

The ethical household: Rethinking the meaning of waste

Prepared for Haringey Council

Dr. Pamela Yeow

Dr. Danielle Tucker

Dr. Alison Dean

Zara Babakordi

Aleksandra Besevic

November 2021 (funded by Birkbeck's Covid Recovery Fund 2021)



Executive summary

The research examines the role of the ethical household when rethinking the meaning of waste. The data collection involved 14 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders of Haringey Council as identified by several senior members within the Waste remit of Haringey council as well as 5 wide-ranging interviews with residents within identified neighbourhoods in the borough of Haringey. This research was also complemented by analysis of documents both provided for and sourced by the research team.

This research highlights three challenges to tackling simultaneous infrastructure provision and individual waste behaviour practices:

- (i) Inconsistent information and messaging at local and national levels;
- (ii) Tensions between perceptions based on stereotypes and reality;
- (iii) The need to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between homes of multiple occupancy (HMO) and infrastructure provision so as to improve consistency of communication and thereby increasing trust.

Our findings showed that there were challenges around increasing diversity in voice, particularly in the decision-making process related to the communication of initiatives and policy, and an urgent need to develop sustainable long-term strategies. This will allow Haringey council to connect effectively with national campaigns for the reduction of waste and single-use plastics, and to build meaningful relationships that harness the trust and good will of residents so as to build trust-based long-term initiatives to impact change in the community.

Introduction

Ethical consumerism is a pluralised concept that, in recent years, has focused on concerns surrounding the manufacture, consumption and disposal of single use plastics. As a concept, it often incorporates multiple practices, experiences and decision-making behaviours as guided by an individual's or group's ethical, sustainable and/or moral concerns. The complexity and fluidity of this concept is demonstrated in UK public discourses which have, in recent years, problematised plastics (and 'single use' plastics in particular) within an ethical and moral frame—including the ways in which plastics are manufactured, consumed, and disposed of (see, for example, Burgess et al, 2020). Our previous research found that there appears to be little consideration in this problematisation of the complexities and heterogeneities of the 'household' in influencing the behavioural practices required. (see link for greater detail

<https://rethinkingethicalconsumerism.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/report-one-2020.pdf>).

In recent years, single use plastic and waste have become a cause for concern across London boroughs. Despite calls for action and initiatives from public, private and third sector agents, there remains a gap in understanding local level practices. The London Assembly has stated that committees and the government need to 'strengthen' resources to ensure that single use plastic can be reduced (London Assembly, 2019). A key challenge in creating change at this place-based level is the ability of local partners from public, private, third sectors working together to provide a consistent vision for change (c.f. Burgess et al (2020), MacLeod et al (2021)).

This research came about through a research grant from Birkbeck, University of London. The research team consisted of academics from Birkbeck, University of Essex and University of Kent. This team of researchers has been examining the behaviour-attitude gap in ethical consumerism and has continued to build a better understanding of the householder in their practices of reducing waste and single-use plastic. More information about previous projects and related findings can be found here <https://rethinkingethicalconsumerism.com/> . Our current research is interested in developing a greater understanding of the role of the householder in tackling the prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse of plastics in a sustainable way.

In this report, we will detail some of the complex issues surrounding waste management, notably enforcement perceptions, the pluralistic nature of homes with multiple occupancy, and inconsistent waste management practices and infrastructure. The inconsistent nature of such policies and practices lead to confusion among residents and an increasing mistrust amongst multiple stakeholders. We will report on our research approach as well as highlight some of the findings and suggest recommendations that the council may wish to consider going forward.

Research methodology

With the assistance of Haringey waste management team, 14 relevant stakeholders were identified and approached to take part in in-depth interviews with the research team. These included ward councillors, employees (senior managers and officers) involved in planning and infrastructure, private sector housing, waste management, enforcement, environment, adjacent roles in waste management processes, as well as individuals drawn from community groups, residents' associations and council-owned property management. For the residents, semi-structured interviews allowed residents to share their experiences, views and concerns regarding waste management in their local area. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to ensure a range of topics could be discussed including general observations about waste management, how

waste is managed in their home and how improvements could be made. It was important that the residents had the opportunity to be open and honest about their practices.

Initial findings

1. Differential and inconsistent perspectives of Waste: co-mingling and contamination

When speaking with the participants (stakeholders and residents), the issue of co-mingling and contamination arose frequently. Briefly, contamination of waste results from the co-mingling of recyclable and non-recyclable products. Contamination can include items that the processing facility cannot or will not accept (technically recyclable but not by that particular facility) or items that are acceptable but not clean. However, in the discussions, it became apparent that contamination was viewed differently by different groups of discussants. Significantly, residents saw the co-mixing of recyclables at point of collection as a lack of commitment by the council to recycling. On the other hand, the council and senior colleagues viewed co-mingling and contamination in terms of its impact on the commodity value of recyclables.

We suggest that it is this difference in emphasis and separation by a common language (the former an 'ethical sustainability perspective', and the latter an 'economic perspective') that leads to a difference in understanding what co-mingling and contamination are, and what their impact will be. The communication about contamination has to be in the context of why it matters which means the need to explain to people what happens to recycling after it has been collected, and the economics thereof.

2. Complexity and diversity of residents

In our discussions and interviews with stakeholders, it became clear that the Haringey community was made up of heterogenous groups of individuals who were diverse in culture, language and practices.

The following sub-sections expand on the diversity of the Haringey community.

a. HMOs and waste management - whose responsibility is it?

A HMO refers to residential properties where 'common areas' exist and are shared by more than one household. In our interviews with stakeholders, it became clear that the category of HMO should be thought of as plural as it encompasses many different property types (e.g., converted street-based houses, tower blocks, flats etc.).

These challenges are not restricted to Haringey and are seen across London – a result of high rental prices, unaffordable housing, resulting in many people living in HMO arrangements. HMOs are framed as a particular challenge by the council and are believed to be correlated to the degree of socio-economic disparity in and across boroughs (e.g., more terraced-housing HMOs in the east of the borough with more vulnerable people reliant on HMO-type housing). We understand that Haringey has an additional HMO licensing scheme that requires all HMOs to have a licence, including retrofitted housing stock. The quality of HMOs is variable, aligned with the plural concept of HMO. The borough is struggling with housing stock and this is exacerbated by the volume of stock converted into HMOs.

The plurality of HMO housing stock makes it difficult to adopt unitary assumptions as to where the responsibility of waste management lies. Will waste management and resultant responsibilities (e.g. who recycles what) lie with the landlords or the tenants? In a multiple tenancy scenario, which tenant will be responsible for what?

While tenants might live under the same roof, they might also have very separate lives (and living practices). Different priorities, understandings, and conceptualisations of recycling and waste are thought to increase the likelihood that the recyclable waste collected will be contaminated. For example, a single-unit dwelling (e.g. a family of 2 adults and 2 dependents) will have a cooperative way of living that aligns with current waste management practices. Converted HMOs (particularly, retrofitted HMOs) made up of multiple-units will generate waste that, collectively, is seen in high volumes.

b. Transiency

In interviews with stakeholders, assumptions were made that many of the residents in the Haringey community are transient, which in turn seems to come with the implication that it will therefore be difficult to connect or reach these residents. The different waste management and recycling systems across London and elsewhere in the UK compounded with the transient nature of the residents fuels the assumptions that residents will not be as willing or motivated to engage with waste management systems in Haringey.

3. Need to develop positive approaches to engaging residents

Residents were asked if they were aware of any incentive and campaign to encourage recycling and best practice. One resident recalled that they were “given £100 from the council who checked my rubbish” (P5) which was a welcomed surprise. In contrast, some residents were unaware of any incentives and campaigns regarding single use plastic (P1/2). Over the years, some residents felt there was a greater sense of optimism in regards to recycling but that despite numerous environmental initiatives in the borough there had been little change overall (P4).

Developing a positive approach to engaging residents is however, challenged by a lack of community building and open communications, as well as the problematic view of enforcement.

a. Community building and open communications **between** residents

There appears to be positive efforts from residents interviewed as to how they as individual householders attempt to tackle the issue of waste. Residents expressed their awareness of recycling and the disposal of products in their household. The residents interviewed were familiar with recycling and some considered themselves as ‘very aware’ (P5). Other residents described how the residents were “both pretty obsessive and we are both committed about the environment” (P4) which suggests that they follow practices which align with their views on the environment and recycling. For example, the residents described ‘small tokens’ of behaviour such as getting various products in glass bottles to avoid additional plastic in the household (P4). In addition, the residents described the process of going shopping and taking reusable bags and ensuring that they selected products with less plastic and packaging such as loose fruits and vegetables. P3 stated they “try not to buy so many things that need to be recycled”. While other residents described the process of disposing of items in various bins and the contribution of their housemate or partner. P4 described how they took the lead in the household to ensure that items were disposed of correctly. “I know how things should be put in the bin and if they should be cleaned and stuff, I’m not saying I’m 100% correct but I suspect I know quite a lot more than other people” (P4).

In addition, the lifestyle of the household can be linked to recycling practices. Time scarcity and inconvenience can be a determining factor in resident's decision making. P1 described the frustration with the current recycling practices. "A long time ago I used to separate plastic and stuff you could recycle and separate normal waste and I would go down stairs and it would be full. So now I have just stopped and leave all my rubbish and put it in the bin. Because my flat is too small to hold rubbish until whenever" (P1). Therefore, if the resident is inconvenienced it can alter their practices and lead to different waste management practices as this example illustrates.

In interviews with stakeholders and residents, it was clear that with the diverse community of residents and the resultant diverse issues which might affect people at the micro-community level (e.g. in the same street or building), local residents are most likely to come up with solutions because they understand each other and the specific local issues.

For example, P5 stated that they "have a WhatsApp group to pass on information...regularly post and remind them which bin is going to be collected, I put a picture on there...every Wednesday as a reminder". This is not only a helpful reminder to others; it aids in the waste management process. P4 is part of Sustainable Haringey and explained that there were various networks to share information and organise visits and talks related to sustainability. In particular, resident associations and Friends of Park groups have been useful in engaging people from across the borough, for example by circulating information and promoting events. Other local groups such as faith, sports and community leaders can have an influence on recycling practices. P2 expressed they are part of various social groups ranging from a local scout group to a church and volunteering which plays a role in their day to day life. Examples included going to litter picks, sharing community news and arranging activities for children.

One resident expressed that "my next-door neighbour relies on me – tends to use my bins because he is not very good at organising things but that is fine" (P4). Furthermore, when the recycling bin was stolen "the lady on the street told her where she could get it replacedand in 5 days received a replacement" (P2). In addition, P2 notices when their closest neighbour is recycling as they are "regularly opening the door, popping out and putting cans in the recycling...they seem to take a few cans at a time" (P2) which suggests that in a neighbourhood it is likely that other residents are observing practices.

There is evidence of community building and open comms between residents, but this is separate from any council intervention. This offers great opportunity for development.

b. Problematic view of enforcement

Enforcement as currently presented by the council is very much punishment oriented, with much fanfare publicised over rates of fly-tipping (and resultant fines generated) for example. Speaking to stakeholders, it was suggested that enforcement was very much seen as a 'last resort' after many efforts had been made to communicate why residents ought to engage with recycling or waste reduction. However, although the resultant fines generate money and additional income to the council, there are also unintended negative consequences. These might include residents feeling afraid to speak out for fear of getting noticed or scrutinised.

With waste management in the UK very inconsistent in its messaging (<https://rethinkingethicalconsumerism.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/report-one-2020.pdf>), enforcement can lead to greater confusion (uncertainty as to what can be recycled where and when, for example) rather than encourage positive behaviour and practices.

Recommendations

A. Co-design: Increase diversity in the decision making process related to the communication of initiatives and policy

Haringey Council should consider reviewing the language used with residents to be more approachable and supportive in issues related to waste management. During the interviews, many stakeholders spoke in a dichotomous and binary manner, with several painting a 'stereotypical' east-west divide. In our view (based on broader literature and interviews with residents drawn from the 'east' of the borough), this was far too simplistic and unhelpful in trying to identify problems and therefore solutions. Instead, a pluralistic view of the east is needed and to help this, we strongly recommend a deeper engagement with a wide range of different groups.

In co-creating the development of policies and initiatives related to waste management with a diverse range of residents (e.g. ages, genders, ethnicities, geographical areas), this will help ensure that residents are not excluded from decisions that quite literally, affect their daily routine and life.

In investing in spending time with specific communities which need support in waste management, Haringey council can improve the nature of relationships with community groups and residents to build stronger connections. One example could be identifying and supporting 'local champions'. In speaking to some of the residents who took part in our interviews, it was clear that residents had nascent pride in where they lived. With such positivity already established, messaging can be less 'deficit-oriented' and more 'community-cohesive'.

B. Clarity: Inclusive and holistic planning and infrastructure

With the plurality of HMO housing stock, there will be the need to provide multiple ways of managing waste which will require adequate inclusive and holistic planning and infrastructure provision. These might include bin shoots, wheelie bins, bulk bins and sacks with different collection set ups (curb side or central collection areas).

C. Co-production: Developing long term and sustainable engagement strategies

In developing long term and sustained change, there needs to be investment and resource allocation, in the form of both financial and human resources. As a council, this will require diverting of resources to this area and in consequence, away from other activities. Speaking to stakeholders, it became apparent that there were challenges in human resources, specifically in terms of perceived high turnover as well as a lack of resourcing of staff. One unintended consequence would be the loss of organisational memory and knowledge, specifically the loss of network knowledge and social networks created and established. Social networks and ties to the communities take time to build and it would be a more sustainable strategy to build on such ties rather than continuously renewing every time employees leave and new ones are recruited.

Conclusions

This research highlights the complexity of the issue of waste. Inconsistent messaging, complex methods for waste disposal and multitudinous definitions of what a householder might be and the different sorts of dwellings they may reside in, demonstrate that effective waste management strategies need to be multifaceted and importantly co-designed and co-produced with diverse householders. Creating an inclusive strategy will not only gain willing co-owners of the strategy to

reduce waste but also open up a genuine channel for communication between the council and their residents.

We have found that there are diverse definitions as to what a HMO householder looks like and therefore an inclusive and holistic strategy to engage with the heterogeneous residents is strongly recommended. These include taking on board a multiple perspective strategy that includes all stakeholders and resident groups. The residents to whom we spoke, spoke positively of their experiences and individual efforts in terms of waste management. Importantly, they were keen to be part of the dialogue and the council should embrace such opportunities and build upon these positive engagements.

References

Babakordi, Z.; Tucker, D.; Dean, A.; & Yeow, P. (2020) Re-thinking Ethical Consumerism: Report One: Institutions, Interventions and Single Use Plastics. University of Essex

Burgess, M., Holmes, H., Sharmina, M. and Shaver, M.P. (2021) The future of UK plastics recycling: one bin to rule them all. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 164.

Einfeld, C. & Blomkamp, E. (2021) Nudge and co-design: complementary or contradictory approaches to policy innovation?, *Policy Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/01442872.2021.1879036

London Assembly (2019) Single-use Plastic: 4 July 2019. Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/motions/single-use-plastic> (Accessed 22nd July 2021).

MacLeod, M., Arp, H.P.H., Tekman, M.B. and Jahnke, A. (2021) The global threat from plastic pollution. *Science*, 373(6550), pp.61-65.