

General Introduction to Fact Sheets

The fact sheets (or briefing papers) on ethical dilemmas which QCEA has produced during the course of 2009/2010 attempt to take a common sense approach to some of the questions facing people who want to do the right thing for the environment, for climate change, but who are confused by the conflicting messages out there.

We are not attempting to provide scientifically based analyses of all the issues involved in each of the dilemmas. Rather, we are trying to point out the range of questions that contribute to the discussions around each of the dilemmas and we try to point to some (though not all) of the answers.

Of course, there is a lot of information out there about low carbon lifestyles, about carbon footprint calculators, about how to reduce carbon footprints by changes in housing, in domestic activity, in food, in travel, etc. But there is still conflicting information about specific issues and having these conflicts in the public debate adds to the obstacles to change. Why should I change my behaviour in a way that might make life a little more uncomfortable if it's not going to help?

We started this strand of work by raising a long list of questions that we had come across in our own discussions and thinking around energy security and climate change. We realised, that each questions raised further questions but in order to focus the work, it is important to limit the scope of each question to something manageable.

They included:

- Should I keep my old car or buy a new one? (We know there is also the question: should I have a car at all? Should I have a smaller car? Should I drive a car with a petrol or diesel engine? Should I have only an electric car?)
- Is it more energy efficient to drive with the windows open or with air-conditioning?
- How can I drive so that I use less energy and produce less CO₂ for a given distance travelled?
- Does carbon-offsetting for travel make sense? How should I do it? What schemes are there? Are they reliable?
- What can and can't be recycled? Does recycling work (i.e. what happens to the stuff after it is collected?)
- Is flying completely off the agenda? How do fast trains compare with flying for energy use and carbon emissions? What about air-freighted food, clothes and other goods I buy?
- What is the carbon impact of different diets? Is organic better from an energy point of view than non-organic? Where should I buy food? Are supermarkets worse than small shops and farmers markets? What if I have to drive to the farmers market but can go to the supermarket by public transport?
- Is a dishwasher more efficient than washing up in the sink?
- Is the eco button on the washing machine for real?
- Should I use a gas, electric, halogen or solid fuel cooker?
- What type of heating should I use in my house?
- What alternative domestic energy generation systems should I invest in?
- Do photovoltaics make environmental sense?
- What about the carbon life cycle of uPVC windows?

For all of these questions there is a wealth of information out there which could be included in a fact sheet? We could not attempt to cover all the questions. So we started with a few that we thought were especially important for day to day decision making:

- 1) Should I fly or go by train? We felt that because Quakers do tend to travel, this was important; and because there is some information out there that is suggesting that high speed trains are no better than planes in terms of carbon emissions, this seemed a good one to start with.
- 2) What kind of diet should I have? People are probably less keenly aware of the impact that eating a meat based diet has on energy consumption and carbon emissions and it is

an area where making marginal changes in lifestyle is quite feasible. But for the committed carnivore, the arguments have to be strong.

- 3) Are photovoltaics a useful way of generating energy? There are issues about the economic cost, the energy cost in production, the life cycle of the panels, and the rare and precious materials which are needed to produce them. But they do contribute to renewable energy.
- 4) Finally, the question of old car/new car became more topical with a number of car scrapping schemes being introduced in several European countries; the fact that these are now on the way out again and that they were more about the economic crisis and less about energy consumption and carbon emissions made this no less an important issue.

What we have learned through the development of these briefing papers/fact sheets is that each of the issues is far more complicated than might be imagined. We have had feedback already questioning some of the assumptions we have made and the basis for our arguments. That is OK. We wanted to stimulate discussion rather than give simple answers.

We have included in all of the briefing papers/fact sheets some policy recommendations. These are based on what in our view (the view of interested, reasonably well-informed non-scientists; in other words people not that different from the readers of these fact sheets who have spent a little time looking into the available information and the commonly pursued arguments) would be reasonable things that national governments and the EU could do to encourage choices which lead to a reduction in the use of carbon in these specific contexts.

That isn't to say that there aren't other things that could be done to encourage other choices; for example, in the case of photovoltaics we know that there are other forms of energy generation which could be better in certain circumstances. But we do believe that there are reasons for using photovoltaics in the right place and that to encourage this certain policy messages need to be given.

The briefing papers/fact sheets should be read in the spirit in which they are offered: a help to those who feel confused, not to remove all the confusion but at least to sort out the questions and give some pointers to possible approaches; an indication of how policy-makers might encourage life-style change in certain specific directions (if those are appropriate in their context).

We are not going to continue this series of briefing papers/fact sheets beyond the four referred to in this introduction. They stand in their own right; but they also attempt to point at one approach to cutting through complexity which can assist people to ask their own questions and come to their own conclusions.