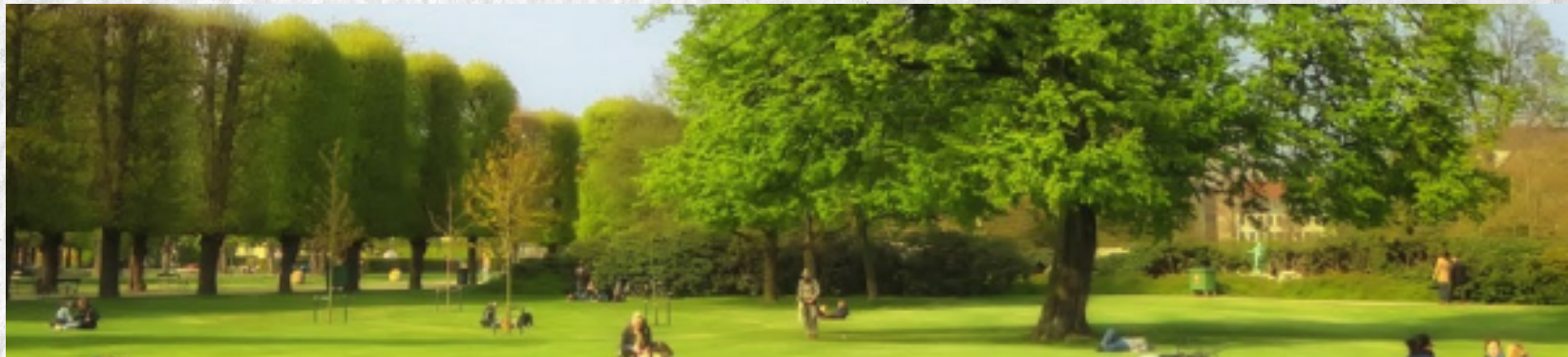


FRIENDS OF THE COMMUNITY PARK NEWLETTER



The Friends Newsletter is published periodically to keep the citizens of Ashbourne informed on how the park project is developing and to provide a forum for all to participate in the design and delivery of the park. It is published by the Greenspaces group, a community organisation set up in 2018 by the PPN Secretariat at the request of MCC Executive to promote the cause of a community park in Ashbourne.



THE NEWS

Preamble

The first Plenary session of the Meath Public Participation Network (PPN) for a number of years took place on April 27.



The Plenary is the paramount body in the PPN structure at the County level. It elects the Secretariat, the 12-member committee which is charged with dealing with matters on a day-to-day basis. The Plenary determines major strategic decisions, agrees programs of work, and generally resembles a meeting of shareholders in a corporate context.

This Plenary was much anticipated by those community groups in Meath who clung to the hope that PPN would experience a resurgence in Meath, that its early promise of community involvement in decision-making at the Local Authority level might become a reality. For reasons that continue to be debated, the health of PPN in Co Meath had deteriorated in recent years. The term of office of the Secretariat had long expired, and there was a conviction amongst some community members that Meath County Council (MCC) and many Councilors felt that PPN was an intrusion into their domain. The Plenary on April 27 was seen by the disciples of Citizen Engagement as a possible 'new dawn', a chance to start anew, lessons learned and imbibed, old scores buried, all in a spirit of 'let's try again'. Alas, that now seems a forlorn and

perhaps naive hope. The Plenary, which could have been held in a public setting, was instead held on Zoom. And no ordinary Zoom either. There was no audience participation - we were all muted for the duration of the meeting. Attendees could not see who else was in attendance - no thumbnail portraits or lists of attendees as per a normal Zoom meeting. The extent of audience participation was the opportunity to vote yes/no to some carefully choreographed questions, crafted to diminish the Citizen Engagement aspect of the PPN's role in Meath to the point of virtual non-existence. And we didn't lack for time, the meeting, scheduled to last two hours, was ended after 57 minutes by the facilitator, the only person who was seen or heard at the much-anticipated Plenary.

A Funeral in County Meath

Citizen Engagement buried in County Meath.

In response, the registered attendee from Ashbourne Greenspaces, Jack Holmes, wrote:

Last week, I had a most unusual dream; I dreamt I went to a FUNERAL.

I had not planned to go to a funeral - my schedule said I was to attend the first Plenary session of the Public Participation Network (PPN) to be held in Meath for a number of years. And a most unusual funeral it turned out to be. The deceased was a member of a large extended family, with more than 1,000 relatives across County Meath, all of whom had been informed of the arrangements multiple times.

Still, less than five percent attended the funeral. But if that was strange, worse was still to come: I know the number of mourners present (54) because the Celebrant said so. However, I do not know who was there, because I could not see any of them. Neither could I talk to them because my voice had been muted by the Celebrant. And we did not get to mingle afterwards, as the Celebrant cut the ceremonies short after less than half the allotted time had elapsed. Truly unlike any other funeral I'd ever attended.



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I should not have been surprised that it turned out to be a funeral. **THE DECEASED** had suffered neglect and downright deprivation for several years. He went by the name of Citizen Engagement, better known locally as PPN. The soubriquet 'Citizen' testifies to his European origins (Strasbourg, France we believe), and, to tell the truth, we're not even sure if his family there are aware of his fate. It will fall to some kind person to remedy this. He was never much welcomed by the authorities in Meath, though heartily so in most other counties in Ireland. Not quite strangled at birth, but certainly never nurtured sufficiently to allow any chance of growing to maturity. We'll miss him more than we know; a great potential lost.

Though we could only guess at who the **MOURNERS** were, our eyes being closed, and our voices stilled by the Celebrant, I'm guessing some of MCC senior management and a substantial cohort of councilors were there, if only to make sure the deceased was properly buried. Most of the mourners would have come from the community sector, no doubt attending out of respect for what might have been, a sadness tinged perhaps with a sense of guilt that they did not give him more support while he was alive.



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THE CORONER'S REPORT



The first draft of the coroner's report being to hand (anything is possible in a dream), I can share some of this with you, the reader (in confidence, of course!!!). I understand that the coroner drew her conclusions from evidence provided by members of the outgoing Secretariat, some community groups, and members of the general public who felt 'something untoward had happened here'. Her view was that MCC senior management never had any sympathy for the deceased, considering him a nuisance who could intrude in their time-honoured manner of doing things, asking awkward questions, and demanding to be kept informed.

He was an unnecessary complication and anyway 'why couldn't the public just ask their excellent councilors'. With some exceptions, the majority of the councilors appeared to consider Citizen Engagement as a competitor rather than as an ally, a veritable treasure trove of skills and wisdom; they dare not say it though, and sure there was no need to; they could just continue stonewalling by pleading their hands were tied by senior management (questionable though convenient). When the traditional 'Powers that be' effectively emasculated poor Citizen, his disciples responded by losing interest. Those Powers did this so effectively that the poor man couldn't even draw a quorum to his funeral.

ENTER THE SHADOWS OF AUTOCRACY

The Dream continued but the scene shifted. I was no longer lingering in the graveyard in the aftermath of the burial, seeking acquaintances whom I knew were there but who were invisible and silent. Rather my eyes were beginning to grow accustomed to the semi-darkness of a theatre with the lights dimmed. Several councilors whom I recognized were sitting at a table on the stage, facing an audience of perhaps 100. On stage right sat a lady who introduced herself as the Moderator. I realized I was attending the Southeast Meath Townhall meeting at the Venue Theatre in Ratoath, scheduled for the night after the funeral of poor hapless Citizen Engagement. The opening topics were dealt with very sensibly, water issues, infrastructure, parks and greenspaces,

access to healthcare; the very stuff that makes Townhalls so useful to those communities attached to them. We moved on to Housing. It was then that the train wobbled a bit. We should be aware (the moderator told us) that a forthcoming referendum which ostensibly is intended to tame land speculators excessive profiteering was going to enable the authorities to take away private homes, or rooms in private houses. The train was veering quite strongly to the right. Then a lady pleaded with us to stop persecuting our young men, who, it seems, 'are afraid to show their manliness for fear of being labelled homophobic'. Not to be outdone a lady beside the manliness champion declared stridently (if mysteriously) that 'No government was going to take away her right to be a woman'.

This was the point when the train left the tracks entirely.

It seems the World Health Organization (WHO) is intent on World Domination, nothing less. And who is its paymaster? Its Professor Moriarty? None other than the arch-fiend Bill Gates. But of course, we should have known that!!! And the real frightener was, this was not coming from some lúdramán in the audience; it was coming from the 'Moderator'. A man in the audience who protested 'this is conspiracy theory nonsense' was silenced by shouts of 'hear her out'. This was ridiculous. Trump had appeared in Ratoath, on a normal Thursday night, albeit in drag. My mind raced. What was

happening here? Was this the Ghost of what was to come, a Kafkaesque reckoning visited on the citizenry for neglecting their role as citizens, for letting others do their thinking for them? For leaving it to the ubiquitous 'Them' to take care of everything, or at least to be available as scapegoats when 'They' didn't do whatever they should have done.

The Shade of Yeats swirled through the auditorium, quietly intoning the lines of his poem,

The Fisherman:

*The clever man who cries
The catch cries of the clown,
The beating down of the wise,
And great Art beaten down.'*



THE REAL NIGHTMARE BEGINS.....

Though I am retired for many years now, I still waken on Friday mornings with that TGIF feeling - 'the weekend starts this afternoon'. Not so that Friday morning. I was still semi-comatose when it hit me. That was no dream. Those two episodes had really happened. PPN in Meath in its legislated role had indeed been buried on Wednesday night, with less than five percent of the Community Groups in Meath following the cortege. And a clone of the Donald had indeed spoken in Ratoath on Thursday night, disguised as the Moderator of a Townhall meeting. There must be a message here somewhere?

I feel I know what the message is; it's not new; in fact, it has been well described by wise men for decades now. Where Communities abdicate responsibility for their own affairs, where what was formerly a community project is now put out to tender, in such cases social capital, pride of place, community resilience, all suffer. Where citizen engagement is discouraged or impeded, as it is now in Meath, a 'can-do' outlook gives way to apathy, feeding an entitlement culture, where our only responsibility is to protest and call names. A local authority which discourages community engagement in decision-making is not only ignoring National Policy; it is also short-changing present and future generations. The ultimate price is the loss of the liberal democracy we have enjoyed for generations, as autocracy and inequality edge out the imperfect but very worthwhile social structures that communities have built over the years since independence.



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THE LATEST NEWS FROM ASHGREENSPACE STROLLERS

On a cool, dry Sunday in April, the AshGreenSpace Strollers had their first walk to the historic Dunsany Castle. We were greeted in front of the impressive castle by Randal Plunkett and taken on a tour of his Rewilding Project. Dunsany Castle and Estate is 20km west of Ashbourne, and is the



site for a very exciting Rewilding Project since 2014. The castle which dates back to the 11th century, is considered one of Ireland's oldest homes in continuous occupation. The present owner is the 21st Lord Dunsany, Randal Plunkett.



<http://www.ashgreenspaces.com/>



The Rewilding Reserve covers 750 acres of the estate (1,600 in total) and has many diverse habitats; woodland, marshy/wet areas, natural springs, the River Skane a tributary of the Boyne and areas of open heath and grassland. The reserve is now home to foxes, red deer, badgers, otters, pine marten and all the usual birds, crows and pigeons along with the more unusual jaybirds, woodpeckers,

sparrowhawks, buzzards and kite. After meeting in front of the impressive castle, Randal took us on a tour of the reserve. We heard about how the rewilding project started, he's not a farmer or a bio-diversity expert, so he observed and explained that he 'pretty much left it all untouched, with natural processes left to reshape the landscape'. If a tree falls, it is left where it falls as that offers a unique habitat for insects and small animals. He is collaborating with research experts and the day before had worked with the Irish Bee Conservation Project to put up a dozen bee lodges for the native Irish black bee. As we walked and talked, he regaled us with stories of his childhood on the estate, his family history, and what he's learnt along the way.

The group were thoroughly enthralled and enjoyed this first walk, and took away lots of ideas of how we might include aspects of biodiversity into our plans for our public greenspace for Ashbourne.

Our next walk is at Beaulieu House and grounds near Drogheda on the 22nd May 2022. We'd love for you to join us. For more details, email

info@ashgreenspaces.com

Ashbourne Greenspaces - Friends of Community Park

We need Volunteers

It's time now to ramp up the numbers signed on as Friends of the Community Park.

Last year the zoning of 80 acres was achieved by:

- The activities of Playspaces group over almost a decade
- The mobilisation of political support in Meath County Council by our elected Councillors
- The organisation of over 2,700 submissions to the County Development Plan by Greenspaces.

The critical factor was 2,700 submissions

The lesson: good arguments help but NUMBERS are what wins or loses in the end. For the next stage, turning the zoned 80 acres into owned 80 acres, we'll need those numbers again.

You can help by signing up as a Friend of Ashbourne Community Park

No commitment, financial or otherwise, just your opinions and ideas from time to time (though if you have the time and energy, we've lots of jobs for you)

Over the next few weeks, we'll be signing up new Friends in the streets of Ashbourne.

If you have a few hours to spare, get in touch and we'll be delighted to enrol you as a recruiter. And you get to meet many very interesting people in our Town.

Contact us at info@ashgreenspaces.com and put '*Recruitment Volunteer*' in the email title line.

Ní neart go cur le chéile



This section will be the 'Letters' page. Use it to seek like-minded persons to help develop an idea, to pose a question, to let off steam, whatever..... Don't use it to malign anybody or any body, rules of common courtesy apply and remember we're apolitical. Our email address is **info@ashgreenspaces.com** and we'd love to hear from you

That's all until next month.

Follow us on Facebook at

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