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Government has key role in shifting us to green lifestyles

What we eat, how we travel and how we heat our homes has a huge climate impact. But what should the government be doing to help us live greener lives?

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Taking personal action to cut our climate emissions – from eating less meat to swapping the car for the train – is often pitted against, and seen as separate to, the more systemic changes needed in the face of the climate emergency.

But a new behaviour change report for the Committee on Climate Change reveals just how critical bold action by government will be to help us make the necessary shift to low impact lifestyles.

Time to step up

The UK is not on track to meet the legally binding fourth and fifth carbon budgets. We need to up our game if we're to reach the government's target of net zero emissions by 2050. In fact, we must go [further and faster](#).

Behaviour change has played little part in the greenhouse gas emissions reductions achieved so far. There's been overwhelming reticence from government to get involved, particularly in the area of food, because it fears accusation of being a [nanny state](#).

Household consumption accounts for almost three quarters of global GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions! . And as sectors like electricity generation decarbonise, there's an urgent need for the public to play a much greater role.



Lifting the guilt

Our lifestyles need to change radically. But the good news is, it's not all on us. A new report for the Committee on Climate Change, [Behaviour change, public engagement and Net Zero](#), breaks with previous messages for households to make small easy changes. Instead, it sets out how the government should support "high impact shifts in consumer behaviours and choices...consistent with the scale of climate challenge".

New policies are needed to steer people in the right direction. The report also urges the government to put its own house in order and get its wider policies in line with tackling the climate emergency.

Eating, heating and meeting

“These changes...will not happen at the pace required unless policy first removes obstacles to change in markets and consumer choice.”

The report usefully sets out the top 3 areas for reducing emissions at home. What we eat, how we heat our homes and how we travel around.

Eating

The report recognises that shifting to a more plant-based diet is one of the most impactful things we can do. We have direct control over choosing what we eat, three times a day.

The report calls on the government to ensure mandatory provision of vegan meals in all public sector catering, along with chef training to create delicious plant-based menus.



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It also highlights the need for product labelling to help people choose foods produced with a lower environmental impact, more research into plant-based meat substitutes (although it's sceptical about lab meat becoming a reality any time soon), and weekly food waste collections for all households.

Importantly, it recognises the role of subsidies and the opportunity to shift them to support more sustainable diets and farming methods, including more horticulture where appropriate. This could and should include a focus on low-input agroecological systems and mixed farming.



Sustainable agroforestry farming system - trees and sheep

The report emphasises the need for environmental labelling of foods – not just carbon labelling. This could include land use, water and biodiversity impacts. Much work is going on in this complex area. But mandatory method of production labelling could be introduced now – allowing people to avoid industrial meat production systems, like cattle feedlots, which have the highest environmental and animal welfare impacts.

It is worth noting that the [Eating Better](#) alliance – over 60 food, farming, environment, animal welfare and development organisations – is calling for a reduction in meat and dairy intake and production of [50% by 2030](#). Across the EU, this would reduce achieve a [25-40% reduction](#) of GHG emissions from agriculture.

Home heating

The gas boilers in our homes might keep us toasty warm in the winter, but they're also heating our planet. Insulating our homes can reduce carbon emissions significantly, but we need to go further. Switching to [eco-heating](#) is the way forward, but people need upfront grants and much more impartial advice to help them to do so. People are much less aware of the need to do away with gas boilers than to take action on diet and transport.

Transport

The report emphasises kickstarting a 'modal shift' away from car use, which accounts for over half of UK GHG surface transport emissions, to public transport, walking and cycling.

A comprehensive package of measures is proposed – including investment across rail and bus networks and cycling infrastructure, and support for car clubs – which it says will deliver more cost effectively than large infrastructure schemes. Instead, the government is ploughing billions into road building and starving more sustainable alternatives of cash.

There's also support for measures that improve both the upfront and running costs of electric vehicles (EVs), as well as improving the EV charging infrastructure and encouraging fleet operators to adopt EVs, particularly in government and local authorities.



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Aviation

Source of the most stubborn GHG emissions, the report calls for the introduction of an escalating air miles levy targeted at the 15% of people who take around 70% of flights. The much larger emissions caused by business and first-class travel should also be factored in. This would encourage a shift from long-haul to short-haul holiday destinations. And it's likely to bolster the shift already taking place, as more people swap short-haul flights for train travel. In response, Eurostar is [expanding its London-Amsterdam service](#), which takes under 4 hours for around [80% lower emissions](#).

I will if you will

People want to see leadership from government. And they don't like contradictions. Yet on one hand, the government has declared a climate emergency. On the other, it continues to pour billions into oil and gas projects overseas.



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The report points out that policies should avoid “creating a context that makes it easy for people to justify inaction”. This includes perceptions of unfairness, inconsistency or lack of leadership by government. In other words, the government must walk the talk – “this should include all sectors and practices - from subsidies for polluting industries to tax breaks for private jets.”

People want to live greener lives, but time, money and conflicting information often frustrate action. A Friends of the Earth survey found that 84% of people would like to take (more) action in their lives to help stop climate change. Lower-carbon choices need to be seen not only as important and urgent but also normal, easy and in line with the demands of our daily lives.

Positive feedback loops

Better information about the environmental impacts of taking action to reduce emissions is a motivator – if you can see progress, it encourages you to do more. In our behaviour change work at Friends of the Earth we've seen this approach reinforced – people want to see the progress they're making, both individually and collectively.

Politicians also need to see that there's a public mandate for change. If policies are introduced which help people take high-impact actions, and people share and talk about them, this can build political momentum and show that there's public support for further bold policy action to reduce emissions.

Win-win-wins

Alongside the core impact of reducing GHGs, the report highlights many other co-benefits of making green lifestyle changes. The government should actively champion these benefits, because people will feel them more quickly and tangibly than the longer-term benefit of reducing emissions. Doing so will help to build and sustain public engagement.

For example, [recent research](#) found that hospital admissions and GP visits spiked during periods of high air pollution. Shifts away from car use to more walking, cycling and public transport will massively reduce air pollution and congestion, and improve health directly. And it will lead to more active lifestyles and safer, stronger communities. This is much more than a switch to EVs would bring – although air pollution would be reduced, congestion and a car-centric mentality would remain.

Healthier, sustainable diets have huge knock-on benefits for our health. [Research for Friends of the Earth](#) found that lower meat diets could prevent 45,000 early deaths from heart disease, cancer and strokes, as well as saving the NHS around £1.2bn a year.



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Money talks

Like it or not, a key area the government must get to grips with is money. Whether installing a heat pump or switching to an EV, help in reducing upfront and running costs will be critical if more people are to make these shifts.

We know that taxes and subsidies work in the case of shifting diets. A growing body of research² is finding that measures to make unhealthy foods more expensive and healthy foods less expensive are among the most effective interventions for changing eating habits. The sugary drinks tax is one example already in place, but this approach will need to be widened from a focus on health, to encourage more sustainable eating and living.

If we're all to make the changes on the scale demanded by the climate emergency, the green option must be the affordable option. And in the longer term, the only option.

Begin now – and learn by doing

The report urges the government to get on with it, to begin now and learn by doing. There's much uncertainty about the degree of behaviour change that can be delivered by any particular policy, but we don't have the luxury of waiting until the research is clear.

Our focus should be on enabling people to act and to see change happening – this can kick-start motivation, engagement, and new narratives and social norms. This would be a shift away from behaviour change strategies which focus on motivating people as a first step.

The government must put the climate emergency at the heart of policymaking. It must step up, making it possible and desirable for people to make the necessary lifestyle shifts. And it must build public trust and engagement by showing leadership, such as committing to doubling tree cover and ditching fracking.



Notes

1. <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/es803496a#>.
2. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/nure.12123>.