



# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## What makes people recycle? An evaluation of attitudes and behaviour in London Western Riverside

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Thomas, Christine; Slater, Rachel; Yoxon, Mark; Leaman, J. and Downing, J. (2003). What makes people recycle? An evaluation of attitudes and behaviour in London Western Riverside. In: International Solid Waste Association World Congress, Nov 2003, Melbourne, Australia.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: [\[not recorded\]](#)

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

# What Makes People Recycle? An Evaluation of Attitudes and Behaviour in London Western Riverside

Dr Christine Thomas, Dr Rachel Slater, Mr Mark Yoxon, (The Open University),  
John Leaman, MORI and Philip Downing, (MORI Social Research Institute)

Contact: Christine Thomas or Mark Yoxon, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes,  
MK7 6AA, UK.

Tel: +44 (1908) 653460 / 652029 Fax: +44 (1908) 858407 Email: c.i.thomas@open.ac.uk /  
m.yoxon@open.ac.uk

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Local authorities throughout the UK are under extreme pressure to improve their recycling performance. Vital to achieving this goal is the need to better engage the public and improve levels of participation.

This paper presents the initial findings from the first phase of a research project, concentrating on the determinants of recycling behaviour amongst residents in the Western Riverside area of central London. The research is a partnership between The Open University and MORI Social Research Institute and involved both qualitative research using focus groups and quantitative research using face to face interviews.

The overall objective of the research was to understand what makes people recycle. The work embraced four research issues:

- General awareness and understanding
- Beliefs, attitudes and behaviours
- What people feel about service provision
- The key influencing factors and trusted information sources

One of the clearest messages from the research is the importance and need for information about recycling. It is one of the key influences to increasing rates of recycling and a fundamental message to communicating what the benefits of recycling actually are.

The research also demonstrates that a lack of understanding of the basic practicalities of recycling should not be underestimated. Residents do not feel informed about what happens to the materials once they have been collected. Lack of concern for the environment generally is not a key issue. A lack of awareness and consideration of recycling issues on a regular basis is. In short, the significance of recycling is not a pressing issue in people's lives. An important motivator agreed by all groups was that recycling needs to be or become familiar behaviour. Both the young mid-recyclers and the medium/high referred to "environmental concerns" motivating them to recycle. The low/non recyclers generally felt that recycling is inconvenient, not an important issue and in some cases "not cool".

All participants favoured a one bag or box kerbside collections and / or convenient facilities nearby, such as mini local bring sites<sup>1</sup> or estate based facilities. The presence of good

---

<sup>1</sup> Bring site facilities provided in Western Riverside mostly comprise groups of containers sited at shopping centres, near estates or leisure facilities or on main streets or thoroughfares

recycling facilities and services can have a dramatic impact on residents' recycling behaviour. Overall there was low confidence in the ability of the council to deliver a reliable recycling service, particularly amongst the low/non and young mid-recyclers.

All groups felt that they had received insufficient information. The general message from low/non and young mid-recyclers was give us more information. Medium/high recyclers wanted more information to help understand the issues. Both the low/non and young mid-recyclers commented that hard-hitting messages are more effective ways to encourage recycling, as are personalised messages and engaging directly with communities. All groups wanted to know more, and agreed that awareness was important in getting people to recycle. The different recycler types though wanted different information, which has implications for communication campaigns potentially engaging in niche marketing and delivering different messages to different groups.

A key message which emerged throughout the research was: "get the service right, make it convenient and easy, get the facilities in place... *then* tell us about it & often!"

## INTRODUCTION

Local authorities throughout the UK are under extreme pressure to improve their recycling performance. Vital to achieving this goal is the need to better engage the public and improve levels of participation. However, much of this effort is happening in relative isolation without any analysis of the effectiveness of different approaches and campaigns. Some experience is beginning to be shared on a piecemeal basis, but more needs to be done to learn from individual projects. We need to identify what does and doesn't work to improve public involvement and then how to disseminate this to the stakeholders concerned.

This paper presents some initial findings from the first phase of a research project, concentrating on the determinants of recycling behaviour amongst residents in the Western Riverside area of central London<sup>2</sup>. The research involved using both quantitative public attitudinal survey data and working with a range of focus groups to provide in depth qualitative data.

The purpose of the research was to collect baseline information of residents' attitudes and behaviour towards recycling, ahead of a five-year campaign by Waste Watch<sup>3</sup> in the area.

The research will provide an informed analysis of attitudinal and behavioural change that can be linked with the public communication and education campaigns, in order to evaluate campaign effectiveness.

This paper presents the results and analysis of the attitudes, motivations and behaviours of a representative profile of households from London Western Riverside, in an attempt to understand how behavioural change can be achieved in urban communities. Current recycling diversion ranges from 7-11%. The Waste Watch extensive communication and infrastructure development campaign is aiming to triple this within three years.

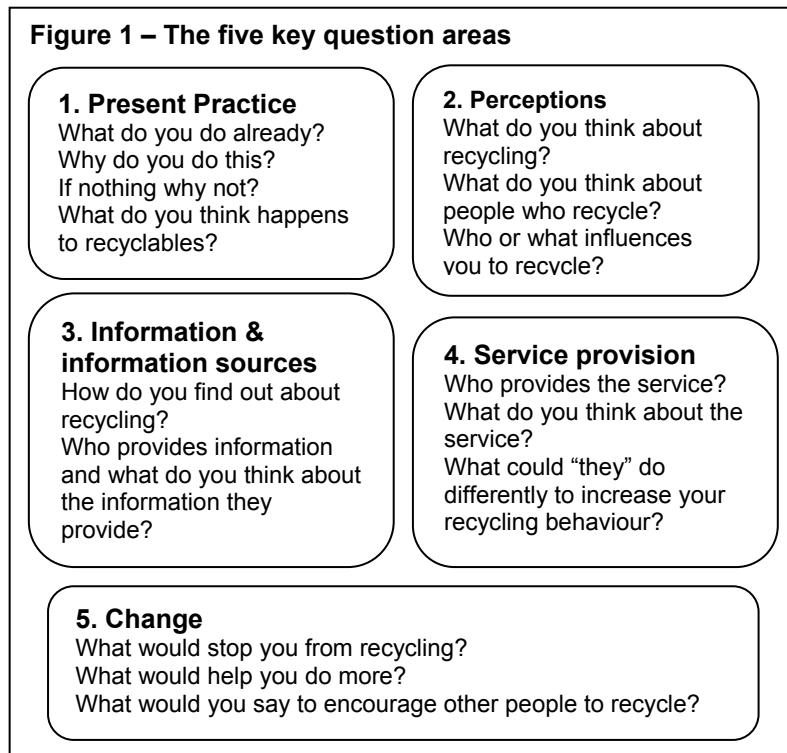
---

<sup>2</sup> The Western Riverside Waste Authority Area covers the London boroughs of Lambeth, Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea and Wandsworth.

<sup>3</sup> Waste Watch is the leading national organisation promoting and encouraging action on the 3Rs - waste reduction, reuse and recycling. Waste Watch works with community organisations, local and national Government to encourage the environmental benefits of waste minimisation and recycling.

## METHODOLOGY

The project was carried out by a partnership between The Open University and MORI Social Research Institute and involved both qualitative research using focus groups<sup>4</sup> and



quantitative research using face to face interviews to establish base line attitudes and behaviours<sup>5</sup>.

The overall objective of the research was to evaluate the impact of the Waste Watch campaign, in terms of its influence on the following issues:

- General awareness and understanding of waste and recycling issues
- Beliefs and attitudes towards waste and recycling and investigation into what would achieve change, whether positively or negatively
- What people feel about service provision (which may touch on other issues)
- The key influencing factors

and trusted information sources

- Actual behaviour and responsibility in respect of household waste disposal, recycling, composting and product purchases
- Awareness, attitudes and reactions to the campaign and the campaign branding, including 'message testing'.

The qualitative research objectives focussed on exploring in greater depth understanding and attitudes and in particular issues concerned with translating attitudes into behaviour change. What enables change; what are the perceived barriers to becoming engaged in recycling activities?

Question areas for focus group discussion were developed from these desired outcomes, with the first two being key areas for investigation through the focus group work.

Focus group participants were recruited from those people who had participated in the MORI survey of Western Riverside and who had agreed to follow-on contact. This allowed recruitment of individuals already primed in this area, and for whom we could profile their current recycling behaviour and socio-demographic characteristics. Other participants

<sup>4</sup> The Open University carried out thirteen focus group sessions. The profiles identified in discussion with Waste Watch, and used to recruit people for the groups were: low and non-recyclers; medium and high recyclers; young (under 35) low or medium recyclers; residents from the trial areas identified for the Western Riverside communication campaign

<sup>5</sup> MORI conducted 2,023 face-to-face and in home interviews with residents aged 16+, between October and November 2002. Enumeration districts within each borough in Western Riverside were selected at random, with interviews undertaken according to quotas (age, gender, work status and ethnicity) to reflect the population characteristics of the local area. The results are weighted by age, gender, work status and ethnicity to ensure the study is representative of the populations of each borough.

were recruited by MORI through face-to face interviews to determine their current recycling behaviour as well as certain socio-demographic characteristics.

Potential participants were identified from self-reported recycling behaviour. Apart from these defining characteristics, groups were selected to include a varied cross-section of gender, age, and ethnic background where possible. What these in-depth qualitative studies were designed for and allowed was exploration of the opinions, practice and attitudes of a selection of residents in Western Riverside, picked to represent certain sections of the population but not necessarily able to represent the views of the population of the borough as a whole. The groups were designed to explore the attitudes and behaviours of groups of similar types of recyclers. Each focus group took two hours, and included a warm-up exercise and introductions; discussion around the five key areas of questions, which were recorded and transcribed for analysis; and a session exploring campaign images.

The participants taking part in the thirteen focus groups reflected a reasonably diverse group in respect of their gender, age, ethnicity, and recycling behaviour. They were split about half and half between medium/high and non/low recyclers, with 25% each of non and low recyclers, and with more medium (35%) than high (15%) recyclers. There were slightly more female participants than male. Half of those attending the groups were aged between 25 and 45, and just under a third 45-65, with only a few either under 25 or over 65. Three quarters of the participants were from white ethnic backgrounds, with the rest split equally between black and minority ethnic groups. The majority of those attending lived in flats or terraced housing. Less than a third lived in household with children living at home, whereas a half lived in adult only households where residents were aged under 60. They were not chosen to represent the socio-demographic profile of the Western Riverside areas, or of each borough, but to reflect the attitudes of people with different recycling behaviours living in those boroughs.

Consistency was maintained across the focus groups by following the same script or question guide with each group. Transcripts of the focus groups discussions were analysed qualitatively through coding and grouping participants' comments around key questions and issues that stemmed from the question guide.

## THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

These are discussed in parallel and identify four key issue areas which begin to answer the principal question "What makes people recycle".

Drawing on the quantitative findings, one in ten residents (11%) say they recycle *everything that can be recycled*, while a further one in three (30%) recycles *a lot but not everything*. However, over half (58%) are rarely engaging in recycling; half of these *do not recycle much* while the other half admit they *do not recycling anything*.

|  |
|--|
| <b>The four key issue areas - What makes people recycle?</b> |
|--|

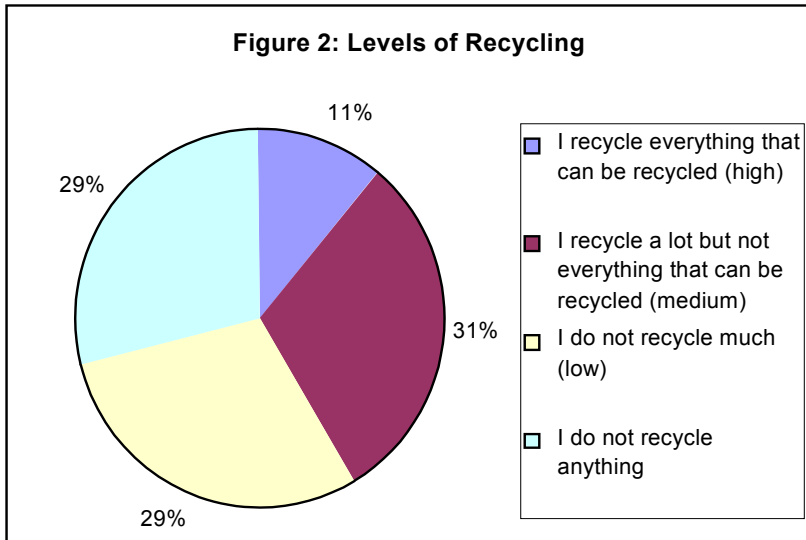
- |                          |                      |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Drivers or motivators | 2. Service provision |
| 3. Collection systems    | 4. Information       |

The research shows that recycling behaviour in the Western Riverside Waste Authority Area is relatively *static*; two in three (62%)

recycle about the same as they did a year ago. Furthermore, while 17% say they recycle more than a year ago, a similar proportion (11%) counterbalance this by recycling less.

This pattern was reflected across each of the four individual boroughs, demonstrating that each borough faces the same challenge; that is, there is little evidence of cultural or behavioural change among residents towards greater levels of recycling.

One of the clearest messages from the survey is the importance and need for **information about recycling**. It is one of the *key* influences behind increasing rates of recycling among residents; among those who say they recycle more than they did a year ago, the most frequent explanation is 'more awareness/ information' (27%). Similarly, a lack of information can reduce the level of recycling; among those who say they recycle less than they did a year, 14% mention 'not knowing where the facilities are' and a further seven percent 'no information about how to recycle'.



A fundamental message to communicate is **what the benefits of recycling are**. While over half (59%) are well informed in this respect, a significant minority of one in three (36%) are not. This is slightly higher than nationally, where 31% do not feel informed about the benefits of recycling. INCPEN/MORI (1999).

The research also demonstrates that a lack of understanding of the basic

practicalities of recycling should not be underestimated. For example, as many as 45% do not feel informed about **what can and cannot be recycled** and over half (52%) do not feel informed about **what local recycling services are provided**. While this is also true of residents nationally to an extent (30% and 37% respectively), the problem is more acute in the Western Riverside Waste Authority Area.

Even more residents do not feel informed **about what happens to the materials once they have been collected** (70%).

Awareness of where the rubbish goes is also important in feeding into three other issues in particular:

- allowing people to understand how their individual action is making a difference
- tackling 'recycling myths' that recycling all ends up in landfill anyway (which as many as 20% in the Western Riverside area believe)
- encouraging people to make 'green' consumer choices in favour of recycled products (54% are currently not informed about *what recycled products they can buy*).

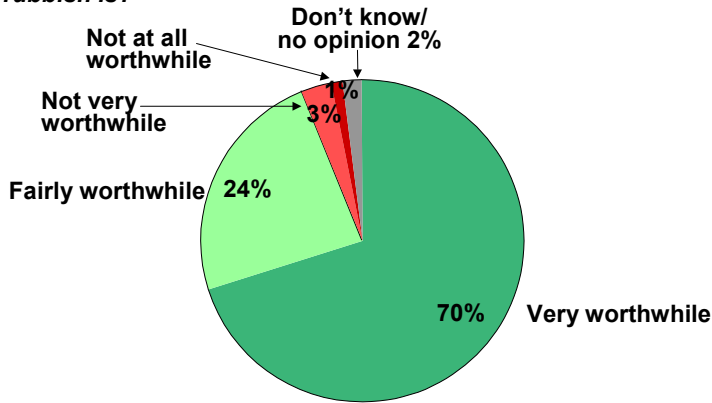
Finally, residents (74%) are not aware of any *campaigns or initiatives in the local area* to encourage them to recycle more. This is significant in the sense that it does little to demonstrate that recycling is a 'normal' day-to-day activity. Likewise it shows that there is little social/peer pressure on people to recycle and a lack of any sense of a 'collective' response to the waste problem. Indeed, most residents do not think that many other people in their area are recycling; the mean average estimate of how many other people are recycling is just one in four (25%), and as many as 54% believe it is less than this. This is particularly significant against a backdrop of 44% saying they would recycle more if others did so as well.

There is little doubt that the residents in the Western Riverside Waste Authority Area think recycling is important; the vast majority (94%) consider it worthwhile.

This is in keeping with results from surveys nationally; 49% consider it a 'serious' problem while a further 45% think it is a 'fairly' serious problem. MORI (1999). Furthermore, one in three consider waste and recycling one of the *most* important environmental issues.

**Figure 3 - Attitudes to Recycling**

Q Overall, how worthwhile or not do you think recycling household rubbish is?



Base: 1,300 residents aged 16+, face-to-face, in-home, London Western Riverside, October-November 2002, Waste Watch/MORI

Source: MORI

The issue, therefore, appears not to be about a lack of concern for the environment *per se*, but more a lack of awareness and consideration on a *regular basis*. In short, the *significance* of recycling is not the most pressing issue; rather it is *salience*. As MORI's research for the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit notes, "*while the public considers the disposal of society's waste a significant environmental concern, it is not an issue*

*at the forefront of their minds. The transient nature in which it is considered appears insufficient to establish and maintain habitual patterns of recycling*". MORI (2002)

## **FINDINGS BY RECYCLER TYPE**

### **Drivers and motivators**

An important motivator agreed by all groups was recycling being or becoming common behaviour. The medium/high and young mid-recyclers commented that it had to become a social norm or habit to take off, although they didn't offer answers as to how this situation could be brought about. However the low/non recyclers saw it more as a hassle for them and not a habit, whereas some of young mid-recyclers felt that by recycling they were leading the way towards creating these good habits.

*"I think the more people that do it the more people will be doing it in the future. Obviously like all pioneer things, when you start doing it you have this hopeless feeling of "what's the point of me doing it if nobody else is going to do it?" But I think that is why it is so important because eventually, gradually, the tendency is that things will broaden and should reach outer levels society really"*

Low/non recyclers felt that at the moment recycling was not an important enough issue to most of them, some even saying it was not cool,. However many of them still thought of it as a 'good thing' to do, and hence felt guilty for not doing it. At the opposite end of the spectrum, medium/high recyclers were often motivated by the 'feel good' factor. Young mid-recyclers were generally keen to recycle, even those not currently doing much.

Both the young mid-recyclers and the medium/high referred to environmental concerns motivating them to recycle, with the young mid-recyclers more likely to be environmentally driven even if they are low recyclers at present. Medium/high recyclers were more concerned about issues of too much waste.

The low/non recyclers generally felt that recycling is inconvenient. This issue of convenience as a motivator was reinforced by the other groups. Medium/high recyclers

said it needs to be easy to do, and felt that the council should drive this by making it easier for them. Young mid-recyclers also considered convenience to be important and wanted more facilities, especially on estates. Time issues were a barrier for this group particularly.

Low/non recyclers had a low awareness of how to recycle, which concurs with the feeling that medium/high recyclers had that people don't understand the issues. Medium/high recyclers also expressed the opinion that those who don't recycle are lazy.

All groups expressed the opinion that it should not be the sole responsibility of individuals to change things, but that government should provide the lead. There were comments though from all groups about the need for shared responsibility from other sectors as well.

"Carrots" for individuals and "sticks" for business was the overall message from the medium/high and young mid-recyclers, who agreed that fiscal incentives were the preferred motivator especially for householders, whereas business needed to be regulated. However the low/non recyclers were more divided over which approaches they felt would be most effective.

Supermarkets and the producers of packaging were the target of many comments, amongst both the medium/high and low/non recyclers, who felt that they needed to take or be forced to take, more responsibility for problems of waste.

### **Service provision**

Where available, kerbside collections were preferred, with the medium/high recyclers particularly commenting on how easy and convenient this type of service was.

Low/non recyclers overwhelmingly commented on the lack of provision, and experienced significant confusion over what services might be available and how to use them. They generally wanted better and more convenient infrastructures for recycling, and felt that estate and flat dwellers especially were left out. This sentiment was also expressed by the young mid-recyclers, with medium/high recyclers agreeing that there was a lack of facilities for those on estates. The medium/high recyclers suggested, as did the young mid-recyclers that more consistency between schemes, some standardisation across boroughs would make it easier to use recycling facilities.

All groups reacted with comments about bring sites being untidy and dirty places, and that they were unpleasant and inconvenient to use. Amongst the young mid-recyclers, those using bring facilities tended to recycle less than those with kerbside collections.

Overall there was low confidence in the ability of the council to deliver a reliable recycling service, particularly amongst the low/non and young mid-recyclers. Medium/high recyclers were more likely to be happy with their service, although many in this group were dissatisfied. Surprisingly many of the medium/high recyclers expressed lack of confidence that materials are actually recycled after they are collected.

*"Now you are never sure whether they have separated those from green bins (recyclables) from other bins (rubbish) so occasionally I am rather sceptical. Is the stuff actually being recycled or not?"*

### **Preferred collection system**

All participants favoured either kerbside collections and / or convenient facilities nearby, such as mini local bring sites or estate based facilities. They also favoured either a one bag or box system for kerbside collections, although with a number of reservations and problems cited for both methods. Medium/high recyclers said that one bag makes



recycling easier, but many using the green box scheme were happy with that system. Young mid-recyclers expressed an overall preference for the one bag scheme. Low/non recyclers were less concerned with the type of container, having less experience to base their preferences on. Most, including those currently recycling with kerbside collections, also wanted more, and more convenient, bring sites, especially on estates. For young mid-recyclers and low/non recyclers storage is an issue. Some wanted easy home storage, whereas others suggested better bring facilities to deal with this problem. The medium/high recyclers wanted easier storage and more frequent collections.

All groups wanted a system provided for recycling plastics and plastic bags.

### **Information**

All groups felt that they had received insufficient information.

*"Because if you ask me how you recycle paper or a can I couldn't tell you so I don't know the importance of that and why you need to recycle"*

The general message from low/non and young mid-recyclers was give us *more* information. Medium/high recyclers wanted more information to help understand the issues. Low/non recyclers complained about a lack of information from the council, as did young mid-recyclers who were ignorant about the service provision. Medium/high recyclers had found difficulties in getting the information they wanted, particularly accurate information and detailed practical advice.

Both the low/non and young mid-recyclers commented that hard-hitting messages would be more effective ways to encourage recycling, as would personalised messages and engaging directly with communities. Medium/high recyclers also felt face to face campaigns were better than leaflets, and also that a long term, consistent campaign is needed.

The message they wanted varied in emphasis, but generally covered how, why, and what. Low/non recyclers said they need a clearer understanding of *how* to do it, but were not so concerned about the whys and whats and outcomes of recycling. This group were particularly concerned with understanding what is most important, and wanted help to prioritise. Medium/high recyclers were more interested in what happens to recycled materials, as were the young mid-recyclers.

The medium/high and young mid-recyclers felt that schools should be targeted, and that educating children was an important element in encouraging recycling.

Some young mid-recyclers expressed surprise at how ignorant of recycling they had previously been, and commented that attending the focus group had raised their awareness.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Examining the results from the focus groups and quantitative survey work highlights a number of similarities and differences between the three types of recyclers represented in the study. All groups wanted to know more, and agreed that awareness was important in getting people to recycle.

*"It's funny I am on my way to a recycling forum and I was just drinking a bottle of beer and I threw it in a recycling bin. Have I ever done that before? No! Suddenly I was conscious"*

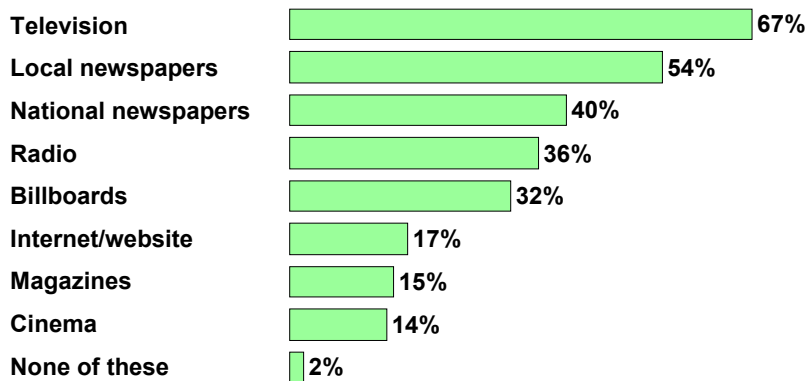
The different recycler types though wanted different information, which has implications for communication campaigns potentially engaging in niche marketing and delivering different messages to different groups. Those not currently recycling or recycling little wanted to know how to do it and why they should, whereas those participants already recycling were more likely to want to know what happens to the recyclables they collect as well as wanting detailed information about what can be recycled

*“Because if you ask me how you recycle paper or a can I couldn’t tell you so I don’t know the importance of that and why you need to recycle”*  
*“I never know whether you can put aluminium cans with steel. That I don’t know. It’s not clear”*

There is strong support for communications which *link* national messages to local information and advice. With respect of general sources, television (67%), local newspapers (54%), national newspapers (40%) and radio (36%) are popular. The link

**Figure 4: Sources of Information: General**

**Q Which of the following, if any, do you think would be the best way for you to get information about recycling?**



Base: 1,300 residents aged 16+, face-to-face, in-home, London Western Riverside, October-November 2002, Waste Watch/MORI

Source: MORI

between national and local media in this respect is interesting and supports the idea that branding and promotion should link national and local work. There is also support for billboards (32%), although the Internet, magazines and cinema all receive less support (17%, 15% and 14% respectively).

However what came across strongly from

these focus groups was that providing information and creating awareness without providing facilities would fail. Provision of infrastructure – and convenience – were major determinants of encouraging recycling behaviour.

A key message which emerged throughout the focus group process was: “get the service right, make it convenient and easy, get the facilities in place... *then* tell us about it & often!”

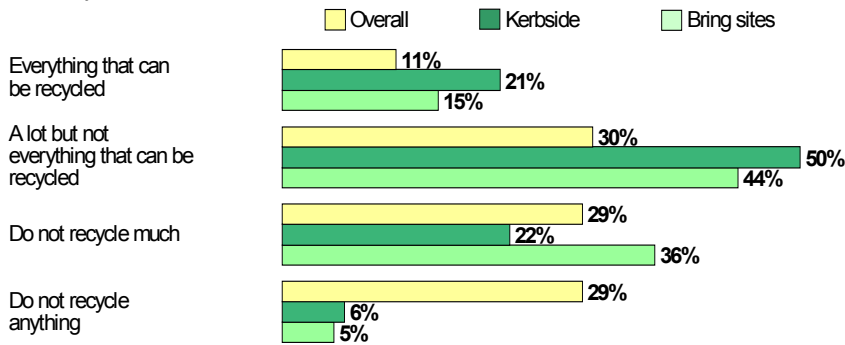
The presence of good recycling facilities and services can have a dramatic impact of residents’ recycling behaviour. The quantitative survey demonstrates this in three respects.

Among those residents who say they recycle more than they did a year ago, many of the most frequent answers related to service provision; for example, ‘more facilities available now’ (19%), ‘been given bins/bags for recycling’ (10%) and ‘offered a better collection service’ (7%). In contrast, poor service provision can prevent residents from bothering to recycle; among those who recycle less than they did a year ago, the single most frequent response is ‘poor/less facilities available’ (28%).

Close proximity to 'bring sites' also impacts positively on recycling behaviour, although not to the same degree as kerbside schemes. 15% recycle 'everything that can be recycled' and 44% 'a lot but not everything'. Therefore, active recycling is increased from 41% on average to 59%. Bring sites are more effective at getting people to recycle to some degree, but less effective at encouraging regular recycling across a range of materials.

**Figure 5 - The Impact of Recycling Facilities on Behaviour**

Q Which, if any, of the following statements comes closest to how much you recycle?



Base: 1300 residents aged 16+, face-to-face, in-home, London Western Riverside, October-November 2003, Waste Watch/MORI (2002)

Source: MORI

*"I think ultimately its convenience. You have got to make it as easy as possible. You have got to try and instil some kind of habit, routine, or regularity that's reliable ... and then people will begin to develop, I don't know, just maybe a little bit of responsibility"*

Where residents have access to kerbside collection schemes, levels of recycling increase substantially. One in five (21%) with access to a kerbside scheme recycle 'everything that can be recycled', compared to 11% on average. Similarly, 50% recycle 'a lot but not everything' compared to 30% on average. In this sense, the presence of kerbside schemes sees an increase in active recycling from 41% in general to 71% (an increase of 71%)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Jim Fielder and Emma Lewis from Waste Watch for their help and feedback on scoping the focus groups, and Philip Downing and John Leaman from MORI, our partners on this study, for their input into the process. We would also like to thank Jay Amies, Waste & Recycling Manager, Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, Deborah Gill, Waste Management Assistant, Wandsworth Borough Council, Luke Henry, Sustainable Waste Manager, London Borough of Lambeth, and David Newman, Waste Development Officer, London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham, for their help in identifying suitable venues and providing us with an invaluable context of waste and recycling activities in each borough.

## REFERENCES

- INCPEN /MORI (1999) 'Recycling Used Packaging from the Domestic Waste Stream: Consumer Awareness and Education', Packaging Consumer Awareness and Education Steering Group
- MORI (1999) 'Business and the Environment', MORI Environment Research
- MORI (2002) 'Public Attitudes Towards Recycling and Waste Management Quantitative and Qualitative Review' The Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office, London
- Thomas, C, Slater, R & Yoxon, M (2003) 'Public Attitudes Towards Waste and Recycling, Western Riverside Communication Campaign Evaluation Research Report on Focus Group Research', The Open University for Waste Watch