

Rescaling Energy and Power: Sustainable Transitions in England

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For many of us interested in climate change mitigation and sustainable energy transitions there has been a recent shift of analytical focus onto the sub-national level. In some senses this refocus has to do with the [70% contribution of cities to global emissions](#) and with debates about the ‘[century of the city](#)’ and predictions of [ever-greater urbanisation](#). This refocus is also, however, based on the significant growth in sustainable energy policies, programmes and other actions at the sub-national level across OECD countries as well as of growing [transnational agreement between cities](#). Indeed, in the wake of Donald Trump’s recent moves to extract the US from the Paris Agreement the response of US states has been to [redouble their efforts](#).

English local authorities have a [long history of electricity and gas provision](#), dating back to Victorian times, and many have had strong sustainability ambitions since the 1980s. However, up until quite recently the consensus view has been that their ability to deliver on sustainability ambitions is limited. This is partly because some central government energy rules and regulations have presented [obstacles to smaller market players](#), including local authorities, seeking to challenge incumbent practices. The broader political context has been one of high degrees of concentration of powers in central government hands. Moreover, recent devolution deals are seen as having been as much about passing responsibility (and failure) from national to local government during times of austerity as about genuine attempts to empower local government.

This viewpoint, however, tends to focus too much attention on central government as *the* energy policy maker and decider about what local government can and cannot do. As part of a new ESRC funded research project, on [Local Energy Governance and Sustainability](#), I will be adopting a slightly different viewpoint that allows a greater focus on what is now possible at the local level. This viewpoint is informed, in part, by notions of [state rescaling](#) that tend to sharpen the analytical lens onto those activities that aren’t part of a pre-determined national-local dynamic, thereby heightening the importance of sub-national governments as sustainable energy actors *in their own right*. This is not to say, of course, that local authorities don’t face huge hurdles in this area or, indeed, that they are all possessed of equal dynamism in sustainability. It is instead to say that some local governments are now in a position to take a range of potentially significant actions in pursuit of locally derived visions of a more sustainable future.

More often than not references to emerging local government energy strategies tend to be about [Nottingham and Bristol’s](#) recent forays into gas and electricity supply. Although their focus on using municipal supply companies to take vulnerable, local energy users off relatively costly standard variable tariffs is welcome, there is so much more going on. This is evidenced in a [recent report](#) from the new UK-wide city sustainability group, UK100, which highlights, for example, Peterborough’s work on energy recovery and reducing landfill and Barking & Dagenham’s work on low carbon supply and energy efficiency through their energy service company (ESCO). It also highlights Oxfordshire county council’s work with the Low Carbon Hub on plans that the whole of Oxfordshire should in future be powered by an interconnected series of smart micro grids centred around small-scale, community-controlled renewable energy.

What is interesting here is not just the level of activity, and other examples abound in recent research by [Shane Fudge, Michael Peters and Bridget Woodman](#) and by [Janette Webb, David Hawkey and Margaret Tingey](#), but that this evidence suggests that local governments are adopting a wide variety of roles. In some cases they are sticking to the recently more traditional role of enabling transitions by bringing interested parties together, but in others they are taking clear leadership roles. This is partly evidenced through the commitment of 67 local authorities to [100% clean energy](#) by 2050, which can be interpreted as a direct challenge to UK national policy where there are no renewable (or energy efficiency) targets beyond 2020. Indeed there is some intention amongst this group to inform national government, partly by demonstrating possibilities for sustainable change, and to advocate for national policy reform.

A second stand-out aspect of what is happening is that, in many cases, the (local) state is becoming an actor once more in energy markets. Not only are local governments, through their new energy ventures, challenging incumbent practices but they are also, through running municipal energy companies, contesting the UK policy of energy privatisation. This is significant in many ways, not least at a time when local government funds have been so severely cut. For some local authorities any small margin made by municipal supply companies can be ploughed back into other local government services, whilst for others the benefits of reducing energy poverty have positive knock-on effects for social care and wellbeing.

All of these changes pose questions about how and why local capacity has been changing. It may well be that local governments have more capacity now to pursue more active roles in sustainable energy, even if this is not the case in other areas, because of the ways in which energy systems are changing. Indeed the case has been made [elsewhere](#), by Stephen Hall and Katy Roelich, that the emergence of renewable, smaller scale generation opportunities allows local authorities to act in ways not possible in previous decades. Further innovations in business models and in other technologies, like storage and ICT also have implications for local governments' possible roles within decentralising (localising) markets. Add to this interesting developments in English devolution, Cornwall County Council [devolved powers in energy](#) as part of their deal and [others are following suit](#), and the capacity of local government to take sustainable energy decisions and to act upon them may grow yet further.

All of these shifts certainly mirror the direction of change in other OECD countries, i.e. towards more a more disaggregated political economy of energy and greater degrees of significance of local actors in energy politics and markets. Arguably what is happening in England is all the more worthy of further analysis given the degree to which national political institutions have historically not favoured local government capacity. As such, the [Local Energy Government and Sustainability](#) project will explore this area in more detail investigating, in particular, the links revealed here between decentralising energy markets, state rescaling, and shifting local government capacities. It could well be that local authority innovations, particularly if new knowledge is made open to others to share, can collectively start to change the shape of energy politics in England.