

We need re-education to cut future waste

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Back in the seventies this newspaper launched a feature under the title Don't Throw It Away. It was a tabulated list of where you could dispose of unwanted items - clothes, jam jars, tins of paint, tin cans, old egg boxes, newspapers etc.

In many ways it was ahead of its time and generated a lot of national publicity. Its introduction found space in some magazines and as editor I was interviewed on Radio 4's Women's Hour. The idea grew rapidly when it was taken over by Gail Hilbert, who shared my enthusiasm. Readers contributed their own suggestions and named organisations that could use what others rejected.

Consumerism was blossoming and it was clear that excessive packaging and wasteful production methods were going to lead to huge problems in the future. So Don't Throw It Away seemed a good project.

We also ran a series of articles in which journalists identified areas of the borough where waste accumulated and listed and analysed what they found - plastic bottles, beer cans, sweet papers, cigarette packets etc.

It was an interesting experiment and again generated widespread interest.

Bottles and jars were always a major concern and in the opinion column we rejected the idea of recycling these but suggested milk, drinks and alcohol should be sold in returnable bottles with a hefty deposit on their necks so that expensive reconstructions would not be necessary.

All of us over 55 remember as children collecting lemonade and beer bottles and hoarding our pocket money by returning them to the retailer. A perfect way of cutting out waste and encouraging responsible thrift. Only last week a distinguished correspondent in The Times brought up this

sensible idea again.

Visionary thinking is needed to meet the demands of climate change but to date, only the Lib Dems have come anywhere close to suggesting the radical solutions - by legislating for measures of this kind - that are urgently needed.

Labour has made the right noises but is too cowed by wealthy corporations to introduce anything with any teeth. David Cameron's green promises have to date resulted in nothing more than lofty abstractions, but it is to be hoped before the next election his party will suggest legally enforceable measures that will make manufacturers change their ways.

Last week in my column, Serge Lourie, the current Lib Dem Leader, spelled out his party's concern to take recycling locally a step further and look to ways of collecting rejected plastics. No-one would quarrel with

this noble objective. But some deeper thinking at government level is needed here. It appears that much of the waste collected from recycling at the moment is just shipped off to China where far from being used usefully, it is consigned to landfill.

It appears that most of the bottles collected are ground to make a kind of shingle which does little for the environment and consumes enormous amounts of energy in transportation and industrialisation.

And in a borough like Richmond, where many people have their own gardens, it would be more sensible to educate people into providing their own compost heaps than embarking on an expensive project of collecting food waste. We need to hear more from local authorities like Richmond upon Thames and Hounslow about exactly what happens to the waste we now sort and sift. There is little point in us doing so if it is

just dispatched to another part of the globe to create problems for someone else.

There needs to be much more pressure on the supermarkets and their suppliers to cut back on expensive packaging and to start their own collection and reuse of bottles and perhaps even some boxes and crates.

Both Hounslow and Richmond boast green credentials. We need to hear their lobbying for strategic national solutions to a problem that will not go away but continue to get worse.

It is not enough to collect segregated rubbish. We need to re-educate the public and manufacturers into cutting down on the waste they create in the first place. And this can only be done through incentive and compulsion.

Only then will we make any real progress in the battle to prevent energy and finite resources being squandered.