

What might a successful transition to net-zero emissions look like for my community?

by Maggie Wheeler

Midwinter, 2035, a decade and a half since the first global Covid 19 pandemic: As I cycle along the main street in the little Orkney fishing town of Stromness I pass other locals on trikes, some with children or goods in trailers. Cycling here is so much more popular now the road surface is user-friendly and bike ramps have been installed on the steps and steep lanes, and the motor vehicles that once dominated the street are absent. Car parking spaces have been replaced with weather-proof parking shelters for bikes, trikes and trailers; there are purchase schemes and free community bike banks.

County-wide there is free public transport with buses owned and run by the local authority; as I reach the travel hub by the pier I see passengers swap from an inbound bus to the little electric carts that run on demand between travel hub and their homes in the town. These carts are also used for commercial deliveries in the town. The small accessible electric buses, with bike racks, provide a very flexible service. The ferries that run between the islands of Orkney, part of the free public transport, are now all powered by hydrogen.

The big ferries once operating services between Orkney and mainland Scotland were discontinued, around the time the cruise ship industry ended, in preparation for oil production stopping (and, it has to be said, the public outcry at the disclosure of the involvement of the parent compsnry in the arms trade). There is a new Scottish-built hydrogen-powered catamaran ferry service that provides for essential travel.

Now I'm cycling past the community schools and its great to see the pupils busy in the gardens that surround both schools, learning how to grow vegetables, fruit and flowers. I love knowing that for part of the school day pupils contribute to producing a midday meal and also to looking after their building.

I reflect on the big changes in education over the past decade and a half: Scottish government ended testing of children, and league tables and replaced the negative school inspection system with constructive collaborative teacher and school management development. Teaching emphasises the development of children with rounded personalities, a broad outlook, imagination and creativity.

I arrive at my destination: the ZeroWaste Centre, and offload the goods my neighbour no longer needs. Goods brought into the county are subject to strict sustainability criteria. Things no longer wanted are passed to the ZeroWaste Centre which runs a busy project restoring and repurposing for reuse. (Craftspeople work here in return for using the work space and specialist tools for their own work).

There is little household waste now that local food shops sell goods loose and purchasers bring their own containers for refilling. Central government policy means that any containers have to be reclaimed by the producers and reused or recycled. (Freight has to be two way). Households either compost their kitchen waste or have it collected for community composting.

As I make my return through the town I pass thriving small shops tailored to local need now they are freed from the tyranny of tourism, the number one economic driver in Orkney, pre pandemic times, and the former unsustainable capitalist economic model. Now, even in midwinter, these places - craft workshops, shops, small businesses, are open, warm and welcoming, providing goods and services tailored to local needs. People who were dependent on tourism for their livelihood, or part of it, now work for fewer hours, protected by the global universal basic income, another innovative social change resulting from the pandemic. I recall how during the Lockdowns, so many folk gradually shared a dawning realisation that they were far happier working less, having more time for a simpler life made possible partly by a reduction in consumption and consumer choice, the prioritizing of community connection and mutual aid. And growing vegetables instead of mowing lawns!

Some people of course have found the far reaching changes too challenging and have chosen to take up the chance offered by the national and local government resettlement scheme whereby people can be assisted to move away. This has enabled those who wish to have a greater level of services to live in mainland cities. Likewise, the community here has benefitted from people wanting to experience a simpler life being supported to make the move to Orkney. (The number of refugees welcomed here has increased; there are schemes to support them, including our local community cafe where some work).

The local authority instigated a major building renovation program, using grants, compulsory purchasing and a restructured planning system to facilitate a big increase in sound, well-insulated, easily heated (non-fossil fuels) homes and work spaces.

All the energy generated on the islands (through wind, solar and wave power), is community-owned. There are a number of district heating schemes (in the three towns on mainland Orkney) which use heat from composting domestic household waste and farm animal waste. Similar schemes are about to start in some of the villages on the other islands.

Orkney has built on its unique position in the renewable energy field. Local and national government's policies enabled the rapid application of this specialised knowledge through a collaboration with renewables workers. Just before the Covid 19 Lockdown in 2020 Orkney's respected OREF organisation had been about to host a groundbreaking conference aimed at bringing together all those in Orkney who were interested in Sustainability, to share knowledge about what initiatives were already happening in the county and move forward into climate action planning. The conference had to be postponed of course but people spent time on-line training in, for example, Extinction Rebellion-generated social organising and the Scottish government's Citizen Assembly ways of working and Schumacher College talks, leading to a wider understanding in the community of the need for change and the confidence that together we could bring about those changes. The fortuitous screening of the film 'Tomorrow' in the 6 months before the pandemic began to Orkney Science Festival attendees and senior pupils at the two high schools on mainland Orkney contributed to community acceptance of the existence of a Climate & Ecological Emergency and the need for major lifestyle changes. Audiences

indicated their support in particular for education change, local food production and building a resilient circular local economy with an Orkney pound and a credit union.

Community Growing Schemes are now the principal source of food in the county with the majority of households being members of their local group. In return for help in the fields, gardens and orchards they take home a share of the produce. Orkney's changeable weather was a factor in all disused farm buildings being surveyed and suitable buildings being recovered with greenhouse roofing or solar panels to provide plenty of indoor growing areas. (Large commercial and public buildings with suitable roofs have been retrofitted with green roofing or solar panels).

Smallholders are encouraged and supported by flexible policies and grants from central and local government. Some keep small numbers of animals. They have organised themselves into the Orkney Smallholding Cooperative. Large scale beef and dairy farming no longer exists. All those involved in keeping animals do so only to provide enough for their household/local community. Similar changes occurred in fishing- nowadays fishing is for local consumption only, with most fishing folk catching just enough for themselves and their family, with any spare being sold at the local community coop. Fishing in local waters by non-local firms is now banned. These changes have come about through the commitment to build a thriving community without the need for many supplies from outwith the county, one that is as self-sufficient as possible for food and drink. People work part time in the community growing schemes, the tree planting program, etc.

It's been wonderful to observe the concurrent growth in the community of imagination and happiness.