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Rural Net Zero Seminar 29 January 2025

Summary

The seminar focussed on discussing the challenges faced by rural communities in achieving net zero and the importance of rural areas in providing solutions to environmental issues. The meeting also featured discussions on community energy projects, the progress of Northumberland Community Energy Limited, and the efforts of Lancaster City Council towards making net zero a priority. Lastly, the meeting highlighted the importance of engaging with society in the development of strategic plans, the challenges and opportunities of transitioning to net zero energy in rural areas, and the need for fair funding for rural areas.

Introduction

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, introduced the first RSN seminar of 2025, focusing on rural net zero. Kerry stated that the Rural Services Network is a membership organisation with over 500 members, advocating for rural communities through its "Delivering for Rural" campaign. Kerry emphasised the need for tailored government policies to address the unique challenges faced by rural communities.

Rural Energy Challenges and Solutions in Northumberland

Andy Dean, CEO Community Action Northumberland discussed the challenges faced by rural communities in Northumberland, particularly in terms of energy costs, resilience, and carbon footprint reduction. Andy highlighted their organisation's efforts to support these communities through various initiatives, such as the "Warm Hubs" programme, the "Slow Cooking Revolution," and the provision of energy advice to vulnerable customers. Andy also mentioned their involvement in community energy projects and their collaboration with other organisations to achieve net zero goals. He introduced the "Cairn" project, a four-year initiative funded by the Climate Action Fund, which aims to provide core expertise and service delivery to rural communities in the northeast. The programme includes community carbon assessments, household energy advice, training, and community energy initiatives. Andy emphasised the importance of individual actions in achieving net zero goals and the potential for community energy projects to improve resilience and reduce energy costs.

Northumberland Community Energy Limited, a community benefit society and cooperative. The organisation aims to install solar panels and battery storage in community buildings around Northumberland, with the goal of reaching 100 buildings in five years. The project has already secured 20 permissions, including two listed buildings, and has completed 10 installations. The organisation is also an associate member of the northeast purchasing organisation, which allows it to jointly procure power with hospitals and local authorities. The strategic funders are supportive of the project, as it enables more places to get installations and has a visible impact. The project manager's funding has been secured for the next three and a half years, ensuring the organisation's financial stability.

Lancaster City Council's Net Zero Efforts

Mark Cassidy from Lancaster City Council discussed the district's efforts to make net zero a priority. The council declared a climate emergency in 2019 and restructured to better coordinate climate initiatives. They undertook a climate emergency review of their local plan, strengthening 32 policies related to sustainable building design, energy efficiency, transport, and water management. A key policy aimed to require all new housing to be net zero by 2028. However, this policy was initially rejected by a planning inspector. The council decided to challenge this decision, engaging in correspondence with the planning inspectorate and raising public awareness through media involvement. After a two-year process involving legal challenges and policy amendments, the council successfully reinstated their desired policy. The local plan was formally adopted last week and is now influencing all planning decisions in the district.

Mark discussed the Lancaster district's efforts towards achieving net zero carbon emissions. He highlighted the successful passive house project at Loom Walk, which involved 20 units and was funded by various partners.

He also mentioned the development of a local area energy plan, which maps out activities and actions needed for a just transition to net zero. The plan addresses electricity, heat, gas networks, the built environment, energy generation, and transport decarbonisation. Mark also shared the district's commitment to community interaction and the importance of public electric charging points. He mentioned the decarbonisation of the Salt Ayre Leisure Centre, which replaced gas boilers with a two-stage heat pump system and installed a 1.3 MW solar array. The centre is now carbon neutral, saving approximately 640 tons of CO2 per year. Lastly, Mark acknowledged the challenges faced by climate sceptics and emphasised the importance of engaging and capturing young people's ideas in climate strategies.

Engaging Society in Energy Transition

Reece Emmett from NESO, the National Energy System Operator, then made a presentation. Reece explained the role of NESO in the energy transition, emphasising the need for a coordinated approach to planning for increased demand and generation. Reece also introduced the concept of the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan (SSEP), which will map potential locations, quantities, and types of electricity generation and storage infrastructure over time. Reece highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement in the development of these plans, aiming to ensure they comprehensively reflect the needs, values, and ambitions of society in relation to the energy transition.

Rural Energy Transition Challenges Discussed

In the meeting, the speakers discussed the challenges and opportunities of transitioning to net zero energy in rural areas. Andy highlighted the fragility of electricity infrastructure in rural areas and the need for more locally generated energy. Mark emphasised the importance of decarbonising transport in rural areas, while Reece stressed the need for rural voices to be heard in energy planning. The speakers also discussed the need for accessible engagement with a broad range of stakeholders and the importance of understanding the needs of rural communities. The conversation ended with a discussion on the challenges of local government reorganisation and the need for fair funding and resources for rural areas.