

Eileen Conn has had a long-term interest in the dynamics of communities and their interactions with public agencies and commercial companies. For her study of social dynamics and complex living systems, and her work in the field of sustainable and cohesive communities, she was awarded an MBE in 2009. Marlow interviews Conn about community activism and systemic change.



## Things are changing all the time

**OM** How do you think systemic change happens—is it through small interventions that then proliferate or by top-down macro shifts?

**EC** If you have a macro intervention change will happen, but it's not necessarily the change you're expecting. One thing that we're missing in our way of thinking is that the systems we're trying to affect are living, organic, dynamic systems, which are unpredictable, non-linear and unable to be manipulated perfectly. We run everything like a machine, which is why it's not effective and why it has perverse results. We're trying to devise all these policies and interventions without understanding the distinction between the systems.

**OM** What are the ways that you can influence or engage with these systems?

**EC** I'm interested in the way we organise things to achieve collective ends and in making decisions more effective. In the complexity theory world, scientists have devised this idea of a space of possibilities, which is that evolution happens for organisms within their interaction with their environment. Some people have used this idea to conclude that this is where change in the organised world happens. I call this the vertical hierarchical world, as compared with the horizontal peer world, where people come together collectively. Part of the problem is that most people have to produce something within certain deadlines and this is deadly because people start cutting corners. I'm under no illusion that it's going to take a long time to change the way the organised world works. We've got to find ways to mitigate,