

# Public Attitudes to Sustainable Development

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**Sustainable**  
Development Commission

This paper is a summary of attitudes to sustainable development issues. The purpose is to give a general flavour of public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. In paper 01/1/1 CAG and ERM have looked at progress in 5 key areas and in tandem with this we have researched these 5 areas for public attitudes in more detail. The results of this work are in a fuller version of this paper, which is available on request.

## Introduction

**1.1** There is quite a lot of information around on public attitudes with varying degrees of reliability and relevance. Most of the work referred to here comes from DETR, the British Social Attitudes survey and MORI surveys carried out for various groups.

**1.2** The results are mainly GB based. There are some results available for Northern Ireland and there are some differences in attitudes there to the rest of the UK. NI hasn't been dealt with separately in this report due to pressure of time. However the differences in attitude certainly merit some investigation in order to learn about the underlying reasons for those differences.

## What are the important issues?

**1.3** MORI ask the following 2 questions almost every month as part of their political attitudes survey.

*Q7 What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?*

*Q7/8 What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?*

The results of the questions combined are useful in giving a general flavour of what is uppermost in the minds of the public. Opinions are swayed quite a lot, month on month under the influence of current events and the media. Therefore we have looked at the average over the last six years compared to the average for last year.

**Table 1.2: - Which issues people consider most important**

Average percentage mentioning the issue as important	Percentages	
	1995-2000 average	2000 average
National Health Service/Hospitals	43%	51%
Education/schools	33%	31%
Common Market/EU/Europe/Single European Currency	23%	22%
Crime/law & order/violence/vandalism	23%	22%
Unemployment/factory closure/lack of industry	33%	16%
Pollution/environment	6%	6%

**1.4** The top five issues are shown along with pollution/environment. Over the six year period, the two most important issues to people have been health and education; key parts of the sustainable development agenda though not widely emphasised as such. The most notable change for popular issues is the substantial fall in concern about unemployment. This has in fact been declining fairly steadily over the 6-year period.

**1.5** Despite this increasingly stable economic climate, the percentage of people who have mentioned the environment since 1995 has always been relatively small; the only marked difference was in November last year, when it reached 14 per cent due mostly to the floods and fuel crisis.

### **Sustainable development: - awareness and understanding**

**1.6** The last DETR Public Attitudes Survey in 1996/97<sup>1</sup> reported that just over a third of those questioned said they had heard of sustainable development. (Interestingly more men than women, 43% c.f. 26%). However of those who had heard of it only around 20 percent understood it to be linked to environmental protection and resource use whilst others gave answers such as simply “development” or “chopping down trees and replacing them”. Overall there were (at best) around 7 percent who had heard of the term and had some understanding of its meaning.

**1.7** I would suggest that the 34 % of people who reported having heard of the term is an overestimate. Respondents may have said they had heard of the term because they have heard of the words sustainable and development, but mostly development. Anecdotal evidence of people in this field asking friends and contemporaries about the term suggests that very few people have actually heard of it.

**1.8** In terms of those offering an understanding of the term, because this question was asked in the context of a survey about the environment, again answers including recycling and trees were fairly sensible guesses. In support of people having heard development in another context, some people gave answers such as the third world development of industry.

### **Global warming: - understanding of and concern about**

**1.9** In the same survey in 1996/97 more than two thirds of people said they were concerned about global warming and thought they could do something to help stop it, but nearly two thirds were confused or wrong about what it actually was. Again confusion about global warming isn't too surprising. More than half of respondents thought that the hole in the ozone layer was a major factor. In addition the communications study (paper 01/1/03) found that even some newspaper reports have confused ozone layer depletion and global warming. This question will be asked again in the 2001 DETR survey and the results will be interesting in the light of the media coverage following recent floods.

### **Awareness in schools**

**1.10** Awareness in schools of sustainable development issues is one of the set of around 150 National indicators<sup>2</sup>, but the data collected to support this indicator is biased towards environmental issues: A 1999 DETR survey of school leavers in a survey in England n found that most recalled studying the cause and effects of pollution, and the sustainable use of natural resources. The social and economic elements of sustainable development appeared to be less well covered, including the links between the growth in the economy and the environment.

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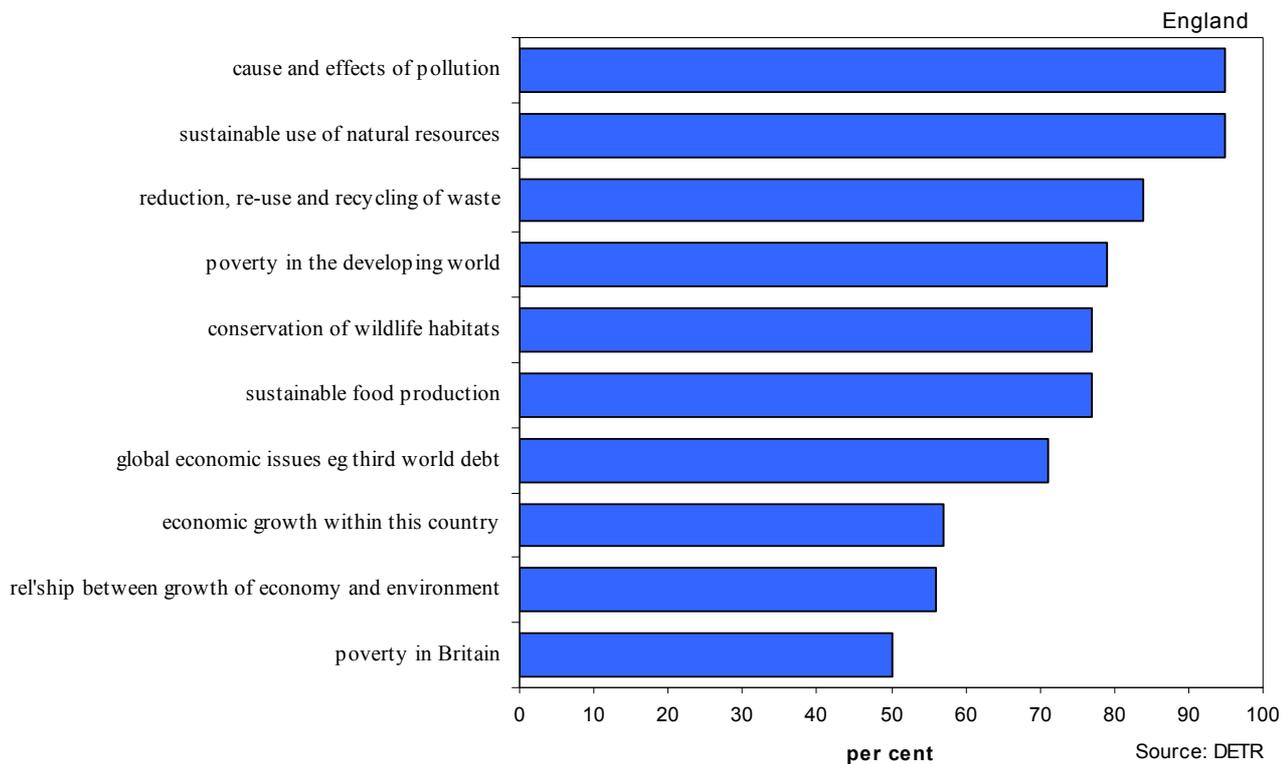
<sup>1</sup> DETR Public Attitudes survey, published in digest of environmental statistics No. 20, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Quality of Life Counts indicator T8: DETR 1999

Chart 1.1 shows the proportions of school leavers recalling various topics.

**1.11** Given that awareness is quite high for school leavers, an interesting question is whether this awareness is retained into adult life and whether it leads to improved sustainability responses or simply forgotten. This is possibly something which the Commission could address with the Sustainable Development Education Panel.

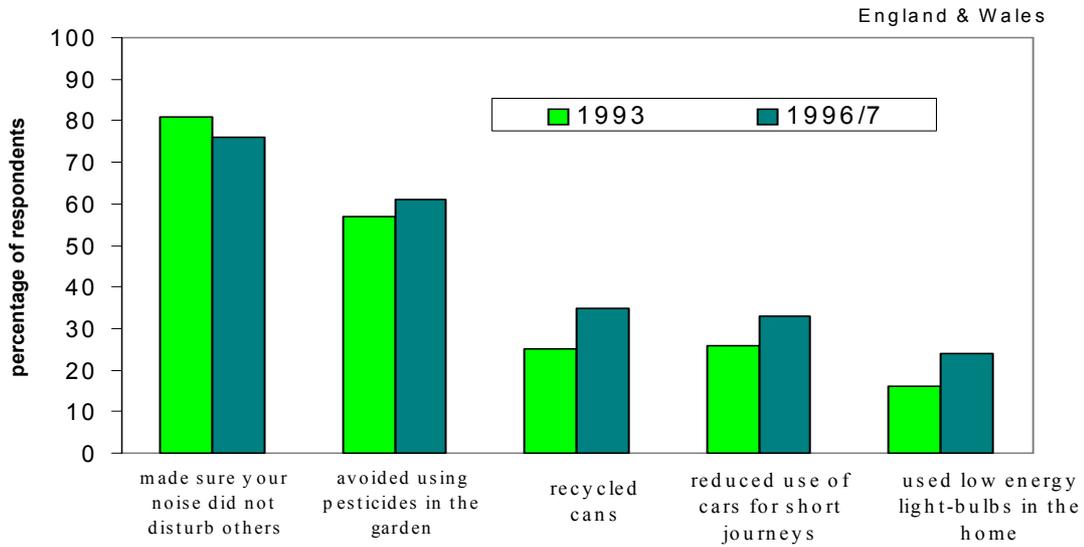
**Chart 1.1: - Percentage of school leavers recalling topics covered in lessons: 1999**



### Personal behaviour

**1.12** Chart 1.2 shows on environmental issues, some actions taken by individuals, which would support sustainable development. All except “making sure noise did not disturb others” have improved over time, which is encouraging. However the overall proportions of people themselves behaving in a sustainable manner are quite small: - approximately a third said they regularly recycled cans and a similar proportion regularly reduced the use of their car for short journeys.

**Chart 1.2: Personal action taken " on a regular basis": 1993-1996/7<sup>3</sup>**

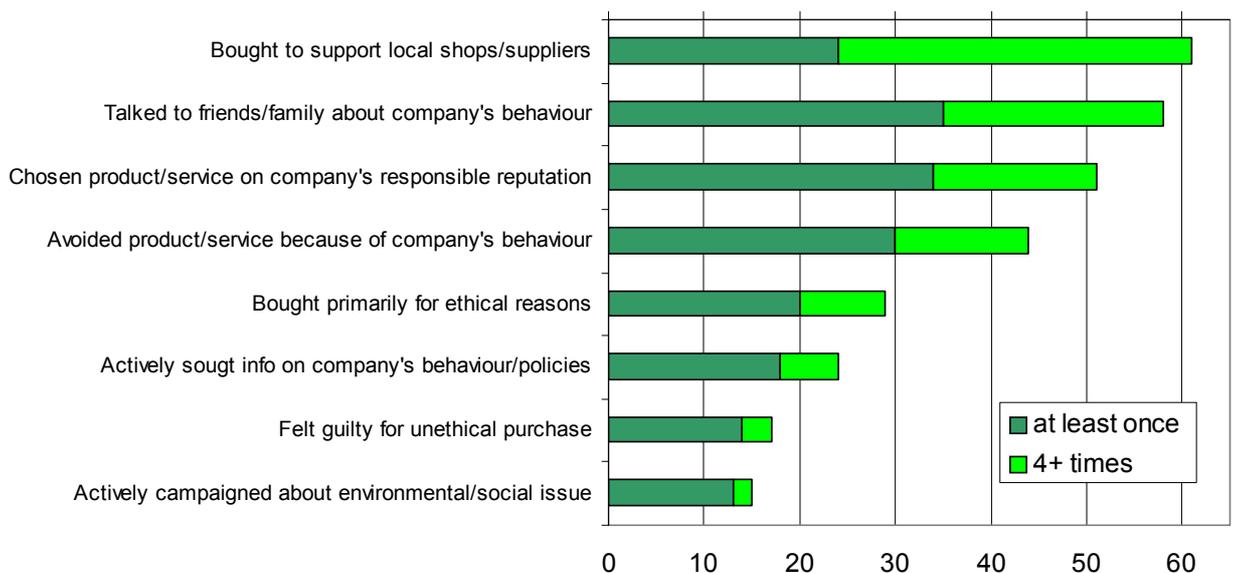


Source: DETR

### Other consumer behaviours

**1.13** The results in chart 1.3 come from research commissioned last year by the Co-operative bank<sup>4</sup>. Well over a third of respondents said that they had purchased several times in the previous year to support local shops, but the data gives no idea of scale: could of course just be the odd pint of milk. In the same period nearly a quarter of respondents had several conversations with friends and family about companies' behaviour and more than half had chosen a product or service because of a company's responsible reputation.

**Chart 1.3: How often, if at all have you done each of the following in the last 12 months:**



<sup>3</sup> Individual action for sustainable development is one of the QOLC indicators

<sup>4</sup> MORI research carried out in May 2000.

**1.14** At least once in the previous 12 months, over a half said they had chosen a product/service on company's responsible reputation whilst a quarter of respondents said they had actively sought information on a company's ethical practices and policies in the last twelve months. In addition, three in five said they had looked for specific products when shopping, such as recycled or GM free, Dolphin-friendly food, Fair-trade and eco-friendly products.

**1.15** Table 1.2 looks at the composition of those describing themselves as ethical consumers. There is little difference in terms of age and sex, though there is some bias towards the higher social groups and those reading the broadsheets. 70% of the broadsheet readers compared to 56% of the tabloid readers described themselves as 'great deal/fair amount' ethical consumers.

**Table 1.2: - Composition of those who describe themselves as 'great deal/fair amount' ethical consumers**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>All</b>
	54	56	55
<b>Age (ranges)</b>	<b>15-34</b>	<b>35-54</b>	<b>55+</b>
	52	57	55
<b>Social (groups)</b>	<b>ABC1</b>	<b>C2DE</b>	
	61	49	
<b>Papers (types)</b>	<b>Broadsheet</b>	<b>Tabloid</b>	
	70	56	

## **How do we compare with other EU member states?**

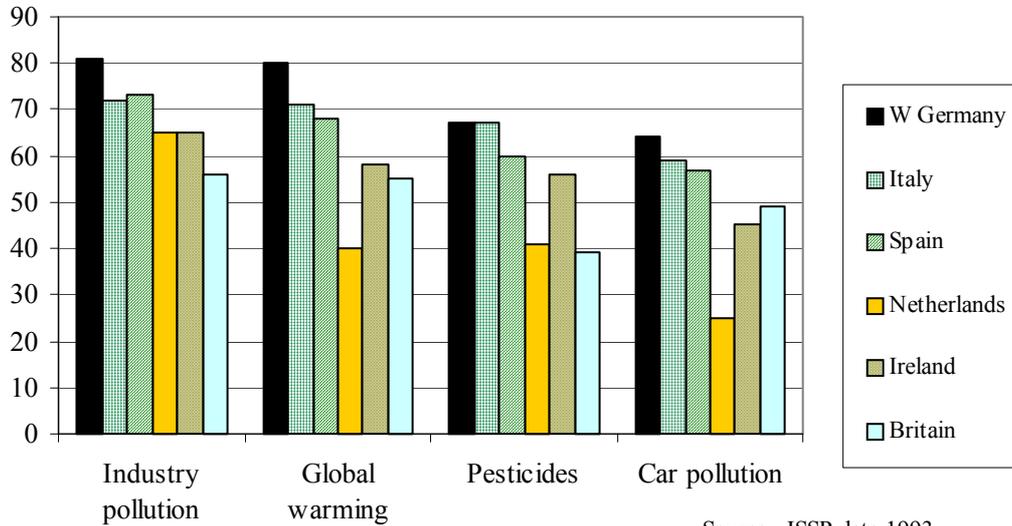
### **Perceptions of Environmental problems: -**

**1.16** The EU wide results below were collected in 1993<sup>5</sup>. Another study is due this year. The results are now quite out of date but do help place us in context with some of our European neighbours. In addition corroborating evidence collected in the meantime suggests that the relative position of Great Britain hasn't changed much in the interim.

**1.17** As can be seen from the chart 1.4, concern for the environment in general is lower in Britain than in many other member states. Another interesting result from the same study was that only a quarter of the British public saw economic growth as a threat to the environment whilst greater numbers in all the other countries in the chart below saw a tension between the two.

<sup>5</sup> The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) had an environment topic in 1993 and the results from environment II run in 2000 are due this year.

**Chart 1.4: Percentage who perceived different threats to the environment to be 'extremely' or 'very' dangerous**

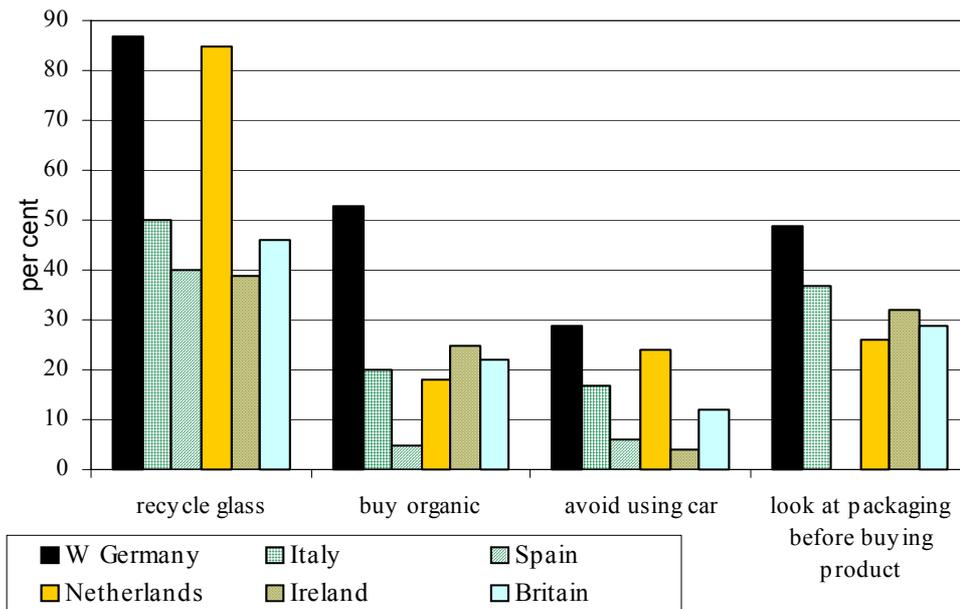


**Personal environmental behaviour**

**1.18** The chart compares the same countries as above but this time on personal behaviour. The results exclude all those who said they did not have the opportunity to undertake the activity in question. The results show that compared to our Northern European neighbours, we have been lagging behind in terms of green consumer behaviour.

**Chart 1.5: The percentage of people who 'always' or 'often'..**

Source:- ISSP data 1993



## Ongoing Work

2.1 There are 2 major pieces of work ongoing at the moment, which should make a major contribution to knowledge in the area. The first is the British Social Attitudes survey environment module surveyed in 2000. The results of this are due in November 2001 and similar questions have been asked in many countries as part of the International Social Survey Programme of work so we will have access to up to date international comparisons. The other is the Public Attitudes Survey run by DETR.

### **The DETR Survey of Public Attitudes**

2.2 The DETR 2001 survey is intended to build on earlier surveys of public attitudes to the environment commissioned by DETR. This is the fifth in the series since 1986 and includes sustainable development issues for the first time.

2.3 Coverage - The survey is being carried out over England by ONS and is expected to include 3,600 successful interviews, with 400 in each Government Office Region. The expected response rate is 70%, so around 5,000 will be approached.

2.4 Breakdowns - there will be some regional breakdowns (GOR level) possible though not for all questions.

2.5 New indicators - the survey will allow DETR to develop some of the 'to be developed' indicators in Quality of Life Counts e.g. Access to green spaces and the countryside.

2.6 Timing - The pilot has now been completed and the main fieldwork started on 29th January. Provisional results are due by June followed by comprehensive results in the summer.

2.7 Some of the commissioners expressed an interest in this survey and they provided useful comments, which DETR have taken into consideration and expressed gratitude for. A copy of the current questionnaire is available on request.

## How the Commission might use public attitudes information in the future

3.1 Part of the SDC's remit is to "deepen understanding of the concept of sustainable development". It would obviously be beneficial if we could monitor progress towards that end, via attitudinal surveys, especially given that current survey information focuses so much on environmental issues on a stand-alone basis.

3.2 One possible though expensive approach might be to survey public attitudes at the beginning and end of the commission's 5-year life. This depends on the extent to which the Commission wants to position itself as a public oriented organisation, which is a key issue for discussion at the February meeting.

3.3 Alternatively and more realistically we could continue to work in partnership with DETR and others who are carrying out research in this field.