Consumer understanding of green terms – a supplementary report on consumer responses to specific green terms

A research report completed for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by Brook Lyndhurst and Icaro Consulting

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About this document

This report sets out findings from a wider research project that sought to provide Defra with insight on consumer understanding of, and responses to, individual green terms\(^1\). The research comprised:

- A rapid, two week literature review (this was designed to identify key pieces of literature in this area and did not follow a systematic approach);
- 15 discussion groups during October/November 2009 (following a qualitative approach, and therefore results are not generalisable to the wider population); and
- An online survey of adults between 29 January 2010 and 1 February 2010 (achieved sample size of 2,019 individuals using a quota sample drawn from an online panel. It should be noted that, while quota sampling is used in this type of research (particularly when time or budgets are limited or a sample frame is not available), it is subject to sampling and response biases. Thus, although the sample was designed to be reflective of national characteristics, the results cannot automatically be assumed to be representative across the population as a whole so some caution is needed in the interpretation of results).

This document addresses each of the terms covered by the main research in turn, drawing on evidence (where available) from the literature review, the discussion groups and the online survey.

Using the research

It should be noted that the online survey used quota sampling techniques. While quota sampling is used regularly in this type of research, it is subject to sampling and response biases. Online panels are self-selecting, in that respondents have agreed to be on the panel and choose whether or not to take part in the survey. No tests of statistical significance have been performed on the data. Thus, although the sample was designed (and the data was subsequently weighted) to reflect national characteristics, the results cannot automatically be assumed to be representative across the population as a whole, nor are results generalisable to the population as a whole. Results should only be seen as indicative and caution is needed in the interpretation of results.

Quantitative research (e.g. the online survey) is usually used to find out what people think about an issue (in this case, what meaning they take from a given term). In contrast, discussion groups are used primarily to explore questions about why people respond the way they do (to green terms in this case). Thus, specific tendencies observed during the discussion groups cannot be considered representative of the wider population. Quotes from discussion groups are provided for illustrative purposes only, and again, should not be considered representative of consumers in general, nor necessarily of the views of other group participants.

For a full discussion of the methodology and limitations of this project, please see the full report.

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About this document

The following points should be noted:

- We occasionally make reference to participants’ levels of engagement with the environment in general. We used Defra’s segmentation model\(^2\) as a proxy for environmental engagement. The discussion groups were recruited so that participants with similar environmental outlooks took part in the same groups, while the results on the online survey were also analysed by environmental segment.
- Where terms were mentioned in relation to other terms we have highlighted this in the text. We have also tried to be clear where responses to terms have been different when tested in isolation or within the context of a claim or advert;
- Where terms were tested in isolation in the online survey, we have shown the results in a chart. Each chart breaks down respondents according to: (i) how familiar they found the term; (ii) how meaningful they found the term; and (iii) whether they felt they would use it in making purchasing decisions (referred to in the charts simply as ‘use’);
- We have also noted cases in which group participants made use of one term in explaining another;
- Some of the terms listed below were tested as ‘lifestyle descriptions’ in the quantitative survey. In each case, we have included figures on how familiar these phrases were to respondents and what percentage actively liked or disliked them;
- In both this document and the main report we have distinguished between three types of green term. These are broadly defined by their level of specificity in relation to an environmental claim. The three groups are:
  o ‘**Inferential terms**’. These make no *explicit* link to environmental issues but have the potential to imply one from context in which they are used. Examples include ‘pure’ or ‘natural’;
  o ‘**Flag terms**’. These make an explicit link to environmental benefit without picking out a specific issue and so may be used to ‘flag’ a product or claim as having an environmental aspect. Examples include ‘environmentally-friendly’, ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’; and
  o ‘**Specific terms**’. These either highlight a specific environmental issue (e.g. ‘carbon footprint’ or ‘carbon emissions’) or specific steps taken to negate an environmental impact (e.g. ‘renewable energy’ or ‘recyclable’).

\(^2\) For more on the segmentation model and Defra’s framework for pro-environmental behaviours, see [http://www.defra.gov.uk/evidence/social/behaviour/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/evidence/social/behaviour/)
Alternative energy
(and renewable energy)

Linked to: bio-energy

Overview: ‘Alternative energy’ appeared to be less familiar to discussion group participants than ‘renewable energy’, and there were some negative associations with the word ‘alternative’. Both terms were generally considered meaningful, although participants sometimes struggled to give precise definitions.

Most discussion group participants felt that ‘alternative energy’ was meaningful to them. They usually seemed to understand that it implied renewable energy of some sort, most often referencing solar and wind power. In some contexts, however, the phrase appeared to function more like a ‘flag’ term, describing a general concept and leaving participants wondering about the specifics. This came up particularly in relation to claims about a dual fuel car that ran on biofuel:

*It should say exactly what it is running on – alternative energy isn’t enough, is it?*

Group 6, Watford

This may be in part because biofuels have, as yet, a lower profile than some other more established forms of renewable energy, but it is nonetheless worth bearing in mind when developing claims or wider messaging around energy generation. Amongst some participants there was a perception that alternative energy comes with a price premium, and in one of the less engaged groups, it was suggested by participants that alternative energy was something that only people strongly motivated by a concern for the environment would consider. This perception seemed to be driven at least in part by the use of the word ‘alternative’.

*They are appealing to the tree huggers aren’t they? “Alternative energy” – they are not saying what [it] is though.*

Group 6, Watford

‘Renewable energy’ was mentioned in several discussion groups during an initial exercise where participants were asked which green terms they had heard recently. In contrast, ‘alternative energy’ was not mentioned in this way at all by participants, suggesting that ‘renewable energy’ may be more familiar, at least to those who took part in the groups.

‘Renewable energy’ also demonstrated the difference between perceived and actual understanding – participants in the groups were comfortable using the term to refer to topics like solar or wind power generation, but found it harder to pin down a definition when pushed. In the words of one participant in the Manchester pilot group, “We know what it means, but we don’t know what it means.”
Binge flying

Linked to: carbon

Overview: The term was well-understood by participants in the group discussions, but generally seen as applying to ‘other people’ and has the potential to be seen as judgemental.

Some discussion group participants clearly related this term to their understanding of ‘binge drinking’, inferring that in order to fit this description, someone would have to fly a great deal in a relatively short period of time.

*M: Well it sounds like people that never fly and then all of a sudden they do loads of it in one hit. But I have never heard of anyone doing that.*

Group 5, Watford

Most of those who took part in the discussion groups tended to see the term as applying to other people, who one participant referred to as “air mile freaks” (Group 6, Watford). Others identified a link with wealth, something that echoed the findings from Futerra’s ‘Words That Sell’ report, which found that this term, “was clearly associated with wealthy or privileged people”.

We suggest that one of the reasons participants found it difficult to identify with ‘binge flying’ may have been a sense that it contained an implicit moral judgement and that, if they were associated with the term, they would be considered ‘bad’. As a result, they seem to have tried to distance themselves from it. This again ties in with work by Futerra, who have long argued against the use of guilt or accusation in promoting pro-environmental behaviours. This is likely to be a particular issue when addressing flying behaviours, since other research has highlighted the degree to which British consumers have come to view a holiday abroad as a right, ring fence flying once or twice a year as acceptable behaviour and resent any implication that they should ‘sacrifice’ this. That sentiment was echoed by participants in the focus groups:

*W: You are going to Gran Canaria in December; do you really need to go there?*

*W: Yes I do. That is my yearly holiday*

Group 6, Watford

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3 Futerra (2007) Words that sell
4 See, for example, Futerra (undated) 10 tips for sustainability communications
Biodegradable

Linked to: landfill, zero waste, plastics neutral

**Overview:** Most discussion group participants seemed to understand that a ‘biodegradable’ product would break down naturally, though there were a few instances in which participants confused the word with other terms with a ‘bio’ prefix. Those taking part in the groups showed little evidence of understanding of the greenhouse gas emissions associated with anaerobic degradation, nor of the distinction between ‘biodegradable’ and ‘degradable’ materials.

Participants in the group discussions were generally familiar with the term ‘biodegradable’ and many seemed to feel comfortable using it. Many participants interpreted ‘biodegradable’ to mean ‘breaks down naturally’ and most responded positively to the term.

*W:*  
... ‘Biodegradable’ is a good environmental thing – simple, easy to understand. It is non-jargon, it is straight to the point... and it is good.

Group 4, Watford

This was often linked to a sense that biodegradable materials were free from negative environmental impacts and participants in several groups extended this to an assumption that it was preferable to send biodegradable products to landfill.

*M:*  
I guess if it is biodegradable then we know that if it is chucked in the landfill it will degrade over time and it won’t cause harmful effects.

Group 3, Croydon

Work carried out by Brook Lyndhurst for WRAP\(^\text{6}\) has demonstrated that consumer understanding of the distinction between biodegradable and degradable materials is extremely poor. This was reinforced in this research project, where some discussion group participants used the two terms interchangeably.

*Q:*  
So if you were going to... define ‘biodegradable’...?

*M:*  
Waste that will break down by its own means, in a reasonably quick time.

*Q:*  
Okay, and you mentioned plastic?

*M:*  
Well plastic is not degradable, is it?

Group 1, Croydon

Discussion group participants demonstrated no understanding of the potential negative environmental impacts associated with anaerobic degradation of biodegradable plastic (i.e. in landfill). As noted in the main report, confusion between words beginning with a ‘bio’ prefix was also evident in relation to ‘biodegradable’, which some participants connected to products such as biological washing powder.

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Biodiversity

Overview: Understanding of the term ‘biodiversity’ in the discussion groups was generally poor, although the word sometimes gained meaning from the context within which it was used. Participants appeared to respond positively to the concepts that underpin the term, however, suggesting that better understanding of the word itself could cause it to resonate with consumers.

In Defra’s 2009 tracker survey, 44% of respondents claimed to know ‘something’ about the term ‘biodiversity’, with just 5% claiming to know ‘a lot’ about the term, and 15% claiming to know ‘a fair amount’. This relatively poor understanding of the phrase was replicated in our own research. Responses to ‘biodiversity’, when tested in isolation, were almost universally negative and most participants in the group discussions showed a total lack of comprehension. When pushed to provide a definition, some of them attempted to ‘build’ one by picking up on the elements that they knew — either ‘diversity’ or ‘bio’. As with other terms using the prefix ‘bio’, a few participants confused the word with the meaning of these other phrases, making reference to, for example, yoghurts or washing powder.

However, when the word was used in the context of a claim, the response was notably more muted, with some participants reacting positively to the claim overall. This supports our suggestion, made in the main report, that even terms that are not well understood when explored in isolation can sound as though they make sufficient sense when used in context for consumers not to notice, and even to make them feel more positive about a claim.

W: “...helping conserve wildlife and biodiversity in Africa’s coffee regions”..., which I thought was fantastic, I am into that...
Q: And you get all that stuff? When it is talking about biodiversity... that all makes sense to you?  
W: Some of it, some of it not, but it makes me think I would like to find out a bit more about it...

Group 10, Reading

In the quote above, the context in which ‘biodiversity’ was used was sufficient to make the participant feel they had derived meaning from the claim in general, without really understanding what the word itself meant.

It was notable that in those instances when facilitators explained the term to mean the full range of species on the planet, participants generally accepted this definition and some indicated that they now felt that the concept was more meaningful to them. Group participants often seemed to identify with the issues covered, suggesting that it was the term itself, rather than the concepts it described, that lacked meaning. As noted in the main report, this conclusion is supported by previous work on public attitudes stretching back to the mid 1990s. In the US, for example, focus group and survey research commissioned by the Consultative Group on Biological Diversity found that: “Most people do not recognise or use the word biodiversity, yet they understand that nature is connected and interdependent. The public also understands that species are declining and that human activity is largely responsible... Once biodiversity is explained to people, biodiversity conservation enjoys wide support.”

It was interesting to note that many participants in the groups said they had heard of biodiversity, but didn’t really know what it meant. We would suggest that the question for those tasked with developing messaging around biodiversity is whether to try to improve understanding of the term itself, or to develop an alternative.

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7 Defra / Energy Saving Trust - Environmental attitudes and behaviours (England only)
8 Our research into responses to green language among managers of small and medium sized enterprises, which has been carried out for Defra in parallel with this project, revealed a similar lack of comprehension in that group.
9 The Biodiversity Project (1998) Engaging the public on biodiversity: a roadmap for education and communication strategies
It is possible, for instance, that a more explicit term such as ‘species diversity’ or ‘wildlife diversity’ might perform better. In the quote above, the term ‘wildlife’ seems to have given the claim as a whole meaning. Certainly it seems that, on the basis of the evidence available from this research, if ‘biodiversity’ is used in green claims, it currently needs to be fully supported by explanatory text.
Bioenergy

Linked to: alternative energy; biofuel
Quantitative findings: Figure 1

Overview: There was a broad awareness that bioenergy (and biofuels) are plant derivatives, but far less understanding of how such energy might be generated, or which types of plants might be used.

There was a general sense in the discussion groups that participants didn’t feel that they understood ‘bioenergy’, and this was reflected in the fairly low percentage of respondents to the online survey who said they found ‘bioenergy’ meaningful (Figure 1). Participants in most of the groups in which ‘bioenergy’ was tested linked the term to plant material of some kind, but beyond this, their understanding was very limited. References to “chip fat” (Group 5, Watford), “vegetable oil” (Group 4, Watford), “flower seeds” (Group 6, Watford) or “manure” (Group 5, Watford) were not uncommon. The same pattern emerged when a similar term (‘BioPower’ – a phrase coined by a car manufacturer to describe its bioethanol powered range) was tested.

![Figure 1 – Quantitative findings: ‘bioenergy’](image)

There was little sign of anyone understanding the process by which organic materials, in their various guises, might yield energy. In a few instances, discussion group participants questioned whether bioenergy might have negative environmental impacts, but such occasions were rare.
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Carbon, carbon emissions, CO₂

Linked to: carbon neutral, zero carbon, carbon negative, CO₂, carbon emissions

Overview: While understanding of climate change science was often imperfect, most participants in the discussion groups felt terms describing carbon emissions were meaningful, and used such terms themselves.

Most discussion group participants were familiar with terms like ‘carbon’, ‘carbon dioxide’ and ‘CO₂’, and on the whole, considered them meaningful. Use of these terms was incredibly fluid, with participants in the discussion groups switching between them and deploying them in different ways depending on the context. Most seemed comfortable using ‘carbon’ as shorthand for ‘carbon emissions’ or ‘CO₂’, though one or two respondents in the more environmentally engaged groups suggested that they were uncomfortable with the use of ‘carbon’ without the suffix ‘dioxide’, since carbon in isolation referred specifically to the chemical element.

Standalone references to ‘carbon’ tended to treat it as a physical resource, strongly linked to the use of individual products or activities. In our 2008 research into public attitudes to per capita carbon footprints, we noted a tendency for people to see carbon as a substance that is ‘used’ or ‘made’ by people or products, and the same trait was in evidence here.

M: *Carbon offsetting to me means that where you would perhaps be using carbon for something, you might use it for something else.*

Group 10, Reading

In contrast, CO₂ and carbon emissions were more often described by discussion group participants as being ‘generated’ by products or behaviours. All the terms were frequently related to climate change and global warming, though without much evidence of people knowing exactly how they were linked. We believe that this highlights the ‘gap’ that can exist between terms people think are meaningful to them (CO₂ scored reasonably well in the discussion group scaling exercise) and the degree to which they actually understand them. This phenomenon is discussed in greater detail in the main report.

Carbon and CO₂ tended to be more closely associated with products that discussion group participants saw as directly emitting gases and there was a sense in some groups that CO₂ was considered environmentally damaging as a pollutant rather than because of any explicit link to climate change.

Q: *CO₂ emissions first, why [do you associate] those [with cars]?
M: *Well it is a pollutant isn’t it? Most cars are polluting. Obviously you have got the newer models that are electric and whatever, but the majority of them are still emitting CO₂.*

Group 7, Bexleyheath (positive greens & concerned consumers)

A small subset of participants in the discussion groups also seemed aware that carbon was a part of everything around them and that carbon dioxide emissions were generated through most manufacturing processes – important points if developing messaging about embedded energy. There is more on this below in relation to understanding of the term ‘carbon footprint’.

When tested in isolation, ‘emissions’ were often linked by discussion group participants to anything with an exhaust – cars, planes and trains, mainly. Most participants said they were familiar with the term and it was quite frequently mentioned unprompted in the opening discussion in each group.
...If it is like zero free carbon... it has still got to get from the factory to wherever it is being sold, and that is still the truck or whatever it is emitting CO₂ emissions.

We believe that the quote above illustrates a subtle nuance when it comes to embedded carbon. The participant was referring to a claim about coffee. While participants generally struggled with the idea of the energy used to grow produce being ‘embodied’ within a final product, they seemed more comfortable with links between the product and its manufacture or transportation. This may well be because of the exposure terms like ‘food miles’ have received, but also because those lifecycle stages are more closely associated with industrial, mechanised processes.
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Carbon footprint

Linked to: carbon, CO2, carbon emissions, carbon neutral, carbon negative, zero carbon, air miles, local, seasonal

Quantitative findings: Figure 2

Overview: As with terms describing carbon emissions more directly (see page 10), research participants seemed to consider ‘carbon footprint’ meaningful and understand it to describe a broad measure of environmental impact. There was confusion, however, about related environmental issues such as recycling and about how a carbon footprint might be measured, as well as a lack of awareness from many participants about the inclusion of lifecycle carbon impacts.

Perhaps demonstrating the speed at which language around climate change is developing, our research was in sharp contrast to Futerra’s ‘Words That Sell’ study, carried out in 2007, which found that “few had ever heard of the term” ‘carbon footprint’. In contrast, almost three quarters of the respondents to our online survey said they were either very familiar or fairly familiar with the term (Figure 2). Furthermore, many participants in the group discussions seemed comfortable using ‘carbon footprint’, unprompted, to help them explain other concepts.

W: …buying things in season rather than getting them from other countries... lowers the carbon footprint, doesn’t it?

Figure 2 – Quantitative findings: ‘carbon footprint’

(为基础: 2,019)

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As noted previously, discussion group participants, when asked about the term ‘carbon footprint’ in isolation, had a general sense that a footprint is a measure of environmental impact.
**M:**  [It is] life isn’t it? Every... action has a reaction doesn’t it?... So everyday... you are using some sort of footprint, unless you sit in a box all day... Every time you do something, it affects the environment.

Group 7, Bexleyheath

It is possible that this ‘catch-all’ definition of carbon footprints reflects a general appreciation that almost every action has a carbon impact. References to recycling – as in the quote below – might suggest that people are aware not only of direct emissions from activities like driving or flying, but also lifecycle impacts. This in turn would have implications for communication around embedded carbon.

**W:**  It is how you are, what you recycle and how you live your life and how you are going to affect the planet.

Group 2, Croydon

In fact, however, views on what sort of thing might be included in a carbon footprint varied widely, and even those that included activities that were not linked to direct emissions were generally restricted to the impact of energy use through manufacture or transportation. Emissions generated from animal stock, or through anaerobic degradation, for example, were rarely mentioned. We suggest that this apparent tension is due to group participants’ perception that ‘carbon footprint’ related to environmental impacts, and not specifically carbon impacts. That is to say, it is not safe to assume that, since they believed “every action” played a part in their ‘carbon footprint’, they automatically understood this to relate to a carbon impact.

Finally, there was little evidence that participants in the group discussions understood the way in which carbon footprints might be measured. When shown the Carbon Trust’s footprint label, participants seemed to struggle to join up their awareness that climate change was caused by CO₂ – a gas – with it being measured in tonnes. This was exacerbated by a sense that, even if measuring CO₂ in tonnes made sense to them, they would still have no way of translating that tonne of gas into a measure of environmental damage that they could relate to.

**M:**  A 100 grams is a few ounces isn’t it?...

**W:**  But I don’t know how that would equate to gas... I have no idea how much that weight of carbon dioxide...equates to the environment.

Group 11, Reading
Carbon negative

Linked to: carbon neutral, zero carbon, low carbon, carbon offsetting

Overview: ‘Carbon negative’ performed poorly in the discussion groups both in terms of meaning and familiarity. With the exception of the few who had a good grasp of carbon offsetting as a concept, participants found the use of the word ‘negative’ counterintuitive.

No participants in the groups seemed to have heard of the term ‘carbon negative’ before, and many found its meaning difficult to decipher. As discussed in the main report, the term was sometimes interpreted as implying a total absence of carbon. Other participants even took it to imply something beyond an absence of carbon—a carbon deficit. For those participants who were aware that most goods and services required energy at some point to manufacture, deliver or use (and so would have a carbon footprint) this term therefore seemed inherently counterintuitive:

M: I can’t understand how something can be carbon negative... Maybe I am wrong but from my understanding of carbon you are using a certain amount of energy to do every activity. I don’t understand how something could be carbon negative.

Group 9, Bexleyheath

A few participants, however, did conclude that ‘carbon negative’, rather than implying a deficit of something, implied “putting something back”, and so made a link with offsetting, but this was very rare and required a basic awareness of offsetting as a concept.

When the term was tested in isolation, some participants were unsure whether the ‘negative’ was an assessment of a product’s carbon credentials (i.e. ‘bad’) or inferred that the product had a smaller carbon footprint (i.e. ‘good’).

Q: ‘Carbon negative’, what do you take that to mean?
M: I don’t know, maybe causes a lot of damage to the environment, if you use too much carbon?

Group 11, Reading

We might conclude that these issues make ‘carbon negative’ an extremely challenging term for use in green claims. Its reliance on consumers understanding a range of other concepts (for more on this, see the section on ‘internal dependencies’ in the main report) mean that it is currently only likely to be meaningful to a small number of environmentally engaged consumers. Where companies are investing in offsetting more than their total emissions, claims to this effect probably need to spell out the measures taken rather than relying on terms of this sort.

See, for example, this article in the New York Times, from 2008.
Carbon neutral

Linked to: carbon, CO₂, carbon emissions, carbon negative, zero carbon, low carbon, plastics neutral, water neutral, carbon offsetting

Quantitative findings: Figure 3

Overview: Tested in isolation, a relatively small percentage of respondents to the online survey found the term ‘carbon neutral’ meaningful. Although the situation improved when the term was placed in the context of a claim during the discussion groups, participants still had difficulties linking the term to some products and many did not have the necessary understanding of carbon offsetting to give ‘carbon neutral’ meaning.

Compared with terms like ‘carbon footprint’, ‘carbon neutral’ was considered familiar by a much smaller percentage of online survey respondents (48% said it was either very familiar or fairly familiar, compared with 74% for ‘carbon footprint’). That said, 89% of respondents had at least heard of the term ‘carbon neutral’, irrespective of whether they felt they were familiar with it or not. When it came to how meaningful respondents found the term, only 47% said they found it either very meaningful or fairly meaningful when it was tested in isolation in the survey.

Figure 3 – Quantitative findings: ‘carbon neutral’

(Base: 2,019)

Responses to ‘carbon neutral’ in the online survey were reasonably consistent across different environmental segments, with the exception of the most and least engaged respondents. Between 47% and 52% of respondents in the waste watcher, concerned consumer, sideline supporter, cautious participant and stalled starter segments claimed to find the term meaningful when it was tested in isolation, compared with 68% of positive greens and only 29% of honestly disengaged respondents.

Despite its relatively poor performance in the online survey, many discussion group participants seemed comfortable with the term ‘carbon neutral’ when used in context, although they often found it difficult to pin
down a precise definition. When linked to products that people associated with overt emissions and offsetting, definitions became more accurate.

M: I think... anything... with an engine – you tend to think of carbon don’t you... Then if you offset something against it, that is when it becomes neutral.

Group 1, Croydon

Some participants found the idea of food products such as coffee being carbon neutral more difficult and tended to fall back on a definition of ‘neutral’ that implied an absence of carbon, rather than a balancing of negative and positive impacts.

Q: So what does it mean? Just clarify what we think it would mean if coffee were ‘carbon neutral’?
M: I don’t see how it can be.
W: It hasn’t used any emissions to get to us really.

Group 1, Croydon

The participants in the quotes above had a poorer understanding of carbon offsetting as a concept, reinforcing the importance of such an understanding in making sense of the term ‘carbon neutral’. For more on this, see the section of the main report on ‘internal dependencies’. It is notable that a smaller percentage of online survey respondents claimed to find the term ‘carbon offsetting’ meaningful when tested in isolation (39%) than claimed to find ‘carbon neutral’ meaningful (47%), despite an understanding of carbon offsetting being necessary to grasp carbon neutrality. We suggest this may underline the importance of familiarity in making people feel a term is meaningful – only 43% of respondents said they were familiar with ‘carbon offsetting’, while 48% felt the same way about ‘carbon neutral’.
Carbon offsetting

Linked to: carbon, CO₂, carbon emissions, carbon negative, zero carbon, low carbon, carbon neutral

Quantitative findings: Figure 4

Overview: Understanding of ‘carbon offsetting’ seemed to be linked to levels of engagement with the environment generally, but even among the more engaged there were those who struggled with the detail of the concept (beyond a basic understanding that it meant paying for some of the environmental damage caused).

Relatively low percentages of respondents to the online survey found ‘carbon offsetting’ either familiar (43%) or meaningful (39%).

### Figure 4 – Quantitative findings: ‘carbon offsetting’

(Base: 2,019)

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There was, however, considerable variation depending upon which of Defra’s environmental segments respondents were in: 57% of positive greens found the term meaningful, sinking to 24% of those classed as honestly disengaged. Similarly, participants in the discussion groups recruited from more environmentally engaged segments were more likely to show a reasonable understanding of the principle of offsetting.

**M:** ...You have got to be putting an equivalent amount of money in to planting some more trees for example, to offset... the carbon...

**Q:** And what do the trees do?

**M:** Soak up the carbon.

Group 1, Croydon (positive greens & concerned consumers)

Even within these groups, however, knowledge about offsetting varied, with some participants having a rough idea that, for example, offsetting could be linked to the planting of trees, but less certain about how this
related to carbon emissions. Many participants – particularly from the less environmentally engaged groups – struggled to explain the term at all, despite many initially feeling that it was meaningful to them.

**W:** Well we couldn’t figure it out. We didn’t get it, just a load of nonsense really.

Group 4, Watford (positive greens & concerned consumers)

Many of these less environmentally engaged group participants seemed comfortable with the idea that you can pay money to ‘offset’ environmental damage, but didn’t understand (and hadn’t really thought about) how this works in practice.

A number of those participants in the more environmentally engaged focus groups who *did* have a good grasp of offsetting expressed scepticism about the concept, suggesting that it was simply a way of assuaging guilt (about flying, for example) while continuing to behave in the same way.

**M:** It is just to make you feel better.

**M:** Yes it is basically.

**M:** Plant a tree and fly 1,000 miles.

Group 7, Bexleyheath (positive greens & concerned consumers)

It would be interesting to know how widespread this view is, since it might suggest that the knowledge required to understand offsetting as a concept simultaneously undermines people’s sense of its value.
Clean

Overview: ‘Clean’ was generally accepted by discussion group participants when used in the context of fuels. It is possible that some participants derived a more specific meaning from the word than simply ‘free of pollutants’, linking it to an absence of fossil fuels, though this would require further research to explore fully.

‘Clean’ or ‘cleaner’ was mentioned, unprompted, a number of times by discussion group participants – usually in relation to fuel or other materials and products linked to direct emissions and air pollution.

M: It is like BA saying, “We fly green, our fuel is cleaner, our planes are more efficient you know.”

Group 9, Bexleyheath

Focus group participants also seemed to react positively to the use of the word ‘clean’ in context, even where they were unsure about what its implications might be.

W: “Clean yet mean,” that is good. You have to read it a couple of times, there are a lot of words in there.

Group 5, Watford

The two quotes above demonstrate an interesting characteristic of the term ‘clean’, in that, while it conveys a specific environmental meaning (i.e. free from pollutants), its use and interpretation could be extremely ambiguous. The second quote, for example, related to a claim about a car that ran on biofuels. The use of the term implied that the biofuels in the claim do not cause pollution, when in fact, biofuels generate both carbon emissions and other pollutants. Use of the word ‘clean’, however, almost became a proxy for a direct claim that the biofuel was free of pollutants; one that went unquestioned by many participants.

Fossil fuels may be important here. Testing of the term ‘clean energy’ presented an interesting contrast with reactions to the term ‘cleaner fuel’, with some participants in the pilot groups suggesting that the former term meant little to them. It may be that this reflects a difference between perceptions of energy (clean) and perceptions of the fossil fuels used to generate it (dirty).

W: ‘Clean energy’, which is opposed to what, dirty energy? ...should it not all be clean energy?

Scoping group 3, Manchester

This may help to explain why no-one questioned the use of clean in relation to the biofuels claim above; it may have been that they saw the absence of petrol as a sufficient basis for claiming a fuel was ‘clean’, irrespective of the actual emissions associated with biofuels.
Climate change

Linked to: CO$_2$, carbon emissions, global warming

Overview: Most participants were familiar with the term and found it meaningful, but understanding of climate change science varied considerably, and within the less engaged groups, was subject to considerable scepticism.

Participants in the discussion groups suggested that ‘climate change’ was one of the most meaningful of all of the terms tested – a trend that was consistent across all groups. In line with Defra’s 2009 tracker survey, which found that nearly everyone interviewed (95%) was aware of ‘climate change’, it was also among the most frequently quoted terms when, at the beginning of each group, participants were asked to suggest environmental words and phrases they had heard recently. While most participants felt ‘climate change’ was meaningful to them, however, some acknowledged that it felt too distant as an issue to motivate them to take action. This, too, reflects the figures from the 2009 Defra tracker survey, which found that 21% of respondents felt that climate change was too far off to worry them.

W: You get all this stuff in the papers about these floods happening because of climate change, but I don’t think it happens severely enough for people to think, “It is my car that is doing that”.

Group 11, Reading

Others, particularly in the groups made up of ‘stalled starters’ and ‘honestly disengaged’ respondents, expressed cynicism about climate change in general and its use as a marketing device in particular.

As with other terms relating to carbon emissions and global warming, when pushed to explain what ‘climate change’ actually meant, discussion group participants often struggled to give a satisfactory definition, even within the most environmentally engaged segments.

M: [If] they could find different ways of producing electricity that doesn’t change the climate, then go for that.

Q: And do you want to explain a bit more about that?

M: Just at the moment you know the way it is produced, it is polluting the air. And if they can find a different way of doing it then it would be best to get it from there.

Group 8, Bexleyheath

There was a tendency to link climate change to products and behaviours that were seen as major emitters of CO$_2$ – namely, cars and flights. Relatively few discussion group participants drew direct links between ‘climate change’ and less familiar terms like ‘carbon neutral’, ‘carbon negative’ and ‘zero carbon’, but it was mentioned in relation to ‘CO$_2$’ and ‘carbon emissions’. A few respondents also made reference to ‘global warming’, most of them using it interchangeably with ‘climate change’.
Durable products

Linked to: biodegradable, recycled

Overview: This term was intuitively understood by research participants, who generally responded positively to its use.

Most discussion group participants fully understood the term ‘durable products’ and reacted positively to it, suggesting that it was reasonably self-explanatory, even if they weren’t that familiar with it.

Q: How about.. ‘durable products’?
W: It’s going to last a long time, like our telly that’s lasted four years and I’ve had to have a new one, gutted...

Group 5, Watford

One or two participants connected the term with whether or not a product was biodegradable or could be/had been recycled.

M: Not necessarily biodegradable or anything, cast iron where perhaps you want something to not wear out.

Group 6, Watford

A number suggested that durability was a consideration for them when making purchasing decisions, but most acknowledged that ‘new’ goods are often more of a draw.

W: It’s like carpets though. Some carpets, it says they’re durable – they wear for years and years – but you go off the carpet don’t you?

Group 6, Watford

On the whole though, there seemed to be a consensus that products should be durable, and that deciding whether or not to replace them should be a matter of choice, rather than necessity. Overall, the term was well understood and received positively by most participants.

For a much fuller exploration of consumer expectations in relation to product durability, see work Brook Lyndhurst has been carrying out for Defra in parallel to this project. This parallel work, which was also based upon findings from discussion groups, revealed that participants tended to weigh up their expectations of a product’s lifetime against its price in order to develop an understanding of whether or not it was good value. However, what that research also found was that participants did not have any satisfactory way of anticipating a product’s potential durability, and so had to resort to using a number of unsatisfactory proxy measurements for durability such as brand, length of guarantee, and appearance of quality.

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11 Defra project code: EVO445, Longer product lifetimes
Eco-friendly

Linked to: Environmentally friendly; green

Quantitative findings: Figure 5

Overview: The term was considered meaningful and familiar by many respondents, but the discussion groups highlighted the scope for people to read too much or too little into it.

‘Eco-friendly’ as a lifestyle description
The online survey tested responses a number of phrases as descriptions of green lifestyles. The results for ‘eco-friendly’ were as follows: 21% very familiar; 38% fairly familiar; 24% have heard of but not very familiar; 14% have heard of but not at all familiar; 4% have never heard this term before. 29% particularly like the phrase as a lifestyle descriptor; 7% particularly dislike it.

‘Eco-friendly’ was a term that most participants were extremely comfortable using and understood as relating broadly to environmental responsibility. Seven out of ten respondents to the online survey (70%) said they were familiar with the term, and even more (73%) said they found it meaningful. One participant in a Croydon group (3) summed up the phrase with the definition, “Less damaging to the environment”.

Figure 5 – Quantitative findings: ‘eco-friendly’
(Base: 2,019)

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Participants did not usually seem to interpret ‘eco-friendly’ (or indeed, ‘environmentally friendly’) as meaning that a product had a net benefit to the environment; rather, some seemed to take it to mean that negative impacts had been reduced. A few participants in the Manchester pilot group went further still, suggesting that ‘eco-friendly’ covered issues like child labour and fair trade.

This may well have been due to the particular context in which the term was used. The advert described an online store as a, “great place to do all your fair trade, organic and eco-friendly shopping”, possibly causing
respondents to link these concepts in a way they might not have done otherwise. Regardless, the episode demonstrates the potential for the term’s lack of specificity about the environmental issues to which it relates to mislead if used in the context of a specific claim.

‘Eco-friendly’ cropped up repeatedly in the discussion group warm-up exercise when respondents were asked to list environmental words and phrases. Several used it unprompted to help them explain other terms and concepts. Participants generally responded better to ‘eco-friendly’ as an aspirational lifestyle description than they did to terms like ‘eco-savvy’, and this was borne out by the online survey, although it’s worth noting that even in the case of eco-friendly, there was a sense that most participants did not see it as a term that would apply to them.

Q: So would everyone here consider that they are eco friendly?
M: Try to be...
W: I’d like to be.
W: Not in everything.
W: Probably not as much as I should be.
Eco-savvy

Linked to: None

Overview: ‘Eco-savvy’ performed poorly both in the online survey and in the discussion groups.

‘Eco-savvy’ as a lifestyle description
The online survey tested responses a number of phrases as descriptions of green lifestyles. The results for ‘eco-savvy’ were as follows: 5% very familiar; 14% fairly familiar; 22% have heard of but not very familiar; 22% have heard of but not at all familiar; 37% have never heard this term before. 8% particularly like the phrase as a lifestyle descriptor; 44% particularly dislike it.

This term was suggested for potential research in Futerra’s ‘Words That Sell’ report12, but was dismissed by most discussion group participants and fared similarly poorly in the online survey. Participants seemed to find it patronising and rarely felt it might be used to describe ‘people like them’.

Q: Would anyone here describe themselves as ‘eco-savvy’?
M: No way...
Q: So broadly what sort of person does ‘eco-savvy’ describe?
M: They’re good people, they’re really nice people... They’re very aware of the environment and the impact they have...
W: I’d think they go to protests and stuff.

Group 3, Croydon

12 Futerra (2007) Words that sell
Ecological

**Linked to:** Environmentally friendly, eco-friendly, green

**Quantitative findings:** Figure 6

**Overview:** ‘Ecological’ was considered familiar by almost two thirds of respondents to the online survey, but seems to be less meaningful than other ‘flag’ terms.

When tested in isolation, ‘ecological’ was interpreted by many discussion group participants to mean, “doesn’t have any kind of impact on the environment” (scoping group 1, London). Some used it unprompted as a ‘flag term’, fulfilling a similar role to ‘green’, ‘eco-friendly’ and ‘environmentally friendly’, though people in general seemed to prefer these latter phrases.

One participant did make reference to “the ecosystem” in trying to define ‘ecological’, but this was a one-off occurrence.

![Figure 6 – Quantitative findings: ‘ecological’](image)

We suggest that the relatively strong performance of the term ‘eco’ when tested in the online survey in relation to washing powder (it was considered meaningful by 52% of respondents, second only to ‘environmentally friendly washing powder’, considered meaningful by 68%) may stem from public awareness of ‘ecological’ washing powder.
Embedded carbon

‘Embedded carbon’ was only explored systematically in the initial scoping discussion groups. Many participants expressed confusion about its meaning.13

**M:** I’m not sure about ‘embedded carbon’. We can’t quite get our heads around that one...

Scoping group 2, Coventry

It may be that there are better ways of conveying the concept of ‘embedded carbon’ that are more intuitive. Most participants, while not initially thinking of all products as having lifecycle carbon impacts, did understand when probed that the processes used to manufacture and transport goods and often, to use and dispose of them, can be linked to carbon emissions. Although ‘lifecycle’ conveys this notion more explicitly, we suggest that consumers may still consider it too technical-sounding and find it off-putting. There may well be some scope for creative thinking by marketers in addressing these issues.

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13 It is worth noting that the phrase met with a similar response when tested more extensively with managers of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in a project we have been carrying out for Defra in parallel with this one. This is particularly relevant since that project has underlined the similarities between SME managers and individual consumers in terms of attitudes towards, and understanding of, environmental issues.
Energy efficient

Linked to: carbon neutral

Quantitative findings: Figure 7

Overview: ‘Energy efficient’ (and ‘energy efficiency’) was both familiar and meaningful to research participants, but often seen to relate to cost savings as much as – if not more than – to the environment.

‘Energy efficient’ registered as the second most meaningful term tested in the online survey (second only to ‘recycling’), and scored similarly well in terms of familiarity.

Figure 7 – Quantitative findings: ‘energy efficient’

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The term was also judged to be relatively meaningful by discussion group participants, but was frequently seen as primarily relating to cost rather than the environment.

W: Some people... are thinking about saving themselves money with the bills, not necessarily helping the environment... That is why I think of ‘energy efficient’ as saving.

Group 1, Croydon

There did seem to be awareness that energy efficiency and carbon emissions were linked, however. There was also a suggestion that energy efficiency might be valued more for some products (e.g. white goods) than for others (e.g. TVs and other appliances). This appeared to have something to do with the amount of time white goods are left on, although there was also a sense in one or two groups that participants felt there would be more of a trade off between performance and energy use with products like televisions or stereo equipment.

M: I think it is more white goods you kind of look at that...

M: Especially something like a fridge which is on continuously.

Group 3, Croydon
Environmentally friendly

Linked to: green, eco-friendly, ecological
Quantitative findings: Figure 8

Overview: ‘Environmentally-friendly’ is considered familiar and meaningful, but the research highlighted the potential for its generality to mislead or confuse consumers.

‘Environmentally-friendly’ as a lifestyle description
The online survey tested responses a number of phrases as descriptions of green lifestyles. The results for ‘environmentally-friendly’ were as follows: 34% very familiar; 39% fairly familiar; 17% have heard of but not very familiar; 8% have heard of but not at all familiar; 2% have never heard this term before. 51% particularly like the phrase as a lifestyle descriptor; 4% particularly dislike it.

The term ‘environmentally friendly’ was used to describe more environmentally responsible products and lifestyles (unprompted) more frequently than almost any other term. Discussion group participants applied it to a range of environmental issues (from carbon emissions to biodegradable products) with confidence. Consequently, ‘environmentally friendly’ was seen as both familiar and meaningful by the majority of respondents to both the online survey and in discussion groups and, among the ‘flag’ terms tested, emerged as a clear front-runner as a means of identifying a topic as pertaining to the environment.

When the phrase was tested in context, the responses of the discussion group participants supported the need for this type of flag term to be supported by more specific detail. One discussion involving ‘environmentally friendly’ also highlighted the dangers around the use of flag terms more generally. In the following quote, the presence of the words “when it comes to carbon emissions” seemed to be sufficient to reassure participants that they understood the meaning of the claim:
M: “No other major home energy supplier in Britain is more environmentally friendly when it comes to carbon emissions.”
W: If it is true then it is great. You would want to use them.
M: Yes. It can at least be backed up with evidence, factual evidence.

Group 1, Croydon

In actual fact, the text gave no indication of what the company concerned had done to make it “more environmentally friendly when it comes to carbon emissions”. We believe that this further illustrates the fact that flag terms can make people feel they have understood a claim, while actually telling them relatively little.
Ethical

Linked to: fair trade, food miles

**Overview:** The term was generally well-understood and participants tended to respond positively to it, but often interpreted it narrowly as relating to labour markets rather than encompassing socially just (and environmental) behaviours in the round.

When tested in isolation during the discussion groups, participants seemed to see ‘ethical’ as being fairly meaningful. When the term was used in context of ‘ethically traded’ in a mocked up advert for fair trade coffee, however, it was less well received.

In this case, it may be the *particular context* that was driving confusion. Respondents tended to prefer ‘fair trade’ to ‘ethically traded’. Some saw the ‘trade’ element of ‘ethically traded’ as relating solely to the exchange of goods and money, and somehow therefore excluding the farmers themselves, despite the fact that the word was also included in ‘fair trade’. This demonstrates the way in which the meaning of terms shifts as consumers become more familiar with them. As people have become accustomed to thinking of ‘fair trade’ as implying support for growers, so they seem to have ceased to think of the precise meaning of its component parts.

Some participants appeared to think that ‘ethically’ carried a greater moral imperative than ‘fair’:

*W:* Well is ‘ethically traded’ the same as ‘fair trade’?

*W:* ‘Ethically’ means more like ‘moral’.

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Group 2, Croydon

Despite this, it is worth noting that for a few participants, the moral connotations of ‘ethical’ seemed generally to be limited to issues around labour conditions and treatment of producers, rather than being more widely linked to environmental issues. The term also fared poorly when linked to products which were seen as being less obviously connected to these issues (such as bank accounts). There is more on this in the main report.
**Fair trade**

**Linked to:** ethically traded, food miles, sustainable

**Overview:** ‘Fair trade’ was generally well understood, though some participants considered purchasing fair trade products to be a luxury that only wealthier consumers could afford.

‘Fair trade’ was considered meaningful by most discussion group participants. A few saw the term as having an environmental bent, although this may have been a result of the overall focus of the groups themselves. Most participants seemed to understand fair trade to be linked to paying producers more for their goods. Many also linked it to the purchasing policies of supermarkets.

**Q:** ...What does it mean to you if you see that on a product?

**M:** The supermarkets don’t nail these people to the floor on price.

**M:** That people are not exploited in the production of it.

---

Group 8, Bexleyheath

Some participants highlighted what they saw as the higher cost of fair trade goods, suggesting that in some cases they were a luxury for those who were better off, though they were in general seen as desirable. Others drew attention to potential trade-offs between fair trade products and CO₂ emissions.

**W:** ...You might be paying someone a fair wage but what about the environmental damage that you’re doing by transporting it all over here?

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Group 4, Watford

On the whole though, the term stood out as being one that participants responded to positively and felt, usually rightly, that they had a good grasp of.
Food miles

Linked to: local, locally sourced, seasonal
Quantitative findings: Figure 9

Overview: When used in context, ‘food miles’ seemed to be reasonably intuitive for many participants, although motivations for buying food that had not been transported long distances sometimes seemed more closely linked to a desire to buy locally than to environmental attitudes.

Although it didn’t rate as being especially familiar or meaningful to respondents to the online survey, ‘food miles’ (sometimes referred to as ‘air miles’ by participants) was seen as a relatively self-explanatory term by most discussion group respondents, even when tested in isolation in the less environmentally engaged groups.

These findings are in keeping with conclusions from previous research. For example, in 2009 Defra’s Food Synthesis Review\(^{14}\) found that “most of the public is familiar with the concept of food miles” but noted results from a Nielsen survey from 2007\(^{15}\) that found that only 3% of respondents chose ‘food miles’ when asked which environmental issue concerned them most.

While many participants saw ‘food miles’ as being a bad thing, many did not explicitly link this negativity to carbon emissions. Instead, motivations for avoiding food that had been transported long distances often seemed to be more closely linked to a desire to buy local or British produce than wanting to protect the environment.


\(^{15}\) Nielsen (2007) Britain’s ethical shopper: which way now?
Q: Does anyone look out for ‘food miles’ when they are shopping?...
W: I did for a while... I kind of caught on to this and thought, “Oh yes, I will buy locally and all the rest of it.”

Group 8, Bexleyheath
Green

Linked to: environmentally friendly, ecological, eco-friendly, sustainable

Quantitative findings: Figure 10

Overview: The term was well liked by respondents, who seemed to find it meaningful, though this was often highly dependent upon context. The general nature of the term itself creates the potential for it to mislead.

As with other ‘flag’ terms, ‘green’ was often mentioned when participants were asked to suggest words they had recently heard linked to the environment at the beginning of each session. Although, if pushed, most group participants expressed a preference for ‘environmentally friendly’ over ‘green’, it was used unprompted over and over again. The term was seen as the “original” environmental phrase and was treated almost with fondness by some discussion group participants, who seemed to value its function as a flag for issues relating to the environment.

W: It [green] has been around for so long. It is one of the first… buzz words that came out, along with ‘environmentally friendly’. So to me I know what they mean if something is described in that way.

Group 1, Croydon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 10 – Quantitative findings: ‘green’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Base: 2,019)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Term</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very familiar</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly familiar</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have heard of before but not very familiar</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have heard of before but not at all familiar</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have never heard this term before</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very meaningful</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly meaningful</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very meaningful</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all meaningful</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always use</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often use</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use occasionally</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use much</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use at all</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many seemed to like the term precisely because it covered so much.

W: ...It covers the lot of it; a lot of people understand ‘green’, so it covers a lot of questions.

Group 1, Croydon

However, when the term was tested in the context of a claim, without supporting detail, group participants reacted less well.
M: It is a very broad term, ‘green’ again. So you know, to just say they are greener than everyone else really doesn’t do that much for me... I would like to know why and what they have done to become greener.

Group 3, Croydon

This highlights one of the key dangers of using ‘flag’ terms – that their lack of specificity about the nature of the environmental benefit tells consumers little, and could as a result cause them to infer greater benefits than are in fact the case. The main report explores this in more detail, as well as unpacking the role of supporting text in giving meaning to more general terms of this sort.
Green energy

Linked to: Green, green tariffs, green electricity, clean energy

Overview: Although ‘green energy’ was meaningful for some participants, in general, references to alternative energy seemed to be better understood if they directly referenced the means of energy production.

‘Green energy’ (sometimes referred to by discussion group participants as ‘green electricity’) was mentioned unprompted by one or two discussion group participants. Many were familiar with the term but when it was tested in isolation, acknowledged that they did not really understand how green tariffs actually work:

Q: ‘Green electricity’, is that the term that you are familiar with?
W: It is but I don’t really understand how it is green.

Group 8, Bexleyheath

This seemed to be linked to difficulties in understanding how simply paying a different amount for the same product (i.e. electricity) could change the environmental impact of that product. Some group participants felt that green energy was “just energy” which, in the words of one respondent, “still comes out of the same pipe” (Group 3, Croydon).

W: And the energy, it is all the same thing. You are paying for the same thing, so if you end up paying more, who is going to get the money?

Group 3, Croydon

Others seemed aware that ‘green energy’ implied alternative methods of electricity generation. In one group there was some debate about whether or not nuclear generation might be included under this banner. Tellingly, when a range of green terms were tested in relation to energy tariffs, ‘renewable energy’ was considered to be the most meaningful (by 57% of respondents, compared with 44% who found green tariff meaningful). This reinforces our conclusions in relation to the use of the word ‘green’, that its lack of specificity makes it less meaningful to consumers than terms that link directly to an particular environmental issue or benefit, such as ‘renewable energy’. There is more on this in the main report.
Landfill

Linked to: recycle, zero waste, plastics neutral, durable products

‘Landfill’, in common with a number of other waste-related terms, was considered very meaningful by discussion group participants across the board. They repeatedly mentioned the word spontaneously and appeared to have a good understanding of what it meant.

\[ W: \text{If you’re only going to buy one product that lasts you 20 years you’re not going to get a landfill full of it.} \]

Group 6, Watford

In particular, landfill was frequently mentioned in relation to other waste terms tested in the discussion groups – often as a negative consequence of failing to adopt pro-environmental behaviours such as recycling – and was broadly seen as a ‘bad’ thing.
### Living lightly

**‘Living lightly’ as a lifestyle description**

The online survey tested responses a number of phrases as descriptions of green lifestyles. The results for ‘living lightly’ were as follows: 3% very familiar; 5% fairly familiar; 14% have heard of but not very familiar; 15% have heard of but not at all familiar; 63% have never heard this term before. 5% particularly like the phrase as a lifestyle descriptor; 36% particularly dislike it.

Although discussion group participants understood the meaning of ‘living lightly’, even in the more engaged groups, some suggested they would not have reached that understanding without knowing that the term related to the environment in some way (through the context of the groups).

**Q:** Would that trigger any environmental thought in your head if you heard that?

**W:** No, I wouldn’t think of it as an environmental, I’d think of it more as a diet – saving money sort of thing.

Group 4, Watford

For the respondents to our online survey, however, the term seemed to be a ‘no go’. Almost two thirds (63%) said they had never heard of ‘living lightly’ as a description for an environmentally friendly lifestyle, while over a third (36%) said they actively disliked it. This was reflected in the responses of discussion group participants, with one suggesting that it might describe “waffling hippies” (Group 6, Watford), though it should be noted this occurred in one of the least environmentally engaged groups.
Local

Linked to: seasonal, food miles

Out of context, ‘local’ meant relatively little to discussion group participants as an environmental term, though they did begin to connect it with food production after a time. As noted in relation to ‘food miles’ (page 31), positive reactions to the use of ‘local’ in context (e.g. in a sentence about buying local) were often driven by motivations that were not directly linked to the environment. Specifically, positive associations with ‘Britishness’ and support for local producers appeared to be a powerful influence.

W: If I had a choice, if I see it is local, it was local or British I would rather get it.

Group 5, Watford

There was a strong connection between ‘local’ and the terms ‘seasonal’ and ‘food miles’. ‘Local’ seems to have had slightly more resonance with some group participants than ‘seasonal’, possibly because it implied an element of regional or national support, though we did not have time to explore this fully in the groups.

Irrespective of the motivations it triggered, ‘local’ did seem to be reasonably well understood when it was explicitly associated with food, though perceptions of what geographical limits constituted ‘local’ seemed to vary by person and by product. Group participants also seemed to be divided between those who felt the term related to local production and those who felt it related to local (and independent) retailers.
Low carbon

Linked to: carbon neutral, carbon negative, zero carbon, carbon emissions, CO₂

Overview: On the basis of this research, we suggest that ‘low carbon’ needs to be used with caution, since it can sound intuitively meaningful to consumers when used in the context of a claim, while their actual understanding of what is implied by the term may lag behind. Quantifying any reductions in carbon emissions associated with a product labelled with the term may help.

When tested in isolation, ‘low carbon’ was liked more than phrases like ‘carbon neutral’ and ‘carbon negative’ because discussion group respondents felt that it avoided any implication that carbon had been entirely ‘removed’. Overall, however, the phrase still performed poorly on meaningfulness when tested in the groups and a number of participants grouped it together with other ‘carbon’ terms as meaning very little to them.

Q: Any others other people haven’t heard of?
W: I have heard of them but I don’t know what they are.

Group 9, Bexleyheath

When tested in the context of a claim, ‘low carbon’ received relatively little comment (possibly suggesting that discussion group participants felt comfortable that they understood it) and one participant even used it in the subsequent discussion.

M: Just cut down on waste, produce things more locally, then that will affect everything else – the emissions side of it – which brings you into low carbon.

Group 2, Croydon

However, when probed about what meaning they were deriving from the term, some participants struggled to pin down exactly what it might imply. When probed further, they began to call for more detail:

W: Maybe we need to have facts in terms of how much they have reduced it.

Group 2, Croydon

We believe this highlights two points. First, it suggests that claims become more meaningful to people the more they quantify the benefits they promote; and second, it suggests that ‘low carbon’ sounds intuitively meaningful rather than conferring actual understanding. This was further supported when the term was linked to a range of products in the online survey. When respondents were asked how meaningful these associations were, ‘low carbon’ was consistently considered less meaningful than other phrases, suggesting that when asked to focus on the term in relation to a specific product, respondents became more aware of their own lack of understanding of what the term might imply.
Low carbon living

Overview: The results of the online survey suggest that, as a lifestyle description, ‘low carbon living’ is currently only likely to have traction with the most environmentally engaged consumers.

‘Low carbon living’ as a lifestyle description

The online survey tested responses a number of phrases as descriptions of green lifestyles. The results for ‘low carbon living’ were as follows: 11% very familiar; 26% fairly familiar; 29% have heard of but not very familiar; 19% have heard of but not at all familiar; 15% have never heard this term before. 10% particularly like the phrase as a lifestyle descriptor; 17% particularly dislike it.

‘Low carbon living’ was not tested in the discussion groups. Around two thirds of online survey respondents (37%) were either very familiar or fairly familiar with the phrase, but only one in ten actively liked it as a green lifestyle description, compared with 17% who actively disliked it. It should be noted, however, that those in the more environmentally engaged segments – and particularly the positive greens – were more likely than the less engaged respondents to say they liked the phrase (particularly true for the positive greens), while those in the least engaged segments were considerably more likely to dislike it (Figure 11). It’s also worth noting that waste watchers were the exception to this rule, with a relatively large proportion expressing dislike for the term.

Figure 11 – Breakdown of responses to ‘low carbon living’, by segment

(Base: 2,019)
Low impact, low impact living

Linked to: sustainable, environmentally friendly
Quantitative findings (low impact): Figure 12

Overview: ‘Low impacts’ needs to be used with caution, since it can sound intuitively meaningful to people when used in the context of a claim, while their actual understanding of what is implied by the term may lag behind. As a lifestyle description, only the most environmentally engaged consumers currently seem likely to engage with the term ‘low impact living’.

‘Low impact living’ as a lifestyle description
The online survey tested responses a number of phrases as descriptions of green lifestyles. The results for ‘low impact living’ were as follows: 5% very familiar; 15% fairly familiar; 27% have heard of but not very familiar; 21% have heard of but not at all familiar; 32% have never heard this term before. 9% particularly like the phrase as a lifestyle descriptor; 24% particularly dislike it.

When tested in isolation in the online survey, relatively few respondents (38%) found the term ‘low impact’ meaningful.

Figure 12 – Quantitative findings: ‘low impact’
(Base: 2,019)

Similarly, when it was tested alone, discussion group participants criticised the term for being too general and not clearly enough linked to the environment. When tested in the context of a claim that was directly related to the environment, however, many respondents read and accepted the term ‘low impact’ without comment or complaint.
W: “The low impact dual spray system is more efficient because it simultaneously releases steam and water into the washing machine, lowering emissions and reducing your water footprint.” That is more factual, isn’t it?

Group 2, Croydon

Indeed, when used in a claim that obviously dealt with the environment, respondents seemed comfortable assuming that ‘low impact’ implicitly meant, “low impact on the environment”:

M: Very similar, it [carbon negative] is like ‘low impact’; it is the same kind of thing really, just the low impact on the environment.

Group 3, Croydon

This tendency to find ‘low impact’ more meaningful when used in the context of a claim has echoes of responses to ‘low carbon’ (see page 39). This was reinforced when green terms were linked with a range of products in the online survey. In this more limited context (i.e. related simply to a product rather than used in a full advert), very few respondents tended to consider ‘low impact’ meaningful – it was the least meaningful term in relation to holidays (considered meaningful by just 21% of respondents), cars (31%), energy tariffs (29%), bank accounts (12%) and washing powder (26%).

‘Low impact living’ was not tested in the discussion groups. Relatively few respondents to the online survey (20%) claimed to be either very familiar or fairly familiar with the term. However, a quarter claimed to actively dislike it as a description of environmentally friendly lifestyles. As with ‘low carbon living’, significantly more positive greens claimed to like the term than any other segment.
Made with care for the environment

Linked to: environmentally friendly, eco-friendly

This term had little traction with discussion group participants in any of the groups. They generally preferred ‘eco-friendly’ or ‘environmentally friendly’, suggesting that “made with care for the environment” was actually less meaningful, possibly because it seemed overly focused on manufacturing processes and not impacts in the round. In a few cases, respondents reacted positively to the phrase, but acknowledged that it told them very little, and their overall attitudes towards the environment seemed to have little bearing on this. Participants also seemed to feel more cynical towards this term than they did towards phrases like ‘environmentally friendly’.

W: “I think that [‘made with care for the environment’] is quite good; that is a natural, soft little fluffy thing that you know sounds nice, like a little cat.

W: It doesn’t mean anything, it doesn’t mean anything.

Group 1, Croydon
Natural

**Linked to:** pure

**Overview:** Unless clearly qualified, ‘natural’ has the potential to imply greater environmental benefits than may in fact be the case, without actually making any explicit reference to the environment.

Some terms seemed to have positive connotations for participants in the discussion groups, despite having no explicit link with environmental issues. In the main report, these terms are referred to as ‘inferential terms’. ‘Natural’ is one such term: discussion group participants often skimmed over the term when used in a claim without questioning its meaning, despite the fact that that meaning was not at all clear. In a few cases, asking discussion group participants to think about their responses to claims including the word ‘natural’ actually caused them to acknowledge its ambiguity.

---

**M:** Well it is one of those things I think supermarkets have used now to draw people in...
**M:** Yes that is what I am saying, I know supermarkets use certain words for certain things.
**M:** ‘Natural’ could cover anything really, can’t it?

*Group 7, Bexleyheath*

When used in association with animal products, ‘natural’ was sometimes assumed to mean that animals had been reared in their natural surroundings.

**Q:** And... ‘natural’... was used in association with fish products. What would that say to you?

**M:** That it is in landed in a natural environment, instead of farmed. When they fish farm salmon or trout, they are in big pens in lakes.

**Q:** So [it means] wild, almost?...

**M:** Yes, swimming around, obviously in the rivers or the sea.

*Group 7, Bexleyheath*

We believe this may have implications for claims relating to, for instance, higher animal welfare or organic products, and it seems wise to be particularly careful when using ‘natural’ in association with this type of claim.
One planet living

Linked to: None

Overview: Overall, ‘one planet living’ appears to have little to offer in terms of wider communications around green lifestyles – even among greener participants, the term only seemed to appeal to a small minority, with almost a third of them disliking the phrase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘One planet living’ as a lifestyle description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The online survey tested responses a number of phrases as descriptions of green lifestyles. The results for ‘one planet living’ were as follows: 4% very familiar; 6% fairly familiar; 16% have heard of but not very familiar; 15% have heard of but not at all familiar; 60% have never heard this term before. 8% particularly like the phrase as a lifestyle descriptor; 39% particularly dislike it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Futerra’s 2007 research on green terms\textsuperscript{16} concluded that the term ‘one planet living’ was liked as a green lifestyle description by research respondents, because, “It was seen to capture a sense of global community and shared values”. The results of our online survey suggest that, if the Futerra focus groups reflected wider public opinion at the time, they do not do so now, with 39% of respondents expressing active dislike for the term, compared with only 8% who claimed to like it (this figure seems to have been skewed by positive greens, 13% of whom liked it, and concerned consumers, 9% of whom liked it). Perhaps more significantly, dislike for ‘one planet living’ was spread reasonably evenly regardless of environmental attitudes, with positive greens about as likely to dislike the phrase (33% said they disliked it) as sideline supporters (34%), cautious participants (34%) and stalled starters (35%).\textsuperscript{17}

Familiarity with the term was low in both the online survey and the discussion groups. When discussion group participants were asked to provide a definition, none linked ‘one planet living’ to living within the limits of the earth’s current resources – the original definition of the phrase as coined by WWF and Bioregional\textsuperscript{18}. Instead, respondents tended to link it (as the Futerra research participants had) with more general expressions of global unity.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{M:} Trying to get along living the same way, but that isn’t going to happen.
  \item \textit{M:} Just living on the same planet.
\end{itemize}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Group 6, Watford}
\end{flushright}

In some cases, linking environmental issues to a global agenda actually seemed to invite negative associations for respondents who were concerned that other countries might negate any positive improvements introduced in the UK.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{M:} ...You go to a different country and they don’t do anything... You... think, “Why are we trying so hard and other places just couldn’t care less?”
\end{itemize}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Group 6, Watford}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{16} Futerra (2007) Words that sell
\textsuperscript{17} Base sizes vary between 103 for stalled starters and 584 for honestly disengaged.
\textsuperscript{18} http://www.oneplanetliving.org/index.html
Organic

Linked to: sustainable, locally sourced, local

Overview: The term was considered familiar and meaningful and seemed to be relatively well understood. There were signs that some research participants were drawing links between various food-related environmental and ethical issues.

Most discussion group participants were familiar with the term ‘organic’ and comfortable they understood what it meant. When we pushed them to elaborate, many demonstrated a good underlying knowledge, with one or two even showing an awareness of the animal welfare element of organic produce:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q:</th>
<th>W:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is an organic cow?</td>
<td>It is fed naturally and kept naturally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instead of?</td>
<td>Being caged up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scoping group 3, Manchester

A number of participants were quick to link organic produce to a perception of higher prices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q:</th>
<th>W:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Things like ‘fair trade’, ‘organic’ – are those things... that really influence you in terms of labelling?</td>
<td>Fair trade, organic to a certain degree but then the cost element does come in to the organic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group 10, Reading

It was also common to link organic food with locally sourced food, despite there being no reason to expect produce to be organic simply by virtue of having been grown locally, or vice versa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>W:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think ‘locally sourced’ is better, because... it is quite a buzz word too at the moment isn’t it, people are getting an organic way of eating.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group 1, Croydon

We believe that this is interesting when considered alongside other terms such as ‘seasonal’, since it suggests that some participants are increasingly aware of the multiple environmental and ethical issues thrown up by food, and that moreover, there may be some form of ‘conceptual seepage’ between the different terms.
Peat free

Linked to: None

Overview: Despite an imperfect understanding of the term, particularly among non-gardeners, participants generally saw ‘peat free’ compost as a good thing. There were no negative responses to the term.

Responses to this term were generally determined by people’s gardening habits – it was rare for non-gardeners to have any awareness of the phrase. Even among gardeners, however, awareness of why compost made from peat might be an issue was patchy at best and some had only a vague notion of what peat actually was.

Q: Is it good? What does it mean?
W: I never know, I buy it and I don’t know...
M: ...I always thought it... had something to do with moss...
W: I thought it helps break up sort of the soil.
W: Yes, the lime, the PH levels in the lime.

The word ‘free’ was picked up on by participants in one group, who saw it as a clear indication that compost with peat content is a bad thing. Peat use was often believed to be bad because of its value as a relatively rare wildlife habitat that had taken millions of years to develop, and there was little mention of carbon impacts. Nonetheless, these assumptions seemed to be sufficiently persuasive to leave participants feeling that buying peat free compost would be a good thing:

M: It sounds good...
W: It only sounds good because it says ‘free’...
W: Not supposed to be in there.

Group 2, Croydon
Plastics neutral

Linked to: carbon neutral, water neutral, recycled, recyclable

Overview: ‘Plastics neutral’ was seen as counterintuitive by many participants, who interpreted ‘neutral’ as meaning ‘free from’. There were signs, however, that a few participants were able to make sense of the term by linking it to other terms such as ‘carbon neutral’ and we believe it is possible that, were both terms to become more familiar to people, they might begin to feel they make more sense.

When tested in isolation in the discussion groups, ‘plastics neutral’ caused considerable confusion, in large part due to a perception, discussed in more detail in the main report, that ‘neutral’ meant ‘free from’. As a result, many participants initially guessed that the term meant a product was ‘plastics free’.

**M:** ‘Plastic neutral’ – again I am assuming no plastics.

Group 1, Croydon

Even when provided with supplementary detail, some participants still had problems with the concept, arguing that if plastic had to be manufactured in the first place, a product made from plastic could never be ‘plastics neutral’.

When the term was used in the context of a specific product, some discussion group participants guessed that ‘plastics neutral’ meant the packaging had been made from recycled plastic.

**W:** ...One is assuming that it is recycled plastic, am I right?

Group 12, Reading

Some participants also seemed to find it useful to link the phrase to the term ‘carbon neutral’ in order to make sense of it, but this was dependent upon them having a good understanding of carbon offsetting (there is more on this type of ‘internal dependency’ in the main report).

**M:** Well if you are carbon neutral that means... what you are producing, you are saving with more, by planting more trees or whatever. So it must be the same sort of concept with plastic.

Group 12, Reading

Others still struggled, however, and the phrase could certainly not be said to have had an intuitive meaning for participants.
Consumer understanding of green terms – a supplementary report on consumer responses to specific green terms

Recyclable, recycled

**Linked to:** recycled, biodegradable, plastics neutral, zero waste, landfill

**Quantitative findings:** Figure 13

**Overview:** Research participants considered ‘recyclable’ and ‘recycled’ to be the most meaningful of the terms tested, and those who took part in the discussion groups seem to clearly differentiate between the two words.

‘Recyclable’ (together with ‘recycled’, covered below) was regarded by many discussion group participants as one of the most meaningful terms tested and it emerged as the most meaningful of the terms tested in the online survey. The term was also used in the groups regularly, unprompted, with reference to particular products and labels. Among survey respondents, 94% said they were either very familiar or fairly familiar with ‘recyclable’ and 92% claimed the term was either very meaningful or fairly meaningful.

**Figure 13 – Quantitative findings: ‘recyclable’**

(Base: 2,019)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familiar</th>
<th>Meaningful</th>
<th>Use in purchasing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very familiar</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly familiar</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have heard of before but not very familiar</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have heard of before but not at all familiar</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have never heard this term before</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very meaningful</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly meaningful</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very meaningful</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all meaningful</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always use</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often use</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use occasionally</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use much</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use at all</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As with ‘recyclable’, discussion group participants were completely comfortable using the term ‘recycled’. Some noted the speed with which the phrase had entered the popular consciousness.

**M:** *It is like anything – all this recycling. Going back 15 years, people never recycled anything really. But then… once you start educating people and give them a choice to make, then they make that choice.*

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Group 7, Bexleyheath

Given the UK’s now extensive kerbside recycling coverage, none of this is all that surprising. What was perhaps more unexpected were the large numbers of respondents who claimed to always or often make use of the term ‘recyclable’ when making purchasing decisions – almost two thirds (65%). When we explored responses to recycling labels in the groups (covered in a separate supplementary report), participants appeared to be more likely to use the information the labels provided when disposing of packaging (to look to see if something
is recyclable), rather than at the point of sale. It may be that survey respondents overlooked the ‘when purchasing’ element of the question and simply answered according to whether they would ever make use of the term.

Equally, some survey respondents may have treated the term ‘recyclable’ as if it covered anything relating to recycling, effectively seeing it as a catch all for both ‘recyclable’ and ‘recycled’. Research conducted for WRAP by GfK NOP in January 2010\(^\text{19}\) suggested that 35% of people would be more likely to buy food and drink if the packaging was made out of recycled material. This said, the qualitative research that accompanied the WRAP survey found that, “ultimately, consumers buy what they want, irrespective of the packaging” (even among committed recyclers). This in turn suggests that the responses in both the WRAP survey and own survey for this research may have been subject to some over-claiming.

Evidence from the discussion groups casts further doubt on this hypothesis, however. One of the most interesting aspects of group participants’ responses to ‘recycled’ and ‘recyclable’ was the way in which they switched between them, applying them correctly depending on the context.

\begin{quote}
\textbf{M:} I suppose all bottles are recyclable anyway. That is why you have bottle bins.
\textbf{M:} A recycled plastic bottle, how does that become neutral, is it neutral because it has been recycled?
\textbf{M:} Everything is recyclable, that is why you have big recycling plants.
\end{quote}

\textit{Group 6, Watford}

Such exchanges suggest that participants were well aware of the distinctions between the two terms, and this in turn makes it less likely that survey respondents would have treated ‘recyclable’ as though it covered both. Further research may be need to bottom this out.

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\(^{19}\) WRAP (2010) Consumer attitudes to recycled content – consumer research results presentation
Refashioned

Linked to: recycled

**Overview:** Responses to ‘refashioned’ were generally negative, but the term was not tested in the context of a claim or particular product, and it may be that changing attitudes towards reuse could see reactions to the term improving in the future.

Responses to the term ‘refashioned’ were almost universally negative. Many participants picked up on the word ‘fashion’, so that their attempts to derive meaning from the term tended to focus on clothing.

For a few, ‘refashioned’ seemed to epitomise a tendency for marketers to invent new terms to find a new way of selling established products.

**M:** *It suggests that there’s not an element of honesty behind it I guess. ‘Fashion’ sort of says to me, it’s still doing the same thing but we’ll colour it green. Green band it, just keep going as we are, people will buy into it.*

Group 3, Croydon

A few participants did eventually conclude that ‘refashioned’ probably referred to reuse, but this was only after lengthy consideration and it seems unlikely that the phrase would have been given this much thought had they encountered it outside the context of a discussion group.

**M:** *Maybe refashioning your clothes or something, or... redoing them differently so you don’t throw them away.*

**W:** *Doesn’t it just mean reusing it?

**M:** *Yes.*

**W:** *Reusing things.*

Group 1, Croydon

It should be noted, however, that we did not test ‘refashioned’ in the context of a general claim, and it is possible that being linked to a specific product may have made the term more intuitive. It would be particularly interesting to have had time to explore reactions to the term when used in association with non-clothing products such as electrical items or furniture. As waste policy increasingly focuses on prevention and reuse becomes a more prominent behaviour, it may be worth monitoring consumer responses to ‘refashioned’ become less hostile.
Seasonal

Linked to: local, food miles

Overview: When used in the context of food, ‘seasonal’ was well understood by participants, who linked it to buying local food.

‘Seasonal’ was considered to be too broad to be meaningful when tested on its own in the discussion groups, but when placed in the context of food, most people appeared to understand and relate to the term. As one participant put it:

W: **It’s only buying strawberries in the summer, not at Christmas.**

Group 1, Croydon

As participants connected ‘local’ with ‘seasonal’, so too they connected ‘seasonal’ with ‘local’.

W: **In Sainsbury’s and places like that they are now saying, you know, locally sourced fruit and veg. And obviously fruit and veg are seasonal.**

Group 3, Croydon

And just as [some] discussion group participants identified trade-offs with buying seasonal and local goods when it came to fair trade products, so when considering ‘seasonal’ they drew attention to the trade-offs in the other direction.

W: **So if we only ate seasonal vegetables it would go a long way to encouraging the use of people flying all these produce in.**

W: **But then on the same hand people are encouraging fair trade aren’t they. So I suppose it is 50/50 isn’t it, which one you are going to help?**

Group 3, Croydon

For more comment on the linkages between seasonal food and other food-related attitudes and values, see the sections on ‘food miles’ (page 31), ‘local’ (page 38) and ‘organic’ (page 46).
**Slow travel**

Linked to: None

**Overview:** This phrase was unknown to discussion group participants and they generally reacted negatively to it, possibly because of negative connotations associated with the word ‘slow’. It is possible that an alternative term that better captures the positive aspects of more leisurely modes of travel might well perform better.

No discussion group participants had heard the phrase ‘slow travel’ used in relation to environmental issues and, in the absence of a better explanation, most tended to interpret the phrase literally.

Q: ‘Slow travel’, what does anyone make of this one?
M: Buses.
M: I would say public transport.
Q: Public transport?
W: Even driving slowly.

---

Group 2, Croydon

Most said the phrase had little meaning for them, mainly because they were preoccupied with shorter, everyday journeys rather than longer trips. As a result, the term drew allusions to horses and carts or, more often, walking and cycling. These references were often made with cynical overtones, with participants appearing to consider transfer to slower means of transport to be a backward step:

W: It is probably by road rather than by air, but you know what, that is terrible.
M: By donkey.

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Group 6, Watford

This isn’t to say that participants were necessarily opposed to the idea of journeys – particularly long distance journeys – being carried out at a more leisurely pace. Rather, the responses in the discussion groups simply suggested that the positive benefits associated with this type of behaviour, such as lack of stress or greater opportunities to see places en route, weren’t conveyed by the term ‘slow travel’ and that the negative connotations of ‘slow’ took precedence.
Smart meter

Linked to: Energy efficient

Overview: For those who are aware of smart meters, the label seems to be understood and logical, but it has little intuitive meaning for those who are less familiar with the concept.

Quite a few discussion group participants were aware of smart meters and gave reasonably accurate explanations of what they might be.

M: *Something that knows... how much gas you are using, how much electricity you are using.*

Group 5, Watford

Awareness of the term seemed to be linked to the greater prominence given to smart meters by energy companies and other promotions.

M: *Isn’t EON doing an advert on TV?*

W: *Yes they are yes.*

Group 6, Watford

At the time of the research (early 2010), the people who had never heard of smart meters outnumbered those who had, and when questioned about possible meanings, they often struggled to come up with a definition. Interestingly, one participant had had a smart meter fitted by her housing authority the week the group ran, but was unaware that it might be called a ‘smart meter’.

There were no noticeable differences in responses to ‘smart meter’ between groups recruited from different environmental segments, though it is worth reiterating that the groups were qualitative in nature and should not be considered representative of the wider population.
Sustainable, sustainable fish, sustainably sourced, sustainable living

Linked to: eco-friendly, environmentally friendly, green, ecological

Quantitative findings (sustainable): Figure 14

Overview: Many group participants interpreted ‘sustainable’ to literally mean ‘capable of being replenished’ and as a result, the term caused confusion when used in relation to products that didn’t sit comfortably with this definition, such as ‘sustainable bank account’.

'\textit{Sustainable living} as a lifestyle description

The online survey tested responses a number of phrases as descriptions of green lifestyles. The results for ‘sustainable living’ were as follows: 12% very familiar; 27% fairly familiar; 28% have heard of but not very familiar; 19% have heard of but not at all familiar; 14% have never heard this term before. 23% particularly like the phrase as a lifestyle descriptor; 9% particularly dislike it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familiar</th>
<th>Meaningful</th>
<th>Use in purchasing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very familiar</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly familiar</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have heard of before but not very familiar</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have heard of before but not at all familiar</td>
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<td>Have never heard this term before</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very meaningful</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fairly meaningful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not very meaningful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not at all meaningful</td>
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<td>Always use</td>
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<td>Use occasionally</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use much</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use at all</td>
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<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most discussion group participants said they found the term ‘sustainable’ confusing when tested in isolation. Rather than connecting it with the environmental definition that evolved from the phrase ‘sustainable development’ in the 1987 Brundtland report\textsuperscript{20}, many interpreted it literally as meaning ‘capable of being replenished or sustained’.

\textbf{W:} \textit{Number three [sustainable] is the most vague.}

\textsuperscript{20} “\textit{Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs}” – World Commission on Environment & Development (1987) Our common future
**W:**  
Yes, it doesn’t mean anything really. “More sustainable” means ongoing.

This was also true when the word was linked to products that participants did not see as being naturally replenished if properly managed, suggesting that, rather than treating ‘sustainable’ simply as another word for ‘green’, participants’ understanding of the term was rather narrower and more literal.

When tested in the online survey, however (also in isolation), the term fared better, with three quarters of respondents (74%) claiming they found it either very meaningful or fairly meaningful. This may well be because many took the word at face value – one which they understood, and so judged it to be meaningful, unaware of the intended pro-environmental subtext. In that case, it may be that the context of an environmental claim actually makes the word more difficult to understand, particularly if linked to a product or resource they see as incapable of being replenished – a sustainable television, for example.

On the flipside, when the term ‘sustainable’ was linked to fish, in most of the groups it became notably more meaningful than it had been when tested in isolation. It seems likely that this was because:

- Some participants were aware that diminishing fish stocks were a problem, possibly due to well publicised campaigns around cod, for example; and
- This awareness of a dwindling resource meshes with the very literal understanding of the word ‘sustainable’ exhibited by many discussion group participants.

Some participants still struggled, however. This seemed to be because the phrase was still not specific enough for their literal interpretation of the word ‘sustainable’ – it is not the individual fish that are being sustained if you buy sustainable fish, but rather fish as a total resource.

This further demonstrates how the specific nature of the context within which a term is used can impact upon how meaningful that use is to consumers. This was supported further when we explored links between green terms and particular products. The term ‘sustainably sourced’ performed better in the discussion groups than either the terms ‘sustainable’ or ‘sustainable fish’. Many considered the phrase to be intuitive and straightforward.

**Q:** What do you think of ‘sustainably sourced’?

**M:** That comes back down to people putting back what they have just taken out.

This appeared to be because, used in this way, the word ‘sustainably’ came closest to the meaning participants themselves understood.

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21 Note that the research took place before Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s ‘Fish Fight’ campaign, launched in January 2011, which had succeeded in gathering 658,000 petition signatures by early March 2011.
Water footprint

Linked to: carbon footprint, water neutral, water offsetting

Quantitative findings: Figure 15

Overview: The term lacked meaning for participants when tested in isolation, but made more sense to them when used in the context of a product that uses a lot of water. There was little sense of participants considering life cycle water impacts in relation to the term.

Discussion group participants frequently made an assumption that ‘water footprint’ related to water ‘use’, largely based on their knowledge of the term ‘carbon footprint’ (see page 11). This intuitive understanding more often than not cropped up when the term was used in context, in relation to a water-using product.

M: I can’t see how it would reduce the ‘water footprint’, is that just because it is using less water?
W: Could be.
M: I think that is all I suppose, because less water if there is steam.

Figure 15 – Quantitative findings: ‘water footprint’

(Base: 2,019)

The term performed less well when tested in isolation in both the online survey (Figure 15) and the discussion groups. Survey responses were broadly similar across different environmental segments, with between 12% and 17% of respondents from the waste watcher, concerned consumer, sideline supporter, cautious participant and honestly disengaged segments claiming to find ‘water footprint’ meaningful. The exceptions were positive greens (21% said the term was meaningful) and stalled starters (33%) of whom said the term was meaningful. It would take further research to explore the reasons for this.
Regardless of context, there were few signs that research participants expected the term to relate to anything other than water used directly in the use of a product, and no mention of wider lifecycle impacts. That said, this may be because the term was only tested in relation to washing machines – a product most respondents would have associated with direct water use. It is possible that reactions might have been different had we tried using the term alongside products with fairly low usage footprints but higher production footprints – soft drinks, for example.

Some discussion group participants also raised questions about water use being a significant environmental problem and whether consumers could do much about it, though this was restricted to one or two groups.

M: I assume ‘water footprint’ is like ‘carbon footprint’, water you’re using, but because not everyone is on a meter it’s pretty difficult to tell what we’re using.

Group 12, Reading
Water neutral

Linked to: carbon neutral, water footprint, water offsetting

Overview: Participants struggled with this term on two counts. First, when linking it to ‘carbon neutral’, they found it difficult to see why anyone would want to ‘neutralise’ water. Second, the minority of participants that identified a link to lifecycle water impacts expressed confusion about how these impacts might be compensated for in order to achieve neutrality.

There was a sense from some discussion group participants that ‘water neutral’ was illogical or counterintuitive because water, unlike carbon, wasn’t something ‘bad’ that needed to be ‘neutralised’.

M: Shouldn’t water be neutral anyway? Water should be neutral anyway.
Q: In what way?
M: It’s water, it’s clean basically.

Group 3, Croydon

Other participants – particularly those in the more environmentally engaged groups – made a connection with ‘carbon neutral’, but in this respect, ‘water neutral’ was in stark contrast to ‘water footprint’. With the latter, discussion group respondents were able to link the phrase to another term (‘carbon footprint’) to give it meaning. When they tried to do this with ‘water neutral’, linking it to ‘carbon neutral’, the connection seemed to make less sense.

M: I was thinking along the ‘carbon neutral’ lines.
M: That wouldn’t influence me at all on anything, I just haven’t got a clue what it means.
M: It wouldn’t mean a thing.

Group 8, Bexleyheath

In only a few cases did participants (in the more environmentally engaged groups) establish a link to lifecycle impacts, but they still struggled to see how those impacts might be ‘neutralised’. In one group, the discussion led participants to focus on two areas. First, they speculated that the term might imply that a product reused or recycled grey water, rather than constantly requiring fresh water. Second, they suggested that it might imply the collection of rain water to flush toilets rather than using water from the mains. In neither case, however, did participants seem to feel comfortable with these explanations.
Water offsetting

Linked to: carbon offsetting, water footprint, water neutral

Overview: As with ‘water neutral’, this phrase was considered counterintuitive. Even when the concept was explained, group participants struggled with the notion that you could somehow compensate for the water impacts of a product.

As with ‘water neutral’, participants in all the groups in which ‘water offsetting’ was tested struggled to come up with a definition for the term, sometimes focusing on grey water recycling or trying to link it with energy.

W: Is that like when you reuse water so like waste water or something?... So you might then turn the water into something else, into another form of energy like I don’t know, a water wheel that would then power a turbine or something else.

Group 12, Reading

Possibly because ‘offsetting’ conjured up notions of water being displaced, some participants linked the term to water efficiency measures in the home.

M: Just using less water... A brick in your toilet...

Group 6, Watford

Even when group participants tried to make sense of the term by linking it to ‘carbon offsetting’, it had little traction and, with the exception of a few participants in the more environmentally engaged groups, there were no references to lifecycle water impacts.

It is worth noting that discussion group participants often continued to struggle with the notion of water offsetting even when it was explained to them, suggesting that the concept itself may be difficult to ‘sell’ to consumers without a greater awareness of the issues surrounding product lifecycles in general.

M: “Helping to conserve seven of the world’s most critical freshwater river basins.”

M: It is a bit of an amount to take in.

M: And can you conserve, when you get a drought, the water shortage in this country, they can conserve by rationing water. But I can’t accept that as believable and that doesn’t mean anything to me.

Group 8, Bexleyheath
Well-being

Most people interpreted ‘wellbeing’ to mean something along the lines of:

*W:*  
*It [is] about individuals’ personal, physical and mental health.*  

Group 4, Watford

A few participants in one of the group discussions did also infer a more general sense of the word applying to all of humankind, including future generations, though this was a minority view. There was also a suggestion that well-being was associated with a sense of achievement at having carried out certain pro-environmental behaviours, although whether this would have been highlighted had the groups not been so obviously concerned about environmental issues is open to question.

*W:*  
*Just feel good about yourself, the little bits you do, even if it is only little bits for the environment, whatever you do is going to help.*

Group 3, Croydon
Consumer understanding of green terms – a supplementary report on consumer responses to specific green terms

Zero carbon

Linked to: carbon footprint, carbon neutral, low carbon, carbon negative, CO₂, emissions, climate change

Quantitative findings: Figure 16

Overview: Many group participants seemed to consider ‘zero carbon’ to have intuitive meaning, though those with a greater awareness of lifecycle impacts sometimes questioned the feasibility of the concept.

Some participants suggested they had heard the phrase ‘zero carbon’ before, and this sense of familiarity with the term was also reflected in the online survey; almost half of respondents (46%) claimed ‘zero carbon’ was either very familiar or fairly familiar to them.

Figure 16 – Quantitative findings: ‘zero carbon’

(Base: 2,019)

There was a tendency to associate ‘zero carbon’ with electric cars, probably born of a sense that a ‘zero carbon’ product would not produce direct emissions (i.e. fumes). Participants in at least one group were also aware of the term’s use in relation to housing:

M: Well there is a housing estate in Cambridge that has been built on zero carbon principles.

Group 1, Croydon

A few group participants expressed doubt as to whether the concept of ‘zero carbon’ was workable. This tended to come up in the more engaged groups, possibly because the participants had a greater awareness of the lifecycle impacts of products.

W: I have heard of it but I don’t... Nobody can be ‘zero carbon’, can they?

Group 1, Croydon
Tellingly, though, in contrast with terms that required some understanding of offsetting (e.g. ‘carbon neutral’), respondents with varying levels of environmental engagement and across a number of groups and said the term was, “quite self explanatory” (Group 1, Croydon). The following quote, for example, comes from group 9, which was made up of participants classed as honestly disengaged or stalled starters.

*W:* *‘Zero carbon’ sounds pretty meaningful I think.*

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Group 9, Bexleyheath

We hypothesise that this reaction actually diminishes as awareness of lifecycle impacts increases.
Zero waste

Linked to: Recycling, biodegradable, recyclable

Overview: Some participants seemed to intuitively understand that ‘zero waste’ related to the amount of waste sent to landfill, though their awareness of how this might be achieved was often limited to recycling. Others interpreted the term more literally as meaning no waste is generated at all, and questioned whether this would ever be possible.

There was some awareness of the phrase ‘zero waste’ in the Croydon groups due to use of the term by the local authority. In all of the groups in which it was tested, some respondents claimed to have an intuitive sense of what the term might mean.

Although no participants explicitly related ‘zero waste’ to volumes of waste being sent to landfill, they often interpreted the term to mean ‘recycling everything’.

M: I think local authorities aspire, when it comes to refuse, they aspire to having ‘zero waste’. In other words they want everything that is thrown out recycled in some way or another.

Group 1, Croydon

Although references to waste prevention behaviours were rare, the ‘recycling everything’ definition did imply that nothing goes to landfill, so it seems likely that some participants’ intuitive interpretation of ‘zero waste’ is reasonably accurate, despite the fact that their awareness of the means by which this could be achieved was imperfect.

Other participants, however, assumed that ‘zero waste’ meant generating no waste at all, and questioned whether this would be possible.

M: Would it be practical though?

Group 1, Croydon

It may be that broadening the phrase to ‘zero waste to landfill’ would rectify this.