

UNA-UK BRIEFING PAPER SERIES ON CLIMATE CHANGE

UK Climate Policy



Current UK climate policy

Britain's climate change policy is set out comprehensively in the 2006 UK Climate Change Programme (UKCCP), which re-commits Britain to an emissions reduction of 60 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050.

The UK already has a wide (and complex) range of policy designed to address climate change and reduce emissions. Among the more significant elements of current policy are the following:

Policy	Description	Million tonnes of carbon (MtC) the 2006 UKCCP estimated the policy would have saved by 2010
ENERGY SUPPLY		
Renewables Obligation	a requirement for power suppliers to source a set proportion of their energy from renewable sources	2.5 MtC
EU Emissions Trading Scheme	a trading scheme introduced at European level, designed to deliver the bulk of Europe's Kyoto target	3.0 to 8.0 MtC
BUSINESS ENERGY USE		
Climate Change Levy	a tax on business energy use	3.7 MtC
Climate Change Agreements	negotiated agreements with companies in energy intensive sectors such as steel and cement	2.9 MtC
Carbon Trust	changes to Building Regulations, the UK Emissions Trading Scheme and other measures	2.2 MtC
TRANSPORT		
Voluntary agreements with businesses	including reform of company car tax and Vehicle Excise Duty	2.3 MtC
Fuel Duty Escalator	phased tax incentives on petrol and diesel to reflect the environmental cost of motoring	1.9 MtC
Other measures	including the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation	2.6 MtC
DOMESTIC ENERGY USE		
Energy Efficiency Commitment	a requirement on energy suppliers to improve their customers' energy efficiency	2.1 MtC
Changes to Building Regulations and other building standards	20 per cent better energy efficiency standards in new homes	1.8 MtC
Other measures	including changes to appliance standards and labelling, better metering and billing and improved consumer information	1.0 MtC
OTHER		
Agriculture	woodland planting and other measures	0.8 MtC
Public sector and action by devolved administrations	including action by local government and emissions reductions within the public sector	0.8 MtC

The Climate Change Bill

Perhaps the most significant innovation since the 2006 UK Climate Change Programme was published is the government's draft Climate Change Bill, which will put the UK's 2050 emissions reduction target on a legally binding statutory basis. However, the science has moved on since the government took on the 60 per cent target in 2000: it is now clear that in order to limit warming to 2 degrees Celsius the UK will be required to reduce emissions by at least 80 per cent by 2050. (The government has recently confirmed that it will re-examine its 2050 target to see whether it needs to be made more demanding.)

What the UK still needs to do

But could the UK manage an 80 per cent reduction within just over four decades – which might imply a cut of 30 per cent below 1990 levels by 2030, and 60 per cent by 2050? A comprehensive analysis by the RSPB, the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Institute for Public Policy Research, based on economic modelling by Imperial College, found that it would be possible – if action starts now.

According to this work, the first task is to get serious about decarbonising the electricity sector. The lifetimes of plant and equipment in power generation can easily be three decades or more, so actions taken today will have an impact for many decades to come. Accordingly, the study argues, much bigger investments in low- and zero-carbon power will be needed, and the government will also need to launch a framework for investment in carbon capture and storage (CCS).

Secondly, a wave of innovation in new low-carbon technologies will be needed. Technologies such as offshore wind power, hydrogen storage and CCS still have a long way to go before they are fully commercialised. Likewise, long-term emissions targets for EU vehicles should be agreed – with a target of zero emissions vehicles as standard by 2030; and UK airports should also impose fuel efficiency standards on the planes that use these airports.

Next, the government needs to make far greater strides in improving energy efficiency – in both the domestic and the business sector – than it has done to date. Governments often find it tempting to focus on the supply rather than the demand side of energy – understandably, perhaps, given that the emissions are more concentrated and less diffuse on the supply side. Nonetheless, energy efficiency is fundamental to long-term emissions reductions: it is otherwise simply impossible to imagine an 80 per cent cut by 2050. The study also emphasises the need for policies to help vulnerable and fuel-poor consumers, and suggests global sectoral agreements for energy intensive industries.

The public opinion question

Of the measures discussed in the study, it is probably the energy efficiency challenge that is the hardest nut to crack. While numerous opinion polls show that publics in countries all over the world (including the US and China) believe climate change to be a vital issue requiring action now, the same data often shows that, so far, individual citizens have taken only very minimal steps to curb their emissions.

At present, climate change policy – in the UK and elsewhere – risks being caught in a catch-22. While policymakers stress the importance of the issue and make progress where they can, most politicians judge that the political space does not yet exist for solutions to climate change that are anything like as far-reaching as needed. Serious emissions reductions are still seen as a political poison chalice rather than a holy grail. Yet voluntary action by individual citizens is not enough: a political framework is needed.

What can break us out of the catch-22 and shift us onto the path towards a low-carbon economy? There is currently no definitive answer to that question. But the answer will lie partly in better organised citizen action – through NGOs, local groups, political organisations and so on; partly in making it easier for citizens to take action (for instance through providing advice and grants for energy efficient equipment); partly through a growing sense that low-carbon lifestyles are also more responsible, more conducive to personal well-being, and more resilient; and partly, no doubt, through increasing evidence of the impacts of climate change itself.



The UN Association of the UK is Britain's leading independent policy authority on the UN and a membership organisation which campaigns for a strong, credible and effective United Nations.

Written by Alex Evans for UNA-UK. This is one of a series of five briefing papers on climate change. Printed on 100% recycled paper
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