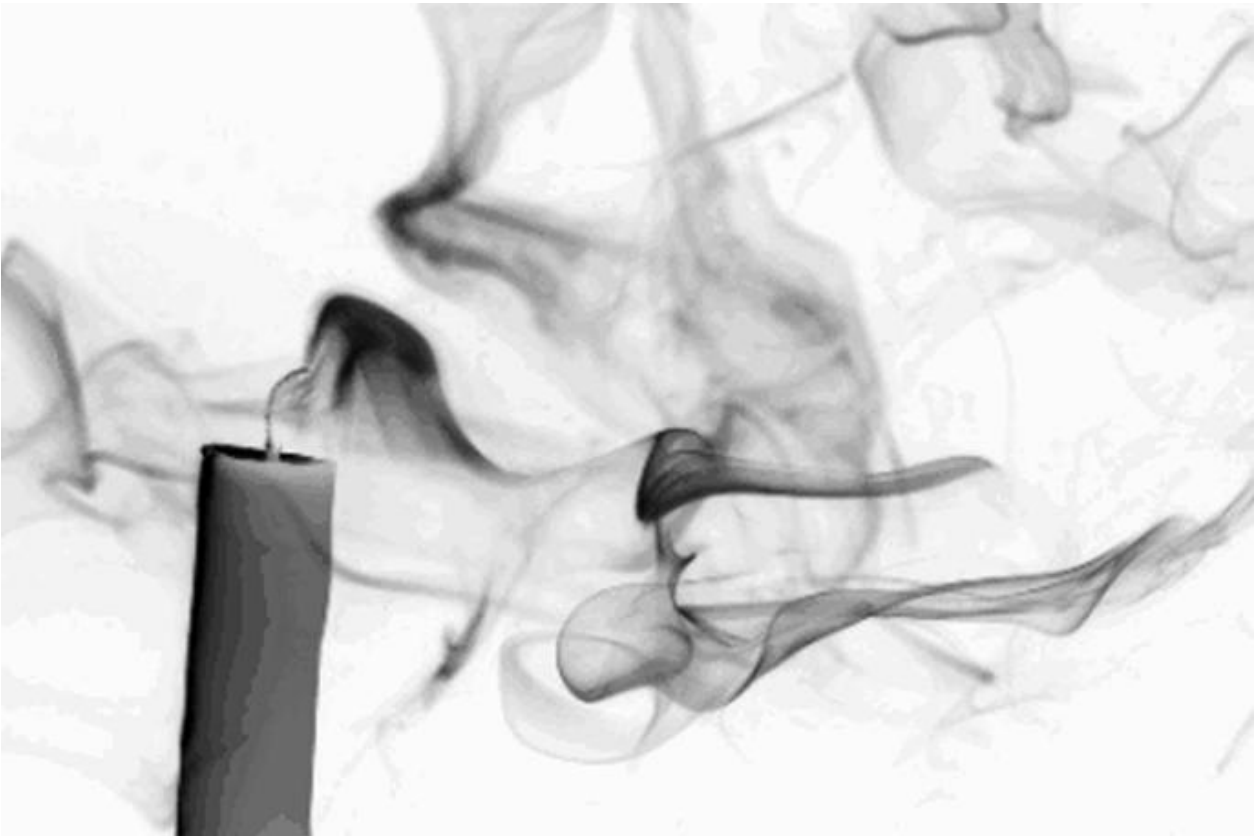


What a Waste



**Report from the Citizens' Round Table
on the Future of Waste in Birmingham**

This report is written by John Newson, senior waste campaigner at Birmingham Friends of the Earth based on the Round Table on the Future of Waste organised by Chamberlain Forum and held at Birmingham Midland Institute on 14 July 2011



Chamberlain Forum aims to empower local communities to become involved in design and delivery of services, using an approach of co-production to regenerate neighbourhoods. www.chamberlainforum.org



Birmingham Friends of the Earth opposes the mass incineration of waste and has a campaign proposing a halving the amount of rubbish, by 2026, nationally and locally. www.birminghamfoe.org.uk

Introduction

A brief citizen enquiry into the way Birmingham deals with waste.

A Round Table Discussion on the future of waste in Birmingham was organised by Chamberlain Forum and Birmingham Friends of the Earth on Thursday 14th July 2011 at the Birmingham & Midland Institute, Margaret St. Birmingham.

Aims

The aims of the Round Table were:

1. To explore, frankly, waste issues and problems in the city
2. To share good practice examples here and in other towns
3. To look ahead to a waste system that can meet future needs.

Who Took Part

Participants were: Paul Kenna, Chris Ward, Hannah Rumsby, Phil Beardmore, Brett Rehling, Andreas Hornung, Julian Stanton, Celia Wallis, Dominika Kaczowska, Haroon Muchal, Conrad Waldron, Simon Gilks, Paul Slatter, Joe Peacock and John Newson. The session

was facilitated by Paul Slatter, Director of Chamberlain Forum.

Who Was Invited

We invited participants from a range of community and voluntary groups and public services concerned with recycling, environmental improvement, neighbourhood regeneration and public protection.

Birmingham City Council will be formally reviewing and consulting on its waste strategy during 2011. We hope this report will feed in to the review. We did not, however, invite representatives of the City Council, or waste contractors, to be part of the round table. This was because we wanted to enable a frank discussion without focusing unduly on the review or its eventual outcome.

This report was written by John Newson of Birmingham Friends of the Earth and published on 28 September 2011.

1. What a Waste!

What's wrong with the current waste system in Birmingham?

When we ask what's wrong with the waste system in our city, we are accepting that we all have a part to play in making it better.

The council and residents and businesses are all involved in producing the waste stream. If we don't like the result, rather than blaming and punishing, or generating excuses, we have to redesign the system, the relationships, the behaviours to get a different result.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that waste is treated as someone else's problem. In fact, waste is *coproduced*. Effective action to improve the way we deal with likewise needs residents and communities to be involved. Our neighbourhoods have knowledge and skills which could be used to provide a long term solutions that have public support.

Waste becomes rubbish

There are potential uses for almost all waste. Until, that is, they are mixed together and become inseparable, contaminated and useless rubbish. The municipal waste system in Birmingham produces 440,000 tonnes of rubbish every year to be burned in the incinerator

at Tyseley or landfilled. The city's recycling efforts seem to have been been 'bolted on' to what is mainly a huge system for making and disposing of rubbish.

Rubbish as a fuel

The mixed refuse burned in the Tyseley Energy from Waste plant owned by Veolia is a 'rubbish fuel'. It consists of air, water, rotting food, contaminated paper and plastic and many incombustible items.

There seems to be no convincing case for burning rubbish. It isn't 'green', renewable or efficient. Most of the heat liberated in the burn is wasted into the air. To capture the heat and pipe it to warm buildings would be difficult and expensive: the incinerator is in the wrong place. How does burning rubbish compare using with a fuel such as natural gas for electricity and/or heat?

The process seems only to exist because of monopoly and subsidy.

Rubbish becomes air pollution

The city currently puts much of its rubbish into the sky. The Tyseley incinerator emits an estimated 13,000 tonnes of CO₂ every

year. Will the council publicise the correct figure?

Birmingham has a target of cutting its carbon emissions by 60% by 2026. How can this be compatible with mass burning of rubbish?

Rubbish becomes litter

Food waste in flimsy black bags creates a ready food source for rats, pigeons, foxes and gulls. How many complaints are received about pests every year? What is the annual cost of call outs for Pest Control officers?

Piles of bin bags mean a visual mess in streets. This encourages people to add litter. This means a poor image, low self esteem and lack of respect especially for inner city areas. It looks like no-one cares for the area and works against our efforts to uplift aspirations in poorest communities.

Rubbish escapes from split or ripped bags. Paper blows from recycling boxes creating litter. What is the cost of cleanups, litter picks and street cleansing?

Piles of rubbish, flytipped waste and unwanted items are a source of fires. There were 1165 arson rubbish fires in Birmingham last year. What are the costs and waste of fire service time from rubbish fires? What is the impact of fires on air pollution?

Residents groups and the public express dissatisfaction frequently about rats and rubbish. How many complaints are there every year and what does it cost to deal with them? How much time do councillors and officers spend dealing with these problems?

Bags or bins

We note that most local authorities have abandoned the black bag. What is the cost of producing, delivering and collecting bin bags to every home to lie around the

streets, be used once and then burned? How would this compare, over say 10 years, with supplying one robust rubbish bin?

Value is destroyed

Many of the items the public take to 'Household Recycling Centres' - including, for example, bicycles - are actually incinerated. How much could be sold, or repaired and reused? The 'bulky waste collection' contains 60% items that can be recycled, according to an experiment by CSV environment. What about recovering materials like wood, textiles? Garden waste is taken away from the city to be composted - can't we make, and use, compost locally?

Who decides?

The current waste system has a strong element of monopoly. The City Council signed a long term contract in 1994 to deliver our rubbish to Veolia to burn in the incinerator for 25 years. Smaller initiatives by the 3rd sector to show ways to recover wastes for reuse and recycling have, historically, been squeezed out. Residents are cast as complainers, or blamed for the poor performance and mess created by the system, instead of being treated as part of the solution. We need a much more inclusive and positive approach to waste management in Birmingham, avoiding 'closed doors' and commitments to big technology-based 'solutions'.

Rubbish capital of the Midlands?

We want our city to reject a role importing and burning rubbish from around the region. Birmingham could be a model of low waste, high recycling and job creation - a beacon to other authorities. We have universities with expertise and a business sector which can help the move to resource recovery.

2. Beyond Rubbish?

Building a waste system for the future

The end of the contract with Veolia in 2019 is a great opportunity to design a waste system for the 21st century - one that is an asset for the city, not a liability. We want a waste system that will be efficient, effective and popular. Residents of the city need to be involved and enlisted to help in this redesign of our waste system. The new system must work backwards from the materials that can be used or reused and create a reliable system for collection that feeds those 'end-uses', such as the paper and plastics recyclers.

Learning from other cities

Every local authority has to collect and dispose of wastes. There is no need to re-invent any solution: just study, learn and apply what has worked elsewhere in similar situations.

A low carbon waste system

The new waste system should contribute to the City's Carbon Reduction strategy, by minimising the amount of carbon released into the air from burning and instead by locking up carbon into new products, or into compost and soil, or inert landfill.

Recovering value from waste

Energy and materials prices continue to rise due to population and economic growth around the world. The 'throw away society' will surely not return as everything becomes too valuable to just dispose of. Landfill sites are almost full and legislation to ban landfill of food waste and recyclable materials may be imminent. Birmingham needs to plan a waste collection system that produces useable materials, not rubbish for 'disposal'. This can be the basis for many jobs, companies, even industries in the city.

Involving local recyclers

There are social enterprises, charities, commercial business already trying to recover wastes within the city. These should be involved in designing a waste system for the future that will maximise the opportunities for value to be recovered and jobs created.

Separating out the food waste

If food waste and other putrescibles can be separated out and collected from homes and businesses it can be digested by bacteria to be a source of renewable energy.

This happens in many towns: Bristol, Cheltenham, Preston, Leeds, Cambridge. This will reduce the problem of rats and other pests. There is a lot of learning already about how to manage such systems.

Renewable Energy Source

Aston University has a leading European Bioenergy Research centre www1.aston.ac.uk/ebri/ They have developed an efficient system to digest and gassify biological waste. This biogas could be used in combined heat and power plants in the city. In Birmingham, waste should be seen an important means of generating renewable power that is low carbon. There is a chance to avoid past mistakes and become a leading city.

Collection systems for food waste will have to be devised which work in every neighbourhood. We see local communities and the 3rd sector having a role in operating this new system. What is the right size and scale for such an anerobic digestion plant? What locations will be best to supply waste heat and gas?

Re-use and recycle

With the 'putrescibles' separated out, there will be clean items and materials remaining. We should plan for a very substantial increase in recycling rate from current 32% of municipal waste so that very little residual rubbish will need to be collected. This has implications for the bins and vans used for collection. Small businesses need a whole system to conveniently separate their wastes for recycling and incentives to do so.

Jobs from waste

Much of what is burned and landfilled could be recovered, sorted and re-used. We must find useful work to engage people in deprived areas of the city. The system needs to move from disposal to economic development. There are examples all over the country of local

projects recovering value and creating jobs and training for local people, such as scrap stores and reuse centres. This will require sites to be provided for reuse and recycling in town centres.

Strengthening communities

We want to see a waste recovery system that builds on the social capital of neighbourliness and community organisation. We believe that the council has a method called Valuing Worth for community asset transfers that could also be used when making decisions about waste.

What is the incentive?

Instead of asking people to throw away wastes we want them to separate and recycle. What incentive can be given? Individual incentives are possible. But community benefit may work better. Visible projects that recycle benefit to local areas, creating jobs and training opportunities.

One size will not fit all

Different areas, housing types, households are likely to need different solutions for separation, storage and use of wastes. We should be wary of any Big Plan, Big Solution approach.

Communicate, communicate

Past waste changes have not been well explained or communicated. This is not just an engineering problem it needs a lot of communication with residents and advice from community organisations should be sought, as to the methods that are likely to work for different communities. There should be community education about how people can reduce waste and assist recycling.

Pilot areas

A good approach, we think, could be to select one or more areas, containing a diversity that reflects the city and discuss with residents what will work for them. If there is one part of Birmingham which has trialled and improved its waste system for the 21st century, this can then be rolled out to all, when the incinerator contract finishes in 2019.

A local Green Fund

People in Birmingham should be able to invest in the transformation of the waste system into one that generates a stream

of income. We need to recycle money within the city, as well as unemployed people and under-used land and resources. The profits from waste should not be signed away to outside big business.

Conclusion

We urge that the Waste Strategy Review by Birmingham City Council be used to consult widely and seek a shared vision of a new waste system that sustains the city and is sustainable for the wider environment.