



The Environment – less talk, more action

The Survey

Results of a public opinion survey conducted among local women by the South London Fawcett Group in Spring 2001. ¹

“The environment is not taken seriously by any of the main parties – it’s just a bandwagon issue.”

Survey highlights:

- Over 60% of the women we spoke to were concerned with environmental pollution. Many expressed a sense of frustration that the environment is not accorded greater priority by politicians. Women want to see *“less talk... + more action”*.
- Recycling and waste minimisation were the main concerns with quite a number demanding less packaging and better household collections for recyclable items, notably plastic (see Recycling and Waste Management).
- One in five (19%) wanted to see public transport improved and traffic pollution reduced. Several even said they would not give up their cars until public transport was a real alternative (see Transport). Many of these women were also concerned about the environmental and health consequences of car fumes.
- Other environmental concerns included poor air quality in South London and the need to see all forms of pollution addressed and reduced (see Air Quality).
- Also mentioned were concerns about climate change, health issues – especially the need for more organic/free range foods free from pesticides and GM ingredients; preservation of biodiversity and local wildlife; a reduction in noise pollution and greater priority for the environment in building and planning.
- Local environmental issues raised included the need for cleaner streets (reducing litter and graffiti mentioned by 13%); preservation of green spaces such as parks and commons (9%) with play areas being properly managed and safely run; fears about personal safety with poor street lighting giving particular concern; and the need for the environment to be addressed more fundamentally in schools and colleges (see Local Issues).

“The Environment – less talk, more action” is compiled by the South London Fawcett Group.

For further information about the survey or the Group, please contact us:

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Recycling and Waste Management

The issue at present

Waste management is at the centre of environmental concerns. As one woman stated:

“Wastage & recycling – too much of one, not enough of the other.”

- The situation is indeed serious. London produces 13.5 million tonnes of waste every year, most of it burned or buried in landfill sights - both polluting and unpopular practices.²
- London recycles only 6% of all household waste (compared to 25% in Barcelona and 30% in Berlin). The Mayor has set out targets and action plans to increase the proportion of recycled waste in London to 25%.³ Currently, the performance of local authorities in recycling collection varies between under 2% and over 20% (using different reporting methods). This means that most local authorities are nowhere near the aspirational targets.⁴
- Despite these attempts the UK has a record of collective difficulty in dealing with the deeper, longer term issues of sustainability. There is a lack of substantial producer responsibility and financial commitment it lacking to tackle waste targets set in the Waste Strategy 2000.⁴

The future

- We still need to educate the public and raise awareness of waste issues. The need for markets for collected materials, the beneficial effects of sustainable waste management and information about the cost of waste management are vital.
- To provide some examples; experience from US regions comparable to London suggests that 2,000 new jobs could be created in collecting, sorting and moving recyclables and in the secondary material processing industries. A further 5,000 jobs could be created in related social measures.² Although the perceived cost of setting up comprehensive recycling schemes is a major barrier for many local authorities, this situation might change as the cost of traditional waste management is set to increase.⁵ Moreover, a lot of the work done in market development, education and communication, and recycling and composting initiatives is eligible for support through the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme which helps to support the development of sustainable waste management.

Recommendations⁶:

- ***“We waste too much stuff”, “Less packaging and junk mail”***
Waste should be avoided/minimised from the outset. Use of packaging, building and household materials, cosmetics, pesticides, etc. all need to be reduced. Local and natural products present a viable alternative. Apparently even baby Leo Blair uses Real Nappies⁷.
- ***“Paper bags not plastic: encouraging reuse or not giving them out automatically.”***
Where waste is created its re-use should be encouraged as far as is possible. Re-use includes returnable container schemes and repairs instead of replacements.
- ***“More recycling facilities”, “Better recycling facilities”***
Women frequently mentioned recycling. This interest should be built on, for example by expanding recycling schemes to plastics and pressurising retailers into helping to reduce and recycle waste. Kerbside collections can drastically improve recycling rates.
- ***“Efficient management of waste disposal”***
Use waste residue in waste-to-energy technology to generate usable energy.
- ***“‘No’ to incinerators in London boroughs”***
While landfill sights may be preferable to incinerators, neither presents the perfect solution.

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Improve public transport, reduce traffic pollution

The issue at present

“Re-organisation of the transport system to provide efficient & economically viable alternatives to the car.”

- London is grinding to a halt due to massive traffic congestion. Morning peak traffic journeys now average just 9.8 mph in central London – compared to 12.3 in the late 1970s.⁸
- Many women currently use their cars because they have no alternative – either because: 1) there is no public transport service along their entire route; 2) a car is cheaper!; 3) the current public transport system is unreliable or 4) they fear for their personal safety.
- First, Londoners need an accessible, efficient, reasonably priced, sustainable and environmentally friendly public transport service. Transport costs in London and the suburbs are amongst the highest in Europe. Many people simply cannot afford the fares.
- Around a fifth of women (19%) wanted to see public transport improved and traffic pollution reduced. Many were concerned about the environmental and health consequences of car fumes. Several said they would be prepared to switch from cars to public transport if they could be sure of a reliable, affordable and clean service.
- The Mayor’s proposed congestion charge may be a step in the right direction but needs to be addressed in conjunction with the underlying public transport problems. In the absence of a reliable, affordable public transport service, congestion charging could make things worse.
- Parts of south London are have no tube service and are dependent on buses or mainline rail services. This makes East-West journeys time-consuming, inefficient and expensive.
- Road freight is another hazard – with large lorries thundering along roads near residential areas. More use needs to be made of alternative routes such as river/waterways and rail.

The future

“Improve public transport - buses belch carbon monoxide & no-one stops it.”

- More innovative solutions to old problems e.g. schools’ “walking bus” initiative. After all, it’s good exercise and, with reduced car use, would be a healthy option.
- Far more comprehensive cycle routes throughout London and greater emphasis on safety for cycle users – specifically to make this a suitable means of transport for children.
- Affordability is a serious obstacle for many people and needs to be tackled as a matter of urgency if public transport is to be given a fighting chance.
- Efficiency is still a problem. Trains, tubes and buses are all found wanting in this area. If Paris, Rome and New York can run an efficient system, why can’t London?
- Other, green forms of transport need to be expanded, such as the Croydon tram service. Parts of south London are very badly served and this issue needs tackling.

Recommendations

“Environmentally friendly transport.”

- Reduced off-peak fares for ALL forms of public transport: bus, rail, tube and river.
- Greater emphasis on clean transport – buses running on natural gas/electricity; higher, **enforced** fines for emission breaches; expansion of the ‘walking bus’ scheme for schools which reduces peak traffic congestion.
- Improved efficiency – without this London’s women will not leave their cars at home.
- Financial incentives for car sharing, walking, cycling and other green ways of travelling.
- Drastic action – e.g. banning cars from central London on alternate days; congestion charging, etc. but only when the alternative forms of transport are established.

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Air quality – give our lungs a break!

The issue at present

- Peasoupers may be a thing of the past but nitrogen oxides and some components of particulates are rising. These pollutants come from the burning of petrol and diesel fuels.⁹
- We know that poor air quality is damaging the health of Londoners. Transport emissions cause around 380 deaths a year and deprive people of 34,000 years of life annually. The London Health Observatory reports that, each year in London, there are 4,000 respiratory and 1,500 cardiovascular admissions to hospital that can be attributed to air pollution.¹⁰
- Nitrogen oxides are linked to increased episodes of asthma in urban areas and are also thought to increase susceptibility to infection. PM10s (particulates) are linked to increased risk of heart and lung disease, worsening the respiratory diseases and, in some studies, sudden infant death syndrome.⁹
- 1 in 50 heart attacks on London may be due to air pollution.¹¹ 1 in 10 children in the UK has asthma and some studies make a link with air pollution. In any event, increased air pollution aggravates existing symptoms.¹²
- In our survey 16% of respondents put air quality as one of their top concerns. **“Having clean air to breathe”** was a key priority of the women we surveyed.

The future

- Pollutants do not respect borough boundaries - co-ordinated action is needed to improve air quality across the whole of London. Responsibility for air quality management/transport planning must be rationalised to ensure clear prioritisation and accountability.
- The GLA needs to introduce new and innovative strategies to tackle poor air quality and ensure that London's air quality exceeds government targets.
- Those who cause pollution must pay the price of their actions - the polluter pays principle.
- Serious fines for emissions breaches and tax incentives / levies for clean/dirty industries.
- Consider the implications for air quality of all planning applications.
- The GLA must take seriously London's contribution to climate change and seek new measures to reduce the capital's greenhouse gas emissions. We hope these issues will be addressed in the Mayor's draft Air Quality Strategy which we await with great interest.

Recommendations

- We need consistent, comprehensive air quality monitoring across all boroughs - 2 or 3 sites are insufficient, especially in large boroughs. (Wandsworth, take note!)
- The targets specified in the National Air Quality Strategy (NAQS) - to regulate levels of key pollutants up to 2005 - should be regarded as the minimum requirement. Our real goal should be to exceed these targets.
- Innovative information services e.g. real-time readouts of monitoring levels on websites, hotlines etc. to raise the profile of air quality among the population as a whole. Progress to be reported in local newsletters and press. Encourage the involvement of businesses, schools, residents and community groups in promoting "clean air" initiatives.
- Tougher penalties for emission breaches at pollution hotspots. Realistic fines to make polluting industries think twice about exceeding recommended levels.
- Make it easier for people to report emission breaches - clouds of diesel exhaust etc..
- Make sure everyone knows the hotline reporting number and that prompt action is taken to charge the offenders. This could provide a much-needed revenue boost.
- Financial incentives for companies - such as bus companies - using/converting to cleaner, greener fuels e.g. gas/electricity, fitting particulate traps.

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Local issues

Cleaner streets

“Public places need to be cleaned more regularly.”

- 13% of the women we spoke to wanted to see our streets cleaned up.
- Many expressed disgust at the amount of litter and graffiti they encounter. Several specifically requested more frequent street cleaning and more litter bins to combat the problem. Some mentioned continental European cities and the fact that they are frequently not only clean and tidy but immaculately maintained. Why isn't London?
- Dog fouling came in for particular vitriol with tough, on-the-spot fines demanded for offending dog owners.

“A cleaner London. When you compare London to other European cities ours is by far the dirtiest.”

Maintaining green spaces

“More open spaces/green areas where people of all ages can spend time in the open air.”

- Next in order of priority was the need to preserve London's green spaces. Ten percent of the women are concerned about the encroachment of building development onto parks and commons.
- Several wanted to see park keepers and wardens re-introduced as they are concerned about children's safety in public spaces.
- Lack of cleanliness was cited with dog owners once more attracting vociferous criticism.

“Look after green areas & make them safe for people to walk in.”

Additional ideas

- **Bring back the local High Street!** The GLA and local authority policies should be geared towards reducing the need for car travel and enabling Londoners to meet their needs locally as much as possible. Supporting independent retailers and local produce in small neighbourhood centres should be a priority for the economic development of London.
- **London boroughs and well-being powers:** Local Agenda 21 processes and the development of community strategies should form the lynch pin of London boroughs' work on sustainable development. London's community plans should adopt an integrated approach to exercising their new 'well-being powers' and not allow purely economic concerns to overshadow the need for greater social and economic well-being in their communities. The community planning process is a means of moving towards meaningful community participation in decision-making.
- **Create and maintain gender auditing schemes:** An ongoing commitment to women's identifying and meeting women's needs now and in the long term.

Sustainable development:

- Sustainable development and the impact of the quality of the environment on our health is a key focus of the work of the South London Fawcett group. Women often bear the brunt of poor environmental quality and decision-making. Reinvigorating local democracy and increasing public involvement in decision-making is vital to achieve a sustainable London.
- Improving the representation of women and other under-represented groups at all levels of decision-making across London will be key to this. Particular attention should also be paid to using innovative ways of involving women and women's groups in consultation and participation exercises run by both the GLA and London boroughs.

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A briefing by the South London Fawcett Group – part of the Fawcett Society

Summary of Recommendations:

1. The more recycling and good waste management is encouraged the better. The survey shows a need among women for help, for example, with reducing packaging and calls for an increase in the number and scope of recycling schemes.
2. London's air quality needs to be constantly monitored in a broad variety of locations with tougher measures needed to deal with offenders and pollution hotspots. Air quality must be taken into account in all policies: not just traffic and transport but also in planning applications.
3. London needs an accessible, efficient, reasonably priced, sustainable and environmentally friendly public transport system. We need to enforce fines for emission breaches and provide incentives for greener ways of travelling.
4. The city is dirty: street cleaning should be more frequent and combined with raised awareness to tackle litter problems. Green spaces must be preserved, maintained and made safer.

Endnotes and References

1. **South London Fawcett Group survey.** Founded in 1998, the Group is part of the Fawcett Society, campaigning for equality between women and men since 1886. The Group conducted its first public opinion survey in Spring 2000. London women, asked what they expected the Greater London Authority (GLA) to achieve, identified an improvement in public transport as their first priority. Their second most important concern was the environment. To explore this in further detail, the Group conducted a follow-up survey in Spring 2001.
Women were asked to "Please tell us the three things that matter most to YOU about the environment." A total of 137 postcards were completed by local women at events as diverse as International Women's Day celebrations in Peckham (March 8th), Capital Women's Day (March 10th) and a stall held at Bromley Library (May 19th). Group members, friends, colleagues and the Southwark Muslim Women's Association were also invited to take part. This briefing summarises the results of the second survey.
2. Friends of the Earth, 2001, Briefing Sheet: Don't burn it or bury it: Alternatives to Landfill and Incineration, www.foe.co.uk
3. Mayor of London, 2001, "The State of London: Environment", www.london.gov.uk
4. WasteWatch, 2001, Submission of Evidence to House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Environment Sub-committee, Inquiry: Delivering Sustainable Waste Management, www.wastewatch.org.uk
5. Friends of the Earth, 2001, Waste: Campaigning on Recycling Plans, www.foe.co.uk
6. These recommendations are based on a hierarchy of waste management derived from: Bailey, Mike. (1996) *Burn, Bury or Recycle, Options for a Waste Strategy in Plymouth*, www.eastdeveon.net/prf/strategy.htm
7. Wen News, winter 2000, Newsletter of the Women's Environmental Network.
8. Transport for London. *Transport Statistics for London*, 2000, p. 29.
9. London Air Quality Predictions, Department of Space and Atmosphere Physics, Imperial College.
10. London Health Observatory, March 2001. www.lho.org.uk
11. British Medical Association, 1997 in Road Transport and Health, 1997.
12. National Society for Clean Air, 2001.

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