

the co-operative party

2019 Policy consultation - background briefing

Climate change, energy and environment

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See also: Discussion paper - Climate change, energy and environment

Context

Time is running out to prevent a climate catastrophe.

Global emissions show few signs of slowing down, hitting unprecedented levels in 2018. Although coal exploitation has dropped since a peak in 2013, oil use has continued to increase. Human-caused climate change has been behind a growing number of extreme and deadly weather events, from hurricanes in the US, to droughts in East Africa, fires in the Arctic and flooding in Bangladesh. As ice caps melt at a faster pace than predicted, the resulting rising sea levels are risking the lives, livelihoods and natural habitats of many coastal regions – some low-lying Pacific islands have already disappeared entirely.

And climate change is not the only damage that we are inflicting on our planet. 9 million tons of plastic enter oceans every year – a figure expected to double by 2030 unless urgent action is taken. Every year more animals are added to the endangered species list as deforestation, pollution and global warming shrink habitats. Contaminants from agriculture and manufacturing are affecting global water supplies, and fumes from cars and lorries are making our busiest streets dangerous to breathe on.

As the problems become more acute, and the window to tackle them narrows, many of the world's leaders are turning away. The rise of right-wing populism is seeing international agreements breaking down and progress at home stalled or reversed.

America elected a long-time climate change denier, who is now rolling back on Obama-era climate measures. Likewise, Bolsonaro's victory in Brazil last year, on a platform of deforestation, echoed Trump's call to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. In France, the Gilets Jaunes are protesting ecotaxes on fuel. Closer to home, Brexit threatens progress with potential loss of funding for mitigation schemes and the risk of lower environmental standards.

There is a significant international challenge in making progress on these issues since no nation can resolve them in isolation - climate change and the environment are, by their very nature, worldwide phenomena. Parts of the UK, for example, were significantly contaminated as a result of Chernobyl. Regulation on food production and manufacturing requires common standards. For decades we have depended on collective legislation and regulation within the EU, often with Britain leading the way. How should we work with others regionally and internationally in the future and where should our priorities lie in terms of British leadership?

From global warming to the plastic waste polluting our oceans, our environment urgently needs international co-operation across borders. And co-operative approaches closer to home can help to bring people together from the bottom up to change the way we consume goods, where our food comes from, and how we generate energy.

Co-operative businesses are leading the way too – from cutting single use plastics and refillable bottle schemes to high environmental standards for food and sustainable, local purchasing arrangements. In local government, councillors are helping to lead the way on air quality, community buses, community energy, local food growing, pension divestment and greening.

This policy consultation seeks to build on the Co-operative Party's longstanding commitment to action on climate change and our belief that we can achieve more for our environment when working co-operatively than we can alone. It is a timely opportunity to update our policy – in energy, for example, there have been many developments since our platform was last consulted on from changes to feed-in tariffs for community energy to fracking and new Party policy on democratic public ownership. Given the impact and importance of Brexit negotiations, it is important that our platform is reflected in the UK's international relationships and trade arrangements.

There is an opportunity to develop new policy in areas where the movement, co-operative councillors and local communities are leading the way. And we need to reflect on how co-operative approaches can convince and engage those communities who may lose out from environmental measures, whether it's job losses in older, more polluting industries or new levies on higher emission cars in our cities and towns.

Our existing policy platform

Climate change

Britain's continuing reliance on fossil fuels places an unsustainable and dangerous burden on our environment, as well as aggravating international tensions and jeopardising progress toward social justice. The government should continue to advance international action on climate change, playing a leading role in pressing for and delivering international agreement.

Community energy

The growth of community energy schemes has ably demonstrated communities' eagerness to be part of an energy transformation in the UK. Brixton Energy, for example, is a community energy project installing solar panels on social housing in one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK. The investment in infrastructure comes from a community share offer, meaning local residents are investing in, and benefiting from the success of, the technology.

Consumer, local government, community and employee ownership models have been shown to offer behavioural benefits, as people who are more involved think about their energy use. They also offer economic benefits, with returns remaining in the locality to be reinvested in energy efficiency or for other social impact. Ensuring that the benefits of local energy generation remain in the locality is fundamentally important to many local economies in the UK - it has been shown, for example, that for somewhere like Cornwall the value of energy services leaving the county dwarfs the income received from tourism.

The government should recognise the benefits of local, community or employee ownership models in the energy sector and support their growth and development, including reinstating Feed-in-Tariffs, Social Investment Tax Relief and the Enterprise Investment Scheme for this sector. Direct supply of community owned renewable energy to local consumers – currently hugely challenging for small scale and community-owned schemes – should be piloted, with a view to make this mainstream by 2020. Other interventions to support this sector could include the development of rules surrounding grid access and recognition of community ownership within planning guidelines.

Energy efficiency

The best route to limiting, or managing, energy costs in the long term is to reduce the need for energy in the first instance. The cheapest unit of energy is the one not used. The Co-operative Party sees energy efficiency as a top national infrastructure priority, which deserves a long-term revenue stream and appropriate incentives for homes and businesses to retrofit their buildings.

We want to see individuals, communities and the co-operative sector able to have tangible impact on improving energy efficiency and reducing bills. Similar to the incentives that the renewable energy Feed-in Tariff and Renewable Heat Incentive created for the installation of low carbon generation, we suggest a Feed-in Tariff for energy efficiency could be developed to incentivise domestic and business consumers to retrofit homes and businesses and replace inefficient appliances. We also believe that the Energy Company Obligation should be reformed to put a community-based approach at the heart of the drive to tackle energy efficiency.