

Half empty or half full?

We've all been chasing our tails trying to boost recycling rates, but maybe we've missed the point. **Mike Read** calls for a transition to real sustainable waste management



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Sustainable waste management. It's a phrase we use so much that we rarely stop to think how daft it is. On a finite planet quickly running out of resources, how can non-biodegradable waste ever be sustainable? Especially if we consider as a resource our atmosphere's capacity to absorb greenhouse gases.

But isn't recycling sustainable? While I fear that recycling has become akin to a religion for some folk, I trust *Resource* readers are not the kind of people to put their fingers in their ears and sing loudly when they hear something unwelcome.

Recycling is not sustainable. It's not even environmentally friendly. It's just less environmentally unfriendly than not recycling.

Well, usually. Consider for a moment the humble disposable plastic cup. Extraction of its raw materials comes with a considerable environmental burden. Then there's the energy used and pollution produced by transporting these materials to a factory where yet more energy is used and pollution caused in manufacture; then there's shipping to a wholesaler, and possibly a retailer, before yet more transport to the end user. Now the religion of recycling says all that becomes excusable if we then collect up loads of cups, transport them again to another reprocessing plant, melt them down and make them into a plastic pencil, which is once again transported via a wholesaler and perhaps a retailer to the end user. No wonder our roads are clogged with heavy lorries.

With due respect to those who make their living from making or selling plastic cups, or even plastic pencils, or driving them around the country, I no longer believe we can fool ourselves that this is sustainable management – not even remotely. Plastic cups are just one example from a catalogue of thousands of products with ludicrously short lifespans, all somehow justified because they are or can be recycled.

Recycling is certainly better than not recycling, and those local authorities riding high in the *Resource* league table have something to be proud of. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Let's not allow the road to global warming to be paved with recycling. Recycling is not the destination, it's an interesting layby on the journey to true sustainability.

That journey is one we cannot afford not to continue, and there are signposts and help available for our next step. For instance, I have recently put the final touches to a report to Defra that looks at how best to monitor and measure waste prevention. Over the last three years, working with other consultants, academics and Dorset County Council, we have been painstakingly

trying to establish what might be best practice. There's no doubt about it, credibly and accurately measuring household waste prevention is difficult and needs time and resources. Indeed, one might question whether the evidence required for waste prevention could or should ever be expected to be of the same quality as for recycling. After all, weighing a box of glass is always going to be

easier than measuring what's never been made in the first place. Yet, it seems that where there is sufficient quality and duration of weighbridge tickets for individual collection rounds, it is possible to demonstrate that household waste prevention campaigns work. We have demonstrated a reduction in total kerbside waste arisings of around two per cent per year in our main target area, compared with an apparent rise of two per cent or more in the control areas and across the county. But should we even need to wait until we can prove common sense before we act?

Waste prevention sits at the top of our waste strategies, so let's get on with developing and implementing it. It's really quite simple. It means efficiently making, choosing and using fewer, better things. 

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