House of Lords Covid-19 Committee – Life Beyond Covid
Sustainability First Evidence

Sustainability First is an independent think tank and charity focused on promoting economic, social and environmental wellbeing in public utilities.

Our response draws on 20 years of deep expertise in consumer issues (engagement, vulnerability, data, behaviour change etc), policy and regulation (innovation, price controls, incentive frameworks etc) and business leadership and practice (governance, infrastructure investment etc).

This submission crucially also reflects some of the over 1,200 entries that we received in our recent Essay and Art Competitions on the question '**How do we build from the corona crisis towards a sustainable future?'** Judged by two independent eminent panels, these entries from university students, early stage researchers and artists provide compelling visions as to how to enact change when dealing with radical uncertainty. They demonstrate a powerful sense of urgency, hope and expectation that sustainability, equity and resilience are embedded in the recovery from this pandemic. This is what we mean by 'build back better'.

We are submitting evidence to the Committee as we consider our expertise in sustainability and essential services such as utilities, and the wider 'crowd-sourced' ideas from our recent competitions, provide important insights into how to ensure the recovery from the pandemic can deliver socially, environmentally and economically beneficial outcomes – short and long-term.

Re-iterated by industry experts and academics, working towards a sustainable future is the "only way out of the pandemic that can ensure a habitable planet and an equitable humanity" – *Tim O'Riordan, Emeritus Professor of Environmental Science, UEA.*

Our full set of policy recommendations and key themes from the work of our competition entrants – plus the short-listed art works - can be found in our virtual book[1] (launched on 27th July).

[1] https://www.sustainabilityfirst.org.uk/bridging-corona/virtual-book

Q - Are there any positives you would take from this pandemic?

Encouragingly, a recent survey commissioned by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, found that fewer than one in ten people wants a full return to our pre-Covid world[2], suggesting an appetite to learn from this crisis and to embed some of the positive personal, social and environmental changes which have emerged. Below are some positive proposals and ideas, which emerged most strongly from our competition entrants.

Well-being, community spirit and connection with nature - We can build on the positive societal changes seen as a result of the corona crisis – such as a wider focus on well-being, acts of kindness in communities, a renewed sense of connection to our local green spaces and appreciation of nature.

- Not only does a greater **connection to nature** deliver beneficial public health outcomes[3], it may also encourage longer-term pro-environmental behaviours[4]. Entrants in our competitions argued that these behaviours should also be encouraged post-Covid for their low-carbon value.
- When policymakers and businesses ask, 'What is in the public interest?' they need to consider well-being in the round. Identifying and focusing on mutual interests and 'cobenefits' – such as improved air quality from reduced traffic pollution – is important to ensure the risks and rewards from change are shared in a fair way.

Sustainable consumption and production - Businesses have been impacted by premises being closed in lockdown, social distancing requirements and disruption to supply chains.

- Though difficult, it has offered the opportunity and made apparent the need to develop more sustainable and resilient supply chains for the future. Many of the artists in the competition highlighted the impacts of high consumption and waste materials, including fast fashion, food waste and plastic pollution.
- Essay writers also considered supply chains, particularly for consumer goods – highlighting impacts on health, the environment and social exploitation. Future supply chains should focus on 'circular' business models – which design waste out of the system. Consumer awareness, labelling and education are also important to get behaviour change to stick long-term.

[2] Wood, 2020. *Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirusuk-lockdown-end-poll-environment-food-health-fitness-social-community-a9469736.html

[3] *BMJ* 2020; 369 doi: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1557 (Published 27 April 2020).

[4] Graver, B., Zhang, K. and Rutherford, D., 2019. CO2 Emissions from Commercial Aviation, 2018. https://theicct.org/sites/default/files/publications/ICCT_CO2-commercl-aviation2018_20190918.pdf

Sustainable Transport - The corona crisis has changed the way people travel, avoiding unnecessary journeys, walking and cycling where possible, using cars instead of public transport.

- The lockdown led to a significant reduction in traffic-related pollution. Government can leverage some of these positive behavioural changes and encourage active transport by prioritising investment in pedestrian and cycle paths, instead of new roads. However, Government need to carry out impact assessments to assess unequal exposure to risk in terms of travel choices as we emerge from the pandemic.

Flexible and homeworking practices - The crisis has accelerated a shift to homeworking, which has brought benefits, including to the environment; reducing stressful commuting times, travel costs and pollution.

- More distributed business models may increase access to talent pools for employee recruitment and improve access to jobs for those not in commuting distance of major cities, therefore helping to reduce regional inequalities.
- Some staff will welcome this greater flexibility; others may struggle to put this into practice (e.g. those in overcrowded accommodation) or to maintain work–life balance when the boundaries are blurred.
- There is an opportunity for businesses to continue offering this flexibility postcorona, so long as they support their staff by understanding and addressing the inequalities and other impacts and costs of homeworking. This includes ensuring staff members have access to broadband and adequate cyber-security and addressing home running costs (particularly heat in the winter).

Representative public engagement and participation - New ways of communicating online make technology-facilitated mass participation possible.

- The pandemic has demonstrated how we can communicate remotely; in some ways this has been democratising. We can take this opportunity to give people a stronger voice and sense of agency in decisions affecting their futures. This is essential to build trust and confidence in decision-making in a dynamic and disrupted world. However, the involvement of those who do not have internet access and capability needs urgent attention if digitisation is not to further exacerbate inequalities and erode democracy medium to long-term.
- This can be done through community-based listening circles across the UK, feeding into larger-scale, representational Citizens Assemblies. These can build on the work of existing Climate Assemblies and focus on the impacts of Covid-19 in terms of equality and the need for tax and welfare reform.

Q - What are the things that you are most worried about?

Redefining value and developing sustainability metrics, or business as usual – The concern is that the misery caused by coronavirus will not be enough to catalyse a national rethink in

focus beyond economic growth and gross domestic product to take account of wider definitions of value.

- Many of the essayists and judges argued that policymakers and regulators need a new set of national indicators and metrics that measure social, environmental and economic outcomes, along with wider health and well-being. Some essay entrants suggested bringing public health into the definition of sustainability, to strengthen the arguments for these new indicators. We will be producing a discussion paper on sustainability metrics at the start of September. Without new ways of measuring value, there is a risk that the 'build back' from the pandemic will not be resilient into the longer-term.
- Certainly the public health implications for prevention of Covid-19 and corresponding reductions in air pollution represent a positive synergy, otherwise known as a **mutual or co-benefit**. Shorter-term co-benefits might also extend to the energy sector, which could use this period for radical energy efficiency retrofit programmes and to test demand side control and smart-metering initiatives, while people spend more time at home. But is the focus on other measures of value: wellbeing, health and resilience, widespread enough to realise the benefits of these interconnections and catalyse change?

Social justice and inequality – Without an appropriate response, the structural inequalities which have been further exposed and accentuated by the Covid-19 crisis, may be entrenched further.

- Equality sits at the heart of a sustainable, resilient society. As one of our short-listed artists said: 'The overwhelming number of events this year are a cascade of interconnected crises; we need to see a climate movement that is more intersectional'; this means understanding how social and political identities (such as race, class, gender, sexuality and disability) might combine to create systems of privilege, discrimination or disadvantage.
- Other essayists suggest tax and welfare reform are necessary to address aspects of disadvantage and unequal impacts. This will require public engagement and institutional change at all levels – local, regional, national and global. Citizens Assemblies could help deliver a fair and acceptable outcome on tax and welfare reform, considering proposals and advising policymakers on the implications and unintended consequences of different approaches. For social justice to be meaningful, decision-making needs to be open, inclusive and representative of diverse communities.

National and regional decision making - The coronavirus has impacted communities and geographies differently. Climate change is further exacerbating some of these impacts.

- While recognising that some issues require a national response, where appropriate, local regions should be empowered to do what is best for them, with adequate resources and power given to the devolved nations, and local and regional government and local leaders consulted on key strategic decisions (such as regulatory price reviews). This is essential for local leaders to be able to meet the needs of their areas and constituents.

- Listening circles and Citizens Assemblies are a key part of this change; they can help formulate local plans (for example, for health, housing, energy, water, waste, transport, communications etc.) and feed through into shaping national policy. These more participative 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' forms of engagement need to be brought together as part of a new social contract for a sustainable future. However, the reality is that local and regional government are facing a huge budgetary crisis. Will decision making powers and accompanying funding be distributed more evenly? And if not, can they really do more with less?

Educational reform, or lessons not learnt – Symptomatic of human pressure on the environment, coronavirus must be a call to action for reform of the national curriculum to include education on social justice, diversity and sustainability, with a central role for the creative arts in imagining and shaping a better world.

- Schools need to develop programmes to teach the next generation of citizens, politicians and business leaders the importance of social justice and diversity, the value of creativity, how their actions impact on sustainability and how to help drive systems change.
- Ideally this would engage the creativity of thought and debate needed to question and reimagine what resilient institutions and businesses in the twenty-first century might look like.
- Schools are already engaging with the UN Sustainable Development goals, UNESCO supports 'Education for Sustainable Development'[5] and Scotland already has a cross curricular approach called 'Learning for Sustainability' aimed at supporting students, teachers and schools to build a socially just, sustainable and equitable society[6]. This can be developed further to teach young people about how to enact change, understanding the interlinkages and trade-offs of environmental, social and economic issues, and on social justice.
- Calls for a more accurate depiction of British History to include colonialism, as called for in the wake of the BLM protests, should be heeded by the Department for education. Understanding the source of structural inequalities and the value of diversity will be the first step to delivering social justice and a more sustainable future.
- On both counts - sustainability and social justice -, there is an urgent need to instigate meaningful educational reform which will result in a more inclusive, supportive population, more resilient to future shocks, with future leaders, capable of the lateral, interdisciplinary thinking, needed to solve such global challenges.
- Sustainability First is planning a sustainability in education work programme in 2021.

[5] UNESCO roadmap for implementing the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000230514

[6] https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/scottish-education-system/policy-for-scottisheducation/policy-drivers/learning-for-sustainability/#:~:text=%E2%80%8BLearning%20for%20Sustainability%20is,just%2C%20sustainable%20and%20equitable%20society.

Q - What do you most hope changes for the better?

Smart, fair and green recovery package – In the near term, the Government's recovery package needs to be smart, fair and green. It will need to address social recovery and environmental resilience, as well as economic objectives.

- Government investment should be focused on smart and low-carbon industries and infrastructure – such as renewable heat, energy storage and full-fibre broadband – and climate adaptation (e.g. flood defences). This needs to be responsive to local needs yet strategic and joined up.
- Reskilling and training support are also needed for a post-Covid-19, net zero and digital/artificial intelligence world, particularly in areas that have been 'left behind'. Radical, local and cross-sector water and energy efficiency programmes can help deliver this. A number of essayists called for the retraining of people to work in green sectors – such as retrofitting homes and businesses to tackle and adapt to climate change; laying fibre optic broadband cables and ensuring cyber secure communications. Apprenticeships can help bridge the gap for young people and those changing careers and can help existing local businesses to innovate and train people in the skills of tomorrow. One essay prize finalist suggested the establishment of sustainable innovation hubs led by universities and facilitated by government.
- All government support and public procurement need to be conditional on addressing environmental goals and social inequalities (particularly those exacerbated by the pandemic, such as race, gender and people without access to broadband). This represents a huge opportunity to align a recovery with plans for a 'just transition' - to deliver a fair approach to decarbonisation and addressing climate change.

Redefining company purpose and utilising environmental, social and governance metrics (ESG) – That coronavirus has encouraged many businesses to question their purpose and contribution to society – and how their activities can deliver for people and the planet, in a profitable way, when it counts. Many businesses have had to adapt, due to coronavirus and many will have had to re-evaluate their resilience to future threats and disruption, such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

- Sustainability First recommends that businesses adopt a sustainable licence to operate approach[7]– integrating and embedding a focus on purpose and the long-term public interest in all their work.
- Essayists suggested that an increased focus on the use of ESG factors to screen investments, by the 'responsible' or 'impact investing' community, offered a huge opportunity for investors to use their money to drive positive benefits for society and the environment. Given the anecdotal evidence that investments with better sustainability profiles performed better during the corona crisis[7] and that we are

[7] MacDonald-Brown, N. and MacLennan, S. 'How have sustainable companies performed during the Covid-19 crisis?'', *Schroders*, 4 May 2020.

entering a deep recession, an approach to investment decisions which delivers positive environmental, social and economic outcomes is not only sensible, but possible. The recent decision of the UK's biggest pension fund – the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST) -, to ban investments in companies involved in coal mining, tar sands and artic drilling, represents a similar step in the right direction[8].

[7] We are carrying out a significant programme of work with public utilities in this area and will be producing a wide range of reports on this over the coming months. The following 'Mid-way' report represents our summary project update from earlier this year – there are many other project materials already on our website https://www.sustainabilityfirst.org.uk/images/publications/fair_for_the_future/SF_F4TF_Mid-Way_Briefing_April_2020.pdf

A societal step change in priorities

A main theme running throughout the work of our art and essay entrants, from the personal perspectives of industry experts and our judges, was that the coronavirus has exposed the fragility of our social, economic, environmental and governance systems.

- From civil society, to business, to government, we hope the 'new normal' is one that prioritises resilience, because the pandemic is just one in a series of shocks that we are likely to experience over the coming decades.
- Summarised by Lord Deben, who chaired our Essay prize judging panel, and speaking specifically about businesses, 'sustainability means being around in 125 years' time. This means working with, rather than degrading, the environment and society on which they rely'. This is an important message, but one that is not exclusive to businesses.
- Individual experiences over the last few months may have been radically different, so the response to the pandemic needs to take into account 'hearts as well as minds.' Leaders – in government, policy, regulation and business circles – need to listen. The entries to our competitions have shown the high expectations of many young and creative people in this area and the power of art to get the cultural shift that we need to get the behavioural and systems change that we need to see for a sustainable future.

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https://www.schroders.com/en/insights/economics/how-have-sustainable-companies- performed-during-the-covid-19-crisis/

[8] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/29/national-employment-savings-trust-uks-biggestpension-fund-divests-from-fossil-fuels