

London Pride

London's new kerbside recycling collection scheme

by Jean McNeil. Pictures by Laurence Bruce

UTIL RECENTLY, Britain's record on recycling was feeble. The percentage of waste recycled is just six per cent – compared for example to 30 per cent in Germany, and 80 per cent of paper, glass, aluminium and plastics recycled in various regions of Ontario, Canada. Meanwhile Britain spends billions of pounds every year importing virgin paper, aluminium and steel, using it once, and then dumping it in landfill sites. And the cost of these holes in the ground is mounting. It's a shameful record, and it has been this way for years. But in London this is about to change, thanks to a group of innovative recyclers.

The Canadian Connection

London Pride Waste Action Programme was spearheaded by Robin Murray, an Englishman who spent several years working for the Ontario Government in Canada, and Keith Collins, a long-time green strategist from Nova Scotia. "In the 1980s, the waste strategy was 'Let's build a dozen incinerators'," recalls a mild-mannered but visibly overworked Keith Collins. Back in

London, Collins and Murray began the programme in earnest in May 1996. The model – although they were not set on it – was Canada's "Blue Boxes" scheme, where each household is given plastic boxes for recyclable waste.

The scheme started in the boroughs of Hackney, Haringey, Hounslow and Enfield. At the same time Collins and Murray used their connections to attract 10 or 12 recycling experts. Together they studied the problems London presented, and concluded that it wasn't necessarily the lack of funds that was stopping a London project from being implemented – the problem was bureaucracy.

Research also uncovered new obstacles. The costs of managing waste in London were enormously higher than they had thought. And with street cleaning, parks maintenance and litter removal taking up the "waste" budgets of the individual authorities, there was little or no money to be found for recycling. Meanwhile each London borough was itself a city of 200,000 people, but with only one recycling officer each, often working part-time.



Litter Culture

Coming up with a recycling programme for London meant looking at its overall rubbish problems. Collins believes there is a direct link between littering – for which London is notorious – and recycling. “The ethos of chucking stuff on the ground was not always there in Britain,” says Collins, who went to university in England and lived in the UK during the 1980s. “The whole decline in public ethics, public space, the Thatcher idea that ‘there is no such thing as society’, contributed to it all.”

Many North American cities, now considered very clean, also used to have a litter problem. “What happened in North America was that recycling broke the back of litter culture,” Collins explains. “Recycling showed people that the tin, or the bottle, was considered by someone to be a thing of value. There were specific receptacles for them, someone would come and take them away – someone would even give you money for re-usables or refillables. So people were less likely to drop them on the ground. It just made people stop and think for a second.”

The first obstacle to recycling in London was the shortage of recyclable materials to sell to a paper mill, steel mill or aluminium smelter. Collins and Murray put together a London-wide Recycling Consortium so they could market London’s recycled materials en masse. Paper was the first product they tackled. “London is the world’s last and greatest waste-paper forest,” says Collins. “There is simply nowhere to recycle the paper – there are not enough paper mills within easy reach of London.”

Another London logistical problem is old buildings, particularly housing estates, which are not suited to recycling or even rubbish collection. But the real challenge was London’s unique traffic nightmare. “We needed to find a vehicle that could deal with London’s narrow streets and constant traffic, to avoid real road rage happening while we were collecting.”

The biggest breakthrough for the programme was the discovery of small, pedestrian-controlled electric carts that could be used to collect recyclables from the pavements instead of the street. Made by the same British companies who build milk floats, these carts emit no exhaust fumes, make no noise, cannot pick up speed and go out of control, and run for about 20 pence a day.

left and below: Collecting recyclables with a “PCV” electric cart in Haringey; inset left: glass separated out at the depot; below right: “Green Boxes” await collection in Haringey



Empowerment

Last year the London Pride Waste Action Programme bid for the Government’s Capital Challenge fund and received a grant of £12 million, to be allocated over three years. The borough of Islington will be the next pilot project, and through its connections with the *Big Issue* newspaper, the project hopes to employ homeless people as recyclers. In March and April of this year these pilot projects will sweep out from Central London to reach other inner-city areas in the UK like Manchester and Liverpool.

Meanwhile, response in the trial London boroughs has been enthusiastic, with between 70 and 100 per cent participation in some localities. Visibly proud, Collins sits back in his chair. “In Britain the recycling movement and the government’s response failed for ten years.” It’s been turned around, he says, by a combination of factors he describes as British inventiveness, social need, and a bit of Canadian experience. Collins thinks that London’s success will radiate outward, and that there will be kerbside recycling programmes across the country within three to five years.

“I think the ethic in Britain of saving and not wasting is very strong,” says Collins. “Whether it comes from the war or wherever, it is there. People just need a chance to exercise it. People feel good about recycling, and they get involved. It’s about empowerment.” ■

The Government has announced that it is to begin a comprehensive review of waste management policy which will lead to a Statutory Waste Strategy, probably by the end of 1999. FOE believes that the UK should increase recycling and waste minimisation and make landfill and incineration options of the last resort. If you would like to help in our campaign, please write for a Waste Strategy Action pack to Heidi Morgan at FOE, 26–28 Underwood Street, London N1 7JQ, or e-mail heidim@foe.co.uk