

## *Why we must go Beyond Recycling*

**Mike Read.**

Recycling isn't the answer. If it is, then it's the question that's wrong.

The first Beyond Recycling conference, over three years ago, was subtitled 'Exchanging Practical Approaches for Municipal Waste Prevention'. The conference heard many great examples of what could be achieved, yet one of the common themes was that statutory recycling targets were forcing local authorities to focus on recycling at the expense of waste *prevention*. And more insidiously, if waste prevention were to be successful then it would make recycling targets harder to reach.

Three years on this remains a problem, and many are still waiting patiently for waste prevention targets, yet it is undeniable that waste prevention is moving closer to centre stage.

Waste prevention is essential if we're to achieve sustainability. It's about selecting quality over quantity, it's about choosing durable, repairable, upgradeable products, and ultimately it's about decoupling consumption of resources from fulfilment and status.

### *What's wrong with recycling?*

There is an insidious and disturbing problem with recycling that we've perhaps been trying to ignore. I want to suggest how recycling may now be getting in the way of sustainable resource use, why we must determinedly go Beyond Recycling, and why actively developing waste *prevention* has become urgent.

Recycling is probably the easiest and most popular 'environmental activity'. Ask people in the 'west' what they do that's good for the environment and recycling will come out high, or probably top of anyone's list. Many of us have worked hard to make it just about the easiest, most popular and tangible 'green' activity. We have encouraged the public to feel good about themselves... while they consume their



way through truckloads of resources. It doesn't matter how many tons I consume so long as I put the rubbish in the right bin, right?

It's arguable that we've all been – unintentionally - promoting unsustainable consumption. The question must now be asked whether recycling now sanctions guilt-free, unsustainable consumption.

*Please* don't get me wrong. Recycling is better than *not* recycling, at least so long as it's done intelligently. I'm a near-obsessive recycler of almost everything that would otherwise be thrown away. Against the cultural background of a disposable society it's taken a huge amount of hard work to achieve present recycling levels and I acknowledge the dedication and hard work of the countless thousands who strived to make this happen. But recycling is only meant to be a means to an end – achieving sustainability. Recycling should not be the objective itself. But the question almost everyone in waste management has become obsessed with is how can we recycle as much as possible? And before long we've lost sight of any question of whether all this stuff is remotely sustainable – regardless of whether we can recycle it or not!

And we have to admit that when we say recycling is environmentally friendly we're being slightly disingenuous. Recycling consumes energy and resources - maybe less than making new products, but certainly not zero. Think about recycling a single-use plastic drink bottle. It's been made from petrochemicals, using energy and producing pollution, then transported – creating more pollution, filled, transported several times more before it's consumed and then sorted, collected, transported several more times – quite possibly overseas – for processing, transporting overseas again for remanufacture if we're lucky back into a plastic bottle, more transport, refilling and more transport for us to use just once again. How can this remotely be *sustainable* waste management?

Just as in other environmental debates such as those about climate change and carbon trading, we must ensure a degree of intellectual rigour and not mistake a reduced debt for a credit. Recycling is not environmentally positive, but just some degree less environmentally damaging than not recycling. And that degree depends on the material we're talking about, the proximity of processing facilities, level of contamination, and so on. So, to my mind, supporting recycling is a bit like saying



how wonderful it is to be slapped just twice instead of being slapped three times. And for some materials, such as green glass in the UK, it's debatable now whether it's any less environmentally damaging at all.

Here's another uncomfortable thought – recycling consumes huge amounts of resources which with tight local authority budgets might well be put to other things with local environmental and social benefits. As we consume more and more we need to recycle more and more to reach recycling targets. And if there are local authorities who think it's been expensive achieving 30 or 35% recycling, what of the costs of achieving 50 or 60% recycling of an ever greater volume of disposed materials? Better surely to get to work at the other end of the pipeline and stop the waste being produced in the first place.

Now I'm aware that everybody's got their strategy with the three Rs (I've written a few of them for local authorities myself), with reduction and reuse coming proudly on paper before recycling, but then time after time I see the most important first two Rs taking the back seat. It's probably little wonder that waste reduction and reuse have been pushed to one side. Recycling is so tangible, measurable and popular that it's easy to campaign for more of it. Even WRAP ditched 'Rethink Rubbish' in favour of 'Recycle Now', in a move perhaps as unfortunate as it was understandable. But recycling should be the *last* option - after reduction and reuse - not the first!

So why has something so important as waste prevention consistently been languishing behind recycling, and what can we do about it? As I've mentioned, for cash-strapped local authorities anything without a statutory target is unlikely to be given priority. And perversely if we prevent waste it can become harder to meet weight-based recycling targets. But I suspect we're also all a little scared of tackling the disposable, consumerist culture that results in all this stuff that needs recycling. Yet the more we're recycling it stands to reason the more we're consuming, and we know we're consuming at far above sustainable levels.

### ***Challenges and Solutions***

I have wondered whether we have sold the public a dangerous part-truth. if we're convincing so many that recycling household waste makes them good citizens, and if



we're making it easier for them to recycle every year, isn't it going to be a huge problem to convince them that they need to change their behaviour all over again? Might not we just turn them off recycling and end up in an even worse state? Well the best news I've heard in a very long while is that emerging research seems to show that the things that influence people to recycle are different from the incentives and motivations to avoid waste in the first place. So it should be possible to *add* waste prevention behaviour to recycling behaviour.

One way or another we've got to make the case for waste prevention – to governments, local authorities, communities, and of course ourselves. Credit goes to Defra for funding research into waste prevention behaviour change, into assessing different ways to measure waste prevention, and supporting the Beyond Recycling conference held in Dorchester in November 2006. Between us all we have to keep pushing waste prevention up the agenda, back into its proper place ahead of recycling. At the moment funding for waste prevention remains a tiny fraction of that for recycling. So what can we do, and how can we make that case?

Waste prevention is fundamentally about (a) making and using things more efficiently and (b) reducing consumption – making fewer things. So there are dozens of practical possibilities: regulations and enforcement regarding production processes, product design for durability, increasing producer responsibility, early planning for waste prevention, direct charging and incentives, deposit schemes, and buying services not products. All are ideas worthy of research and development alongside promoting home composting, 'Smart Shopping', 'real' nappies, stopping junk mail, and many more local initiatives. And in a time of green tax structures, how about a tax-break on repairs and servicing? And of course setting local authority targets for waste prevention alongside recycling. As many others have suggested, a target in terms of kg/household could be a wise way to go, to make it all a little more meaningful.

Some of this requires that we can measure waste prevention. Measuring what's not there any more is never going to be easy. And this raises a question of the level of proof required for waste prevention. I suspect it is unrealistic to expect the same level of evidence or proof for waste prevention as for recycling, but that should absolutely not stop us from requiring progress at local and national level. Frankly, we're trying to



prove common sense here – and if you can't formally prove common sense that doesn't mean we should not behave sensibly!

### *Images and Alliances*

Waste prevention should not be presented as hard-core nor hair-shirted, and with just a little imagination I don't think it needs to be. Vitality we need to find the right positive images and messages for waste prevention, as we're up against a powerful consumer culture after all. At a prosaic level it is about buying better quality, buying durable and serviceable, buying secondhand, and yes, buying less. So what about clean, clutter free living, Volvo or eBay as associations with waste prevention? And as we have in fact paid good money for everything we throw away (whether it be packaging or products that no longer have a value to us) how about a campaign based on the slogan 'Stop Buying Rubbish!' After all that's ultimately what we are doing. Maybe the message need not be so unpopular after all.

Even in advance of policy directives and wise targets, a number of local authorities have already started making strides and trialling initiatives. Regardless of the policies and strategies, waste prevention saves money.

In passing maybe we also need a better phrase than 'waste prevention' – for both words have negative connotations. Many of us may have come from a 'waste management' background. But waste prevention has its strongest allies in climate change management, cost saving, personal debt management, and wise fiscal management. We must forge new alliances.

At Beyond Recycling 2006 I proposed a new national forum specific to waste prevention. If it is to come out from the shadows of recycling then prevention needs its own spotlight and resources. It should be an interdisciplinary forum, drawing on expertise from geographers, marketers, academics and practitioners as well as policy makers. I'm pleased to say that not only did that proposal receive very strong support from the conference, but Defra decided to support the consultation exercise being run through [www.beyondrecycling.net](http://www.beyondrecycling.net) as part of a scoping study hopefully leading to a waste prevention 'network'. Although referred to here as a 'network' the final name/s and structure/s will be guided by this consultation. It is quite possible that a



forum and/or 'think tank' might be part of the final package. The proposed objective is to make a significant and cost-effective contribution to sustainable waste management policy and practice in the UK through facilitating sharing of information, understanding and expertise in waste prevention, between all those with a role to play in its implementation and evaluation.

Waste prevention is steadily coming of age, is appearing on diverse agendas and many local authorities will be looking to incorporate prevention in their municipal waste management portfolios. Many will find liaison with the community sector a cost-effective way forward if carefully facilitated. In addition to legislation and government policies, waste prevention is very much about changing lifestyles and society. Consequently it's an area where the community sector and 'social marketing' have big roles to play.

The expertise and skills required to plan, develop and monitor waste prevention are distinct from and more diverse than for recycling. Waste prevention needs the brightest ideas and will benefit from a much more interdisciplinary approach than is conventional in 'waste management. Demographers, economists, designers and communicators all have roles to play. There is a need for research at a variety of levels – from behaviour change to carbon balances. The scale and the nature of links between waste prevention and climate change need investigating. With mitigation of climate change increasingly the only game in town, waste prevention offers huge opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And it deserves the finest minds. I hope you'll pitch in and get involved with the changes that are now gathering momentum.

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