Motivating young Londoners to recycle

A report for the London Waste and Recycling Board by Shift Sustainability
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REPORT

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Note on Images

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Executive summary

Young people aged 18-34 have emerged as the least effective recyclers in London, with previous research identifying three factors to be addressed in order to increase recycling across this age group: knowledge, ease and motivation. Behavioural interventions aimed at addressing motivation have not been as effective as hoped. **LWARB** commissioned **Shift Sustainability** to conduct research to build a deeper understanding of motivational levers that might change attitudes and drive better recycling behaviours amongst this age group.

Research objectives and methodology

This research aimed to uncover the motivators and demotivators behind the recycling behaviour of people aged 18-34 in London, using in-depth cognitive interviews accompanied by individual nudges, mobile ethnography and follow-up interviews. We spoke to 40 young people across 16 London boroughs and from a mix of ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants had a range of living arrangements (i.e. with partners, children, housemates and alone) and lived in a range of accommodation types, with a focus on those living in flats. While the findings were varied and many, they broadly fell into the areas outlined below.

Recycling habits: The status quo bias

Most participants supported recycling and wanted to engage with it. However, this desire was not so ingrained that it motivated them to act differently when making spur-of-the-moment decisions around what to do with their waste. Participants stressed how immediacy and ease were key for them building new habits, meaning that anything involving extra time, effort or deliberation represented a significant barrier. Living in London was also said to make recycling difficult to adopt. Small homes with miniscule kitchens made collecting materials difficult, and a culture of convenience and a lack of positive feedback or visibility for good behaviour meant that there was little impetus to recycle.

The link between recycling and climate change

While participants were clear that climate change and environmental degradation had become an unavoidable concern, they almost universally struggled to fully describe any link to recycling. While having a world fit for their children and grandchildren to live in was a strong motivator, the lack of knowledge here was profound, and messaging focused on climate impact risks missing the mark. Concerns tended to be closer to home or directly connected to waste, with a focus on reducing landfill, rather than emissions.

Influencers and motivation

It was common for consistent recyclers' behaviour to have been strongly influenced by their parents. In some ways, a lack of motivation amongst this group suggests retrospective failures to communicate the benefits of recycling, making successful interventions with this younger audience all the more important. However, very few participants said they actively spoke to friends or housemates about recycling, suggesting these kinds of interpersonal levers do not appear to be hugely important when it comes to raising motivation.

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Making recycling the norm: the link to identity

Recycling did not appear to be strongly linked to the identities of the vast majority of our participants. They described how their own identity was far removed from that of a recycling advocate their own age, with a difference in socio-economic circumstances, ethnicity and the level of stress and complexity in their lives being the main factors. Recyclers were perceived by many participants to be well off, white and middle class, living lives which were relatively carefree, and with time on their hands.

Making a difference: agency, impact and compromise

Many participants felt unable to affect change in anything but their immediate day-to-day lives. For them, it was up to authorities to lead the way when it came to societal or environmental issues, and to support them in recycling. At the same time, we uncovered a deep sense of distrust in councils, government and business, with participants cynical of their objectives and abilities. This is a difficult dichotomy to address and makes landing meaningful communications with this audience extremely challenging.

Knowledge as a motivational lever

Still, there seem to be strong levers to motivation around knowledge, increasing a sense of agency, and attracting attention to the recycling process. Uncertainty around how to recycle, and where it goes next, led to inconsistent or poor recycling, but exposure through individual experience and knowledge drove a feeling of agency and motivated recycling behaviours. Many felt motivated to recycle, some for the first time, just from giving it sustained thought during the research. Seeing the next step in the recycling process looks to be especially key. Participants were eager to find out 'what happens next' with recycling, and this knowledge looked to positively impact motivation.

Motivating young Londoners to recycle

Five related themes arose from the research which may inform future communications and initiatives:

1. Higher priorities (personal, family, financial and local) compete for young Londoners' time and attention.
2. A lack of agency and the anonymity of London and flat-living make individuals feel they have little impact.
3. A lack of knowledge and the motivation to gather knowledge leads to confusion and misconceptions.
4. Distrust of authorities and cynicism around their intentions means communications are not trusted.
5. Young Londoners do not align recycling with their identities.

Nudges introduced during the research that addressed identity and individual interests and priorities appeared to be most likely to motivate and change behaviour. Clarity on materials and building up knowledge also look to be crucial, with uncertainty a demotivator for young respondents. Communications need to be transparent and direct to allay distrust of establishment sources.

1.   RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Context and objectives

Young people (18-34) have emerged as the least effective recyclers in the city, with previous research[1] identifying three factors to be addressed in order to increase recycling across this age group: knowledge, ease and motivation. Behavioural interventions aimed at addressing motivation have not been as effective as hoped. The main research objective was to identify the key motivational levers that could be used to increase recycling rates among young Londoners. The research aimed to:

Understand attitudes around environmental topics and their relation to motivation:

- What are young Londoners' attitudes to climate change? What behaviours might or do they take to mitigate climate change?

- How do young Londoners perceive the link between climate change and recycling?

- To what extent does London life play a part in recycling attitudes and behaviours?

Explore motivational levers:

- How can insight around status quo bias, social norms and comparison, identity, agency and knowledge-seeking help inform levers for behavioural change[2]?

- How can these motivational levers be best used to increase motivation to recycle among young Londoners?

The research findings built on behavioural insights around driving motivation to recycle, to inform future messaging, communications and initiatives at LWARB.

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[1] See https://resourcelondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/LWARB-Making-recycling-work-for-people-in-flats-full-report_200128-1.pdf
[2] We used Stern's Value-Belief-Norm theory to frame the research questions. See: Stern, P., 2000. Value-Belief-Norm Theory of Environmentalism. J Social Issues, 56, pp.407-424

2. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

We spoke to 40 young Londoners as part of the research, including 10 in the cognitive interviewing phase and 30 during the mobile ethnography, with 15 of these taking part in follow-up interviews. Young people living with their parents and parents with young babies were excluded from the sample.

Variable	Quota criteria	interviews (10)	Ethnography (30)	Ethnography interviews
Age	18-21	3	3	1
	22-25	2	9	5
	26-30	1	10	6
	31-34	4	8	3
Gender	Male	5	14	8
	Female	5	16	7
Socio-economic grade	B	1	3	1
	C1	4	12	5
	C2	-	4	3
	D	4	9	6
	E	1	2	-
Ethnicity	White (incl. White British)	5	16	10
	Black (Incl. Black British, African and Caribbean)	2	6	2
	Asian (Incl. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese)	1	4	1
	Mixed ethnicity (incl. Mixed Black and Mixed White)	2	4	2

ariable	Quota considerations	Cognitive interviews (10)	Ethnography (30)	Ethnography interviews
Living arrangements	Children	2	5	1
	Partner	1	7	4
	Friends	3	7	1
	Flat-share	2	6	6
	Alone	2	5	3
Ownership	Own	2	4	2
	Rent	8	26[3]	13
Type of building	House	2	8	4
	Flat	8	22	11
Borough	Barking and Dagenham		1	1
	Brent		3	1
	Camden	1	1	1
	Enfield	1	2	
	Hackney	1	2	1
	Hammersmith and Fulham	2	1	
	Haringey		2	2
	Islington		1	1
	Kensington & Chelsea		2	2
	Lambeth	2	1	
	Lewisham		3	1
	Newham		2	1
	Southwark	1	3	2
	Tower Hamlets	2	2	
	Waltham Forest		2	1
	Westminster		2	1

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[3] Rental included 18 private, 5 local authority, 3 housing association.

3.   APPROACH

Shift Sustainability designed an approach strongly focused on obtaining deep qualitative insight. Cognitive interviews aimed to uncover the actual actions of respondents in their daily lives, with participants speaking their recall and remembering thoughts and feelings related to specific occasions in their daily routines. Tailored nudges were introduced between the two cognitive interview sessions to test a range of levers with different young Londoner profiles. Ethnographic tasks allowed space and opportunity to investigate routines visually, as they happened, and time for respondents to consider responses to their feelings and attitudes around recycling and climate change. In both phases, respondents were only informed of the client and the recycling subject matter some way into the research, to avoid conscious or unconscious bias, or posturing around recycling behaviour.

Cognitive interviews Phase 1	→	Nudges introduced over 7 days	→	Cognitive interviews Phase 2	→	Mobile ethnography	→	Follow-up interviews
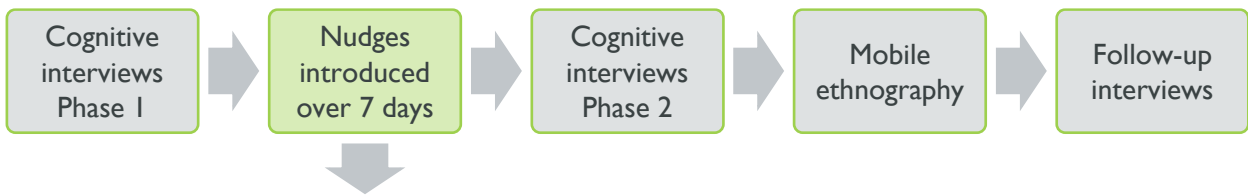
Introducing the nudges

The initial interviews with ten respondents probed their recall of specific household routines, generating insight around their behaviours. The interviews also used cognitive questioning and repeated 'why' questions, or 'laddering' to understand participants' drivers, values and beliefs in relation to recycling. This insight generated a range of participant-specific 'nudges', which we asked participants to consider over seven days until their second interview. The table shows details of the nudges, the rationale for each and their Impact.

Participant values and beliefs arising in Interview 1	Nudge generated and kept in mind over 7 days	Impact uncovered in Interview 2	
Some participants expressed **empathy** with recycling workers tasked with sorting recycling at the plant. They had shown **curiosity** about the process – what happened next?	We asked these participants to imagine that recycling workers were watching them sort, clean and put items in the kitchen and communal street bin. We sent them pictures of recycling workers and the conveyor belt sorting line to put near their bins. **Would empathy and knowledge of the process increase motivation?**	The visual demystified the process. This was impactful in terms of understanding where their recycling went next and motivated better recycling over the week. The conveyor belt/hand sorting was a 'wow moment' for one participant. Empathy for the workers existed but was not as impactful as understanding the process.	
Two students who had **attended climate protests** were willing to make **behavioural changes to their diet** but were unlikely to view their own recycling behaviours as having a major impact on climate change.	We provided an infographic with some commentary. This outlined how use of materials, products and physical resources accounts for a massive 45% of the total emissions we produce globally. **Would clear facts and figures increase motivation?**	The infographic helped to make the connection between recycling and climate change by showing the impact on reducing emissions. Both participants were shocked at the influence it could have and felt motivated to recycle. This was new information for them.	

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Participant values and beliefs arising in Interview 1	Nudge generated and kept in mind over 7 days	Impact uncovered in Interview 2	
A young student's friends and sister were strong **influencers** to have a vegan diet and recycle.	We asked her to imagine that every time she threw something away her main 'influencer' was watching. **Would peer pressure and social normalisation increase motivation?**	The process sparked conversation with her housemate, which was positive – recycling is rarely discussed between friends. However, she did not feel the nudge would have a lasting impact.	
Two young mothers had little time or energy to think about recycling. Their values and attention centred on the **health and safety of their children** and the **local environment**.	We asked them to imagine that each time they threw something away, this waste was going straight into a local playground they used with their child. **Would drawing attention to protecting the environment for children's futures increase motivation?**	There was a strong emotional reaction – they worried that their children would get sick from touching rubbish. However, there was minimal impact on their behaviour because they found it hard to connect the rubbish outside to their recycling habits inside their homes.	
An engineering graduate had a keen **interest in how things worked**. He felt that climate change was a lost cause.	We asked this participant to view video clips about successful aluminium recycling 2-3 times over the week and keep these in mind when he threw anything away. **Would seeing how efficient aluminium recycling really was motivate better recycling?**	Seeing the processes and how recycling has an impact on reducing emissions and saving energy deeply resonated. He had started to 'test' crisp packets using the scrunch test shown in the video.	See footnotes[4]
A mother with a daughter who loves animals had had an **emotional reaction to images of ocean rubbish and marine life** in the past. She thought shocking messaging like warnings on cigarette packages were effective at changing behaviour.	We sent her images of turtles and seals tangled in plastic waste and asked her to imagine that these were printed on plastic food packaging that she threw away **Would linking her own actions to plastic in the oceans encourage better recycling?**	This nudge had little impact. This participant had become immune to the shock factor in this type of image and if anything wanted them to be more shocking and frightening.	
A **passionate conservationist** and meticulous recycler who was a **key influencer in his flat-share**. He frequently called his flatmates out for not recycling and added a recycling chart to the lid of the bin.	We asked him to take careful note of what worked, and what didn't work, to positively change the recycling behaviours of his flatmates. **What has a real impact on motivating housemates to consistently recycle?**	Ideas that recognised habit and the need to change automatic or 'status quo' behaviour: a laminated chart on the bin checked an uninformed decision; an 'unsure' bin prevented contamination when knowledge was lacking. Documentaries and videos were the most hard-hitting.	

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4. RECYCLING HABITS: THE STATUS QUO BIAS

Most people are prone to 'status quo bias' - that is, a preference for keeping things as they are. The initial interviews and the earlier stage of the ethnography aimed at uncovering the status quo - that Is developing a deep understanding of current recycling behaviours - before going on to Investigate in the second interview and the later ethnography, what might motivate young Londoners to change it.

Most participants were confused or inconsistent recyclers

The initial interviews, and images and videos posted during the ethnography, revealed a wide range of recycling behaviours – from those doing no recycling through to 'eco-warriors' who meticulously recycled. Most fell somewhere between – they may be eco-aware, but confusion around how to recycle properly, and the pressures of daily life, prevented a consistent approach. Complicated labelling, or not instinctively knowing if a product could be recycled, led to split-second decision making, which was often wrong.

No recycling	Confused	Inconsistent	Eco-aware	Eco-warrior
No recycling bin in the house/flat, despite having communal or outside recycling facilities.	Lacking knowledge on what materials can be recycled and usually only recycling glass, cardboard or tins.	Will not recycle if extra time and effort is required, e.g. rinsing. May not recycle bathroom or cleaning packaging.	Has knowledge on what materials can be recycled and will separate and clean waste the majority of the time.	Will go the extra mile to make sure their waste is being recycled, e.g. taking batteries to a battery recycling bin, or carrying recycling home.

What caused the confusion?

There was confusion around mixed materials, thinner plastics, lids and caps, tinned foil, cleaning products, clothes and fabric, dirty items, toothpaste tubes and other bathroom products. Cognitive recall demonstrated how the automatic and routine nature of the task meant that uncertainty was not followed up through seeking knowledge. The participant quickly moved on in their minds to the next thought or task.

What caused the inconsistencies?

Inconsistent recycling behaviour was mainly caused by:

- Lack of time or motivation to wash or separate waste.

- A sense of disgust – not wanting to clean products that had food residue.

- A lot of recycling being generated at once, e.g. glass bottles and cans after a party because it was too much effort to separate during a quick clean-up.

- A very small amount of recyclable material because they thought it was too small to make a difference.

Food waste was a particular obstacle. Challenges arose in small kitchens where a food waste bin was seen to take too much space. Participants said their councils did not collect food waste and they tended to put their food in the general waste. Some thought it would decompose quickly and would not be a

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problem in landfill. Some separated waste in the kitchen to keep the general waste bin cleaner, and then disposed of it together in the general waste.

Practical factors created barriers to better recycling

Type of property: Those in blocks of flats spoke of the additional effort needed to take recycling down flights of stairs, especially if communal recycling bins were not next to the general waste, meaning it took more than one trip, rather than being part of an existing routine.

Bins: Having the space for recycling in their home often dictated whether this was a habit. A general waste bin was considered a standard, but a recycling bin was an added extra for many. Some didn't have the disposable income for this, or were prioritising spending on other areas they considered a higher priority.

> *"I also think recycling is a nightmare in small houses/flats because the amount of space you need for sorting rubbish is huge. If we are to effectively recycle we need about four different bins – which is just not possible in a tiny London home."*
>
> Female, 22-26, house share, Hackney

> *"You'd have to spend a good £20 on quite a large bin, and some people don't have spare money to do that."*
>
> Female, 31-34, living with children, house, Hammersmith & Fulham

Council rules: Participants were confused by inconsistency across boroughs and councils' rules on recycling (e.g. whether glass needed to be separated out). When in doubt, they resorted to their own instincts 'in the moment' – which were often wrong.

Bin collection routine: Some felt the council did not collect recycling frequently enough. Not wanting bins to overflow and make their homes untidy, recycling would be thrown in the general waste instead. Those in flats knew much less about the collection routine for recycling, whereas those in houses tended to know which day to take their bins out.

Lack of monitoring: Participants felt there was little repercussion if they didn't recycle, with no one seeming to monitor their actions, either with sanctions for bad behaviour or praise/rewards for recycling correctly. This made it easy to revert back to bad habits. Surprisingly, a range of participants from across the socio-economic groups included in the study themselves suggested that it may take a system of fines or rewards to convince them to give more conscious thought and encourage them to recycle better. The impact of neighbours and anonymity is explored further on.

5. FITTING IN OR STANDING OUT: SOCIAL NORMS AND SOCIAL COMPARISON

Parents and family, housemates and friends could have a positive or negative impact on recycling behaviours.

Parents, particularly mothers, were often mentioned as good recyclers, having instilled the idea of recycling as 'the right thing to do' in their children. However, leaving home could trigger rebellion in younger participants, and less urgency to recycle, with no one in their home to pull them up on their habits. Some faintly recalled learning about recycling in school, with a few having visited waste-management plants. These influences made recycling of cans and glass a routine behaviour. Where participants had their own children, they could be strong influencers, bringing recycling messages and fears around climate change home from school. These messages held weight coming from their own children.

Media figures, such as David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg, had brought recycling more to some participants' attention.

For those in house-shares that did recycle, this household norm was effective. However, where there was no real drive to recycle or it was not already part of the norm for the majority of the household, it often got left by the wayside. Very few participants said they actively spoke to friends or housemates about recycling. While it might be easy for them to correct someone else's behaviour, it was not something that was often spoken about and participants did not want to appear 'preachy' among friends.

With flat-living particularly, neighbours were cited as bad role models, leaving rubbish in communal areas or putting items in the wrong bins. If bins were already contaminated or the local area already dirty, this discouraged some participants from recycling.

Living in London was said to make recycling difficult to adopt: small homes, a culture of convenience and a lack of positive feedback for good behaviour were all noted

Living in London was said to have both positive and negative impacts on motivation to recycle. Small homes and flat-living were clearly a factor. Beyond this, many were clear that living in London did affect their behaviour and motivation, often comparing their experiences with those of friends and relatives who lived in the suburbs or outside of the city altogether.

Many felt it was too easy to go along with the crowd and not recycle – a sense of anonymity meant no one would know, and there were no repercussions or social reward for recycling. Still, some living in closer proximity, e.g. on estates, described how they felt they were being watched by neighbours, which sometimes shamed them into recycling.

There was an emphasis on convenience and fast-paced living: Most public and private services work well and are set up to meet the demands of busy people, e.g. transport and food-delivery apps. Immediacy was part of their identity, as was being able to get what they desired with the minimum extra effort and energy. Recycling felt anomalous here.

The local environment was said to be dirty or unkempt, with few green spaces. Participants had a sense of 'it is what it is'. For the more affluent with plans to make the move out of London when they start families, and students, London was sometimes seen as a short-term place to work, rather than

somewhere to live and settle down. Investment in their community was low and few saw how recycling could make any difference to their borough.

There appeared to be two key mechanisms at play here, which helped perpetuate non-recycling as the norm and this behaviour was cited as part of the identity of many of our participants. Interventions in these areas may help to support behavioural change:

- A lack of feedback or tangible incentive for any recycling behaviour.

- Consensus bias: "Nobody else is doing it, why should I change?"

"I can literally throw whatever I want in the recycling because nobody can see me. Let's say a milk carton, in reality you should rinse that out, make sure there's no stuff in that before you recycle it. Here, I'll throw that in the bin. If it leaks, it leaks. I don't care because I'm just throwing it in that recycling thing. Nobody is seeing me. There's no attachment to me. That's really bad. I'm judging myself…"

Female, 22-26, living with friends, flat, Tower Hamlets

6. MAKING RECYCLING THE NORM: PRIORITIES AND IDENTITY

Recycling was not a priority for participants, and not seen to play a part in any of their top areas of concern, with a knock-on effect for motivation.

In many cases, participants were leading difficult lives in less than ideal circumstances. They were often concerned about meeting basic physiological and safety needs, recalling Maslow's hierarchy of needs[5], and were preoccupied with these before they could think about anything more abstract to them, like recycling.

Recycling felt unconnected to any of these immediate needs or desires – it served no role in bringing down the cost of bills, having secure employment or keeping safe – and a lack of feedback made throwing all materials into the general waste an emotionless, automatic decision. Convenience and ease were highly prized – not because participants were selfish or unthinking, but because any respite from the stresses of their day-to-day lives was extremely valuable.

Where priorities reached beyond the home, these remained local, such as the cleanliness of the streets, parks and canals or fly-tipping. Social issues, like racial inequality, drugs and knife crime, were often discussed as a high area of concern and it was thought laughable to consider recycling as important.

> "*I feel like the world that we live in now, is like, why are you talking about recycling when we've got this going on, and that going on. If I rang my friend and said I want to talk to you about recycling she'd probably laugh and say, 'have you gone mad?'*"
>
> Female, 26-30, renting a flat, Tower Hamlets

Where concerns did reach beyond the local area, concern was focused on the human rather than the natural, such as the impact of war or famine. The natural world seldom figured as a priority, particularly for those from lower socio-economic groups.

Interviews uncovered how participants strongly empathised with individuals in trying situations and sought to understand their issues. These issues trumped concerns about the environment, which perhaps felt a little less tangible. The images here were provided by ethnography participants in response to the prompt

"What is more important than recycling?", with comments discussing war, poverty, malnutrition and homelessness.. When prompted to post views and images around "What would happen if no one recycled?", the images most often focused on landfill sites and the conditions for people living in these environments, rather than on the natural world.

Participants struggled to see or articulate a link between climate change and recycling. A minority of the sample were deeply sceptical about its importance. Lifestyle choices like yoga, diet and attending climate

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[5] Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory of motivation which states that five categories of human needs dictate an individual's behaviour. Those needs are physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.

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change marches rarely extended to good recycling behaviour. While recycling made participants 'feel good', not all were able to say why.

Participants described their identity being far removed from a recycling advocate their own age, with different levels of stress and complexity being the main factor.

We asked participants to describe a person their age who recycles. In the small number of cases where the participant was a regular recycler, they were more likely to say, 'someone just like me'. However, overall, this exercise produced a remarkable consensus.

While there is an element of hippie cliché in these responses, they help us understand the differences between most participants and their conceptions of a regular recycler, and indicate the barriers to recycling. Being able to be a good recycler was linked to privileges that were out of reach for many, i.e. spare time, a lack of worries, feeling 'settled' and having a defined set of values to live by.

What is someone your age who recycles like?		
Comfortable job, student or stay-at-home mum	White	Middle/ upper-middle class
Homeowner	Time on their hands	Relatively frugal
Living in the outer suburbs – not really a Londoner	Well travelled	A hassle-free life

Even those who saw themselves as 'eco-aware' favoured convenience at the expense of recycling, such as picking up a plastic-wrapped Tesco pizza after a long shift and being too tired to think about recycling even the cardboard outer box. We heard participants describe a person for whom recycling was integral to their identity, further strengthening the link between identity and behaviour. This person was often very different from the participant, and in some cases felt extremely distant.

Crucially, some of those who did consistently recycle also found this ideal distant and perhaps a little over the top. One participant was keen to point out that she was "eco-aware NOT an eco-warrior". This pragmatic tone was common in the research – young people wanted to be told the facts and deal with them accordingly, rather than have to work through confusing messages and align themselves with ethical or political issues.

> *"[a good recycler my age is]…a hippie sort of person, all about the earth. They would be white, quite posh, with a part-time job, a part-time student for sure."*
>
> Female, 31-34, living with children, renting a house, Hammersmith & Fulham

The range of responses suggested that perceptions, norms and a sense of what is and is not attainable are variable across individuals within different socio-economic grades.

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7. MAKING A DIFFERENCE: AGENCY AND IMPACT

The range of responses suggested that perceptions, norms and a sense of what is and is not attainable are variable across individuals within different socio-economic grades.

We asked ethnography participants, "What is recycling good for?"
"I think recycling is good for keeping our streets and roads clean."
Female, 26-30, living with child, flat, Lambeth

Although we heard that 'every little helps' and that participants recycled to 'do their bit', most thought their sphere of influence was small or non-existent and only had an impact if everybody played their part, which they doubted was the case in today's society. In line with their higher priorities, their sphere of influence was seen as being centred on the local rather than the global, and was discussed in terms of cleanliness and decreasing waste to landfill. Emotive images of climate change impact in other countries were seen to have little relationship to individuals' actions, although they were sometimes referred to in the abstract as a possible consequence 'if no one recycled'

Young Londoners look to authorities to affect change, yet also distrust them

There was a strong sense that it was up to councils, government and business to deal with pollution and climate change. However, we repeatedly heard young Londoners express cynicism and distrust in authority sources and actions, creating a difficult dichotomy. They want government and businesses to drive action, but don't trust them to do so. The Edelman Trust Barometer[6] demonstrates the strong distrust towards government, corporations and the media globally and particularly in the UK, suggesting this issue is not confined to our sample.

Respondents wanted more support to recycle from:

- **Housing associations, landlords and local councils** in providing more facilities;
- **Businesses** in taking the lead by using recyclable packaging and providing clear instructions;
- **Government** in using policy to force businesses and councils to fight climate change.

Some thought it was the last of these three in which individuals could make a difference, through larger group movements, i.e. voting in elections and attending marches to drive climate change up the policy agenda. There was a sense of injustice that individuals were made to feel ashamed when model behaviour wasn't demonstrated by the authorities and, additionally, when no benefits of recycling were returned to the public, e.g. through lower taxes or lower prices.

"I just really believe the world just isn't how we see it and you get all these people who claim they want to help and I'm sure they do but I just think there's a lot of hypocrisy and a lot of things that don't make sense within the government."

Male, 31-34, living alone, owner, studio flat, Hammersmith & Fulham

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8. KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: ATTRACTING ATTENTION

Uncertainty around how to recycle, and where it goes next, led to inconsistent or poor recycling

Respondents were hazy about many aspects of recycling and the journey of materials to landfill, oceans or becoming new items. This gap in knowledge also drove misconceptions and myths, which could also be fed by the distrust felt towards authorities. It was also exacerbated by the fact that recycling is seldom top of mind. As a split-second decision, the trigger to seek information is often passed too quickly to drive motivation to find information and fill the knowledge gap.

> *"…that's confusing because I put some plastic things in there. [My mum's] like that can't go in there. [You've] got to take the lid off that. I'm like I give up. That's what puts me off doing it. That can't go in with that lid."*
>
> 31-34, living with children, renting a house, Hammersmith & Fulham

> *"I have no idea about where it goes or what happens to it. I guess I would just assume landfill, but I don't know where that is.… I've no idea what the process is… So, if it's just put somewhere or if someone has to go through it, that seems like such a huge job, going through recycling for so many houses and there's recycling on the street. I think that that must get contaminated every single time because not everybody cares.*"
>
> 18-21, living with friends, renting a house, Southwark

Exposure through individual experience and knowledge drove a feeling of agency and motivated recycling behaviours

The motivation of respondents in the eco-aware or eco-warrior groups was often attributed to personal experience of seeing the recycling process in action, or seeing at first-hand the environmental impact when it doesn't happen. Visits to recycling plants and recycling projects in school stuck in some participants' minds. Travelling in East Asia, and seeing plastic-strewn beaches had resonated. It seemed that this exposure gave them the motivation to find out how to recycle and the confidence that they were doing it right, as well as understanding the impact it has – driving better and more consistent behaviours. This idea was reflected in the impact of the nudges too – the participant who had received the image of conveyor-belt recycling drew an interesting analogy combining empathy and understanding to motivate new behaviours:

> *"Before I worked in hospitality, I wasn't really thinking… what do these waitresses and waiters have to do when they come out for the plates – you know, you might just leave your plate in front of you and wait for them to come and collect it, but after working in that industry, every time I go to a restaurant I'll pile up the plates to make it easier for the waiters. It's that same kind of impact… trying to make a difference for that person."*
>
> 22-25, living alone, renting a purpose-built flat, Lambeth

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Distrust of authorities led participants to prefer 'cold, hard facts' and a personal approach

Do you trust the council?

"Not really. I watched a programme, they use robots to detect the materials, if material is thin or the wrong colour it'll go in landfill anyway. Technology is perhaps not at the level required."

26-30, living in a house share, renting, Hackney

We asked participants directly what types of communications they tended to pay attention to. When they recalled facts about recycling and climate change they were prompted to also recall the sources these had come from. For some, few communications resonated because, as we have seen, personal priorities battled for their attention – these groups are a particular challenge to reach. Where participants did interact with wider information and communications, reactions were strongly linked to the themes of distrust and the demand for transparency and authenticity revealed in the course of the research. Participants wanted facts and figures from verified sources, transparent messaging and charts and images with clear unambiguous instructions. They were put off by emotive images and straplines, but also by faceless or 'boring' messages that looked dry and uninviting.

Shocking or impactful messages through video and documentaries were most often remembered and had impacted on behaviours

The power of video and documentary

The most resonant and impactful messages had reached participants through video, TV and documentary. With direct experience impacting motivation, there was a sense that the moving image could help respondents feel they were there in the moment, aiding recall. The 'shock factor', combined with these channels, could impact behaviours. Although most could not recall specific details about the names or titles of documentaries or TV shows, some facts were remembered from these channels, particularly recycling processes and specific images of impact.

Because of the scepticism we saw, these channels didn't always affect behaviour positively. Messages that debunk myths or misunderstandings generated through these channels are also important.

The shock factor

Although this had lost some resonance and was seen as 'old news', many recalled the *Blue Planet II* documentary. This was either because they had seen it themselves, or recalled the way it had resonated among the public and media. The shock of the content notwithstanding, the impact of David Attenborough as a real face on the story likely also had an impact in contrast with the distrust of faceless, impersonal or dry communications.

Shock in other areas had driven behavioural change. The direct personal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had also driven participants who rarely did so to seek out news and information on this topic, although even here some were relatively relaxed about the impact.

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9. WHAT WILL MOTIVATE YOUNG LONDONERS TO RECYCLE?

The findings suggested five key themes to consider in future initiatives, campaigns and communications designed to motivate young Londoners to recycle. While this research has shown that challenges around convenience and ease clearly remain obstacles to overcome, the findings aim to build on the initiatives arising from the previous research, conducted in 2018 which generated the testing of initiatives to promote ease and knowledge of recycling, with the focus here on motivation.[7]

Theme 1: Participants have higher priorities that take up their time and attention

Londoners often had personal and family worries around health, safety and paying the bills – sending recycling way down their priority list. Where attention went beyond the personal, it was likely to remain local – in the immediate area or community, focusing on litter and unchecked landfill sites. Where it became global, it focused on the impact on humanity (e.g. homelessness, war, overseas recycling workers) rather than the natural, and on the future of the planet for participants' children.

Linking messaging to the priorities that compete for young Londoners' attention, showing the benefits of recycling to personal/family/children's health and safety, the local and the human, and on messages which work together to make recycling 'the norm', could help raise recycling up to join these higher priorities.

Messaging might focus on:

Ease and opportunity – signage on bins and distributed charts to keep at home; clear, simple instructions; more readily available communal bins in streets of terraced conversions could help respondents in small conversion flats.

Personal and family health and safety – clean streets, rubbish-free canals, rivers and playgrounds and preserving natural resources for children in the near future.

Saving money – how reduced production costs are passed on to consumers in the products they buy and potentially a stronger economy to improve public services.

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[7] See https://www.lwarb.gov.uk/revealing-research-gives-insights-into-how-to-increase-recycling-rates-in-flats/

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Theme 2: Lack of agency and anonymity (including the London effect)

Our sample felt they had a very narrow sphere of influence. They also felt that any actions they took or didn't take went largely unrecognised, and poor behaviours weren't penalised. This was tied up in the circumstances of communal living, including feelings that 'if no one else is doing it, why should I?' and 'What's in it for me?'

The anonymity discussed here was increased by the 'London effect' – that people didn't necessarily know or communicate with neighbours. Nevertheless, although sceptical about the possibilities, there was a desire for a stronger sense of community, with the belief that people working together could make a difference. Harnessing this driver may help motivate better recycling.

Messaging might include:

Displaying behaviour – collection schemes in flats, which display who is and isn't recycling; rather than rewarding, or penalising, this might 'display' good recycling behaviours carried out by an Individual household.

'Closing the feedback loop' – celebrating recycling levels that increase, communicating how they have impacted within communal flats and locally – increasing a sense that individuals together can make a difference.

Theme 3: Lack of knowledge and motivation to gain it

The uncertainty about how to recycle, and a lack of knowledge about where recycling went next, were strong demotivators. Most participants wanted to recycle, and the discovery of recycling processes could be a 'wow' moment for them, increasing their agency and thus motivation.

This concept was reflected in the better recycling behaviours of the more knowledgeable or experienced participants in the group who had seen the process first-hand or experienced the damaging effects of plastic pollution or climate change during their international travels.

Extending this idea, the research uncovered a strong lack of understanding of the link between recycling, emissions and climate change. Steps to correct this through simple messaging will inform and connect, increasing capability and motivation.

However, the fleeting nature of the recycling 'moment' meant that seeking information was an issue. Participants relied on myths and hearsay to inform their split-second behaviour or used their 'automatic brain' too frequently during the recycling 'moment' to make an informed decision. Normalising the recycling process will be key for this reason, so that the right behaviours themselves become automatic.

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Messaging and channels to consider might include:

Simple instructions for recycling dilemmas, using communications that people don't need to seek out, e.g. bus stops, billboards and social media advertising.

Audio-visual media, e.g. TV, video (social media) and documentary to demonstrate the fascinating next steps in the recycling journey rather than emotive images relating to climate / natural world impact. Social media and promotion of relevant documentary and TV programming can help bring attention to these media.

Simple communications demonstrating individual elements of the direct journey between recycling, emissions and the impact on climate change. For example, 'the journey of a milk bottle' from disposal to reuse, or recycling to reuse, was suggested by one participant.

Theme 4: Distrust of authorities

There is a challenging conundrum presented by young Londoners who feel it is up to government and business to provide solutions, but who deeply distrust authorities. This is demonstrated by certain climate change marchers who don't recycle, yet protest to government for not raising climate change higher in the policy agenda. This distrust extends to housing associations and landlords, local councils, businesses and government.

Because of this it is a real challenge to get through to young Londoners who set up a mental barrier when confronted with information from authority sources. LWARB may be in a strong position here. Few young Londoners are likely to associate the organisation with borough councils or government, while the 'single issue' nature of LWARB makes communicating the message clear and transparent – a characteristic that the research showed may be more likely to make young Londoners pay attention.

Clear facts and figures from verified sources – participants wanted to know who was contacting them and be reassured they have no other 'agenda' in their messaging.

Transparency and authenticity – showing that recycling processes aren't perfect but that councils 'do the best they can' with the public's help, i.e. acknowledging the limitations while celebrating the successes.

Personal approaches – including photos of people responsible for recycling goals, with communications from them and addressed directly to individuals by post. The research suggested that familiar faces (like the high impact of David Attenborough) could grab attention and drive behaviour change. This is related to the identity issue described on the following page, where a personal approach from a relatable personality may combine to both draw attention and normalise recycling behaviours.

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Theme 5: Lack of identity with 'a recycler my age'

Participants often likened recycling to a privilege that was not available to them – a typical recycler was seen as having time, money, space and a solid sense of well-being, which gave them the capacity to think more deeply about the wider world. This 'otherness' of a good recycler is a real challenge to changing behaviours.

The themes outlined in this section are all aimed at this goal of social normalisation. Linking to front-of-mind priorities, making recycling into a social norm, informing and demystifying the process and reassuring young Londoners about the benefits of recycling to humanity, both locally and globally, would all be strong motivators towards recycling.

Crucially though, young Londoners need to believe that it is something people like them do. Initiatives and messaging might look at the following ideas, although caution is needed. Because of the cynicism and distrust present in this group, transparency and authenticity in communications is vital.

Bringing recycling into their world – presenting recycling in the context of a range of London lifestyles that could reflect their own.

Disseminating messaging through a wide range of channels – note that caution is needed due to the cynicism and distrust present in this group, meaning that transparency and authenticity in communications is key.

Combining the themes to motivate young Londoners to recycle

Overall respondents displayed some inclination to 'do the right thing' and most wanted to recycle. However obstacles clearly remain around ease and knowledge and are a sticking point for young Londoners who value speed and convenience, and who, crucially, are often living life under difficult circumstances. This is likely to be particularly exacerbated now during the Covid-19 crisis. At the same time, LWARB are in a good position to promote direct, authentic messages to these Londoners which can inform and reassure, and appeal to their interests and higher priorities. Building recycling into the identity of these groups will also be key in driving motivation, to overcome the perception that recycling is something which aligns with privilege and wealth. The findings suggest that combining the five key themes in messaging could help to normalize the activity – the ultimate goal in motivating young Londoners to recycle well and consistently.