THE CARBON FOOTPRINT OF WASTE

The things we buy, and the way we dispose of them have a huge impact on the environment.

Our modern way of life has resulted in the burning of increased amounts of fossil fuels. This creates polluting gases such as carbon dioxide (CO_2) and methane, which get trapped in the atmosphere and contribute to changes in climate temperatures. Climate change is happening at a rapid pace, upsetting the planet's natural balance and threatening our habitats and wildlife.

The average household in East Sussex generates over a tonne of rubbish every year. About a third of this is recycled (which reduces its carbon impact), but this proportion could be higher – and a lot of waste creation could be avoided in the first place.

You can help slow the pace of climate change by dealing with your rubbish carefully. Here are the best ways:

The best

Avoiding waste is the most favourable option. Avoiding packaging or not buying items in the first place:

- saves valuable raw materials and energy
- avoids or reduces the CO_2 emitted by transporting materials and products, and
- avoids having to deal with rubbish afterwards.

A third of food we buy is thrown away (60% of that is perfectly good food which could have been eaten!). If we all stopped wasting food it would save 15 million tonnes of CO_2 – the equivalent of taking one in five cars off UK roads.

Reusing things as many times as possible before throwing them away is also very important. Reusing:

- conserves valuable raw materials and energy,
- reduces the CO_2 emitted by transporting materials and products, and
- reduces the amount of rubbish we have to deal with.

Using a reusable bag each time you go shopping saves 8kg of CO_2 per year.

Next best

Recycling converts waste into new products. Recycling:

- conserves valuable raw materials
- uses less energy than making things from scratch, and
- reduces the amount of rubbish sent to landfill or incinerators.

Recycling still has an impact on the environment as CO_2 is produced by transporting materials to, and processing materials at, recycling plants.

The current level of recycling within the UK saves 18 million tonnes of CO_2 a year – the equivalent to taking five million cars off the road. Even transporting recyclables overseas to places like China produces less CO_2 than landfill sites or using virgin materials. Making aluminium cans from old ones uses one twelfth of the energy required to make them from raw materials.

Composting garden and food waste reduces the effects of climate change in a similar way to recycling. Composting at home in your garden is an even better option as it:

- avoids the CO_2 emitted by transporting waste to large composting sites, and
- can add nutrients to soil to help plants grow. These in turn will naturally absorb CO_2 from the atmosphere.

By composting at home you can save as much carbon as your kettle produces annually.

The worst

Throwing waste away without separating what can be reused, recycled or composted is the worst option because it wastes resources.

When rubbish is sent to landfill sites it rots down and releases methane, a damaging greenhouse gas which is 21 times more powerful than CO_2.

Landfill sites in the UK produce a quarter of the UK's methane emissions.

For further information about climate change, visit

- eastsussex.gov.uk/climatechange
- energysavingtrust.org.uk
- carbontrust.co.uk
- direct.gov.uk/actonco2
- defra.gov.uk
- climatecare.org

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ACT ON CO_2

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