

UNA-UK speech, 30 April 2009: local recycling initiatives in the fight against climate change

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The election of President Obama greatly strengthened the global consensus that climate change is one of the most pressing challenges facing the planet.

While in countries like the UK there is already some evidence of climate change, it is not necessary at a UNA event to say that some of the World's poorest people, who have contributed least to climate change, already face the most daunting challenges of climate change.

The need to cut greenhouse gas emissions is ever more urgent. It is an imperative that everyone plays their part and front line greenhouse gas emission reductions at local level are a fundamental part of the response against climate change. As you know, the British Government signalled in the Climate Change Act that UK emissions must be reduced to 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. This requires a revolution in the way we all source and use energy and other resources.

In the UK, local authorities in partnership with the private sector are responding to this challenge. The most effective way affecting most people most of the time is through the recovery of energy and materials from municipal waste.

The waste management industry is in some respects unusual. Every penny we earn is based on regulation. And the motivation of our sector is the EU legal mission to protect the environment and human health. By becoming a key part of the growing renewable resource management sector, the waste management and recycling sector is a key part of the solution.

3% of the UK's direct emissions arise from the waste sector, largely in the form of methane from landfill. However, this same resource is also providing 1/3 of the UK's renewable electricity.

The Government's Committee on Climate Change has noted that the waste sector reduced its emissions by 58% from 1990 to 2006 and that current Government waste policies are likely to lead to further reductions of more than 10% by 2020, a 63% reduction from the 1990 level of emissions by 2020. A strong achievement.

Much policy is conceived at the EU and international levels of government and is directed by central government. However, obviously, a lot of implementation is local. In partnership with ESA's Members, local authorities across England have more than quadrupled household recycling rates since 1997 and are on course to meet their 2010 targets for landfill diversion.

Such rapid and substantial improvements in recycling performance have only been made possible through the strong partnership forged between the public and private sectors. ESA's Members, in partnership with their local authority customers, can fairly claim to have been at the forefront of engaging householders in the fight against climate change.

Again, recycling is one of the most visible ways in which the general public participates in environmental measures and reduces the need for energy intensive extraction of virgin materials from the Earth and the associated and sometimes massive environmental impacts on some of the most defenceless and vulnerable communities in developing countries.

Figures from the Government's Waste and Resources Action Programme suggest that the UK's recycling of paper, cardboard, glass, plastics, aluminium and steel saves at least 10-15 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent per year compared to applying the current mix of landfill and energy recovery to the same materials. This is equivalent to about 10% of the annual CO₂ emissions from the transport sector, and equates to taking 3.5 million cars off UK roads.

As ESA's Members commissioned by local authorities across the UK have recycled ever more material, collection systems have evolved to try to maximise material recovery. Differing local circumstances, demographics and housing stock mean that different collection systems are suitable for different authorities.

The most appropriate system for any local area will be the one that considers the delicate balance between minimising the materials that have to be rejected at Material Recovery Facilities and maximising both the number of people who recycle and the total tonnage of material recycled for a given housing stock. An important factor in maximising this balance is providing clear and reliable information to local householders. The local authority, the contractor, and central

government all have a role to play in ensuring the householder is reasonably clear about what materials should be put out for recycling.

An additional initiative which is now beginning to be explored is the separate collection of food wastes. This is considered by the British Government to be unequivocally a good thing but, as with most things in life, there is a trade off. Separately collected food waste delivers some of the highest methane reduction potential for waste management as the material is diverted from landfill and the material yields both electricity and soil stabilisers. At the same time, these systems are generally expensive to implement and depend critically on householders only putting in the correct materials.

A deal at Copenhagen delivering a long term and high carbon price across the global economy would help with the viability of plans such as those to collect food waste separately.

Unlike householders, businesses already pay directly for their waste management services. The Government's announcement last week to raise the landfill tax to £72 a tonne will undoubtedly convert the overwhelming majority of British businesses into enthusiastic waste minimisers and recyclers!

Changing from being a Disposal Society to a Recycling Society does cost money. Defra says the UK needs to invest £11b in new municipal waste infrastructure by 2020 to meet its obligations under the Landfill Directive.

I have already noted the very rapid and significant increase in recycling in the UK since the Labour Government came to office.

The absence of domestic recycling infrastructure led the UK to rely on export markets to recycle much of the material collected at the local level. Waste cannot be exported from the UK for disposal but it is lawful to export some materials for recycling and this can provide employment in developing countries. We are reasonably confident that materials exported by ESA's Members for recycling are processed in accordance with environmental standards comparable to those in Britain. A downside of reliance on overseas markets is that the UK's recycling industry is exposed to the global commodity cycle and international trading pressures. This in turn reduces revenues received by local authorities from our Members.

Further substantial increases in the level of material and energy recovered from waste are required in the UK.

We have therefore suggested that an acceleration in green public procurement would be one way in which the Government could help to support and underpin domestic recycling markets by providing them with a more stable and consistent local revenue stream. After all, in Britain today the public sector accounts for about half the economy. Our motivation is not protectionist: it is simply a recognition that economic, environmental and social sustainability might be better enhanced if more recycling activity is undertaken more locally.

Overall the waste management and recycling industry is at the front line leading the fight against climate change at the local level. Two out of every three voters say ours is the most valued local service and a similar proportion of the British public now considers itself to be committed to recycling. 100% of this first stage of the recycling process is undertaken locally and, through recycling, most people in Britain now already participate in climate change mitigation.