

Countdown to COP26 - U3A Trust group

“No-one made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could so do little.”
Edmund Burke.

Members of ‘Countdown to COP’ are most definitely seeking to do as much as they can! Meeting monthly and with a growing membership (currently approaching 40), they feel there is a shared awareness that our generation won’t see the worst consequences: it will be our grandchildren’s generation that will be severely affected by global warming – unless urgent action is taken now.

During monthly meetings, there has been a focus on the Paris Agreement, COP26 and the issues around averting the climate crisis. Several members have made well-informed presentations to the group; these often have led to lively discussion. Three topics consistently arise: domestic heating, travel and food choices. Here is a flavour of some of these discussions.

Food and Farming

Agriculture is known to have a high carbon footprint, contributing 10% of greenhouse gases¹, partly from its use of manufactured fertilisers and animal feed. Lorna Brown led the group through a session of food and farming which covered a wide range of issues. The topic of meat was controversial, but the idea that we could come to view eating meat as a luxury and not an everyday essential was suggested.

So should we all become vegan?

Peter Holmes said “No!” I wish to see British agriculture supported, including livestock farming, whilst recognizing that the consumption of meat should be reduced by c20%.” Taking a different view, Idris Hughes was clear that ‘developed’ countries eat far too much meat; it should be rationed. Clive Teague added “Livestock are significant carbon and methane producers². Remove beef and lamb from our diets and reduce eating other meats (adding that in their home, they eat none)”.

Since the 1950s and the availability of artificial fertilisers, there has been a race to make farming more efficient to cater for rising populations. In many ways this has had a negative impact on the environment with impoverished soils, increased use of antibiotics and steroids and reductions in animal welfare. So is the way we farm important? Alan Briggs felt that there should be a focus on a combination of health and environmental impact reduction, banning the use of antibiotics and steroids in meat production. Equally, Peter Holmes didn’t mince his words: “I wish to see very high animal welfare standards and would strongly resist the importation of animal products from countries with lower welfare standards. I wish to see all export of live animals banned. I would encourage the consumption of local foods as much as possible and more seasonality in the range of foods available”. Taking a slightly different approach, Clive Teague was concerned for our land and water systems: “Our land use must change with mixed arable planting and more rewilding. We need to protect the carbon sinks of soil, peat and plants and to stop poisoning our rivers with chemicals.”

But what about the way we shop?

¹ [2019 UK greenhouse gas emissions: final figures - statistical summary Gov.uk national statistics. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957687/2019_Final_emissions_statistics_one_page_summary.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957687/2019_Final_emissions_statistics_one_page_summary.pdf)

² [2019 UK greenhouse gas emissions: final figures - statistical summary Gov.uk national statistics.](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957687/2019_Final_emissions_statistics_one_page_summary.pdf)

Theresa McVeigh commented: “I’m trying to change my eating habits, reducing consumption of processed foods and buying more of locally produced foods”. Frances Halliday agreed, “Food needs to be available near the places where it is grown. Why on earth does a large supermarket chain import mushrooms from Poland? No doubt it is cheaper. We need to stop buying imported fruit which has been flown in from far flung places”.

This is a complex area and probably needs a ‘package’ of approaches for our food industry, as suggested by Catherine Budgett-Meakin: “Encourage a ‘flexitarian’ diet, more organic farming and regenerative agriculture. Encourage seasonal and local eating. Ban food products flown in. Reduce food waste massively. Encourage composting. And food waste collection by councils. Phase out pesticides and fertilisers.” David Dundas also drew attention to the complexity of this: “Healthy food and good animal husbandry are important issues but not in the climate debate, which is about burning fossil fuels, not biomethane given off by farming.” He felt it would be better to concentrate our resources on stopping the use of fossil fuels. Sir Patrick Vallance, Government Chief Scientific Adviser and Head of Government Science and Engineering Profession³, is also clear that there must be a joined-up approach across all government departments, such as domestic heating.

Heating our homes

In the UK about 15% of our total carbon emissions come from domestic heating – topped only by the proportion emitted by transport.⁴ The independent Climate Change Committee has said in its most recent report that “An ambitious Heat and Buildings Strategy, that works for consumers, is urgently needed” (ibid).

What are the alternatives to fossil fuels? Why are gas boilers still being fitted in new houses?

Unsurprisingly, there is much shared concern in the group at the lack of action. Members such as Catherine Budgett-Meakin expressed their frustration: “I had to replace my gas boiler recently. I had hoped to install an Air Source Heat Pump but I don’t think the technology is ready yet”. In addition, Alan Briggs expressed his concern at the anomaly that “surcharges are currently on electricity yet not on gas. There is a lack of Government commitment to heat pumps meaning low manufacturing volumes and hence high cost, also few trained and competent installers. Building regulations are appallingly lax in terms of energy efficiency”.

Members from the devolved nations have similar concerns. Ann MacGarry (Wales) commented: “The lack of effective support for most householders in knowing what to do and how to choose someone to do it. It is a real problem”. Theresa McVeigh (Northern Ireland) added: “I have a gas-fired central heating boiler which was installed with the help of a Northern Ireland government grant. I wasn’t offered any alternative to gas. Now I find that these are not recommended as being the most environmentally friendly option. Why is the locally devolved government promoting the installation of gas?” Joe Grimm (Scotland) commented: “Our blocks of flats were new builds, yet they were fitted with gas boilers instead of more eco heat pumps. Our governments should mandate that all new builds are fitted with the latest green technology in heating, lighting, appliances and insulation.”

In the run-up to COP 26, members of the group have looked carefully at various solutions, including a thorough explanation by Joe Grimm about using carbon pricing to address anomalies such as those pointed out by Alan Briggs (above). Alan also ran an informative session on the use of Hydrogen technology. Links to documents from these talks are all available on the Countdown to COP website: <https://tinyurl.com/Countdown-to-COP-Home-page>

³ [Keynote address and Q&A with Sir Patrick Vallance | Links Day 2021 | Royal Society of Biology - YouTube](#)

⁴ [2021 Progress Report to Parliament - Climate Change Committee \(theccc.org.uk\)](#)

Members who are interested to learn more about some of the solutions may be interested to watch Sir Patrick Vallance, Government Chief Scientific Adviser and Head of Government Science and Engineering Profession.⁵ In his keynote address to the Parliamentary Links day 2021, he stresses the need for implementing innovation at scale and a “whole systems” approach to try and meet the net-zero targets by 2050.

Getting around

The transport industry is the UK’s biggest polluter contributing 27% of greenhouse gases⁶. So what can we do about our transport system?

Reducing the need for travel is an obvious first step. On a macro level, some members of the group felt that could we ensure that future planning built affordable homes close to workplaces. Idris Hughes suggested we increase incentives for reducing the need to travel through schemes such as working from home, sharing a car and borrowing/hiring a bike. Clive Teague reminded us of the logic in simply walking and cycling for short journeys. Public transport was seen by many of our members as an important part of the journey to net zero. Frances Halliday made the pragmatic point that if we are going to entice people away from cars then public transport needs to be frequent and cheap everywhere in the UK. Leon Herwig commented further, “Before Coronavirus, we used to maximise use of public transport and minimise use of car. In general terms but particularly for older people we need money and effort to be put into making public transport more covid safe longer-term and not letting things like social distancing and mask wearing slip.”

Private car ownership is an issue in the UK with three quarters of households owning at least one car and 32% owning more than one vehicle⁷. Joe Grimm’s comment was that “There are big government plans for building more roads. That needs to be cut back. Governments must get the older model diesel taxis off our roads now - they are spewing pollution. In additions, the government must launch a “No Stationary Idling” campaign to encourage compliance with awareness tactics and strict enforcement.

Several members are interested in or already have an electric vehicle (EV). Alan Briggs and Eleanor Brooks led a session in the July meeting on EVs, outlining what ownership feels like and answering questions about the practicalities. Peter Holmes pointed out improvements that are necessary in order to scale up EV use: “The use of electric cars must be made more attractive with lowering of costs and improvements in range.” This is in addition to rapidly increasing the electricity supply to our country through sustainable means.

Air travel is often seen as one of the biggest polluters. Joe Grimm also expressed his frustration at subsidies for flying: “For the past many years, airlines have been able to offer super cheap flights, while train travel is relatively expensive. Governments MUST stop subsidising airlines and must increase the taxes on jet fuel/airport arrivals (tourist tax) and at least part of the revenue must go to the rail system to result in lower cost rail fares and improved rail services.” Idris Hughes suggested we “ration ‘air miles’ per annum per head of population, and apply an incremental taxation program on petroleum and other high carbon fuels to punitive level, ending in rationing”.

Where does this leave the group? It is not uncommon for people interested in the environment to feel ‘eco guilt’ and a range of feelings of impotence and even distress. At their meeting in July, Neil Deuchar led a session on this. Eleanor Brooks commented “When I hear

⁵ [Keynote address and Q&A with Sir Patrick Vallance | Links Day 2021 | Royal Society of Biology - YouTube](#)

⁶ [2019 UK greenhouse gas emissions: final figures - statistical summary Gov.uk national statistics.](#)

⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/adhocs/009922numberofvehiclesperhousehold>

about global warming, I know I am contributing to the problem so feel I am not doing enough. But then I remember doing SOMETHING is what is important! Every little helps”.

The overriding message from the ‘Countdown to COP 26’ group so far is that they would like to see an urgent government strategy to install green infrastructure including safe, usable cycle routes and charging points for EVs with green developments joined up across all departments. They would like to see reliable information for the public with grants and subsidies directed away from fossil fuels onto green technologies. They would support sustainable, organic farming, encourage more home cooking from raw ingredients and help the nation see meat as a luxury to be enjoyed sparingly.

Many members of the Countdown to COP group are very keen to do what they can, as individuals. Doing nothing most certainly isn't an option for them - and neither are they put off by 'small steps': every action counts.

Eleanor Brooks and Brenda Ainsley

The group has developed a website with open access to all u3a members. There are several helpful documents, including two that offer practical actions to reduce energy consumption. It is arranged in stages so those wishing to reduce their carbon footprint can start with easy steps.

What can I do? Here are some examples from our document:

Stage 1: Drive less and walk, cycle and use public transport as much as possible.

Stage 2: Inform yourself, read and join environmental organisations.

Stage 3: when your boiler needs replacing consider heat pumps.

Contributions from

Alan Briggs – Camberley and District u3a
Eleanor Brooks – White Cliffs Country U3A
Lorna Brown – Trust u3a
Catherine Budgett-Meakin – Hampstead Garden Suburb u3a
David Dundas – Lichfield u3a
Joe Grimm – Edinburgh u3a
Frances Halliday – Trust u3a
Leon Herwig – Trust u3a
Peter Holmes – Helensburgh and District u3a
Idris Hughes – Pershore u3a
Ann MacGarry – Machynlleth u3a
Theresa McVeigh – Belfast u3a
Clive Teague – Odiham District u3a