

Environmental scientist Jack O'Sullivan

'WE CAN ALL DO OUR BIT'



In 1999, environmental scientist Jack O'Sullivan who has lived in Castlepollard for 25 years, was working for groups of local people around Ireland people who were very concerned about landfills.

"They either didn't want a new landfill near where they lived, or alternatively the local landfill was smoky, with scavenging birds, rats, wind-blown litter, occasional fires and horrible smells. That was before the EPA was established, and made sure that County Councils managed the landfills properly. About a dozen of these groups came together in 1999 in the Hudson Bay Hotel, Athlone and set up **Zero Waste Alliance Ireland**, which is a non-government environmental organisation with the aim of trying to get landfills improved or closed down, stop incineration, promote recovery of discarded materials, not just energy, but recovering actual materials, recycling, repairing and reusing."

For the first 10 years, **Zero Waste Alliance Ireland** comprised of just four people. It is now a registered charity, with 30 mem-

bers, a six-person board of management and is registered as a not-for-profit company. Jack O'Sullivan has been at the heart of The Alliance.

"A lot of our work is education," Jack said. "We also respond to public consultations. Every few months, Government departments or the European Commission will issue a public consultation notice, saying they've produced a draft policy and would like comments on it. They post it on their website, then we decide if we'd like to respond to that, for example we responded last year on the topic of vaping devices."

Jack is not a fan of the nicotine devices for environmental reasons. "They are horrible things, creating a lot of difficult to manage waste, plastics, toxic materials and some electronics as well. There's no way of recycling or reusing the materials. So you're dealing with thousands and thousands of small objects, which are useless at the end of their lives, and have to go to a landfill or an incinerator.

"Another of our pet grievances is from 2011 onwards, all of our waste is handled by private companies. They have control. We

don't really know where our waste is being taken, and our national recycling rates are far too low. If I send my waste to be recovered, it is burned. Eight or nine years ago, this form of disposal was called "energy recovery", meaning when you burn all this waste, you get some heat, some energy; for the reason that plastics have a very high calorific value."

Getting to zero waste is achievable though challenging according to the Cork native.

"When you think of zero waste, you think about living in a way that produces no waste, and that is entirely possible. We can design and make everything we use with an end-of-life point in mind. You create something which can be recovered, reused, recycled or put back in nature. In a forest there is no waste, in a meadow there is no waste, it all gets used up by animals and plants, everything is circular.

"Government policy needs to change radically; and we believe at **Zero Waste Alliance Ireland** that waste is a community resource and should be community managed. This makes sure that people produce as little waste as pos-

sible, and recycle whatever waste is there. We might have to sell off our plastic to a company that manufactures useful objects from it, but we take control of it. We don't use waste as a source of profit."

The environmental crisis is so big that people can feel overwhelmed and think their efforts make no difference, but Jack says this is absolutely not the case, outlining four steps we can take today to help the planet.

1. SHOP CONSCIOUSLY

Try to grocery shop locally for local, loose products and, if they are in packaging, check the label to see where they've come from, and drop the packaging in the store before you leave where possible. Buy only what you need, grocery offers might seem like a bargain but will they end up in the bin? Hundreds of thousands of tonnes of food are thrown away every year.

Fast fashion is bad for all sorts of reasons including environmental, ethical and waste. Look after your clothing, swap with friends, donate, use charity shops and social media swapping groups. In European towns and cities, and

in eastern countries, local markets are cheaper than the shops, but not here. A lot of our problems are because we buy things we don't need to impress people we don't like.

2. GO WILD

If you have any land around you, let a little of it go wild. If you don't mow your lawn, watch the grass grow, come into flower and you'll find butterflies, bees and other insects will start to come. Then they'll bring the birds. At the end of the summer you will need to cut it with a strimmer because if you leave it wild the grass will die, and the downside is that it is a lot of work. Leave natural hedgerows of different species when possible to attract the wildlife.

3. REFILL

Jack recommends using local stores like The Refill Mill in Mullingar where eco-friendly products are on sale with a zero waste aim. "If we don't use them, we will lose them," he added.

4. LOBBY

Something we can do that takes more thought but Jack believes is vital, is to lobby. "It is the only way big change happens. Take public transport. We should use it when it is available and lobby for better transport where it is not. 80% of people living in rural Ireland are totally car dependent, including myself. That is outrageous and we need to do something about it.

"One of the things I learned about public transport years ago is that if you want people to use it, it must be comfortable, reasonably fast, affordable, efficient and reliable. Far more small bus routes leading to a main route, ideally with a central bus station beside the train station, demand it!"

"Doing these small actions will make a difference to the planet," he concluded. "They may well leave more money in our pocket too. Don't feel the issue is too big. We can all do our bit."