

We can't keep ignoring the environment in our approach to the pandemic

Saturday's last-minute tier change - and the mass of resulting food waste - is the latest blow the UK's pandemic management has dealt to the climate. Moving forward, we need to be mindful about the environment and public health simultaneously.

Despite originating from unsustainable animal breeding practices, the COVID-19 pandemic was once hailed as a blessing for the natural world. Production fell dramatically in the early days, and so too did emissions. But now - as the year draws to a close and we try to regulate our way back to normality - it's become strikingly clear how low a priority environmental sustainability is for those making the rules.

COVID's impact on our planet is not new; the surge in single-use has been with us since the very start. Initially, the WHO estimated that we were using 89 million medical masks, 76 million pairs of gloves and 1.6 million sets of goggles a month. Coffee chains stopped accepting reusable flasks - based on spurious evidence; and takeaways skyrocketed. Crucial climate talks - such as COP26 - have been delayed, and numerous countries have launched economic recovery schemes that are anything but green.

But the excesses of Christmas bring human impact on the planet to the forefront of our consciousness - and this even without last-minute rule

changes. In normal circumstances, millions of pounds worth of food is thrown away at Christmastime and the period leading up to it. This year, particularly since the introduction of the tier system in October, things have been much worse.

The impact of the tier system

In the UK, Tier 2 restrictions mean that people meeting friends and family from other households have to sit outside, and also that they can only order alcoholic drinks with a substantial meal. This has seen an already struggling hospitality industry forced to bear an economic – and environmental – brunt.

Some reports suggest that sales of outdoor heaters have gone up by 300% in the UK in recent months. Heating the outdoors sounds ridiculous – and in normal circumstances it is. A standard gas-powered heater emits 3kg of carbon dioxide in just a couple of hours; because the outside isn't contained, most of the heat produced dissipates entirely.

Outdoor heaters are such an unnecessary luxury that they were actually banned in France earlier this year – although the ban won't come into effect until 2021. This is so as not to further compromise an industry that will – certainly in the UK – be relying on them for custom this winter.

And with London and the Southeast now in Tier 4, venues such as Paddington's Heist Bank and Park Lane's CUT, which invested in heaters to ensure COVID custom, have been forced to close. Equipment that retails at circa £100-a-piece will now lie dormant for an unspecified period of time – a sunk cost.

Complex and counterintuitive rules, frequent backtracking, and dwindling support for hospitality have seen fossil fuels and money wasted. But perhaps the most obvious, and urgent, issue at the moment is the associated rise of *food waste*.

In Tier 2, people have been buying and leaving meals to get around the rules. Finley Kamen, an employee at The Elgin in London's Maida Vale, told me last week that,

“On Friday and Saturday more guests are buying food – small plates and sides generally – almost as an entry fee. They may not even touch it. Generally

during the week, you get less of that – people are happy to get a meal. But in terms of food waste, there's no doubt that it's increased."

Saturday's last-minute change to the Christmas rules exacerbated the problem. With a day's notice, Southeastern venues with stock levels suitable for what's normally the busiest period of the year, had to close. Some items will freeze; some will be sent out in takeaway dinner form; but the environmental and economic impact will be huge. Already one third of food produced globally goes to waste, leading to 8% of all greenhouse gas emissions. As British Hospitality Association CEO Kate Nicholls told *The Guardian*,

"As with previous short-notice lockdowns, this is going to cause a glut of wasted food and drink. It's not possible to just turn on and off a hospitality business. Beer will go down the drain, fresh food will have to be thrown away and there will be impacts throughout the supply chain of cancelled orders. This stop-start approach to hospitality is disastrous."

Food waste prevention apps and programmes

Some food, thanks to innovation and grassroots organising, will be given away or sold at a low price. [Too Good To Go](#) has created a function for struggling pubs, restaurants and hotels, and food sharing app [OLIO](#) is providing a conduit for dealing with the problem on a household level.

‘This Christmas, many of us will have too much food while others won’t have enough to eat,’ reads a recent OLIO Instagram post. ‘With new [#COVID19UK](#) restrictions, many of us are now forced to make last minute changes to our Christmas plans. We’re calling on everyone to share surplus Christmas food to prevent food waste & keep our communities together, whilst safely apart this Christmas.’

Just as we will need to see more decisive government action and financial support – we will need to see innovators not simply responding to crises, but inhibiting them. If the government – despite recent announcements about stopping overseas fossil fuel investment and channelling billions into a Green Industrial Revolution – continues to neglect considering the environmental impact of coronavirus policy decisions, innovators can step in.

They can make it easier to preserve the health of the planet, the financial health of hospitality and other sectors, and the health of the population – in tandem.

One organisation making this transition to more sustainable pandemic management possible is [Unreasonable Group](#) – which, in collaboration with Barclays, has launched the Unreasonable Impact COVID-19 Response scheme. It has awarded grants (adding up to a total \$2M) to a number of businesses pivoting to combat COVID-19 challenges – in line with the principles of a green economy.

Amongst the recipients is OLIO, which Unreasonable Group notes has seen demand double post-COVID with food insecurity on the rise. Also supported under the waste reduction umbrella (and UK-based) is [Globechain](#) – a reuse marketplace that connects corporates to charities and people to redistribute unwanted items.

According to founder May Al-Karooni,

“We shouldn’t be doing waste anymore; it’s a resource for somebody. For example, NHS patient beds and medical equipment can’t be reused in the UK for legal reasons. However, other places can use them.”

To date, Globechain has diverted over 5 million kg from landfill – and helped

charities and small businesses save approximately £2M. Its COVID pivot saw it moving towards designing the first transparent and trusted supply chain system for medical and emergency goods at times of crises. In Gloucestershire, Green Fuels – already producing over 400 million litres of green fuel every year – is designing waste cooking oil collection systems that are contactless, more hygienic, and compatible with lockdown and curfew rules.

The Unreasonable Impact COVID-19 Response scheme is also funding projects elsewhere in the world: Tamil Nadu's LEAF mobilised a network of farm workers to harvest fields that would otherwise have been abandoned, before connecting that produce to hungry consumers; New Delhi's Ecoware has been making compostable products from agricultural residue for use in culinary and medical environments; and California's Kiverdi is developing Air Protein – the world's first air-based meat – which on one level will remove the risk of animal-to-human disease transmission from our supply chains.

Treating animals with respect will stop many a future pandemic – by limiting the emergence of zoonotic viruses such as COVID-19. And minimising waste (whether it be food or medical equipment); cooling and transporting the vaccine sustainably; and ensuring steadfast, green and transparent supply chains, will be vital in how we continue to deal with this one.

There are ways of preventing contamination without relying on single-use plastic, and there are ways that we can deal with COVID – an unpredictable virus, which will of course entail a certain number of sacrifices and U-turns – without reneging on commitments to climate action. As we move into 2021, we would do well to remember this.