GLOSSARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL TERMS

The Go Green team at Westminster Council has put together this glossary of common environmental terms. This is not intended to be definitive reference, but may be of use to residents and businesses alike as well as those interested in environmental issues in general.

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ENVIRONMENTAL TERMS DEFINED

A

Air Pollution
The presence of particulates, noxious gases, or other impurities in the air that harm human, or environmental health. Air pollution can occur both outdoors and indoors. Some of the harmful effects of air pollution include smog, acid rain, the greenhouse effect, and holes in the ozone layer. Air pollutants can be released from natural sources like volcanoes, but humans are responsible for most of the pollution in our air today. Air pollution leads to poor air quality which affects all living things; humans, animals and plants.

Air Quality
Air quality is a measure of how good our air quality is in terms of the type and quantity of pollutants contained within it.

Agenda 21
The international policy agreed on at the Rio Conference in 1992. Under Agenda 21, countries agreed to work towards sustainable social, economic and environmental development

B

Biodegradable
Any waste material that is made up of naturally occurring parts, can be decomposed by bacteria or fungi and will be absorbed back into the ecosystem. For example, food waste is biodegradable, while plastic is not.

Biodiversity
Biodiversity is the variation of life forms within a given ecosystem, biome, or for the entire Earth. This variation is both in the number and variety of species.

Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP)
An internationally recognized program addressing threatened species and habitats and is designed to protect and restore biological systems. There are regional, county and local BAPs. The UK’s new Biodiversity Action Plan launched in 2007, identified...
1,149 species and 65 habitats in the UK that need conservation and greater protection.

**Biofuel**
This is a term used to describe a type of fuel made from biomass, (any living or recently dead biological material). Most commonly, this means that plant matter (such as corn, soybeans, flaxseed, rapeseed, sugar cane or palm oil) is used to produce the fuel, but animal matter (such as cow dung) can also be used. Biofuels are used to ensure power supply and reduce the greenhouse effect, although they are usually thought of as being less carbon neutral than other forms of renewable energy.

**Carbon Balancing**
Often confused with carbon offsetting, but generally more concerned with reducing personal carbon levels, rather than compensating for them. Carbon balancing sometimes refers to a new technology that will reduce overall greenhouse emissions.

**Carbon Calculator**
A tool to help you to work out the size of your carbon footprint.

**Carbon Dioxide (CO2)**
A naturally occurring gas and one of the most abundant greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is also a by-product of industrial processes, burning fossil fuels and land use changes. Due to its ability to absorb some infrared wavelengths of sunlight and the fact it stays in the atmosphere for a long time, is an important factor in global warming.

**Certified Emission Reduction (CER)**
Certified Emission Reduction – a carbon credit created by a Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) project. One CER corresponds to one tonne of CO2e emission reductions.

**Carbon Footprint**
A carbon footprint is the total set of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions caused by an organisation, event or product. For simplicity of reporting, it is often expressed in terms of the amount of carbon dioxide, or its equivalent of other GHGs, emitted. Average national carbon footprints vary greatly, from 0.04 tonnes in Cambodia to 19.8 tonnes in America. The average British footprint is 9.4 tonnes.

**Carbon Neutral**
Carbon neutrality is a term generally used when a certain amount of carbon is offset by payment or by giving up other carbon-producing activities. For example, a flight from Edinburgh to Southampton produces 0.12 tonnes of CO2 per person, which can be offset by paying £5. Once this payment is made, the flight can then be referred to as carbon neutral for that individual.
Carbon Offsetting
This is a term that refers to reducing carbon levels somewhere else in the world to compensate for your own CO2 emissions. A common example of offsetting is paying a company to plant trees to counterbalance the emissions produced by your air travel. However, some critics believe that paying for individual ‘eco-sins’ is the wrong way to reduce overall CO2 emissions and may even help to legitimize the continued production of greenhouse gases.

Carbon Trading
This is an administrative approach to controlling carbon and one that provides financial incentives for lowering pollution levels. The system works by putting a cap on the total emissions levels for a particular country, and then giving various business tradable carbon credits that relate to the amount of CO2 they are allowed to emit. Businesses can then buy and sell these credits as they expect to fail or meet their emissions target. This system also allows corporations to retire their carbon credits in return for a tax deduction. Over time, the amount of carbon credits available will be lowered, therefore reducing the amount of emissions in the environment.

Charging Points
A point that supplies electricity for the recharging of electric vehicles

Climate
This refers to averages and variations in weather and temperature over a particular timeframe. Climate can refer to the whole planet, a continent or a particular country.

Climate Change
The overall changes in the Earth’s climate, whether looking at millions of years or just a few decades. These changes can be due to internal Earth processes, external forces (such as solar variation) or, in more recent times, human activity.

Compliance Carbon Market
The segment of the carbon market for carbon offset transactions which meet regulatory requirements i.e. offsets purchased by governments and organisations to meet Kyoto targets.

Composting
The process of breaking down biodegradable waste into mulch or compost to be used on a garden.

Ecological Footprinting
The amount of the Earth’s energy that someone or something uses
**Eco-Schools**  
An international program of environmental and sustainable developmental education for schools.

**Electric Vehicles**  
Vehicles that use electricity (usually derived from batteries recharged from electrical outlets) as their power source. Electric vehicles produce no exhaust fumes and use minimal energy if charged from renewable sources.

**Environment Policy**  
An agreed written statement outlining an organisation’s stance towards the environment in which it operates. This is the cornerstone of an organisation’s intent to improve it’s impacts on the environment, including areas such as reducing it’s carbon footprint, improving recycling rates, reducing packaging, minimising waste etc.

**EU Energy Label**  
According to several different EU Directives most white goods, light bulb packaging and cars must have an EU Energy Label clearly displayed when offered for sale or rent. The energy efficiency of the appliance is rated in terms of a set of energy efficiency classes from A to G on the label, A being the most energy efficient, G the least efficient. The labels also give other useful information to the customer as they choose between various models

**Food Miles**  
The distance food is transported from the time of its production until it reaches the consumer. It is one dimension used in assessing the environmental impact of food. The concept of food miles originated in 1990 in the United Kingdom

**Fossil Fuels**  
Any type of fuel that is made from the fossilised remains of dead animals and plants. This includes oil, natural gas and coal, which are also commonly referred to non-renewable natural resources.

**Global Warming**  
*(see climate change)*

**Green Roofs**  
A roof of a building that is partially or completely covered with vegetation and a growing medium, planted over a waterproofing membrane.

**Greenhouse Effect**
The warming effect of the Earth's atmosphere by a process that raises the temperature of air in the lower atmosphere due to heat trapped by greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, chlorofluorocarbons, and ozone.

**Greenhouse Gas (GHG)**
Greenhouse gases are gases in the atmosphere that absorb and emit infrared radiation. This process is the fundamental cause of the greenhouse gas effect. The main greenhouse gases are water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and ozone. Some of these gases occur naturally, while others are the result of human activity.

**H**

**Hybrid Car**
A hybrid vehicle combines a conventional engine with an on-board energy storage system. This secondary motor tends to be electric and gains its charge by capturing the kinetic energy produced during braking. This engine combination allows the vehicle to achieve a greater fuel economy without having the limited mileage range of a fully electric car.

**I**

**Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)**
The IPCC was established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The job of the IPCC is to evaluate the risk of human-induced climate change by considering all the available scientific and technical literature. The IPCC does not carry out research or directly monitor climate change.

**K**

**Kyoto Protocol**
An amendment to the international treaty on climate change – the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), that requires industrialised country signatories to meet greenhouse gas emission reduction targets relative to their 1990 levels. The protocol currently covers over 160 countries, with America and Australia being notable exceptions. Other countries, such as India and China, have ratified the protocol but are not required to reduce their carbon emissions under the present agreement. The Kyoto Protocol will come to an end in 2012, at which point a new agreement will be made.

**L**

**Landfill**
This is a site where waste materials are buried in the ground as a form of disposal. Landfills are sometime referred to as the ‘dump’ or ‘tip’.
Local Agenda 21
Local government projects to carry out sustainable development under Agenda 21. This charter developed out of the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio, Brazil in 1992.

Low Emission Zone
A geographically defined area which seeks to restrict or deter access by specific polluting vehicles or only allow low (as regular or plug-in hybrid) or zero emission (as all-electric) vehicles, with the aim of improving the air quality.

M

Mayor of London’s Green Procurement Code
A free support service for London based organisations committed to reducing their environmental impact through responsible purchasing

N

Natural Resources
A term given to any naturally occurring product that is useful and/or valuable in its unaltered state. Mining, oil extraction, fishing, hunting, and forestry are generally considered natural-resource industries. Natural resources are generally grouped into renewable, flow renewable and non-renewable.

Nature Reserve
An area of land managed to conserve wildlife or plant habitat or other natural features

Noise Pollution
A displeasing human, animal or machine-created sound that disrupts the activity or balance of human or animal life. The source of most outdoor noise worldwide is transportation systems, including motor vehicle noise, aircraft noise and rail noise. Other sources of indoor and outdoor noise pollution are car alarms, emergency service sirens, office equipment, factory machinery, construction work, groundskeeping equipment, barking dogs, appliances, power tools, lighting hum, audio entertainment systems, loudspeakers, and noisy people.

Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change
A one page document for UK local authorities to voluntarily make a public commitment to tackling climate change locally. The Declaration itself is signed by the political and organisation heads of the signatory authority. Signatories acknowledge the evidence, welcome the various benefits that can come from tackling climate change and the opportunity for local government to lead locally
One Planet Living
A global initiative based on 10 principles of sustainability developed by BioRegional and WWF.

Recycling
Collecting, cleaning and re-using waste materials.

Recycled Products
Recycled products are made from manufactured materials that have been reclaimed and reprocessed to create new products. Paper, glass, aluminium and wood are among the most commonly recycled materials.

Renewable Energy
Energy generated by renewable sources means that the supply is regenerative or unlikely to be depleted. This covers energy production from wind, solar and tidal power. Renewable energy sources currently account for 14% of the world’s energy consumption and, due to the fact they produce little to no greenhouse gases, this figure is likely to rise in the future.

Smart Driving
Driving in a more efficient way by making small changes to driving technique, smart driving can improve a vehicle’s fuel consumption by around 15%, which can save car owners money and carbon emissions.

Supply Chain
The overall system that covers the flow of material and information from a business to its customer.

Sustainability
Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable Consumption
The use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations.

Sustainable Design
The philosophy of designing physical objects, the built environment and services to comply with the principles of economic, social, and ecological sustainability.
**Sustainable Development**
Development that is planned to meet the needs of present and future generations, e.g. the need for basic environmental, social and economic services. Sustainable development includes using and maintaining resources responsibly.

**Sustainable Living**
This is a lifestyle that can be sustained without exhausting any natural resources. It can be applied to individuals or whole societies. The philosophy behind sustainable living is a series of life choices favouring sustainability, such as decisions about transport, diet or accommodation.

**Tripple Bottom Line**
Refers to the practice of being accountable for three results: financial, planet and profit.

**Validation**
An independent assessment of the carbon offset project design and baseline calculations by an accredited third-party auditor that takes place before the project activity is underway.

**Verification**
An independent assessment of quantification of actual emission reductions achieved by a carbon offset project, carried out by an accredited third-party auditor after the project is underway.

**Verified Emission Reduction (VER)**
Verified Emission Reductions (VER) – a carbon credit created by a project which has been verified outside of the Kyoto Protocol. One VER corresponds to one tonne of CO2e emission reductions.

**Voluntary Carbon Market**
The segment of the carbon market for carbon offset transactions outside of government-related regulatory schemes i.e. offsets purchased by organisations wishing to offset their carbon on a voluntary basis.

**Waste Hierarchy**
An order of preferred waste management options. The most preferred option is reduce, followed by re-use, recycling, recovery, treatment and, lastly, disposal.
Westminster Carbon Alliance
A partnership based approach to carbon and energy reduction across the City of Westminster. It’s made up of a network of organisations from various sectors who are all working to reduce carbon emissions from their activities in the borough.

Wildlife
Living things that are neither human nor domesticated, commonly used to refer to fauna.

Zero Carbon
Any activity (whether an operation, plan or policy) where absolute carbon emissions are zero.