



Sustainable remote working

A mySociety Climate Action Group guide



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Note that some of the links in this guide lead to internal documents or private repos which only mySociety staff can access. It is also written from a UK perspective where, for example, central heating is common but air conditioning is not. Nonetheless we hope it still proves useful as a basis for anyone, anywhere in the world, who wants to create a guide for their own organisation.

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Introduction

Why does this guide exist?

When mySociety's Climate Action Group started thinking about which areas of our working practice we could change to make a difference to the organisation's carbon footprint, we realised that most of the guidance for businesses assumes they operate out of a shared office.

Of course, for bricks and mortar businesses, the responsibility for emissions during working hours would belong to your employer: they'd be the ones thinking about recycling, or sustainable stationery suppliers, or keeping heating economical and eco-friendly.

But as a remote organisation, mySociety doesn't have an office building: and now that we're in lockdown, none of us even use coworking spaces. So here we all are, working in our own individual homes across the UK. Does that mean we should forget about our workplace carbon footprint?

Certainly there's an argument to say that once you're working from home, it's up to you what you do, and your climate impact is your own responsibility. Fair enough, but we reckon we can still encourage good practice — and that's why we wrote this guide.

None of the suggestions you're about to read are mandatory: that really would be rather too intrusive — plus, we know that not all of these ideas will be practical or possible for every employee, in all our variety of living and working spaces.

But if it is important to you to keep your working environment sustainable, we want to encourage that, and make it as simple as possible. And so, with that in mind, here are some tips and some handy links to at least get you thinking along environmentally-friendly lines.

Does mySociety do anything more than make suggestions?

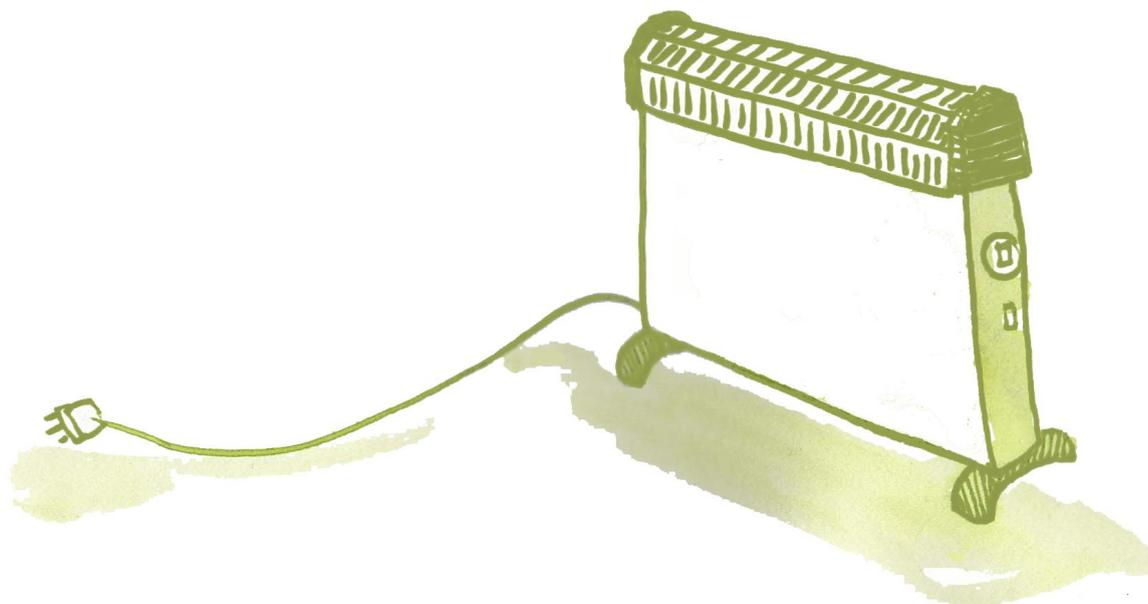
It's always possible! The Climate Action Group will be discussing ideas like offering staff grants or dedicated time to help you improve your workspace in future meetings. CAG meetings are always open to anyone who would like to come along and discuss such concepts; just check the calendar or pop into the #climate-emergency Slack channel.

Feedback and additions

- Ideas for improvements or additions to this guide can be mentioned on the relevant GitHub ticket [access to mySociety staff only] or send them by email to communications@mysociety.org.
- If you'd like to discuss points you're not sure about, bring them to the #climate-emergency channel on Slack [access to mySociety staff only].

1. More efficient temperature regulation

With temperatures expected to reach higher and lower extremes due to climate change, in the UK we need to consider both how to keep our workspaces warm in winter, and cool in the height of summer.



Small and easy: start here

How to use less heat when it's cold

No matter how efficient or sustainable your heating supply is, using less of it is always going to be better. This can be as simple as:

- **Putting another layer of clothes on.** Your colleagues don't mind if you look a bit bulky on that video call because you're wearing three jumpers — lots of us keep a fleece or a cardi nearby to slip on when we feel the chill.

- **Rocking a hat.** So apparently it's a myth that you lose most body heat through your head — but hats (and scarves and fingerless gloves) still help to keep you warm.
- **Embracing thermals.** Thermal leggings, vests and tops come in quite cool designs these days — check M&S or Uniqlo for example — and, used as a base layer, will keep you toasty warm.



Apparently every degree you turn your thermostat down saves "up to £75" per year in energy costs.

How to cool your house down when it's hot

- Creating a through draught is one of the best and cheapest ways to keep cool: open windows or doors at opposite sides of your house. There is more sophisticated information in the [Tune Your Windows section of this article](#).
- Keep blinds or curtains closed during the day.
- Run cold water over your wrists and other pulse points.
- Heat rises, so work from the lowest room in your house, if possible.

Requiring a bit more thought

When and how to heat

Q: Is it better to keep your house at a constant temperature rather than heat it up at set periods?

A: Experts seem to agree that keeping your house at a constant temperature is more fuel efficient **IF your house is well insulated and draughtproof**, but otherwise the advice is to heat it in the more conventional manner of a period in the morning and in the evening, and, since we're at home, potentially add in a short lunchtime top-up.

The logic is simple: if the insulation is poor, even with heating on all the time, you'll be constantly warming up the space as heat escapes. But if it is well sealed, heat will stay inside.

More information on this at [The Green Age](#), [Ovo](#) and [Money Saving Expert](#).

Q: Is it better to run a heater in a single room rather than heat the whole house?

A: Again, there's no simple answer; it depends on your circumstances.

If you have gas powered central heating and the ability to control each radiator separately, it is generally best to keep most of the house at your base temperature/s, and during working hours just have the radiator on in the room where you work.

If you can't control radiators individually (we'll look into how that's done later on in this guide), the answer will depend on:

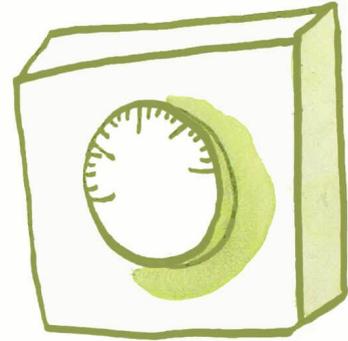
- How well insulated the room you work in is
- How many windows it has, and how high the ceiling is
- What type of heater you have, and how efficient it is
- What type of central heating you have and how efficient your boiler is
- How large the rest of your house is and whether any of the other rooms are in use

The conclusion, with many caveats, is that it *may* be best to have a heater that you use to 'top up' the temperature when you need it.

This is Money [goes into the variables here](#), and [elsewhere recommends](#) an 'electric throw' (like an electric blanket) rather than a heater, saying they cost around £40 up front, and cost 1p a day to run. Mind you, that was in 2015.

Top tips:

- If you do run a heater, don't do it in the same room that has the thermostat in it, as this will affect the temperature of the entire house when you do come to use the central heating.
- To be certain of the compared energy usage, you can check your smart meter if you have one (or buy an [energy monitor](#) if you don't). See how many units you use when your central heating is on, as opposed to when you are running your heater. Struan has written a detailed blog post on this approach here [available to mySociety staff only].



Q: Which type of heater is the most environmentally friendly?



A: Again this is a question to which there doesn't seem to be one clear answer without knowing everyone's individual living circumstances. The Centre for Sustainable Energy [lays out the various pros and cons here](#), suggesting that a convector heater with a thermostat, switched on only when needed, is probably the best option.

Cheap ways to keep your space well insulated

If you'd like to make your room or home better insulated but don't want the disruption of building works, you can still look at small changes that will make a difference:

- Seal gaps in windows, doors and even unused chimneys
- Put a curtain over a draughty door
- Cling film on the windows makes for a cheap alternative to double glazing! (You can get some that is [especially made for this purpose](#).)

Here is advice on draught-proofing from the [Energy Saving Trust](#), [Homeserve](#), [Which?](#) and the [Centre for Sustainable Energy](#).

Energy suppliers

If you're looking to change energy suppliers for one that is more sustainable, be careful of some of the terminology that's used: green doesn't always mean green — about which we're almost certainly all jaded enough not to be surprised.

[This really useful article from Which? explains more](#) about exactly what we should be looking for in this context.

There's a table in that article which shows which firms actually "help increase the amount of new renewable electricity generated." When the article was written in 2019, those were just two: [Ecotricity](#) and [Good Energy](#).

More useful links:

- Ethical Consumer (March 2021) [compares the current green credentials of UK suppliers](#). Companies passing their test for truly green credentials are [Ecotricity](#), [Green Energy UK](#)

and [Good Energy](#). It also points out that Octopus Energy (which supplies Co-Op energy too) is owned by one of the largest investors in renewables in Europe.

- [Good Energy](#) on how to spot greenwashing in the energy industry
- [Moneysupermarket](#) gives an overview of the different ways to improve the green credentials of your supply, and lets you compare offerings.
- [Real Homes](#) jumps into the topic with a list of best green energy suppliers
- There is a list of suppliers with recommendations and loyalty codes from colleagues (including one for Ecotricity) on the wiki [mySociety staff only].

Going a bit deeper

Home insulation

Insulation, done well, keeps your home warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

There are various ways of insulating a house — see the [Energy Saving Trust's guide](#) and [this page from Homebuilding and Renovating](#).

If you are retrofitting insulation, some common options are to add it to internal walls; to add it externally; to fill cavity walls; and to add it to your loft/between floors.

As an added bonus, insulating your house reduces your heating bills. [Here's a table](#) showing the sort of sums that can be saved.

At the time of writing, the government's [Green Homes Grant](#) will pay up to £5,000 or one third of the cost of insulation (and other eco-friendly changes to your house, such as solar panels and ground source heat pumps) if:

- You own your own home
- You live in England (sorry, Welsh and Scottish colleagues! But see more about grants below)

You must redeem the voucher and ensure improvements are completed by 31 March 2022. [More details here](#) — see also our 'grants and incentives' section below.

Update: [but see this story](#) 😞

Gadgets and tech

Thermostatic radiator valves (TRVs) are what you need if you want to be able to control which rooms of your house are heated up at any one time — ideal, for example, if you work from a single room in your house and everyone else is out until evening.

Here is [a guide to the basics](#) from Best Heating Advice Centre which claims that energy savings through TRVs can be up to 40%.

You can also get smart radiator valves which work with systems such as Hive, Nest or Tado°. [Here's a comparison guide.](#)



Struan says, “Wifi controlled thermostats on each radiator work well and have definitely reduced our gas consumption; however, there is quite the outlay at the start, plus they need batteries. However, we have quite a large house and very predictable patterns of when rooms are used so turning off the heating in various rooms on a schedule works well.”

If you have a 'smart thermostat' (like Hive), it's feasible to put TRVs only on the radiators you want to be able to boost without firing up the rest of the house's radiators — in our case, that's likely to be the room you work in. But other systems often require you to have TRVs on every radiator, switching *off* the ones you don't need. This is obviously a far more expensive approach, so do check before you buy.

2. Grants and incentives

If you're interested in making any of the larger changes suggested here, it is worth checking what grants, loans or incentives are available.

Note that these are sometimes time-limited, so if you notice one that's out of date please do amend or delete it. Equally if you hear of new schemes, please add them to the list.

For up to date information, check [the Grants and loans page of the Energy Saving Trust website.](#)

UK

[The Renewable Heat Incentive](#) (RHI) pays participants who have installed greener heating systems like solar panels and heat pumps for the amount of clean, green renewable heat their system produces, over a period of seven years.

This can be deployed in tandem with the Green Homes grant (see below).

England

We've already mentioned the [Green Homes grant](#) for those in England, in the insulation section. As well as insulation, it can also be put towards low carbon heat installations such as new types of boiler and solar panels; if you claim for one of these 'primary measures' you can also access funding for a 'secondary measure' like double glazing or a new hot water tank.

Find out more about heat pumps in [Ethical Consumer magazine](#).

Scotland

Check out [Home Energy Scotland](#) which offers:

- interest free loans and cashback for installing energy efficiency measures
- grants for home charge points for electric vehicles
- interest free loans and grants for purchasing eBikes and electric vehicles

They provide a [funding finder tool](#) to help you see what's available.

See also [Greener Scotland](#).

Wales

[The Nest scheme](#) is available for those on lower incomes or benefits.

3. Minimising waste in the home office

If we all worked from a shared office, we'd have recycling bins, print quotas, food waste collections... but, as we don't, here are some basic tips.

Using less

- It barely needs saying, surely, that we should avoid printing things onto paper where possible. But that said, even storing loads of unneeded documents digitally isn't that great — see [this article on Digital Cleanup Day](#).
Going through and deleting old, unneeded documents is a nice relaxing task for those times when you need something undemanding to do.
- If you like to take notes on a physical piece of paper, there's always the option of using the backs of old envelopes, etc. Yes, not as beautiful as a swanky notebook but far more thrifty,

and it gives that paper one more lease of life before it goes to the great pulping machine in the sky.

Recycling

- Your council website is the best place to check what can and cannot be recycled in your area. You can [find it via the GOV.uk website](#) if that's easier.
- Some places also have an independent service, like [Magpie in Brighton](#), that take a wider range of materials.
- Don't forget you can also use recycling bins which often collect stuff that your weekly collection doesn't (like electrical goods, batteries, clothes, bras, shoes, tetrapacks etc). Your council website should have a map to show where these are.

Food waste

Matthew says: “Our council doesn't collect food waste. We use bokashi which eats all food you'd throw away and makes it compostable.”

See <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-jvq4pnbgr> and <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-pUyLVHDra>

- Some councils collect food waste: check the website of yours to see.
- Councils usually provide compost bins for free or low cost.
- If you don't have a garden yourself, look for a local shared compost bin scheme, an allotment-holder who would take it off your hands, or a community garden (if there isn't one, and you're really committed, set one up!)
- [Love Food Hate Waste](#) gives tips and recipes to help ensure you don't waste too much food to begin with.

Shopping

- Of course, there's one thing that's better than recycling and that is not to have any packaging in the first place! Some ways to achieve this are:
 - The increasing number of services like [Real Plastic Free](#) and [Zero Waste Bulk Foods](#) that deliver packaging-free goods (but remember that deliveries also add to your carbon footprint, so you might prefer to buy in bulk)
 - Local 'scoop and weigh' shops which encourage you to take your own containers. [Here is a UK directory](#). But be aware — sigh — that "[measuring the impact of plastic-free shops is complex](#)". Think about what your home-brought container is

made of, how many airmiles the food you are buying has come, and what might go to waste, are the general messages of this article.

- Consider asking the shops you use to cut down on their packaging — either in person, by email, or calling them out on Twitter.
- Shop local where possible: this is also great for your local economy and the financial wellbeing of those around you, as well as cutting down on pollutants if you can walk or cycle rather than drive.
- Ideally, when shopping online, check you're not summoning goods from half way around the world and amassing airmiles in the process. Try to buy in bulk or to bundle many items into the same delivery if possible.
- Think about setting up bulk buys of food or toilet paper, etc with neighbours - this can work out cheaper, but does require time, effort, and (if you're collecting money) trust to co-ordinate.
- Although not available everywhere in the UK, [Oddbox](#) delivers fruit and veg boxes whose contents have been rejected by supermarkets for being irregular shapes or sizes.
- Community Supported Agriculture has [a map](#) that lets you find out your nearest community farm is.
- [TooGoodToGo](#) and [Olio](#) are apps which offer surplus food either for free or very cheaply.

Furniture and equipment

If mySociety had an office, we'd have policies around our shared equipment; but as we don't, here are some optional considerations.

- **Assess suppliers before you use them.** We're all used to checking that a company has a good returns policy or customer service. We can take that one step further by checking their environmental record, too - a quick Google of the company name plus 'sustainability', 'carbon' or 'environment' will usually bring up anything you need to know.
- **Think about the materials.** Has your item been made from sustainable materials? Is it better to pay a bit more (if you can) for something that will last longer?
- **Consider end of life.** Will you be able to recycle the goods, or perhaps pass it onto someone else to use rather than taking it to the tip and adding to landfill?



Getting rid of bulky goods

You might be surprised at the demand, even for imperfect goods or stuff that needs repair.

- If you use Facebook, you can often find local groups where users ask for and offer furniture or other goods for free.
- Freecycle, Greencycle, Freegle and Olio are all sites where you can see if anyone wants your stuff for free.
- Local homelessness charities are often glad of furniture they can use when people move into a new home and need to furnish it.
- Consider listing broken stuff on eBay, marked as 'for spares and repairs'. There's always a hobbyist somewhere looking for that broken old thing.

4. Best practice

Things that cost nothing but are good habits to get into

Q: Should I switch my computer off every night?

A: As with so much else, the answer is 'it depends'. Consensus seems to be that if you have a modern, solid state laptop, and sleep mode is enabled, shutting down doesn't affect its longevity or power consumption as much as if you have an elderly hard disk drive that has to power up every time you switch it on.

As most of us work a full day, rather than using our computers for a short spell every now and again, it's probably fine to shut down nightly, if you want to, and this will save a small amount of energy. Switching a machine on and off for several short bursts a day could wear out components more quickly. See the flowchart [towards the bottom of this article](#) for further advice.

There's [lots more nuance here](#), and [in this article](#), as well.



Q: Should I avoid sending short emails?

A: [This news item](#) highlights the load that short, useless emails (eg one-words to say 'thanks') place on servers (though the main environmental load is thought to come from actual spam).

If you would like to discourage the use of polite but effectively useless emails, you could try adding 'No reply required or expected' to the appropriate messages. It might catch on!

Here is more coverage of the 'save the world, ban short emails' story in [the Guardian](#) and from the originator of the research it's based on, [Ovo Energy](#):

“If every adult in the UK sent one fewer “thank you” email a day we would save more than 16,433 tonnes of carbon a year – equivalent to 81,152 flights to Madrid or taking 3,334 diesel cars off the road.”

Q: Should I turn off my webcam during meetings?



A: If the environment is your only concern, [then apparently yes](#): "Just one hour of videoconferencing or streaming, for example, emits 150-1,000 grams of carbon dioxide (a gallon of gasoline burned from a car emits about 8,887 grams), requires 2-12 litres of water and demands a [land area](#) adding up to about the size of an iPad Mini."

But do balance this with your own wellbeing and need to connect with colleagues. Switching to lower-definition streaming may be a sensible compromise.

Q: Should I try to develop lightweight web services?

A: Yes! For all sorts of reasons and not just the environment. See [Zarino's blog post](#) [public] on how we made our 2020 annual report as light as possible.

[This tweet](#) says: “Shaving off a single kilobyte in a file that is being loaded on 2 million websites reduces #CO2 emissions by an estimated 2950 kg per month.

That is the same amount of #CO2 saved each month as 5 flights from Amsterdam to New York. (679 kg CO2 per flight).”

Assess third party suppliers

As with purchasing furniture, we encourage team members to [check any third party supplier out](#) before renewing or entering into a new contract, especially focusing on whether they have a robust environmental policy.

When suggesting new tech, why not seek out the environmentally friendly companies like [this one](#) ("powered by renewable energy running on cooperatively owned infrastructure")?

Do good while searching

Consider using [Ecosia](#) as a search engine — it plants a tree [roughly every 45 times](#) you search, and it also [indicates which search results are 'greener'](#).

Do let the Climate Action Group know if you discover any other ways of helping the environment while doing things that you'd be doing anyway.



Be an active mySociety employee

Everyone in the organisation's welcome to come along to Climate Action Group meetings, but if you can't or don't want to join them, you can also keep up with the ideas we're discussing on our GitHub repo [mySociety staff only].

Please add new ideas, links or examples of what other organisations are doing. Keep thinking about new ways that mySociety could help tackle the climate emergency, both with our internal actions and with the services we develop.

(If you are reading this but are not a mySociety employee, please do drop a line to communications@mysociety.org and tell us any of your experiences or research in any of the areas covered in this guide - we would love to share best practice).