

# CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION



# **INSIDE THE HEAD OF THE CONTAMINATOR**

**RESEARCH WEBINAR  
8 OCTOBER 2020**

**CENTRE FOR  
SOCIAL  
INNOVATION**



# HELLO FROM US



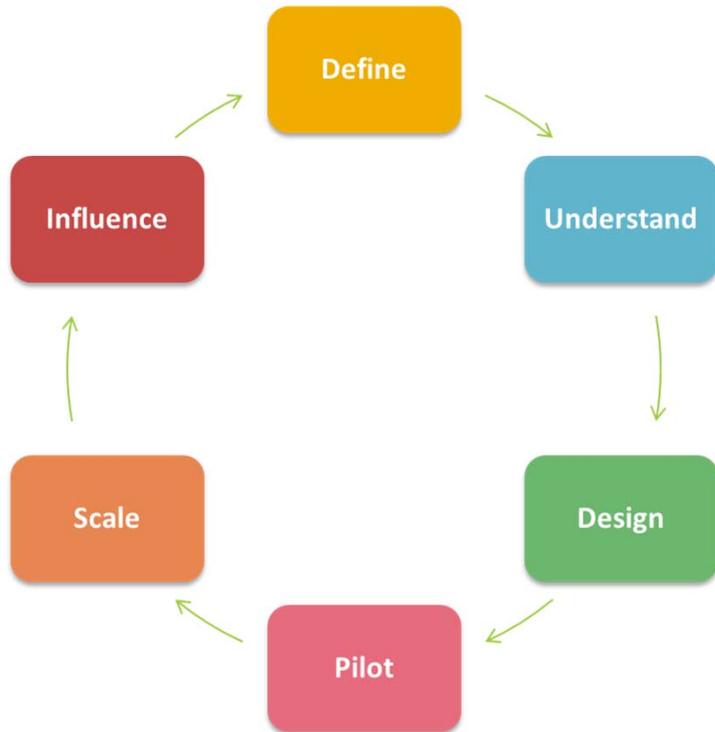
**LIZZIE KENYON**  
**DIRECTOR - CENTRE FOR**  
**SOCIAL INNOVATION**



**DR. ANNA SCOTT (MCIWM)**  
**WASTE INSIGHTS MANAGER**



# ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION



Our Social Innovation Framework



Some of our partners



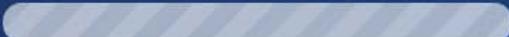
# QUICK POLL

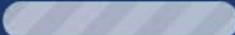


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**#6983**

How would you describe your understanding of what is driving contamination in your authority/area? 0 9 3

We think we know some of what is going on, but there are gaps  
 66%

We think we know what's going on but we haven't any evidence  
 23%

We understand it completely  
 9%

We haven't got the foggiest  
 3%



# THE RESEARCH

# ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

**Aim:** To understand the underlying behavioural drivers of recycling contamination, alongside potential interventions to change behaviours.

**Partners:**

Braintree District Council  
Darlington Borough Council  
Great Yarmouth Borough Council  
Leicestershire County Council  
London Borough of Haringey  
Luton Borough Council  
Milton Keynes Council  
Northumberland County Council  
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

**Fieldwork and Analysis:** Conducted with 137 residents using eight online discussion boards from April – July 2020



# THEMED DISCUSSION GROUPS

18 participants



## 1. Food waste (with kerbside collection)

Whole food, packaging  
with food inside,  
unfinished drinks

16 participants



## 2. Food waste (no kerbside collection)

Whole food, packaging  
with food inside,  
unfinished drinks

22 participants



## 3. Textiles

Clothing, bags, shoes,  
accessories, bedding,  
towels, curtains,  
rugs, etc.

13 participants



## 4. Nappies

Clean, wet or dirty

11 participants



## 5. Non-targeted materials

Glass, plastic pots/tubs/trays

22 participants



## 6. All other contaminants 1

Hard plastics, cookware,  
WEEE, sanitary items, DIY  
waste, general  
rubbish, etc.

18 participants



## 7. All other contaminants 2

Hard plastics, cookware,  
WEEE, sanitary items, DIY  
waste, general  
rubbish, etc.

17 participants



## 8. Wrong container

Recyclables being put in the  
wrong bin, box or sack.

# KEY INSIGHTS

# THREE BROAD GROUPS IDENTIFIED

## Committed recyclers

- Perceive themselves as good at recycling, but getting a lot wrong without realising it
- See 'more' as 'more' – the more recycling they produce 'the better'
- Put effort into washing, crushing, etc.
- High levels of guilt about waste
- Get frustrated with people who don't recycle properly
- Not necessarily updating their knowledge and behaviours with regards to what can/can't be recycled.

## About 80% there

- Perceive themselves as 'okay' at recycling, but recognise need for improvement and greater effort
- Allow minor barriers to impact their recycling (putting in time and effort, etc.)
- Need the extra push/incentive to be really good at recycling.

## Poor recyclers

- Smallest group in our research
- Often start the weekly/ fortnightly cycle with good intentions, but then start to use the recycling bin as a second general waste bin when bin space or time/effort becomes an issue.

# PEOPLE DO NOT NEED TO BE CONVINCED THAT RECYCLING IS A GOOD THING

- Even the worst recyclers saw recycling as a positive
- The term ‘doing my bit’ was frequently used
- ‘Helping the environment’ was overwhelmingly the most reported reason for participants feeling positive about recycling
- People don’t need to be convinced that recycling is a good thing or helps the environment – rather that their individual recycling efforts make a difference within the system.

**“RECYCLING DOES MAKE ME FEEL HAPPY WITH MYSELF. I FEEL LIKE I'M CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS SOME PORTION OF CLIMATE CONTROL AND HELPING THE PLANET, EVEN IF IT'S ONLY A TINY PART.”  
(SAM, GREAT YARMOUTH)**

**“I LIKE TO RECYCLE BECAUSE I FEEL I AM DOING MY BIT TO TRY AND SAVE OUR PLANET, I FEEL GOOD THINKING THAT ALL THE PLASTIC IN PARTICULAR THAT I RECYCLE WILL NOT END UP HOPEFULLY IN OUR OCEANS AND KILL MARINE LIFE...”  
(JACKIE, MILTON KEYNES)**

**“THE FACT THAT YOU RECYCLE MEANS YOU ARE DEFINITELY DOING YOUR BIT BY HELPING THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE WORLD WE LIVE IN, YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM THE FACT THAT CLIMATE CHANGE IS HAPPENING SO KNOWING YOU CAN START TO HELP FROM RECYCLING AT HOME.”  
(MARIA, BRAINTREE)**



# PEOPLE ARE NOT SEEKING OUT THE INFORMATION THEY NEED

- Participants generally said that they do not seek out information about recycling
- People are basing their decisions on **assumptions** and their own '**rules of thumb**'
- Assumptions most often based on the material type
- People can be influenced by the fact that the material/item can be recycled elsewhere
- There is an assumption that 'the process will sort it out'

## **Personal rules include:**

- If in doubt, put it in ('more is more'; better to be safe than sorry; 'it sends a message' that certain things should be recyclable)
- Materials-related (e.g. thicker plastic perceived as more recyclable than thin, 'it just looks recyclable')
- When to rinse and when not to (e.g. germs, mess, ick factor, amount)

**"I'LL BE COMPLETELY HONEST. I'VE NEVER ASKED ABOUT RECYCLING. I JUST THOUGHT IT WAS A COMMON SENSE THING. I JUST THOUGHT IF IT LOOKS LIKE IT CAN BE RECYCLED THEN IT GOES IN THAT BIN."  
(XAVIER, GREAT YARMOUTH)**

# PEOPLE ARE NOT SEEKING OUT THE INFORMATION THEY NEED

- The local council website cited as a source of information by only a small number of people
- Information sought was often for a specific purpose (e.g. to check whether wood could be recycled at the kerbside)
- Prompts for visiting the council website included 1) moving to the area, 2) looking up a related service ('the tip' or local recycling banks) and 3) seeking clarity on a specific item / material type
- Feedback on council websites was mixed, with many feeling that they were 'tricky to navigate', 'vague' or 'confusing', but there was some positive feedback as well
- Council social media only mentioned by **one participant** as a source of information

**“I HAVEN'T ACTUALLY SOUGHT MUCH INFORMATION ABOUT RECYCLING. I'M NOT SURE WHY I HAVEN'T. I KNOW THAT THIS IS SOMETHING THAT I SHOULD ACTIVELY LOOK UP TO CLEAR UP ANY MISTAKES THAT I MIGHT BE MAKING...”**  
**(JESSIE, HARINGEY)**

**“I'VE FELT I'VE KNOWN WHAT I NEED TO KNOW, NOT BEEN LEFT WITH ANY REAL QUESTIONS, SO NEVER HAD REASON TO SEEK FURTHER INFORMATION.”**  
**(CHRIS, DARLINGTON)**



# THE INFORMATION PEOPLE DO ENCOUNTER IS OFTEN UNRELIABLE OR INCOMPLETE

Where participants **did** seek out information, this was often from unreliable sources such as packaging labels (most commonly) or Google



**TWO LIKE PRODUCTS PURCHASED ON THE SAME DAY FROM THE SAME SUPERMARKET WITH CONFLICTING GUIDANCE ON RECYCLABILITY**



**EXAMPLES OF LABELS LEADING PEOPLE TO THINK ITEMS ARE RECYCLABLE**



**“I HAVE NEVER ASKED FOR ANY INFORMATION. I ALWAYS READ THE PACKAGING TO SEE IF IT CAN BE RECYCLED.”  
(JASON, BRAINTREE)**

**“ALL PLASTIC RECYCLING THAT HAD THE UNIVERSAL LOGO GETS WASHED THEN PUT STRAIGHT INTO THE GREEN RECYCLING BIN OUTSIDE.”  
(WILL, DARLINGTON)**



# THE COMMUNICATIONS THAT DO REACH PEOPLE ARE PROACTIVE AND DISRUPTIVE

Recalled examples included:

- Leaflets delivered with recycling sacks
- Information printed on recycling sacks
- New bins/containers (and leaflets delivered with these)
- Changes to collection dates (bin tags, leaflets, etc.)
- Annual collection calendars
- Rejected bins and feedback tags/stickers
- Leaflets in post
- General social media (especially local community groups on social media)

**“THE MAIN INFLUENCE I HAVE FOUND TO DETERMINE WHAT GOES WHERE IS A FOUR PAGE COLLECTION CALENDAR/SUPPORT CARD LEAFLET PROVIDED BY BRAINTREE DISTRICT COUNCIL... I AM NOW MAKING A POINT OF KEEPING THIS CLOSE TO HAND ON THE KITCHEN WALL.”  
(MARTIN, BRAINTREE)**

**“I DON'T SEEK INFORMATION BECAUSE I FEEL I KNOW WHAT GOES IN THE RECYCLING .THE SACKS GET DELIVERED AND THERE IS A LEAFLET IN THEM TELLING YOU WHAT TO PUT IN THEM . IF I'M UNSURE I WILL REFER BACK TO THE LEAFLET.”  
(BEVERLEY, MILTON KEYNES)**



# THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF UNCERTAINTY AND CONFUSION ABOUT RECYCLING

- Most participants said that they were confused about something to do with recycling
- ‘Rules’ that people were confused about included:
  - Whether mixed packaging components need to be separated - lids and/or labels removed
  - Whether washing is required
  - The plastic ‘scrunch’ test
  - Size of items that will be accepted (e.g. ‘foil the size of a fist’)
- Participants felt frustrated about the ‘unknown’ of recycling – why certain ‘rules’ were in place and whether they were doing things correctly.
- Recycling systems and ‘rules’ are often counter-intuitive and illogical for people (and they are basing their own decisions on logic)

**“[I] AM MOST SURPRISED THAT DRINKING GLASS CAN NOT BE RECYCLED... GLASS IS GLASS, I WOULD NOT THINK THERE WAS ANY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A DRINKING GLASS AND A BOTTLE. THE SAUCEPAN WAS THE FACT THAT IT WAS A METAL OBJECT AND THAT IT WOULD BE BETTER RECYCLED THEN GOING INTO LANDFILL.”**  
**(TRISH, DARLINGTON)**

**“I WAS UNDER THE IMPRESSION THAT ALL PLASTIC / GLASS COULD BE RECYCLED, SO JUST CARRIED ON, AND I GUESS ONCE YOU ARE USED TO THE SCHEME, YOU KIND OF GO ON AUTOPILOT AND MAKE ASSUMPTIONS BASED ON OTHER TYPES OF RECYCLING GOING INTO THE BAGS.”**  
**(CHRIS, SOUTHEND-ON-SEA)**

# PEOPLE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THAT THEIR INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOURS HAVE IMPACTS

- Participants often did not understand the rationale for certain rules and this was linked to a general lack of understanding of the recycling system
- Examples include not understanding why unemptied/unwashed packaging and textiles can cause issues in recycling systems, believing that unwanted items will be sorted-out,
- There was a clear appetite amongst participants for understanding more about the ‘**why**’ and this is something we are recommending local authorities do more moving forward

**“MY HUSBAND IS UNDER THE IMPRESSION IT ALL GETS WASHED BY MACHINE, SO IT DOESN’T NEED TO BE CLEANED BY US.”  
(PETRA, MILTON KEYNES)**

**“I REALLY DO NOT BELIEVE THERE ARE ANY CONSEQUENCES OF UNWASHED KETCHUP BOTTLES - ALL GLASS IS WASHED AS PART OF THE RECYCLING PROCESS! EXCEPT THE POSSIBILITY OF CONTAMINATING NON-WASHABLE PAPER AND CARD IF THE COLLECTION SYSTEM INVOLVES CRUSHING.”  
(EVE, LEICESTERSHIRE)**



# CONTAMINATION BEHAVIOURS ARE OFTEN DRIVEN BY FEELINGS OF GUILT ABOUT WASTE

- When in doubt, people were more likely to 'put it in' (**twice as many participants** said they do this than opt to put in residual bin)
- This was strongly linked to feelings of guilt about waste and perceptions that 'more is more'
- Participants also expressed 'hoping for the best' with items in that they are unsure about
- This gives us a positive motivator on which to build in interventions to address contamination

**“WE'RE ALL ENCOURAGED TO RECYCLE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE AND SO WE WOULD RATHER PUT SOMETHING THAT 'MIGHT' BE RECYCLABLE IN THE GREEN BIN RATHER THAN THE BLACK ONE.”  
(SAM, GREAT YARMOUTH)**

**“I HATE WASTE, ALWAYS HAVE, SO IF ANYTHING CAN BE RECYCLED I WILL.”  
(EVE, LEICESTERSHIRE)**

**“THE THOUGHT OF SOMETHING DECENT GOING IN THE LANDFILL IS CRIMINAL!”  
(SARAH, NORTHUMBERLAND)**



# CYNICISM ABOUT THE 'SYSTEM' DOES NOT APPEAR TO HAVE A MAJOR IMPACT ON BEHAVIOURS

- There was some cynicism about whether recyclables are indeed recycled, making some participants question whether their efforts are worthwhile
- This was most often linked to media stories and people seeing their recyclable waste been put in the same collection truck as their general waste
- For the most part, this did not appear to impact on behaviours – most continued to recycle anyway due to the positive drivers
- It is important though to ensure it doesn't get used as an excuse to rationalise incorrect behaviours

**“I DO ACTIVELY TRY AND RECYCLE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, ALTHOUGH EVERY NOW AND THEN I OBSERVE THE COLLECTORS PUTTING MY RECYCLING BAGS IN WITH THE GENERAL WASTE. AT THAT POINT I THINK TO HELL WITH IT AND I STOP RECYCLING. THIS LASTS A COUPLE OF DAYS, THEN GUILT KICKS IN AND I START RECYCLING.”**  
**(MARIA, MILTON KEYNES)**

**“I ALSO HEARD THAT SOME RECYCLING RUBBISH IS TAKEN OVERSEAS AND JUST BURNED, HOW TRUE THAT IS I DON'T KNOW, BUT I REALLY HOPE NOT, THAT WOULD BE SO DAMAGING TO OUR EARTH.”**  
**(SARAH, NORTHUMBERLAND)**



# FEEDBACK LOOPS ARE ESSENTIAL

- Feedback loops include direct feedback to household on specific behaviours (bin/sack rejection, stickers on bins etc.) as well as general feedback on performance and/or issues
- Many participants had received a form of direct feedback and this had caused them to change behaviour
- There was a clear desire to hear feedback from their council about their area's recycling performance
- There are some examples of feedback loops reinforcing negative behaviours and so we must be mindful of how these are applied

**“I HAD A STICKER WHEN I FIRST MOVED HERE TELLING ME THAT MY BIN WOULDN'T BE REMOVED AS IT HAD GLASS BOTTLES IN IT. THANKFULLY WE CAN NOW PUT BOTTLES IN OUR RECYCLING BINS.”  
(SAM, GREAT YARMOUTH)**

**“IF I AM UNSURE WHETHER SOMETHING IS RECYCLABLE THEN I DO NOT PUT IT OUT...I HAVE HEARD YOUR BAG WILL NOT BE TAKEN IF YOU DO, SO I TAKE NO RISK.”  
(FOX, BRAINTREE)**

**“THERE WILL OCCASIONALLY BE LEAFLETS EITHER POSTED OR ON THE BIN TO TELL YOU WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE TO PUT INSIDE THE RECYCLING BINS. ALSO I HAVE ACTUALLY SEEN THE BINMEN LOOKING IN RECYCLING BINS AND REFUSING TO TAKE THEM ...THAT'S ENOUGH TO DISCOURAGE ME FROM PUTTING ANYTHING THAT I SHOULDN'T OBVIOUSLY IN THERE.”  
(LOU, HARINGEY)**



# QUICK POLL



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Which of the following contaminants is the most problematic for your authority/organisation?

1 0 2

Something else



Food Waste



Nappies



Textiles



# QUICK POLL



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What are the 'something else' contaminants that are problematic?

039



# **SPECIFIC CONTAMINANTS**



# FOOD AND DRINKS WASTE

Key drivers include:

- Believing that washing food containers is unnecessary because they are washed centrally as part of the recycling process
- A sense that household rather than centralised washing of individual containers is a waste of water, electricity, money
- Not considering consequences
- Perception that a 'small amount won't hurt'
- Perception that small amounts of dry food is OK
- Time and effort / convenience / 'laziness'
- Ick factor – touching leftover / old food in containers
- Messiness of cleaning out containers and packaging

**“THERE HAS BEEN SOME TIMES IF I’M HONEST WHERE I’VE HAD A TAKEAWAY THERE WOULD BE SOME FOOD LEFT IN THE BOX AND I’D JUST PUT IT IN THE SACK. THIS IS BECAUSE OF THE EASY IT IS TO DISPOSE OFF.”**  
**(IMRAN, MILTON KEYNES)**

**“MY KIDS HAD A PIZZA THAT CAME IN A PIZZA BOX, MOST OF IT WAS FINISHED JUST A FEW CRUSTS LEFT AT THE BOTTOM SO THAT WENT INTO THE RECYCLING BIN. IT’S NOT WET FOOD AND WON’T CONTAMINATE ANY PAPER PACKAGING.”**  
**(LOU, HARINGEY)**

**“I THINK I ANSWERED ABOUT THE FOOD PACKAGING WITH FOOD INSIDE IT, SO SAUCE BOTTLES. YOGURT POTS ETC. THE REASON I DON'T WASH THESE OUT IS BECAUSE I ASSUME THERE IS A PROCESS - THAT ALL RECYCLING GETS WASHED OUT BEFORE BEING REUSED, BUT MAYBE THAT ISN'T CORRECT.”**  
**(DAN, SOUTHEND-ON-SEA)**



# TEXTILES

Key drivers include:

- A belief that textiles can be recycled on the kerbside – often linked to knowing they are recycled elsewhere
- A belief that textiles in too poor a condition for the charity shop should be recycled at the kerbside
- Not wanting to burden charity shops with unwanted / unsellable items
- A lack of understanding as to why they can't be accepted alongside other recyclables
- Full / unmaintained clothes banks; a lack of accessible clothes banks
- Wanting to avoid waste; concern about the environmental impacts of textiles waste (landfill, 'fast fashion')
- Lack of feedback loop (assumption that continual collection without rejection means it's okay)

**“I ONLY TEND TO THROW CLOTHES, SHOES ETC IN RECYCLING IF THEY ARE TATTY AND NOT NECESSARILY GOOD ENOUGH FOR CHARITY.”  
(LIZZIE, BRAINTREE)**

**“I HAVE PLACED TEXTILES IN THE RECYCLE BIN AS YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO OUT THE LIKES OF DUVETS OR PILLOWS IN THE TEXTILE BAGS THAT ARE GIVEN OUT. SO WHERE ARE YOU EXPECTED TO PUT THEM. AS I WANT TO DO MY BIT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND RECYCLE.”  
(SAM, SOUTHEND-ON-SEA)**

**“I HAD HEARD THAT ITEMS THAT WERE UNSUITABLE FOR CHARITY SHOPS COULD STILL BE USED AND ‘RECYCLED’ INTO NEW ITEMS. I DIDN’T KNOW THAT THIS WAS A SEPARATE SERVICE.”  
(KATIE, LEICESTERSHIRE)**



# NAPPIES

Key drivers include:

- A belief that nappies can be recycled (based on the material)
- A belief that clean nappies are acceptable for recycling
- A lack of bin space and wanting to get rid of dirty nappies quickly
- Wanting to avoid waste / environmental impacts of nappies in landfill
- Awareness of nappy recycling services available elsewhere (e.g. Nappicycle)
- Social influences (mum, friend, etc.)

**“I PUT MY NAPPIES INTO THE RECYCLING BIN AS THEY APPEAR TO BE MADE FROM PAPER, PLASTIC AND MATERIAL ALL OF WHICH I FEEL ARE RECYCLABLE. IF SOILED I DO REMOVE THE WASTE FOR HYGIENE PURPOSES.”  
(TROY, GREAT YARMOUTH)**

**“I WOULD ONLY PUT CLEAN NAPPIES IN THE RECYCLING IF MY BABY HAS GROWN OUT OF THAT SIZE AND I DO NOT NEED THEM ANYMORE. I ASSUMED IF UNUSED THESE WOULD BE RECYCLABLE.”  
(KRYSTAL, BRAINTREE)**

**“I DID ACTUALLY THINK NAPPIES COULD BE RECYCLED AS SO CAN TOILET PAPER”  
(SAMANTHA, LEICESTERSHIRE)**



# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. People know why recycling is a good thing – therefore, rather than trying to convince people of this, focus messaging on how their individual actions make a difference within the context of the ‘recycling system’.
2. Use feedback loops to reinforce positive behaviours and tackle negative behaviours.
3. Use personalisation and stories to tell and show people **why** certain behaviours matter.
4. Give people a **new ‘rules of thumb’** to address confusion, perceptions that ‘more is more’, reliance on packaging labels, etc. and which help to **build capacity** to recycle correctly i.e. through encouraging people to update their knowledge more frequently.
5. Assume that residents don’t currently visit council web or social media pages – use targeted and direct communications and engagement to meet people where they are, however create longer term objectives to drive traffic to council websites.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

6. Design communications for salience to help them stand out and encourage people to update their recycling knowledge.
7. Use 'compassionate' communications - acknowledge that recycling is confusing and then help people to get it right.
8. Optimise webpages for search engines such as Google (e.g. using specific terms and layout approaches) – there are a number of guidelines and services available online for this.
9. Continue to address cynicism about recycling processes to ensure this can't be used as an excuse – e.g. via signage on trucks and community-level feedback.
10. Use creative ways to engage people (quizzes, ask people for their ideas, conduct surveys).
11. Use targeted interventions to tackle problematic behaviours and measure results

# NEXT STEPS

1. Sharing research findings and recommendations with stakeholders across the country
2. Implementing the findings in our own work on waste and recycling
3. Developing a new campaign to tackle nappy contamination
4. Seeking funding and partners to pilot new behavioural interventions
5. Identifying how these insights can be applied in different parts of the country to achieve maximum impact.



# QUICK POLL

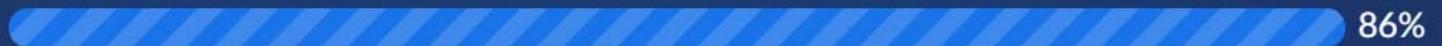


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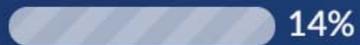
How many LA's on the webinar today still provide....

0 2 8

Annual calendars



Annual leaflet drops



# Q&A

# THANK YOU AND HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

For more information about this research or our work, please contact:

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