

In Conversation with Dr. Alison Gilliland

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Dr. Alison Gilliland was Dublin's 353rd Lord Mayor in 2021/2022. She is currently a Dublin City Councillor for the Labour Party, representing her local area of Artane/Whitehall and works as a facilitator, advisor and researcher. Her community-oriented council work is underpinned by her previous experience as a training and equality officer for her trade union, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation.

CJLPA: Dublin has had a mayor for nearly 800 years. How do you view your role as mayor this year?

Dr. Alison Gilliland: The role of mayor this year is a particularly pertinent one in the sense that we're transitioning out of a global pandemic. And then suddenly, we have the dark cloud of a war in Ukraine. So it's a year with lots of ups and downs.

When I was elected in June, I had three priorities: the sustainable recovery of our city, giving visibility to women and girls, and housing. I chose those three because they were issues in our city, like other cities around the world that are trying to recover from COVID, but they also speak to the global perspective – of the climate crisis, for example.

Firstly, COVID gave us great opportunities here in Dublin to accelerate some of the plans we had, particularly with regard to active travel and mobility. You might see a huge increase in cycling infrastructure around the city. That change took place over a couple of months, to allow people greater space to walk around and to cycle, conscious that people didn't want to get on public transport, but also conscious at the back of our head that we need to keep people less dependent on private cars. So there's an element of human and community recovery as well one of climate resilience.

Women, secondly, because globally women are not equal partners at the decision-making table. I'm only the 10th female Lord Mayor of Dublin City. The 10th in the last 80 years, because our first female was in 1939. So I'm very conscious of that gender imbalance. Also, from the perspective of urban planning and development, we need to have both views. How women move around the city and their experiences of work, culture, and recreation are very different to those of men.

And finally housing. We have a massive housing crisis in the country, but more so in Dublin as our capital city and biggest urban centre. We have people struggling to make rent, and people who would like to buy their own home but can't, due to lack of supply.

We're seeing an excess of 'build-to-rent' development, generally funded by investment funds demanding very high rents. That has a financial impact on people's ability to live and work in the city, and a knock-on impact on our domestic economy. The question is: how can we square that circle? We do as a city have responsibility for the provision of what we call social housing, housing for people under a certain income threshold. While we don't technically have a responsibility for the provision of housing for those above that threshold, we're very conscious of those at a middle income that are struggling, so we've taken it upon ourselves to build cost-rentals: lower rent, not-for-profit rentals on public land.

They're the three big issues for me. And, of course, other issues pop up during the course of the year. One of the issues that has come up for me is the high level of street issues: on-street homelessness, on-street addiction and substance misuse, and on-street safety.

CJLPA: You said earlier that 'we only have a responsibility for social housing, but have taken on developing cost-rentals on public lands' to ameliorate the housing crisis. Who is 'we'? Is that the Dublin City Council?

AG: Yes, it's the Council. At the national level, the Minister for Housing, Local Governments, and Planning produced legislation that allows for what we call cost-rentals. As a local authority, we own some of the public land in Dublin City, with other public land owned by state bodies or the Office of Public Works. What we are doing on some of our larger developments is mixing social with cost-rental.

I think one of the reasons we have got into a situation where we have so little housing stock in public ownership is because we've had a scheme whereby local authority tenants could buy out their local authority rental house. We've 'lost' 25,000 units because of that and I'm very concerned about the long term. We have people now paying very high rents. My question is: what will happen to those people when they retire and they take a significant drop in their income? They won't be able to afford those rents. We need to build

and increase our housing stock so that we have a cushion there for that eventuality down the line.

We also need to increase our stock to accommodate those on social housing waiting lists. As a state, I believe we have a responsibility to help those who can't afford housing because we need sustainable communities. If we don't have sustainable mixed income communities, we're going to get different ghettos and communities isolated from each other.

CJLPA: How has Russia's invasion of Ukraine impacted Dublin?

AG: We now have refugees arriving in the city every single night. We have established several 'resting centres' with the civil defence and housing section, where we look after them for 24 or 48 hours until they're allocated somewhere for accommodation. That's our role at the moment. I can see that developing into the provision of housing and also integration.

I'm conscious that most of the families are women and children, who will need schools, and involvement in local community activities. They are safe here, but probably suffering trauma and we need to figure out how we can best support the manifestation of that trauma.

CJLPA: You have been a Dublin City Councillor from 2014 to 2021. Over those seven years, which of Dublin's issues have grown in salience and which have shrunk?

AG: What has particularly grown in importance is the climate crisis. Every report that we get is worse. The national government does have a Climate Action Plan, which is very good in the sense that it sets out very clear objectives. But I don't feel that we are doing enough. I don't feel a sense of urgency from some of the actors at a national level. So for ourselves at council, it's our responsibility, and my responsibility as Lord Mayor, to push that agenda. The climate lens permeates everything I do.

For example, in the sustainable COVID recovery, we're concerned with accessibility in the city, permeability in the city, walking, and cycling. This ensures sustainability, but also enhances the quality of our air. I'm old enough to remember smog in Dublin clinging to your clothes. We've come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.

We also need to be more conscious of greening our city, not only from the carbon and climate change perspective, but also in terms of quality of life and the aesthetics in the city. We started a pilot to pedestrianise some of our streets. We have two main areas that are pedestrianised, and a third one which we trialled on weekend evenings last summer. That is now going to be made permanent.

This should really enhance the city. What we hope to do is have people arrive into the city by Connolly Station, which is our north-south access, and be able to walk at least five kilometres in a pedestrianised or traffic-free area. That will give great accessibility to the city, a lovely sense of flow, and a sort of added ambience.

CJLPA: The Dublin City Development Plan 2022-2028, and the development strategy of other cities such as Paris, emphasise the '15 minute city'. Can you speak to the significance of this?

AG: Yes. What the idea of the '15 minute city' will do for Dublin is make us focus on creating communities that have all the services they require within a 15 minute walk, cycle, or journey by public transport.

There are two challenges in that. Obviously, it's about reducing your carbon footprint by limiting the need for private transport, but it's also about growing communities and bringing people back together. I think we all saw that during COVID lockdowns, with small enterprises developing within local communities. The challenges we have in this respect are getting more people to live in the city centre, because that's where a lot of the employment is, and getting employment into local communities. We now need to be more conscious of the balance between employment opportunities and housing. We can't build residential units and housing on every single piece of land we have and take every piece of land, because it's more than houses. You need community infrastructure, recreation, and employment.

One of the issues I'm working on is over-the-shop vacancy, or what we call upper floor vacancy. I hosted an online summit just before Christmas, where we brought in a lot of the stakeholders, owners of some of those buildings, architects, developers, and businesses, to identify what the key challenges were. There are challenges around planning requirements. But one of the biggest challenges is that those who own them are not motivated to go through the pain of planning, financing, and regenerating the floors of the shop. In a lot of cases, they don't need the income. Many of the owners don't even live in Dublin.

So that is a challenge. We have a few ideas of how we might partner with private developers and owners to help regenerate those upper floors because they're such a valuable resource. We can't demolish and rebuild everything. We need to be sustainably 'recycling' these buildings, reusing them and not releasing any more carbon into the atmosphere.

CJLPA: Do you compare Dublin to other cities? And if so, are they other Irish cities, other EU capital cities, or global cities?

AG: I consider Dublin a European capital city. The size of our country and the size of our capital is similar to Denmark, one of the smaller European countries. Every city, particularly Dublin, has its own unique characteristics, but we do aspire to be one of the leading European capital cities and I think we're well respected. Tourists love Dublin because of its unique character and the people. Dublin people make Dublin. And we have similar challenges to other European countries with regard to climate, housing, resilience, and post-COVID recovery. So there are a lot of similarities, but Dublin has its own unique context.

One of the things that really struck me this year was the reaction from Dubliners to outdoor dining. We don't have a tradition of outdoor dining in Dublin because of the climate, but with COVID we introduced outdoor dining as a way of enabling the hospitality industry to get back on its feet while there were still restrictions on eating indoors. We doubled the number of seats and tables in an outdoor space in the city in a couple of weeks. And I think that that atmosphere, along with the pedestrianisation of a lot of the streets, has really increased the European vibe in the city. I know a lot of people have fed it back to me and said the city now feels like those modern European capital cities. You have it in Paris, and it rains in Paris as well. I think we don't mind sitting outside, under the heater, with coats on. It's an element of the city that we can then enjoy.

CJLPA: How has COVID impacted Dublin?

AG: No more than any other European city. We've lost businesses, particularly in the hospitality sector because they suffered most from the lockdown and the restrictions. I wouldn't say we 'lost' our arts and culture and industry, but they really, really suffered.

I think that had a two-fold impact on us. We realised how central arts and culture are to our well-being, and the balance that we need in every community within our city. Previously, there was focus on the city centre and on people coming into what we call 'town' to go for a bite to eat, go to the theatre or cinema. COVID exposed the dependence the city centre had on workers coming in every day for retail, for hospitality, and for culture. When they weren't there, communities in the periphery of the city were flourishing because everybody was located at home in their own area. And the city centre was vacant and empty. That has given us a real impetus to work harder on upper floor vacancies, for example, to get more people living in the city.

CJLPA: Why are arts and culture important to communities?

AG: I suppose it's the coming together of the community. Even though you may not know most of the people in the cinema, everybody laughs at the same thing. It's that sharing. As there can be such a focus on academia, and business, and the economy, people tend to forget the importance of people who work and thrive in the arts, how we as humans thrive through the arts.

One of our challenges is to find more arts and culture spaces. Because it's not a business as such, it's hard to make a profit that will allow you to pay the high rents. When we came out of lockdown just after my election last year, myself and the head of city recovery approached some of the big landlords on our main retail shopping street, Grafton Street, where they had vacant commercial space, and asked them if they would give us the space for six months at a very cheap rent, where we could experiment with pop ups. Whether that be arts workshops or the circular economy and upcycling, to see what people would react to, what they wanted in a space, and at the same time create footfall.

CJLPA: Where, and in what way, is Dublin's local art and culture under threat?

AG: We're particularly conscious of 'The Liberties', Dublin 8. We've had a significant amount of applications for build-to-rent. We're looking at thousands of new apartments. But it's also one of the areas that has the fewest green spaces. We're in favour of preserving green spaces for recreational use. If we're going to be true to the concept of a 15-minute city, you should also be able to walk to your local football pitch to play, or your local club. So there's always a tension around use of land.

The other challenge we have is where private owners develop older buildings that might have a cultural space in them. One earlier this year was called the Cobblestone which, for all intents and purposes, is a pub. But it's bigger than that! It has rooms for people to learn to play Irish traditional music or take Irish language classes. It brings people together for that Irish cultural space, and you just can't recreate that. That was going to be demolished, and a hotel built on it, but planning wasn't given. We've written a compromise into our Development Plan: where a cultural space is going to be redeveloped, the size of the cultural space has to be retained and

recreated as far as possible. One of our problems, in the interaction between national and local, is that we have no definition of 'cultural spaces' in national legislation. So for some, as in this case, a pub was a cultural space, even though that would generally come under hospitality. The other is the architecture of the place. These new shiny buildings are beautiful, but it's almost like we're sanitising the city.

We have to be conscious to retain what makes Dublin City's character and hold onto some of those old buildings. We have a beautiful theatre, Smock Alley Theatre, and we're in the process of reclaiming that as a municipal theatre space. We have the old school of music off Grafton Street, which is vacant at the moment. In our Development Plan, we're looking at how we can best use that space. We're giving it over to artists for temporary use, but questions remain in the long term. Should we use it as a museum? My preference would be using it for something that's more interactive. That could be science, tech, or arts, but the aim would be something that people can actually go in and interact with, instead of just passively looking. My underlying principle when it comes to developing our city is: if it works for Dubliners, it'll work for tourists alike. I think there was an over-emphasis during the early 2000's on the tourist economy. We're creating an experience in the city for tourists without thinking about our own Dubliners who need experience.

Another challenge is that our public cultural experiences like museums all close at six, which isn't always accessible to families with children or workers. We hosted an exhibition at the Round Room of the Mansion House this past summer open until eight o'clock, and the public reception towards this showed these opening hours are more accessible.

CJLPA: In an architectural sense, how do you balance progress with culture and heritage?

AG: We have a scheme called 'Protected Structures', according to which we are conscious of buildings with a particular architectural, social, or historical value. Once they're included in that record of protected structures, the physical and cultural integrity of those buildings has to be preserved. In some cases, planning would just require the façade to be retained, whilst the inside can be regenerated in a more modern way. Other times it's the integrity of the entire building, including the contents. That's probably the best way that we can retain our cultural and social architectural heritage.

CJLPA: Who puts structures on that protective list?

AG: We retain the list. Anyone can apply and say 'let's save this building, we think this building is of significant architectural heritage'. You make an application, then it is assessed by heritage officers in the Council. Every building has some sort of architecture, culture, or social value to it. It is a balancing act, since you have to ensure you're not blocking a huge amount of modern development, but we're very conscious of the need to preserve our cultural and architectural heritage.

CJLPA: How does a city facing a housing crisis balance the rapid delivery of houses with social infrastructure?

AG: We use our Development Plan. In this Plan, we have certain criteria with regard to social and community infrastructure. For example, our Development Plan requires a childcare or creche facility for every X number of residential units. There are requirements in some of our zonings for 20% of the land to be used for public open space.

It's not always easy. Take schools, for example: the Department of Education decides where schools are. If we own the land we can work with them, but where private owners own the land this isn't possible. One of the difficulties we have run into is that the Department of Education doesn't take account of the 15-minute city or sustainability. They look at a five kilometre radius, but you cannot walk five kilometres, and you probably couldn't cycle it if you're a young kid. Again, it's trying to align national and local parameters.

CJLPA: Dublin is a short city, slow to incorporate skyscrapers. But are they a viable solution to the housing crisis?

AG: We've been gradually moving to higher buildings in the city. Our docklands are a wonderful example of height when it's well planned. I think that there's an aesthetic 'skyline' consideration. There are questions with regard to them being the solution to residential needs. I'm not sure about that. There is a cost: the higher you build, the more expensive it is. And with regard to our own fire safety requirement, once you pass a specific height, you then have to increase your fire safety installation requirements.

There's also the energy concern as regards the installation of lifts up and down. There's a lot to consider there. We have some very high-density areas that are low; height doesn't necessarily give you density. The other consideration is the amount that a residential skyscraper would cost either to buy or rent. We have a lot of very high end, high buildings that are financially inaccessible to those who need housing. While developers will say 'I want to build a 42 storey residential building that will provide X amount of residential units', my question is: well, how much will they cost through rent? Because if it's more than 30-40% of somebody's disposable income, it's not going to serve the city.

CJLPA: What would be some popular misconceptions about solutions to the housing crisis?

AG: That there is a solution. It's very, very nuanced. We do have to build, but planning regulations can inhibit this. The new, special planning policy requirements that were brought in nationally, which superseded our development plan, particularly with regard to height, have held up so many planning applications.

With regard to social housing, we have to jump through hoops with the Department of Housing when we're building. It takes about a year and a half to go through that application process with them. The big challenge now is how to build sustainably.

The war in Ukraine has created difficulties with international trade and prices of construction products have increased. There is a difficulty finding people now to work on construction. So there are lots of factors and no one simple solution, except just build! And build sustainably.

Kylie Quinn was born in Dallas, Texas, and studies Law and Political Science (LLB) at Trinity College Dublin. Focusing her final year on Law, Sustainability, and Finance, she will graduate in 2023.
