

Sustainable wellbeing needs more than lifestyle change

What if living better - rather than simply consuming less - could also help us stay within planetary limits?

A new paper in *Ecological Economics*, co-authored by Surrey Climate Commission's Angela Druckman, explores this question for the UK, France and Finland. Its message is clear: lifestyle changes matter, but they are not enough on their own.

The paper's central lesson is simple: a good life within planetary boundaries will not be achieved by asking individuals to try harder inside unsustainable systems. Surrey can help change those systems - so that the healthier, fairer and more enjoyable choice is also the lower-carbon choice.

Time is part of the climate solution

The paper, entitled "[How will we use our time in a future of sustainable wellbeing?](#)" adds an important dimension to the climate debate: how we spend our time.

Activities such as active travel, caring, spending time with family and friends, reading, learning and exercise can support wellbeing with relatively low emissions. By contrast, high-carbon travel, energy-intensive leisure and some forms of consumption can add substantially to our footprints.

But our choices are not made in isolation. Long commutes, inadequate public transport, unaffordable housing and limited access to care all shape how much time people have—and what they can do with it. The paper's scenarios show that simply expecting people to change their lifestyles, without changing these underlying conditions, will not deliver sustainable wellbeing.

This suggests various actions that local groups and leaders can do:

Local leaders can join up housing, transport, energy, public health and nature recovery strategies; set ambitious standards for new development; support area-based home retrofit; and give town and parish councils meaningful roles, resources and information.

Community groups can map local barriers to low-carbon living, work with councils and schools, develop shared transport or energy projects, improve local green spaces, and document what helps people live well with less energy and fewer emissions.

Everyone can help build demand for places where sustainable choices are easy, affordable and enjoyable.

Why this matters in Surrey

Surrey has a major opportunity to turn the insights from this paper into local action. Road transport accounts for nearly half of the county's carbon emissions, while housing contributes nearly one-third. These are not just matters of personal choice: they reflect how places are planned, how homes are built and retrofitted, and whether walking, cycling and public transport are practical alternatives to the car.

Surrey Climate Commission already brings together communities, businesses, public services and researchers to accelerate climate action and nature recovery. The paper reinforces the value of this collaborative approach.

Three priorities for Surrey

1. Plan for time-rich, low-carbon lives

New homes should be energy-efficient, affordable to run and located near services, green space, schools and reliable transport. Planning should make walking, cycling and public transport convenient - not an afterthought.

2. Invest in shared systems

Retrofitting homes, decarbonising public buildings and designing efficient leisure facilities can reduce emissions while improving comfort and reducing bills. Better buses, safe cycle routes, local services and accessible community facilities can give people more choices and reduce dependence on cars.

3. Measure wellbeing as well as carbon

Local climate plans should ask not only “How many tonnes of carbon will this save?” but also:

- Will people have more time for family, care, exercise and community life?
- Will the benefits reach households on lower incomes?
- Does this make everyday life healthier, safer and more affordable?
- Does it reduce the need for high-carbon travel and consumption?

What the Paper Does

The researchers model a 2050 “sufficiency” future based on:

- household consumption sufficient for a decent standard of living;
- major shifts towards walking, cycling and public transport;
- less meat-intensive diets;
- cleaner production; and
- lower and electrified household energy use, supplied by a decarbonised grid.

The researchers find that, even with all these changes, emissions remain above safe ecological limits. The conclusion is not that individual action is pointless. It is that people need different systems around them - systems that make low-carbon, healthy and happier lives easier.

Read the paper: [How will we use our time in a future of sustainable wellbeing?](#)

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