

University of Cambridge Carbon Offsetting Policy

Guidance for individuals, departments and institutions

Background

In June 2019, University Council approved a science-based target (SBT) for carbon reduction, which commits the University to becoming absolute zero carbon from its scope 1 and 2 (energy-related) carbon emissions by 2048. The Council also adopted an aspiration to achieve zero carbon at least ten years ahead of the target date.

Council also agreed initiatives to better understand and reduce our scope 3 emissions. Scope 3 emissions are those that arise upstream and downstream of the University's core operations and activities, and include emissions from business travel (including flights), procured goods and services, staff commuting and waste. These include:

- Developing SBTs for the University's scope 3 emissions.
- Establishing a [Carbon Offsetting Working Group \(COWG\)](#), drawing on expertise from across the University and partner organisations, to develop proposals for a transparent and robust internal carbon offsetting scheme.

Offsetting will only be used for addressing the University's unavoidable emissions, i.e. those that cannot be reduced through direct action as the University takes active steps to decarbonise its activities in line with the above commitments.

Why is offsetting important?

The theory behind offsetting is that by paying for carbon offsets the cost of the externalities associated with an activity (such as burning aviation fuel) are transferred to the prospective end-user. This has two main purposes: (1) the activity should be discouraged due to the higher price, thereby reducing emissions; and (2) the offset pays for activities that reduce atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations by an amount at least equal to the emissions created.

Even dramatic emissions reductions, requiring decisive and forceful policies, will likely be insufficient alone to limit global warming to 1.5°C ([Energy Transitions Commission, 2021](#)). Consequently, unavoidable residual carbon emissions must be offset through the purchase of trusted carbon credits. The financial stimulus from offsets will be valuable to drive the scaling-up of negative carbon technologies, such as habitat restoration and direct air capture and storage. In addition, it will support better management of high carbon habitats, including the conservation of forests and soils. Last, some offsets can generate important co-benefits besides mitigating climate change, in particular conserving biodiversity and supporting rural livelihoods.

Why should I use this scheme?

Our carbon offset scheme delivers demonstrable carbon benefits and ensures positive outcomes for people and nature. The projects in this scheme have been carefully selected by the COWG from a mixture of respected and world-leading restoration, conservation and technological efforts.

We have developed an analytical framework against which projects are evaluated to scrutinise reported evidence, as well as running independent assessments of remotely-sensed changes in carbon stocks. The framework includes state-of-the-art methods for estimating the additionality of projects (emissions reductions beyond 'business as usual'). These are based on the identification of counterfactuals (estimating what would have happened if the project didn't happen), as well as consideration of carbon leakage effects (the intervention simply causing emissions to shift elsewhere) and of how permanent the project benefits are likely to be. Biodiversity consequences have been assessed by measuring how species extinctions are reduced through habitat conservation and restoration.

Finally, every care has been made to ensure that local people benefit from these projects. Our framework addresses well-documented issues with various mainstream offsetting projects such as carbon fraud and harmful social consequences. The University scheme costs more than some other schemes, but has been devised to provide confidence that the offsets purchased are as robust as possible.

Internal price of carbon

The social cost of carbon is often several times that charged by external offsetting schemes as this price is influenced by market factors or the cost of developing and managing carbon offset projects.

Through the development of the University's internal offsetting scheme the COWG will set a carbon price based on the basket of measures adopted under the scheme. As an interim measure, the COWG have agreed that an internal price of £45 per tonne CO₂e should be used in business case calculations, grant applications etc as this is the price used by the Bank of England¹. This price is likely to change in the future.

Scope of policy

The offsetting of carbon associated with business travel is currently voluntary, but as a minimum it must be used if the costs of offsets can be claimed from external funders. For example, The Wellcome Trust has a [carbon offset policy for travel](#) and it is anticipated that other research funders will follow suit. The Wellcome Trust policy explicitly states that if the host organisation has a carbon offset policy, researchers must follow this.

Institutions are also invited to use this scheme to offset carbon emissions associated with other business travel, the costs of which will be borne by the institution.

This scheme should be used for all offsets relating to University activity.

¹ <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/annual-report/2020/climate-related-financial-disclosure-report-2019-20.pdf?la=en&hash=5DA959C54540287A2E90C823807E089055E6721B>

How to purchase offsets

For emissions associated with business travel, a form is under development. The calculation of carbon emissions will be undertaken centrally and the associated costs of offsets will be taken from the cost code provided and paid directly to the projects that you have selected from the basket of approved projects on the scheme.

If you wish to offset emissions associated with activity other than business travel, please contact sustainability@admin.cam.ac.uk.

The CUFS transaction code for carbon offsetting is ETQZ.

Calculating carbon emissions

If you are calculating carbon emissions as part of a grant application, you should ensure that you use the calculation methodology specified by the awarding body. If none is specified, you should use the tools below:

- [atmosfair Flight Emissions Calculator](#) for flights
- [UK government conversion factors for greenhouse gas emissions](#) for UK train journeys (updated annually)

A [template](#) is available for estimating the total carbon emissions associated with a research grant proposal.

Reporting of University carbon emissions

The University calculates its carbon emissions following the [Greenhouse Gas Protocol](#), the most widely-used international greenhouse gas accounting standard.

Emissions are reported annually within the University's [Environmental Sustainability Report](#).

Independent assurance is undertaken on our environmental sustainability data.

The [Data Assurance Methodology Statement](#), [PricewaterhouseCoopers' Independent Limited Assurance report](#), and the University's detailed [Carbon Emissions Report](#) 2019/20 can all be accessed online.