



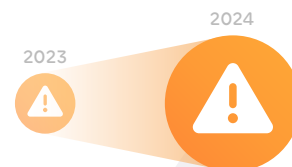
Lifestyles



Far too slow

Sustainable behaviour patterns and social practices, enabled by policies that make sustainable options accessible, affordable, and the default, are key for decarbonisation.

4.7 Lifestyles



Past progress: Progress towards sustainable lifestyles has picked up in speed compared to last year’s classification, but it is still **far too slow**. This is primarily due to positive developments in the diffusion of climate-friendly habits such as choosing plant-based options or taking self-reported action for the climate. However, limiting emissions from consumption still has a long way to go: The average carbon footprint of EU citizens declined far too slowly over the period assessed, and material consumption was even increasing. Scarce data availability, particularly regarding infrastructure development and economic incentives, and the lack of official targets makes it challenging to assess the overall progress in this building block (Chancel, 2022).

Policy context: At present, the EU does not have an overall strategy targeting sustainable lifestyles. There are policy and implementation gaps in demand-side measures. However, there is movement in some Member States and local governments, and in some instances, lifestyle choices are tackled by other policy areas. The *LIFE* scenario of the impact assessment to the 2040 climate target (EC, 2024j) shows how changes in lifestyles could reduce energy, land, and resource use. New and upcoming EU policy proposals support sustainable behaviour. The Circular Economy Action Plan lists measures to decrease resource use and provides data for monitoring progress. The EU Alternative Fuel Infrastructure Regulation (AFIR) and the revision of the trans-European transport network (TEN-T) (EP, 2023d) would support the shift to more sustainable mobility choices.



Areas of action: A key necessity for advancing progress in lifestyles is the establishment of a comprehensive policy framework. The number of current policies targeting changes in behaviour is marginal. A first step is the Joint Research Centre’s (EC, 2024d) Competence Centre on Behavioural Insights, which examines how values should be considered in policy-making. In addition, data availability in this building block is sparse and leaves little room for drawing conclusions on where progress might be insufficient. A low-hanging fruit is the consideration of data on EU funding for investments into enabling infrastructure in the regular assessments of EU funds. Finally, data on benchmarks is inexistent, underlining that lifestyle changes still is not a significant policy priority for the European Union.

Table 16: Progress in lifestyles towards the objective and enablers

OBJECTIVE	ENABLERS		
Limiting emissions and resource use 	Providing enabling infrastructure 	Enhancing economic incentives 	Diffusion of climate neutral habits

Note: Large circles show the progress classification of this year and small circles the one from last year’s progress assessment. Arrows indicate positive or negative changes in classification. See Table 35 for further information. Source: ©ECNO.

Table 17: Details on indicators' past progress and required change

2023 ▼	2024 >	Historical data			Required change	
		Time period	Relative change p.a.	Absolute change p.a.	Benchmark	Absolute change p.a.
OBJECTIVE: Limiting emissions and resource use						
Per-person material footprint [t/capita]		2017–2022 (Eurostat, 2024t)	+0.1% per year	+14.1 t/capita	n/a	n/a
Per-person carbon footprint from household expenditure [tCO ₂ /capita]		2015–2020 (Eurostat, 2024s)	-3.2% per year	-0.1 tCO ₂ /capita per year	n/a	n/a
ENABLER 1: Providing enabling infrastructure						
Investment in cycling infrastructure [EUR]		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Population living in municipalities that promote sustainable food in canteens [%]		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
ENABLER 2: Enhancing economic incentives						
Price on carbon [EUR/t CO ₂]		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Affordability of vegetarian compared to meat options		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
ENABLER 3: Diffusion of climate neutral habits						
Self-reported climate-conscious behaviour [% of population]		2018–2023 (Eurobarometer, 2023a)	+1.2% per year	+0.8 %-points per year	n/a	n/a
Climate-damaging advertisement [EUR]		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Sales trends of plant-based food items in EU [EUR billion]		2020–2022 (Good Food Institute, 2022)	+11.8% per year	EUR 0.5 billion per year	n/a	n/a

Note: Icons indicate progress classification of this year's progress assessment and coloured lines the change in classification; See Table 35 for further information. n/a indicates that data are not available.

Source: ©ECNO.

Objective: Limiting emissions and resource use

Past progress: Through the end of 2022, average per capita material consumption in the EU increased after a slowdown caused by the pandemic and was thus moving in the **wrong direction**. Non-metallic minerals make up around half of the materials consumed. The EU's level of resource use surpasses the planet's safe operating space (EEA, 2023c). The carbon footprint from household expenditure decreased on average over the period, albeit this development was still **far too slow** and will need to accelerate significantly to be in line with climate neutrality by 2050.

Indicators:

- Per-person material footprint
- Per-person carbon footprint from household expenditure

Policy context: The Circular Economy Action Plan, updated in 2020, aims to reduce raw material inputs into the EU economy, which in turn also reduces the raw material footprint of each EU citizen. The circular economy monitoring framework was revised in 2023, adding valuable data input for policy-making. In addition, the EC proposed a directive 'on common rules promoting the repair of goods', securing a 'right to repair', which encourages citizens to repair viable defective goods to reduce waste and resource use (EC, 2023ac), as well as introducing stricter rules on more sustainable packaging in the EU to reduce avoidable resource use (EC, 2022j).

Areas of action: The above outlined proposal shows that the year 2023 saw several strategies within the EU Green Deal targeting the problem. Still, relevant proposals remain pending, especially regarding the agriculture and food sectors. The commitment to detailed monitoring using circular economy indicators is a step towards improved data availability. While some policies would benefit from higher ambitions, the EC may firstly focus on delivering on implementation (ESABCC, 2024). Policy-makers have the responsibility to support both policy development and implementation adequately, through setting economic incentives, educating and empowering consumers, and setting the right legal frame for decoupling resource use and economic growth.

Enabler 1: Providing enabling infrastructure

Past progress: Infrastructure provisions should make sure that the most sustainable option is available for users, or at best the most convenient one to choose. At present, there are **no data** available that allow for a comprehensive assessment.

Looking at investment in cycling infrastructure at EU level, a 2023 report by the European Cyclists' Federation provides only a general indication along one dimension (Küster, 2023). The report compared the combined total planned investments by Member States from EU Structural Funds from the periods 2014 to 2020 and 2021 to 2027, highlighting a 32% increase. Sustainable public procurement, promoting the increase of plant-based foods in canteens, is not monitored at the EU level. Locally, there are some cities and regions that stand out as good practices, e.g., a plant-based option required in Portuguese canteens or the support for more vegetarian collective catering through the French Climate Law (European Vegetarian Union, 2023).

Indicators:

- Investment in cycling infrastructure
- Population living in municipalities that promote sustainable food in canteens

Policy context: There are no overarching policy roadmaps that focus on promoting climate neutral behaviour through infrastructure expansion. Still, some specific regulations under the Green Deal nudge consumers towards more sustainable ways of living. The adoption of the EU Alternative Fuel Infrastructure Regulation (AFRI), increasing the number of electric charging stations and allowing users to pay with a credit card, will make it more convenient for consumers to choose an electric vehicle. Further, the EU funds projects that aim to provide the necessary surroundings for changing behaviour. As an example, the interregional NiCE project restructures city centres to encourage local and circular consumption (Interreg, 2024). The Social Climate Fund is supposed to increase access to sustainable transport (EC, 2024q). In line with the New Urban Mobility Framework (EC, 2021q), the EC proposed a 'European Declaration on Cycling' (EC, 2023f), following the EP's resolution on developing a cycling strategy (EP, 2023c). Since 2020, Next Generation EU has created fiscal space for Member States to invest in a vast array of projects, including railway infrastructure. Meanwhile at national and local level, some investments continue to go in the opposite direction.

Areas of action: If sustainable daily lifestyle choices are to become easy for citizens, EU policies need to deliver on the right 'choice architecture' (Thaler & Sunstein, 2021). Considerate spatial planning, offering safe bike lanes, reliable public transport options and a network of electric charging stations, make it more expedient for consumers to stop relying on fossil fuelled mobility. Public procurement can be a trendsetter by regularly providing vegetarian and vegan options. Legislation has so far been fragmented and is scattered around different legislative proposals. EU public funding granted to Member States (e.g. Recovery and Resilience Facility) and regions (e.g. ERDF) can support the deployment of such infrastructure, or least ensure that they do not promote the development of unsustainable lifestyles, but details on the use of this EU funding is scarce and incomplete. A citizen-centric comprehensive strategy is needed to plan and encourage the necessary behavioural shifts.

Enabler 2: Enhancing economic incentives

Past progress: Implementing carbon pricing makes unsustainable products and services more expensive. The OECD monitoring of net effective carbon rates show an increase from 2018 (EUR 58.9 per t CO_{2e}) to 2021 (EUR 74.7 per t CO_{2e}) (OECD, 2018, 2021). However, the carbon price might need to reach around EUR 190 by 2030 to align with climate neutrality (Pietzcker et al., 2021). There are no EU-wide aggregated data on the affordability of vegetarian options compared to meat options. The little information available has been compiled by NGOs, e.g., in Germany, where plant-based alternatives held a 25% price premium in comparison to conventional meat and dairy products. This marks a reduction from the 53% premium estimated in 2022 (Gerstenberg, 2023).

Indicators:

- Price on carbon
- Affordability of vegetarian compared to meat options

Policy context: The proposed Energy Taxation Directive (ETD) (EC, 2023as) and the adopted reform of the EU ETS Directive may lead to a price increase for products and services with high carbon footprints. The revised ETD aims to order fuels and electricity according to their environmental performance, making Member States tax them adequately. Through this, products most polluting during their production are taxed highest. For now, carbon pricing fails to cover all emission sources, and simultaneously, EU subsidies may counteract its effectiveness. According to a report from WWF, EU subsidies for locally produced animal products negatively affect the affordability of sustainable diets, for instance (WWF, 2023).

Areas of action: Taxing carbon does not only drive consumers away from more carbon-intensive products, but further generates revenues that countries can use for investments needed for the transition to climate neutrality (ECNO, 2023). Measures and policies are promising, but policy-makers need to make sure they are comprehensive and include all emitting products and services. The EU still heavily subsidises the use of fossil fuels, which needs to be reduced and ultimately terminated. When applying carbon prices, designing the measure to be non-regressive is crucial, e.g., through paybacks.

Enabler 3: Diffusion of climate neutral habits

Past progress: Through 2023, progress towards the diffusion of climate neutral habits was **on track**. This suggests some movement in European societies towards making the sustainable option the norm. Looking at the Eurobarometer’s biennial self-assessment, an increasing number of EU citizens have personally taken action to fight climate change in the last six months. This correlates with an increased awareness of the seriousness of climate change (Eurobarometer, 2023a). As there are no aggregated EU data on investment in advertisement campaigns for carbon-intensive products, the absolute sales of plant-based food items were considered as a proxy. These show remarkable increases from 2020 to 2022 (i.e., meat and dairy alternatives), providing further evidence for a proliferation of climate-friendly norms. The trend has been driven by the increased availability and popularity of plant-based products among the population (EC, 2024q).

Indicators:

- Self-reported climate-conscious behaviour
- Climate-damaging advertisement
- Sales trends of plant-based food items in EU

Policy context: The proposed Ecodesign Regulation seeks to promote sustainable energy-related products as the market default by, i.a., strengthening repairability and durability requirements (EC, 2022o). Other EU legislative endeavours, however, risk deterring consumers from perceiving the sustainable option as the norm. For instance, the European Court of Justice ruled in 2023 that purely plant-based products cannot be labelled with words traditionally reserved for animal products, such as ‘milk’ or ‘yoghurt’, even if they come with a clear distinction, e.g., ‘tofu cheese’ (CJEU, 2017). Likewise, most public funding for agricultural production in the EU still supports climate-damaging business models like meat and dairy farming, as well as direct subsidies for their advertising (EREA, 2023). This potentially locks food producers in instead of incentivising them to explore alternatives (Vallone & Lambin, 2023).

Areas of action: Looking at sustainable food consumption, EU legislation still favours the consumption of meat and dairy products (ECA, 2021). The EU needs to acknowledge the necessity of a dietary transition and follow up with adequate policies. Habits must also shift regarding to how people move, consume, and heat. Allowing the use of animal product names for plant-based alternatives can be a first low-effort step. Informing citizens both about alternatives and about why other options can be beneficial is one way for the EU to support making the sustainable option the norm. Further, applying stricter sustainability standards, as done by the Ecodesign Directive, for appliances on a wider range of services, products, and food items can help drive unsustainable practices out of the EU market.