

Perspective on Waste Management

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Perspective

Waste management has a political profile in the UK today unrivalled in recent historical times. In the last 5 years there have been two major acts, three waste strategy consultation documents, two waste strategies, and a plethora of UK implementation in response to European Directives. It is the intention of this Special Edition to review some of the changes taking place in the UK and the manner in which it manages its municipal solid waste streams at the turn of the 21st century. Production of waste in the UK across all sectors of manufacturing, industry and municipal sectors generates in excess of 400 million tonnes per year (Department of the Environment, 1995a). McGrath deals with the Construction and Demolition waste sectors in more detail in her paper. Of this, households generated 25.1 million tons in 1998/99. This equates to 0.42 tonnes of waste per head of population.

At current growth rates of 3% per annum, waste quantities will double in 20 years and by 2020, the UK will require twice the number of waste facilities (and twice the processing capacity) than at present (Audit Commission, 1997). This is a significant challenge for all of those involved in the management of society's waste, particularly local authorities who facilitate collection and disposal and the private sector companies who are contracted to collect, recycle, treat and dispose of this waste. Collection and disposal of domestic wastes in the UK has historically been provided through the two-tier levels of local and county authorities acting in their roles as Waste Collection and Waste Disposal Authorities (Audit Commission, 1997). On a more specific level, waste management services include the following municipal services: refuse collection, street cleansing, recycling, waste disposal and civic amenity sites. These services deal with all aspects of household waste from generation to treatment to final disposal. Local authority waste services deal with the 'end-of-pipe' solutions, waste collection, recycling etc.

There exists a wider context and role for local authorities to implement strategies for waste education, promotion and awareness. If we are to deliver sustainable development and make a step towards change in attitudes towards waste, local authorities must work in partnership with businesses, community groups and the public. Persuading people to change their attitudes towards waste is probably the biggest challenge that we face, and all parties must take responsibilities (Read, 1999a). Thomas and Evison et al address this in their papers. However, according to the House of Commons Select Committee (Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, 1998) there were striking inadequacies in the 1995 UK Waste Strategy which need immediate attention... it did not recognise the scale of change required to meet

its own targets for recycling and recovery; and it did not place its waste strategy squarely in the context of sustainable development and resource use.

They went on to report that it is important to stress from the beginning of our Report our profound disappointment, on the basis of evidence we have received, that waste management in this country is still characterised by inertia, careless administration and ad hoc, rather than science based decisions. Lip-service alone, in far too many instances, has been paid to the principles of reducing waste and diverting it from disposal. Central Government has lacked the commitment and local government the resources, to put a sustainable waste management strategy into practice. Waste continues to be a highly emotive and politically charged issue both at a European Union, UK Government and local level. Although the ideal of sustainable waste management is well acknowledged and generally accepted it is proving more difficult to implement (Read, 1999a). This is essentially because the public are unwilling to change their consumer habits and households are not directly charged for waste collections and disposal. Local authorities have historically suffered from under-funding of their waste management services, and because local authority politicians have been unwilling to make difficult decisions regarding the location of the required processing and disposal facilities. Policy related themes are dealt with in some detail in the papers by Coggins, Price and Burnley [1-5].

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