Sustainability first

Personal Perspective

The independent charity and think tank shaping policy, regulatory and company agendas for UK utilities – to deliver social, environmental and economic wellbeing

Building from the corona crisis to a sustainable future
Rose O'Neill

Rose O'Neill: Principal Specialist for People and the Environment, Natural England.

Please could you tell us a bit about yourself and your background? I am principal specialist for People and the Environment, at Natural England. My role there is to oversee social science in the chief science directorate. My background is in behavioural sciences and I'm quite interested in how to apply behavioural and social sciences to the environmental and nature conservation problems that we have. At Natural England our social research is really broad and at the moment we've been concentrating on public attitudes and behaviours in relation to the environment, during the COVID pandemic. We've recently started publishing official statistics around how the nation is using the natural environment as a way of coping at this time.

I first started working with Sustainability First though when I was at WWF, when I used to run the rivers program there. Water and rivers are my real love, so I was really interested to come into this competition to see how people would think about water in the context of a green recovery.

How do we ensure that a post covid recovery is smart, fair and green? One of the things I've been thinking about is that, although this is a global pandemic and everyone's experiences of the pandemic are different, I really like the analogy that it's not so much that we're all in the same boat, but we're all in the same storm. How COVID-19 is impacting people's health, but also how lock down and the other associated impacts of COVID-19 are affecting people's mental health, their wellbeing, their economic position, their access to nature, that will all be different for different people. So I think one of the things that I'm really interested in is making sure that a smart, fair and green recovery really reflects the fact that there's no one experience.

We need to make sure that we think about the differences across the population and that's particularly important because there were already inequalities, especially around health, but also in people's experiences of the environment. They did exist before COVID, and now they're manifesting in a deeper way and inequalities are widening. It's so important to think about that diversity, especially

because we know that the environmental sector is one of the least diverse sectors in the UK. It's really important for us as a sector to challenge ourselves, to think about the diversity of experience under COVID and bring views from different people, of different ages and backgrounds and ethnicities into our thinking.

How do government policy, regulation & institutions need to change for a more sustainable future? One of the things that I really enjoyed about the essays that I read as a judge for the Sustainability First Essay Prize was the fact that there's so much potential. There were so many ideas, both in order to rebuild and recover both the economy, but also people's health, in a way that really starts to tackle the climate and biodiversity crisis on a scale that's needed. The upswell in ideas and research is encouraging. There has been a shift in thinking to consider what the art of the possible is. Even before Covid-19 there was a sense of a movement building, with the number of people thinking about the environment at a 30 year high. I think this has continued despite Covid-19, with a real demand from the public for a change in the social contract, especially with the ongoing Black Lives Matter protest. For me, this is a real takeaway. We need to make sure regulators and companies are in tune, that they are listening and that they are responding to this expectation for change.

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The other thing that I think has been interesting is the way that some companies have really shown leadership. We've had both Unilever and BP make business responses because of the changing context around COVID, but also because there's this idea that they need to accelerate some of their sustainability and climate commitments. There's a role for regulators to keep abreast of that best practice and really push that agenda. One of the themes for me around the essays that came across was this idea of conditionality. That we need to make sure that all of the state support for

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the private sector is conditional on mandatory requirements for the climate, for example. The idea that we can direct investment or steer markets to accelerate particular programs is also an area for regulators to provide leadership in terms of a green recovery.

What does business leadership, governance and practice need to look like in a sustainable world?
One of the essays in the shortlist mentioned the idea about representation on boards. A sustainability representative, a customer, or even better a citizen representative to sit on the board of companies. This sort of thing was happening before Covid, but hopefully we'll see an acceleration of that. It goes back to the point about listening and understanding the diversity of views around an issue. This is only a starting point, however. Companies shouldn't be aiming to find a perfect person who represents all interests, because that person doesn't exist. It's also important that we don't just recruit one new person onto a board and continue having conversations in the same way that has always happened. We must change boards to listen to more diverse perspectives and have different sets of discussions.

Perhaps a climate assembly, or a process based on dialogue where issues are explored in a representative and diverse way, which are then brought to boards, could work.

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