Basic information: Climate change, environment, health

The Panel “Climate change, environment / health” is related to climate change, environmental issues and new health challenges for the European Union. These topics also relate to the EU’s objectives and strategies such as agriculture, transport and mobility, energy and the transition to post-carbon societies, research, healthcare systems, and responses to health crises, prevention and healthy lifestyles.

This document provides you with background information on the different topics of the Panel. Most importantly, it lays out what the EU already does in these areas and what the users of the Multilingual Digital Platform (https://futureu.europa.eu) have expressed as their main concerns and wishes for the future. Lastly, the document also includes links for more information on many topics.

Your task

In this panel, we will invite you to deliberate and to formulate a set of recommendations for the Union’s institutions to follow-up on for the future of Europe in the areas of climate change, environment, and health. For example, recommendations can state which general direction to follow or how to solve a specific problem.

Over the course of three sessions, you will discuss and collaborate directly with other citizens from all over Europe, together with whom you will draft the recommendations. At the third and last session, you will collectively vote on the recommendations, which will be presented and discussed with the other participants in the Conference Plenary.
Climate change and the environment: leading the way for a more sustainable future

The battle against climate change and environmental damage is an urgent issue for the European Union and across the globe. To achieve a better world for us all, we need a strategy where Europe can continue leading the world on a path to sustainability and climate neutrality.

What is the EU doing?

The European Green Deal is our plan to make the European Union’s economy sustainable, turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities, and making the transition fair and inclusive for all.

The Green Deal is the new growth strategy that aims to transform the European Union into a modern, climate neutral, resource-efficient and competitive economy. This includes:

- no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050
- economic growth uncoupled from resource use
- no person or place is left behind in the transition to a climate-neutral and resilient society

Input from the Multilingual Digital Platform (19 April – 2 August 2021)

The topic of ‘Climate change and the environment’ has generated a total of 3,156 comments, ideas and events since the inception of the platform (1,074 ideas, 1,798 comments and 284 events). The concept of climate change and awareness of its effects underlies a number of suggestions, with contributors highlighting the numerous environmental challenges and calling for concrete action to address them. The ideas within this topic are diverse and can be grouped in the following themes:

- Pollution
- Transport
- Agriculture
- Consumption
- Subsidisation, taxation
- Energy
- Creating change in attitudes and behaviour

Pollution

Pollution is identified as a major source of pressure on the global environment by contributors. A green transition is discussed with a variety of solutions to decrease pollution (see event). For instance, one of the most endorsed ideas on the platform suggests that the EU should provide a strong and inclusive governance approach where both workers and trade unions are involved in the design and implementation of adaptation policies at all levels. It is stressed that the EU strategy to deal with climate change should include concrete policy measures that maintain jobs and protect workers’ health and safety as well as active labour market policies and reskilling and trainings to prevent job losses (see idea). Several areas of pollution are discussed, with the following sub-themes: emissions, deforestation, water pollution, light pollution and plastic use.
With regard to emissions, one of the most discussed issues concerns taxing emissions, more specifically, to encourage businesses to lower their greenhouse gas emissions by opting for cheaper renewable energy sources, leading, in turn, to customers making more sustainable choices (see example of idea). Additionally, there is a call for the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) to be expanded. A sub-theme of ideas concerns deforestation with calls to invest in reforestation of Europe (see example of idea) or globally to save the lungs of the planet, namely, the Amazon rainforest and other world rainforests, in order not only to slow down global carbon pollution and save species, but also to reduce migratory pressures on Europe (see example of idea).

On the sub-theme of water pollution, there is a strong emphasis on the need to ensure the future security of drinking water resources and clean ecosystems (see event). Moreover, there are concrete proposals for combatting rising ocean levels and river pollution (see example of event). One of the ideas suggests to create facilities for recycling plastics taken out from rivers and oceans (see idea). Lastly, some ideas on the platform want to limit light pollution (see example of idea).

Transport

A large group of ideas under the theme of transport focuses on the relationship between transport and pollution. Some of the suggestions listed below concern changing the transport system in order to reduce pollution. Ideas submitted on the platform to change the transport system call first and foremost for a ban of short-distance flights in the EU in order to reduce pollution (see example of idea). Contributors highlight that the pandemic has already led to a shrinking aviation industry.

In general, there is strong support for public transport systems in Europe to be improved (see example of idea) as more environmentally friendly alternatives to short-distance flights. Specifically, a common European railway network is widely discussed (see example of idea). One contributor proposes the Euro Trainscanner search engine to make travelling by rail more attractive (see idea) and another suggests introducing an integrated EU ticket and making it free of charge in cities (see idea).

Other ideas concern a common cycling network, proposing, for instance, an extension of cycling routes or the creation of a Europe-wide cycling junction network (see example of idea).

Another pool of ideas focuses on innovation and the development of electric vehicles, such as cars and bicycles, and their integration into the current environment, for example by providing for a charging station network (see example of idea).

On the question of the decarbonisation of transport and more environmentally friendly transport, the participants also emphasise the importance of cross-border projects to foster shipping and rail transport (see example of idea). There is also a call to develop programmes to encourage R&D and innovation, in order to produce means of transport, both public and private, individual and collective, that are non-polluting and 100% energy self-sufficient (see example of idea).

Agriculture

Under the theme of agriculture, the concept of ecological farming and more small farms (see example of idea) is fairly frequently advocated by contributors, with calls for the use of pesticides and intensive farming to be banned (see example of idea). Some contributors go even further, suggesting that the
ban should be extended to private use: while farmers must document their use of pesticides, there is no such requirement for private garden owners, who can legally purchase such products, and are often unaware of their harmful effects (see example of idea).

Other ideas suggest that the EU should do more to promote a plant-based diet on the grounds of climate protection and the preservation of our environment. Some contributors add ethical concerns to motivate such action (see example of idea). This is also addressed under the Health topic.

The need to ensure food sovereignty and security by promoting local farming is also strongly emphasised by contributors (see example of idea). Local farming could be promoted, for example, by creating food belts around cities, requiring fruit trees to be planted in urban areas, supporting the acquisition of land by producers and farmers by limiting the price of such land, requiring part of the rooftop space of public buildings to be used for urban agriculture, limiting housing pressure on agricultural land (see idea).

Additionally, contributors want to promote biodiversity in Europe, for example, by concrete measures such as green roofs (see example of idea). Lastly, there is a discussion about the income of farmers, with some contributors calling for farmers to receive a guaranteed income through fair prices instead of subsidies (see example of idea).

Consumption

Within the theme of consumption, there is a general call to change the current system of the mass consumption of goods and services (see example of idea). Some contributors go even further by proposing to have quotas for maximum consumption and production (see example of idea).

A number of contributors on the platform point to the considerable volume of waste produced and propose several measures to avoid and combat such waste, such as recycling (see example of idea), opting for zero or low waste product packaging in order to decrease the negative impact on the environment (see example of idea). In addition, there is a strong call to stop imports of products that cause tropical deforestation (see example of idea).

The second strand of ideas advocates a more advanced product labelling system (see example of idea) that would detail the environmental impact of production or indicate whether the products contain microplastics and thus have a negative long-term effect on the health of consumers (see example of idea).

The third strand revolves around the fast fashion and the textile industry, with the aim of making it more eco-friendly; contributors highlight the huge quantity of resources used in the production of clothing and that clothes are often unsuitable for recycling (see example of idea).

Additionally, participants highlight the need to promote green and sustainable tourism instead of mass tourism, since the latter is considered to have a considerable impact on natural and cultural resources (see example of event).

A last group of comments and ideas under this theme expresses concerns about the waste generated by new electronic appliances, and calls inter alia for an increased mandatory warranty for them and
the need to ensure reparability (see example of idea). Some participants also want energy consumption to be limited - especially since electricity is largely produced with fossil fuels - by imposing a monthly quota of electricity for consumption, with the surplus being taxed (see example of idea).

**Subsidisation, taxation**

Within this theme contributors call for a halt to environmentally unfriendly subsidies, such as harmful fishing subsidies (see idea) or fossil fuel subsidies (see idea). Similarly, suggestions advocate increasing subsidies for biodiversity and climate change projects that would lead to a long-term positive outlook.

Contributors also propose introducing a sustainability tax (see example of idea) that would make unsustainable products more expensive, thus making such products less attractive for both consumers and producers. Moreover, it is considered to provide the EU with additional revenue to invest in sustainability.

**Energy**

Contributors on the platform suggest boosting both the small-scale and large-scale use of renewable energy, as well as limiting the use of nuclear energy, or, alternatively, developing safe nuclear energy and using it in countries and places where it is not possible to use renewable energy sources (see example of idea). Additionally, the second most endorsed idea since the launch within the topic of climate change calls for a halt to all fossil fuel subsidies (see example of idea).

Simultaneously, there is a call to investigate alternative sources of energy (see example of event), such as thermonuclear fusion, geothermal energy or hydrogen that would contribute considerably to energy diversity (see example of idea). However, contributors emphasize that even alternative sources, such as wind energy, should be accepted by local populations and that it must be ensured that they have a positive impact on the biodiversity, human beings and landscapes (see example of idea).

**Creating change in attitudes and behaviours**

Another focus is on education and raising awareness among Europeans of all generations (see event). While most of the ideas address the education of young people (see example of idea), there is also a call to engage older Europeans with climate change initiatives, especially because of the increasing population ageing in Europe (see example of idea). Additionally, some contributors stress the need to promote eco-responsible communication by the European institutions. For instance, they propose to develop communication kits on "how to be an eco-responsible European" and to strengthen environmental education in order to create neighbourhoods responsible for the environment (see idea).
Find out more about the topic:

- European Green Deal
- Climate change
- Circular economy and waste reduction
- Climate change - what the EU is doing
- Biodiversity - how the EU protects nature
- Climate neutrality - 5 facts about the EU's goal of climate neutrality

Health: Prescribing a healthier future for Europeans

Healthcare, well-being and a healthy lifestyle are vital for all of us. The coronavirus pandemic has revealed a need to work together to build stronger health systems and protect European’s physical and mental health.

While national governments are primarily responsible for healthcare and medical services, European Union health policies can support and strengthen this action. By voicing your opinions, hopes and concerns, you can influence the way healthcare is provided in Europe.

What is the EU doing?

Through joint action to fight coronavirus and protect people’s health, the EU has already demonstrated how much more we can do in the area of public health. Some of the ways we do this include securing vaccines, ensuring the availability of affordable medicines, treatments and medical equipment, and helping countries work together to coordinate their responses.

Looking to the future, the coronavirus pandemic has increased the need for a European Health Union, stronger Europe-wide coordination, more resilient health systems and better preparation for possible future crises. Our goal is to protect you with high-quality care in the event of a crisis, and provide the tools needed to prevent and manage health emergencies that affect the whole continent.

While fighting the pandemic and leading an emergency response, the European Union continues to act in other health-related areas, including improving preventive care, treatment and aftercare for major diseases such as cancer.

Input from the Multilingual Digital Platform (19 April – 2 August 2021)

Under the topic of health contributors address a wide variety of themes. They suggest more harmonisation and integration at European level; this is also influenced by the experience of COVID-19 and its impact. This topic has generated 1,018 contributions: 392 ideas, 576 comments and 50 events. The main themes explored under this topic are:

- Integrating EU healthcare systems
- Healthcare access for everyone
- Healthy ageing
- Healthy lifestyles
- Responses to COVID-19
- Prevention, rather than intervention
Integrating EU healthcare systems

Participants on the platform advocate closer cooperation among Member States to strengthen European healthcare systems in various ways. Ideas include pooling knowledge and capacities by, for example, allowing intensivists to move freely and take care of critically ill patients across the EU (see idea), standardising pre-hospital emergency care (see idea), recognising carer qualifications across the EU (see idea), setting up a European hospital for rare diseases (see idea) and improving legal regulation on transplantation to create a unified transplantation coordination system (see idea).

Accordingly, discussions underline the need to equip the EU with more emergency competences and powers in the area of public health through a revision of the Treaty of Lisbon (see example of an idea). These suggestions are most often put forward in connection with how Member States dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and the related shortage of medical equipment, the challenges of vaccine development and joint vaccine purchases.

Healthcare access for everyone

Ideas put forward regarding healthcare access support the introduction of a European medical insurance scheme (see example of idea and idea). The idea of de-privatising the healthcare industry is also put forward as a way to make healthcare affordable for all (see idea). On a different note, a further idea to make healthcare practically more accessible to everyone is that of expanding the mobile health system, in the form of health buses which would facilitate high-speed and low-barrier access to medical systems (see idea).

Healthy ageing and anti-ageing

In light of the ageing populations in Europe, citizens highlight the importance of good health during the “silver age”. One highly endorsed and commented idea promotes science-intensive healthy longevity research and technologies (see idea), such as rejuvenation therapies and clinical trials in this field and implement effective legal, budgetary, regulatory and institutional commitments, with the objective to increase healthy life expectancy in the European Union.

One citizen raises the potential of rural areas as hubs of innovation for healthy ageing strategies, as these “struggling areas” are generally more densely populated by elderly citizens and the quality of healthcare is not as high as in urban areas, therefore requiring innovative solutions (see idea). Taking the topic even further, one citizen advances cryonics as an opportunity to delay care until a cure is found, by freezing terminally ill people (see idea).
Healthy lifestyles

Several ideas underline the importance of healthy diets, with many citizens suggesting that the EU should promote vegetarian diets (see idea) because of their health and environmental benefits. In this context, one idea is to increase taxes on meat while reducing VAT on healthy foods (see idea). Further contributions call for an investigation into the effects of emulsifiers (see idea), for a ban on artificial trans fats (see idea) and regulation of agricultural techniques impacting nutrition and health, such as antibiotics in intensive farming (see idea). Similar ideas are also brought up under the topic of Climate change and the environment.

The idea of integrating natural remedies in medicine is widely discussed on the platform (see example of an idea). Specifically, contributors suggest that non-medicinal interventions can demonstrably benefit the health and autonomy of patients (see example of an idea). One citizen also highlights the benefits derived from northern berries with high antioxidant content in enhancing cancer treatments (see idea). Similarly, alternative therapies are suggested, such as sylvotherapy to counter stress, burnout, depression and anxiety (see idea). Support for promoting health literacy (see idea) and instilling health-related practices from an early age, as a key factor to a healthy lifestyle are also proposed on the platform (see idea). For example, several citizens point to the need to discourage tobacco consumption at European level, by increasing the price and reducing selling points to pharmacies (see example of an idea).

Responses to COVID-19

The effects of COVID-19 are widely discussed by participants who, overall, feel that there is a need to restore rational and scientific credibility and confidence in medicine and politics, vis-à-vis the widespread diffusion of misconceptions and fake news during the pandemic. When discussing COVID-19 related measures, citizens on the platform agree that any COVID-19 measures in the EU should be implemented in an evidence-based manner, in order to achieve a cost-benefit analysis that is as realistic as possible (see idea).

Further ideas highlight the need to develop inclusive strategies to deal with future pandemics at EU level, protecting the rights of people with a disability (see idea). One suggestion put forward is to carry out research on the impact of COVID-19 measures on residents and staff of homes for the elderly in the different EU countries, in order to have first-hand accounts of the experiences of elderly people with COVID-19 measures (see idea).

One contribution addresses the procedures relating to vaccine purchases at EU level, calling for greater disclosure and transparency with respect to the contracts with the pharmaceutical companies (see idea). Furthermore, debates on the vaccination programme reveal conflicting views, ranging from the idea that vaccination should be mandatory for everyone (see idea), to suggesting that citizens should be free to choose (see idea). Another contributor argues that vaccines should not be mandatory for young people and that the EU should not “blackmail” them by enabling “facilitated” transnational travel in exchange for vaccination and that if PCR tests are required they should be provided for free (see idea). It is also proposed that EU Member States should agree to recognise the relevant WHO standards and the national document certifying the level of antibodies (or vaccine/refreshment) (see idea). The green pass certificate is also widely discussed, pitching those
who fear the rise of two classes of citizens (see idea) and suggest that Europe should defend the right to choose not to be vaccinated (see idea) against those who support such a health pass and obligatory vaccination as part of a collective effort to defeat the virus and ensure viability of the healthcare systems (see example of an idea).

Several citizens call for greater solidarity and the establishment of a global partnership and funding to fight and eradicate diseases globally and suggest that Europe can be the world leader in fighting and winning against pandemics, cancer and heart disease (see idea). One citizen suggests that the European Commission, in cooperation with World Health Organisation, should promote an international agreement to enable the worldwide production and distribution of medicines in the context of pandemics (see idea) and another contribution underlines the need to vaccinate the world to prevent the rise of new strains (see idea). At the same time, contributors propose that measures should be taken to safeguard the patents of the companies and suggest that the European Commission could play a significant role as mediator and ambassador (see idea).

Prevention, rather than intervention

Several ideas put forward by citizens concern raising awareness about mental health and its consequences, such as burnout, stress, depression and anxiety, and call for a European Plan to tackle this issue (see idea), especially in view of the impact of the restrictive measures imposed due to COVID-19.

The influence of air pollution on citizens’ health is also raised as a pressing issue (see idea), as is the need to tackle noise pollution by defining strict levels on permitted noise emissions for car tires (see idea). In addition, there is a call to lower exposure to substances of very high concern, including PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) (see idea).

A cross-cutting sub-theme on the platform is a criticism of the EURATOM Treaty, which is considered to favour nuclear power compared to other energy sources and to not adequately protect European citizens against the dangers of nuclear power, with some citizens advocating the abolition of the EURATOM Treaty (see example of an idea).

Health in a digitalised era

A group of citizens discuss the opportunities and threats relating to increased digitalisation during the past decades. Several ideas see digitalisation, compatibility and integration of European eHealth systems as a way of providing citizens with interoperable health records across the EU (see example of an idea). However, some contributors are cautious and emphasise the vulnerability of such sensitive data and the need to limit both nationally and Europe-wide the size of the health data set, e.g. for research purposes, to a fixed number of given records or patients (see idea). One citizen calls for the prohibition of national genome databases which are used for medical research purposes, but may be accessed by other entities, such as government services, for other purposes thereby violating privacy rights (see idea).

Another idea suggests to prioritize funding for research on exercise and in relation to eHealth points to digital solutions that help citizens to remain physically active, thereby combating a diverse range of chronic conditions that are due to inactivity (see idea).
On a different note, digital addiction is discussed and an EU action plan against digital addiction is suggested (see idea) with some contributors suggesting that training should be introduced in schools, as well as information campaigns for adults to limit digital interaction.

Health research

Various citizens endorse the idea of creating a centralised European Health Research Institute, to coordinate health research across national institutes and invest in pharmaceutical research (see example of an idea). A citizen underlines the necessity for the purchase, production and supply of protective clothing and medicines to become more Europe-based (see idea). The proposal to encourage research on the pathomechanisms of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis within Horizon Europe (see idea) has been endorsed by a number of participants. The need for Europe to join forces with universities on research to develop a new antibiotic against super resistant bacteria is also put forward (see example of an idea). Some citizens also call for a law making it obligatory for pharmaceutical companies which are distributing vaccines to publish full data from the clinical trials for those vaccines to encourage evaluations of their safety and effectiveness (see idea). Other ideas include the creation of a European laboratory for infectious diseases (see idea).

Sexual and reproductive health

An idea proposes that free menstrual items should be made available in public spaces to combat so-called ‘period poverty’ (see idea). Other proposals suggest the introduction of tax relief on sanitary pads and the full reimbursement of female contraceptives. In addition, the need for more research into female reproductive health and the development of less invasive female and male contraceptives is raised (see idea). There are also calls on the platform to ban male genital mutilation without consent and before the age of majority (see idea). A proposal suggests instituting EU sponsored and promoted sexual health clinics (see idea).

Other ideas

Other ideas relate to rewarding responsible behaviour as part of health insurance, for example in the form of cashback in case services are not used in a given year, (see idea). One idea highlights the need to find a solution for disposing of hazardous medical waste (such as needles from diabetes insulin kits) (see idea). Several citizens also call for cannabis to be decriminalised for public health reasons (see idea and idea), while others advocate a more sustained fight against drugs at EU level (see idea). Lastly, a largely discussed idea suggests following the astronomical time zone instead of changing to winter and summer times (see idea).

Find out more about the topic:

- EU Public Health
- Coronavirus response
- EU health policy
- EU response to coronavirus
- EU’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- EU health policy
Find out more about all EU policies and activities:

- European Parliament website
- Council of the EU website
- European Commission website

This document was prepared by the Common Secretariat of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Please follow the digital platform on the Conference on the Future of Europe (www.futureu.europa.eu) to see more information and to read the posts of other citizens who have already posted their ideas and thoughts. To find out more about the ideas submitted so far, please also consult the first interim report from the Platform.