

**A**ccording to the government's ActOnCO2 website, a typical household in the UK produces around 10 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO2) a year. Driving, heating your home and going on holiday all contribute to this carbon footprint.

The best ways to cut emissions include insulating your home and using energy-efficient products. There's also a growing number of companies offering to ease your conscience by 'offsetting' some or all of the carbon emissions you can't avoid. You give them money and they invest it in projects that claim either to remove an equivalent amount of CO2 from the atmosphere or to prevent that CO2 from being created.

More than 90% of Which? members surveyed told us they had heard of carbon offsetting but, while more than a third (37%) agree that it can play a significant role in fighting climate change, a further third (33%) disagree.

### Our findings

When we asked 2,214 members of the Which? online panel for their views on carbon offsetting in April 2009, they said they would feel more confident about paying for an offsetting scheme if the provider gave more details of where the money went (36%) and the projects supported (30%). Around a quarter would feel more confident with a government carbon offset quality mark.

With this in mind, we analysed the websites of 17 carbon offset companies to find out how informative they were – and how pricey. We found major differences and some serious problems.

- Several of the sites failed, in our view, to give enough information about where your money goes.

- Most failed to reveal how much of your payment goes on administration fees and company profits.

- The emissions calculated for our scenario varied hugely between the different sites.

The companies that we felt gave the most relevant information were Climate Care, Pure and World Land Trust. Others appeared less open about their operations on their websites and many – including Carbon Footprint, Carbon Offsets, Flying Forest and RBS/NatWest – published, in our view, insufficient financial information.

# Which way to reduce your carbon footprint?

We investigate schemes that claim to cancel out your carbon footprint – for a price

If you decide to pay to offset, choose a company that offers the sort of projects you want to give money to and gives details on where your money goes. Note that voluntary schemes are not currently government-approved (see 'Quality assurance schemes', right).

We analysed only the websites of companies that sell carbon offsets as their primary activity. We didn't look at offsetting schemes sold as an add-on to other services, such as flights.

### How much?

The prices charged to offset a tonne of CO2 varied widely in our study. For example, Carbon Clear charges £7.50 per tonne, compared with more than £20 per tonne for Carbon Offset Scotland's tree-planting project. However, cheaper schemes are not automatically the best, as the projects supported vary and can't be compared like-for-like.

We also tested the sites' carbon emission calculators – and found significant variations. On each site we attempted to calculate the same sum – the amount of CO2 produced by a couple living in a two-bedroom semi in West London, driving a Honda Civic 8,000 miles a year, and taking a return flight from London to Barcelona each year. The calculated emissions ranged from 7.73 tonnes with Carbon Offset Scotland to 11.5 tonnes with RBS/NatWest – a difference of almost 50%.

These variations seem to suggest that sites use different methods and data; some may be more accurate than others. To avoid confusion, use the government's calculator at [www.direct.gov.uk/ActOnCO2](http://www.direct.gov.uk/ActOnCO2). Then enter this figure into

## CHOOSING A SCHEME

There are many different types of offsetting scheme, each supporting different projects.

- **Buying and cancelling industrial carbon emission trading permits** – this drives up the price of the remaining permits for polluting companies, making damaging activities less economically attractive.

- **Investment in Kyoto Protocol-compliant, fully verified projects (known as CERs)** – wind power and methane-capture projects, often in the developing world.

- **'Voluntary' schemes (known as VERs)** – can have a prominent social aspect, such as African community projects, or can be UK projects such as tree planting. These tend to be cheaper because of the reduced administrative and verification burden, and can often bring additional benefits such as social and economic help to deprived communities. However, it can be less easy to measure and track the exact amounts of carbon dioxide removed or prevented.

your chosen offset company's website to calculate how much you should pay.

### Quality assurance schemes

The government launched a quality assurance scheme (QAS) for carbon offsetting earlier this year. To qualify, offsetting schemes must meet required standards of transparency, quality and verification. The QAS is currently available only to Kyoto-compliant offsets, not voluntary schemes, and projects must be additional to plans that may have happened anyway.

Companies that have QAS-approved schemes currently include Carbon Footprint, Carbon Passport, Clear and Pure. The QAS mark is awarded on a product level, so individual offset companies can sell qualifying as well as non-qualifying products – make sure you check carefully when you buy.

The two leading quality assurance schemes available to non-Kyoto compliant schemes are the Gold Standard and the Voluntary Carbon Standard.

## OFFSETTING FOR CHARITY



### Jenine and Ian Langrish, Richmond, Surrey

Jenine and Ian offset their flights through a small charity, Excellent Development, and have been pleased with their choice.

**Jenine told us:** 'They may be slightly less scientific in their calculations, but I'm concerned that many of the big players aren't even charities. If we offset via Excellent Development, I know that the money goes to help small-scale farmers in dry areas of Africa, who benefit from tree planting for fodder, medicine, shade and reduction in soil erosion. The trees planted are often endangered species.'

### CARBON OFFSETTING SCHEMES

	MAIN OFFSET PROJECTS	WEBSITE EASE OF USE	PROJECT DETAILS	FINANCIAL DATA	TOTAL CO2	TOTAL PRICE (£)
<b>BLUE VENTURES CARBON OFFSET</b>	Community energy projects in Africa	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	8.06 <sup>a</sup>	113
<b>CARBON CLEAR</b>	Kyoto-compliant and voluntary schemes	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	7.88 <sup>a</sup>	59
<b>CARBON FOOTPRINT</b>	Tree planting and Kyoto-compliant projects	★★★★★	★★★★★	★	9.17 <sup>b</sup>	75-146 <sup>c</sup>
<b>CARBON OFFSET SCOTLAND</b>	Tree planting in Scotland	★★★★★	★★★★	★	7.73	165
<b>CARBON OFFSETS</b>	Fire efficiency and windfarm projects	★★★★★	★★★★★	★	9.36 <sup>d</sup>	72-182 <sup>c</sup>
<b>CARBON PASSPORT</b>	Kyoto-compliant credit cancellation	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	9.64	125
<b>CLEAR</b>	Kyoto-compliant Biomass electricity project	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	10.31 <sup>b</sup>	129
<b>CLIMATE CARE</b>	Portfolio including stoves and wind power	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	10.15	88
<b>CO2 BALANCE</b>	Include stoves in Africa and UK tree planting	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	10.59	79-212 <sup>c</sup>
<b>EQUICLIMATE</b>	Cancellation of EU carbon credits	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	9.69	166
<b>FLYING FOREST</b>	Tree planting in Africa	★★★★	★★	★	n/a <sup>e</sup>	n/a <sup>e</sup>
<b>PURE – THE CLEAN PLANET TRUST</b>	Kyoto-compliant credit cancellation	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	10.85	125
<b>RBS/NATWEST</b>	Forestry and renewable energy projects	★★★★★	★★	★	11.5	146
<b>SPONSOR TREES</b>	Tree planting in Africa	★★★★	★★★★	★	9.98	40
<b>THE CARBON NEUTRAL COMPANY</b>	Renewable energy and Kyoto-compliant projects	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	10.2	87-204 <sup>c</sup>
<b>THE OFFSET CARBON COMPANY</b>	Supplying energy-efficient stoves in Nepal	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	10.93	104
<b>WORLD LAND TRUST</b>	Conservation work including tree planting	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	10.75 <sup>d</sup>	161

Prices to the nearest pound, correct at 14 May 2009. The table gives an illustrative emissions figure and price for a couple living in a two-bedroom semi in West London, spending £1,200 a year on gas and electricity, driving a petrol Honda Civic 8,000 miles and taking one return flight each per year from London Heathrow to Barcelona. Company contact details at [www.which.co.uk/carbonoffsetting](http://www.which.co.uk/carbonoffsetting). <sup>a</sup> ActOnCO2 calculator used for gas and electricity calculations <sup>b</sup> Flight includes radiative forcing option <sup>c</sup> Range of products available <sup>d</sup> Kilowatt hour equivalent used for gas and electricity calculation <sup>e</sup> No calculator. Flat price of £10-£20 per flight suggested