

By Richard Delahay



More than two-thirds of Britain's land area is classified as rural yet less than a third of the population live in these regions (Pateman, 2010/2011). Zero Carbon Britain (ZCB) promotes many changes that will impact directly upon rural Britain. For example, the majority of large scale renewables will need to be installed near these communities.

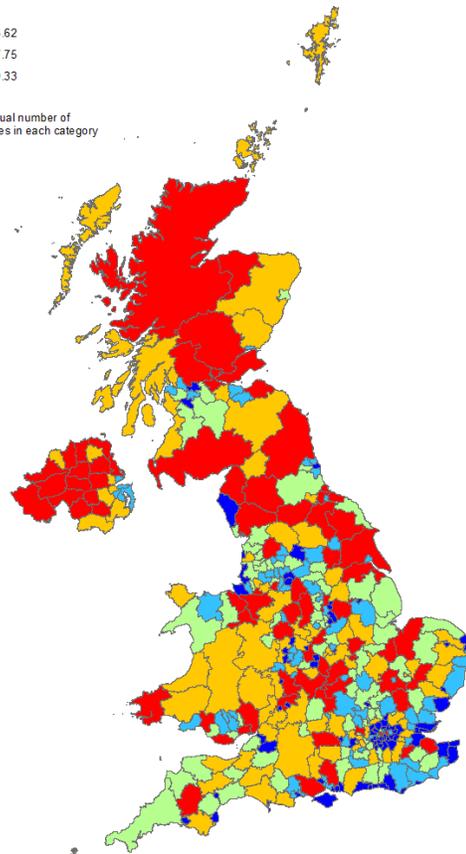
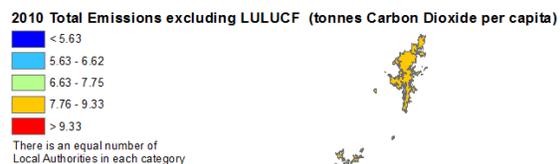
With the ongoing recession and economic decline hitting rural areas hardest (DEFRA, 2012), can decarbonisation improve local economies and the environment?

As our emissions continue to rise, it is clear that rural communities will need to play a fundamental role in rapid decarbonisation. The average greenhouse gas emissions per person are 8% higher in rural areas than in urban areas (CRC, 2010) (see Figure 1). ZCB promotes a vast reduction in Britain's livestock because of high emissions from grazing. This shift in farming means that rural communities will have to embrace the transition. Therefore it is important that rural Britain is completely behind rapid decarbonisation.

Large scale renewable energy developments, such as wind farms, have been subject to a 'not in my back yard' effect (NIMBY). Indeed, Devine-Wright (2010) shows that local opposition is not as influential on the outcome of the planning process as many might believe. While ZCB promotes a majority of offshore wind compared to

onshore, there is no doubt wind farms are going to become a more familiar sight within the British landscape.

This displays the underlying paradox that in order to protect the wider environment sometimes we have to impact upon rural landscapes. Hill Holt Wood, a successful social enterprise in Lincolnshire, provides a good example of how rural Britain can benefit from generating energy off grid, whilst minimising impact. Income is generated from training and the sale of wood products. This approach to forestry has created a sustainable business that rewards the environment and community.



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Figure 1: Emissions of CO₂ per capita by Local Authority (t), excluding LULUCF (DECC, 2010). Rural Local Authorities are generally seen to have higher emissions than urban.

Another barrier to change is car dependency, perhaps one of the toughest to solve. Rural public transport is inconvenient and expensive in comparison to the service available in cities. In 2009 42% of households in rural areas had a regular bus service close by compared to 96% of urban households (DEFRA, 2012). Thus, car ownership levels in the countryside are higher than those nationally; 90% of households own at least one car compared with the national average of 59% (Barnett, 2007). How can rural councils expect to reduce their carbon emissions without prioritising public transport?

Subsidies have been put in place to support these important rural life-lines. The Green Bus Fund, introduced in 2009 to support low carbon buses, is a step in the right direction (though the majority of funded buses tend to operate in more urban areas). The Scottish Green Bus Fund has enabled Aberdeen to invest in ten hydrogen buses. If these can be shown to be viable then more of these schemes should come to rural regions.

However, the Government's Rural Bus Subsidy Grant has been drastically cut in recent years. This highlights the pitfalls of subsidies. Funding is only a short-term solution if no growth is stimulated. Policy should seek to invest instead of subsidise, which would see rural Britain begin to tackle car dependency. The number of jobs related to the building and running of this infrastructure would necessarily increase (Kemp and Wexler, 2010). By investing in the decarbonisation of core areas such as transport and services, rural Britain can become sustainable and reduce emissions.

Community energy and district heating schemes should also be important targets for investment. They can reduce emissions whilst providing social and economic rewards. Micro-schemes are on the increase (Seyfang and Park, 2012) but in policy terms, Britain lacks a comprehensive and integrated framework of support for community and co-operative energy schemes. Mainstream commercial scale energy is backed by the existing regulatory structures. Research consistently shows how difficult it is for new entrants to compete alongside the established players for whom the market and regulatory context is designed (Hielscher, 2011).

If Britain centralised the frameworks for community energy and coupled this with a greater push towards retrofitting rural housing to address energy efficiency concerns, it would both reduce emissions and help relieve fuel poverty. In 2009, around 23% of rural households were fuel poor compared to 17% of urban households (DEFRA, 2012).

Hence there is great potential for community energy schemes and district heating to become the preferred methods for providing energy and heating to rural areas.

Almost two thirds of existing community energy schemes are rurally located, which is perhaps not surprising. Furthermore, DEFRA (2012) cites that rural households are more likely to be off the gas grid than urban households (38% compared to 9%). Without an existing reliance on gas, there is a niche to be filled that creates a willingness to participate in alternative schemes.

Westmill is a community owned wind farm: a successful co-operative funded through a public share offer and bank loan. Investment in such schemes could help address the NIMBY attitude by providing rural Britain with a sense of control and gain.

Someone recently described me as a 'mountain wrecker' because of my support of wind farms. I understood the objection but the truth is that action needs to be taken. ZCB proves that wind farms are the logical choice of power for Britain. We have to let go of the notion that the landscape as it exists is natural. It is not. Rural Britain is the product of thousands of years of farming and land management. There has been an almost universal historical trend towards higher consumption of livestock products (Kemp and Wexler, 2010), which needs to stop.

Local councils need to be given the power to implement positive changes for the benefit of their communities. Let rural areas prosper from the renewables on their doorstep by prioritising local energy demand and selling excess to outlying regions.

By investing in rural Britain we can see these areas bloom sustainably. These are the communities that have to live with the transition in their backyard, so if they benefit we all benefit.

About the author:

Richard now works at the Centre for Alternative Technology's visitor centre and volunteered for the ZCB project to communicate its positive message for sustainable communities.

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