

Our choices as consumers

Background and explanation of our proposals

As well as the carbon emissions we produce within the city, we are also responsible for emissions elsewhere produced from making and delivering the products and the services we buy in from outside. They could add at least another 40% to the total. For the city to become carbon neutral we have to do something about them too.

1. Becoming informed consumers

Our impact from consumption results from the many weekly decisions we all make about what and how much to buy. We believe that to make progress in cutting the emissions from consumption, we all need to know more about which decisions have the biggest impact and what climate-friendly alternatives to look for.

Businesses are most important here. It is essential that they make information available to customers about the impact of different products, their durability and repairability. Without this, customers can't make informed choices.

Schools, colleges and universities have a role to play too, by giving students a good foundation of understanding about climate change, its causes and the possible solutions.

The council and other public sector organisations who have regular daily contact with the public could also look at what they can do as part of any information they provide. The council already supports schools through the Eco Schools programme. Similarly, local community projects, advice services and charities could have a role.

2. Changing our diets

Estimates suggest that food accounts for 20-30% of carbon emissions worldwide. Most experts believe that current western diets, with their emphasis on meat and dairy produce, are not sustainable because of the energy and resources used for intensive production, the land needed for growing animal feed and the methane generated by cattle and sheep. (Methane is another gas that adds to climate change, alongside carbon dioxide).

So for Leicester to become carbon neutral, the typical diet will need to change considerably. The average household will ultimately need to consume a lot less meat – particularly beef and lamb – and a lot less dairy produce and eggs. Plant-based ingredients will need to play a much bigger role in a nutritionally balanced diet.

Food transport adds to the problem. Consumption of air-freighted food will need to reduce and an overall reduction of 'food miles' will be necessary.

Food businesses can – and many already are - helping make dietary changes easier for people by offering appetising, nutritionally balanced meat, egg and dairy-free options. They can also look to source ingredients locally where possible and pick 'in season' vegetables and fruit to reduce food miles.

Schools can look to do similar things and for those schools choosing to have their school meals provided by the council, these already include meat-free options and a proportion of fresh seasonal and local ingredients. Vegan menus are available where required. The council's School Meals Service has achieved the Food for Life 'silver award' standard.

Growing some of our own food can make a small contribution to reducing food miles too. It can also help raise awareness about this and other food and environmental issues where it's part of a community project. The council provides allotments and is supporting local growing projects through the Food Plan.

3. Our influence as individuals

Each of us can use our buying power to have an influence on how goods and services are produced. If we ask retailers and service providers for information and consider climate impacts when we're making our choices, this gives a clear message that there's demand for climate-friendly products.

Apart from food, some other products likely to have a big impact include: mobile phones, computers, other electrical goods and clothing – especially 'fast fashion'. Similarly, if we choose to fly that can add a lot to our carbon footprint – particularly if it's long haul. Unless or until zero carbon flights become possible, we will have to fly less.

When we're buying goods, important questions to ask are: "Will it last?" and "Is it designed to be repairable?" because the lowest-carbon product is the one that doesn't need to be replaced too often.

4. The influence of purchasing choices by organisations

Organisations including businesses, the public sector, schools, universities and community organisations are responsible for buying a significant amount of the goods and services coming into Leicester. Like individuals, they have an influence through their purchasing choices on how these goods and services are produced.

The council provides 'sustainable procurement guidance' for our staff and suppliers about environmental standards we expect goods and services to meet. This guidance was written before the climate emergency was declared and could be reviewed to see if it fully addresses the need to reduce emissions.

Proposals for businesses' purchasing are in the At Work section.

5. What is 'carbon offsetting' and does it provide an answer?

Many of us will have been offered the chance to 'offset' the carbon emissions from a purchase we're about to make – such as tickets for a flight – by paying a bit extra. Couldn't we all just pay to offset the emissions from what we buy?

The idea behind carbon offsetting is that the extra we pay funds a project somewhere else which will either absorb an equivalent amount of carbon emissions – often by planting trees – or will reduce someone else's emissions by the same amount – such

as by saving energy or generating renewable energy to reduce fossil fuel use. There is disagreement about whether buying carbon offsets is a good way to deal with the impact of our purchases. Criticisms include:

- How do we know that the actions are really cutting emissions? (Although many offsetting schemes offer guarantees)
- By buying offsets instead of looking for alternative low or zero-carbon products, or finding different ways of doing things, we're not influencing suppliers to develop lower-carbon products
- We should be focusing on reducing our own emissions first.

Up to now the council has focused on reducing its own emissions and choosing goods and services which help us to do this. We don't currently pay to offset any of our emissions.

Is there sometimes a case for buying carbon offsets though? If so, is there any merit in considering a local offsetting scheme – which local individuals and organisations could pay into to fund projects in the city?

We would like to hear the public's views about carbon offsetting.

Summary of our proposals

Vision for consumer choices

- All of us will need to become well-informed about the climate impacts of what we buy – so that we can make climate-friendly choices.
- Customer demand for climate-friendly products and services will need to convince shops, manufacturers and suppliers to provide them.
- Customer demand will need to convince manufacturers to produce long-lasting products which can be repaired. Disposable and short-lived products cause extra carbon emissions when they have to be replaced.
- The overall consumption of beef, lamb and other meat, eggs and dairy produce will need to be a lot lower than today. There will need to be much more emphasis on plant-based ingredients. 'Food miles' will need to reduce too.
- Air travel will need to reduce a lot unless zero-carbon flights become possible.

Potential actions for consumer choices

Potential actions by the council and other public service providers

1. Schools could teach pupils about the causes of climate change including the impacts of what we buy.
2. The council could look at how we could help raise awareness amongst the public about consumer choices they could make to reduce their carbon footprint.

3. The council's school meals service could see if there is more it could do to reduce 'food miles' and provide appetising, healthy choices for pupils wanting to reduce or avoid meat, eggs and dairy products.
4. The council could keep supporting local food growing in the new Food Plan through allotments and the Get Growing scheme.
5. The council could lead by example with what it buys. It could see if its 'sustainable procurement guidance' for staff and suppliers needs changing in light of the climate emergency.

Potential actions by businesses

6. Shops and other businesses could provide more information to customers about the climate impact of their products.
7. Food businesses could ensure that they're offering an appetising, healthy choice of options for customers wanting to reduce or avoid meat, eggs and dairy products.

(Refer also to the At Work and Waste sections for more potential actions by businesses.)

Potential actions by individuals

8. Individuals could find out more about the climate impacts of goods and services. They could use this knowledge to reduce the carbon footprint of what they buy.
9. Individuals could create customer demand for climate-friendly products. They could choose long-lasting and repairable products for example and avoid disposable products.
10. Individuals could reduce their dietary impact by eating less meat, eggs and dairy produce. They could also reduce 'food miles' by choosing local and seasonal ingredients and buying less air-freighted food.
11. Individuals could grow some of their own food.
12. Individuals could choose to fly less.
13. Groups of people could set up community schemes such as 'tool banks' to share items that are only needed occasionally.

Potential actions by the government

14. The government could introduce mandatory labelling schemes for the carbon footprint of products.
15. The government could look at how it could encourage the supply of longer-lasting consumer goods.