

# Community Carbon Auditing PACE/PAVO

## Report and findings

Ecodyfi and collaborators

26/10/2022

### The commission

Originally, the main output was to be an action plan in each of three agreed communities, following a community level carbon audit – together with this overall report. Ecodyfi started work during February 2022 with the onerous requirement to finish before the end of June. Early on it was agreed to include each of the four communities that had expressed interest in participating: Hay on Wye, Brecon, Knighton and Erwood. Subsequent changes to the funding regime permitted successive extensions to the ends of July, August, and October.

### The team

Led by Andy Rowland and Ann MacGarry at ecodyfi, the team also included Gareth Ellis of The Green Valleys (TGV), Vanessa Garwood and Peter Harper. Peter's role was to advise and comment on carbon audit methodologies, but the lion's share of the auditing was done by Gareth, drawing on previous work done by TGV. Gareth (for Brecon and Hay) and Vanessa (for Knighton and Erwood) led the direct work with the communities, being based in Breconshire and Radnorshire, respectively.

### The process

The key actions were to work with the identified communities to complete a carbon audit (as far as is possible at community scale) for each community, to work with them to develop a carbon action plan, and to produce a report that would enable other communities to use the methodology themselves.

The communities were identified by PACE. They were required to have declared a climate emergency but not yet produced an action plan. The number of communities was increased from 3 to 4, as only 4 communities expressed an interest.

The whole process had a very short timescale and PACE were dealing with launching several other projects with the same short timescale. It emerged, as contact was made with the communities, that they had not all fully committed to the process, nor had they all been clear about what they had signed up to (one thought that they were just expressing an interest, rather than applying to be part of the process).

It was supposed to be a process where we supported the town or community council to work with a group or groups in the community to develop a whole community action plan. Not only was the timescale short, it also spanned the summer, when councils usually don't meet, and the election. Councillors are in 'purdah' for 6 weeks before the election and not always sure that they will be re-elected, so it is the most challenging time to try to work with them.

The four communities identified were Brecon, Erwood, Hay and Knighton. The partners recruited to work with local communities were Gareth Ellis and Vanessa Garwood. Gareth, who has previous experience of producing community carbon audits, worked with Brecon and Hay and produced the carbon audits for all four. Vanessa worked with Erwood and Knighton. Peter Harper contributed to the audit methodology. Ann MacGarry worked on administration and coordination. Andy Rowland managed the process. Regular meetings were held (at least once a month) within the team to discuss progress.

Producing a carbon audit for a community involves several steps. Data for electricity and mains gas use at a local level is available online at the level of 'Local Super Output Areas'. These areas are small enough to coincide with some of our communities. Where they don't quite coincide with what is locally seen as 'the community' then the council or local group needed to identify the number of extra homes they want to include so that Gareth could factor that in. Where some of the homes did not have access to mains gas, the council or local group needed to make an estimate of how many were using bottled gas, oil, wood or electricity. In practice it proved to be difficult to get any of these figures from the local contacts.

The other elements of carbon impact needed to be calculated from data that is only available at county or national (UK) level and is therefore less likely to be accurate. The national figures were recalibrated in a percentage (87%) that reflects the lower level of income in Wales, as consumption is normally closely linked to income level.

In addition to this report, it was decided that Gareth would produce a guide to community carbon auditing. This is a 4-page illustrated guide designed to be as easy to use as possible.

The assumption was that it would be a process whereby the local councils each worked with one or more community groups to produce the action plan. In practice the relationships between councils and community groups varied a great deal and expectations varied. The short time scale made it very difficult to change [influence?] this much.

Brecon & Knighton were led by their Town Councils, whereas Hay & Erwood were community-led with council involvement.

This report takes into account comments made during a PACE meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2022 to discuss a draft report and appendices.

## The four communities

### Hay on Wye

Hay engaged with the process immediately. There is a Net Zero Carbon Hay group which is an unconstituted group of individuals, councillors and community groups' representatives, with the Town Clerk providing administrative and coordination support. There is already a Town Plan which has some actions that relate to carbon and sustainability.

They were keen to have a carbon survey for businesses, so Gareth/group members produced one for them for completion via SurveyMonkey - but only one business completed it. Engagement with the business sector is still considered a priority and alternative approaches need to be developed.

As a border Town, the area of Cussop in Herefordshire is immediately adjacent to the Town boundary, and it was important to the group that the community here would not be excluded. Following some revision of the audit process it was possible to incorporate an area larger than the LSOA datasets, using a simple proportional increase to include the additional homes in Cussop.

After an initially promising start in February 2022, the group paused for the local Council elections. Unfortunately, the Town Clerk left soon after the election period and this caused some difficulties that extended into the summer, as the Town Clerk was the primary contact point. However, the new Clerk and Mayor made significant efforts into quickly reviving the group in late summer, that allowed the audit and beginnings of the action planning process to take place.

The Net Zero Hay group aims to become more active. It benefits from several of its members being professionally employed in energy and sustainability industries and the group enjoys a level of technical expertise and competency beyond what would be expected. There is a clear commitment to develop the draft action plan further and ensure a focus on delivery. A meeting on 1/9/22 generated a range of ideas that have been developed into the draft Hay Net Zero action plan for future discussion and delivery.

Hay Town Council aims to review its existing Town Plan and it is likely that any climate actions will be developed as part of the Town Plan review – though this still requires a formal agreement to do so from the Council. This ensures that the climate actions do not stand alone and can be integrated into other themes such as Tourism and Regeneration. An audit for the Councils carbon emissions from their buildings was also completed.

## Brecon

The council has a Climate Emergency Working Group, and the Town Council has previously met with community representation from Brecon Climate Action Group. The Council had initially understood that this project would provide an audit of the Town Councils' own direct carbon emission and support the development of their organisational action plan. It was explained that the project had a wider scope than the Town Council and while this was favourably received, concerns were raised over what could be achieved in the tight time scale, given the election and need to follow proper Council procedures.

After the election they did not think it would be possible to do anything quickly, and there had been some turnover of councillors. They had already produced a draft action plan for the council itself. Support for this group focussed on reviewing and expanding these actions for future formal adoption through the Council.

It was agreed that it would not be possible to secure the necessary wider engagement in the time available as it was essential this was properly organised and delivered. Instead, some suggestions for how Brecon Town Council (BTC) could engage and facilitate wider community involvement would be considered for the Council Action Plan.

The Town Council's immediate requirement was for an audit of carbon emissions from the building they are responsible for. This was produced for them from their utility billing data.

The draft action plan will be discussed at a future Council meeting and amended and expanded before final adoption. There is a clear commitment from BTC to follow up with appropriate actions, having declared a climate emergency.

## Erwood

In Erwood the Council's declaration of a climate emergency led to the formation of a voluntary group to take it forward. Laura Shewring coordinated a good mix of members. It's been a very proactive group including 3 community councillors. It had no track record of action planning, and both parties under-estimated the time required.

It lost momentum when Laura's capacity to lead was much reduced at the end of the original project period (30<sup>th</sup> May). They held a public meeting to collect community ideas for the action plan, which Vanessa and Gareth attended, and several others.

The audit is difficult as Erwood is in the same data area as Bronllys, which has mains gas - whereas Erwood doesn't. This means the data won't be quite right for either area.

## Knighton

Things started off with a challenge as it emerged that the council thought they were just enquiring about the project, not making a formal application that committed them to participation if selected. The Clerk had to go back to the council meeting for confirmation. The election delayed things as well. They had significant councillor changes and were very difficult to get a response from until July. They were going to have a meeting and set up a sub-group of the council. There doesn't seem to be a voluntary group active in the town.

The audit was delayed because they needed to provide data on non-mains-gas households. Vanessa and Gareth estimated the number of homes using other fuels so that Gareth could complete the audit. There are a lot of homes that don't have gas.

The council's original action plan is now rather dated and in need of revision.

## External evaluation

There has been good contact with Liz Bickerton who has been evaluating the project from an early stage.

## Reflections, lessons learnt and suggestions for future work

- Time needs to be available to work first with the council concerned, then with any relevant community groups, and then with the wider community. These periods can overlap, but in total imply many months.
- A community group can respond more quickly than a council, which has to pass decisions through monthly or less frequent meetings.
- The councils could put their progress into the end of year reports that they now have to produce for Welsh Government.
- The audit should be understood to be limited by the data available, but it does provide a reasonable picture. Groups can use this as a benchmark and use it to stimulate and inform discussion and action plan development.
- There is a risk that spending time on auditing consumes people's time and attention, at the expense of planning and implementing community responses to the climate emergency.
- The community's action planning is in most cases not really mature enough to support funding applications very well, especially to the anticipated Shared Prosperity Fund. However, PACE could consider an umbrella application to take forward this kind of work with a larger number of communities/councils.

Clarity on the project scope and expectations for involvement need to be communicated from the very beginning. The team inherited this difficulty from the short Expression of Interest process; groups were not clear precisely what support would be provided and what their role would be.

Specifically – some thought they were literally expressing interest and that they would receive further information that would help them consider whether to “sign up”, and some thought the project concerned only what the council was directly responsible for, as opposed to the whole community’s climate impacts. While this was not the cause of significant problems it did generate delays in an already very tight timescale.

Securing wide community engagement takes time, motivation, and resources. Time constraints limited what was achievable, especially with elections and summer holidays within the project period. Groups are often starting from nothing. This is new ground for many people, but it appears that this project has acted as a catalyst for action, even if currently action plans are not well developed. Action Plan development takes time, consideration, consultation, and review.

The audit process was relatively straightforward, as the project used existing methodology for domestic energy figures developed by The Green Valleys, drawing on UK Government data but amending that slightly based on local mapping and knowledge. However, the need to include additional carbon figures for consumption and public services took additional time as this had not been developed previously. Local data on these two elements does not exist and so national figures were used. This part of the audit does allow communities to greater understand the relative impact of goods and services consumed.

The 15<sup>th</sup> September meeting compared aspects of the audit methodology used during this project with the one employed by the Centre for Sustainable Energy with Exeter University. They categorised the data in different ways. Nevertheless, the results were similar for some communities, so could other communities simply use the published Exeter results? The advantage would be to save time and effort, so that communities could focus on action planning and implementation.

However, Erwood illustrated the potential for big differences in the emissions attributed to housing. Exeter do not use actual electricity and gas consumption data. It was noted that the TGV methodology allows more bespoke geographic areas to be studied.

More radically, the value of spending any effort on carbon auditing was questioned. The climate crisis is urgent, and we need to act. An understanding of the relative significance of emissions from different sectors should inform the choice of actions but researching detail can cause delay. Prioritisation will also be informed by opportunity, resources, people’s motivation and enthusiasm – and by the multiple or additional benefits usually provided by climate action, such as clean air, well-being and community connections.

A need for 'exit strategies' was discussed, so that communities are not left hanging. One prospect is for communities to seek support from one of the Mentors that are expected to be available through the successor programme to Renew Wales. This will be managed by Development Trusts Wales.

Meanwhile, the contractors expressed willingness to continue supporting the four communities in an informal manner. Linking the work into the 'Localities' networks in the various communities was also suggested. These are coordinated by PAVO's Community Connectors.

PACE could consider an umbrella funding application to take forward this kind of work with a larger number of communities/councils. Alternatively, simple guidance could be provided, building on some of the appendices to this report. Communities can carry out their own carbon audits so long as they understand the data sets available - and ideally, are willing to download it annually, so that they can monitor changes.

## Appendices

- Carbon Audit Reports for 4 communities
- A Guide to using the audit reports
- Methodological note about the audits
- Report on Hay Town Council's direct emissions
- Draft Action Plans for Erwood, Hay Town Council, Hay Zero Hay and Brecon

[andy@ecodyfi.cymru](mailto:andy@ecodyfi.cymru)

01654 703965

Y Plas, Machynlleth SY20 8ER