

Headline Report from:

Cut costs and help save the planet

On the 30th March 2023, the Energy Plus Academy organised a knowledge exchange Think Tank attended by social housing residents and staff, charities, and expert energy saving organisations to discuss practical changes individuals can make in their everyday lives to reduce their carbon footprint and save money. We also discussed what support people needed to implement these ideas, and the wider structural changes required to tackle both the cost-of-living crisis and the climate crisis.

1. How are the cost-of-living crisis and climate change linked?

People are increasingly struggling to meet everyday costs as the price of day-to-day goods and energy rise. At the same time, we are facing a climate crisis, the impacts of which are already being felt. Often people can feel powerless in the face of these problems, and changes are needed at a macro level to tackle the root causes of the problems. There are some adaptations we can make to reduce our overall energy consumption that will help by lowering our bills and saving energy.

2. People on lower incomes often have a lower impact on the planet

There is an argument that individuals struggling with the cost-of-living don't have the available cash to use resources extravagantly. Nor do they have the time and energy to prioritise thinking about climate change, they are just working to get by every day. On the other hand, when people are struggling for money, they make choices that reduce waste and therefore their impact on the planet: thinking carefully about the food they buy and using up what there is so to not create waste; limiting the amount of electricity, gas and heating used in the home; not owning a car or taking flights. People on low incomes, who struggle with the cost-of-living crisis, may have a lower impact on the planet than higher earners¹. However, they are also more likely to feel the keenest impacts of climate change, as they have less resources with which to adapt. Reducing our carbon emissions and energy use has to be something that everyone takes part in, and messages should reach everyone not only those with the lowest incomes. Many different ideas for saving money and reducing our energy footprint came up in the workshop.

3. Using energy in our homes

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/04/carbon-footprint-gap-between-rich-poor-expanding-study>

According to the Office for National Statistics, 26% of total emissions in the UK come from our homes². With high energy prices conserving energy in the home is crucial to both saving money and protecting the planet. Lots of people are not aware of how much energy they are using, but organisations such as Energy Project Plus can calculate this, and suggest ways to save energy, for example, only heating the rooms that are in use. Other changes, such as putting reflective strips behind radiators, adding rugs and curtains, only boiling the amount of water needed, and using energy efficient LED light bulbs can also help cut energy use in the home, and have an impact on bills.

There is reliable information available about how to save energy in the home, but for it to be useful it needs to be accessible and clear. National Energy Action ensure that their information and advice are written in easy-to-understand language and they make it available in several languages, and in large text formats.

4. Retrofitting

While cutting down on heating helps people save money, there are health impacts from living in a cold home. Homes need to be well insulated, so they require less heating and the heating that is used is efficient and has maximum impact. Retrofitting homes, by adding insulation, fitting double and triple glazed windows and draught-proof doors, all help ensure homes are warm and cheap to heat.

For retrofitting to be effective, it needs to be carried out carefully so that it doesn't create other problems. A retrofitted home must be well-ventilated to ensure that it does not become damp and encourage mould. Furthermore, a dryer house will feel warmer. Where a social housing provider is carrying out retrofitting works, it is critical that tenants are properly consulted and kept informed throughout the whole process. Works need to be inspected post completion to check they are performing how they should, and contractors need to be closely supervised. Hygrometers, which measure the temperature and humidity of rooms, can show how a home is performing.

Renewable energy such as solar panels and heat pumps carry an upfront cost but can help people save money in the long run. They need to be properly maintained to ensure they are working effectively. There are lots of grants available, particularly for people on lower incomes or in receipt of benefits. Organisations that are part of LEAP – the Low Energy Advice Partnership network – can support households to access eligible funding. Householders can consult Trustmark, a government endorsed scheme that vets and monitors business to ensure they meet required standards. Trustmark can check that a tradesperson or business has a sound reputation and will deliver good quality works.

5. Eating sustainably

²<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/climatechangeinsightsuk/august2022#:~:text=Households%20are%20a%20big%20emitter,UK%2C%20on%20a%20residency%20basis.>

There are many small changes we can make in the way we eat that will help us save money and reduce our environmental impact. First of all, we can reduce waste by carefully planning our meals and only buying what we need. We can also creatively use scraps of food that would otherwise be thrown in the bin, for example making soup out of peelings and growing new spring onions from the root ends. Meat consumption has a significant impact on the planet, but it can be replaced with other sources of protein such as beans and pulses. Whilst plant-based diets are the most sustainable, even cutting down on meat rather than completely cutting it out, such as with 'meat free Mondays', will reduce the environmental impact of our diets. With fish we should only eat sustainably fished produce that is not endangered.

Batch cooking and freezing can also reduce the energy needed to prepare food. However, this is only a sensible option for those with a big freezer and the money required to run it.

It is also important to understand the labels on food; just because something is past its sell by date doesn't mean it cannot be eaten. Sell by, use by, and best before are all different labels and mean different things. Sell by allows a wider margin. Using common sense when deciding whether to throw food away or eat it is important. Generally, the food will smell or look different if it is in a state that is unsafe to eat. Dry food tends to last longer than fresh food.

Growing your own food is environmentally friendly and can be done at a low cost. For people who do not have gardens, pots and growing bags on balconies and windowsills can produce very efficient yields. Community gardens are a good way to bring the community together, whilst also providing low-cost food.

6. Food support

As food prices increase, people are struggling more and more to afford basic food items. At the same time, we have a food industry that generates 3 million tons of still edible "food waste" every year in the UK³. Community groups such as the Cupboard Network provide much needed free food to people in need, while also tackling food waste. These groups collect surplus, still edible food from supermarkets and food chains that would otherwise throw it away: this can provide a lifeline for people who are struggling to make ends meet. The groups are also useful as go-betweens, to link people to wider support. For example, Citizens Advice attend community meals organised by the Cupboard Network to give people advice when they want it. These community food groups are mainly volunteer run and have limited funds, but they require food hygiene training, grant writing capacity, and money management skills in order to operate successfully.

7. Cycling

Cycling offers a low-cost way to travel that is good for the environment. Groups such as the Chester Cycle Campaign help cycling become part of people's everyday lives through offering low-cost bikes, repairs and maintenance skills

³ <https://fareshare.org.uk/what-we-do/hunger-food-waste/>

workshops, and a buddy scheme helping people improve their confidence on the roads. They also have a specialist worker helping people with disabilities to cycle with adapted bikes. Designated cycle lanes help people feel safer when cycling, particularly segregated lanes. These need to be carefully planned out, so they cover the most frequented routes and don't cause too much disruption to local businesses.

8. Public transport

Using public transport produces less carbon emissions per person than a car and reduces congestion on the road. The standard of public transport varies hugely across the country. For people to be able to use it to go about their everyday business, it needs to be reliable, affordable, and regular. Public transport also needs a joined-up approach to make it work effectively: buses need to meet trains; trains and train stations need to provide suitable cycle spaces. For public transport to be efficient, frequent enough and cheap enough it needs to be regulated and subsidised. The Arley and Ansley Big Local Group¹ have helped subsidise a direct bus service to the local hospital, as the existing bus took over an hour despite it just being a 6-mile journey. In areas where public transport isn't available, car-pooling schemes can be a useful alternative although this requires significant coordination.

9. Cutting back on what we buy

One of the largest drivers of climate change and environmental pollution is the over-production of clothes, gadgets and electrical items, other household goods and "stuff". Sites such as Facebook Marketplace, Gumtree, and Freecycle can be a useful way to reduce our need for newly produced items, and offer a cheap way to get the items we need, which is helpful in a cost-of-living crisis. Events such as school uniform swaps and clothes swaps also offer a low-cost, low environmental impact option. These events can also have a community benefit, by bringing people together. Repair cafés and workshops that teach people how to repair items we already have is also essential in reducing our carbon footprint, and invariably repair is more affordable than replacing the item.

10. Changing our habits and expectations

Over the years what people expect in their everyday lives has changed. We now expect there to be air conditioning in our cars, and for strawberries to be available in the shops all year around but air conditioning in the car pushed up petrol consumption and winter grown strawberries require heating, lighting and transport costs. Adjusting these expectations and patterns of behaviour, having a better understanding of seasonality, and the need to live within our "environmental limits", will help us live in a way that is less damaging to the planet and will also save us money.

11. The importance of education

Many of the changes we need to make require skills development, and education. It is possible to do this with children in schools, who will then go home and share what they have learnt with their parents. Lessons can be taught

both in school and in out of school clubs. One community group runs “Ready Steady Cook Off” competitions, teaching children to cook meals using a selection of different ingredients. They are then given the bag of the same of ingredients to take home for their parents to recreate the dish with them. Community groups and social housing providers can also support individuals to develop climate and wallet friendly skills –organising repair cafés, sewing workshops, food growing courses, swap shops, sharing clubs etc.

12. The wider structural changes needed to tackle the climate and cost-of-living crisis

While many of the topics at the Think Tank focussed on the individual actions that we can take to tackle the cost-of-living and climate crisis in our own lives, participants acknowledged throughout that these can only go so far, and that significant structural change, government intervention, and intergovernmental, action are needed to tackle both the cost-of-living crisis and the climate crisis together. As the climate crisis deepens, cost-of-living pressures will rise further as food and resources are affected by climate change. People need access to secure, fairly paid work and a comprehensive welfare system, that allows people to have a reasonable quality of life. Government also need to take comprehensive action to ensure that big businesses are working sustainability, they also need to invest heavily in green, renewable energy sources, and to think more holistically about our food, energy and transport systems.

Messages to Government

At the end of the Think Tank we asked to everyone to write down their key messages to government to help people cope with the cost-of-living crisis and tackle climate change. Some of the key messages are below.

- Commit to improving the energy efficiency of domestic properties through a national infrastructure programme funded through taxes.
- Regulate the energy market more tightly.
- Provide pro-active advice to all social housing tenants on how to save money in their homes.
- Simplify the benefits systems so it is easy to access and understand.
- Invest in renewable energy.
- Subsidise public transport more coherently and comprehensively.

About NCRC:

Since 1995, the National Communities Resource Centre (NCRC) has existed to empower local people to create positive change where they live and beyond. Our Trafford Hall home provides a place for people with different backgrounds to come together as equals and solve problems facing their communities.

There is a seat at our table for everyone, with participants at our events sharing their experiences, learning new skills, and forging connections that help create vital change for communities in stress. We have organised, supported, and hosted many events and workshops run by housing associations, charities, community groups, and public/Government organisations alike.

The work of NCRC also provides essential support to families under pressure, and young people looking to build their confidence, skills and resilience.

About the Housing Plus and Energy Plus Academies

Through our partnership with the London School of Economics, we deliver the Housing Plus and Energy Plus Academies. These are a series of think-tank events designed to tackle some of the key issues affecting low-income communities, like welfare reform, financial pressure, climate change and energy saving. Discussions from these events guide our research, creating briefings that influence high-level stakeholders to drive change.

View our upcoming events [here](#).

View other reports from the academy [here](#).
