



Green or greenwashed?

Time needed for activity 60 minutes plus

Location Indoors

Context

This activity plan focuses on identifying the credibility of pro-environmental and sustainability claims. Natural Resources Wales' purpose is to pursue sustainable management of natural resources in all of its work. This means looking after air, land, water, wildlife, plants and soil to improve Wales' well-being, and provide a better future for everyone.

Curriculum for Wales

Humanities	Health and Well-being	Science and Technology	Languages Literature and Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What matters Informed, self-aware citizens engage with the challenges and opportunities that face humanity, and are able to take considered and ethical action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What matters How we engage with social influences shapes who we are and our health and well-being. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What matters Being curious and searching for answers is essential to understanding and predicting phenomena. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What matters Understanding languages is key to understanding the world around us.

Digital Competency Framework

Completing this activity provides opportunities to meet the following strands of the Digital Competency Framework.

Citizenship	Interacting and collaborating	Producing	Data and computational thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identity, image and reputation. Online behaviour and online bullying. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication. Collaboration. Storing and sharing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sourcing, searching and planning digital content. Evaluating and improving digital content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data and information literacy.

Objectives

- Learners will be able to understand and explain the meaning of the term 'greenwashing'.
- Learners will be able to describe some of the tactics companies use to greenwash products and services.
- Learners will be able to collaborate to investigate and form an opinion on the environmental sustainability of a product, honing their research skills to do so.

Resources and equipment

- Smart devices
- Online research materials sourced via search engines and websites



Background information

Identifying sustainable products (physical, tangible objects such as a bar of soap) and services (a service someone provides e.g. giving advice, food delivery, website design) isn't always easy.

Greenwashing, or green sheen, are terms which refer to companies advertising and marketing their goods or services as environmentally friendly, when they are not. For example, companies involved in greenwashing behaviour might mislead consumers by making false or vague claims that their products are made from sustainably sourced materials, recycled materials or have energy-saving benefits. Greenwashing techniques can be quite subtle, such as deceptive packaging to convince customers that a company is an eco-champion.

Greenwashing can be bad for the environment as it can mislead customers into acting unsustainably. If a company says that its products and services are eco-friendly and sustainable, customers may be more likely to purchase them.

False pro-environmental claims can lead to customers unknowingly purchasing toxic, dangerous and environmentally damaging products, accidentally contributing to harming the environment by supporting the company.

Some companies have also been accused of virtue signalling in marketing, campaigning, public relations and brand communication. In this case, virtue signalling is the act of speaking or behaving in a way that's meant to look pro-environmental, while there is no actual associated pro-environmental behaviour.

Many companies and brands are promising to remove non-sustainable products from their offer and advocating for others to do likewise, and even publicly naming and shaming others for failing to do so. When a company is exposed as using greenwashing techniques to sell their goods and services, rival companies can use this to bias customers to influence them in favour of their own products.

Ask if your learners have heard of the term 'greenwashing'. Ask the group to discuss the possible meaning amongst themselves and feedback their thoughts. Can your learners think why greenwashing could be bad for the environment? Can they think of any positives to greenwashing?

What to do

Activity 1 - Greenwashed away

1. Explain to your learners that they are going to look for examples of companies whose products and services have been found to be greenwashed. Ask your group to consider how they might find out about this? Where will information on these kinds of activities be located? What kind of questions could they ask a search engine to lead them to the correct sites where information on this topic can be discovered? For example, they could search for advertisements that have been banned by the Advertising Standards Authority for greenwashing inaccuracies.
2. Provide your learners with sufficient time to search for clues and to note any pertinent discoveries. There are many examples of companies who have found to be greenwashing online.
3. Once the searches are complete, ask your learners to feedback on their findings. Did they find anything that surprised them? How does it make them feel about the companies that have been found to be greenwashing their products and services? What impact does greenwashing have on consumers? If your learners thought a company was not living up to their sustainable claims, how would they react? What actions could your learners take to highlight greenwashing to others or to praise a company for their environmentally friendly behaviour, e.g. make a consumer questionnaire, write a press release or an article?





Activity 2 - Outrageous claims

1. Introduce the subject by asking your learners to consider the word 'green'. What connotations does this word give to products and services? How does being told a product or a service is 'green' make them feel? Is there an automatic positive response? Can your group think of any items they might have in their household that were purchased because they believe them to be sustainable, ethical products, e.g. something made from recycled materials, or not tested on animals?
2. Divide your learners into pairs or small groups and explain that they are going to work together to convincingly 'greenwash' an item of their choice.
3. Instruct your learners to choose something to greenwash. This item could be a product or service, e.g. an ordinary household product, something they can find in the vicinity, or something bigger such as a holiday cruise to Alaska or an internet service.
4. Explain that they now need to work up some outrageous claims or fantastic fibs about how sustainable, ethical and/or environmentally friendly their product or service is. Give each pair or group sufficient time to discuss what blatantly false claims they could make and how to phrase them as convincingly as possible.
5. Ask each pair or group to present their outrageous claims about the chosen product or service. This could be completed as a written or filmed advertisement or simply a show and tell presentation.
6. After each presentation, encourage the rest of the group to ask questions to the presenters to test their claims. The presenters will have to think on their feet to creatively answer and stay 'on brand'.
7. Once each pair or group have completed their presentations, have a group vote for the most creative and/or believable outrageous claims.
8. As a whole group, discuss how easy or difficult it was to greenwash the products and services, and how it could be used as a business model in the real world to promote sales.





Activity 3 – Greenwash spotting

1. Set up a greenwash spotting homework task for your learners, asking them to take careful note during the week of adverts or promotions for products and services in magazines and newspapers or on television, social media or online.
2. Task your learners with noting any possible greenwashing techniques in use in these adverts and promotions. Can they persuade their family members to join in the spotting activity?
3. At the end of the week, ask your learners to feedback and tally the suspected greenwashed finds. Compare findings with others to check for multiple greenwashing strategies being spotted by single or multiple individuals – what might this say about how obvious or subtle these strategies are?
4. Any findings could be interrogated in the next activity or simply fact checked.



Activity 4 – Green checking

1. Can your learners explain what they think is meant by an eco-friendly or a sustainable product or service? Can they come up with a definition? This can be defined as obtaining the materials, products, and services an organisation needs from its suppliers in a manner that is socially and environmentally responsible, while still being economically sound. For example, a product made in a way that doesn't deplete natural, non-renewable resources, harm the environment and wasn't made in a socially irresponsible way.





2. With your learners in pairs, task them with researching the level of eco-friendliness and sustainability of a product. The whole group could investigate the same theme or set a different topic for each pair. For example:

- Articles such as clothing and footwear made from recycled plastic bottles
- Electric vehicles
- Palm oil
- Almond milk
- Sustainable fabrics in fast fashion
- Vegan leather
- Antibacterial soap
- Charcoal toothpaste
- Potato crisps
- Bottled water
- Recycled plastic products
- Granola bars
- Ethanol fuel
- Mobile phones
- Free range eggs
- Biodegradable bags
- Bioplastics
- Cola
- Vegetarian meat substitute products
- Non-toxic cleaning products
- Non-stick saucepans
- Chocolate
- Coffee pods
- Meat

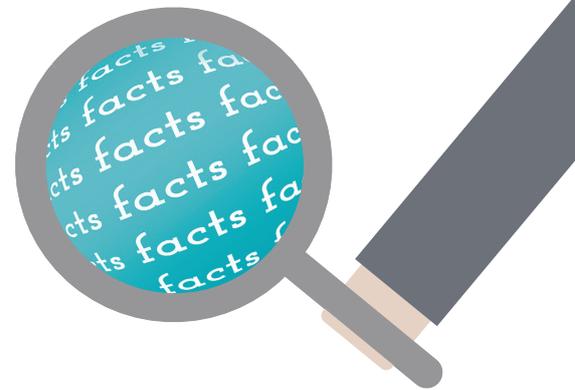
3. Ask your learners how they might be able to find out more about if these items are genuinely eco-friendly or if they might have been greenwashed. Discuss how it can be very difficult to find out if a product or service is genuinely sustainable and eco-friendly, but they can:

- Observe the marketing, packaging and labelling of a product. You can be tricked into thinking that the product is eco-friendly by the use of simple visual signals such as the use of natural, earth-toned colours in packaging, using environmental language in the product name or images of nature used in marketing.
- Examine the specific claims a company makes about their product. This could be via their website, advertisements, or on the packaging of the product. How detailed and specific are they? Are they just using broad statements like the product is 'green', 'organic' or 'natural,' that don't really mean anything? Or do they use very specific detail, such as a product is made from 100% recycled material? If you're struggling to find environmental information about a product, brand or service, take that as a warning sign.
- Investigate if reputable, 3rd party organisations endorse the company's eco-friendliness by checking the product website or the label of the product itself for green certifications, e.g. Forest Stewardship Council for sustainably sourced wood products. Eco-labelling, standardised by ISO 14024 (International Organization for Standardisation - an independent, non-governmental international organisation with a membership of 166 national standards bodies), is recognised around the world and remains one of the most useful tools to avoid greenwashing.
- Check the company's advertising information. Generally, the things that customer reviews and external organisations say about a company are more trustworthy, but look into what the company says about itself. Check the company's website, especially the 'About Us' pages.





- Examine carbon offsetting claims. A business can attempt to balance their own emissions by finding other ways to remove an equivalent amount of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere without dealing with the issue of actually cutting emissions. Carbon offsetting is one of the most popular forms of greenwashing.
 - Ask your learners to complete an online search and see what is being said by others including the media, about what the company does to help the environment. Are the sources of information reputable, trustworthy and have a history of integrity?
 - Is the company transparent about how it treats its employees, sources its materials, and manages its waste?
 - Hidden trade-offs - environmental issues that are emphasised at the expense of another potentially more concerning issue. For example, paper products highlighting their recycled content or sustainable tree harvesting practices without attention to manufacturing processes which might be heavy on emissions.
 - Lack of proof of any factual evidence on any environmental claims. For example, toiletries that claim not to have been tested on animals, but offer no evidence or certification.
 - Vague, meaningless environmental claims that are lacking in specifics. For example, 'natural' doesn't necessarily mean eco-friendly or sustainable - mercury and uranium are naturally occurring; or 'chemical-free' when actually water is a chemical substance.
 - Creation of false certificate or labels to mislead consumers into believing that the product went through a valid green screening process.
 - Unrelated environmental issues are emphasized. For example, saying something is plastic-free when it is, in fact, illegal to have traces of plastic or other harmful chemicals in that product.
 - Environmental claims on products that have no environmental benefits to begin with. For example, organic cigarettes and green insecticides.
 - Environmental claims that are blatantly false. For example, saying that a product is packaged in 100% recycled paper, when the container is actually plastic.
 - Overcomplicated language and use of long lists of product ingredients e.g. palm oil is often hidden by using various chemical names which in turn hides the fact it is not sustainable.
 - Look into who the ultimate owner of the company is, as bigger firms or conglomerations often purchase smaller companies to use to target the environmentally conscious customer, while their entire environmental impact might be high.
 - Think about the bigger picture. For example, can environmental claims made on a single-use plastic item be taken seriously?
4. Ask your learners to look for any possible greenwashing of the product, and considering the points discussed in 3, put any environmental/sustainable claims to a validity test. Remind the group to be careful to research all opposing sides/views.





5. Allow sufficient time for product research.
6. Ask your learners to feedback on their findings. How easy or difficult did they find it to access the information they were looking for? Has the research given them enough information to make an informed opinion about how eco-friendly or sustainable the product is? Have any of the products been identified as non-sustainable or environmentally harmful? Have any of the products researched been shown to be clearly eco-friendly and sustainable?
7. With their knowledge of greenwashing, how do your learners feel about trying to make their own ethical choices or trying to influence their families shopping habits? Discuss how being socially responsible isn't about putting every single purchase through a green lies test, but about making reasonable choices on a day-to-day basis. Not every family can afford to buy organic, but we can all do other things to help.
8. Can your learners think of any changes they or their family could make to accommodate this? For example, could they:
 - purchase less by avoiding new trends
 - buy second-hand goods as opposed to new
 - buy clothing made from natural fibres
 - buy locally produced goods to cut down on shipping and food miles
 - buy seasonal foods
 - look for recyclable packaging
 - purchase locally sourced and made items
 - purchase from sustainable businesses that make an effort to maintain a low environmental impact
9. In small groups, ask your learners to make a list of any products in their day to day lives that they assume are made in an eco-friendly, sustainable way. These could include food products, items of clothing, household items, pet products, garden items, school equipment, stationery, toiletries, etc.





Suggested key questions

- What is greenwashing and why is it bad for the environment?
- Why do some companies use greenwashing techniques?
- How can greenwashing tactics be identified?
- How can we shop more sustainably?

Adapting for different needs or abilities

More support

- Only complete activity 2
- Provide collated research data on pre-chosen products
- Complete as adult led groups

More challenge

- Complete the research elements independently
- Allow the learners to identify and chose a suitable product to research
- Investigate the greenwashing of several products and services
- Give your learners something to debate, e.g. is greenwashing a deliberate and deceptive marketing method to cheat people of their money and from making ethically informed decisions?

Follow up activity/extension

Why not try out:

- **Activity Plan – Climate emergency**
- **Activity Plan – How can we live sustainably?**
- Create a greenwashing awareness raising campaign

Looking for more learning resources, information and data?

Please contact: education@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk or go to <https://naturalresources.wales/learning>

Alternative format; large print or another language, please contact: enquiries@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk **0300 065 3000**