

## Is it possible to reconcile the cost-of-living crisis consumers are experiencing with the need for sustainable consumption?

Sustainable living is seen as a far-fetched dream to those feeling the weight of the 2021 cost-of-living crisis. It has been accepted that living sustainably cannot be tied together with cost-effectiveness. However, it is possible to achieve cost-effectiveness and sustainability if the government and business make drastic changes cutting back on the level of unnecessary products on the shelves, promoting refill schemes and changing our laws around energy.

According to [www.crisis.org.uk](http://www.crisis.org.uk), the cost-of-living crisis is when “the cost of everyday essentials like food and bills increases more quickly than average household income”<sup>1</sup>. Economic depressions are commonplace throughout history as comes with our boom-and-bust economy, but the severity of this resulted from recovering finances from COVID-19 economic stagnation. People who had been made redundant during the pandemic, or whose businesses had collapsed, particularly in tourism and entertainment industries, were already suffering. Then Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and since the UK relied on Russia for energy sources, gas, and those supplies were cut off and became unreliable. The UK now must source more of its gas from Scandinavia which is more expensive. On top of this, the UK used to source its grain partly from Ukraine which was landlocked by Putin. As a result, the UK has seen extensive inflation misaligned with wages so people cannot afford to run their homes.

However, at the same time, sustainable consumption is at the forefront of our minds with the ongoing deterioration of our natural environment from human activities. The main issue being climate change, which is defined as by, [www.un.org](http://www.un.org), “long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns”<sup>2</sup>, an issue we cannot be sure humans will survive. Therefore, sustainable consumption has become a huge part of modern society defined in 1987 by the United Nations Brundtland Commission in the “Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future” as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”<sup>3</sup>. Products made from sustainable, renewable resources are often longer-lasting, refillable, providing a discount, and UK-manufactured eliminating problems of political instability and supporting local people. However, along with that comes a price-tag that is higher than imports from afar of cheap, single-use materials. Even though often the sustainable option is cheaper in the long term, in that present moment, people may not have the money to purchase that more expensive option outright.

Sustainable products tend to be longer lasting from better materials like wood, bamboo, and steel or for clothing hemp, organic linen, and cork. This will mean people buy less as their products last over time, causing savings with infrequent replacement of items. This will make the most difference for things that are used habitually like trainers, everyday clothes, or workwear. In terms of sustainability,

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<sup>4</sup>[25 Latest UK Landfill Statistics & Facts \(2023\) \(diygarden.co.uk\)](#) (accessed 21/12/2023)

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<sup>11</sup>[Home - Refill - find places to eat, drink and shop with less waste](#) (accessed 22/12/2023)

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this limits production demand and non-biodegradable products going to landfill. According to [diygarden.co.uk](http://diygarden.co.uk) the UK creates 26 million tonnes of waste, of which 14 million tonnes ends up on landfill sites<sup>4</sup>. These items remain for millions of years polluting the Earth so reducing waste levels gives the Earth recovery time. In terms of domestic machinery like dishwashers, washing machines, if they are made of a higher standard with better materials, they break less, and less money is spent replacing them and having workers fix them. This means if people can justify making the investment, it is cost-effective. However, despite long term benefits, there is no avoiding the fact that some people don't have the money when they need to make the purchase. Even if a pair of shoes is made sustainably and will last a lot longer being cost-effective in the long term than the cheaper alternative, if a person's wages do not stretch to accommodate that pair of shoes, it is only realistic to buy cheap and keep repurchasing. This is why sustainability appears feasible for certain living situations as not everyone can make those investments in the current economic climate. This could be seen particularly with people needing to sacrifice the trivial things to save for bigger investments like house deposits or cars. However, new ways around this are developing.

Local, sustainable products are being made more financially justifiable and accessible with programmes like "Klarna" allowing you to spread the cost of purchasing items online generally over three instalments. On the [www.klarna.com](http://www.klarna.com) website they state that they "believe that conscious shopping should be effortless"<sup>5</sup>. By spreading the cost people can afford to pay a deposit on an item and pay it off, accessing higher end, more sustainable and better-quality products benefiting the environment and individual. However, eligibility checks are required including a soft-credit score check. Credit scores are only affected by the software if repayment does not occur. In terms of food, it is much better to buy products from the UK, historically seen as more expensive. However, the world no longer lives by the seasons. If people reverted to eating seasonally, products are cheaper. It isn't possible with every item to be UK sourced, but reducing food miles is pivotal for sustainability as planes and lorries transporting food from all over the world uses up copious finite fossil fuels releasing greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere enhancing the greenhouse effect and climate change. There are ways to get around the UK price tag with the help of promotion. The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted shopping local as people aim to buy from UK businesses supporting those facing collapse. That precedent was set and left behind a more considerate group of consumers. According to [www2.deloitte.com](http://www2.deloitte.com) in 2023 49% of 0.1% of all UK adults bought more locally produced goods<sup>6</sup>. If the government and other influential people continue to push purchasing local and advertise the ways in which we can do this.

Whilst individuals are impactful, more could be done by the government to pass laws countrywide eradicating packaging materials that we have already found replacements for.

[www.packaginglaw.com](http://www.packaginglaw.com) states that single-use plastics were banned effective October 2023 in England.<sup>7</sup> Making this standard by law removes the choice of the cheaper, unsustainably packaged

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item eliminating any impact of financial difficulty on people. However, this hasn't been extended to the materials that make our clothes and actual products we are purchasing. An example of this would be deodorant, sustainable deodorants like [www.wearwild.com](http://www.wearwild.com) natural and refillable deodorants for the most basic bundle cost £10<sup>8</sup>. However, the [www.boots.com](http://www.boots.com) 250ml cotton fresh anti-perspirant deodorant is £1<sup>9</sup>. Even though people may want to pick the refillable option from natural ingredients, the price difference is sometimes not justifiable. It is unrealistic to believe that every deodorant, could be all natural, recycled, reusable, but it feels as those brands emerge, they are seen as exclusive, luxury brands targeted at certain people. However, the government could slowly withdraw the unsustainable options from the shelves making sustainability more accessible.

Furthermore, to eradicate the options we should adopt a more minimalist lifestyle. Currently, our society's development means everyone uses a multitude of products just to get through a single day. Due to the consumer society and clever marketing, people feel that they always need more, losing the difference between need and want. Realistically, we only need food, water, shelter, clothing, and oxygen to survive. Everyone likes to experience a bit of luxury in life, but advertising could make everyday essentials luxurious and sustainable, everything else is extra. In practice this would mean convincing people to strip back the number of things they have and have everything be as sustainable as possible. This could be done by eradicating unsustainable options on the shelves and limiting the number of new product releases from brands each year. A culture has been created of unrelenting new limited, launches causing people to fear missing out. Limiting this forces people towards sustainable options and less "stuff" in their lives.

Refillable concepts are gaining popularity in the world as a marketing tool convincing people to pay more for sustainable, durable packaging with the benefit being buying the refill provides discounts. This is seen for cleaning supplies created by the brand itself and with refill shops like [www.refillrevolution.co.uk](http://www.refillrevolution.co.uk)<sup>10</sup> and [www.refill.org.uk](http://www.refill.org.uk)<sup>11</sup>. In those shops you can get refills of cleaning supplies, food and more. This concept also occurs in coffee shops like [www.costa.co.uk](http://www.costa.co.uk)<sup>12</sup> where buying a refillable cup, reduces coffee prices. The final example of this is by bringing a bag of used clothes to be recycled into [www2.hm.com](http://www2.hm.com)<sup>13</sup> you will receive a voucher to spend in store. These schemes being put in place everywhere makes sustainability appear the smart, financial choice rather than something done begrudgingly because it benefits the environment. If refill shops became mainstream and were given tax discounts benefitting the shop and consumer, it could make an impact. This could be done by limiting supermarket stocks to force people to go to these refillable shops, or make the stocks of cereal, dishwasher tablets and more, dispensable within the supermarkets eradicating packaging entirely.

Finally, unrenewable energy and the burning of fossil fuels is a huge cause of climactic changes. This is another matter where government action is crucial, the difficulty is the government rarely has

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surplus expenditure as most people don't have the disposable income. However, as new houses and housing estates develop, they could slowly install sustainable energy throughout. Wind and solar is expensive, but we already have the infrastructure to expand this over time. Whilst this demands a large budget, climate change should be high up the priority list if the large temperature increases are to be curtailed. Biofuel is accessible and cheap to provide to increase stability and sustainability. It is talked about less but a valuable weapon for sustainable living.

To conclude, it is possible to reconcile the cost-of-living crisis with sustainable consumption if it is treated as the critical emergency that it is. It must be done through a myriad of schemes from a multitude of key players: from the government, outlawing materials, limiting stock on shelves, implementing refills and putting more money into sustainable energy, from businesses using refill schemes, limiting collection drops, partnering with payment programmes, from individual people, simplifying their lives, buying less, but of a sustainable quality. This will not be possible for everyone, not everyone will agree, and many deny that climate change exists, but drastic measures will cause change making this standard not a luxury.

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