

# Are you really eco-conscious?



In the first of a series of pieces for *First Voice* from MEPs,

## Caroline Lucas, leader of the Green Party, offers her top 10 environmentally-friendly tips for small businesses

In busy workplaces, environmental concerns can often be brushed under the carpet – or else condensed into a few token words and tacked on to the end of the company strategy. But if we are to really protect ourselves and the planet from the worst effects of climate change and environmental degradation, it is crucial we make positive changes to our workplace practices.

While small businesses tend to pollute less than larger enterprises, improvements can still be made. By making the right changes in your office, workshop, factory or garage, you can save your business money on maintenance and energy costs, as well as vastly improve your image as a genuinely eco-conscious organisation.

To ensure support for green action, employees should be encouraged to come up with new eco-ideas and energy-saving measures. And once some progress has been made with green initiatives, you can use this success to build momentum for more ambitious plans.

While it is vital that businesses and individuals make efforts to improve the sustainability of their work and home environments, the government must ultimately take the lead. By lobbying ministers for a more ambitious climate policy, which commits to tough targets and adequately promotes the renewable energy sector, businesses can play a key role in ensuring the UK is at the forefront of global action on climate change.

Here are my top tips for businesses to cut carbon emissions, reduce energy bills and generally make small business workplaces more sustainable.

### 1. Appoint an environmental representative

Trade unions have championed this idea as a great way to deliver greener workplaces through agreements between employers, employees and unions. In the European Parliament, Green MEPs have been fighting for green trade union reps to be given the same legal status in the workplace as health and safety reps. Employers should free up time for these green reps to take part in relevant training, and carry out workplace environmental audits and other duties.

### 2. Get an energy audit

The Carbon Trust will carry out a free energy survey for any business with energy bills over £50,000 per year. Its experts can suggest a range of low-cost measures to improve energy efficiency, and you can find online tools and affordable ideas on the Trust's website.

### 3. Find ways to make your workplace more energy-efficient

Subscribe to a green energy provider and reduce the use of printers by encouraging employees to add a footnote to emails saying 'Think green: please only print this email if absolutely necessary'.

### 4. Use video and phone conferencing

To save money on travel and reduce carbon emissions, hold meetings between different offices via video link or by phone. Video conferencing technology has come on in leaps and bounds from the early days of unwieldy and expensive equipment, and communications networks are better and more affordable than ever.

### 5. Provide incentives for travelling to work by bike, public transport or on foot

Make it easier for employees by providing monthly travel cards for public transport, putting in bike parking and a shower, and offering company bikes. Promoting cycling and walking to work is also an obvious way of improving employees' fitness and wellbeing. Prioritising rail travel for business trips should be easy, given that business train travel is comfortable and allows for telephone use and, often, internet access.

### 6. Join a car-share initiative

Company cars travel twice as far as private cars and can cost a great deal, so why not use a car-share company to provide pool cars instead? You can use incentives to encourage employees to take up this greener choice, such as reserved parking spaces.

### 7. Control the temperature

If your office has an air conditioning or heating system, make sure the settings are right for the season. For workplaces without air conditioning, open windows strategically in summer to encourage a good flow of air. Open spaces such as garages or outside workshops can be heated in winter using infra-red, directional lamps.

### 8. Allow employees to work from home

Few people work at home regularly but many of us could work at least some of the time away from the office. Fewer people travelling to their office means fewer cars on the road – meaning less pollution and less congestion at peak times.

### 9. Small changes can make a big difference

Recycle all toner cartridges, paper, card, plastic bottles, cans and glass. Buy as many office supplies as you can from local independent shops or specialist green stationery providers – they are often no more expensive than from better-known companies. Use environmentally friendly cleaning materials and source catering locally.

### 10. Think long-term

When refurbishing a workplace, put in place energy-saving measures such as double-glazing or more efficient light fittings. By installing energy-saving fluorescent tubes and lightbulbs to illuminate your workplace, you can save money on maintenance and electricity bills. Ensure that saving energy, reducing carbon emissions and reducing waste are priorities in any long-term company strategy.

