

Sustainable Households: the gap between intentions and practice

The Sustainable Households Group, part of the RSA's Fellow-led Sustainability Network, is committed to helping UK households assess and improve their sustainability and we are seeking simple, implementable solutions based on currently available information and methods. We have conducted a survey mostly among our members on the gaps, barriers and opportunities for more sustainable behaviour in UK households. We will explore the themes of energy, water and waste further through an [Ideation Workshop](#) to be held on 4th July 2017.

If you would like to participate or want to join the group please contact Tanuja Pandit for more information.

Survey finds 98% of UK householders want to be more sustainable *Sustainable Households: intentions, practices and barriers to change¹*

Preliminary findings of the survey have been very interesting and insightful. Here are the main findings and thank you for taking part in the survey.

Household sustainability is a matter of great interest to this group and 98% of respondents feel they can do more to improve on their current performance. The biggest concerns are *energy wastage, excessive use of water, food waste*, and the challenges of recycling.

Themes Surveyed

Energy
Water
Waste
Transport
Health
Habitats
Community

Sustainability means different things to different people, as these quotes indicate:

“Not using natural resources at a level that cannot be sustained in the long term”

“A circular household where any waste is offset”

“People who aim to live in a sustainable way - minimising impact on the environment and achieving, as far as is possible carbon neutral or even carbon positive level”

“One where both the physical building and the people who live in it are as sustainable as possible”.

¹ The Sustainable Households Project Group surveyed householders' views on sustainability early this year. 157 people have responded to the survey, the majority of whom are from the RSA's Sustainability Network



A massive 82% feel that they can reduce their energy use. 60% think that changing behaviour is critical and this includes turning off lights, unplugging appliances and turning down the heating. The other categories are improving insulation, using more efficient lighting including LED and CFL bulbs and installing solar panels.



For 36% of this group the high cost of sustainable food, household products and energy solutions is a barrier to choosing these options. 26% say they lack the motivation to change behaviour or to give up the comforts of current lifestyles. Other barriers are lack of time to be more sustainable (22%), the limitations of local options for recycling or public transport (20%) and the constraints of living in an old property (14%). 8% mention the challenge of excessive packaging and 6% the lack of knowledge of sustainable solutions.

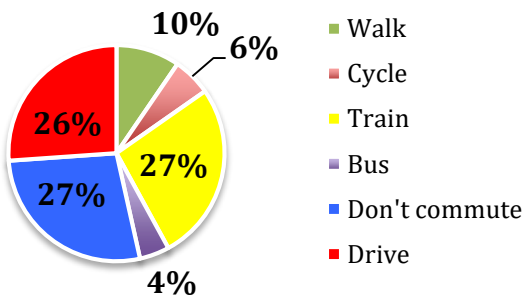
Recycling and reducing waste are strong priorities for this group. 38% of respondents recycle mainly through their local council schemes and some through charity shops. 33% reduce food waste by buying less, planning meals in advance, cooking from fresh and using leftovers. 32% are tackling excess packaging by picking shops and products that have minimal packaging, buying local produce where possible and using their own shopping bags.



71% of respondents believe they can reduce their water use. We are surprised that only 6% specifically mention water meters, so it is likely that most respondents are unaware of how much water they use. Regardless, 29% are moderating their water consumption by switching from baths to showers and by taking shorter showers. 17% have installed water butts to capture rainwater for garden use and a handful are using more efficient toilet flushes. 16% say they are not taking any action to reduce their water use.



The daily commute



69% of respondents say they don't think they can commute in a more sustainable way. The 27% that don't commute at all could reflect a change in work patterns with greater self-employment or people choosing to work from home.



Air pollution is the most mentioned health hazard in the home (18%), followed by lifestyle issues, such as, excessive sugar and alcohol consumption, stress and lack of exercise (13%).

**This response was
bittersweet:**

“If we got rid of the cat,
more birds might nest
in the garden, but we'd
miss the cat”

Our questions about creating wildlife habitats and engaging with communities are part of a broader interpretation of sustainable households. Respondents are very conscious about making their gardens attractive to wildlife. 34% say they have created wild areas, or log piles, or planted trees and shrubs that are attractive to birds, bees and butterflies. 27% have bird feeders, bird boxes or bird

tables in their gardens and a few are taking steps to maintain bio-diverse and pesticide-free gardens.



Our question about community engagement received a variety of responses. 74% of households are contributing to the community in different ways, as parish councillors, volunteers for local environmental initiatives, supporting local schools with fundraising and governance, organising community events and skills exchanges and helping elderly neighbours. 19% say they don't contribute to their communities.

The level of engagement with this survey indicates that we have raised questions that respondents are seeking answers to. If you would like to join the discussion please [Book Now](#).

Tanuja Pandit
RSA Sustainable Households Group, part of the RSA Fellow-led Sustainability Network