

I will if you will

Towards sustainable consumption

A summary



About the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable

This brochure summarises the conclusions of the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, jointly hosted by the National Consumer Council (NCC) and the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) from September 2004 to March 2006.

Funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Roundtable assembled a small group of experts in consumer policy, retailing and sustainability to advise Government on how to create consumer choices that stay within environmental limits.

The Roundtable conducted its own primary research into a range of possible solutions and approaches to sustainable consumption, besides drawing on the existing evidence base.

Roundtable members

- > Ed Mayo (chair): chief executive, NCC
- > Alan Knight (chair): head of corporate accountability, SABMiller
- > Rita Clifton: chair, Interbrand
- > Tim Jackson: professor of sustainable development, University of Surrey
- > Jill Johnstone: policy director, NCC
- > Sinead Furey: General Consumer Council of Northern Ireland
- > Andrew Lee: director, SDC (campaigns director, WWF-UK to February 2006)
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Introduction

Our consumer society brings us unprecedented comfort, convenience and choice. However, the complexity of our economy does not always help us to connect the way we live with the natural systems on which we depend. The simple truth is that if everyone in the world consumed at the average rate we do in the UK, we would need three planets. We need to move from three-planet living to one-planet living⁽¹⁾, at home, at work or travelling around – and we're running out of time to make the changes needed to meet that challenge. Scientists have given us just ten years to take the collective action necessary to prevent catastrophic climate change⁽²⁾.

The government's sustainable development framework for the UK aims to deliver a 'strong, healthy, just society, within environmental limits'.

The key to achieving one-planet living lies in making sustainable habits and choices easier for us to take up. The challenge now is to create a supportive framework for collective progress – encapsulated in the notion 'I will if you will'. We need to feel confident that we are acting in step with others – neighbours and colleagues, friends and family - not alone and against the grain.

The government has already promised to 'set out a plan for further action on sustainable consumption'. This brochure sets out the key Roundtable recommendations for action in the short and longer term.

The full report, *I will if you will: towards sustainable consumption*, is available to download from www.sd-commission.org.uk or www.ncc.org.uk.

Quotes throughout this brochure are drawn from a Consumer forum event held by the Roundtable in Manchester with more than a hundred members of the general public, which explored how sustainable consumption relates to their lifestyles and aspirations.



One: There is space for change

Growing numbers of individuals and businesses are ready and willing to embrace the challenge of one-planet living, if the right policies are in place to help. Most of us now understand the logic of doing the right thing by the environment, for our own health and wellbeing, and that of our children and grandchildren. Roundtable market research showed that many people recognise the need to balance material possessions with the fundamentals of having time and energy to invest in good relationships and healthy living.

Changing the habits of a lifetime is not easy for any of us. But public commitment can be harnessed by positive leadership that delivers a compelling vision for change and makes that change possible. People need to feel confident that their own efforts are part of a collective effort, supported by policies that make sustainable choices the easier choice.

The government is well placed to give the lead people want, and enable this collective approach to evolve.

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > make all central government buildings and transport systems carbon neutral⁽³⁾ by 2012.
- > give priority to providing sustainably-produced food, and on-site renewable energy, in public settings like schools and hospitals.

What people want from politicians and policy-makers

A Consumer forum was held in Manchester in October 2005, attended by over 100 participants. Its purpose was to better understand consumer aspirations and provide insights that could help shape policy-making on sustainable consumption.

There was a clear appetite among participants at the Consumer forum for government to take action to make sustainable habits and choices easier. But this had to be the right kind of action, for them to be willing to support it. The key messages to government were:

Make it fair: so that all income groups can play their part and share the benefits.

Help people to act together: it's easier to change our habits as a community rather than individually.

Make it positive and tangible: specific and visible actions, like installing a mini-wind turbine on a roof, can encourage others to follow suit.

Win people's trust by setting an example: politicians who 'walk the talk' encourage others and inspire enthusiasm for change.

'They [the government] are the biggest landlords in the country, aren't they? So if they want change to happen, you start with the biggest person not the smallest person.'



Two: Start from where people are

Four areas of our lives account for four-fifths of our impact on the environment: how we run our homes, what we eat, how we get around and our holiday travel. We often find ourselves locked into unsustainable consumption patterns, either out of habit or because we see others acting in the same way. The Roundtable believes that practical catalysts are needed to open people's minds to the impact of their actions and demonstrate alternatives, helping to build the mandate for more radical change.

What are these practical catalysts – and how would they help people to make a real difference?

i) Waking up to the real costs of air travel: carbon offsetting

Many people do not connect cheap flights with climate change. Carbon offset schemes are one way of engaging people in taking responsibility for the impacts of flying. Paying an extra charge on the cost of each flight to offset these emissions can help fund projects that prevent greenhouse gases being released elsewhere. One scheme, for example, uses carbon offset payments to invest in stoves for Indian schools that run on carbon neutral crop waste rather than gas.

People at the Consumer forum backed the Roundtable idea that all passengers should be offered carbon offset when

they book flights, with the ability to opt out if they choose.

Of course, carbon offset is no substitute for the demand management policies needed to curb projected emissions growth. We urgently need to bring aviation into the Kyoto Protocol and emissions trading schemes, and introduce an emissions charge for domestic flights. But it would be short-sighted to think that we can leave air passengers out of the equation when we push for more radical interventions. Opt-out carbon offset can spread the awareness needed to build a mandate for bolder political action.

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > give airlines a clear incentive to introduce good quality carbon offsetting on an opt-out basis.

ii) Bringing home the impact of climate change: micro-generation

Energy can seem like an invisible magic in our homes. Most of us are still not making the connection between climate change and the way we use the lights, heating and appliances that are responsible for 27 per cent of our UK carbon emissions⁽⁴⁾.

New Roundtable research shows, however, that people moving into homes with built-in renewable energy

technologies, like solar water heating or micro-wind turbines, report far greater awareness of what they can do to reduce their climate impact – and their energy bills. Micro-renewable technologies can provide a tangible hook to engage us emotionally with the issue of energy use. People also report a sense of satisfaction and pride that they are helping to tackle climate change in their everyday lives.

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > set targets for rolling out micro-renewables on new and existing homes and schools, to help people make a personal connection between energy use and climate change.

iii) Helping people into healthy & sustainable eating habits: fresh, seasonal and nutritionally-balanced meals in schools and hospitals

Food production, packaging and transport accounts for nearly a third of all our climate impacts⁽⁵⁾. How do we influence current trends towards eating too much meat, or habits of buying strawberries in December? We can start by getting into more sustainable habits in the first place. The example set by meals served in schools and hospitals will have a spill-over effect on what parents, pupils and patients assume is a healthy diet for themselves at home.

Thanks to Jamie Oliver’s Feed Me Better campaign, parents everywhere are now calling for school meals to set a better example for kids and get them used to a more healthy diet⁽⁶⁾. The school meal reform agenda is a crucial opportunity to enthuse children about seasonal eating and healthy alternatives to eating intensively-produced meat twice or three times a day. So far it is not clear that the opportunity will be taken. A narrow focus on nutrients alone risks neglect of the wider synergies with climate change and local agriculture that can flow from a shift towards more fresh, sustainable-farmed fruit and vegetables.

It will also pay huge dividends for health and sustainability if cooking classes are viewed as an essential life-skill for all. Evidence also suggests that involving children in growing their own vegetables can make the job of persuading them to eat their greens a lot easier⁽⁷⁾.

‘Bringing lettuces here from Spain... I don’t know why we do that. It’s crazy isn’t it?’

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > work closely with the Audit Commission to ensure councils, schools and hospitals are enabled to serve meals that are both healthy and sustainably-produced.

iv) Tracking our energy use at home: smart metering for all

In Northern Ireland, new energy meters have been rolled out which give people instant feedback on how much energy they are using, and offer them tariff savings if they switch more energy use to off-peak times. This has helped to reduce demand on the ‘dirtiest’ power stations, which come on stream at peak times, and customers have on average cut their energy use by 3.5 per cent. One estimate is that smart meters could help users save up to 15 pence in every pound off their electricity bills⁽⁸⁾.

‘I’d like to have a kind of meter in the house so that you can actually become aware of how much you are using – because we don’t know, do we?’

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > establish a UK-wide programme to give all households smart meters by 2012. Initially, smart meters should be required for all meter replacements and new connections.

v) Getting around: affordable low-carbon cars

Addressing the car culture is vital. At the Roundtable’s Consumer forum, people talked about the need for more accessible, more reliable public transport

and even highlighted the advantages of walking and cycling more. At the same time, they were also very candid about their emotional attachment to cars.

There is no long-term alternative to improving public transport if we are to tackle issues of access and mobility in a sustainable way. But let’s be practical. If we have to have cars, let’s ensure they are cleaner and greener. The Roundtable believes that buying and running a low-carbon car, like the ‘hybrids’ that are now on the market, should be made progressively cheaper than opting for fuel-hungry vehicles.

‘What do you think would happen if Tony Blair started driving around in a hybrid vehicle? I think sales of them would go up 1,000% overnight.’

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > give serious incentives to the purchase of new low-carbon cars, and discourage fuel-hungry vehicles. The top band of Vehicle Excise Duty should rise sharply to £1,800 a year, for the most polluting vehicles, and low-carbon vehicles should get complete exemption.



Three: Don't put the burden solely on green consumers

'I want to see the day when consumers can expect that environmental responsibility is as fundamental to the products they buy as health and safety is now...'⁽⁹⁾ Prime Minister Tony Blair

We must find ways of making it easier for people to make sustainable choices. As shoppers, in the face of overwhelming levels of choice, we all expect some issues to have been dealt with upstream. Often we are not aware that government and retailers are delegating to us as individuals the responsibility for choosing society's way out of unsustainability. As a result, our concerns as citizens often do not get reflected in the choices on offer. It is unrealistic to expect the heroic minority of green consumers to solve environmental problems that face us all.

The solution lies in the trend towards what we call 'choice editing'. From the magazines we read, the radio stations we listen to or the shops we visit, we look to others to help organise the choices we face.

'Choice editing' for sustainability involves editing out high-impact products and services, and replacing them with low-impact ones that consumers see as equally good or better. This can happen in a number of ways. Governments can set minimum standards or give clear

incentives to sustainable options. Manufacturers can decide what products and services to offer, and with what impacts. Retailers then choose which products they wish to stock and promote.

Manufacturers, retailers and regulators have already used choice editing to raise sustainability standards for certain products like fridges, paints and timber, helping to make sustainable options the norm rather than the exception.

The government needs to work closely with businesses that have demonstrated best practice to plot roadmaps that will achieve a rapid market shift towards low-impact products by set deadlines.

These 'product roadmaps' may involve a variety of different interventions.

Product roadmapping

'Product roadmaps' are a policy approach for addressing high-impact products through:

1. understanding the issues and range of possible solutions
2. clear deadlines for achieving the desired level of transformation
3. labelling products as a basis for incentives and standard-setting
4. robust incentives tied to product sustainability
5. supportive public procurement specifications
6. raising the bar through progressive regulation.

Product labelling achieves little on its own, but enables a powerful set of drivers to promote change, such as procurement policy, regulation or voluntary agreements to set minimum standards, fiscal incentives and product charges.

‘Enforcing change...you could do this by basically saying we’re not going to produce normal light bulbs any more; every light bulb is going to be an energy-saving one.’

‘Many people wouldn’t even notice if cod was banned...if you go into a fish shop, there’s a whole range of fish and... there’s no cod. You can’t buy cod – end of story really.’

Choice editing in action

In 1995, the DIY store chain B&Q set a target that by 1999 it would only sell timber that was certified as sustainable by the Forest Stewardship Council. Instead of leaving the onus on the consumer to distinguish between wood products on grounds of sustainability, B&Q edited out unsustainable options. This means that customers can now focus on the look or the price of the door or shelf they’re thinking of buying – safe in the knowledge that the entire range of wood products are all FSC-certified. One third of demand for wood products in the UK is now met by FSC-certified timber.

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > work with business champions to plot 10 product roadmaps for high-impact products by 2007. Priorities include accelerating consumer demand for:
 - > Low-carbon cars
 - > Low-energy home entertainment
 - > The next generation of low-energy lighting.





Four: Show people they are part of something bigger

To go with the flow of sustainable consumption, we need bold leadership and positive role models. It's also essential to know that we're not acting alone, but in step with others – neighbours and friends, family and colleagues – part of a bigger picture of worthwhile progress that's making a real difference.

Community action is easier than going it alone, and this has already been seen, as recycling schemes have been rolled out across the UK. We are social animals – most of us don't want to risk isolation.

Councils can mobilise us at the neighbourhood level to consume more sustainably and to acquire more environmentally-friendly habits. Some have already introduced a range of incentives and penalties to help everyone switch to lower-carbon lifestyles, and councils should be free to develop this leadership role.

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > reward households for careful use of energy and water via taxes and tariffs. The Government's energy review provides an opportunity to establish such a system of rewards and penalties.
- > empower and resource local councils to help people create sustainable communities. Councils should give street-level feedback on recycling and other achievements and reward people who pledge to adopt sustainable behaviours.

Rewarding action by all

Warmer homes

Homeowners in Braintree, Essex receive £100 council tax rebates in the year that they install cavity wall insulation. They also receive a free energy audit and energy-saving light bulbs worth more than £20.

Variable waste charging

Currently in the UK, householders pay a fixed charge for waste disposal. Some countries have switched to a 'pay as you throw' system.

Feedback on recycling achievements

Giving neighbourhood-level feedback on recycling achievements can dramatically increase recycling activity. A pilot scheme in Guildford raised community recycling rates to 90 per cent – simply by giving householders feedback on how well their street was doing compared with others.

Sustainable community pledges

Sutton Council has signed up more than 1,000 residents to a 'Planet Pledge'. In return for pledges to fit loft insulation, recycle plastic bags or leave their car at home for short journeys, people receive advice, support and discounts on cycle repair and Tube travel.

'I would certainly reduce the amount of waste I had if I knew I was paying between 50p and £1 for a bag.'



Five: Sustaining the gains

Sustainable consumption can be seen as a spectrum. At the near end are measures requiring less in terms of active change in habits and routines – the installation of a mini-wind turbine on a roof, or a big cut in stand-by requirements for new TVs, for example. At the far end of the spectrum lie innovations and measures that require more fundamental change – such as reducing demand for air travel and car use.

Public policy on sustainable consumption should enable government, business, and all of us as individuals to move progressively along this spectrum.

The experience of the Consumer forum suggests that people are willing to engage constructively in exploring the wide range of policy options that will be needed. Policy-makers at all levels should embrace every opportunity to engage us in dialogue about how we can collectively achieve a better quality of life within global limits.

Events like the Consumer forum, where people have the time and space to deliberate on the big challenges like climate change, and relate these to their own lives, can help to demonstrate and build the mandate for policies that enable sustainable consumption. Crucially, they can also help ensure that the policies chosen will be both effective and fair.

'If we don't look after the world, it won't be here for the children or the great-great grandchildren.'

The Roundtable calls on government to:

- > commit to an ongoing programme of national and regional public events to further inform policy planning. A priority is to engage people in debates on how to meet the UK's carbon reduction targets of 20 per cent by 2010 and 60 per cent by 2050.

Alongside public engagement, sustainable consumption requires that government dramatically improves its understanding of the reliance of the economy on material resources. Only with the right tools can we determine where we need to consume more efficiently, where we should consume less – and where we can consume more.

The Roundtable calls on HM Treasury to:

- > develop a working economic model by 2008 to track links between national income and our collective use of limited global resources.

The Roundtable does not claim to have found all the answers. The best way of learning, after all, is by doing. It is time for the government to get policies in place to support and reward people working to make sustainable consumption a reality in schools, hospitals, businesses and their own homes. The crucial missing pieces of the puzzle will be supplied by them.

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‘The Roundtable’s work has clearly demonstrated that citizens can engage positively, constructively and creatively in the debate on how we tackle the big environmental challenges of our time.’

Wiki Cooke, Joint Chief Executive, Opinion Leader Research

‘This report highlights that consumers are increasingly looking to government and business to help them live more sustainable lives and make better choices about the products and services they buy. The job for the business community then is to satisfy this consumer need and to provide clear and practical guidance to government on the steps required.’

Neil Carson, CEO, Johnson Matthey & Chair of the Business Taskforce on Sustainable Consumption and Production

‘The Roundtable has rightly identified that reconnecting people with the origins of the food they eat can repay powerful “double dividends” for public health and the environment. *I will if you will* makes a significant contribution to a critical public debate.’

Sir Don Curry, Chair, Sustainable Farming and Food Implementation Group

‘It is hard to go it alone as a green consumer. The Roundtable has set out practical steps that government can take to make sustainable consumption a reality in people’s daily lives and reassure them that their actions are part of something bigger.’

Robert Napier, Chief Executive, WWF-UK