

Energy Biographies at Lammas Tir y Gafel Ecovillage

The Energy Biographies research project based at Cardiff University has been working in four communities across the UK to explore everyday energy use in the context of people's previous life experiences, current routines and anticipated futures. You can find out more about the project at: www.energybiographies.org

As part of the project, 18 residents and volunteers at Tir y Gafel took part in an initial interview in early 2012. Residents were followed up for two further interviews and photograph activities over the course of a year. This document highlights some initial findings from the research focusing particularly on experiences of ecovillage living, both from the perspective of those living within Tir y Gafel and participants from our other case sites. All participants have been given pseudonyms and are referred to here by their pseudonym initials for anonymity.

Energy use of Tir y Gafel residents

In the first interview, everyone was asked what they considered to be essential energy use. The word cloud below offers a visual representation of the things most commonly mentioned at Tir y Gafel. Whilst some of these were common across all the case sites (e.g. computer), others – such as light and firewood – were rarely mentioned in other case site areas.



The appeal of ecovillage living

People moved to the ecovillage for a range of different reasons but one of the most appealing factors was that planning permission provided the opportunity to live this lifestyle legally, which afforded some security.

We had previously been looking at different pieces of land and talking about it and maybe doing it in a sort of so-called traditional way of just building and going in without thinking about planning permissions and things like that but Lammas seemed like a bit more of a safe option... It gives us stability; no one can really kick us out of this land, which does feel more secure but there is obviously drawbacks in that as well. (AE)

[w]e just decided it was worth a go primarily because it let us do what we'd been trying to do for quite a long time but with the potential of doing it legally and it was that, in all honesty it was that, not having to hide away and as it were live in a shack at the end of a track, which lots of people have done over the years and particularly down here, it's happened a lot, people have done it hidden away but, you know, we just couldn't see doing it you know? (RH)

[w]hat is revolutionary and what has the potential is the fact that it's legal within a Western country. We have planning permission and we have Building regs and it enables Joe Public to come here and they have been coming and they probably will continue to come certainly until there's lots and lots of them and have a look around and say, 'I can do this! (VA)

The status of the ecovillage project as the first of its kind meant it was appealing to some who felt this may potentially lead to wider influence.

The fact that it was like a pioneering, flagship sort of project seemed like worth more than us just trying to do it ourselves, I liked that fact. (LW)

Whilst some felt planning permission offered legitimacy and security, others indicated concerns about the precariousness of the project; particularly if they were making the move from a more mainstream lifestyle.

Another motivating factor for many of the residents was the view that the ecovillage lifestyle was positive for raising children, and children were a central part of ecovillage life

In terms of the system, we love it, we love to be on the ground and to actually have our own ground to plant things on; to have places where the kids can run about, to have bees, so many of the things that we can do that we just haven't been able to do before and we did say for a long time. Giving our kids that opportunity is amazing ... a minute percentage of the kids in this country have that possibility, that life, and that's the great thing about it if you like, in a way for us. I can put up with a lot of struggle as long as I remember how much of a good deal they're getting really. (RH)

Planning

Given the emphasis placed on being able to live legally, the planning process was significant for residents and many had experienced it as an ordeal. At the time of our first interviews, several participants had outstanding planning issues that were being resolved. Some felt that the planners had tried to be accommodating, whilst being restricted by their guidelines.

Everybody needs to put in additional planning applications basically because their buildings have changed in design and people here would argue that because of the nature of the building and because it relies on what recycled materials you can find and what's available on the site, it's very difficult to predict what your building is going to look like, because you might find something and think, 'Oh I'll use that!' and then it's going to look different but the planners, the system doesn't cope with that and they have to know what it's going to look like in advance. So what's been happening is people have built something and then they apply for planning permission to live in it and I think the planners are bending over backwards actually and being really relaxed with us to allow us to do that. So I think they are doing their best for us, the planners actually, there are some really great planners in the planning department. I think, initially, there was a lot of hostility to this project but I think it's changing; there has been changes in staff with quite a lot of young, kind of sustainably-minded planners there now. (GR)

Others thought that the process had been obstructive as there was little political will to support the project and felt there had been a missed opportunity to see the ecovillage development as an opportunity for learning how guidelines and regulations might need to be adapted for low impact developments.

It was incredibly frustrating, not least in the sense that the planners came up with this policy and then made it as obstructive as possible for anybody to actually realise a project under their policy and to actually have eliminated their policy, it no longer exists even in Pembrokeshire... so yes, I find it very frustrating that whole, what is it? It's obstructive, it feels obstructive and to my mind it's like if they come up with a policy therefore there must be some will for that policy to become made manifest and when it's evident that there's absolutely no will to make it manifest it's just like the dots don't join up really and it's absolute pig-headed determination on the part of the people wanting to do this that enabled it to actually happen rather than it feeling like a process that was assisted by the planners, yeah. (VA)

The outstanding planning issues had been resolved by interview 3, although residents were still concerned that the planning process remained too obstructive for others to follow in their footsteps.

You've got, between us the movement and the Welsh Government we've developed a very, very, very comprehensive framework to assess and carry these types of projects but the problem is in interpretation because at a local level particularly but also to a degree at a national level it, it's not really working in that it's becoming too onerous and too restrictive. Because in order to justify, you know this type of project, generally you need to write something like a two hundred page application backed up by all sorts of professional expertise and so it's starting to get more and more costly. And because there are so many criteria to fulfil and they all need to be fulfilled just the smallest omission or, or interpretation can really obstruct an application process through the planning system. And so on the one hand I'm feeling, I'm feeling good that we're getting support from the Welsh Government but I'm also feeling a little bit concerned that, that it's not having the desired effect because it, it's just too cumbersome. (PR)

This speaks to current debates around the development of low impact housing more generally, particularly with regards to how the planning system has been shaped by specific models of house building that tend to favour larger companies. Although outstanding issues regarding temporary accommodation had been resolved by the later interviews, residents were still under pressure to meet targets of producing 75% of their basic needs from the land within five years in order to comply with planning regulations. The extent of what they were expected to achieve and the daily time pressures this brought about were significant.

If we were just raising young children that we put a huge amount of focus and time and energy into. If we were just building a house, I mean you see these grand designs programmes where people are building a house and you know, what kind of energy that takes. If we were just trying to start a smallholding; people come to Wales all the times to start a smallholding but with an existing house or a house that just needs a bit of work or you know. If we were just trying to build a community or kind of go through a developmental process for a community that really didn't exist before we got here because we didn't know each other, we've never lived together, we don't have a shared ethos or principles necessarily, it's not built into the Lammas project. If we you know, or just trying to deal with and engage with local and national governments in terms of low impact development policy and things like that, any one of those things or just trying to promote sustainability or low impact development within the, within the population and supporting people who want to do low impact development. Any one of those things is, would be a full time undertaking within itself. We've decided to do them all at once and we have agreed to meet some, these kind of abstract targets within 5 years as well, so it blows my mind. (MJ)

Negotiating community

In initial interviews, all participants were asked about their experience of community. This provoked particularly interesting reflections amongst Tir y Gafel residents on the process of forming a community. The absence of any *prescribed* social structure or ethos, as referred to above, has meant that this process has entailed the negotiation of relationships both on-site and off. Some described the benefits of this lack of prescribed social structure, although still highlighted community relations as important.

Umm, well we have a shared woodland; not that I've been involved this year with it but there would be a need for a group to get involved together, to work in the woodland for firewood and things. The Hub, I'm hoping will become more of a central focus for us as a group, there's no real compulsion and that's why I came here really because I've done the compulsory bit in the community and if I don't want to do anything I don't have to so it's quite nice that. (JE)

During the planning phase the site was met with some opposition from the existing local community. Tir y Gafel residents worked hard to assuage these concerns and felt that much of the animosity was overcome when villagers had a better understanding of the ecovillage and its residents.

There were a lot of people who were really against it in the village and who are now as pleasant neighbours as I've ever had really and in a way the profile's high enough, it's such, or we've had such a profile that maybe it's almost helped integrate us into the community more if you like because people know us more, they've got a handle on us a bit and in most cases they don't find us particularly threatening anymore and so, therefore, we have a place in the wider community. (RH)

I'm sure you've heard, there was lots of opposition, there was huge amounts of opposition, especially from the local villagers, placards and opposition letters and blah, blah, blah but we had Open Days, the first year we had them monthly and then last year we had them weekly but they made a massive difference. In that first year we had over a thousand visitors come up and over half of them were local. So there was a sea-change in people's attitudes towards who we are and what we're up to. I think as a result largely of those Open Days, and then there's things like the duck race in the village and we all go down, this ridiculous thing with these yellow ducks, floating ducks floating down the stream and stuff and the raffle and the tombola and all that sort of stuff you know ... So there's that kind of connection and I think there's quite a lot of goodwill that comes out of just being part of those things. There are quite a lot of people learning Welsh ... so just being able to speak a little bit of Welsh and communicate in the Post Office or whatever in Welsh, that kind of thing. I think that all definitely helps. (VA)

The ecovillage was intended to operate socially as a conventional village, where households could live relatively independently and people did not have to subscribe to a combining ethos, as in some other alternative communities.

I don't really see Llammas or Tir y Gafel here as an intentional community in that it was always designed that anybody could move in, could be a complete hermit all their life and sell up and move on and that's one of the kind of core principles ... it attempts to marry the best parts of the alternative culture with the best parts of the conventional culture and you know that's the intent. I mean you could argue that it is intentional in that everybody living here has got some commitment to low impact living but yeah, yeah broadly that's how I define the village. (PR)

However, the nature of the site requires some elements of communality. For example, residents have a shared woodland and community hub building. There is also a community hydroelectricity scheme, which requires careful negotiations over individual household electricity consumption.

There are communal aspects to it; we have got communal land and woodland and hut and events and we do things together but it's not a very tight community in the sense that we are quite free to make our own decisions and our own livelihoods and it's quite 'loose' in a sense. So I guess it's certainly not a commune but I guess in a village there is a village community and in the same way we have a community and maybe we have a little bit more to do with each other than a modern village community would have with each other because we live our day-to-day lives here and we have to do things together to be able to establish ourselves, so we have to meet each other on a daily basis (AE)

For some, developing a social structure alongside the other pressures residents faced was discussed in initial interviews as being a further strain. However, people also described positive aspects of the on-site relationships.

I feel I've got really good neighbours and anybody I could ask you know. People do all the time send out texts saying 'can anybody help with this?' or 'can anybody lend me this?' you know 'can I borrow somebody's car?' or whatever and that's lovely, that's really lovely. I see the rest of the world it's just chance, you might have a good neighbour or you might not and you might be able to build a good relationship, whereas here I feel that people have really signed up to be good neighbours and that's lovely. (EJ)

One of the more contentious issues discussed in initial interviews was the distinction between Lammas as an organisation and Tir y Gafel as the ecovillage itself.

I think so much of what we're supposed to be doing is local, land-based, we're selling produce locally, people know who we are; they see us walking down the street and go 'oh that's one of them' they know who we are, we don't need a logo, we don't need Lammas at the top of anything actually, we're already notorious (laughs). We just do what we do and people come to Tir y Gafel, they come on open days, they walk round the place and they say 'oh isn't Lammas great' no, we're Tir y Gafel. (JH)

Lammas is an organisation; Lammas is a lobbying organisation it is not a location. So we might be 'The Lammas Project' but when there are sixteen more of them I'll want the signs to come down so 'we' our residents have a place called Tir y Gafel. (JE)

Some people feel a real strong desire to differentiate ourselves as Tir y Gafel from Lammas as the landlord come Industrial & Provident Society, for myself I don't have a very strong need or desire to make that distinction or to make it that clear right now. Yeah we have been kind of thrown together and you don't pick your neighbours sort of thing. So we are becoming a community. I feel that's quite important. (VA)

By the third interview the majority of participants were much more positive about these relationships, feeling that they had come through a process of development to form a community. This sense of community was bolstered by other low-impact developments in the local area.

Well I like to think it's gradually sorting itself out you know? There is, there's definitely a, a sort of noticeable wider community building up. It's just in terms of you know

there's other people who have bought the land and moved here you know they're a bit more permanent volunteers or ones that have gone and come back on quite regular you know become sort of family members. So the place has kind of expanded from that quite insular feel of just the nine units huddled on the side of the river do you know what I mean? (RH)

Residents were also hopeful that community relations would continue to develop in future.

What I'm hoping, it will happen actually is that once everyone's got their home, or what you would call zone zero on the permaculture thing, that kind of your needs met, you know your warmth, your shelter and whatever, that we will start doing things, well obviously everyone's going to be more happy aren't they? ... Hopefully our businesses will be more established and I think more of a sense of community will come, that's what I want to see so that's what I'm going to work at making sure I do see! So yeah completed buildings and people just you know coming together and helping each other on the land ... somebody has taken that on and is trying to set up dates this year where we can go round people's plots and help if they want help and that's lovely isn't it? (HB)

Well it's this community working together; it's cooperation and you know the wealth is far more than money and individualism and I think I'm pretty anti-competition; I think we should cooperate rather than compete (RT)

Energy on-site

As the planning regulations stipulated the ecovillage must be off-grid, residents have been responsible for meeting their own energy needs.

The decision that we had to be off-grid came from the local authority and it was part of their stipulations in their Planning Policy, or their Planning Guidance I think; that the project should not be connected to any mains services and as I understand it there was a meeting where we tried to negotiate have an 'export only' electricity collection and they still regarded that as being connected to the grid So that means that we are left with the hydro-electric installation which ... is potentially a huge amount of power compared to what will be typical in low impact development projects ... In the wider scheme of things it's absurd that we're not able to export that (DS)

During the set-up phase, meeting energy needs involved piping water to all households, using solar panels and renting premises where they had access to mains electricity for charging. Residents were also working on establishing the site's hydroelectricity scheme to provide power for each household. By interview three this was up and running and they no longer needed to rent a space with access to mains electricity. After living with very limited electricity for several years, the hydro provided much higher levels of power, which required some adjustment in people's energy use.

I think you just 'do' and you just take it for granted. In fact a good example is when we didn't even have water, we didn't even have running water when we first came here, so you used to have to go and get your water. So that became really precious and you are really aware of not wasting water but now we've got running water and you're not so aware of it and you take it for granted I suppose and I think it's the same with the energy, you just take it for granted, that it's 'there'. I think you need famine in order to keep appreciating it do you know what I mean? (JP)

One aspect of energy use that participants frequently spoke about was car use. The location of the site made it

very difficult to rely on public transport and whilst some people used bicycles, the most common method of travelling off-site was via car. Most people expressed some concerns about this, particularly those who had moved from more urban areas and found that their car dependency had increased, which contravened their efforts to live more sustainably. Vehicle use was monitored as part of their annual monitoring/planning requirements, which was also an incentive to reduce car dependency. Many people had taken steps to address this, such as car sharing and combining journeys. Others had had vehicle modifications to run cars on more sustainable fuel, although this was often found to be problematic. Residents were confident that they would be able to reduce their vehicle use further in the longer-term.

I mean we are thinking of not owning a vehicle in two years' time so the car and the school run thing would be different ... in two years' time the amount of productivity from the land will increase further still so our needs for kind of shopping would be less and less. Plus in less than two years' time the hub shop will be much more so our kind of eco village shop will be much more established and have wider range of produce as well as other plots selling more and more produce, so yeah, yeah. (PR)

Issues related to physical energy were raised by Tir y Gafel residents more often than by participants in our other case site areas, as ecovillage living was described as physically demanding. Again, this is where the importance of volunteers was highlighted; the influx of physical energy and enthusiasm when volunteers arrived was particularly important.

It's physically very draining ... I come to this and that's when you really need a lot of energy to do it; it's not for the faint-hearted or weak backed, and conversely on that we've had loads of help, loads of volunteers, it's been an unbelievable thing ... [and later] I think's been the most interesting; not just the technical energy waffle we had about power and plugged into the grid and stuff, it's that energy and that's a different kind of energy but nonetheless energy and it has been the most real positive and upful bit of this. (RH)

Legacy

Each participant was asked what they felt the future held for the ecovillage, and what they thought the legacy of the project might be. Most people imagined that they would live in the village for the foreseeable future, and were endeavouring to create something that their children may want to come back to, or run themselves in the future (although acknowledging that their children may well have other ideas).

I don't know what the kids will think; maybe they will get to thirty and forty and think, 'Actually this is good' and come back with their family and take it on. In fact some of the buildings I'm building with the intention, although it's not meant to be that it could be reconverted back into a living space because this land could easily house more than one family and really I think ultimately, as we get older, I think it's going to have to be able to have a younger input because I can't, just like a village would, people look out for the older people in the community. So yeah maybe one of them, I don't know, no pressure on them to do it but I think the pressure might come from society in terms of things just getting really ridiculously expensive. I don't know what it's going to be like in 20-30 years' time. (JP)

Others commented that the site had a wider legacy, in terms of forging a path through the planning process and demonstrating to others that such a set-up is possible.

I guess that's how I see this as starting somewhere to prove viability. Yeah, that's a brief answer, there's a lot more to it than that because one of the key things to consider if you're looking at future scenarios and the role of Lammas is will the future be an organised planned change or will it be just you know chaotic? And that's quite a big question that I don't see the answer to but certainly in terms of sustainable futures this is a model that can be widely replicated with massive sustainable advantages on many, many fronts; you know carbon biodiversity, health, pollution, local food production, it ticks all the boxes you know it works as a holistic kind of system. (PR)

Views from outside

The final interviews we conducted concerned future energy use, particularly in the home, and all participants were shown video illustrations of future homes. As some of the promotional material concerning Lammas had described the site in terms of future living (and some residents also remarked that they thought this would become a more popular way of living in the future) we asked participants from other case sites what they thought of ecovillage living as an alternative to the high-tech solutions we presented to them in the videos. Although important issues were raised around availability of land etc., many people were positive about low impact living existing as an option, and often saw it as preferable to high-tech futures.

I'm a bit wary of that whole sort of going back to some idealised kind of a past when we used less energy ... there can be romanticism of this kind of past ideal age that I just don't buy really. And yet I do think you have to have respect for some sort of ancient ideas if you like and that's just something about us, we were supposed to be a bit more connected to our food supply and know where things come from and are involved in growing them and understand the processes that get food to our table for example to get fuel to our homes. I mean we have to value that, certainly the non-sustainable resources that we're using and understand those kind of issues (Steve, Cardiff)

I think if more people understood it and had an opportunity to experience it that would make connections for people because there's nothing so lovely as to sit in front of a real fire and if it's a sustainable wooden fire or to have your natural materials you don't have to have plastics and stuff you know ... I think as human beings we're animals and I think a lot of certainly young people who have been brought up in central heated houses with double glazing and everything don't connect, they just don't connect and it's a shame. When we were kids we used to go and play and light fires in the woods and kids can't really go out ... I think kids would benefit from growing food and seeing where it comes from and realising what it takes and what it costs to get the things that they take for granted. (Jack, Cardiff)

I love the sound of that you know if I could I would just go and live by the sea and have my own solar energy and you know be self-sufficient I just think it's a really nice natural way of living. And just the thought of it fills me with 'oh it's so nice'. I find like the reliance on electricity or gadgets to be quite depressing, it just seems to take like the human touch out of things and like we're losing touch with the basics of life you know which is human contact and interaction and so yeah. (Sarah, London)

I think as long as they are not going back and living in caves that is a good change ... So if they are living, if they're building these houses in a way that we can still keep the good things we have but in a way that we're not damaging any more the world around us then I would really like to see improvements and to see this growing. (Suzanna, London)

Ecovillage living was thus aspirational for many and represented a desirable vision for the future. Others had perceptions that it would be difficult to convince people to learn lessons from ecovillage life.

I think whereas the high tech view that there's a lot of money and a lot of effort going into selling the attractions I think there are as many things to be learnt from the eco village and the alternative lifestyles and I know it's not for everybody but there are things that you can learn from that and build into planning for the future and policy and developments for the future in just the same way that there is from the high tech, it's just not quite as sexy for politicians to sell that. (Mary, Cardiff)

One of the perceived challenges was that ecovillage life would involve communal living (although this was not the case at Tir y Gafel), which was seen as largely unappealing.

I think we can persuade some of the population to do more for themselves but not a lot and on the communal and cooperative side I think you're looking at a fairly steep mountainside on that one so I don't think they are the model for the future but they have aspects of a model for the future. I think it is to some degree a harking back to a simpler more self-reliant lifestyle and I think we've got too many people, too high a complexity of technology for people to actually be that self-reliant ... I hate having to buy anybody in to do things for me, I want to do it for myself and I am kind of willing to tackle quite a lot of things, but I know there's a whole host of stuff that is just beyond me and however much effort I made there would still be whole swathes ... that I just couldn't get to grips with. So to that extent we are stuck with specialisation and therefore growing your own food, doing your own repairs all of those things it's kind of out of sync with I feel the way it needs to be (Jeremy, Cardiff)

Summary

The Energy Biographies project visited the Tir y Gafel ecovillage at a time of significant development, both in terms of individual and village infrastructure and in establishing a community. A significant aspect of this was the planning process, which many people felt could have been handled differently in order to learn about different requirements for low-impact developments, rather than attempting to fit them to existing criteria.

Volunteers were an important aspect of the ecovillage and were attracted by the project's visibility and pioneer status. This raises important questions about how this could be sustained in the longer-term if such low-impact developments became increasingly ubiquitous.

Ecovillage life was seen as an attractive option for future living, both by Tir y Gafel residents and participants from our other case sites. The public visibility of the project means it is an important space for people to encounter and engage with ideas about low-impact living.