

Environmental Information Sheet

Jargon Buster

Biofuels: Gas or liquid fuel made from plants, such as sugar cane, maize, palm oil or flax. Unlike petroleum, they are a renewable source of energy and do not contribute to climate change, since the carbon dioxide produced when they are burnt is cancelled out by the carbon dioxide they take in when growing. However, the UK could never grow enough biofuels to meet its needs, and many imported biofuels lead to carbon dioxide emissions from their transport as well as causing deforestation.

Bio-mass: Forms of living matter that can be used as fuel, including wood, manure, and plants. Renewable source of energy which does not contribute to climate change. See biofuels.

Carbon: This is often used as shorthand for carbon dioxide, the commonest of the gases which contribute to climate change.

Carbon footprint: The total amount of carbon dioxide produced by an activity, area or household. For example, the carbon footprint of people in the UK is far higher than that of most people in Africa.

Carbon Neutral: Not contributing to the overall production of carbon dioxide. For example, using wood for heating is carbon neutral because the carbon dioxide it produces when it is burnt is cancelled out by the carbon dioxide it took in when it was growing. In a carbon neutral village, carbon dioxide from use of fossil fuels (eg in individual transport) might be cancelled out by a village wind farm that sells renewable energy to the National Grid.

Climate Change: The earth is surrounded by a blanket of gases which keeps it warm and able to sustain life. However, the gases produced by burning fossil fuels are making this blanket thicker, trapping heat in. As a result our climate is starting to change. For example, this means higher sea levels, as the polar ice melts, and more extreme weather – storms, floods and droughts.

Deforestation: The world's forests are disappearing rapidly, cut down for timber or to enable the land to be used for agriculture. Sometimes this is for subsistence agriculture, enabling the some of the poorest people in the world to survive. More often than not, it is for large-scale commercial interests, providing food, biofuels or other goods to the developed world. Yet forests have a vital role in absorbing carbon dioxide, and so slowing down the rate of climate change.

Emissions: Gases released into the atmosphere. Often used for greenhouse gases.

Emissions Trading: This is a government scheme to control the amount of greenhouse gases by creating a "carbon market". Participating companies are given a carbon allowance, and then have to buy more from others who have made savings, if they exceed this. There is a similar scheme at European level. So far the allowances have been set fairly high, and the effectiveness has been limited.

Energy audits: Review of a business or building to assess current energy use, how this can be reduced and where renewable energy might be used.

Energy descent: The process of changing to a post-oil, low carbon economy. At present, oil is at the heart of almost everything we produce. Changing this in response to **peak oil** is a major challenge, and requires long-term planning if we are to avoid world crises and recession.

Food miles: The distance food travels from farm to plate. The often considerable distances food is transported makes traffic congestion worse, as well as contributing to the greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

Fossil Fuels: Coal, oil and gas, which produce greenhouse gases, contributing to climate change when they are burnt.

Global Warming: Often used as a synonym for climate change, which is caused as the earth heats up. However, the effects of a hotter earth are not just warmer climates – see climate change. In fact, there is a (remote) chance that the Gulf Stream might reverse, which would mean that the UK could become much colder.

Greenhouse gases: Gases responsible for climate change, so-called because they act like a greenhouse (or blanket) around the earth. The commonest is carbon dioxide, which is often used to represent all the gases.

Ground source heat pumps: These transfer heat from the ground via a buried loop, to heat buildings. It's a bit like a fridge in reverse. Some electricity is required for the pump, but otherwise the energy does not produce greenhouse gases.

Local Agenda 21: Agenda 21 was the global action plan for sustainable development, signed by governments at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. A key principle was the need for local at a local level. This led to *Local Agenda 21* initiatives worldwide including in the UK, with a flowering of community led and local sustainability initiatives.

Offsetting: Cancelling out the carbon dioxide produced by an activity (like flying) through paying for activities (eg energy efficiency) which save carbon dioxide elsewhere. Tree planting is less effective, as carbon dioxide savings are calculated over a very long lifetime. Offsetting should always be seen as a last resort: some have compared it to the sale of indulgences for sinners in medieval times!

Peak Oil: This is when the demand for oil can no longer be met by increasing production, as oil gets harder to extract and no new large reserves are found. The world economy depends on cheap oil, so rising oil prices are likely to have a major impact. Some think we are already close to peak oil, while others think it is still 30 or 40 years away.

Renewable energy: Energy from renewable sources, like the sun, wind, water or wave, that do not generate the greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

Slow Food: This is the opposite of fast food! It is often locally produced, with care for producers and the environment, and enjoyed at leisure. The Slow Food Movement started in Italy. The first UK Slow Food town was Ludlow, and is now expanding widely.

Sustainable Communities: Government use of this term can be confusing. It usually refers to "Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future", which focuses largely on housing and planning issues (including the Thames Gateway) and was launched by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2003. The remit has now been taken over by the Department of Communities and Local Government.

Sustainable Community Strategies: The Local Government Act 2000 required local government to produce a community strategy, promoting "the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the area and contributes to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK". More recently, the name has been changed to Sustainable Community Strategies to reinforce the wide sustainability remit.

Sustainable Development: There are many definitions of sustainable development. One of the best known is: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" – or "not cheating on your children". Achieving sustainable development means balancing three aspects: economic, social and environmental.

Transition Towns: Towns which are planning how to cope with the transition to a post fossil fuel economy, following peak oil. Totnes was the first Transition Town in the UK.