

What's wrong with the Government's Waste Strategy?

On 21 March 2001, the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee, a multi-party group tasked with looking at, amongst other things, waste issues, released their report, *Delivering Sustainable Waste Management*. The report delivers a stinging analysis of the inadequacies of the Labour Government's current waste strategy. The following material is excerpted from the Select Committee press release announcing publication of the report.

"At times this was a depressing enquiry to undertake. More often than not, we heard the same excuses for limited progress or inaction that were trotted out the last time we looked at waste in 1998.

"In this report, we make many radical and important recommendations but it is difficult to be optimistic that they will be acted upon. Sorting out waste continues to be a low priority for the Government and the *Waste Strategy 2000* underlines this truth.

"Although the *Waste Strategy 2000* does set in train some improvements, it is woefully inadequate to bring about the step-change required in the way we think about and deal with waste. Minimisation should be at the heart of the strategy, but is paid only lip-service. Quite simply, the strategy is an awkward and under-funded compromise when this area is crying out for leadership and ambition from the Government. We made clear what the Government needed to do in our 1998 report but they appear to have passed over the more difficult decisions, failed to provide clarity in other areas and simply left gaps elsewhere.

*"One example of the problem with the strategy is provided by incineration. We believe that incineration will never play a major role in truly sustainable waste management and cannot, and should not, be classified as producing renewable energy. Yet the strategy fails to set out what role the Government believes waste incineration should play whilst also leaving the door open to a big expansion of large-scale incineration of household waste."**

"The Government are urging business to take waste matters seriously and setting targets for local authorities to improve their performance. But the Government are, in themselves, setting others a bad example: their plans to green procurement are unambitious and uninspiring. Why should others make the effort to think about and change what they are doing when the Government cannot be bothered to put their own house in order?"

Andrew F Bennett,
Chairman of the Environment Sub-committee

Summary of Main Recommendations

The majority of those involved with waste in this country appear to be guilty of thinking without imagination and planning without ambition, of finding problems instead of solutions and aiming for short-term goals without a vision of the system of resource use and waste management for which we should be striving. The failure to implement real and ambitious change in waste management is all the more disappointing since the Government has had almost two full years between our previous report and the publication of the *Waste Strategy 2000*. It is obvious to us that the Strategy fails to reflect the thrust of that Report and that many of our recommendations have been disregarded.

The *Waste Strategy 2000* fails to offer an inspiring vision of sustainable waste management. It sets some useful short and medium term targets, but without the inspiration provided by a longer-term vision of what we are trying to do, it risks succeeding in its own narrow terms whilst failing to provide a foundation for a more sustainable system (paragraph 21).

Minimisation and Resource Efficiency: The Government does not appear to be taking waste minimisation seriously. There are few significant measures aimed at minimising the amount of waste and the Strategy embraces the current and future growth of municipal waste, rather than challenging it. We were told that the Government had not yet "broken the link between economic growth and waste" but it does not appear to be trying to do so. This acceptance of waste growth without challenge demonstrates our prime criticism of the Government's approach to resource use and waste management: that it lacks depth and ambition. The Government must set a target for reducing the rate of growth of waste and consider with some urgency precisely *how* it can drive waste growth down and ultimately reverse it (paragraph 39).

Reuse and Recycling: The kerbside collection of source separated waste is a necessity if we are to transform waste management. It must be ensured that the Best Value regime works to increase the proportion of households covered by kerbside collections. A prerequisite of an authority being awarded beacon council status should be that at least 50% of its households should be covered by kerbside collections. We also recommend that the Local Government Association develop in consultation with other appropriate bodies a best practice guide for local authorities wishing to introduce (or improve) kerbside collections (paragraph 51).

The national targets for recycling and composting provide a real challenge for the year 2005 (25%) but the target for 2010 (30%) and 2015 (33%) are depressingly unambitious and appear implicitly to accept that there is a 'ceiling' on the proportion which can be recycled. These later targets fail to build on the significant efforts which will be required to meet the 2005 target and could result in a loss of momentum in recycling. We strongly recommend that new targets be set of 50% by 2010 and 60% by 2015: these targets will ensure that vigorous efforts to recycle are maintained (paragraph 56).

Energy from Waste: The Environment Agency... needs to examine its strategy for communicating the risks of incineration to the public. In addition, continuous monitoring of the emissions from all incinerator stacks should be carried out and the data made freely and easily available to the public. Where recurrent breaches of limit values are found to occur, the operator should be fined. *If breaches continue to occur, the plant should be closed down.***

*We do not accept that energy from waste incineration is a renewable form of energy.*** Even if one considers that it meets the technical definition of renewable energy, it utterly fails to meet what might be called a 'common-sense' interpretation. A waste stream is only 'sustainable' in the most twisted definition of the word since sustainable waste management has as its cornerstone the minimisation of waste, and the explicit maintenance of waste streams for the purposes of incineration is in complete contradiction of this principle. By classifying energy from waste as renewable energy, a signal is sent to the public and business that it is acceptable to continue producing waste because 'renewable energy' is generated from it. We therefore recommend that:

- energy from waste incineration be excluded from counting towards the target of 10% of electricity to be generated from renewable sources;
- the Government's exclusion of energy from waste incineration from the Renewable Energy Obligation proposals be maintained;
- the exemption of energy from waste incineration from the Climate Change Levy be withdrawn (paragraph 121).

Our Vision: We need stronger leadership from Government on waste. Central Government, local Government and business must examine their attitudes and policies on waste. *It is not good enough to shuffle along in a laggardly fashion behind European Union Directives.*** There are sufficient examples from here and abroad which show what can be done and how to do it. Nothing will change until everyone in waste starts to believe that things can be changed. We, and many others, believe they can. It is time for the rest to join us. (paragraph 216).

** Emphasis added.

The full report, *Delivering Sustainable Waste Management*, can be viewed at the following web address:

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmenvtra/36/3602.htm