



The Rural Services Network

National Rural Conference 2024

Delivering for Rural – Unlocking rural prosperity

Wednesday 18th September

Rural Net Zero Session

AI GENERATED SUMMARY OF THE SESSION

Rural Services Network National Rural Conference

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, welcomed participants to the session and thanked sponsors for their generous support. Kerry gave a brief presentation outlining the RSN's role as the national champion for rural services. She highlighted, the RSN campaign for a fairer funding settlement for rural public services and called for nuanced rural policy. Kerry discussed the challenges faced by rural areas, such as higher carbon emissions from heating homes and transportation, and the need for support in transitioning to a green economy. She also emphasized the importance of a fabric-first energy strategy and the need for reliable electricity distribution networks.

Exploring Renewable Heating Technologies and District Networks

Neil Harrison, Director of Reheat, a company specializing in heat solutions. Neil discussed the slow progress in heat decarbonization, the need for more focus and money from policymakers, and the challenges of misinformation. He emphasized the importance of collective solutions and community involvement in tackling energy transition issues. Neil highlighted the challenges of decarbonizing heating, particularly in rural areas, and the need for policy changes to accelerate the drive to renewable heat. He also addressed the issue of fuel poverty and the need for stable and affordable heat solutions. Neil presented various renewable heating technologies and their applications in rural and urban areas. He highlighted the importance of sustainable sources of heat, such as biomass, and how it can improve forest economics and drive the forestry sector to achieve planting targets. Neil also touched on the concept of district heating networks, which are centralized production of heating and energy, and how they can be more efficient and environmentally friendly than traditional heating systems. He mentioned a project in Northumberland that aims to decarbonize heat in rural areas, which is community-driven and future-proofed.

Decarbonization Challenges and Collective Solutions

Carole BARR FROM act Cumbria, raised concerns about the affordability of energy transition for some individuals, and Neil responded by highlighting the potential for social tariffs and community-led projects. He also addressed concerns about battery technology's environmental

impact, stating that renewable energy technologies, including batteries, have better overall environmental credentials than fossil fuels.

Rural Retrofitting Challenges and Opportunities

Gareth Field, Senior Sustainability Consultant from Turner & Townsend, representing the RISE Project (Retrofit Information Support and Expertise) discussed the challenges and opportunities of retrofitting homes in rural areas. He highlighted that 20% of Cumbria's carbon emissions come from housing and homes, with rural areas experiencing higher fuel poverty rates. Gareth emphasized the need to improve energy efficiency, tackle fuel poverty, and develop new jobs in the retrofit sector. He also mentioned the importance of training the workforce and overcoming supply chain challenges. Gareth shared a case study of a project in Cornwall that retrofitted 75 homes, supported 42 local jobs, and extended the life of the homes. He concluded by stating that retrofitting can bring new life to old homes and reduce fuel poverty. Delegates discussed the challenges of retrofitting homes and community buildings, the importance of education and resident engagement, and the relevance of the retrofit energy design guidance for village halls. Cllr Trevor Roach from the Forest of Dean expressed concerns about the training of the next generation of retrofit specialists and suggested local apprenticeship schemes as a solution.

Rural Areas as Carbon Sinks and Wood Burning Stoves

Cllr Angus Jenkinson from the Cotswolds emphasized the potential of rural areas, particularly farming landscapes, to become carbon sinks and contribute to climate solutions. The group acknowledged the importance of utilizing natural capital for carbon sequestration and the need for more attention to the rural economy. Cllr Judith Derbyshire from Westmorland and Furness raised concerns about the removal of wood burning stoves in rural areas, which Neil from Reheat agreed were essential for heating and income. The group agreed on the need for lobbying to address these issues.

Electric Vehicles Adoption and Waste Collection Challenges

Simon Anthony, Head of Environmental Services for Cotswolds District Council, Forest of Dean District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council discussed the electrification of waste fleets, highlighting the challenges faced by rural, hilly terrains and the importance of engaging in procurement and using the right tools. The discussion revolved around the UK's waste fleet situation and the need for a more sustainable waste fleet due to the unsustainability of fossil fuel-derived fuels. Simon highlighted the challenges faced by local authorities in adopting electric vehicles due to lack of funding, but expressed hope for future funding opportunities. He highlighted advancements in waste collection vehicle technology, emphasizing the need for a strategic approach to implementation. Simon also shared the Forest of Dean's successful trial of electric vehicles, which are outperforming expectations and returning with 60-70% charge. Anthony discussed the Forest of Dean's transition to electric vehicles, their expected longevity, and the importance of involving members and climate change offices in vehicle procurement decisions. He also expressed interest in joint procurement with other local authorities to achieve economies of scale.

Achieving Net Zero Target in Rural Communities

The meeting focused on strategies for achieving a net zero target, particularly in rural communities. The panellists discussed joint procurement among neighbouring communities, retrofitting homes for energy efficiency, and the idea of targeted taxation on fossil fuels. They also addressed challenges faced by rural communities, such as increased costs for heating and transport, and the impact of large companies buying up farmland. The panellists agreed on the importance of using less energy and the need for more efficient solutions. Cllr Mandy Ewings from West Devon expressed her interest in trying to tackle housing associations disposing of difficult to retrofit homes and the potential for large-scale developments to overshadow energy efficiency efforts.

Next Steps

- 1.** Rural Services Network to send out a request to rural local authorities to gather information on housing association disposals in rural villages.
- 2.** Rural Services Network to continue lobbying government on rural-specific challenges related to net zero targets and energy efficiency.
- 3.** Local authorities to consider workshop approach for vehicle procurement decisions, involving multiple stakeholders.
- 4.** Local authorities to explore joint procurement opportunities for electric waste vehicles.
- 5.** Rural Services Network to provide briefings and updates to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on rural net zero issues.
- 6.** Rural Services Network to continue advocating for rural-specific funding and support for net zero initiatives.