

Survey of Marlow residents on sustainability issues

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Report prepared for Marlow Town Council by Nick Rowcliffe, Sustainability Action Consultant

Introduction

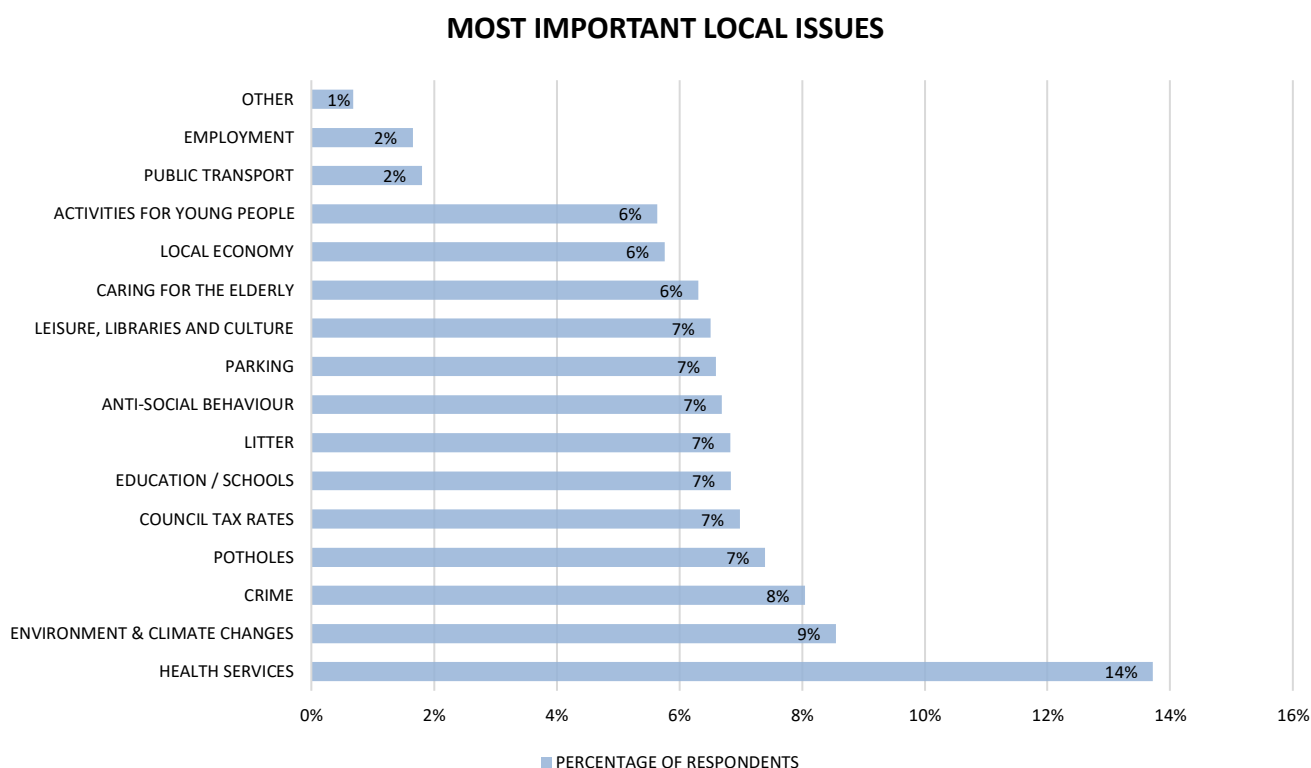
In 2019, Marlow Town Council launched its Sustainable Marlow programme, including a commitment to raise awareness of environmental issues among residents.

<https://www.marlow-tc.gov.uk/sustainablemarlow/>

This survey was designed to inform the council's work by exploring residents' opinions and appetite to engage in pro-sustainability behaviour change.

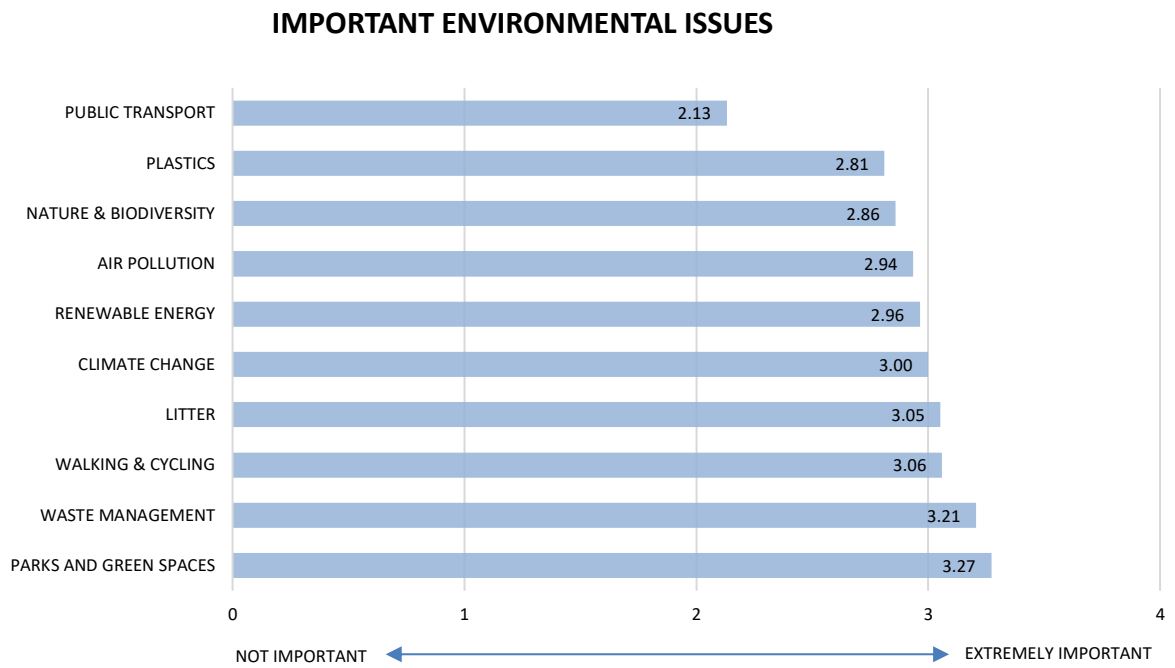
Not only is the survey the most detailed the council has ever run on environmental issues but also it marks the first time the council has carried out any survey on a fully randomised basis, with weighting of responses against Marlow's actual population. No opinion poll is ever 100% representative, but the council has worked hard to make this one as representative as possible.

Respondents were asked to identify their most important local issues



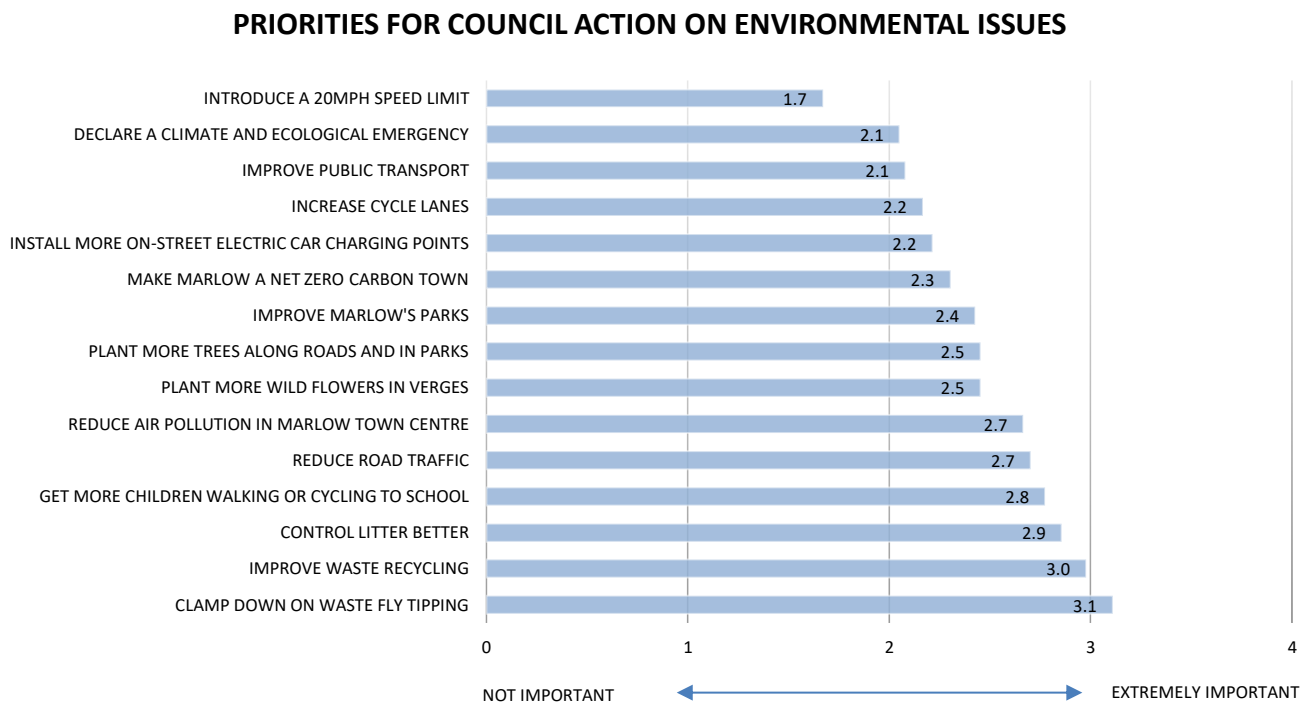
Each respondent was permitted to select up to five options from 17 choices. The very high score for health services probably reflects the ongoing context of the Covid pandemic. Environment and climate change is ranked second. This is especially notable because respondents were not informed when they started the survey that it would be mainly about environmental issues. Conversely, the fieldwork for the survey overlapped with the global COP26 climate conference in Glasgow, which generated a lot of mainstream media coverage.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance to them of different environmental issues



Respondents were asked to rate the importance of ten environmental issues on a five-point scale from “not important” to “extremely important”, which here has been turned into a numerical scale of 0-5. Responses show that residents attach significant importance to a wide range of environmental issues. There is no stand-out priority, and the only outlier is public transport, which emerges as a relatively lower priority, reconfirming a finding in the previous question.

Respondents were asked their priorities for Council action on environmental issues



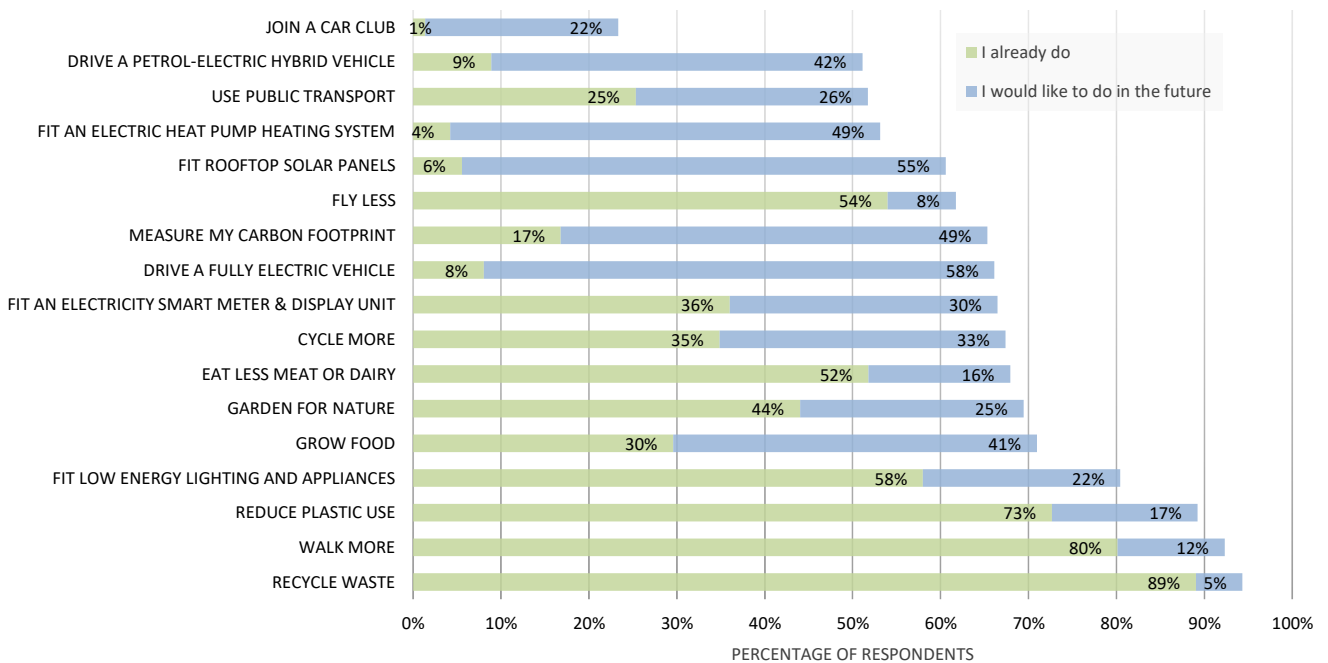
Respondents were asked to rate their priorities for “council action” on environmental issues on a five-point scale from “not important” to “extremely important”. The intention of the question was to probe priorities for public policy in general: the question deliberately avoided specifying whether “council” meant town or county since many residents are unclear which tier is responsible for which policy, some are shared, and some rely significantly on central government. The options were chosen to reflect known public policy issues that are or have been salient.

Respondents attached significant priority to many policy areas. However, the spread between the highest and lowest-voted areas is wider than with “most important environmental issues”, giving a clearer sense that some policy areas are more important to residents than others. It is also important to note that respondents were not asked to consider trade-offs nor given an option to voice opposition to any option.

Three different aspects of waste management were rated as the highest priority policy areas. Nature and green space management emerged in the middle. Some aspects of greener transport were highly rated, others relatively low. There was least support for reducing the speed limit for vehicles in Marlow.

Respondents were asked to identify sustainability behaviours they already do or want to do in future

THE SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOURS MARLOVIANS DO AND WANT TO DO



Respondents were asked to say whether they already engage in any of 17 possible sustainable behaviours, and if not then whether they want to do so in future. The results show that there is a wide variation in current engagement rates: for example, an overwhelming majority of respondents say they already recycle waste, whereas virtually no residents heat their homes with an electric heat pump.

The responses also show that more people want to join in even already well established behaviours like walking more. At the same time, very significant numbers of people want to explore currently uncommon behaviours, including driving an electric vehicle and fitting solar panels.

Conclusion

The overall findings of the survey are that Marlow residents care a lot about environmental issues, want their councils to do more, and want to engage in more sustainable behaviours themselves. The results will inform Marlow Town Council's Sustainable Marlow programme, and in particular its plans for community engagement on sustainability issues.

Technical note

Fieldwork for this survey was carried out in October-November 2021. Invitations to participate were distributed by post to 750 adult residents randomly selected from the electoral register. Responses were mainly submitted online but paper copies of the questionnaire were provided for respondents requesting them. Only invited participants were able to respond.

Responses were received from 195 residents, a 26% return rate. Polling firm Opinium provided "weights" for each respondent based on how over or under-represented they were in the sample compared with Marlow's population at 2011 census based on sex (M/F) age group (18-39, 40-59, 60+) and electoral ward (N&W, SE).

Opinium reported that the raw sample of respondents had a weighting efficiency of 82.4% (equivalent to a perfectly representative sample of 160) and was therefore of "good" quality.