

# Sustainable income standards: Towards a greener minimum?

Findings  
Informing change

December 2011

The Minimum Income Standard (MIS) for the UK describes the household goods and services required for a minimum acceptable living standard. If everyone stuck to this minimum, the carbon footprint of household consumption would fall by around 37 per cent. While technical progress will help to reduce emissions, changes in consumption patterns are also required.

Looking at options for greener living and the acceptability of these options among members of the public, this study explored whether a minimum acceptable standard of living in the UK could be defined by the public in a 'greener' way.

## Key points

- The main sources of greenhouse gas emissions from households come from home energy, food and transport.
- Savings on home energy, through adjusting behaviour, could potentially reduce domestic fuel consumption by 25 per cent, saving about £250 a year on an average fuel bill. In many cases, the public accepted such adjustments as being compatible with a minimum living standard.
- Reducing the carbon footprint of food consumption was more complex. The most obvious way was cutting down on meat. This was resisted by the research participants, who felt people should continue to have the choice of the relatively modest levels of meat consumption specified in the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) diet.
- The public was reluctant to adopt more sustainable modes of transport as an acceptable norm without improvements in safety, convenience and cost.
- People were more likely to regard greener ways of living as socially acceptable where price differences caused them to see non-green consumption as a 'luxury'. They were reluctant to accept measures that restricted choices, caused time inconvenience, or compromised safety.

## The research

By a team from the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University and ESRC Research Group on Lifestyles Values and Environment (RESOLVE), University of Surrey

# Background

Present commitments to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions imply profound changes in the ways we live and consume. One way to think about such change is to consider how we define our minimum needs. The MIS study describes the composition of household budgets required for a minimum acceptable standard of living. It is based on consultation with members of the public about what items are necessary for families in order to meet material needs and participate in society.

According to the latest estimates by Druckman and Jackson, if every household consumed at the MIS level, GHG emissions in the UK would be cut by around 37 per cent. However, given that some people will always consume above the minimum, and that the Climate Change Act 2008 specifies an 80 per cent reduction by 2050, fundamental changes in behaviour producing household emissions are needed. Some will be possible through technological developments, but the evidence suggests patterns of consumption also need to change.

This research set out to explore the extent to which changes towards 'greener' forms of consumption may be seen by the public as compatible with preserving a minimum acceptable standard of living, using MIS as a baseline.

## Green possibility and green acceptability

The research first explored what changes in household consumption patterns bringing environmental benefits are possible, and then talked to groups of members of the public about whether such changes are compatible with maintaining a socially acceptable standard of living.

The 'carbon footprint' of a minimum household budget falls most heavily in three areas: home energy, food and transport. In the 'green possibility' phase, researchers consulted scientific experts and written sources to identify ways in which changes in consumption in these areas could bring clear-cut, quantifiable reductions in emissions. Unfortunately, scientific knowledge does not generally produce simple calculations showing that a specified change in how consumers behave or in what they buy will reduce emissions by a given amount. The science is complex and imperfectly understood, and both human beings and the life history of products are highly individual, making it hard to come up with valid rules. Nevertheless, a range of specified changes likely to reduce emissions were taken to four focus groups in the second, 'green acceptability', phase of the research. These groups, involving people from different household types in both urban and rural areas, were asked to reflect on the extent to which particular changes would be compatible with maintaining a minimum acceptable standard of living.

## Reducing emissions from household energy consumption

Analysis of emissions from home energy use produced relatively straightforward evidence of how changing consumption behaviour could bring environmental benefits. Most household energy is used to heat homes, meaning simple measures such as wearing warmer clothes indoors and switching the heating down, or avoiding heating rooms that are not being used, could allow substantial reductions. Other savings are available from using energy-efficient light bulbs, taking showers instead of baths, better use of appliances and less energy-intensive cooking methods.

The project estimated that adopting the measures shown in Table 1 could potentially cut domestic energy consumption by around a quarter. As well as bringing substantial environmental benefits, these measures would save the average household around £250 a year in fuel bills.

Focus groups tended to respond favourably to the idea of saving energy by changing the use of space heating, lighting and appliances. With rising energy prices, participants were very conscious of the need to economise on energy use. They thought it reasonable that people should, for example, wear warmer clothes indoors in winter to save heat. In other areas, their willingness to adopt measures was qualified by cultural norms. Having a shower rather than a bath was considered acceptable most of the time, but retaining the choice of an occasional bath for relaxation was deemed important. Cooking in the microwave was not considered an acceptable substitute for traditional cooking methods.

**Table 1: Estimates of greenhouse gas emissions reductions achievable through selected measures**

<i>Action</i>	<i>% reduction in household energy GHGs</i>
Put on a thicker sweater in winter	7%
Install energy-efficient light bulbs	6%
Shower instead of bath	5%
Small LCD TV instead of plasma	3%
Appliances not on standby	3%
Reduce heating by one hour a day *	2%
Turn heating off in one unused room *	2%
Wash clothes at 30 degrees centigrade	1%
Increase use of microwave in place of other forms of cooking	<1%
Only boil required quantity of water in kettle	<1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>~25%</b>

\* These measures are not included in the total as they cannot be assumed to be mutually exclusive with others.

The analysis of household energy consumption also found that emissions could be reduced substantially if households with children lived in flats with communal gardens rather than houses. Parents in the research had divided views: a group of rural parents believed that it was, but an urban group disagreed.

## Reducing emissions from food

Specifying consumer practices that could reduce the carbon footprint of food was difficult because of complex interactions between aspects of production and distribution of various products. Nevertheless, the analysis identified two main guidelines that could be applied to a minimum diet to make it more sustainable:

- reducing meat consumption and especially the consumption of red meat from cows and sheep;
- favouring UK field grown fruit and vegetables that are in season.

There was little support amongst the focus group participants for reducing meat consumption in the MIS diet. They emphasised that choice should not be restricted and that eating meat was an important part of our way of life. Furthermore, the amount of meat in the MIS was already considered to be modest.

Most groups agreed that it would be acceptable for the consumption of fruit and vegetables to move towards being more seasonal. However, opinions were mixed. There was consensus on the idea of only eating in-season UK strawberries, but participants had varying views, for example, about only eating apples when they are in season. The lack of any clear price signal here made it less evident that eating out of season produce might be a 'luxury'.

## Reducing emissions from travel

A model for greener transport use, switching from cars to public transport for longer trips, and cycling or walking more for shorter ones, together with greater use of community transport, was devised.

Groups were more positive about the scope for more cycling than for more walking. The main barriers to using walking more for transport were weather and time. Safety was an issue for both walking and cycling, but with improved infrastructure, groups thought cycling could be a more feasible transport method for adults and children.

Previous MIS research found that it is acceptable to live without a car in urban areas, but groups saw the cost and frequency of public transport as an issue that could undermine that position. Good school bus services were also cited by parents as a crucial factor that could avoid the use of cars. Participants in the rural groups spoke positively about community transport schemes.

**Figure 1: Green Acceptability – barriers and drivers**



### **Cross-cutting influences on green acceptability**

The research identified a number of factors that influenced the acceptability of greener consumption patterns, both positively and negatively. These are shown in Figure 1. Of particular importance were:

**Choice** - greener consumption options were rejected where they were seen as unreasonably taking away people's choice. People have got used to having a high degree of choice and do not want to be told what to consume, but this does not prevent a degree of restriction from being introduced where it seems reasonable.

**Cost** was a key driver in making greener options more acceptable. Where creating more emissions is reflected in substantially higher cost to the consumer, this makes it obvious to individuals that reducing emissions is desirable.

**Cultural and social norms** were discussed as both barriers and drivers of green acceptability. Some forms of consumption such as food seemed to be closely associated with traditional aspects of British culture. In contrast, there was a strong feeling that, under the right conditions, cycling to places could become far more part of normal British behaviour than it has been in the recent past. This evidence suggests that cultural norms affecting consumption can be strong, but that they have the potential to become a dynamic of change.

**Knowledge** of the environmental consequences of various forms of consumption was often limited, and respondents said that they did not always get clear messages about what form of behaviour they should be adopting.

### **Policy implications and conclusions**

While this research showed that members of the public are often open to the idea of greener behaviour, barriers must still be overcome in order for norms to change. Government and private organisations seeking to encourage greener norms need to address the factors that influence their acceptability. Part of the challenge is ensuring change is compatible with people's cultural perspectives and priorities. If new ways of living appear to reduce choice to unacceptable levels or to require much greater expenditures of time, they risk being resisted. At the same time, people do not always feel that they are getting coherent messages about how behaviour can contribute to sustainability. More work is needed to identify a range of measures that both have predictable and substantial benefits for the environment and can be presented as clear-cut options to the public

The most promising area where a minimum standard of living could be maintained with substantially fewer emissions was the consumption of heat and power in the home. The rising cost of energy has contributed to the acceptance that people should adopt energy-saving practices. This could save an average household around £250 a year and cut domestic energy consumption by a quarter.

## About the study

The Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University worked with RESOLVE at the University of Surrey to follow up CRSP work on a minimum income standard and RESOLVE's calculation of the standard's carbon footprint. The first phase of the research, *Green Possibility*, involved three seminars and individual discussions with a range of experts; its calculations are reported in a working paper, Druckman, A., Hirsch, D., Perren, K. and Beckhelling, J. (2011) *Sustainable income standards: possibilities for greener minimum consumption*. Loughborough: CRSP Working paper No.616.

The second phase, *Green Acceptability*, involved two focus groups in urban areas and two in rural areas. The project is presented in full in Druckman, A., Hartfree, Y., Hirsch, D. and Perren, K. *Sustainable income standard: Towards a greener minimum?*

---

## For further information

This Findings is part of a programme of work on Climate change and social justice. See [www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/climate-change-and-social-justice](http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/climate-change-and-social-justice)

The full report, **Sustainable income standards: Towards a greener minimum?** by Angela Druckman, Yvette Hartfree, Donald Hirsch and Kim Perren, is available as a free download at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

[Read more Findings at www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Other formats available.

Tel: 01904 615905 email: [info@jrf.org.uk](mailto:info@jrf.org.uk)