

# London Borough of Lewisham, Waste and Recycling Services Consultation Focus Group Report, 2015

## Introduction

As part of its waste and recycling services consultation, Lewisham Council held 5 focus groups for their residents in September and October 2015. The objective was to consult targeted residents to obtain a fuller representation for the consultation process, and to keep the decision-making process around the future of Lewisham waste services open and transparent. The focus groups were part of a variety of methods and opportunities for all residents to share their views and contribute to the final decision on the most appropriate service.

## Methodology

Participants for the focus groups were selected by household type. This was based on the assumption that some households could present operational difficulties when delivering the proposed service changes, and residents may have more resistance to change.

Invitations were sent to households with very minimal or no frontage, were accessed by steps or were multiple occupancy flats. Five, two hour sessions took place in 3 different venues located in close proximity of the targeted households. They were attended by 22 Lewisham residents.

Prior to conducting these sessions, we also ran a test focus group whose results are also included within part of the findings in 'The Bin Game'. Though only some of these participants live within the borough, all (5) work in Lewisham.

The sessions began with an open discussion asking 2 broad questions:

- What are your views on the current waste and recycling service?
- How important is it to recycle more?

Following this, each participant individually and anonymously filled in a question sheet asking what they think should be the Council's priorities. These were then handed back to the facilitator. Participants repeated this exercise at the end of the session after all the presentations, discussions and workshops were finished.

Officers then introduced the 4 key drivers for change, and viewed the consultation video in a presentation. The key drivers included:

- Improving the Environment
- Legislation
- Budget
- Ease of delivering the service and ease of using the service by residents

During the presentation, Officers raised key discussion questions, which centred on how Lewisham's future services might be delivered. These closely followed some main questions asked at the Citizen's Forum (19<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2015). Discussing the legislative requirement to increase the quantity and quality recycling, as well as the possible introduction of a food waste service, time was allowed for people to physically look at the bin containers that may be used for such services. These included a recycling box and lid; insert (into wheeled bin) for separating recycling; and kitchen caddy and lockable food waste bin. The introduction of a subscription based garden waste collection service, the frequency of collections and special arrangements were also discussed.

The participants then worked in small groups (2 to 4 people) to design their own waste and recycling service. Some guidelines, such as needing to consider all 4 key drivers, were given so that people stayed within reasonable parameters. Approximately an hour was given to the groups to discuss and present their service.

Results of the questions and the workshop are below.

## Results

### Views on the current waste and recycling service

Though there were some similarities, there was a distinct difference in the overall tone between focus groups held in the south of the borough to those held in the north.

Those attending in the south were broadly satisfied with current service. They like the frequency (weekly) and simplicity of collection. Some confusion about what materials could be put in the recycling bin led to a call for more recycling information to be provided. The residents were both aware and conscientious about contamination to recycling bins. Most agreed that sharing bins with neighbours to reduce bin quantity was simple and not a problem. Positive comments included ease, regularity, reliability and tidiness of the crews and service. Residents were aware of other waste services too, remarking that the bulky waste collection was good value, and that although Lewisham's Reuse & Recycling Centre is too far, they use a neighbouring borough's facility.

Those attending in the north were less positive. Although participants did not explicitly express a dissatisfaction of what the current service provides, there was only one positive comment which stated that 'Lewisham seemed to recycle a lot' [of materials]. The majority of negative comments were focussed around space issues, placement of bins, bin clutter on streets, pedestrian access, litter and contamination by other pedestrians, and bin size.

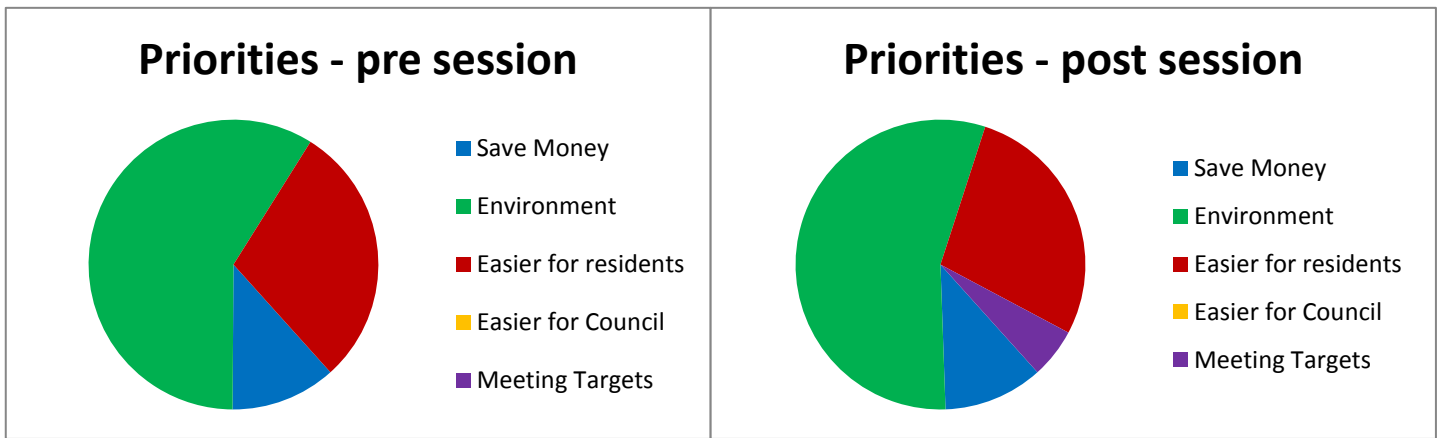
Half of each of the south and north groups strongly voiced their desire for a food waste collection, stating they felt bad for discarding food into the refuse bins. Other comments included the need for improvement to the garden waste service and fly-tipping issues (although the south seemed happy with the Council's response to fly-tipping reports).

### How important is it to recycle more?

There was a broad consensus within all groups that recycling is very important, citing environmental issues as the main reason that people should recycle habitually. Some key comments included the need for a uniformed national system, a reduction of packaging, and the need for more communication and education to provide clarity regarding recycling. It was stated that education should address cynicism regarding where recycling goes, closed loop explanations, and positive press about our landfill rates, as well as what can and can't be recycled. It was also mentioned that the Council needs to provide more recycling provisions to allow avid recyclers to recycle even more than what they currently do. The need for a food waste collection was also passionately mentioned again.

### What should be the Council's priorities?

Participants reviewed five suggested priority areas, once at the beginning of the session prior to the presentation, and then at the end of the session. The priority areas were: saving money; reducing our impact on the environment; making it easier for residents to recycle; making it easier for the Council to collect good quality recycling material; and meeting recycling targets to avoid fines. All focus groups showed minimal change of opinion about what their priorities were in the two reviews. There was a consensus that the main priority for the Council should be to reduce the impact on the environment. The second priority should be to make it easier for residents to recycle.



## Results - Designing a new waste and recycling service ('The Bin Game')

When asked to work in small groups (9 in total, which includes the 5 participants of the test group) to design what a new service might look like, there were some commonalities across the groups. Most prevalent was the unanimous desire for a weekly food waste collection service. A large majority also were in favour of separating out paper from other recyclables, and many also chose a fortnightly refuse collection as opposed to the current weekly service. There was considerable variation in the design for a garden waste service – some suggested pay-as-you-go on request (this is the same as the current service), while others preferred a seasonal service with a lower subscription rate to the ones proposed by the Council in the ‘Let’s Talk Rubbish’ Survey. The main findings from this exercise are presented below.

### Separate collections

Most participants chose to separate paper from other recycling. Of these, all suggested using an insert into the wheeled bin, rather than a box to separate out the paper. However approximately half also suggested residents have a choice in the size of the recycling bin available. A common theme was visual tidiness and ensuring the system was not confusing. The frequency of collection was less decisive, with half of participants suggesting a fortnightly collection.

### Food waste service

Participants unanimously chose to have a weekly food waste collection, with all participants suggesting using the food waste caddy and lockable bin as per shown during the focus group session. Some also suggested other bespoke options, such as a hooking the food waste bin onto a wheeled bin, communal bins located on the street, or presented in sealable bags. It should be noted that these comments came from one focus group, who were specifically targeted for their ‘no frontage’ or ‘minimal frontage’ housing type. All groups felt that the Council should provide, free of charge, bio-bags to line the kitchen caddy. Though there were some initial concerns regarding foxes and smell, comments tended to be more on the positive side, especially when shown the locking system on the bin.

### Garden waste service

Decisions regarding garden waste collections were the least clear out of the topics discussed, though none of the participants chose to have a weekly collection. The majority of participants suggested the use of sacks (as per the current service), while a little over a third suggested having a wheeled bin, or the option of choosing a bin or sack.

There was a strongly held view amongst many participants that any garden waste service provided should be free. Many argued that as they pay Council tax, it should be part of the waste service. A small number of participants felt however, that if it was explained to residents what it costs to run a garden waste service, people would be more willing to pay between £50 and £75. Many people also encouraged continuing the promotion of compost bins.

## **Preferred refuse service**

The majority of people chose to have a fortnightly refuse collection, running in conjunction with a weekly food waste service. Though some participants were happy with the 180L size of the refuse bin, nearly half suggested a smaller bin or suggested that residents should have a choice in the size of the refuse bin available to them.

## **Preferred recycling service**

Most participants felt that recycling collections could be fortnightly, though there was some debate on its frequency, with nearly half either undecided or choosing a weekly service. As previously mentioned, a larger majority opted to separate paper from the rest of the recycling, with only one group out of the nine choosing to stay with the current co-mingled service.

## **Conclusion**

Participants were not conclusive about their satisfaction with the current waste and recycling service. The groups in the south of the borough were satisfied with the current service, but the groups held in the north expressed dissatisfaction with issues surrounding the implementation of the current service, however, no conclusive opinion was put forward about the frequency of collection, or the 2 bin service per se.

Throughout the sessions, people held the view that recycling was important. It was also a priority for the majority to reduce our impact on the environment. Stemming from this, there was a strong view that increasing and improving recycling should be a priority for the Council. However, residents stated the need for an easy, non-complicated system. Education and communication was also a strong theme throughout the sessions, participants in favour of multiple forms of communicating recycling messages to residents, particularly if introducing significant changes.

Participants were also open to exploring collection frequencies for different types of waste. Some made a clear connection between changing a collection frequency and changing residents' behaviour, for example, if refuse is collected less often, then people will look at other options for materials usually destined for the refuse bin. Participants tended to feel that a fortnightly refuse and recycling service was favourable, provided a food waste collection was weekly. Half of the participants also suggested that residents should have a choice in the size of bins available to them, generally suggesting a smaller bin for refuse and a larger one for recycling in addition to the current sizes.

There was unanimous support for the idea of introducing a food waste service, providing it is collected weekly and if bio-bags were provided free of charge. People also supported the kitchen caddy and lockable outdoor food bin.

The majority of people were also in favour of separating out paper from the rest of the recycling, provided it could be disposed of in an insert into the recycling wheeled bin. It was noted that if the Council explained why paper needed to be separated, residents would be more open to the idea and willing to participate.

Introducing an annual subscription based garden waste service created much debate, particularly if charged. Nearly everyone felt this should be a free service. People did not embrace the idea of a regular wheeled bin service, opting more in favour of an 'on request' service, similar to the current service.

As the participants learned more about the pressures the service faces and how it currently performs, they became more open to discussing change, including how materials are collected and how frequently this happens.

When asked to design their own service, participants came up with a range of different service configurations but some of the common themes emerged including:

1. Separate food waste collections, collected weekly.
  - a. indoor kitchen caddy, external lockable bin and free bags
2. Separate collections for recyclables (paper in particular)
  - a. Groups were more in favour of fortnightly collection, using an insert container to avoid excess bins
3. A separate garden waste collection service
  - a. Groups were very divergent in their views on how it should be operated (free, annual subscription, pay as you go, collection frequencies etc.)
4. Residual waste,
  - a. Groups were more in favour of collected fortnightly (if a weekly food waste collection was implemented)
5. No exemptions based on property size/frontage
  - a. Different systems were suggested for properties with space/storage issues including stackable boxes, communal on street recycling and smaller containers.

The key results from the main discussion questions are outlined in the table below.

Main Discussion Questions	Key results	
<b>Views on the current waste and recycling service</b>	South – broadly satisfied with current service and crew	North – less satisfied, especially with the implementation of the service (clutter, space, litter)
<b>How important is it to recycle more?</b>	Important / very important	
<b>What should be the Council's priorities?</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. reducing our impact on the environment</li> <li>2. making it easier for residents to recycle</li> </ol>	
<b>Separate collections</b>	Majority would be prepared to separate paper using an insert into the wheeled bin	
<b>Food waste service</b>	Unanimous desire for a weekly food waste collection	
<b>Garden waste service</b>	Less decisive, many opting for current service over a regular wheeled bin service. Nearly all felt it should be a free service.	
<b>Preferred refuse service</b>	Majority opted for a fortnightly refuse collection, alongside a food waste collection.	
<b>Preferred recycling service</b>	Many opted for a fortnightly recycling collection, the majority opting for a separated system.	