



Although climate change will ultimately be solved only through a comprehensive international agreement on reducing emissions, it is worth remembering that what such an agreement is designed to do is affect the behaviour of individual citizens and businesses. What can individuals who want to short-circuit the process do in the meantime?

Home energy efficiency

The single most important area in which individual citizens can have an effect is in reducing emissions from their homes. About 28 per cent of the UK's total emissions come from energy used to light, heat and run its homes – and this figure could be reduced by at least one third from improved domestic energy efficiency. Among the key actions to take are:

- using energy-efficiency light bulbs, which use 80 per cent less energy than traditional ones, and last up to 12 times longer
- buying low-energy appliances, especially washing machines, fridges and (above all) boilers, which account for one third of household emissions
- insulating walls and lofts, through which 50 per cent of the heat lost in homes escapes – double-glazing windows can also have a big effect
- taking other easy steps like switching off lights, not leaving electrical goods on standby, unplugging phone chargers when not in use, boiling only as much water as needed in the kettle, using lids on pans when cooking, and defrosting fridges regularly

Switching to renewable energy

UK power companies are already legally obliged to source 6.7 per cent of their electricity from renewable sources, and this figure will rise to 10 per cent by 2010. However, individual customers can help accelerate take-up of renewable energies like wind power, biomass, hydroelectricity and solar power by switching to 'green' electricity suppliers.

Not all green electricity suppliers are of the same standard. Some companies simply count customers for 'green' tariffs towards their minimum obligation, and others claim that their

energy is '100 per cent green' when in fact it only represents a small proportion of the total. A company called Good Energy (www.good-energy.co.uk) claims to be the only power company in the UK that obtains all of its electricity from renewable sources.

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Generating electricity at home

Domestic scale power generation has attracted a lot of media attention, and there are many options available. Among them are biomass (fitting a stand-alone stove fuelled by wood pellets or logs – both of which are renewable fuels – which can also power central heating and hot water), micro combined heat and power (CHP), and ground source heat pumps which transfer heat from the ground into the building.

Perhaps the most realistic option to begin with, though, is solar water heating – where solar panels are fitted to a south-facing roof. In Britain these systems will tend not to be able to heat all the water needed for a household but, by working alongside a conventional water heater, they can reliably generate about a third of a household's hot water needs.

Lower-carbon food

While there has been extensive media coverage of 'food miles' – the distance travelled by foods on the way to our plates – the picture is actually much more complex than this sole variable might imply. Roses grown in Kenya are more carbon efficient

than roses grown in the Netherlands, for instance, as they require less heating during their cultivation – even though they are then flown to the UK.

However, one action that unequivocally reduces emissions is eating less meat. Livestock farming results in extensive emissions, both from cattle themselves and from the process of producing feedstock for animals. One scientific study published in 2007 shows that producing one kilogramme of beef results in more carbon dioxide emissions than going for a three-hour drive while leaving all the lights on at home.

Cutting waste

The UK produces some 272 million tonnes of waste each year, 62 per cent of which goes straight to landfill. This is a climate change issue above all because landfill sites are major emitters of greenhouse gases (both carbon dioxide and methane, which is four times more potent than CO₂ as a greenhouse gas). You can reduce your household waste by reducing the amount of waste created (e.g. using fewer shopping bags), reusing items (e.g. envelopes) and recycling. Composting organic matter can reduce emissions too.

Reducing transport emissions

Transport is the fastest-growing source of carbon dioxide in the UK: road transport alone is already responsible for 22 per cent of the UK's emissions. Cars account for about a half of the transport sector's emissions, but aviation is an increasingly important proportion of the total: UK flying rates grew from 125 billion kilometres per year in 1990 to 287 billion kilometres per year in 2005.

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The most obvious way to reduce emissions from cars is of course simply to walk, cycle or travel by rail or bus: changes in this area can be some of the most significant ways that an individual citizen can reduce his or her emissions. To reduce emissions from driving avoid short trips (cold engines use more fuel), use higher gears, slow down (emissions are 30 per cent higher at 70mph than at 50mph) and share cars where possible.

Political action

Although all the actions noted in this paper – and many others too – are important for reducing carbon dioxide, there are limits to how much one individual or household can achieve on its own. Climate change is in the end a problem of collective action more than anything else – so political action is key. Perhaps the most important contribution individuals can make is to pressure their political leaders and representatives to take far-reaching action on protecting the climate.

More information

The Energy Saving Trust offers extensive advice on assessing your impact on climate change and what you can do to reduce it, including on energy-saving products, home improvements and generating your own energy. The Trust also offers a free home energy check service. Visit its website at www.energysavingtrust.org.uk; or call 0800 512 012. Google offers an excellent Carbon Footprint calculator, which allows you to compare your emissions with other people in the UK and get advice on carbon-reducing actions: see www.google.co.uk/carbonfootprint.



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