The transition to net zero presents rural areas with both distinctive challenges and significant opportunities. Many rural homes are off the gas grid, reliant on oil, solid fuel, or expensive electric heating – and often housed in older, harder-to-insulate buildings. Electric vehicle charging infrastructure is sparse, while car dependency remains high due to limited public transport. Yet rural areas also possess natural advantages: space for renewable energy generation, potential for community-scale heating schemes, and agricultural land that could contribute to carbon sequestration through changed practices.

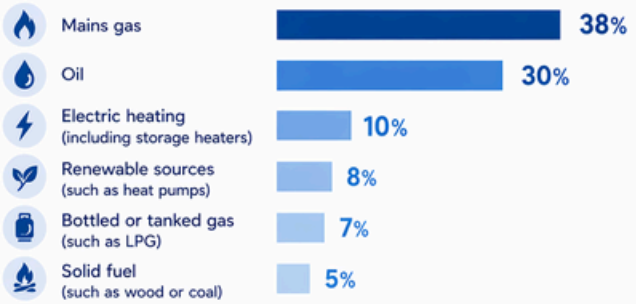
The question is whether policy and investment will enable rural communities to participate in the net zero transition, or whether they will be left behind, facing the costs of decarbonisation without sharing in its benefits.

Key Survey Findings

The survey explored respondents' home heating arrangements, views on renewable energy, and access to electric vehicle charging.

1 HOME HEATING

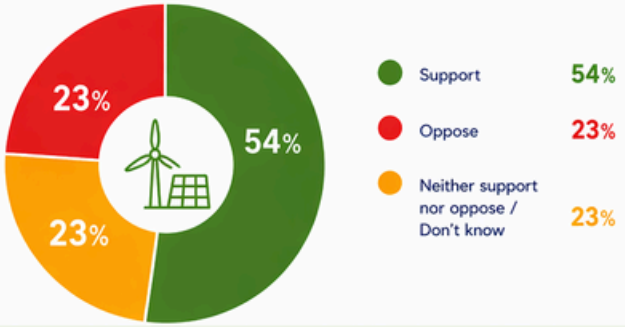
The most common primary heating source was mains gas (38%), followed by oil (30%).



This distribution highlights that a significant proportion of rural households remain dependent on carbon-intensive heating fuels, with nearly a third of respondents using oil.

2 RENEWABLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENTS

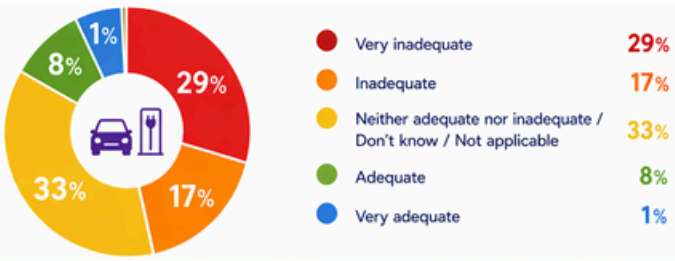
Views on renewable energy developments such as wind farms or solar farms were broadly positive.



Over half of respondents expressed support for developments in their local area. Opposition was a smaller view, with 23% being opposed.

3 EV CHARGING INFRASTRUCTURE

Assessment of electric vehicle charging infrastructure was notably negative.



Nearly half of respondents rated it as inadequate or very inadequate. Only 9% rated it as adequate or very adequate. A third said they did not know or that the question was not applicable to them – potentially reflecting both limited infrastructure and limited EV ownership in rural areas.

Rural Net Zero - The Lived Experience

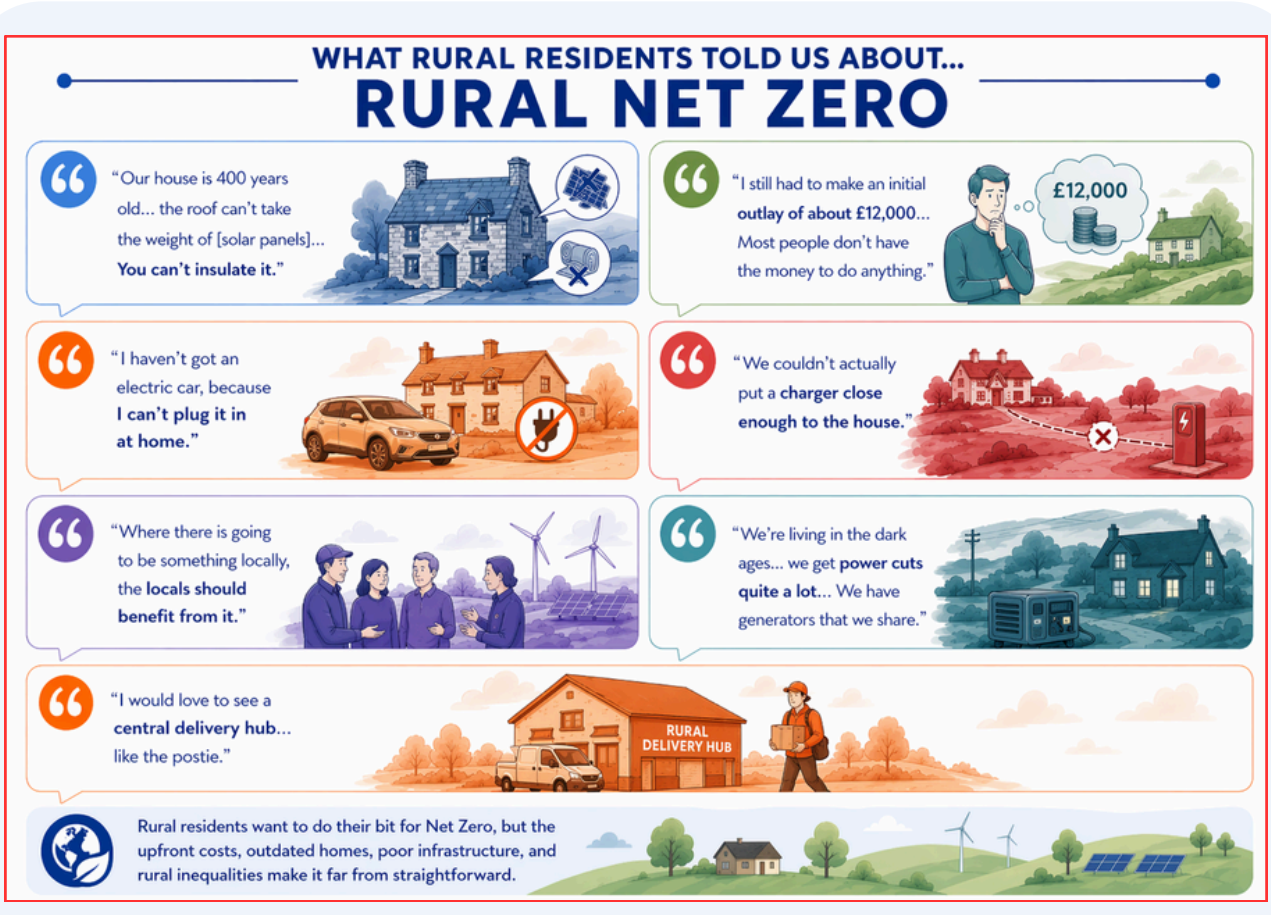
Participants showed strong support for environmental action, but highlighted significant practical barriers to achieving net zero in rural areas.

Older housing stock was a major challenge, with many properties unsuitable for insulation or renewable technologies, and additional constraints created by planning requirements. Even where improvements were possible, high upfront costs limited uptake, particularly for those without access to financial resources.

Infrastructure barriers were also evident. Limited access to charging points made electric vehicle adoption difficult, while grid capacity restricted both individual and community-scale renewable energy solutions.

Despite these challenges, there was clear enthusiasm for local and community-led energy initiatives, alongside a strong view that rural communities should directly benefit from nearby developments. Examples of progress were noted, including community projects and engagement with sustainable farming practices. However, participants highlighted inequalities in who can afford to invest in green technologies.

More broadly, rural areas were seen as overlooked in national net zero policy, with issues such as unreliable power supply and inefficient delivery systems adding to the challenge. Overall, participants emphasised the need for more practical, locally tailored approaches that reflect the realities of rural life.



Rural Net Zero

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

What rural residents told us about rural net zero

1. Nearly a third of rural homes of respondents are heated by oil, with limited access to mains gas.
2. Only around 9% use renewable heating sources such as heat pumps.
3. Over half of respondents support renewable energy developments in their area, but practical barriers limit uptake.
4. EV charging infrastructure is rated as inadequate or very inadequate by nearly half of respondents.
5. Older housing stock, including listed buildings, presents significant challenges for insulation and retrofit.
6. Upfront costs for measures like heat pumps and solar panels are prohibitive for many.
7. Planning restrictions in protected landscapes add further barriers.
8. Grid capacity constrains both individual installations and community-scale schemes.
9. Contract farmers and tenant farmers have less incentive to invest in long-term environmental improvements.
10. Positive examples exist of community-scale solutions, including geothermal, village heating schemes, and net-zero retrofits.
11. Local communities should benefit from renewable developments on their doorstep.
12. The term "net zero" has become politically charged, complicating community engagement.
13. Rural areas risk being left behind in the transition – facing costs without sharing benefits.
14. Delivery logistics in dispersed rural areas generate significant emissions that could be reduced through consolidation.

Rural residents want a fair, realistic and locally led transition to net zero – one that reduces emissions, lowers bills, protects the environment and ensures rural communities share in the benefits.