

Letter to all City Councillors

9th June 2020

From Birmingham Friends of the Earth

Concerning the Tyseley Incinerator

Dear Councillor, Our members live in all parts of Birmingham and we are writing to you because a contract for the council's waste services has been advertised until 2034, with a cost of £500 million as we understand. BFOE recognises that COVID19 is making BCC's job harder, however there is now a great opportunity to rethink, pivot and escape from the trap of the existing "collect to burn" model of waste.

What we are asking for?

A Waste Task Force to be set up very urgently within the council, including all parties, under the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive, to find ways to rapidly run down the Tyseley incinerator towards a closure, by transforming how the city collects and treats its waste.

Why are we asking for this?

COVID19 is making BCC's job harder, but there is urgent opportunity to rethink the future of waste. The virus restrictions have shown that the public will cooperate with change, when they are given clear instruction what to do and powerful reasons to do it. People are very concerned about public health and also climate disruption, which is set to get worse, so cutting carbon emissions is high up public concerns. Let's invest in the future, not the past.

Who says we should make the change?

The Council has had many discussions and reports, which have recommended changing the waste system, but not they have not been implemented.

Green Waste Scrutiny Inquiry 2014

'Air Quality Strategy' 2019

'From Waste to Resource' 2014

The Plastic Free Birmingham Inquiry', 2019

'Waste Strategy 2017'

'Climate Emergency Declaration and Route to Zero Taskforce' 2019

'Birmingham Development Plan' 2017

Independent Waste Review' 2020

'Clean Air Zone' 2018

What's the problem with incineration?

The Tyseley plant is highly inefficient and polluting, so is not compatible with moving towards Clean Air. COVID19 has shown that existing lung conditions makes people more vulnerable to an infectious disease. Background pollution from traffic and industrial sources is worst in low income areas which have the worst health statistics, such as East Birmingham where Tyseley is located. It would be a good contribution to Inclusive Growth to close the plant. By burning it makes acidic vapours; nitrogen oxides, hydrochloric, hydrofluoric, sulphuric

acids and fine particulates of soot which can penetrate people's lungs. The Clean Air Zone will from next year be charging motorists, but they emit a small fraction of the emissions of the Council's Tyseley plant, so that will look very unjust.

The plant is the biggest single source of carbon dioxide emissions in the city. For every tonne of rubbish burned, about a tonne of CO₂ is released. In June 2019 the Council voted unanimously that there is Climate Emergency and that all policies and processes need to be looked at in the light of progress towards being net zero carbon by 2030. The UK has targets on CO₂ reduction which mean that mass burning of rubbish is going to be banned, or taxed heavily, at some time soon. The sky is full.

'Waste to burn' requires a continuing failure to compost, digest or recycle items. It requires that Birmingham should remain at the bottom of the recycling league of local authorities. We are currently going backwards, in that currently both garden waste and clinical waste are being added to the incinerator.

Recycling and burning are in competition, so are NOT complementary. The danger is that to operate the plant until 2034, a company will want a flow of material and income from gate fees. There will be no incentive to run the operation down and would reduce their income. If plastic waste is prevented, or recycled, then that will reduce the calorific value, i.e. less combustible and less electricity generated from each tonne. Meanwhile, the plant will corrode and wear out, requiring increasing repairs. The city will be very dependent on one ageing plant, which will fail at some point.

The items that have value and should be recovered will be destroyed, leaving thousands of tonnes of useless ash. Almost half of what is burned is organic matter, such as food waste, which the council will soon be forced by government to collect separately anyway. The rest comprises items that should be reused or recycled, or plastic packaging, which again will be taxed and phased out.

As a producer of electricity, this process is about as dirty as a coal fired plant. The plant is very inefficient, because the rubbish is wet and contains many incombustibles. Much of the electricity is used in running the plant. Therefore, the whole process only exists due to a huge public subsidy, and it cannot be a source of cheap electricity. The benefit mostly goes to the operating company in gate fees.

It may be true that "There will always be some residual waste", but Birmingham City council doesn't need to burn 75% of the waste that it collects. If we got as far as a true residue; without paper, plastic, organics; then that may not burn at all. Burying carbon in the ground would keep it out of the atmosphere.

What's the alternative to burning waste?

Other local authorities are decades ahead with recycling their waste, but Birmingham keeps failing to learn from them. BCC is near the bottom of the recycling league in England, in having a less than 25% recycling rate. There are 340 waste collection authorities in England who recycle more of their waste. Wales has passed 60% recycling and some areas are near to 70%. They collect the remaining rubbish every 2 weeks, 3 weeks, even monthly. If the incinerator

in Birmingham is run down, then the gates fee could be diverted into paying for a different collection system.

Collection generates the waste stream, which in Birmingham is mostly mixed refuse that costs to dispose of. Increased separation of waste by households will be the key factor, but the Independent Waste Review found that most residents of Birmingham do not understand what they are supposed to separate, or why, or what happens to their waste. We need community engagement and an information campaign to explain and to motivate people.

Material Recycling Facilities (MRFs) were proposed in the Birmingham Development Plan 2017, but this has not been progressed. Companies will only invest in new processing plants, if they have an adequate flow of recyclable material from the council collection.

The same Plan promised to encourage food waste schemes, using anaerobic digestion (AD) to make gas and fertiliser. Burning organic materials is actually burning the future fertility of the soil. Food waste comprises more than 40% by weight of what goes into the incinerator. People waste less food when they are given a caddy to put it in, i.e. they buy less and throw less away. Birmingham already pays for a weekly food waste collection from every home, but it tells people to mix this into general waste, so making it useless. Gate fees at AD plants are typically very low, because gas is made with fertilizer, to cover the cost of operations. There is one at Coleshill, owned by Severn Trent Ltd. Again, no-one will build a new plant, unless they are guaranteed a supply of waste.

There is a contract to sell paper waste for recycling, so paper burning in the incinerator is effectively burning the council's money, whilst paying a gate fee to dispose of it.

Plastic items are make the waste burn. Plastic Free would mean No Burn. A deposit return scheme on bottles is due to be introduced, which will recover most plastic bottles and give the authority the deposit money - unless they are put in the incinerator.

Thank you for reading this.

Birmingham Friends of the Earth cannot solve the problem, but we do understand what is at stake, and we are keen to have this city escape a future locked into "money to burn".

We welcome your response and to hearing how you plan to tackle this urgent situation. Can you help to get the Task Force that we are calling for set up?

Shaz Rahman, Chair of Birmingham Friends of the Earth